

From the Archives

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Addressing the Naval War College near the end of the 19th Century, Theodore Roosevelt sounded a clarion call to those listening patriots who would diligently perform the far-sighted work of upholding America's enduring good. To that end, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy beckoned his audience to hear anew Washington's familiar refrain: "To be prepared for war is the most effectual means to promote peace." His adamant appeal was that America must sustain a vanguard of readiness and willingness to fight in order to protect the nation's greatest cause—a lasting peace. If ever America fails to fulfill such preparation, be it by ignorance or intent, Roosevelt warned, all else within the nation will eventually be for naught.

We are obliged to continue contemplating pivotal questions evolving from Roosevelt's two principle assertions.

First, is Roosevelt's foundational argument still valid? Whether in jest or earnest hopefulness, Roosevelt acknowledged a potential future in which peace need not be sustained by a readiness to fight. However, he insisted, "As yet no nation can hold its place in the world or can do any work really worth doing unless it stands ready to guard its rights with an armed hand." Roosevelt labored to prove his case by appealing to history. Would we now, reflecting on more than a century's worth of additional hindsight, cast different standards and estimations of what is required to best promote peace? If we continue to agree with Roosevelt that "We of the United States have passed most of our few years of national life in peace," how has this been achieved? If we deem Roosevelt to be mistaken and a nation's readiness to wage war upon any foe is not the surest means of preserving peace, in light of what emerging international precedent would we do so?

Secondly, is the U.S. Navy, as Roosevelt declared, still America's chief sentinel of national security, diplomacy, and influence? Roosevelt emphasized that a strong sea going fleet was critical in 1812, but was ten times as important 85 years later. He stated, "Then, as now, it was the Navy upon which the country had to depend in the event of war with a foreign power; and then, as now, one of the chief tasks of a wise and far-seeing statesmanship should have been the upbuilding of a formidable fighting navy." Have the stakes for a strong expeditionary force continued to rise through out the last 113 years? Or has "the present state of naval and military knowledge," coupled with the nebulous effects of globalism, reversed the slope of a strong navy's importance?

Forethought and foresight are every generation's essential needs; too late is the hour "to prepare for war when the time of peace has passed." This is especially true in the arena of sustaining national peace, which is the primary purpose of Roosevelt's address. Regardless of arguments or conclusions, we have here a sobering call which continues to demand diligent and thoughtful evaluation.