

Remarks by the Honorable Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
On the Occasion of the
100th Anniversary of the Great White Fleet's
Visit to Hawaii
USS MISSOURI
Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, HI
Friday, July 18, 2008

Admiral Willard, RIMPAC partners, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor to have this opportunity to celebrate the arrival of Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet into the welcoming arms of Hawaiians 100 years ago.

I am particularly pleased that we are joined today by participants in RIMPAC, including representatives from Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, the Netherlands, Peru, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and the United Kingdom.

Today's gathering offers us a unique opportunity to reflect on what happened 100 years ago.

This evening's celebration in the middle of a major multi-national exercise—including a number of nations that were visited by the Great White Fleet—reemphasizes Theodore Roosevelt's vision of our Navy's engagement with maritime partners across the globe.

The history of the Great White Fleet is an inspiring tale of vision, America's place in the world, and historic consequences for the United States Navy.

Hawaii has been at the center of major world events throughout the 20th century, and it served as an important destination during the Great White Fleet's transit across the Pacific.

Arriving in Honolulu 100 years ago this week, with Rear Admiral Charles Sperry in command, the 14,000 Sailors aboard the 16 battleships, anchored off Diamond Head, were eight months and 18,000 nautical miles into their record-setting world tour.

The crew enjoyed luaus, sailing regattas and the sun and waves of Waikiki.

The port visit to Hawaii was in keeping with the extraordinary excitement and patriotic affection that had followed the crew from the very first day of its journey.

The awe-inspiring departure of the Great White Fleet from Norfolk, Virginia on December 16, 1907 set the tone, and Americans waited eagerly for news of the Fleet's

progression around the world.

Abroad, the peoples of nations that were hosting the Fleet's port visits also waited with great enthusiasm and excitement to welcome their guests as they made their history-making journey across the globe.

The U.S. Navy had come of age.

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The Great White Fleet's round-the-world voyage was a demonstration that America had arrived on the world stage as a major Naval power.

But this show of force also served two other purposes that were fundamental to American interests then, and which have since become critical elements of the U.S. Navy's strategy.

First, it was an operational exercise to test and evaluate the equipment, the crew, and our logistics supply system.

We take for granted today our ability to send ships out on extended deployments lasting many months and covering thousands of miles far from our shores.

This was not the case 100 years ago.

Some Naval leaders believed that our Fleet was capable of operating for many months at a time, beyond what had been our traditional focus on coastal defense.

President Theodore Roosevelt wanted to prove it.

And he knew that the only way to really find out what our capabilities were was for the Fleet to conduct an extended training exercise.

Roosevelt, in a July 1907 letter to Secretary of State Elihu Root, explained the operational factors that drove his thinking, and I quote:

"It is high time [that the fleet] should go on a cruise around the world. In the first place I think it will have a pacific effect to show that it can be done; and in the next place, . . . [it is] absolutely necessary for us to try in time of peace . . . , and not make the experiment in time of war."

Note the word he chose—"experiment."

It had never been done before by the U.S. Navy, and the only way you can really know something is to actually do it.

So Roosevelt decided it was a particularly auspicious time to try because the 16

battleships of the Great White Fleet embodied significant changes in technology.

Roosevelt's visionary idea took place during a period of tremendous technological transformation in virtually every aspect of weaponry and design.

Technological innovations in steam propulsion, the screw propeller, explosive shells, rifled canon, and armor plating changed the way ships operated and fought as the 20th century opened and the Great White Fleet prepared to set sail.

Battleships had only entered the fleet a little over a decade earlier, when the Indiana was commissioned in 1895.

The U.S. Navy was in transition from a period after the Civil War, limited to coastal defense, to a blue water Navy that we hoped could be operated and maintained for months at a time away from our maintenance facilities.

For a voyage around the world, Sailors could not depend on extended maintenance periods in shipyards.

Sailors at sea would have to take on the burden of maintaining their ships.

The critical importance of Sailors in performing maintenance and in testing and evaluating new technology during actual operations highlights the human factor in evaluating the capabilities of a Navy.

It is not only a ship's tonnage or the number of missiles onboard that determines the capabilities of navies.

Indeed, the real differentiators are the competencies of the crew, the people themselves, and their ability to operate and maintain the ship during extended deployments.

This was true in Theodore Roosevelt's time, and it is true today.

We see Theodore Roosevelt's legacy here in RIMPAC.

The list of lessons learned that emerged from the Great White Fleet applied to everything from logistical support to fleet maintenance over long deployments to the value of exercises at sea.

Roosevelt, as a former assistant secretary of the Navy, knew that training exercises were invaluable.

They still are today.

In conducting RIMPAC, we are once again reminded that there is no substitute for

exercises at sea.

The nations participating in this exercise have invested significant resources in their fleets and in the people who operate them.

We can only know the real value of those investments when we conduct operations in exercises such as RIMPAC, testing and evaluating our equipment, our people, and our interoperability with partner nations.

I am personally looking forward to observing ASW exercises during RIMPAC, and I view them as particularly important to the security of our nations, given the proliferation of quiet diesel submarine technology to many nations, including some whose peaceful intentions are not always evident.

40 nations currently operate submarines, among them rising powers who seek to use submarines as part of their strategy to utilize asymmetric capabilities.

To counter the potential threat posed by submarines, ASW training is indispensable.

We need to conduct ASW training exercises to test our equipment, to train our people, and to develop procedures with our international partners.

It is only by testing and evaluating the full scope of our capabilities that our national leaders can gain confidence in our ability to counter the evolving threats we face, and obtain a measure of our ability to respond to the changing security environment.

In the same way that Theodore Roosevelt insisted on a clear evaluation of the investment that had been made in his beloved Navy, so too do we need to conduct the exercises this week that are part of RIMPAC.

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President Roosevelt would be proud of the many long-term, positive effects his experiment has had on the Navy, the Nation, and the world.

Roosevelt—like George Washington and other great leaders before him—believed in peace through strength.

The whole point of showing strength is to avoid war.

He understood that a nation must show that it is willing and able to wage war and win, lest aggressors take advantage and exploit the weakness of other nations, as they have throughout history.

Today, let us all reflect on Theodore Roosevelt's vision and the lessons of the Great White Fleet world tour, and let us celebrate this great day in the history of the United States and its great Navy.

Thank you, May God bless our Navies, our Sailors, our Marines and our Nations, and may God continue to bless America.