

History's Verdict on the Maine Disaster

The explosion which sank the battleship U.S.S. *Maine* and claimed the lives of 260 American sailors in February 1898 was the spark that inflamed war fever in the United States. Once a U.S. Navy court of inquiry asserted that the ship had been sunk by an external explosion, war was almost unavoidable. American public opinion was clearly convinced of Spain's guilt and demanded vengeance.

Even at the time, however, there were doubts about the official report. Three days after the explosion, the navy's leading weapons expert, Professor Philip Alger, said in a newspaper interview that the *Maine* could not have been sunk by an external mine, but rather was probably ripped apart by an internal explosion.

Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt was so furious when he read the interview that he accused Alger of taking "the Spanish side." In a letter to the professor's superior, Roosevelt wrote that "whether probable or not, it certainly is possible that the ship was blown up by a [Spanish] mine." Roosevelt feared that members of Congress who opposed his effort to strengthen the navy would use the incident against him. In fact, two Republican congressional leaders immediately called for a halt to Roosevelt's program to build new battleships.

Historians would later uncover new evidence that essentially cleared Spain of responsibility. The most serious study was published in 1976 by Retired Admiral H.G. Rickover.

After a detailed examination of the *Maine's* wreckage, Rickover concluded that the ship was damaged by an internal explosion. Rickover believed that the explosion had been an accident, most likely caused by the ignition of gunpowder from the heat of a coal fire.

Below is a summary of the eleven main points that Rickover presented to support his findings.

1. An underwater explosion, such as that caused by a mine, typically produces a high plume of water, much like a geyser. None of the observers who witnessed the explosion of the *Maine* reported seeing such a plume.

2. The shock wave of an underwater explosion typically kills a large number of fish. After the *Maine* disaster, few dead fish floated to the surface.

3. A 1911 naval investigation had concluded that the primary explosion within the *Maine* had occurred in a reserve magazine (a storage area for explosives) containing nearly six tons of gunpowder. The investigators, however, had assumed that a mine had triggered the internal explosion.

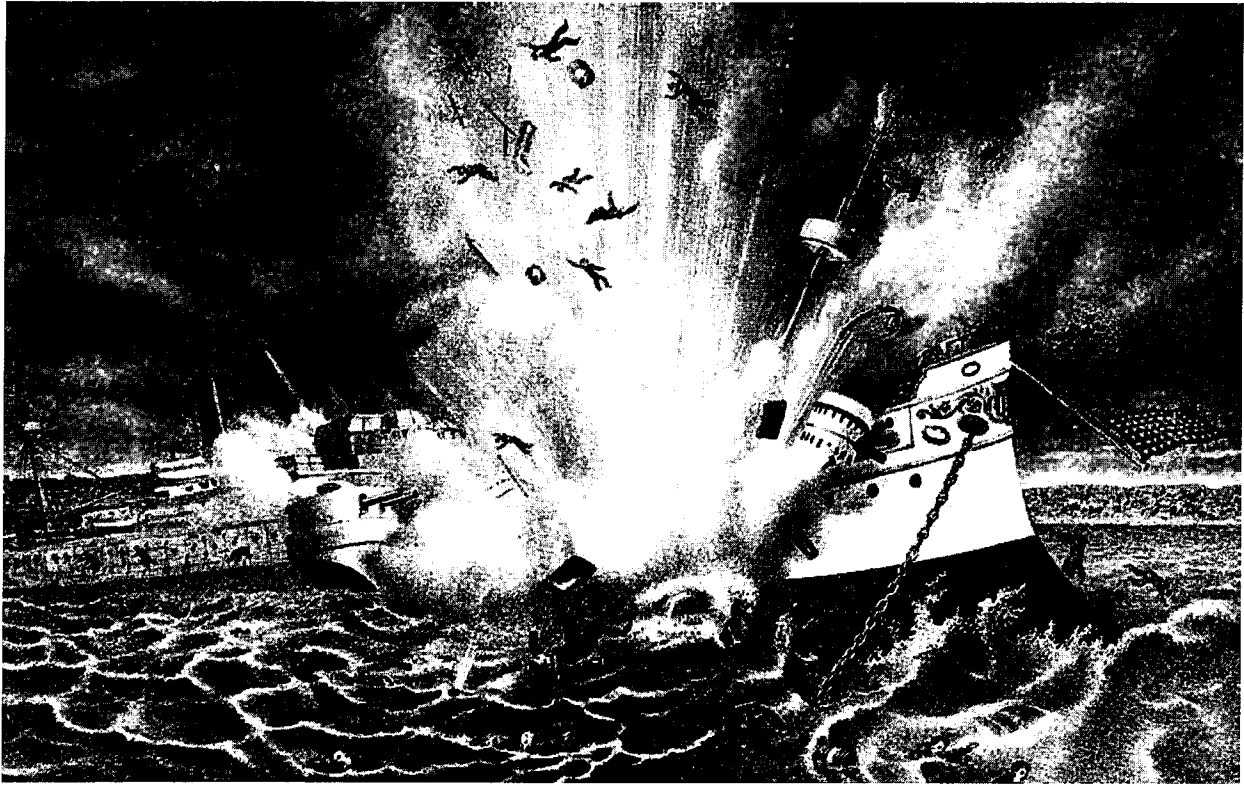
4. No mine available in 1898 could have had the explosive power to ignite the *Maine's* magazine, even if the mine had been in contact with the ship's hull. Rickover calculated that only a mine containing at least 100 pounds

of explosive power placed directly beneath the *Maine's* magazine could have ignited the gunpowder.

5. The gunpowder stored in the *Maine* tended to chemically decompose in warm, humid conditions, leaving it susceptible to spontaneous combustion. In 1907 and 1911, two anchored French battleships exploded in similar circumstances.

6. Placing a large mine close to the *Maine's* hull would have been nearly impossible. After the *Maine* dropped anchor in Havana harbor, Captain Charles Sigsbee ordered his sailors to maintain an around-the-clock watch to protect his ship. Small boats were prohibited from approaching the *Maine*. Rickover also rejected the theory that the mine could have been placed before the *Maine's* arrival, since anchored ships drift over large areas depending on tides and wind patterns.

7. The *Maine's* keel (the main structural



An artist's interpretation of the *Maine* explosion.

component of a ship's bottom) had been bent into the shape of an inverted "V" by the explosion. Although investigators in 1898 cited this as evidence of an external explosion, Rickover found none of the mangling of the steel plates that would have been expected.

8. The inverted "V" shape of the keel was much more consistent with a massive internal explosion, which would have lifted and twisted the structure.

9. From 1895 to early 1898, there were at least twelve recorded coal fires on U.S. warships. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt was so concerned about the problem that in late 1897 he recommended the appointment of a naval board to develop methods for preventing coal fires.

10. Only a single steel wall separated the

reserve magazine that exploded on the *Maine* from the coal bunker (storage compartment) that is believed to have ignited the gunpowder. Captain Sigsbee had filled the *Maine's* bunkers in Virginia with bituminous coal, which was known to be particularly susceptible to spontaneous combustion. (Sigsbee could have opted to load a less combustible fuel, anthracite coal, in Key West, Florida, the *Maine's* last American port of call.)

11. The Spanish had no motive to sink the *Maine*. On the contrary, they were eager at the time to repair relations with the United States to avert American intervention in Cuba. The Cuban nationalists did have an interest in provoking the United States to enter the conflict. However, they had neither the means nor the opportunity to sink the ship.

Rickover's study focused on the technical and factual weaknesses of the naval investigation. Other historians have explored how the political atmosphere of early 1898 may have influenced the report's conclusions.

Above all, the naval court of inquiry was under pressure to put forward its findings quickly. The sinking of the *Maine* had set in motion a series of preparations for war. Shortly after the explosion, McKinley ordered the military to draw up plans to fight Spain. On March 9, 1898, both houses of Congress unanimously approved his request to add \$50 million to the defense budget.

By the time the naval inquiry wrapped up its work on March 21, McKinley had little room to retreat. He had been kept informed of the inquiry's progress since late February and the final report contained no surprises for him when it reached his desk on March 25. The following day, McKinley instructed the U.S. ambassador in Madrid to demand that Spain grant Cuba full independence. War was at hand.