

OBSTACLES TO IMMEDIATE EXPANSION

1897 - Letter to Alfred Thayer Mahan

This letter must, of course, be considered as entirely confidential, because in my position I am merely carrying out the policy of the secretary and the President. I suppose I need not tell you that as regards Hawaii I take your views absolutely, as indeed I do on foreign policy generally. If I had my way we would annex those islands tomorrow. If that is impossible I would establish a protectorate over them.

I believe we should build the Nicaraguan canal at once, and, in the meantime, that we should build a dozen new battleships, half of them on the Pacific Coast; and these battleships should have large coal capacity and a consequent increased radius of action.

I am fully alive to the danger from Japan, and I know that it is idle to rely on any sentimental goodwill toward us.

I think President Cleveland's action was a colossal crime, and we should be guilty of aiding him after the fact if we do not reverse what he did. I earnestly hope we can make the President look at things our way. Last Saturday night Lodge pressed his views upon him with all his strength. I have been getting matters in shape on the Pacific Coast just as fast as I have been allowed.

My own belief is that we should act instantly before the two new Japanese warships leave England. I would send the *Oregon*, and, if necessary, also the *Monterey* (either with a deck load of coal or accompanied by a coaling ship) to Hawaii, and would hoist our flag over the island, leaving all details for after action. I shall press these views upon my chief just so far as he will let me; more I cannot do.

As regards what you say in your letter, there is only one point to which I would take exception. I fully realize the immense importance of the Pacific Coast. Strictly between ourselves, I do not think Admiral Beardslee quite the man for the situation out there; but Captain Barker, of the *Oregon*, is, I believe, excellent in point of decisions, willingness to accept responsibility, and thorough knowledge of the situation.

But there are big problems in the West Indies also. Until we definitely turn Spain out of those islands (and if I had my way that would be done tomorrow), we will always be menaced by trouble there. We should acquire the Danish Islands and, by turning Spain out, should serve notice that no strong European power, and especially not Germany, should be allowed to gain a foothold by supplanting some weak European power. I do not fear England - Canada is a hostage for her good behavior but I do fear some of the other powers.

I am extremely sorry to say that there is some slight appearance here of the desire to stop building up the Navy until our finances are better. Tom Reed, to my astonishment and indignation, takes this view; and even my chief, who is one of the most high-minded, honorable, and upright gentlemen I have ever had the good fortune to serve under, is a little inclined toward it.

I need not say that this letter must be strictly private. I speak to you with the greatest freedom, for I sympathize with your views, and I have precisely the same idea of patriotism and of belief in and love for our country. But to no one else excepting Lodge do I talk like this.

As regards Hawaii, I am delighted to be able to tell you that Secretary Long shares our views. He believes we should take the islands, and I have just been preparing some memoranda for him to use at the Cabinet meeting tomorrow. If only we had some good man in the place of John Sherman as secretary of state there would not be a hitch, and even as it is I hope for favorable action. I have been pressing upon the secretary, and through him on the President, that we ought to act now without delay, before Japan gets her two new battleships which are now ready for delivery to her in England. Even a fortnight may make a difference. With Hawaii once in our hands most of the danger of friction with Japan would disappear.

The secretary also believes in building the Nicaraguan canal as a military measure, although I don't know that he is as decided on this point as you and I are; and he believes in building battleships on the Pacific slope.