

Studies of Maine blast still inconclusive

Dispute over source of fatal explosion remains contentious

BY CHARLES J. HANLEY

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HAVANA — The lightning and thunder of a huge explosion, ripped through the still darkness, shattering windows, knocking doors off hinges, sending the panicked people of Havana streaming down toward the waterfront.

After the echoes died, the destruction of the USS Maine that February night did one more thing as well: It propelled a new player, an assertive United States, onto the road to global power.

Today, 100 years later, the oily black waters of Havana harbor ebb and flow over the spot where the U.S. battleship exploded and sank, claiming the lives of 267 crewmen. Tiny ferries chug past, as they did then. Rusting old freighters ride at anchor.

And just as on the moonless night of Feb. 15, 1898, dark suspicions and uncertainties still cling to the Maine.

At Havana's City Museum, Nora Benitez, a custodian of photographs, equipment and other artifacts of the Maine, sets out the standard Cuban view: That the warship was destroyed in a cold-blooded American conspiracy.

"The United States was behind the explosion," she insists. "We've always known it was a pretext the United States used to intervene in Cuba."

A Cuban naval historian, Gustavo Placer Cervera, more in touch with technical analyses of what happened that night, subscribes to the "Rickover report"—the conclusion that the Maine explosion was probably an accident, not sabotage.

But what's more important, says the retired navy commander, is that the U.S. government "manipulated and used the explosion. ... The key fact is that the war was prepared in advance."

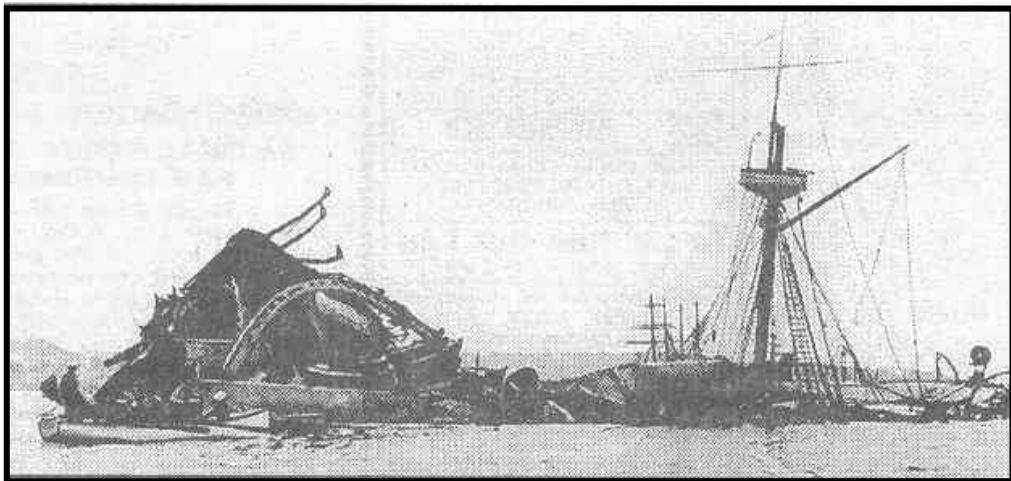
The mystery of the Maine, spark to the Spanish-American War, reaches back to the 19th century. But on this 100th anniversary it's clear it will feed mistrust between nations well into the 21st.

When the 319-foot-long warship, armed with 10-inch guns, sailed into Havana harbor on Jan. 25, 1898, it was an unwelcome guest.

Spanish colonial authorities had been notified of its "friendly" visit only hours before. But trying to block it would have been dangerously provocative. Relations were bad enough between Madrid and Washington.

The U.S. government was pressuring Spain to pullout of Cuba, where guerrillas were fighting an independence war. Americans were outraged at Spanish atrocities. Some in Washington—and Cuba—favored U.S. annexation of the sugar island.

President William McKinley ordered the battleship to Havana to intimidate hard-liners in the Spanish military who were resisting Spain's autonomy plan for Cuba. These officers were furious. Ashore in Havana, the Maine's captain,



The Associated Press/file

This is a Feb. 15, 1898, file photo of the USS Maine following an explosion in Havana Harbor, in which 267 crewmen were killed.

Charles D. Sigsbee, was handed an anti-American leaflet on which someone had scrawled, "Watch out for your ship!"

On Feb. 15, most of the 328 enlisted crewmen retired after 9 p.m. to their hammocks in the forward quarters. Twenty-two officers were in aft cabins or at their posts.

At 9:40 p.m., those in the rear felt and then heard the explosion, a "bursting, rending and crashing roar," as Sigsbee later called it. It was tremendous—experts estimated 10,000 to 20,000 pounds of powder in forward ammunition magazines blew up.

Towering flames shot into the sky, along with bits of metal deck, guns, men and pieces of men. The forward third of the ship was transformed into mangled, sunken wreckage. The aft settled to the muddy bottom.

Back in the United States, a sensationalist press decided a Spanish mine had destroyed the ship—even though Spain wanted to avoid war at all costs. "The Warship Maine Was Split In Two By An Enemy's Secret Infernal Machine!" the New York Journal screamed.

The U.S. Navy was not so sure. It convened a court of inquiry in Havana, four officers who relied on what the Maine's officers and Navy divers, working in primitive helmets in the inky murk, could tell them.

The court focused on the hull's steel keel, bent upward in an inverted "V." Its report, on March 21, 1898, concluded there were two explosions: The explosion of a mine beneath the hull that blew the keel upward, and the resulting detonation of the powder stored above.

It said it had no evidence fixing responsibility. But for America's yellow press and congressional jingoists, there was no question it was the "perfidious" Spaniards. "Remember the Maine!" was the slogan on millions of American lips, emblazoned across shop windows, sung by children, printed on candies and women's hair ribbons.

In 1911, because the sunken Maine was a navigation hazard, and 70 men's remains were still trapped in the hulk, U.S. military engineers built a cofferdam around the wreck, water was pumped out, remains were recovered, and the rear two-thirds of the ship was refloated, towed to sea and sunk again.

The "dewatering" allowed the Navy to photograph the wreckage in detail, and a

new court of inquiry was convened. It rejected the 1898 finding on the inverted "V," saying that was caused by the internal explosion. Instead, it focused on a hull bottom plate bent inward—damaged, the court held, by an exploding external mine.

So the record stood for decades, until U.S. Adm. Hyman G. Rickover, "father of the nuclear Navy," took an interest and put experts to work on the Maine case, using more sophisticated analysis of the old photos.

Their 1976 report concluded the explosion was almost certainly caused by spontaneous combustion of coal in a bunker abutting a powder magazine. Such coal fires were commonplace in that day. They said a mine would have caused more damage to the inward-bent plate.

But they acknowledged, "A simple explanation is not to be found."

In 1995, Smithsonian Institution Press published a book, "Remembering the Maine," by Peggy and Harold Samuels, pointing up flaws in the Rickover analysis and concluding that Spanish fanatics had set off a mine. It cited no new hard evidence, but uncorroborated reports of the time about plots against the ship.

In Spain, opinion is also divided. The Spanish navy approvingly reprinted the Rickover study, but a Spanish historical journal has pointed a finger at Cuban saboteurs.

Most recently, the National Geographic Society commissioned a computer modeling study of the coal-fire and mine theories, and found both feasible. "The case remains open," National Geographic says in its February issue.

The 40-foot-high columns of Havana's Maine Monument rise forlornly over the Malecon, the city's seaside boulevard. Broken beer bottles litter its derelict fountain.

The pedestal on top has been bare since Castroites pulled down the "arrogant" American eagle in 1961. A new plaque describes the dead sailors as victims of "imperialist greed in its effort to take over the island of Cuba."