

Why T.R. Sent the Great White Fleet

by Lori Bogle

One hundred years ago this December, the Great White Fleet left Hampton Roads becoming the first and only global naval parade in history. When commemorating the event it's easy to focus on the fleet's notable achievements. Over a 14 month period, 14,000 men on 16 battleships and auxiliaries, traveled 46,000 miles, circumnavigated the world and demonstrated to Europe and the Far East, American strength during a time of peace. Painted white, but with ship bows still decorated with the gilded scrollwork of a bygone era, the fleet was greeted by increasingly enthusiastic crowds at 20 different domestic and foreign ports of call. By February of 1909, the battleships had returned to Virginia in excellent shape and on schedule for a grand finale a few days before President Theodore Roosevelt left office

The successful completion of the voyage of the Great White Fleet was a world sensation, elevating its officers, sailors, and even the battleships themselves into national heroes. But it

T.R.'s Battle Fleet The Voyage of the Great White Fleet 100 years Later

would be Roosevelt who received the lion's share of the praise for conceiving and executing such a spectacular voyage. No other world leader was daring enough, or critics would say quite so foolhardy, to risk their fleet on a worldwide, goodwill tour. While it is impossible to identify a single, overriding motivation behind Roosevelt's decision, it is clear that he discovered a myriad of benefits – political, diplomatic, military, and even personal – as he considered the possible ramifications of a worldwide voyage for the Great White fleet.

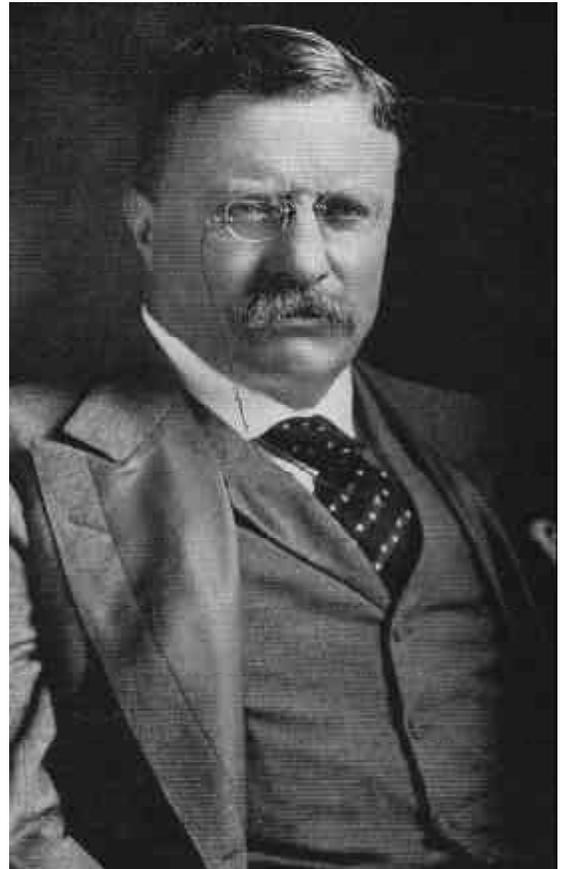
By the time of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency the United States had become a true imperialistic power. With an inadequate naval force to protect America's overseas possessions acquired

during the Spanish American War, the new president asked Congress for the funds to build the ten first-class battleships (augmented by a number of lesser vessels) that he argued were essential for national security. Roosevelt also began the process of reorienting naval strategy around the doctrines of Alfred Thayer Mahan by consolidating all American battleships into a single fleet stationed on the Atlantic coast. Roosevelt had considerable success in the first four years of his presidency achieving his diplomatic and defense measures.

After winning congressional approval for his ships, acquiring the sole rights for America to build a transatlantic canal through newly independent Panama (Hay-Pauncefote Treaty of 1901 and Hay-Burnau-Varilla Treaty of 1903) negotiating a peace treaty between Japan and Russia (1905 Treaty of Portsmouth), and giving his unofficial approval for the division of the world's oceans between the U.S., British, and the Japanese fleets, the president announced that no further naval expansion was necessary, except for replacing obsolete warships when needed.

Roosevelt's friend and advisor, Henry Cabot Lodge, had warned him against declaring a moratorium on new battleships. The senator correctly predicted such a public announcement would make it difficult for the president to build additional ships if world conditions changed. They quickly did. The appearance in 1906 of the HMS *Dreadnought* outclassed even the most modern vessels in the U.S. fleet and gave Germany the opportunity to match the British in number of all-big-gun battleships. That coupled with the failure the following year to impose international naval arms restriction at the 2nd Hague conference, convinced the President that the American fleet would soon lack the firepower needed to back his Big Stick diplomacy.

The Navy had discussed the need for fleet maneuvers to the Pacific with Roosevelt



As President, Theodore Roosevelt was one of the U.S. Navy's strongest advocates and the send of the U.S. Battle Fleet around the world in 1907 was his signature naval initiative. (Naval Institute photo)

as early as 1905, but such a cruise was barred by technical and political obstacles. As a practical matter the navy needed to drill in the skills required for a Mahanian-style war with the Japanese fleet. It also needed to investigate coaling and docking/repair capabilities along the transatlantic route that would take the fleet to the Philippines – where the service planned to concentrate its ships to fight Japan. Until 1907, however, the U.S. did not have the necessary number of battleships or colliers to make the trip useful or possible. Political opposition came from East Coast congressmen who felt it would be dangerous to leave their states unprotected for the extended period of time necessary for the fleet to travel to California and return by either proposed route – the Suez Canal or back through the Strait of Magellan. Some representatives feared that the battleships would never return and that

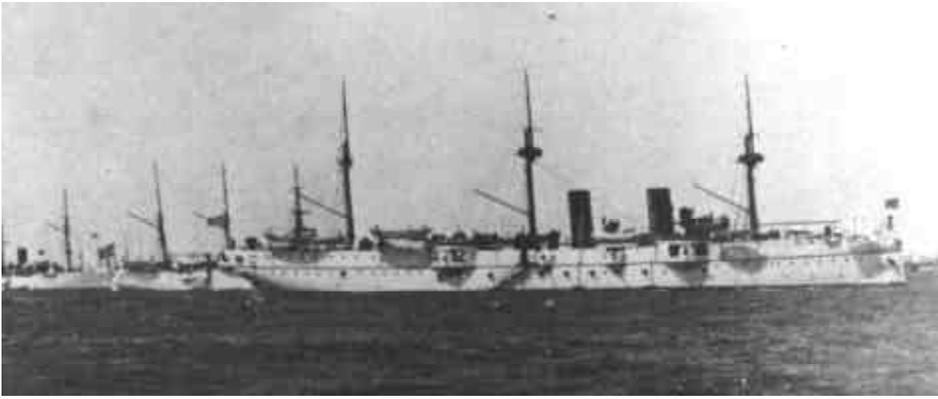
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Before the Great White Fleet, there was the great "White Squadron" of cruisers shown here assembled in Hampton Roads in the early 1890s. Fleet gatherings and rendezvous were effective ways for all of the world's navies to publicize and showoff their fleet. Before the Great White Fleet left, two such rendezvous, 1893 and 1907, were held in Hampton Roads. (HRNM photo)

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Roosevelt was actually using the proposed exercise as a ploy to force Congress to build a two ocean navy. Overall, Roosevelt's critics felt that his so-called "practice cruise" was an attempt by the president to bolster his political support on the West Coast by capitalizing on fears of a possible war with Japan.

While the Department of the Navy viewed the fleet exercise as a trial run for a war with Japan, Roosevelt only gave final approval to the voyage because of a world climate of peace. One of the main reasons Roosevelt decided in 1905 to halt battleship construction had been America's cordial relations with Japan and England that had allowed each power to retain the bulk of their fleets in home waters. While Japan's overwhelming naval victory that year against Russia at the Battle of Tsushima had pleased the President, it also caused him worry. He needed Japan to strengthen itself militarily to keep European nations from threatening American interests in the Philippines and China.

Yet, Roosevelt fully believed that unless checked the Japanese would become increasingly aggressive and someday declare war on the United States. In 1906 a measure by the San Francisco School Board segregating oriental children, led to riots in Japan and California. Roosevelt resolved the San Francisco issue with the Gentleman's Agreement of February 12, 1907 and by the time the Great White Fleet left Hampton Roads that December, relations with Japan had improved considerably. For that reason the voyage cannot be interpreted as threatening war. It was a military measure, nonetheless. The

President designed the maneuvers to demonstrate to the Japanese, during a time of peace, that the United States could move its fleet to the Pacific with or without the Panama Canal and that it would arrive battle ready.

world tour was "to impress the American people" and "stimulate popular interest and belief in the navy." With the country in the midst of an economic recession, the President, a master at harnessing public opinion, attempted to overcome congressional opposition to his request for four modern battleships by taking his case directly to the public in numerous speeches and through a number of creative media events. He designated the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition at Hampton Roads, the embarkation and termination points for the Great White Fleet, as an "international, naval, marine, and military celebration." He also refashioned the proposed fleet maneuvers, with its nuanced diplomatic and military objectives, into a global maritime parade in order to increase the popularity of the navy at home and to increase the prestige of the nation abroad.

Prior to World War I, Great Britain and Germany held extravagant, annual naval pageants (often called reviews or parades)

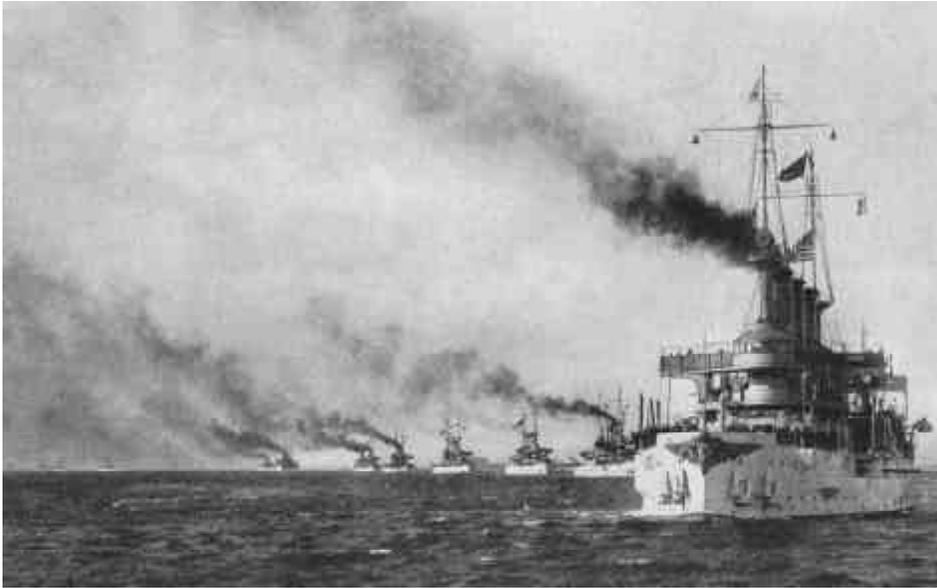


If Roosevelt was looking to publicize the Navy with the voyage of the Great White Fleet, he succeeded with flying colors as shown with this headline from the local newspaper of the small town of Mansfield, OH. Newspapers from coast-to-coast covered the voyage. A larger version of the cartoon can be seen on page 16. (December 17, 1907 edition of the Mansfield News)

While the first and most difficult leg of the voyage (Hampton Roads to Magdalena Bay, Mexico) can be viewed largely in military terms, the rest of the fleet's itinerary served the President's domestic and international publicity needs. Roosevelt claimed in his autobiography that his primary reason for sending the fleet on its

inviting select nations and foreign journalists. America hosted its first pageant in 1893 at Hampton Roads in connection with the World's Columbian Exposition. The second was in 1902 when Roosevelt invited German battleships to New York. Both attracted large crowds of spectators and

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The fleet departs Hampton Roads for California on December 16, 1907. Originally, Roosevelt signaled that he was only going to send the fleet to the West Coast of the United States. It was only later that he announced that they were going around the world. (HRNM photo)

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were effective in popularizing the Navy. U.S. participation at international pageants, however, depended on a supply of showcase vessels capable of traveling great distances and arriving in respectable condition.

America’s first detachment arrived in Europe in 1903, but it is noteworthy that Roosevelt was only able to send a handful of cruisers to parade in the harbors of France, Germany and then England rather than the customary battleships of major naval powers. With the successful transit of the Great White Fleet, “Uncle Sam’s Greatest Show on Earth,” however, America had entered the world stage, at least

symbolically. Greeted by enthusiastic crowds wherever the battleships steamed, including the ports of Japan, the American fleet brought prestige to the nation and sent a clear message to Congress – build more ships.

While political, diplomatic, and military factors figured heavily in the planning for the Great White Fleet, personal factors cannot be discounted. After announcing in 1904 that he would not run for another term, the President began building his legacy by planning a historical demonstration of his belief in the Navy as the instrument of America’s foreign policy and an example of its national greatness.



U.S. Navy sailors pose for a picture with their Commander-in-Chief when the fleet returned to Hampton Roads in 1909 (HRNM photo).

Roosevelt did not consult with the State Department or even his cabinet before deciding on the venture and then micromanaged nearly every detail of the grand spectacle. He closely monitored the fleet’s progress to ensure that it would return in time for him to preside at its homecoming and gave the president elect, William Howard Taft, no role in the ceremony.

The multi-purpose Great White Fleet, however, has a mixed legacy. The Japanese did understand the implications of the voyage and were inspired by the American visit to Yokohama to further efforts in their battleship program. Diplomatically Anglo-American relations improved but differences increased between the U.S. and both China and Germany. The international naval community was impressed by America’s success at circumnavigating the globe, but much less so by the fact that the U.S. could not supply its own ships and had to rely on over 40 British colliers to do so (The Navy only had eight colliers and could not charter private ships because American companies could not secure return cargo.) And ironically while the Great White Fleet was immensely popular with the American people, it did little to secure funding for the four battleships requested by Roosevelt for 1908 (he was barely able to get an agreement for two).

His overconfidence in sending the fleet without congressional authorization only increased the impression that he had usurped the power and privileges of the legislature. When criticized before the fleet’s departure that he would exceed the Navy’s yearly appropriation for coal if he dared proceed with his plan, Roosevelt taunted his opponents in a public speech. He had enough money to get the battleships to the Pacific, he argued. It would be up to Congress to bring them back.

But the American people loved the Navy and they loved their president. Whatever reason was the primary factor behind Roosevelt’s decision to send the fleet around the world; the President had taken a bold step and created a public relations sensation that came to epitomize the bravery and resourcefulness of the national spirit. Shortcomings could be overlooked. For the Great White Fleet, extravaganza extraordinaire, announced the arrival of America as a naval power of significance. And the people were proud. 