

Remarks by Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
100th Anniversary of Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet
USS NASSAU (LHA 4)
New York, New York
Sunday, October 12, 2008

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be here, and I am honored to be in the company of USS NASSAU Sailors and Marines.

You are to be commended for your superb performance these past few weeks in providing disaster relief to the victims of Hurricane Ike.

You have rendered the people of Galveston a service they will long remember, and you have made the Navy shine in the eyes of your fellow citizens.

This comes on the heels of a very successful deployment to the Med and to the Arabian Gulf.

Congratulations and well done.

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I am very happy to be back in New York City, and it is great to be joined here today by so many New Yorkers.

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I am also especially pleased to be sharing this special, Columbus Day version of the Great White Fleet events with our friends from the Italian Navy, many of whom arrived on the submarine TODARO.

Thank you for sharing this celebration with us.

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This is a bittersweet moment for me.

Since last winter, I have been participating in celebrations both on U.S. shores and around the world in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Great White Fleet.

This is the final such event in the United States, and so I take very seriously my task of paying tribute to a great American and a hero of mine—Theodore Roosevelt.

Doing so here in New York only adds to the emotion I feel in honoring the achievement that the Great White Fleet represents.

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

years ago.

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.

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 progress 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 cruise was primarily a demonstration of U.S. Navy strength, an announcement that America had arrived on the world stage as a major 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 in the U.S. Navy's operations and strategy.

First, it was a training exercise.

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 required, given 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, and the only way you can really know something is to actually do it.

So Roosevelt decided it was time to try.

His experiment was successful, and this extended, peacetime deployment set a precedent that helped define the United States Navy.

The list of lessons learned that emerged from the Great White Fleet world tour applied to everything from logistical support, to fleet maintenance, 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.

Theodore Roosevelt, as Commander in Chief, would never have allowed anything to interfere with vital training.

Nor should we.

As NASSAU Sailors and Marines experienced first-hand in their most recent deployment, there is no substitute for operating at sea, particularly when our underway exercises take place in concert with partner nations.

And you need look no further than over to our friends on the Italian submarine TODARO—here with us today—to see some of those partners with whom we are working.

These submariners are concluding an extended deployment to the United States, a mission that included joint training opportunities for our Navies.

Recognizing the importance of interoperability with partner nations, we have expanded our engagement efforts around the world.

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The U.S. Navy’s engagement with partner nations is not new, however.

It is, in part, a legacy of a second major purpose of the Great White Fleet’s world tour—the use of the Navy as a diplomatic tool.

It was envisaged as a way to reach out to foreign lands, particularly to countries such as Australia and Japan, where U.S. Navy ships had seldom gone before.

By all accounts, it succeeded brilliantly in that regard, establishing relationships that long outlived the Great White Fleet.

The U.S.-Italian relationship, in particular, was significantly affected by an unexpected event, and a response that established a now long-standing U.S. Navy tradition of providing aid to victims of natural disasters.

When a terrible earthquake struck Messina, Italy in December 1908, two ships responded to the news by diverting to Sicily and dispatching Sailors and Marines ashore to render humanitarian assistance to the victims of that disaster.

It should be noted that today—three generations later—this traumatic event is still remembered there, with grandparents telling their children and grandchildren about what transpired so long ago, and how their families were affected.

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President Roosevelt would be proud of the many other examples of humanitarian relief operations that our Navy and Marine Corps have carried out over the past 100 years, and he would certainly take great satisfaction in seeing the warm and friendly relationship that has developed between Italy and the United States.

Over the past seven decades, the enduring quality of this partnership has been a testament to the strength of its foundation.

The ties established through military, economic, and diplomatic channels were built on the foundation of long-standing relations between the millions of Italian immigrants who have come to our shores, and who have made so many contributions to the American story.

Today, the kinship we feel towards our Italian friends extends far beyond America's warm embrace of the Italian-American community.

We consider Italians vital partners in the global war on terror, and in maintaining the security of free peoples everywhere against those who may threaten it.

We share in the success our nations have had in helping to maintain peace and stability in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Our Sailors and Marines operate closely with the Italian Navy in maritime

security and other operations around the world.

Italy is a gracious host to many of our Sailors, their families, and the headquarters of the U.S. 6th Fleet.

And we regard Italy as an indispensable partner in counter-terrorist operations across a broad range of missions that are vital to the security of both of our nations.

As TODARO Sailors know, the training missions that Italy conducts with U.S. forces take place in a partnership of trust, cooperation, and mutual interests.

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The United States Navy has chosen a direction in its maritime strategy.

That direction is towards the development of strong maritime partnerships such as the U.S.-Italy Alliance.

Today, as we celebrate the Great White Fleet and Columbus Day with our Italian friends, let us continue on the path of friendship between our nations.

May we continue to build on Theodore Roosevelt's vision of peace through strength, and cooperative engagement with all those who cherish liberty.

May God bless our Navies, and may God bless America.