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Hist 301

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Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet

 James R. Reckner approaches the circumnavigation of the American fleet by beginning with an iconic moment at the turn of the 19th century: the victory of Japan over Russia in 1906. Before this, the United States had established itself as an imperial country with a foothold in the Philippines by 1898 and a victory in the war against Spain in the same year. The victory of small Asian country over a massive European power struck the world and forced president Theodore Roosevelt to consider a defensive solution to protect U.S interests in case conflict with Japan were to arise. His response was to invest heavily in the navy and construct a powerful navy to bolster a revering image of the U.S on a national and international level.

 The dilemma regarding relations between Japan and U.S was due to regulations preventing Japanese immigrants from entering the California. Furthermore, Japanese workers on the battleships were also relieved of their duties because they were accused of being spies. Such events were caught up amidst the publicity of the battleships as they visited major ports around the world with millions staring in awe at the accomplishments of the U.S. Fear of Japan also encouraged other European powers to invest in their navies. The naval mission headed by Roosevelt was incredibly successful at catching the world’s eye as the battleships rounded South America, traveled to both coasts of the U.S, to Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and made their final passage through the Mediterranean. But, as Reckner states, this escapade was not a sign of war, it was a rather a “cruise” that was a “manifestation, a result, of [the] arms race, not one of its major events.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In short, the purpose for this expedition was not to provoke an aggressive response, but to prove to the world that the U.S had the ability to mobilize a sophisticated navy capable of reaching any part of the globe.

 To put this book into the perspective of the world in 1900, we must observe the implications of such an event as well as how the cruise was viewed by the world. The circumnavigation of sixteen U.S battleships between 1907 and 1909 was the result of an emerging U.S imperial presence amidst external conflict around the world. The heightened xenophobia towards Japanese immigration along with the victory of the Japanese over Russia increased tensions between the U.S and Japan. The cruise appeared controversial in the eyes of the press, but the government’s intentions of developing a defensive fleet would help strengthen the nation’s national identity and to make known that the U.S must be revered.

The cruise reasserted a sense of security and protection, while it also contributed to the idea of projecting power by developing an intimidating navy.

 The news of Japan’s victory over Russia forced the U.S government to consider a defensive plan that could be projected out to the world with the popular support of the American population. Nine years before the cruise, in 1898, the U.S had established a foothold in the Philippines and had defeated Spain. The subsequent victory of Japan over Russia put stress on U.S interests in Asia and the only viable solution would be to create a larger navy. Roosevelt wanted the movement of the navy to be publicized because the proposed global cruise would be an “exercise of a naval war plan, evolved into a tool of public relations: it would popularize the nation.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The goal was to place the navy in the hearts of Americans who would be wowed by the presence of a powerful American fleet. The intentions of creating the fleet were not to encourage aggression, it was instead to resemble a response to the then-current tensions in case greater conflict were to arise. But the press, and especially the international press, saw this cruise as either an “enlightened emulation of naval policies” pursued by previous European powers or a “crude and untimely flexing of American muscle.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Both perspectives provide insight into the government’s intentions and the media’s response.

 Another interesting aspect this book highlights is the challenge of foreign policy with Japan after restrictive regulations towards Japanese immigrants. In the early 1900s, the influx of Japanese immigrants “had raised the concern of American working men on the West Coast and triggered discriminatory measures in California.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The fear was Japan’s response to these xenophobic reactions to Japanese immigration. A question that may have circulated was: is Japan navy going to invade the U.S for these reasons? In response to ongoing pressure between the U.S and Japan, admirals in the U.S fleet wanted “all Japanese [to] be transferred to home stations or discharged” for fear that they “might cripple the fleet” if the U.S were to engage Japan.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is interesting to see how such tensions between the U.S and Japan created such a negative social response.

These negative responses can be further emphasized when looking at the reaction of media. While the cruise was traveling to New Zealand in 1908, the press considered the implications of a Japanese victory and “concluded that it would unleash an expansionist drive by millions of Japanese.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Even after the Japanese had accepted the invitation for the U.S fleet to arrive in Yokohama, literature published by Germany like the book *Bonzai!* “attempted to rekindle anti-Japanese feelings in the United States.”[[7]](#footnote-7) By observing these two examples of media involvement during the U.S fleet’s cruise, it was obvious that the event provided media with the ability to dramatize and muddle the reality of the situation. After the U.S arrived in Japan, “the Japanese were unanimously applauded as the perfect hosts whose generous treatment… went a long way to dispel much of the suspicion…”[[8]](#footnote-8) Reckner’s use of media publications in contrast to government document accounts allow the truth to come through the facade created by media. Reckner also includes an argument provided by Robert Neu that states that racism and immigration, not Japanese expansion, were the cause of growing tensions between the U.S and Japan.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nevertheless, Reckner emphasizes how the media was able to distort information for the public.

Expanding out of the Pacific, it is also important to emphasize the impact on foreign policy, especially the more hostile countries. The cruise was a part of an already prominent arms race that was due to “the appearance of HMS Dreadnought, and the failure of the Second Hague Conference in 1907.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Such events highlight that tensions between European powers had been developing before the emergence of the new U.S navy. Eric Hobsbawm writes in *The Age of Empire* that governments in the early 20th century needed “the capacity to produce [weapons] on a wartime scale, if the occasion arose… [and] that their industry maintained a capacity far in excess of any peacetime agreement.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The countries being discussed were of course still colonial powers, and the importance of an active navy was vital for diplomacy. As for Germany, it rejected negotiations regarding disarmament in The Hague Conference. In fact, “unlike all other navies, the German fleet’s bases were… opposite Britain… [and] its objective could not be anything except conflict with the British Navy.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The threat of Germany was apparent. Not surprisingly, the “German naval expansion were significant factors leading to American rapprochement with Japan.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It is interesting observe that relations between the U.S and Japan, which were contentious at one stage of the cruise, ultimately brought them closer to an alliance after considering various foreign policy agreements and treaties. Over the course of the cruise, the antagonist changed from Japan to Germany.

*Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet* helps illustrate the pressure so many countries experienced during the early 20th century. For the majority of the 19th century, European countries had reaped the rewards of colonialism and carved out their parts of the world. However, the early 20th century saw the emergence of two new imperial powers, the U.S and Japan, who made the rest of the world realize that *their* world was still in the process of changing. As Reckner states multiple times, the cruise of sixteen American battleships was Roosevelt waving his “Big Stick” at everyone else. Events like the victory of Japan over Russia in 1906 proved that a massive European power could be defeated. But, as this book illustrates so well, this important historical event was met with a rapid, successful response from a country that had just started to utilize its imperial power. The U.S’s ambitious cruise paid off in the end. But was this response for better or worse? Only time would tell.

Works Cited

Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Empire*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987

Reckner, James R. *Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988

1. James R. Reckner, *Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 163 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Reckner, *Great White Fleet*, 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. ix [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Reckner, *Great White Fleet*, 116 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. 118-199 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. 163 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 308 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 319 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Reckner, *Great White Fleet*, 158 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)