

MAHAN'S INTERFERENCE IN U.S. POLICY

BY ALAN M. ANDERSON

Publication of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* thrust its author, Alfred Thayer Mahan, onto the world stage. Previously a relatively unknown instructor at the U.S. Naval War College and an officer at best indifferent to command at sea, Mahan was catapulted to international fame as a historian, naval strategist, and supporter of American imperialism. His book developed a worldwide following and was translated into numerous languages. Mahan retired from the Navy in 1896 and embarked full speed on his literary career, building on the fame that publication of *The Influence of Sea Power* in 1890 had brought him. He became a prophet for increased sea power and naval expansion in the United States, revered for decades by legions of naval personnel. As one historian has written, “Never has one book on naval history and strategy meant so much to so many.”¹ More than 100 years after his death, his works continue to be studied today.² Given the success of his first book, Mahan undoubtedly could have focused on his writing and avoided trying to change U.S. policies and positions on topics related to naval matters. But in August 1898, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia proposed an international conference to consider arms limitations and means for ensuring the peaceful resolution of international disputes. The tsar’s proposal incentivized Mahan to try to influence and change U.S. policies. Mahan

To influence the nation’s guiding principles and promote his views, the prophet for U.S. sea power pushed the envelope and even crossed the line.

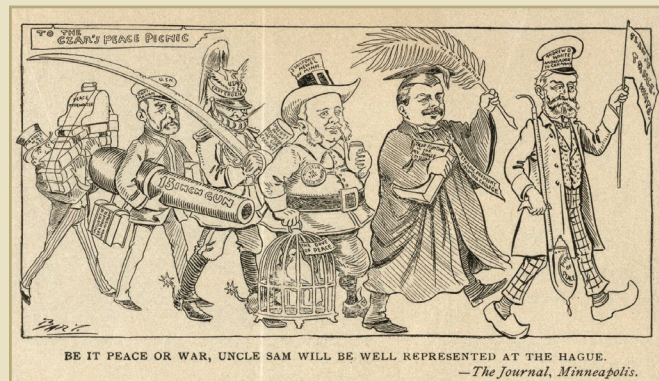


The United States supported the immunity of private property at sea in wartime, but Mahan lobbied against it. This British ship prepares to search for contraband, an exception, in 1916.

wanted the United States to build a blue-water navy. He wanted the nation to promote and subscribe to policies that would require the development of a large navy consistent with his theories as expressed in *The Influence of Sea Power*. As he later wrote:

Navies are instruments of international relations . . . The scope of navies is . . . far wider [than that of armies]. [Navies] can be felt where the national armies cannot go, except under naval protection. . . . *The question for the United States, as regards the size of its navy, is not so much what it desires to accomplish as what it is willing or not willing to concede* [emphasis in original].³

However, in vigorously pressing his views, Mahan not only pushed the envelope, he also at times exceeded the bounds of appropriate political conduct for a retired naval officer, regardless of his international stature.



Surprised when he was invited to be part of the U.S. delegation to the April 1899 international conference in The Hague, Mahan (above, second from left; left, third from right) disregarded his instructions and argued against limitations on naval arms or armaments. Ambassador White, the delegation's chair, "was especially embarrassed." This cartoon identifies members, shown also in the photo.

The primary focus of Mahan's lobbying was the principle of the immunity of private property at sea in time of war. Since its founding, the United States had promoted worldwide recognition and adoption of this principle. The principle immunized from seizure any privately owned property on any vessel—whether an enemy-owned merchant or a neutral ship—during time of war, except if the property at issue was "contraband" (goods primarily for military use) or if the ship was captured while attempting to violate a lawful blockade. The United States wanted to maximize the ability of its merchant navy not just to continue trading with belligerents during a war, but also to expand that trade. U.S. adherence to this principle was predicated on its large merchant marine and traditionally small navy, which could hardly provide protection to the nation's merchant ships during a war, even if

the United States remained neutral. The immunity of private property at sea, therefore, was a "small navy" policy.

Shortly after the United States accepted the tsar's invitation to attend an international peace conference, proponents of the immunity principle pushed for the United States to sponsor international adoption of the concept at the planned gathering. Mahan quickly swung into action, vigorously arguing in newspaper articles against the principle despite editorial opposition from various sources, including the *New York Times*. Notwithstanding Mahan's efforts, President William McKinley supported the immunity principle in his annual message to Congress in December 1898.

And then in April 1899, much to Mahan's surprise, he was asked to be one of the members of the U.S. delegation to the conference in The Hague. His selection literally was an afterthought of Secretary of State John Hay, who asked President

McKinley in a postscript to a letter, "Do you not think Mahan would be a good man to attend the conference on behalf of the navy?"⁴ Mahan's views were antithetical to the goals of the proposed conference, and Hay and the President undoubtedly knew this. Why Mahan was selected is uncertain, but it surely was not because his views aligned with those of President McKinley or Secretary Hay. Despite any misgivings he might have held, Mahan accepted the appointment after being assured the government would pay his expenses.

Hay's instructions to the delegation should have given Mahan more than a little pause. Hay directed the delegation to promote the creation of a convention for the peaceful resolution of international disputes. The delegation was instructed to support extension of the laws of land warfare to naval warfare. Hay also commanded the members to

"propose to the Conference the principle of extending to strictly private property at sea the immunity from destruction or capture by belligerent Powers which such property already enjoys on land as worthy of being incorporated in the permanent law of civilized nations."⁵

Mahan's actions at the 1899 Hague Conference to change U.S. policies overstepped appropriate bounds. To a great extent, Mahan simply ignored Secretary of State Hay's instructions to the delegation. He cast one of only two votes (the other being from France) against a proposal to ban submarines. Mahan argued against any limitations on naval arms or armaments. He became notorious for his lone opposition to banning projectiles whose sole purpose was to spread poison gas, arguing that it was "no more cruel to asphyxiate one's enemies" by poison gas than to drown them when their ship was sunk by a torpedo.⁶

Mahan opposed adapting the laws of land warfare to naval warfare, and finally had to be instructed to withdraw additional provisions he proposed in order to permit the conclusion of the conference's work. Contrary to the delegation's instructions, Mahan forced the head of the U.S. delegation to water down his presentation favoring immunity of private property at sea. As a result, the U.S. proposal went nowhere at the conference. Regarding the proposed international arbitration convention, Mahan "threw in a bomb" within the U.S. delegation and nearly caused the conference's most significant accomplishment to fail by arguing that the U.S. delegation could not sign it because it would violate the precepts of the Monroe Doctrine. In the end, the United States signed the international arbitration convention, but only after inserting a reservation into the proceedings.⁷ Ambassador Andrew D. White, the U.S. delegation's chair, "was especially embarrassed by" Mahan's views and wrote that Mahan "had very little, if any, sympathy with the main purposes of the conference, and has not hesitated to declare his disbelief in some of the measures which we were especially instructed to press."⁸

Mahan did everything possible to block, minimize, or dilute proposals at the conference with which he disagreed—which was essentially all of them—and that he thought were contrary to ensuring the development and expansion of the U.S. Navy. He succeeded in preventing international consideration and adoption of the immunity of private property at sea, although Great Britain also, as the world's leading sea power at that time, had long objected to and opposed the principle. Mahan ensured that submarines and other nascent technologies and naval arms were not limited or banned, including poison gas. While his efforts against the laws of naval warfare failed, his position forced the U.S. delegation to decline to sign that convention at the conference. And he nearly caused the United States to refuse to sign the agreement on the peaceful resolution of

international disputes. Still, Mahan was not finished with his efforts to influence and change U.S. policies.

Three months after the conclusion of the conference, Mahan published an article disparaging the convention on international arbitration. He contended that nations should retain the right to resort to war rather than be compelled to submit disputes to arbitration.⁹ And his push to influence U.S. policy did not stop with writing articles. Mahan made an unprecedented direct approach to the British government seeking support and assistance in changing the U.S. position on the immunity of private property at sea during war. In November 1899, he wrote to Arthur Balfour, the Leader of the House of Commons and nephew of British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, asking for Britain's support in changing the United States' long-held position. Balfour eventually responded that Great Britain agreed with Mahan's view and would likely not change its opposition to the principle, although Balfour himself harbored some reservations.¹⁰

Mahan's efforts to end the United States' support for the immunity principle appeared to have failed as the 19th century closed and the 20th century dawned. In his message to Congress in December 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt referenced the exemption of private property at sea and called for international recognition of the principle. Congress passed a resolution in April 1904 urging the President to work toward an international agreement on this principle. In his October 1904 invitation to the international community to hold a second peace conference, Secretary of State Hay explicitly raised the inviolability of private property in naval warfare as a proposed topic.¹¹

Once again, Mahan quickly tried to get the United States to change its traditional support for the principle. This time, he made his appeal directly to the President, likely believing he would find a sympathetic ear. Roosevelt, who had served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy before the Spanish-American War, understood the usefulness of the Navy as an instrument of diplomacy and projector of power, as well as its limitations. In a letter to the President in December 1904, Mahan urged in harsh terms reconsideration of the United States' traditional support for immunity. Recognizing that the issue was inextricably tied to the size of the Navy, Mahan told the President that "property employed in commerce is no more private, in uses, than lives employed on the firing line are private. . . . The question is one of expediency; and what was expedient to our weakness a century ago is not expedient to our strength today. Rather we should seek to withdraw from our old position of the flag covering the goods. We need to fasten our grip on the sea."¹²

Roosevelt equivocated in his response, questioning Mahan's analogy to taking lives on land, but indicating he would discuss the matter with Secretary of State Hay and think it over. Hay did not equivocate. He told Roosevelt he was not



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President Theodore Roosevelt, a well-established navalist, was influenced by some of Mahan's thinking but supported the private-property exemption. He ordered the U.S. Great White Fleet's circumnavigation from 1907 to 1909 and welcomed sailors home, here on board the flagship, the USS Connecticut, in Hampton Roads.

impressed with Mahan's reasoning and said the arguments were insufficient to cause the country to reverse its century-old traditional policy. With that, another attempt by Mahan to change the country's position on the issue had failed.

However, Mahan soon showed that he did not lack persistence as a virtue. The proposed second peace conference was deferred for several years because of the Russo-Japanese War, which ended in 1905. Shortly after Russia announced a list of topics for the conference, which included the immunity of private property at sea, Mahan interrupted his holiday in Germany to express his concerns to Hay's successor as Secretary of State, Elihu Root. Mahan argued against continued adherence to the principle and proposed that the subject be presented for review to a panel of experts, such as the General Board of the Navy.

Mahan's plea to Root found somewhat more fertile ground. Although Root expressed serious personal doubts about the policy, he recognized that the United States had unequivocally advocated in favor of the immunity of private property at sea for a very long time. Regardless, Root sent Mahan's letter to the Secretary of the Navy, raising the essential arguments in favor of and against the standard. On the pro side, immunity obviates the need to protect U.S. merchant commerce, which would otherwise require increased expenditures on naval armaments and result in a naval arms race. On the other hand, without immunity, the risk of capture of private property during war would promote a powerful commercial class interested in preserving peace. Root requested the views of the General Board, headed by Admiral of the Navy George Dewey.

Soon after the referral, the General Board responded. It recognized that U.S. support for the policy stemmed from the historical weakness of the Navy. The Board concluded that because a relatively small amount of commerce now was carried in U.S. ships compared with those of potential enemies, the United States should not give up its military advantage by continuing to argue in favor of the immunity of private property at sea. A month after this initial report, Mahan received inside information from a Board member that the analysis was not acceptable to every member and that the issue would receive further consideration. Three months later, in a supplemental memorandum, the General Board argued that the United States should tie itself to Great Britain, an opponent of the principle.

Mahan was dissatisfied with the General Board's failure to recommend outright rejection of the inviolability of private property at sea. He therefore raised the issue in late July 1906 during a meeting with President Roosevelt. Mahan's arguments again did not impress the President. Afterward, Mahan presented his case in a letter to the President and asked permission to put the matter before the court of public opinion.¹³ Roosevelt consented. Mahan then embarked on a vigorous writing campaign, ultimately combining his works and those of other leading naval theorists in a book devoted in part to the issue.¹⁴ Mahan hoped his efforts would result in the United States dropping its traditional position.


By late 1906, Mahan's efforts appeared to be gaining ground. The Navy's designated delegate to the 1907 Hague Conference, Rear Admiral Charles Sperry, added his voice to Mahan's arguments within the government. Sperry argued that the U.S. position resulted from an incorrect belief that private property on land held the same status as private property in transit on the oceans. Yet the United States still struggled to reach a final decision. At a meeting in April 1907 at the State Department with all the members of the delegation, Secretary of State Root maintained that although he personally was undecided, he did not see how the United States could alter the position it had taken at the 1899 conference. After much discussion, Root decided to continue supporting the immunity principle. His final instructions to the delegation in late May unambiguously directed members to maintain the United States' traditional position in favor of the immunity of private property at sea in time of war.¹⁵

Mahan was undaunted. He again approached Great Britain, seeking its continued opposition to the U.S. position. In May 1907, he asked a senior member of England's Foreign Ministry to give Great Britain's delegates copies of his forthcoming article, in which he attacked the view that private property at sea should be treated the same as private property on land during war. He also promoted the offensive benefits of capturing private property at sea.¹⁶ Mahan's efforts likely helped ensure that at the 1907 conference, Great

Britain led the opposition to the U.S. proposal to prohibit the seizure of private property at sea in time of war. He may not have succeeded in getting the United States to change its position, but at least Mahan aided England to maintain its traditional opposition to the policy.

Mahan continued throughout the last years of his life to publish articles promoting the need for a large U.S. Navy. He challenged future Nobel Peace Prize recipient Norman Angell's opinion that war was no longer viable because of the increased interdependence of the European economies. Because arbitration could not resolve all international disputes and war therefore was inevitable, the best way to deter war, according to Mahan, was to arm. Of course, the European powers had for years been engaged in a massive arms race. The commencement of World War I seemingly undercut Mahan's arguments. When he died on 1 December 1914, Mahan left behind an article, "About What Is the War," which the Navy had refused to allow him—or his widow after his death—to publish.¹⁷ Mahan's final attempt to influence U.S. policy in effect never made it out the door.

Even today, Mahan's efforts to influence and change U.S. policies and positions more than 100 years ago provide useful guidance on the proper bounds of political participation by retired military personnel. Indeed, Mahan was in many respects the "test" of what those bounds were at the time. He was a publicist in the original meaning of the word. He was an advocate of naval expansion and wanted the U.S. Navy to assume what he believed was its rightful place on the world stage. Writing articles and books promoting his views certainly was an appropriate means of engaging in these efforts. But taking positions contrary to instructions as a member of the U.S. delegation at an international conference, contacting and appealing to foreign governments (even a friendly one in Great Britain) for assistance in pressing his views, and directly attempting to influence the President and others serving in the U.S. government went beyond appropriate methods. Ultimately, Mahan's influence on the policies and positions of the United States may not have been as significant as *The Influence of Sea Power on History* has been on naval thinking, but his actions

provide important lessons for today's often-fractious political discourse and suggest appropriate limitations on political participation by former members of the military. 

1. Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 190.
2. See, for example, Benjamin F. Armstrong, *21st Century Mahan: Sound Military Conclusions for the Modern Era* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013); Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997).
3. A. T. Mahan, *Armaments and Arbitration* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912), 66–67.
4. Letter, Hay to McKinley, 18 March 1899, John Hay Papers, U.S. Library of Congress, reel 1, vol. 2.
5. James Brown Scott, ed., *Instructions to the American Delegates to The Hague Peace Conferences and Their Official Reports* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1916), 9.
6. James Brown Scott, ed., *The Proceedings of The Hague Peace Conferences: The Conference of 1899* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920), 283, 366–67.
7. Andrew D. White, *The Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White* (New York: Century, 1922), vol. 2, 338–41.
8. *Ibid.*, 347.
9. A. T. Mahan, "The Peace Conference and the Moral Aspect of War," *The North American Review* 169, no. 515 (October 1899): 433–47.
10. Letter, Balfour to Mahan, 20 December 1899, Additional Manuscripts 49742, Balfour Papers, British Library, ff. 249–51.
11. Scott, ed., *Instructions*, 59–63.
12. Letter, Mahan to Roosevelt, 27 December 1904, in Robert Seager II and Doris D. Maguire, eds., *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), vol. 3, 112–14.
13. *Ibid.*, 14 August 1906, 164.
14. See A. T. Mahan, ed., *Some Neglected Aspects of War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1907).
15. Scott, ed., *Instructions*, 81.
16. A. T. Mahan, "The Hague Conference: The Question of Immunity of Belligerent Merchant Shipping," *National Review* 49 (July 1907): 521–37. The article later was included in *Some Neglected Aspects of War*.
17. Letter, Josephus Daniels to Ellen Mahan, and attached typescript, 25 June 1915, Alfred Thayer Mahan Papers, U.S. Library of Congress, container 6, reel 4, folder "Articles."

Alan M. Anderson received his Ph.D. in War Studies from King's College London, working under the supervision of Professor Andrew Lambert. His dissertation is titled "The Laws of War and Naval Strategy in Great Britain and the United States, 1899–1909." He received the Rear Admiral John D. Hayes Pre-Doctoral Fellowship in Naval History for 2013–14 from the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command. He also holds a J.D. from Cornell University Law School.

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