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How the Battleship MAINE Was Destroyed

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the timetable for the relief expedition to allow reinforcements to reach Fletcher and specifically "ordered Fletcher to fuel before he approached the island." Lundstrom also shows that Nimitz did not learn of the impending Midway offensive until mid-May and originally expected that the Coral Sea battle would be the decisive engagement with the Japanese carrier fleet. "Coral Sea could easily have been as decisive as Midway, had the Japanese actually committed forces there in the magnitude which Nimitz thought [sic]."

It is impossible within the space of a short review to do justice to all of the author's new and provocative interpretations. Some, such as his discussion of Halsey's operations with Task Force 16, in the Ocean-Nauru campaign, will certainly be the subject of some contention. The heroes of Mr. Lundstrom's book are, not surprisingly, Admirals King and Nimitz, Marshall, Arnold and their staffs come off as a rather inept bunch who never clearly appreciated the danger in the Pacific and "pushed vigorously for premature offensives in northern Europe." This is a view which will probably appeal to Pacific veterans, but may strike others as somewhat unfair. Whatever their views, students of World War II cannot afford to ignore this book.

RONALD SPECTOR
Center for Military History

Rickover, Hyman G. *How the Battleship MAINE Was Destroyed*. Washington: Naval History Division, 1976. 173pp.

The explosion of the U.S. battleship *Maine* at her anchorage in Havana harbor on 15 February 1898 was one of the events which impelled the United States into war with Spain. As a result of victory in the ensuing conflict, the United States acquired a protectorate over Cuba and colonies in the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico. Possession of the Philippines did much to

make the United States an Asian/Pacific power and in that sense opened the way to the often controversial 20th-century American involvement in Asia. The importance of the Spanish-American War in shaping the modern pattern of America's global commitments interested Adm. Hyman G. Rickover in the conflict and drew his attention to the aspect of the coming of the war most within his field of knowledge and experience: the sinking of the *Maine*.

The U.S. Navy itself twice attempted to pinpoint the cause of the explosion that shattered the bow of the *Maine*, killed 266 of the 354 officers and men of her crew, and sent the ship to the bottom of the shallow harbor. In March 1898, a court of inquiry headed by Capt. William T. Sampson, a former chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, concluded that the *Maine* had been demolished by the explosion of one or more of her forward magazines and—what was at the time politically crucial—that the magazine explosion had been set off by an initial explosion outside the ship, probably that of a mine planted by persons unknown.

A second Navy board of inspection conducted another, more thorough investigation in 1911 while the Army Corps of Engineers was preparing to raise the wreck. The engineers built a cofferdam around the *Maine* and pumped out most of the water within the dam, permitting close inspection of the exposed hulk before it was raised, towed out to deep water, and sunk to prevent it from continuing to obstruct harbor traffic. This second Navy investigation contradicted the findings of the Sampson court by placing the site of the fatal explosion farther aft in the bow section than had the earlier court but again insisted that a mine had set off one of the magazines. At the time of the disaster and throughout the years that followed, naval officers, experts on ship construction and explosives, and journalists and historians, in the United

PROFESSIONAL READING 139

States and abroad, expressed doubt that a mine had caused the explosion. The true explanation of the *Maine* disaster has remained an unresolved question.

Adm. Rickover in this compact study comes about as close to settling the question as is possible this far away in time from the actual event. He demolishes the theory that the ship was mined and proclaims that the explosion was an accident resulting from a cause within the *Maine*. To reach this conclusion, Rickover has reviewed the reports, testimony, and exhibits of the two Navy inquiries, consulted naval records and personal manuscripts, searched contemporary newspapers and periodicals, and read a host of obscure late 19th-century technical publications, including, for example, a Navy report on the burning characteristics of various types of coal. For comparison, he reviews the explosion of the French battleship *Jena* in 1907 and the French investigation which ruled it an accident, both from the standpoint of what caused this disaster and from the standpoint of the investigative technique used. Most important, Rickover asked Mr. Ib S. Hansen and Mr. Robert S. Price, two Department of the Navy civilian experts on ship construction and the effects of underwater explosions, to review the evidence amassed by the two previous investigations and to develop their own theory on why the explosion occurred.

Rickover begins his book with an account of the sending of the *Maine* to Havana and of the explosion. Then the author moves to a discussion of the two successive investigations and finally to his own conclusion, based on the report of Hansen and Price, which is printed in full as an appendix. Hansen's and Price's technical analysis and reasoning are the heart of the book and are too lengthy and too complex to summarize here. This reviewer lacks the background and expertise to evaluate most of the technical points raised. However, the

reasoning and the conclusions of the Hansen-Price report certainly fit the facts about the disaster which have been established by more conventional historical inquiry.

Hansen and Price conclude that the *Maine* was demolished by the detonation of her forward 6-inch reserve magazine, which in turn probably was set off by a fire started by spontaneous combustion in an adjacent coal bunker. Such bunker fires were common in battleships of the time. Hansen and Price consider the possibility of a mine detonation at length and conclude, first, that a mine explosion was most unlikely to set off a magazine and, second, that neither the condition of the wreck nor the recorded observations of crew members and other eyewitnesses contain any conclusive evidence of an external explosion. Hansen and Price also describe in detail the almost insurmountable difficulties of planting such a mine while the *Maine* lay at anchor.

Rickover sharply criticizes the conduct of the two Navy investigations, especially the first one under Sampson. The Sampson court, he notes, based its conclusions entirely on testimony from the officers and men of the *Maine* and from other persons in Havana, and on the reports of divers working on the wreck under very unfavorable conditions. The court did not call for the advice of the available contemporary technical experts, many of whom, even then, doubted the mine hypothesis. Further, the court made no effort to review comparable catastrophes in other navies. Rickover strongly implies that many influential individuals in the Navy Department had made up their minds about the cause of the disaster before the investigation even started. Indeed, the warlike Assistant Secretary, Theodore Roosevelt, denounced an American scientist for taking the Spanish side because he publicly expressed doubt that a mine could detonate a ship's magazines.

140 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

Rickover also has some sharp words for the *Maine's* commander, Capt. Charles D. Sigsbee, whom Rickover calls brave but unfamiliar with his vessel. The 1911 board of inspection, which, according to Hansen and Price, correctly located the source of the explosion within the ship, comes off better than the Sampson court, but Rickover insists that the later investigation reached the wrong conclusion on the cause of the explosion for unsound, possibly political, reasons.

This book will not radically alter the historiography of the coming of the Spanish-American War. Most recent historians of the conflict have assumed that the *Maine* probably was destroyed by accident. Rickover's analysis simply furnishes expert confirmation of that assumption. How decisive the sinking of the *Maine* was in bringing on the war remains questionable. The Spanish position in Cuba would have been untenable, regardless of whether the *Maine* exploded. The American effort to find a peaceful solution to the island's troubles was a search for a middle course when neither side was interested in a middle course. The Spaniards were unable or unwilling to grant Cuban independence; the Cuban rebels would settle for nothing less and knew that public opinion in the United States supported their demand. Given this stalemate, sooner or later a mixture of democratic and humanitarian idealism, jingoistic nationalism, and strategic calculation likely would have brought about American intervention. Probably, then, the sinking of the *Maine* did little but hasten the inevitable by a few weeks or months. It is worth noting that President McKinley, in his message of 11 April 1898 asking Congress for authority for armed intervention, mentioned the *Maine* only in passing and based his request on the generally intolerable situation in Cuba.

Aside from its effect on diplomacy, the *Maine* disaster offers the historian

the chance to examine late 19th-century military and governmental institutions at work under stress. Rickover does not avail himself of this opportunity. He merely touches upon the political and bureaucratic interplay of forces in relation to the disaster, and his book thus is a scientific treatise rather than a full and complete historical study.

Rickover's narrative abounds with unanswered administrative and political questions of interest to the historian. Why, for example, did Secretary of the Navy John D. Long first allow Rear Adm. Montgomery Sicard, Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Squadron, to appoint a court of inquiry of relatively junior officers to investigate this major and politically sensitive incident? And then why did "someone in Washington" overrule Sicard and select a board of more senior officers under Sampson? The roles of President McKinley and Secretary Long are but lightly treated, and Assistant Secretary Roosevelt emerges as a man committed to a "political truth" before the investigation even started.

All these facts, and indeed many others, call for a thorough reexamination of the primary sources to reconstruct the full interplay of administrative, political, personal, and technological factors in the *Maine* incident. Admiral Rickover's useful but limited analysis deals with the disaster primarily in terms of what went wrong with the machines. Another study remains to be done on the human elements in the situation—the men and institutions responding to the crisis. The definitive account of the fate of the *Maine* remains to be written.

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Rose, Lisle A. *Roots of Tragedy*. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1976. 249pp.

The tragedy is the failure of American policy in Asia and the roots are in