Lessons from An Earlier 'Golden Age': 1900-1922

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America's victory over Spain in 1898 had two significant impacts on American politics and foreign policy. First, it ushered in a new era of American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, which neatly aligned with America's isolationist tendencies and the pivotal 1823 U.S. policy known as the Monroe Doctrine. This doctrine, which remained influential throughout the 20th century, warned European powers against further colonization or interference in the Americas and threatened U.S. intervention if they did not adhere.[1] Second, the Spanish-American War victory propelled the U.S. into world politics with its new insular possessions, including the far eastern territories of Guam, the Philippines, and Samoa. More than 120 years later, there is growing consensus that the U.S, under a second Trump administration, is returning to strategies from the early 1900s including a new era of grand strategy that prioritizes the Homeland and the Pacific.[2] In the first half of the twentieth century, U.S. Naval leaders routinely used the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door to China policies as justifications for an expanded Naval fleet and rationale for advanced bases across the Pacific.[3] The Navy acknowledged these were American policies that carried no international legal basis. Still, Navy leaders thought integrating the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door to China policy into naval strategy could further America's foreign policy, defend its interests, and in doing so, expand the U.S. Naval fleet.

This article draws from larger historical research concerning inter-service rivalries over Guam and the Philippines in the early 1900s in which the U.S. Navy's thoughts about advanced basing and the U.S. Army's lessons from the 1904 Russo-Japanese War strongly influenced each services' concerns over land and coastal defense.[4] Together, both services, while entrenched in their doctrines, struggled to reach a joint solution to advanced basing in the Pacific before the 1922 Washington Conference treaties redirected naval investment and innovation elsewhere. The repercussions left both the Philippines and Guam vulnerable. Today, as current military leaders pivot their services to align with President Donald Trump and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's visions focused on the Homeland and the Pacific, the inter-service rivalries, poor civil-military relations, and fiscal constraints of the early 1900s may provide a window into hard lessons about readiness and lethality and the services' alignment with the Executive Branch.

The U.S. Navy's endorsing of an American-focused doctrine and advocating for an expanded fleet through the first two decades of the twentieth century did not translate to support for advanced basing options, resources, or fortifications abroad. Although policymakers supported acquisition of the Philippines and Guam and viewed the expansion as a gateway to China, many leaders did not desire to advance the military's role in the Pacific nor establish European-style imperialism.[5] Furthermore, policymakers did not see an international or political policy role for the military and viewed statecraft and diplomacy as civilian matters. The work of various historians such as William R. Braisted and Richard D. Challener showcased inefficiencies with civilian oversight of the Navy's proposals.[6] This was especially evident during the Woodrow Wilson Administration, with Secretary Josephus Daniels heading the Navy. For example, in 1913 when heightened tensions between Japan and

U.S. led the General Board and the Army Navy Joint Board to urge the Wilson Administration to mobilize the fleet and begin war preparations in the pacific, Secretary Daniels failed to support the military recommendations.[7] Many critics, including then Vice Admiral Williams Sims also cited Daniels' aggressive preoccupation with corporate profiteering, including his brazen seizure of oil reserves and refusal to pay oil companies during World War I, as an example of how his tenure created civilian-military friction and failed to prepare the Navy with the needed modernization and investment.[8] Nevertheless, research does not specify if the Navy understood the complexities of their civil-military interactions and that military decisions and rivalries with the U.S. Army could have unintended consequences on subjects, such as resource allocation and investment.

The General and Joint Boards

To forge naval consensus, the Secretary of the Navy John D. Long established the General Board in 1900 with the purpose of preparing the Navy fleet for war and for naval defense of the coast. In 1903, the Secretaries of War and the Navy established a Joint Board comprised of Army and Navy board members with a charter that required members reach "common conclusions for all matters calling for the cooperation" between the Army and Navy.[9]

Although the Navy's General Board had free reign to determine probable enemies, committees worked independently versus collaboratively in the early years.[10] The Army and Navy Joint Board's work also did not seek guidance or consult with the State Department, the executive branch (aside from the service secretaries or occasional engagement with the president), or the legislative branch. Instead, officers from both boards drew their understanding of foreign affairs from observation. For example, the General Board argued for a strong fleet and naval capability. General Board members viewed conflict as inevitable due to trade rivalries among great powers, and, guided by the Mahanian philosophy, believed that "nations must expand if they are to achieve greatness."[11] Furthermore, many officers who served on the General Board from 1900-1917 were veterans of or knew shipmates who served in Manila Bay during the Spanish-American War. Therefore, a "decisive battle" at sea and the need for a powerful battle fleet shaped much of the veterans' early recommendations.[12] Recommendations were often incompatible with U.S. Army priorities and offered legislators insufficient appropriation options which ultimately sidelined Far East basing decisions.

Two trends became apparent in the early days of the General Board and the Army and Navy Joint Board. First, Guam was of secondary importance and primarily considered a coal depot. Second, no consensus existed where to install a fortified fleet base in the Philippines although board members agreed on the need for one and that both Guam and the Philippines required defense. From the onset, Admiral George Dewey, a hero of the Spanish-American War who was responsible for the victory at Manila Bay and headed the Navy's General Board, favored the Philippines and specifically Subic Bay.[13] The Army's defense assessments favored the larger area of Manila Bay. In 1906 the Taft Board recommended additional build-up of the insular possessions. Dewey actively endorsed its findings by arguing that the territories "cannot be held unless the principal ports, naval bases, and coaling stations are fortified before the outbreak of war."[14] In 1907, the General Board directed the Naval War College to study air-raid defenses needed for Guam. This study resulted in defense proposals; however, in the same year, the Army and Navy Joint Board concluded it was not practical to assemble sufficient defense forces in Guam.[15]

Perhaps more importantly, despite military experts' conversations regarding the need to protect the new American Far East territories, lawmakers, prioritized domestic needs and declined defense spending elsewhere. For example, Congress' Naval Committee cut the Department's recommendation from 16 ships (consisting of destroyers, submarines, colliers, mine layers, and repair support) in half, suggesting it unlikely advanced basing anywhere would have been approved.[16] Meanwhile, the General Board and the Army and Navy Joint Board's conflicting recommendations over location continued, weakening their analytical credibility. The disagreements proved particularly damaging given the impact of reduced budget proposals created by marred joint service work and minimal congressional support overall. Together, these factors resulted in stagnation regarding Far East advanced basing initiatives.

Entrenched Doctrines

The services continued asking for military spending often using narrow and service-specific justifications. One of the main catalysts for this wrangling occurred because of lessons from the Russo-Japanese War.

In 1908, Major General Lenard Wood successfully encouraged President Theodore Roosevelt to halt build-up plans for Subic Bay. Major General Wood presented analysis that compared the geography between the Philippines' Subic Bay and Port Arthur where the Russian Navy was decimated in 1904. Major General Wood convinced the President of Subic Bay's "utterly indefensible" geography that provided for a barrage of gunfire from the mountains and rear. He added that Subic Bay's natural geographic structure provided operational advantages for executing an amphibious assault and could result in the adversary's defeat similar to the slaughter of the Russian Navy in 1904.[17] Wood's persuasion worked, but Roosevelt was furious about spending the political capital on Subic Bay and chastised the Joint Board for the lack of coordination on a joint matter, for which he had spent years advocating.[18] Admirals and Generals of the period frequently sacrificed civil-military credibility for an inter-service victory, which ultimately paid zero long-term dividends. In this case, the president put his political efforts toward Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i instead.

The Russian defeat at Port Arthur revealed a crucial difference in how the Army and Navy thought about advanced bases, coastal defenses, and naval stations. The Army viewed these through the lens of defensibility. Leaders focused and based decisions on the cost of mortars, direct gun fires, and men to defend a harbor, port facility, or advanced base and these views remain fundamental in current Army doctrine.[19] On the contrary, several of Mahan's writings stressed the subordinate nature of defensive operations to naval offensive capabilities. "The offensive element in warfare is the superstructure, the end aim for which the defensive exists."[20] Mahan later wrote that the main military requirement of a naval station should be that its "useful in war."[21] Port Arthur's attack presented a significant problem for Navy and Army strategists. Each service saw the *front*, aligned its forces, supplies, and offensive and defensive positions differently in times of war.[22] This dilemma eventually led to a stagnant, inter-service rivalry over the future of Subic and Manila Bays. The discord also unconsciously extended to Guam with the General Board and the Joint Board's inability to select an advanced base that excluded the Philippines. Between 1907 and 1909, President Roosevelt directed the Joint Board to re-evaluate Subic Bay, Manila, and Cavite, a province of the Philippines located in the Calabarzon region (see Figure 1). Serious consideration of Guam as a permanent Far East fleet base option may have generated a definitive solution between those options, but board members did not consider Guam. Efforts were instead narrowly and consistently focused on the Philippines and arguments about the two services' doctrinal strengths. To be sure, building and fortifying Guam would have been expensive.[23] Still, San Luis D'Apra was the only location possible for a fleet base in the region, and board members did primarily agree upon Navy and Army requirements in board meetings. However, the General Board and Joint Board leadership did not consider Guam a viable option until 1913. Those studies became overshadowed by a world war and resulted in inaction. Finally, the 1922 Washington Conference article XIX expressly prohibited the build-up of any Far East location west of Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i. This permanently eliminated the opportunity to invest in the Philippines or Guam entirely. Therefore, the broad indecisiveness and arguments over the location of any Far East bases crippled naval progress and led to conflicting recommendations from the General Board and Joint Board. As a result, policy-makers abandoned all future build-up opportunities.

The Navy experienced some successes in their civil-military interactions. Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i was a popularly supported naval project, well-funded, and able to be built in a relatively short time.[24] Additionally, World War I pressed President Woodrow Wilson to order service Secretaries to develop a comprehensive plan for national defense. However, military planners turned their focus to threats in the Western Hemisphere with Germany's potential attack of the Caribbean. Nonetheless, the General Board responded with a five-year, $100 million shipbuilding proposal.[25] Congress approved the Naval Appropriations Bill in 1916, which consisted of ten battleships, six battle cruisers, and fifty destroyers. Still, passing the legislation required considerable pressure from Secretary of the Navy Daniels and General Board President Dewey.[26] The difficulty in which the Navy had to shore up support and budgetary spending for the U.S. despite a world war affecting its interests showcased the broader struggles of the General Board in convincing lawmakers that the U.S. Navy needed real investment. Far East basing priorities, therefore, took a backseat.

Conclusion

By the turn of the century, with new territories in America's possession and Admiral Mahan's ideas about sea power taking hold, the U.S. Navy had a formidable fleet from which to project its influence. However, America also found itself politically naïve to the challenges before it. From 1900 onward, the General Board made consistent recommendations to undertake a major shipbuilding program and build critical

defense, fortifications, and fleet infrastructure. The Navy argued this would enable a two-ocean Navy, which was necessary to protect the U.S. and adequately project its influence abroad. Unfortunately, the Navy was less than effective in its advocacy for naval investment, especially in the newly acquired territories of the pacific despite integrating executive branch policies. Board recommendations indicate the debate over suitable Far East locations for fleet bases was further exacerbated by an Army-Navy rivalry, which undercut the military's position during interactions with the president, Congress, and other civilian policymakers. Furthermore, the independent Navy Bureaus, who reported directly to the Secretary of the Navy, were often resistant to General Board recommendations.[27] These factors delayed or sometimes ended Far East naval expansion as initially envisioned and routinely resulted in Guam being considered of nominal importance.

FIGURE 1: Map of Philippines.[28]

Likewise, the contemporary military struggles with a unified focus on integrating its main mission and operations into the pacific theater, which is naval and airpower dominant. Yet, the U.S. Army's current voice and advocacy, especially with a prior Army officer as Secretary of Defense, is strong and forceful. Given the U.S. defense priorities are once again returning to Monroe Doctrine isolationism, the services would do well spending their energy on developing true joint objectives and proposals that align directly with current Department of Defense and Presidential priorities, rather than on those that support their unique doctrines. Joint initiatives and cost-saving proposals that support and defend the Homeland and the first island chain in the pacific are likely the only way for the services to collectively preserve and garner investment and financial support from a Congress and President focused on severe federal budget cuts and governmental reforms. ■

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Notes

1. Ken Drexler, "The Monroe Doctrine: Primary Documents in American History," The Library of Congress, last updated October 9, 2020, https://guides.loc.gov/monroe-doctrine. The full text of President James Monroe's Seventh Annual Message to Congress, delivered on December 2, 1823 can be found at https://www.congress.gov/annals-of-congress/page-headings/18th-congress/president-s-annual-message/45799.

2. Alex Horton and Hannah Natanson, "Secret Pentagon memo on China, homeland has Heritage Fingerprints," *Washington Post*, March 29, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/29/secret-pentagon-memo-hegseth-heritage-foundation-china/.

3. Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1914*. (Princeton University Press, 1973), 18.

4. Asheleigh Gellner, "U.S. Naval Expansion, Advanced Basing, and The Army-Navy Rivalry Over Guam From 1898-1922," U.S. Naval War College, to fulfill Graduate Certificate in Maritime History Requirement, May 26, 2022.

5. Diane B. Bendahmane and John W. McDonald, *U.S. Bases Overseas: Negotiations with Spain, Greece, and the Philippines*, (Westview Press, 1990), 67.

6. William R. Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific*, (University of Texas Press, 1958); Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy*.

7. Stephen Van Evera "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984): 58-107, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538636.

8. Roger Stern, "Peak Oil, Progressivism, and Josephus Daniels, 1913-1921," *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 4 (2020): 139-166, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48739571.

9. General Orders No 107, 17 July 1903, Box 7, Entry 284, Record Group 165, National Archives Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

10. John T. Kuehn, *America's First General Staff: A Short History of the Rise and Fall of the General Board of the Navy, 1900-1950* (Naval Institute Press, 2017), 37-40; Ronald Spector, *Admiral of the New Empire: The Life and Career of George Dewey* (Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 128.

11. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy,* 13. Mahanian philosophy refers to widely accepted foundational doctrine and theories on seapower by Alfred Thayer Mahan. His most well-known work was *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*, (Little, Brown, and company, 1890), now in its 15th edition.

12. Spector, *Admiral of the New Empire*, 132.

13. This article uses the modern spelling of Subic Bay. However, the records of the Joint Board regarding discussions about the Philippines as well as other primary source material of the period refer to the area as Subig Bay. Original Joint Board records can be found at The National Archives Microfilm Publications, "Records of the Joint Board 1903-1947," Washington D.C, 1986.

14. "Roosevelt Makes Plea For Better Defenses: Sends Report of Expert Military Board to Congress," *New York Times*, Mar 6, 1906; Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific,* 178.

15. Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific,* 207. The Joint Board also made the made conclusion for Samoa and Hawai'i.

16. "Admiral Dewey's Reply To Protest Against Naval Increase," *Washington Post*, March 15, 1908.

17. Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan: 1897-1945*, (Naval Institute Press, 1991), 67.

18. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy*, 48-49.

19. W.G. Haan, "Coast Defense," *Journal of the United States Artillery*, (1908): 137-139; Brian A. Linn, *The Echo of the Battle: The Army's Way of War*, (Harvard University Press, 2007), 97-98, 108-109.

20. Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Consideration on the Dispositions of Navies," in *Mahan on Naval Strategy*, ed. John Hattendorf, (Naval Institute Press, 1991), 288.

21. Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Strategic Lines," in *Mahan on Naval Strategy*, ed. John Hattendorf, (Naval Institute Press, 1991), 173.

22. Italics used for emphasis by the author of the "Lessons From an Earlier 'Golden Age': 1900-1922."

23. Miller, *War Plan Orange*, 73-74.

24. Daniel J. Costello,"Planning for War: A History of the General Board of the Navy, 1900-1914," (PhD diss., Tufts, 1968), 220.

25. David Trask, “The U.S. Navy in a World at War, 1914-1919, in *In Peace and War: Interpretations of American Naval History*, ed. Kenneth J. Hagan, (Praeger Security International, 2008), 172.

26. Spector, *Admiral of the New Empire*, 201.

27. The eight bureaus of the Department of the Navy are Yards and Docks, Construction and Repair, Steam Engineering, Ordnance, Equipment, Supplies and Accounts, Navigation, and Medicine and Surgery. For more information about the history of the Bureau System see Daniel J. Costello, “Planning for War: A History of the General Board of the Navy, 1900-1914,” (PhD diss., Tufts, 1968); Alfred Thayer Mahan, “The Navy Department,” (reprinted from *Scribner’s Magazine*, (May 1903); “*The Need of a General Staff: Extract from the message of the President*. Excerpt also, from *The Annual Report of, and Memoranda Submitted to, The Secretary of the Navy*. 1903.” Washington: Government printing office: 27.

28. Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific*, Part 2 portion of map insert.