

Remarks by Dr. Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
On the Occasion of the
100th Anniversary of the Great White Fleet Sailing
USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT (CVN 71)
Naval Station Norfolk
Norfolk, VA
Saturday, December 15, 2007

Admiral Roughhead, Admiral Greenert, distinguished guests, officers and crew of USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT, ladies and gentlemen, having this opportunity to pay tribute to a great president and an outstanding achievement in the history of the United States is a rare honor.

* * *

In our history, there have been moments when the hearts of the American people have been taken away in a wave of patriotic pride and joy.

Learning the news that World War II had finally ended, and that our soldiers were coming home.

Watching our television screens in awe as America made history by putting a man on the moon.

Watching fireworks in 1976, as a great nation celebrated 200 years of the most successful experiment in human liberty the world had ever known.

* * *

The awe-inspiring departure of the Great White Fleet nearly 100 years ago today was another such moment.

* * *

Patriotism—a genuine, deep feeling of attachment to and pride in America—pulled at the heartstrings of virtually every American in those days, and Teddy Roosevelt’s idea of sending 16 battleships on a cruise around the world captured the public imagination to an astonishing degree.

Theodore Roosevelt—famous today as the youngest president in U.S. history, the builder of the Panama Canal, the leader of the Rough Riders who charged up San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War, and a figure of such eminence that his likeness is carved on Mount Rushmore—was even then considered a force of nature with a larger-

than-life sized personality.

A man of many talents and possessed of indomitable will, he set a standard of energy and unflinching courage that still inspires admiration and awe.

He was also a thinker, a master strategist, and, of course, a passionate supporter of the Navy.

He recognized the unique role and value of the Navy.

His study of history convinced him from early on in his career that the strength of our Navy was inextricably tied to the fate of the nation.

America has been, is, and always will be a maritime nation with maritime interests.

Those interests must be and can only be defended by a strong navy, a branch of service which—by its very nature—encourages an international perspective.

Navies operate in peaceful fashion upon the high seas, and oceans have always been dominated by their international dimension.

Serving as a major medium of travel and communication, oceans connect nations wishing to engage each other, with navies serving a diplomatic function since the beginnings of recorded history.

Teddy Roosevelt built upon that tradition in proposing a cruise circumnavigating the globe of 16 U.S. battleships—the pride of our fleet.

* * *

The round-the-world tour had several purposes.

It was first and foremost a demonstration of U.S. Navy strength.

Riding high in the wake of the exploits of Admiral George Dewey in Manila Bay and our victory in the Spanish-American War, America was a nation eager to be recognized as a respected actor on the world stage.

Another important objective in TR's mind was to rally U.S. public opinion in support of the Navy, and win over recalcitrant members of Congress who opposed his shipbuilding program.

The tour was also envisaged as a diplomatic outreach to foreign lands, particularly countries such as Australia and Japan, where U.S. Navy ships had seldom gone before.

A final rationale for the world cruise was operational, as Roosevelt, in a July 1907

letter to Secretary of State Elihu Root, explained, 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.”

This extended, peacetime deployment set a precedent that helped define the United States Navy.

As a training exercise, it showed the value of testing and evaluating the fleet, and established a way of doing business that is still reflected in how we operate today.

Although today major fleet exercises are standard practice, we should remember that in 1907, an exercise of such magnitude was a novel idea—and even considered inordinately risky.

Roosevelt’s visionary idea took place during a period of tremendous technological change 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.

Radio communications on ships were a new feature that revolutionized not only communications, but command and control.

The sixteen battleships that assembled here one hundred years ago were the product of a transformational period of modern warfare at sea.

The Great White Fleet not only is a technological milestone in American seapower, it also represents a defining moment in U.S. history in the way Americans saw their place in the world.

The world cruise fundamentally changed our defense posture from a posture dominated by a continental focus to an international perspective.

A fleet centered around battleships operating in blue water dramatically re-oriented and enhanced the traditional coastal fleet that had protected our shores in the

past, but which no longer met the challenges of a new century.

We have the irrepressible Theodore Roosevelt to thank for moving the Navy in a new, more forward-leaning direction that has served us well ever since.

* * *

From our perspective today, the fourteen-month journey of the Great White Fleet was an exceptionally notable achievement in Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, and one that he himself considered a highlight.

Roosevelt saw an opportunity to make a bold statement—for domestic as well as foreign consumption—and he seized the moment.

His vision was clear—America as a respected world power, with a strong Navy leading the way.

The cruise was, by all accounts, a sensation, drawing rapturous, enthusiastic crowds at home and abroad, and generating boundless pride in the United States in the hearts of the American people.

The cruise also served as an early outreach effort to other nations, with port visits and diplomatic outreach wherever they sailed.

One year into the cruise, an unanticipated mission in response to a crisis also established a now long-standing U.S. Navy tradition in the area of disaster relief.

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.

* * *

All the Navy's capabilities on display during the 14-month deployment announced to the world that America was a both a world power and a maritime power.

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.

It is one of the timeless lessons from Teddy Roosevelt's day that we would do well to keep in mind today.

* * *

Other important lessons also come to mind.

We have a need for a strong, standing Navy.

The Navy is a very capital-intensive enterprise, requiring long lead times and ships that are in service for decades.

Thus, the Navy, more than all the other services, must maintain a long-term perspective.

Roosevelt understood this, and the need to prepare the Navy well in advance of threats is a recurring theme in his writings.

If we wait until threats are fully in view to build the ships we need, we will have waited too long.

For this reason, it is necessary to sustain strong Congressional support for funding the Navy, support that is based on an informed populace that understands the necessity of long-term investments and planning.

* * *

In his 1906 letter to the Secretary of the Navy, he is emphatic about the role of public support for the Navy in a democracy:

“In a great self-governing republic like ours the army and navy can only be so good as the mass of the people wish them to be.”

The American people have to understand why it is vital to our security and to the protection of our interests to maintain a strong Navy-Marine Corps team—not only during wartime—but in times of peace.

The future of the United States as a great nation depends on our continued maritime superiority—and a long-term perspective.

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.

I look forward to celebrating with all of you the events being planned over the next fourteen months to commemorate the historic cruise conceived and brought to fruition by this ship's namesake.

Thank you, God bless our Navy, and God bless America.