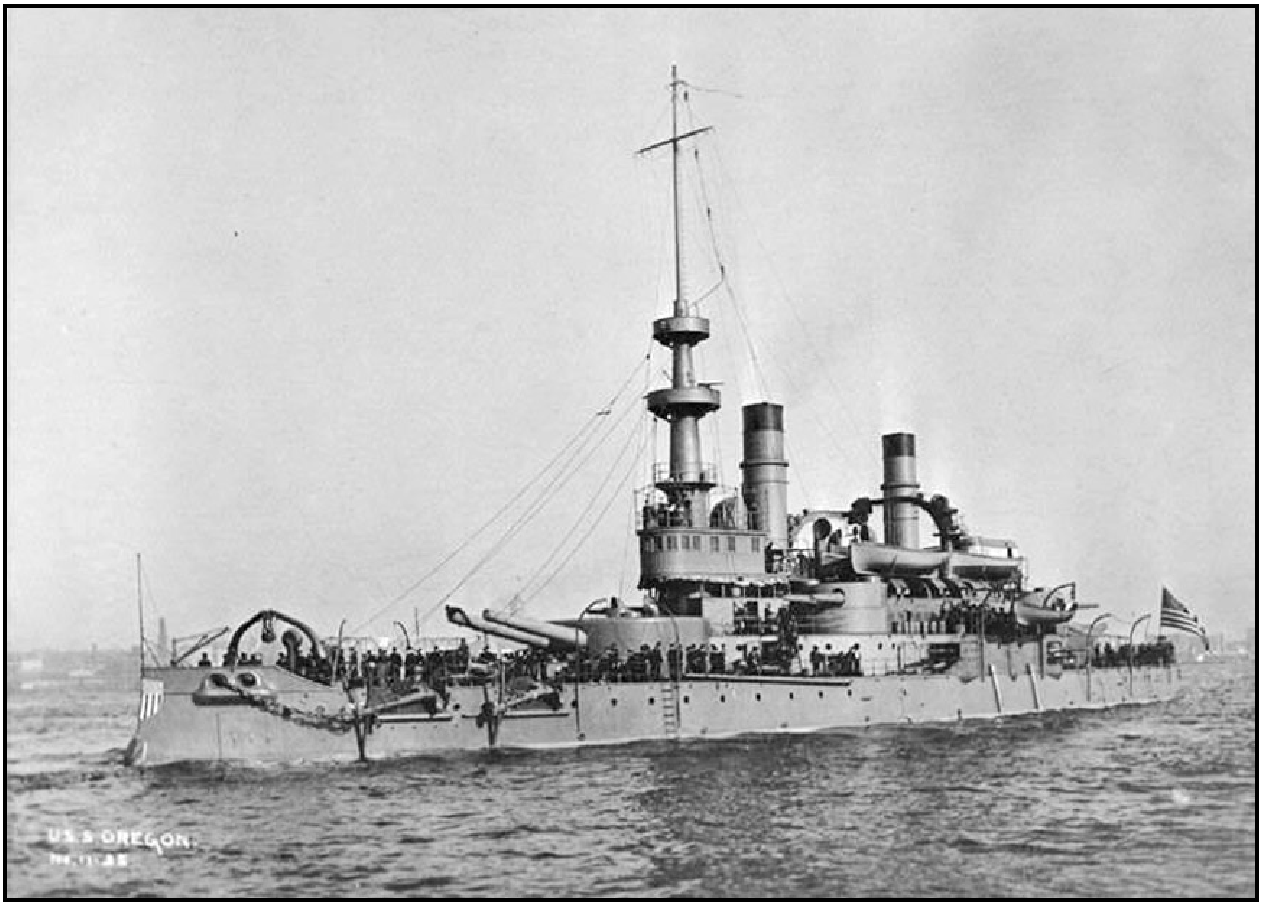
A World in Flux

Before the War with Spain - 1898



Battleship USS *Oregon,* on way to Manila 1898 – Naval Historical Center

> Between wars judgments are entirely subjective; war is the only objective test. Except when war provides proof, no nation enjoys respect and prestige as a great power except insofar as it is recognized as such by others. And since a nation ordinarily defends its interests with its prestige rather than its arms, the United States, in a very real sense, became a great power when it came to be thought one. – Ernest May in *Imperial Democracy* -1961

As the year 1898 came into being, the pre-eminent power in the World was the British Empire, comprising 25% of the world's land surface and, roughly, the same percentage of the world's population. The British currency was the world's standard and the nation was the world's investment banker, pouring huge sums of money into ventures abroad (especially the United States). In the Napoleonic Wars of the early 1800's Britain had defeated and then outdistanced her nearest rival imperial France, and, afterwards, achieved three times greater size and affluence. In 1898, with the aging Queen Victoria as the monarch and symbol, *Pax Britannica* was in its full flower.

The population of Europe had almost quadrupled during the nineteenth century, while world population had doubled. However, the combination of the stress European fecundity placed on its own resources and a wide-open door to the new world served to increase the population of the United States eight-fold during the same period. In other words, the population of Europe increased double the rate of the rest of the world, and the rate of population increase of the United States was double that of Europe. The ideology of nationalism brought into being two significant new nations, Germany from the uniting of thirty-nine principalities, and Italy from a union of seven states. Of the two, Germany rapidly became the up and coming powerhouse, assembling the largest population in all of continental Europe and a highly-industrialized, technologically-sophisticated export-driven economy. To the East, Imperial Russia, had embarked upon an aggressive course of industrialization and expansion into adjoining countries. During the latter part of the 19th century, the Empire of Japan shed its isolation, dramatically transforming and bootstrapping its economy, military and the workings of its society in the process. All of these newer arrivals benefited from the commensurate decline and waning of other empires: China, the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Spain.

Accompanying the huge increase in world population in the 19th Century was an unprecedented explosion in new technologies, processes, medicine and science. The way in which ordinary Europeans and Americans lived, worked, played and died changed more dramatically than it did at any other time in history (including the 20th Century). Changes in transportation had shrunk the time of crossing oceans from many months to several days, and continents from the better part of a year to weeks. The distances within cities had been dramatically shortened by electric trolleys and subways, so that many people no longer had to live within walking distance of their work. The invention of the telephone permitted a person in New York to talk to someone in San Francisco. A telegram could be sent across the Atlantic, the Pacific, or even completely around the world. Ships and cities were lighted by electricity, reclaiming the night. The concept and practices of "public health", gained through understanding microorganisms, was revolutionizing the practices of public sanitation, and, in turn, laying the foundations for enormous increases in both population and average longevity. The 19th Century was the age of coal, steam, chemistry, electricity, public health, and countless other earth-changing developments.

But, most parts of the Eastern world and those south of the Equator remained little impacted. And, while the daily lives (and occupations) of ordinary people in the more advanced nations radically changed, the primary economic benefits in nearly every country (including the United States) accrued to only a small portion of society. The faces of those who held the wealth changed measurably, landed aristocracy giving way to the new railroad barons, manufacturing czars, financial entrepreneurs, and newspaper owners, in every country, but, paradoxically, control over national economies had become concentrated and entrenched in ever fewer hands. While political power had gravitated to and become the province of those with new wealth in the U.S., in Europe power remained with the old institutions; the centralized government bureaucracies, the churches, and, above all, the militaries. The disparities between those at the top of a very tall but very narrow pyramid became as great as had occurred at any time in the modern history of North America and Europe; and engendered enormous and sometimes radical social and political discontent.

In Europe, there had been no major conflicts since 1815 to equal that of the Napoleonic Wars which had defined the political equilibrium for much of the rest of the century, but there had been smaller, shorter conflicts and domestic insurgencies and the many, often bloody and one-sided, wars of empire. Towards the end of the century, particularly as the ascendant powers such as Germany, Russia, and Japan began to economically challenge the British Empire, more and more government revenues became channeled into military capability. Except in the United States, military power was considered inseparable from commercial power. The British sought to utilize their substantial advantages in financial resources, technology, manufacturing, and the vast manpower reserves of their colonies and possessions to build an overwhelming and unprecedented military hegemony which would allow them to withstand any and all challenges to their leadership, dominance in world trade, and control of their vast realm. It is arguable as to whom was initiating and whom was reacting, but Europe had begun a period of militarization and arms races, all in the name of both “national defense” and national mercantilism, that would have profound future consequences.

Two factors played a prominent role in this militarization. The first was a change in accepted military doctrine, which had come to emphasize that the best defense was a strong and aggressive offense. The second was an emphasis on utilizing the many new technologies to create revolutionary (and destabilizing) instruments of war. Emblematic of this was the great naval race that began in the last decade of the century. Hardened steel plate, structural steel, pneumatic riveting, steam turbines, anthracite coal, the screw propeller, and the revolving turret would be imaginatively combined with the rifled barrel, explosive projectile, and electrical generators to produce the most terrifying and destructive weapons systems the world had ever seen to that time, the all steel battleship.

But while this added almost unimaginable power to the advanced nations, it exponentially increased the complexity of modern weaponry and placed new limitations on how and where it could be deployed. Wooden ships had relied on wind for power, their crews included sufficient skilled artisans to accomplish all but the most difficult repairs and maintenance, and their unrifled cannon were able to fire almost any projectile that was at hand. A wooden ship was largely self-sufficient, and could operate almost independently for voyages of one-year or longer. But the new, very high-technology steel “battleships” while individually possessing and exceeding the destructive capability of entire fleets of wooden ships, were in many ways curiously vulnerable. They could only reliably function supported by a well-managed and established complex network of services. The new weapons systems ultimately were only as effective and useful as their logistics and support infrastructure, which put a premium on the development, deployment, and protection of the valued infrastructure as well.

A good defense might have been the best offense in theory, but it was only dimly understood in 1898 that it was also a lot trickier to implement than many policy-makers thought. For almost ninety years the peace of the world had depended upon “balance of power” diplomacy, which in turn was enabled by relative military parity. No one world power could dominate or overthrow another world power on its own. But the very technologies which had revolutionalized Western societies threatened to upset that equilibrium by the introduction of new means of destruction whose implications were only dimly understood. Among nations, the wild card in the great power contest at the end of the 19th Century, was the somewhat inscrutable United States.

After 120 years of independence, the ruling classes of Europe and much of the rest of the world still perceived Americans as odd ducks, but it had become impossible, especially for the Europeans, to ignore the enormous economic importance and prosperity the U.S. had achieved. By 1898, the U.S. had become the largest overseas market for nearly every European country and the world’s fastest growing economy. However, internationally power was still equated with military capability. In this regard, the only argument concerning the United States was whether it was a third-rate or a second-rate military presence. The U.S. Navy, while boasting a high percentage of modern ships, was still only about fifth or sixth in size in the world and had to protect two ocean coastlines.

Following the Civil War, the American Army, then one of the world’s largest, had been scaled back to a permanent cap of 25,000 officers and men, contrasted with European standing armies numbering from several hundred thousands up to one million men.[1] Its roles had been deliberately limited. The most prominent was as a large, internal constabulary force that policed and controlled the Indian tribes of the West. This rarely engaged more than a third of the Army’s troop strength, about 120 small and geographically scattered posts. While it resulted in more than 1,000 combat actions between 1866–1890, the killed-in-action total for the U.S. Army totaled less than 1,000, with over half of those occurring in the years following the Civil War (the Battle of Little Bighorn alone accounted for 267). Indian combatant deaths from the wars totaled about 5,000.

The second prominent role of the Army was strike duty. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the aggressive organization of American labor and the accompanying overt, often armed resistance to the labor movements by big business became pervasive. Between 1881 and 1900, 22,793 strikes took place involving 117,509 establishments and 6.1 million workers.[2] While the number of actual interventions were few, the use of the Army by the President to end "riotous strikes" became one of its most publicly visible functions. Even though the state National Guards performed far more strike duty, being called out an estimated 150 plus times, often Guard soldiers were workers themselves and not infrequently sympathized with the strikers, increasing the pressure by big business to use federal troops in place of state militias. Neither the War Department nor military officers sought strike duty, it was thrust upon them by the politicians. Unhappily for the Army, this placed it unwillingly at the center of the most contentious and violent domestic social, economic and political struggles of the last quarter of the century.

As the 19th Century drew to a close, the Army was operating on a firmly-based assumption, consistently communicated by their civilian political superiors, that it was very unlikely it would ever be called upon to prosecute a major offensive action, let alone a foreign war, any time soon. Its primary role was thought to be entirely defensive and limited to the American continental homeland. It was expected to remain small (and seriously under-funded) and, in the unlikely event of an invasion of the homeland, the plan was to immediately augment it by the state National Guards, which in 1898 numbered some 114,000 troops, versus the 28,000 regulars.[3]

The image should not be drawn, however, of an Army establishment that was totally unprepared for the 20th Century. The Army had been blessed with the retention of a few outstanding young Civil War veterans who became an influential body within the service that pushed reform and modernization. While the Army was often a victim of repeated economy drives by Congress, these men were able to work together to keep the Army almost as up-to-date as any of their much larger and better-funded European counterparts when it came to organization, weapons and tactics. Even though its experience at large scale command during the Civil War had become moribund, the Indian Wars and such activities as mapping and exploring the remote areas of the West and Alaska and assisting in natural disasters, gave it a wealth of practical experience in small unit and independent command. On the eve of the Spanish-American War, while saddled with many deficiencies, it was still an organization run by intelligent, capable individuals with many inherent advantages that would permit it to respond, even though imperfectly, to the new demands that would soon be placed upon it at the dawn of the 20th century.

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[1] The Russian Army numbered over 1 million men, France over 600,000, Germany almost the same number, and if Great Britain included her colonial manpower, she could quickly top one-half million. Even the "lesser powers" of Austria, Italy, and Japan had between 200-300,000 regulars on active status. Ominously, Spain, had an Army that numbered almost 500,000.

[2] Jerry M. Cooper, *The Army and Civil Disorder: Federal Military Intervention in Labor Disputes, 1877-1890.*

[3] Another characteristic of the Army, was the age of the officer corps. Following the Civil War and the dramatic down-sizing that took place, many very able, young officers were left competing for a very few positions for the next thirty years. As new graduates of West Point came into the service and the Army continued a limited practice of commissioning promising "mustangs" from the ranks, it became common to see 40-year old Lieutenants and Captains and 50-60 year old Majors. There were very few Lt. Colonels and above. The highest rank in the Army was that of Major General (two stars). To make matters worse, there was no mandatory retirement and Generals were often as distinguished by their age and girth (a surprising number were corpulent) as by their many Civil War medals and campaign ribbons.

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