

1978

The Barometer

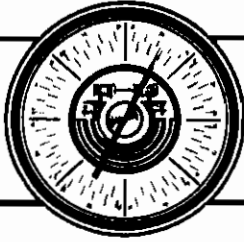
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THE BAROMETER

DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
NAVAL SEA SYSTEMS COMMAND
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20362

19 October 1977

VADM James B. Stockdale, USN
President, Naval War College
Newport, Rhode Island 02840

Dear Admiral Stockdale:

I am writing about the review of *How the Battleship MAINE was Destroyed* which appears in the Fall 1977 issue of the *Naval War College Review*. There are two points I want to raise: the qualifications of the reviewer, and the function of the *Naval War College Review*.

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As the surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Your reviewer, Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, failed to meet his responsibility.

He admits that the technical appendix is the heart of the book. Yet he also admits that he lacks the background and expertise to evaluate most of the technical points raised. Nonetheless, he continues his review. His admissions should have warned the editor of the *Naval War College Review* that Dr. Cosmas--by his own testimony--was not the man to write the review.

Another inconsistency is also troubling. Dr. Cosmas states that the true explanation of the loss of the *MAINE* has remained an unresolved question; that my book comes about as close as is possible to settling this issue; but the book will not radically alter the historiography of the coming of the Spanish-American War, since most recent historians have assumed that the *MAINE* probably was destroyed by accident. Between a close approach to truth and an assumption of probability there is a great distinction.

The major flaw he finds is that I did not write the book that he thinks I should have written. This is a fallacy common in most reviews, and a major

reason why they are of so little use. I—with the help of others—investigated the technical evidence that might shed light on the loss of the *MAINE*. Because I have been engaged in directing naval engineering matters for over half a century, I believed this expertise might make a contribution. I could approach the problem technically, and this I did. I did not “avail” myself of the “opportunity” to make a full historical study of the interplay of administrative, political, personal, human, and technological factors in the loss of the battleship since this was not my intention and, further, there were limitations of time and professional qualifications in these areas. Nor did I write a psycho-history—a morass into which historians too often descend. Dr. Cosmas criticizes me for restricting myself to areas of my knowledge and experience. I would have criticized myself if I had gone beyond them.

And yet, almost unwittingly, Dr. Cosmas raises an important issue. It is almost eighty years since the *MAINE* was lost. Nearly all American historians agree that the war that followed marked an important transition in American history. Why has it taken “professional” historians of the Spanish-American War so long to investigate the matter—to study the vast interplay of forces that Dr. Cosmas feels should be made? If my book only substantiates the verdict of conventional historical inquiry, why then have not historians examined the questions he raises? The documents have been available for decades.

What appalled me when I first began to study the loss of the *MAINE* was how little first-rate historical scholarship has been spent on the subject. That, indeed, was why I felt compelled to write a book, and not a brief article as I had planned. Perhaps, to paraphrase, history is too important to be left to “professional” historians.

The *Naval War College Review* purports to be a learned journal. A true learned journal can be an important source of information for those who have heavy demands on their time. From my experience, such a journal is no better than its reviews; and institutions are no better than their journals.

Why is it necessary to have the *Review* at all? There are several publications already covering the same fields with greater specialization. Also, the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* includes the areas of particular interest to naval officers and was founded for that purpose. It is published at no expense to the government. I am sure that articles by staff and students would, if worthy, be published by it. In these days when the government is attempting to reduce paperwork, do away with superfluous employees, and save money, eliminating the *Review* would be a noteworthy, precedent-setting action by the War College.

I assume this letter will be published in the *Naval War College Review*.

Sincerely,

/s/

H.G. Rickover