



You're *the* Historian

Who Sank the *Maine*?



Captain Charles Sigsbee

During Cuba's revolt against Spain, the American battleship *Maine* dropped anchor in the Havana harbor to protect American interests in Cuba. On the night of February 15, 1898, the ship exploded and 266 Americans lost their lives. The United States sent a court of inquiry to Havana on February 21. Despite the lack of evidence concerning the source of the explosion, American newspapers and many public officials claimed that Spain was responsible. Pressured on all sides, President McKinley sent Spain an ultimatum that led to war. Who—or what—really sank the *Maine*?

Read the following excerpts from testimony and evidence. Then answer the questions and complete the activities that follow.

From the commander and an early interview

Telegraph from the commander of the *Maine* to the secretary of the navy, February 15:

"Maine blown up in Havana harbor at nine forty to-night and destroyed. Many wounded and doubtless more killed or drowned. . . . Public opinion should be suspended until further report. . . . Many Spanish officers, including representatives of General Blanco, now with us to express sympathy."

—Captain Charles D. Sigsbee

The court of inquiry was interested in discovering whether the explosion had come from inside or outside the ship. If it came from inside, was it sabotage or an accident? If it came from outside, who or what caused it? Before the court met, the *Washington Evening Star* published a February 18 interview with the U.S. Navy's leading ordnance expert:

"We know of no instances where the explosion of a torpedo or mine under the ship's bottom has exploded the magazine [powder and explosives] within. It has simply torn a great hole in the side or bottom, through which water entered, and in consequence of which the ship sunk. Magazine explosions, on the contrary, produce effects exactly similar to the effects of the explosion on the *Maine*. When it

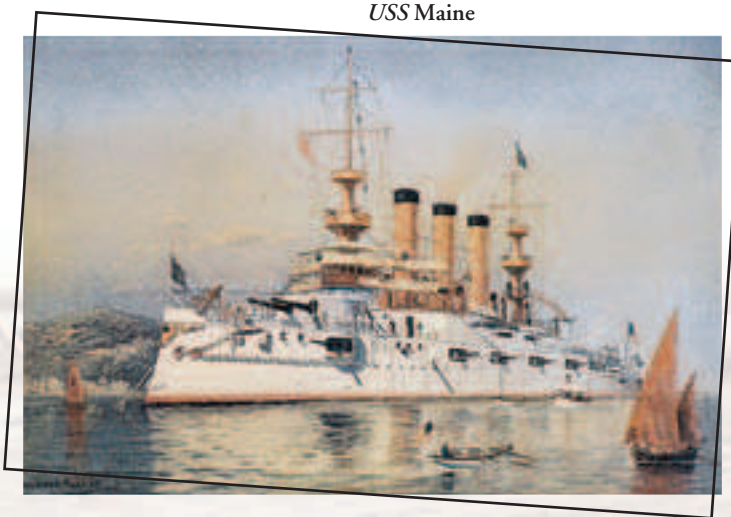
Newspaper headline



comes to seeking the cause of the explosion of the *Maine*'s magazine, we should naturally look not for the improbable or unusual causes. . . . The most common of these is through fires in the bunkers."

—Philip R. Alger

USS *Maine*





Engraving of the explosion



Mast of the Maine at Arlington National Cemetery

From the inquiry and later reports

As the court of inquiry concluded its investigation, it considered reports of the divers who examined the *Maine* and evidence that suggested there had been two explosions. On March 11, 1898, Lieutenant Commander Adolph Marix, judge advocate of the court of inquiry, questioned Commander George A. Converse, who was brought in as a technical expert.

Marix: Looking at the plan of the *Maine's* forward 10-inch and 6-inch magazines, would it be possible for them to have exploded, torn out the ship's side on both sides, and leave that part of the ship forward of frame 18 so water borne as to raise the after portion of that part of the ship, drag it aft, and bring the vertical keel into the condition you see in the sketch?

Converse: It is difficult for me to realize that that effect could have been produced by an explosion of the kind supposed.

Marix: Do you think, then, necessarily, there must have been an underwater mine to produce these explosions?

Converse: Indications are that an underwater explosion produced the conditions there.

In 1911 the U.S. Navy raised the *Maine* from Havana's harbor. The navy's board of inspection

reexamined the ship, and its findings were similar to those of 1898. Then, in 1976, Admiral H.G. Rickover and other naval historians gathered a team of experts to examine the official court records of 1898 and 1911. This team's conclusions were very different.

1911 board conclusion:

The board finds that the injuries to the bottom of the *Maine* above described were caused by the explosion of a charge of a low form of explosive exterior to the ship between frames 28 and 31.

H.G. Rickover team conclusion:

The general character of the overall wrecked structure of the *Maine*, with hull sides and whole deck structures peeled back, leaves no doubt that a large internal explosion occurred. . . .

The mines available in 1898 are believed to have been incapable of igniting the *Maine* magazine if they exploded on the harbor bottom or against the ship side. . . . It is most unlikely that the *Maine* explosion was indeed initiated by a mine. . . .

The available evidence is consistent with an internal explosion alone. . . . The most likely source was heat from a fire in the coal bunker adjacent to the 6-inch reserve magazine.

Understanding the Issue

1. Why did the original investigation's conclusion that there was an underwater explosion lead to war with Spain?
2. If there had been an underwater explosion, was it logical to conclude that a Spanish person planted the mine? Why or why not? Is this an example of a biased opinion?
3. Why did the 1976 review conclude that the explosion came from inside the *Maine*?

Activities

1. **Rewriting History** Suppose that the initial court of inquiry had concluded that an internal explosion sank the *Maine*. Write a paragraph describing an alternate course history could have taken in the following year.
2. **Oral Report** Read a biography of one of these key players in the decision of the United States to go to war: Hearst, Roosevelt, or McKinley. Write a short oral presentation on this person's perspective and influence on the war.