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# SET AND DRIFT

## The Ad Hoc Nature of Policy Making The *Missouri* Visit to Turkey

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Robert E. Fisher, Jr.

*The remains of the late Turkish Ambassador, His Excellency Mehemet Munir Ertegun, who died at his post in Washington as Dean of the Diplomatic Corps on November 11, 1944, will be returned with full honors to Istanbul, Turkey, on board the U.S.S. Missouri, sailing from New York Harbor on March 21 next.*

U.S. Department of State Bulletin, 17 March 1946

**A** NAVAL VISIT TO TURKEY AND GREECE in 1946 became a symbol of national resolve in support of a threatened potential ally, when the world's most famous battleship was assigned to a mission usually carried out, according to diplomatic precedence, by a cruiser. It also was taken as a model of U.S. restraint in the face of Soviet belligerence, in that the strong Eighth Fleet escort originally proposed by Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes was not sent.<sup>1</sup>

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The importance of this symbolism for American policy has become axiomatic. The following characterization is typical: "The most prestigious and powerful ship in the United States fleet, the battleship *Missouri*, was selected to maximize the 'splendid effects' of the mission on the area. The gesture was designed solely as a carefully calculated 'political manifestation' appropriate for the unsettled conditions of the region at the time, and to embellish it Forrestal got Byrnes's approval for plans for an accompanying task force in the region—one that might be made permanent later on."<sup>2</sup> The accompanying task force was never sent, because, reportedly, of a disagreement over such "a grand display of U.S. naval power in the Mediterranean," which would have included the two newest American aircraft carriers plus escorts.<sup>3</sup> "Truman and Byrnes decided that a less formidable display of American naval strength in European waters was appropriate."<sup>4</sup>

The real story of this naval port call, however, is more complex and ambivalent, and less rational and coordinated, than surface appearances suggest. *Missouri*'s visit was the end product not of a highly coordinated and rational process of carefully calibrated symbolism; rather, it resulted—like so much of the policy of that period—from the convergence of differently motivated actions and quite limited instruments.

One of the facts that almost has been forgotten by historians is that the selection of the *Missouri* was coincidental, not deliberate. Another—the reason the Eighth Fleet did not provide support and escort—had little to do with last-minute State Department reluctance to provoke the Soviets. Due to the absence of trained and experienced personnel, the major fleet units that would have been involved were simply incapable of such a deployment. A closer look at the *Missouri* visit reminds us of these important realities.

Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, as Acting Secretary during Byrnes's trip to the Moscow conference on 25 January 1946, suggested to Truman by memo that a mission to return the deceased Turkish ambassador be planned; Truman approved the visit the same day. On 1 February, the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OPNAV), after informing Acheson, signaled Admiral H. Kent Hewitt, the commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe, that a cruiser would be provided.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the Atlantic Fleet had no cruisers to spare; every cruiser had been assigned to Operation Magic Carpet, bringing home soldiers from overseas. OPNAV next considered the two operational Atlantic Fleet battleships. On 9 February 1946 a second message was sent to Hewitt that referred to the *Wisconsin* as the ship designated for the trip. However, close examination of the battleship's schedule revealed that *Wisconsin* was due in port for overhaul on 1 April. By default then, *Missouri* was selected, probably by Vice Admiral Forrest P. Sherman, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (DCNO) under Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the CNO.

Acheson's original request, while it may have been initiated by Loy Henderson's Near Eastern Affairs office, seems to have been no more than a matter of courtesy. Therefore, that a battleship was sent, much less the legendary *Missouri*, to carry the ambassador's remains was not a premeditated act of geopolitical gunboat diplomacy but merely a coincidence. Once the battleship was selected, however, it took little time for others to support and even expand the mission for reasons of their own.<sup>6</sup>

Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States had become increasingly tense. On 9 February 1946, Joseph Stalin gave a speech that portended sinister Soviet intentions. On 22 February the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Moscow, George Kennan, sent his famous "long telegram," which received wide and immediate attention among most senior administration officials. With calculated timing, Forrestal approached Byrnes on 28 February, just before Byrnes's hard-line speech to the Overseas Press Club, and asked for clearance to augment the *Missouri* with strong units from the Eighth Fleet—which was just forming up under the command of Admiral Marc A. Mitscher. Although this proposal was definitely made by Forrestal, it very likely originated with Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, the U.S. Navy representative to the United Nations Military Staff Committee, by way of the DCNO, Admiral Sherman. In any case, Byrnes promptly approved. Since his return from Moscow, Byrnes had been in Truman's "doghouse" for taking to himself too much presidential authority and "giving away" too much to the Soviets. His political capital with Truman was at a low ebb, and Byrnes sought any means available to reverse his perceived softness toward the Soviets.<sup>7</sup> The mood in Washington had definitely hardened.

If the selection of the *Missouri* was coincidental, however, Forrestal's proposal to augment the battleship with powerful elements of the Eighth Fleet was a deliberate attempt to send a strong signal to Turkey, Iran, and the Soviets. Byrnes endorsed the proposed increased deployment. Loy Henderson welcomed the harder line with its tangible support for American friends in the Middle East. OPNAV welcomed the idea of showing the Navy's new role and capabilities in a good light.<sup>8</sup> In the event, however, the heavy escort was cancelled and the *Missouri* was sent alone. Hanson Baldwin of *The New York Times*, in an article entitled "U.S. Fleet Parade in Europe Dropped," credited the State Department with restraint and sophistication in abandoning the proposed naval display.<sup>9</sup> The story, however, was likely a deliberate plant by either the State Department or the Navy, or both, to cover up a very real weakness in the national defense. In fact, the Navy was virtually unable to steam most of its major Atlantic Fleet units for any sustained period, due to shortages of trained and experienced personnel. Though the Navy hierarchy in Washington was in favor of sending

the augmenting force, sometime between 28 February and 18 March the escort mission was dropped, almost certainly at Mitscher's initiative.

By the time Commodore Arleigh A. Burke, Mitscher's chief of staff, had set up shop in preparation for the activation of the Eighth Fleet on 1 March 1946, the lack of qualified personnel was severely limiting combat readiness. Burke said that the few ships he had could barely steam, much less operate, and that although the senior leaders were sound, the great majority of intermediate commanders, commanding officers of ships, watchstanders, and crews were green. Burke would later recall that if he gave an order during maneuvers—for instance, to shift the disposition of destroyers in the escort screen—the watchstanding officers on those ships would not know what to do. As chief of staff, Burke would have to show them how, train them on the spot. Mitscher also was quick to note his new command's shortcomings; despite a “back-breaking training schedule,” the fleet was barely ready for the major exercise that Mitscher had set for late April.<sup>10</sup> In light of this background, it is most likely that it was Mitscher, through Nimitz, who was responsible for curtailing the Eighth Fleet's proposed escort mission.

And so the *Missouri*, designated by default, steamed to Turkey alone. Contrary to subsequent legend, it neither was specially chosen to signify American political resolve nor sent without escort to convey American restraint. The reality of ships' schedules and naval training requirements had—once again—overtuled political theory.

### Notes

1. The Eighth Fleet was activated 1 March 1946 under the overall command of Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Under its new commander, Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, Eighth Fleet would be the heavy striking arm of the Atlantic Fleet. It would consist of the preponderance of Atlantic Fleet aircraft carrier assets, including the new fast carriers *Midway* and *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, their escorts, and support ships. The last did not include the fast battleship division made up of the *Wisconsin* and the *Missouri*, retained under direct command of Atlantic Fleet.

The dispatch of cruisers—fast, practical, and powerful symbols of national power—had precedents. According to David Alvarez, Acheson told Truman that since the remains of the late British ambassador, Lord Lothian, had been transported to Scotland on a cruiser in 1939, Captain Richmond Kelly Turner in the cruiser *Astoria* sailed to Japan to return the ashes of Minister Saito, ambassador to the United States. See David Alvarez, “*Missouri* Visit to Turkey: An Alternative Perspective on Cold War Diplomacy,” *Balkans Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, Spring 1974 (Thessalonika).

2. Gabriel and Joyce Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 233.

3. Stephen G. Xydis, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1944–1947* (Thessalonika: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1963), p. 168.

4. Michael A. Palmer, *Origins of the Maritime Strategy: American Naval Strategy in the First Postwar Decade* (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1988), p. 22. Palmer's excellent account of this period is balanced and thorough. As with many before and since, his natural inclination was to take at face value an article by Hanson Baldwin, “U.S. Fleet Parade in Europe Dropped,” *The New York Times*, 18 March 1946, pp. 1, 3, describing the State Department's new-found forbearance (see below).

5. Alvarez, pp. 235–6.

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6. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-4; Command Narrative, *Commander in Chief, United States Atlantic Fleet 1 September 1945 to 1 October 1946*, Command File—Post 1 January 1946 (hereafter CINCLANT History), Operational Archives, U.S. Naval Historical Center (hereafter OA), p. 4; War Diary, COMNAVMEDE, February 1946, in COMNAVEUR History, OA; Palmer, p. 22; and Alvarez, p. 234. Alvarez saw four independent interests at work: the NEA and Loy Henderson, Acheson and Byrnes at State, the Secretary of the Navy, and naval factions pressing for favorable publicity. To this list I would add the pragmatists, led by Mitscher and Burke, who stopped the fantasy.

7. Walter Millis, ed., *Forrestal Diaries* (New York: Viking, 1951), p. 141; and Palmer, p. 22 and notes, pp. 6-7.

8. Palmer, p. 22; and Alvarez, pp. 225-36.

9. Baldwin, *The New York Times*, 18 March 1946, pp. 1, 3; and Alvarez, pp. 225-36.

10. E.B. Potter, *Admiral Arleigh Burke* (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 268-71. Access to Burke's oral histories is limited by law, but Potter's biography captures their essence.

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### This Issue's Cover

The U.S. Army began offering its best and brightest to the Naval War College even before Stephen B. Luce founded it; Admiral Luce's early conversations with Generals William T. Sherman and Emery Upton strongly influenced his conception of this institution. It was no accident, then, that when the College opened, its only full-time faculty member—teaching strategy—was Lieutenant Bliss.

Since that time, the Army presence at the College has been conspicuous and distinguished. Twenty general officers now on active duty are Naval War College graduates; one of them—General John M. Shalikashvili—is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In recent years, the College has awarded master's degrees to 646 U.S. Army officers. On board today are sixty-four Army students and twelve faculty members, who include two research fellows, a Judge Advocate officer specializing in oceans law, and an advisor to the President.

Tasker Bliss, the subject of this issue's cover, went on to put the Army War College into operation in 1903, quickly establishing close professional interaction with Newport. In 1917, as the Army's second four-star general, he became Chief of Staff of the Army, going to France the next year as a member of the Supreme War Council and thereafter of the Commission to Negotiate Peace. The cover portrait, which shows him as he appeared in those later years, is by George Sottung. It was donated to the College in 1984, and it hangs today in Mahan Hall. Reproduced by the permission, and with the assistance, of the Naval War College Museum.