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MAHAN'S THEORY AND THE REALITIES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

His Final Considerations on Sea Power

Kevin D. McCranie

As July 1914 slipped into August, Europe convulsed into war. The actions of statesmen, the mobilization plans of militaries, and the fervor of peoples merged onto a path that yielded years of destruction later known as the First World War. However, across the Atlantic the mood was quite different; there, interest kindled in a way that occurs only when watching a catastrophe develop from afar.

Few in the first tumultuous weeks of the war became more captivated than Alfred Thayer Mahan. For over a quarter of a century, he had commented on the international environment, with a particular emphasis on the naval and economic elements of what he termed *sea power*. In the very year the war began, one article described Mahan as “America’s foremost naval strategist” and “the world’s greatest authority on sea power.”¹ Needless to say, demand for his opinions about the war outpaced his capacity to supply them. Newspapers wanted his thoughts and magazines asked for articles. Overnight, he became inundated.

Then it all stopped. On 6 August, just two days after Britain declared war on Germany, President Woodrow Wilson issued the following instructions to both the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy: “I write to suggest that you request and advise all officers of the service, whether active or retired, to

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refrain from public comment of any kind upon the military or political situation on the other side of the water.” Worried about how the states of Europe would perceive America’s professed neutrality, Wilson asserted, “It seems to me highly unwise and improper that officers of the Navy and Army of the United States should make any public

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utterances to which any color of political or military criticism can be given where other nations are involved.”²

When Mahan, a retired USN officer, learned of Wilson’s order, he begged for governmental leaders to reconsider: “I would represent that the status of a retired naval officer is by law so detached from employment by the Government, that his relation to the course of the Government, and the consequent responsibility of the Government for his published opinions, differs scarcely at all from the case of a private citizen.” Mahan asked whether Wilson even had the authority to restrict a retired officer such as himself from writing.³

Although he appealed for reconsideration, Mahan would not disobey the order. A life in the naval service had created too strong a loyalty for him to trespass against a presidential directive. Mahan’s son later explained that his father stopped his current writing project almost midsentence: “He obeyed the order so far that he would not even set pen to paper to write.”⁴

Wilson’s directive stifled Mahan’s airing of his views on the war; however, articles he had written before the presidential order, plus a smattering of comments in private letters over the next few months, supply important evidence of his opinions. Since Mahan died on 1 December 1914, his reflections on the war constituted his last words on the international environment and naval strategy. These final thoughts challenge several stereotypes often ascribed to Mahan’s broader theory relating to sea power while providing a more thorough explanation of Mahan’s most mature theoretical arguments.

ON THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR

One day before Britain officially declared war, Mahan was interviewed regarding what he believed to be the origins of the war and the spark that had ignited it. His statements addressed power relationships among European states and underlying motivations instead of focusing on the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Mahan believed Austria-Hungary had expected that Serbia would refuse its ultimatum and concluded that Austria would issue such a demand only if Germany had consented; we now know this speculation to be correct, in the form of the infamous “blank check.” Mahan also theorized about the underlying factors behind the Austrian and German decisions for war. He linked Austria’s choice to unease about the Slavic peoples along its southern border, while he connected the German support of Austria to concerns over the rising power of Russia. Turning to Britain, Mahan expected intervention. The date of the interview is important in this assessment. Twenty-four hours later, Germany’s violation of Belgian neutrality would cloud assessments of Britain’s decision, but on 3 August Mahan zeroed in on the balance of power and the effects on Britain’s position as a world power if its leaders did not intervene.⁵

Mahan's assessments become compelling when we consider that he developed his analysis in real time, across the Atlantic from where the war had ignited, and without access to government correspondence or the memoirs and diaries of participants. His conclusions are not far removed from arguments that continue to be made even a century later. More than anything, his assessments go far to demonstrate that Mahan, although in his mid-seventies at the time, retained an insightful and discerning mind. His assessments about the origins of the war add credit to the more-theoretical comments that he made during the same period about the employment of navies, the efficacy of technology, and the way in which the war would develop.

THE NORTH SEA THEATER OF OPERATIONS

During the first days of the war, Mahan speculated a great deal about navies. This should not be surprising, given the overall focus of his writings and his association with the concept of *sea power*. Four years before the outbreak of war, one of his contemporaries even claimed, "We may regard him as the virtual inventor of the term. . . . He has made it impossible for anyone to treat of sea-power without frequent reference to his writings and conclusions."⁶ His writings on sea power focused heavily on the role of navies in both peace and war and how geography influenced the environment in which naval forces operated.

Mahan identified the North Sea as "beyond any possible doubt the chief theatre of this great naval war."⁷ At the outbreak of the war, that body of water contained the largest concentration of warships of any region of the world. A casual understanding of Mahan's theory might lead us to expect a fixation on an imminent battle between the opposing fleets in that region, pitting the British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet against each other for control of the North Sea. Some evidence even points in this direction, for Mahan, at the outset of the war, speculated, "[W]e may expect any minute, apparently, to get word of a great engagement."⁸

Those words came in an interview and probably represent more of a hope than a balanced assessment. A full reading of Mahan's period writings points to a much deeper appreciation of naval strategy that looked beyond a great sea battle to focus on the strategic effects that naval power provided to states. He believed that the sea provided Germany a possible means of escape from its resource constraints. Overseas trade supplied its industries and fed its people. "It is a question of existence for her," claimed Mahan. "The stagnation of her carrying trade on the seas must threaten her very life, and the neutral shipping, already taxed to its limits, cannot bear the additional burdens of supplying Germany."⁹ This statement aligned with many of his writings since publication of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* in 1890. Mahan had argued consistently for the

determinative effects of commercial wealth and the resources it provided. He considered it a decisive factor in world history, and because of the importance of international commerce he believed that sea power would have significant influence on the outcome of any major European war.

Germany needed the resources of the globe, but these were forthcoming only if its navy could overcome Britain's dominating geostrategic blocking position that stifled German overseas trade. The British Isles sat astride Germany's two routes out of the North Sea to access the global maritime commons: one through the narrows of the English Channel, the other through the wider but more tempestuous passage between Scotland and Norway.

Germany could break down Britain's geographic advantage only by altering the naval balance between the Grand Fleet and the High Seas Fleet in the North Sea. Mahan saw no substantial difference between the opposing fleets with regard to training, so numbers assumed added importance.¹⁰ An estimate of naval strength in the North Sea at the outbreak of the war gives the British Grand Fleet twenty-one dreadnoughts to thirteen German ones in the High Seas Fleet.¹¹ Britain's clear numerical advantage led Mahan to determine that he "should expect the British fleet to win."¹²

It is noteworthy that Mahan never advocated that naval leaders allow their fleets to commit willful suicide. In his opinion, navies did not seek "the sterile glory of fighting battles merely to win them."¹³ Mahan ascribed the previous quote to the early-nineteenth-century Swiss theorist of war Antoine-Henri de Jomini, who asserted that armed forces are employed for the purpose of advancing a state's political objectives rather than engaging in senseless combat. Mahan repeated those words about "sterile glory" that he associated with Jomini in multiple publications to drive home the point that states used navies to obtain political objectives.

As Mahan saw the First World War begin to unfold, he concluded that the German fleet lacked the strength to obtain the political objectives that German leaders desired. "Germany, therefore, might wish to postpone action till a happy blow, or happy chance, diminish the inequality." In the meantime, Mahan thought the Germans would avoid dividing their fleet: "It will not risk division, with the chance that in seeking to unite[,] one part may be overwhelmed by the whole British force." Even concentrated, the German fleet stood little chance against the entire Grand Fleet. Rather than accept deadlock, Mahan claimed, "it is natural to suppose that the time of waiting will be signaled by attempts to reduce this [superior British] margin by attacks of torpedo boats, of submarines, and very probably of air-craft." Although he advocated for the concentration of the main German fleet to include its battleships, that concentration did not extend to more-expendable light forces, including submarines. He thought

Germany should disperse these light forces on missions aimed at reducing Britain's numerical advantage.¹⁴

The British too had to grapple with Jomini's dictum about fighting for "sterile glory." Mahan thought that the British would be careful about risking their fleet in torpedo-infested German coastal waters.¹⁵ On the open seas, Mahan saw more-favorable possibilities; Britain could use superior numbers in rapid, concentrated actions. If, however, the Royal Navy did not have its expected numerical superiority, Mahan thought the service should wait until its full force became available. Once the Royal Navy reached strength, he entreated the British to eliminate their German opponents as soon as feasible.¹⁶

Decisions on how to employ the British and German fleets in the North Sea rested with the naval leaders on both sides. Mahan had spent decades studying naval leadership and decision-making. This included writing biographies of leaders such as Horatio Nelson and David G. Farragut. Mahan concluded that choices made by individuals shaped the strategic environment.¹⁷ Although he could play armchair admiral from afar, he knew that his assessments carried only so far: "In the balance of such considerations so much depends upon individual judgment, and upon particular circumstances, that it is impossible to speak positively as to probable action."¹⁸ Some might consider this statement an attempt to dodge a clear assessment of what would occur in the war, but Mahan's long studies had led him to appreciate the human element and the understanding that in war chance always existed. The longer the war continued, the greater the chance that something unexpected would result in the loss of a substantial portion of one fleet or the other. Given the operating environment, this was a more likely possibility for Britain, especially if the Germans remained averse to risking their main battle fleet.

TECHNOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY

Those who have studied Mahan and his theories sometimes have claimed that he looked "nostalgically" to the age of sail, and "when he did look at the present, it was often with the eyes of his eighteenth-century heroes."¹⁹ These statements have led to an even more damning claim: that his thoughts on submarines and aircraft indicate that "there is hardly any evidence that, to the day of his death in 1914, he anticipated in the slightest the revolutionary effects that these and other mechanical inventions would produce in the years just ahead."²⁰ These conclusions misinterpret Mahan's theory by 1914; they are instead most accurate with respect to his earlier writings.

The intervening sea change occurred quietly, and it largely seems to have been the result of Mahan's studies of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), which caused Mahan to reflect ever more profoundly on technology's role in

naval warfare. This is particularly evident in several articles published in *Collier's Weekly*, in which he reflected on the strategic effects of torpedoes and submarines.²¹ Although he never believed that technological change had a dominating influence on his theories, Mahan rightly claimed, "I have not ventured so positive an adverse opinion as sometimes I see attributed to me."²² Rather, he asserted in August 1914, "I was non-committal on submarines and aero-planes, not because I have not opinions, but because after all only the test of war, which is now on, can give any reliable bases for estimate."²³

To provide an accurate assessment, Mahan needed something akin to the First World War: a conflict involving navies possessing the latest technologies in which "the opponents are skilled, enterprising, and trained."²⁴ Until such an event, he could only hypothesize that the most important questions to be answered in a naval war dealt with the increased effectiveness that submarines and aircraft offered. Actually to assess the effects of these new technologies and understand their impact on his theory, Mahan needed to live long enough to observe the realm of the possible under the pressures of combat in real-world conditions.²⁵

Given that he died only four months into the war, Mahan was granted only a very narrow window during which he could delineate his thoughts on new weapons technologies. Wilson's order forced him to obscure his conclusions further. Our knowledge of the results of Mahan's analysis is limited to a few letters addressed to close friends. In these he reflected on the incomplete nature of the evidence, made even more obscure by the stealthy nature of submarines and their classified missions.

When the German submarine *U-9* fatally torpedoed the British armored cruisers *Cressy*, *Aboukir*, and *Hogue* on 22 September 1914, Mahan claimed that it "did not greatly impress me from the military standpoint. I have always held that torpedo protection is a matter of scouting—watchfulness, and lapses there will occur. The result will show if I am greatly wrong."²⁶ In this case, Mahan was correct; poor British decision-making had contributed to these losses.²⁷ More important, Mahan's response signals that he expected submarines to inflict significant losses, ones that would have been impossible in previous wars. Technological change had affected his calculus, but he did not consider the changes significant enough to alter the primacy of the main battle fleet.

UNDERSTANDING THE OUTCOME

Although Mahan developed an interpretation of events that focused on the navy, he understood better than most that navies are but one instrument of national power.²⁸ As early as his publication of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* in 1890, Mahan focused on the interplay between naval and economic power. He later would go on to write extensively about land forces, including a book on the

Second Boer War (1899–1902).²⁹ Given the breadth of his writing, it is not surprising that his theory about how the First World War would play out involved a complex interplay of land, naval, and economic instruments of power.

Only several days into the war, Mahan speculated on how German leaders were planning to achieve victory. Although he did not know the specifics of what some have labeled the Schlieffen Plan—under which the Germans sought to overcome Entente resistance by a quick, decisive victory against France before concentrating against Russia in a more protracted campaign—he came to a similar solution.³⁰ Mahan accurately asserted, “Germany’s procedure is to overwhelm at once by concentrated preparation and impetuous momentum.”³¹ German leaders could obtain their objectives on land only if they could overcome their opponents swiftly.

The sea, however, posed a riddle for German leaders. Even if they won quickly on land, Mahan contended, “[i]t can scarcely be so decisive as to enable Germany to bear the wasting disorder of your [the British] blockade.” Even if the Germans defeated Russia and France, Mahan did not believe that German leaders would realize the lofty objectives they sought, because Britain would remain in the offing to protract the conflict. To defeat Britain, Germany needed to challenge its command of the sea. This required the use of torpedo-armed warships such as the submarine to redress the naval balance. To a British friend, Mahan claimed, “Otherwise, they can hope nothing from an open battle, because your superiority is too great.”³²

Mahan concluded that British sea power would triumph eventually in a protracted conflict with Germany. As he explained, “If the German rush proves indecisive or prolonged, the financial pressure thus in the power of Great Britain may determine the issue.”³³ Navies by themselves do not win quickly; Mahan maintained, “The battles of naval warfare are few compared with those of land; it is the unremitting daily silent pressure of naval force, when it has attained control of the sea against an opponent,—the sustained blocking of communication,—which has made sea power so decisive an element in the history of the world.”³⁴

Industrialization, according to Mahan, made sea power even more decisive: “[W]e have only to consider a few of the items upon which highly organized nations depend for the well-being of their population: food, raw materials for manufacture, exports to pay for imports, the carriage of specie in moments of emergency.” Germany was particularly vulnerable to a British blockade that “will bring the pressure of sea power directly and continuously upon the daily life of Germany.”³⁵

To make the blockade of Germany effective, Mahan did not think the British fleet needed to engage the German High Seas Fleet in a major battle. He explained to a British friend that as long as Britain’s Grand Fleet could maintain its dominating position in the North Sea, “[y]our fleet holds the balance.”³⁶ To

sustain the silent, grinding pressure of the blockade, the British merely needed to be vigilant and patient. If they executed this properly, he concluded, “Sea Power I think will vindicate itself again, and exhaustion effect what possibly the Entente armies cannot.”³⁷ This resulted from the fact that “numbers and money will eventually tell. . . . [I]n any case the British Fleet holds the decision in its hands, as in the days of Napoleon.”³⁸

As noted, President Wilson’s order forced Mahan to restrict his musings about the war to private letters to friends. In these, he kept coming back to a similar overall argument. Germany’s greatest chance for victory entailed gaining a quick triumph on land by employing its well-trained army. A failure by the kaiser to obtain a rapid victory there would allow the Entente to succeed through endurance, largely because sea power would allow Britain to harness the globe’s resources while Germany found itself contained to a small geographic region of continental Europe.

This theme does not represent a sea change in his theory. *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, published in 1892, had applied a similar explanation to the Napoleonic Wars: “The question thus resolved itself . . . into a conflict of endurance,—which nation could live the longest in this deadly grapple.” He contrasted Napoléon’s successes on the battlefield with the persistence of British sea power.³⁹ In 1914, Mahan saw the same forces at work again. The value of sea power did not rest on the ability to fight naval battles or even the possession of a fleet; these were merely the means that allowed a combatant to control the sea and throttle commercial activity. In the end, sea powers such as Britain obtained their greatest leverage through command of the sea, with the ultimate object of wrecking economies and crippling finance.⁴⁰

THE DEATH OF MAHAN

Mahan applied the many layers of his sea-power theory to the First World War, but he found himself “silenced at a moment when the particular pursuits of nearly thirty-five years . . . might be utilized for the public.” President Wilson’s order left him utterly devastated.⁴¹ Putting a good face on it, Mahan reflected, “Luckily, I had fired off my mouth all I needed before the order came out. It has done me out of dollars only, of which a good many were in sight; but it is all for the best, for the pressure to write all that was asked of me brought on a heart attack.”⁴² The war came in his seventy-third year, with his health failing. If he had been left to write, the desire to comment on events might have driven him to work himself to death, while the stress of being prevented from writing may have accelerated his deterioration anyway.⁴³ As one family member recounted, “[T]here is no doubt . . . that his death was hastened by the worry caused through not being able to show our people, as this wretched war goes on, the necessity for preparedness, by illustrating the subject from the events of the day.”⁴⁴ Thus, if he had been allowed

to write, it seems that Mahan would have been driven to his grave as equally as he was by the executive order that silenced his thoughts. Either way, events beyond his control likely contributed to his demise. Mahan died on 1 December 1914.

The First World War challenged Mahan's theories, but he was prepared. For over a quarter of a century, he had laid a foundation by actively commenting on the international environment and amassing a trove of historical examples. As war broke out in Europe, Mahan grappled with incomplete evidence obtained primarily through newspapers. His assessments first turned to the international environment to set the political and geostrategic conditions on which his naval and sea-power theories rested. His understanding of naval strategy at the strategic level proved almost impeccable. He even made significant deductions about the newest technologies and their effects. Although some would conclude that he overestimated the significance of sea power on the outcome of the First World War, his conclusions explain to a significant degree how the war developed in the years following his death. With the Germans unable to win on land, the war became protracted, and in this situation resources played an integral role in the eventual triumph of the Entente powers.

NOTES

1. "Admiral Mahan, Naval Critic, Dies," *New York Times*, 2 December 1914.
2. Wilson to Garrison, 6 August 1914, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 30, *May–September, 1914*, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 352.
3. Mahan to Daniels (both "Official" and "Private Requests"), 15 August 1914, in *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan*, ed. Robert Seager II and Doris D. Maguire (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), vol. 3, pp. 540–42.
4. Lyle Evans Mahan, "My Parents, Rear Admiral and Mrs. Alfred Thayer Mahan," ed. John B. Hattendorf, *Naval War College Review* 43, no. 4 (Autumn 1990), p. 92.
5. Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Origins of the European War," interview with the *New York Evening Post*, 3 August 1914, in Seager and Maguire, *Letters . . . of . . . Mahan*, vol. 3, pp. 698–99.
6. Cyprian Bridge, *Sea-Power, and Other Studies* (London: Smith, Elder, 1910), p. 4.
7. Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Sea Power in the Present European War," originally published in *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, 20 August 1914, republished in Seager and Maguire, *Letters . . . of . . . Mahan*, vol. 3, p. 707. This article likely was written between 1 and 3 August 1914; see *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 706.
8. Mahan, "Origins of the European War," p. 699.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Mahan, "Sea Power in the Present European War," p. 709.
11. Paul G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I*, 2nd impression (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), pp. 8–9.
12. Mahan, "Origins of the European War," p. 699.
13. Mahan ascribed this or a similar phrase to Jomini in several of his writings. See *From Sail to Steam: Recollections of Naval Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), p. 283; "Possibilities of an Anglo-American Reunion"

- and “The Future in Relation to American Naval Power,” both in *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1897), pp. 128, 149; *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), p. 680; and “Naval Warfare” (lecture to the Lowell Institute, 1897), p. 5, Papers of Alfred T. Mahan, container 5, reel 4, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
14. Mahan, “Sea Power in the Present European War,” p. 708.
 15. *Ibid.*, pp. 708–709.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 708.
 17. Jon T. Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997). See also biographies by Mahan: *The Life of Nelson* and *Admiral Farragut* (New York: D. Appleton, 1893).
 18. Mahan, “Sea Power in the Present European War,” p. 708.
 19. Azar Gat, *The Development of Military Thought: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1992), p. 199; Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York: Free Press, 1972), p. 344.
 20. Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, unpaginated introduction to 1966 ed. of *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776–1918* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966; repr. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015).
 21. For examples, see Alfred T. Mahan, “Torpedo Craft vs. Battleships,” *Collier’s Weekly*, 21 May 1904, pp. 16–17, and “The Submarine and Its Enemies,” *Collier’s Weekly*, 6 April 1907, pp. 17–21.
 22. Mahan to Roy B. Marston, 14 October 1914, in Seager and Maguire, *Letters . . . of . . . Mahan*, vol. 3, pp. 550–51.
 23. Mahan to Laughton, 24 August 1914, in *Letters and Papers of Professor Sir John Knox Laughton, 1830–1915*, ed. Andrew Lambert (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate for the Navy Records Society, 2002), no. 272, pp. 258–59.
 24. Mahan, “Sea Power in the Present European War,” p. 708.
 25. Mahan, “Origins of the European War,” p. 700.
 26. Mahan to Clark, 1 October 1914, in Seager and Maguire, *Letters . . . of . . . Mahan*, vol. 3, pp. 548–49.
 27. Julian S. Corbett, *Naval Operations, History of the Great War* (London: Longmans, Green, 1920), vol. 1, pp. 180, 182; Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996; repr. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), p. 390.
 28. Kevin D. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021).
 29. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Story of the War in South Africa 1899–1900*, 3rd ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1901).
 30. The members of the Triple Entente were Britain, France, and Russia.
 31. Mahan, “Origins of the European War,” p. 698.
 32. Mahan to Laughton, pp. 258–59.
 33. Mahan, “Origins of the European War,” p. 699.
 34. Mahan, “Sea Power in the Present European War,” p. 706.
 35. *Ibid.*, pp. 706, 708.
 36. Mahan to Clark, pp. 548–49.
 37. Mahan to Laughton, pp. 258–59.
 38. Mahan to Marston, pp. 550–51.
 39. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812*, 8th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1897), vol. 2, pp. 406, 411.
 40. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, pp. 217–18, 222–23.
 41. Mahan to Daniels, “Official Request,” 15 August 1914, in Seager and Maguire, *Letters . . . of . . . Mahan*, vol. 3, pp. 540–41.
 42. Mahan to Clark, pp. 548–49.
 43. Mahan to Brownwell, 21 September 1914, in Seager and Maguire, *Letters . . . of . . . Mahan*, vol. 3, p. 547; “Admiral Mahan, Naval Critic, Dies,” p. 1; “Admiral Mahan Dies,” *Washington Post*, 2 December 1914, p. 8.
 44. Frederick Mahan to Theodore Roosevelt, 11 February 1915, in Seager and Maguire, *Letters . . . of . . . Mahan*, vol. 3, p. 539.