

NATIONAL INTEREST AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF ADMIRAL ALFRED THAYER MAHAN

Thomas F. X. Varacalli

The political thought of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan was a response to two particular waves of American progressivism. Social Darwinism, the first wave, in its most secular, conservative, and unadulterated form, claimed that the human race is constantly progressing, that the survival of the fittest is embedded in the historical unfolding of history, and that morality is conditioned by the contingencies of one's historical epoch. Social Darwinism led to an emphasis on human selfishness, competition, and the following of one's interest.¹ The second wave, influenced by a variety of factors including Kantian ethics, European social policies, and the American Social Gospel, focused on the more positive aspects of progressivism. The state, according to this worldview, existed to better the world and to promote moral responsibility in both the domestic and international spheres.² Herbert Croly, one of the most influential progressive thinkers, believed that "the promise of American life" could be achieved through various internal social, political, moral, economic, and constitutional reforms that would both redress a perceived loss of individual liberty and further the common good.³

Mahan combined both of these strands of American progressivism to provide his country a new and reinvigorated foreign policy. Nations, Mahan argued, had to be self-interested. The United States needed to protect itself from the possibility of European encroachment against the Monroe Doctrine. Unlike many of his contemporary social Darwinists, however, Mahan balanced his emphasis on interest

Thomas F. X. Varacalli is a doctoral candidate in political science at Louisiana State University. His research interests include political theory, American politics, and history.

with a genuine concern for moral responsibility. The United States had a duty not only to ensure its national interest but also to improve and better the world. American armament, for example, not only protected the United States from foreign encroachment but protected the sovereignty of South America from European imperialism—an objective distinct from national interest. American armament, therefore, promoted a moral tenet: the right of South American nations to self-determination.

Mahan was not a comprehensive thinker. By profession he was a historian and essayist. His comments and ideas about progressivism are sporadic, peppered throughout writings concerning particular moments of history or specific policy issues. Mahan never created any overarching theory about the interplay of national interest and moral responsibility. The absence of any grand theory is intentional: Mahan, like his most important intellectual source, baron de Jomini, made universal claims only through the study of particular situations. Examining multiple historical and contemporary events, Mahan emphasized the supremacy of national interest in American foreign policy, but he balanced this position with a genuine concern for moral responsibility. Although America had to follow its own interests, Mahan argued, he never advocated any action or social policy that he believed to be evil.

Progressive expansionist tendencies did not begin with Mahan, but he was one of the best exponents of this outward movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ The uniqueness of Mahan's thought stemmed from his integration of thorough strategic and military knowledge, shrewd political analysis, and the academic vigor of two burgeoning fields of his time, economics and history. Mahan's career as an intellectual began with his study of sea power, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890), which was based on the lectures he delivered as President of the newly founded Naval War College. Although *Influence of Sea Power* is largely a technical and terse account of sea power, its most celebrated parts—the introduction and first chapter—provide an outline of his political philosophy. Nations, he argues there, are concerned primarily with their own survival. They follow their own interests, creating a competitive international environment based predominantly on force and strategic calculation. They employ various forms of coercion, including outright war, to pursue their interests. The study of history, Mahan holds, demonstrates that the development of sea power is one of the most influential elements in the forming of a great nation.⁵

Mahan's concept of sea power was broader than the mere military possession of a navy. Rather, for him "sea power" was an economic term, one that explained how a nation became dominant at sea, in three steps: the production of goods,

the building of a navy to protect and transport these goods, and the creation of colonies, which provided the raw materials necessary to produce more goods while simultaneously creating other markets for trade.⁶ Sea power, then, was fundamentally tied to expanding economic markets. For nations such as the United States to grow in influence, they had to expand economically as well as militarily.

The political implications of Mahan's thought—the centrality of national interest in international affairs, the reality of competition, the imperative to maintain a strong home market and economy, the importance of strategic military and naval force, the necessity of constant economic and military expansion, and the benefits of colonialism—were not lost on Mahan's contemporaries. *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, as well as its acclaimed sequel, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812* (1892), produced a significant splash on both sides of the Atlantic. Many Europeans were enamored of *Influence of Sea Power upon History* because they thought it defended their own nations' policies on armament and imperialism. It was translated into several languages and placed in all the naval ships and schools of Germany and Japan.⁷ Kaiser Wilhelm owned two copies of the book, one in English and the other in German, and claimed that he was “trying to learn it by heart.”⁸ In Great Britain, Mahan received an audience with Queen Victoria and honorary doctorates from Oxford and Cambridge.⁹ The nation that most effectively employed Mahan's ideas, however, was Japan. Several Japanese theorists, such as Akiyama Saneyuki and Sato Tetsutaro, read Mahan religiously. Many of Mahan's books were translated into Japanese.¹⁰ In America the book's reception was a bit less sensational, except in the Republican Party. The William McKinley administration picked Mahan, by then retired, to serve on a board formed to advise on naval strategy during the Spanish-American War and, then in peace, as a delegate to the first Hague conference, where he was noted as the only representative to vote against the ban on asphyxiating gas in war.¹¹

Owing to Mahan's forty-year naval career, the subject matter of his histories, his philosophical emphasis on the competition of nations, and his staunch opposition to arbitration, his name has become synonymous with the promotion of war, force, and imperialism. This unfavorable association began with several of his contemporaries. The noted British pacifist Norman Angell considered Mahan's political thought “a doctrine of savagery.”¹² Charles Beard, in a sensational piece, characterized Mahan as a “bookish” manufacturer of American imperialism and one of “the four . . . most powerful agitators that ever affected any nation.”¹³ A generation later, Richard Hofstadter dismissed Mahan, claiming that “[Mahan] believed that every nation like every schoolboy was bound to come to

blows with its fellows.”¹⁴ By midcentury, many historians had labeled Mahan a social Darwinist.¹⁵

These interpretations not only are uncharitable but purvey a certain caricature of Mahan’s political thought. It is true that Mahan was not afraid to use force to protect American interests. In his books, essays, and articles, he supported the annexation of Hawaii, the creation of the canal across the Central American isthmus, the Open Door policy in China, the Spanish-American War, the taking of Cuba, the colonization of the Philippines, and increases in naval armament. Above all, Mahan urged his countrymen to uphold the Monroe Doctrine. Mahan defended these positions primarily as imperatives of national interest. On several key issues, however, Mahan entwined his position with a moral responsibility that he perceived Western nations to have with respect to non-Western nations. That emphasis on moral responsibility, which many of Mahan’s critics either flatly ignore or dismiss as ethnocentric cultural and religious imperialism, is pivotal to an understanding of the depth and balance of Mahan’s political thought. Mahan is neither Hofstadter’s rambunctious schoolboy nor Beard’s trigger-happy imperialist. He did not desire war for its own sake. In fact, he thought that various elements of his political thought, such as economic reciprocity, military and naval armament, and the European balance of powers, would help reduce the likelihood of war.¹⁶

At first glance, it may seem that national interest and moral responsibility are incompatible, in that the former deals with the appetites while the latter focuses on morality. Mahan attempted to wed these two concepts by claiming that the ultimate arbiter of both national interest and moral responsibility is the nation itself. Nations, he argued, are sovereign and independent. As there is no universal and impartial arbiter of justice, every nation has the right to form its own subjective understanding of moral responsibility. Only the individual nation is able to decide whether its policy is based on national interest, moral responsibility, or a combination of both. Even when a nation realizes that it has made an error in policy judgment, it is better that it err than allow another nation or arbiter to decide what is moral or in the interest of that nation. Ultimately, the radical subjectivity and nationalism of Mahan’s thought make his distinction between national interest and moral responsibility less apparent and self-evident than Mahan seems to have intended. In principle, however, there remains a substantive difference between interest and responsibility: in the latter, perceived charity and beneficence are offered to non-Americans. Mahan, though, did not provide an example in which national interest is absent from acts of moral responsibility. Recognition of the interaction in his political thought between national interest and moral responsibility is important in any evaluation of his public-policy positions.

THE NATURE OF NATIONS: COMPETITION AND THE PURSUIT OF NATIONAL INTEREST

There is little evidence that Mahan was exposed to the classics of Western political thought. In the over two thousand personal letters that have been collected and published by his most recent biographer, Mahan did not comment on Niccolò Machiavelli, Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, or Karl Marx.¹⁷ These thinkers were absent also from his published work, although he did quote Montesquieu on the importance of commercial monopolies.¹⁸ Rather, Mahan's thought was influenced primarily by the military strategist baron de Jomini, by various works of nineteenth-century high Anglican theology recommended by his uncle Milo Mahan, and by a vast array of political and military historians, ranging from Thucydides and Plutarch to Leopold von Ranke and François Guizot.¹⁹ It was his study of history that specifically led him to develop his sea-power thesis. Mahan recounts in his autobiography how, while reading an account of the Carthaginian Hannibal's failed Second Punic War campaign in Theodor Mommsen's *History of Rome*, he came to understand the historical importance of the navy: "It suddenly struck me . . . how different things might have been could Hannibal have invaded by the sea, as the Romans often had Africa, instead of the long land route."²⁰ From this insight, Mahan argued that the study of history demonstrated that Hannibal's undoing—failure to deploy naval power equal to that of the enemy—was not an isolated event but a fault that had plagued many campaigns. In the preface of *Influence of Sea Power upon History* he compares the failure of Hannibal (and the concomitant success in that war of the Roman general Scipio) with the failure in the nineteenth century of Napoleon and the success of the Duke of Wellington. Although these cases were over two thousand years apart, they manifested a universal principle: in both, "mastery of the sea rested with the victor."²¹

Mahan's sea-power thesis and his political philosophy were based on a historiographical approach called "subordination." The composition of history, Mahan asserted in his 1902 presidential address to the American Historical Association, begins with a "multiplicity of details often contradictory" that "do not readily lend themselves to a unity of treatment."²² Like that of an artist, the task of the historian is to find unity within the multiplicity of human affairs. Banal curiosities need to be discarded and the important facts of history "subordinated" to "a central idea."²³ The central ideas of history, like the tension between freedom and slavery, are motivated primarily by conflict. In Mahan's histories, the tension among nations in international affairs and the appropriate means through which to handle conflict and war in particular situations receive the most attention.

Many of Mahan's ideas about war, particularly about strategy and tactics, are influenced strongly by Jomini's *Art of War*. Jomini was not a political philosopher. Though Jomini recognized the importance of politics, especially the roles of diplomacy and statesmanship in war, many moral ambiguities arise from his work. Jomini, like Mahan, was not an adherent of the traditional just-war theory. He recognized that nations go to war for a variety of reasons, some of them more defensible than others. He openly admits, in the first chapter of his work, that many wars arise from "so many doubtful and contested rights."²⁴ Whereas just-war theory holds that war can be waged only for a just reason, Jomini does not make the pursuit of justice a necessary prerequisite of warfare. Wars that according to just-war theory must not be waged can still be fought according to Jomini's work, with its moral ambiguities. In the interplay of national interest and moral responsibility, it is clear that national interest dominates Jomini's thoughts; Mahan, nevertheless, owing to the limitations of Jomini's work, often focuses on the role of conflict in human affairs.

The prevalence of conflict in both human and international affairs guided Mahan's emphasis on the impulses, sentiments, and feelings of nations and their citizens.²⁵ Although these elements of human behavior are volatile, Mahan posited a fairly static view of human nature: "It must be remembered that, among all changes, the nature of man remains the same."²⁶ He provided neither a stage of human history in which the flaws of human nature are overcome nor the possibility that human nature itself can change. Since he believed that human nature was constant, Mahan was able to make a universal claim about humanity: "All men seek gain and, more or less, love money; but the way in which gain is sought will have a marked effect upon the commercial fortunes and the history of the people inhabiting a country."²⁷ Humankind is, was, and always will be moved by a universal principle: the pursuit of interest. The nation does not differ from the individual in its pursuit of interest. Rather, the pursuit of interests is amplified in the nation, especially in the realm of international relations.

Successful nations, Mahan posited, adhere to what he called the "national will," or "popular will." The national will is different from that of the government. It is best defined as the opinion of the majority of the citizenry.²⁸ Nations are simply agents of the people. "Governments," Mahan claimed, "are trustees, not principals; and as such must put first the lawful interests of their wards, their own people."²⁹ The policies of a strong government will need to be congruent with the national interest, because the most successful policies of a nation are grounded in "the sentiment of the people."³⁰ Thus, statesmen who wish to push certain policies that are currently against the wishes of the people must somehow convince the people to convert to their positions.³¹ While Mahan himself was an intellectual and not a statesman, he took his own advice. In order that America might expand

its commercial interests and become a sea power, Mahan attempted to convert the American people through his own writings to support his main political project—the expansion of America’s sea power.

The opening line of *Influence of Sea Power upon History* boldly states, “The history of Sea Power is largely, though by no means solely, a narrative of contests between nations, of mutual rivalries, of violence frequently culminating in war.”³² Embedded in this thesis is Mahan’s view that conflict is a natural part of human nature. Human nature, moved by various feelings and impulses, is volatile and avaricious. History, he argues, has shown that the course of human affairs is a narrative of competition. Whether at peace or at war, nations act out of both impulse and calculation of profit. Tension arises naturally among neighboring nations, because they often have the same pursuits. “Clashing interests” lead to “angry feelings” over various economic concerns, and then to attempts by nations “to exclude others, either by legislative methods of monopoly or prohibitory regulations, or, when these failed, by direct violence.”³³ Successful nations have to find ways to procure their interests while simultaneously protecting themselves against their competitors. War is just one possible solution to such predicaments, but Mahan defended adamantly a nation’s right to wage it: nations have a “right to insure by just means whatsoever contributes to natural progress, and correlatively to combat injurious action taken by an outside agency, if the latter overpass its own lawful sphere.”³⁴ The basis for international relations is national interest. The impulses, sentiments, and feelings of a nation dictate its relationship with other nations. Peace, nevertheless, can be found, if there exists mutual profit in attaining it. Nations invade other nations (or indigenous groups) only if there is something to gain from the conquest or occupation. Sometimes interests encourage nations to invade; in other cases, interests encourage nations to negotiate treaties.³⁵

The pursuit of interest stems from self-preservation, which Mahan defined quite broadly. “The first law of states, as of man,” Mahan wrote, “is self-preservation—a term which cannot be narrowed to the bare tenure of a stationary round of existence.”³⁶ Self-preservation is not simply a reaction against an external threat but something more comprehensive: it is the right to defend the nation’s interests, whether in direct response to provocation or not.³⁷ Self-preservation is not merely instinctual but also strategic and calculative. The use of reason, not just instinct and the passions, is necessary to preserve the nation. A nation ought to realize that it may not possess tomorrow what it does at the current moment. Preparedness for defense is legitimate, because it is prudent for a nation to take precautions against future disasters. When not at war, the most appropriate act of self-preservation is economic expansion. A healthy nation needs to engage economically with other nations and to compete with its neighbors. Mahan’s study

of history even suggests that competition often has positive, constructive, and moral qualities. The prosperity of the Western world derives “from the fact that our present world of civilization consists of strong opposing nationalities, and is not one huge, consolidated imperium . . . [where] the individual declension [i.e., decline] of the Roman citizen had destroyed the material from which the more healthful organism of earlier days could have been reconstituted.”³⁸ The defeat of Carthage, for example, provided Rome with no antagonism; instead of flourishing, Roman mores faltered.³⁹ Mahan defended competition by imagining what the world would look like if there were no competition. Behind his argument is the belief that creativity and innovation need some sort of impetus; complacency breeds stagnation. Likewise, from a moral perspective, the absence of perceived evil or actual struggle fosters decadence. It is vigorous, antagonistic competition—the need to overcome something or someone—that molds great men and nations. Without Napoleon, there would have been no Nelson. Competition provides the necessity that forges the tools and means by which progress is made.

The closest synonym to “progress,” in Mahan’s understanding, is “growth.” Nevertheless, Mahanian progress is a vague concept, best defined as the “onward movement of the world [that] has to be accepted as a fact, to be advantageously dealt with by guidance, not by mere opposition, still less by unprofitable bewailing of things undesirably past.”⁴⁰ Progress is a fact not because nature itself inherently progresses but because a particular nation is bound to take advantage of another’s weaknesses. Progress, in other words, occurs through human activity and effort. Unlike Herbert Spencer, in whose thinking progress happens naturally, through evolution, from homogeneity to heterogeneity, Mahan argues that progress is achieved laboriously, from human toil and experience.⁴¹ It is possible, for instance, for progress to slow down and even, theoretically, to falter entirely. Progress is “dependent upon each man’s thorough, consummate knowledge of his own business, supplemented by an adequate understanding of the occupations and need of his neighbors.”⁴² Progress is the result of human reason, not the movements of the natural order. Mahan admits that the “raw materials” of progress often come from geographical and physical conditions, but, just as a nation must touch a sea if it is to develop a navy, the success of a nation often depends on its geographical, cultural, and racial characteristics.⁴³ In the modern age, Mahan argued of his time, progress advances by looking outward and is achieved through interaction with the outside world. The aforementioned three determinants of sea power—production, shipping, and colonies—involve constant motion and growth. This growth intensifies when other, opposing nations are also expanding, thereby creating competition.

Mahan’s focus on development and competition affected the way in which he understood the nature of human rights. Mahan defined natural rights as those

“that result from the simple fact of being born.”⁴⁴ Natural rights differed, for him, from political or legal rights in that the latter “depend upon other fitnesses than that of merely being a man.”⁴⁵ Using this distinction, Mahan defended the imperialism, colonialism, and expansion of Europe over the less developed parts of the world on the ground that the indigenous peoples of those regions did not have natural rights to the lands they occupied, whatever legal or political rights they might have enjoyed. No nation, he argued, has a natural right to its land. Territory is held by *fitness*. Mankind at large has a natural right to the unused goods of idle lands; hence, Mahan asserted, the raw materials of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East belonged to those who could develop them. The strongest, most progressive nation is the most likely to use and to develop a region’s natural goods most efficiently; the strong, then, should rule over those resources.⁴⁶

As the historian Walter LaFeber has noted, Mahan defined “colonialism” differently from the seventeenth-century mercantilists. Sometimes Mahan’s use of the term centered on created settlements, such as in Hawaii, but most of the time he associated it with purely strategic points of trade and military forts.⁴⁷ For example, Gibraltar, an English possession, was considered by Mahan to be a colony although it was primarily a strategic naval fort. Colonialism, then, fundamentally involved two things for Mahan. First, it brought wealth for the nation. Second, it provided a base for further expansion and acted as a check against hostile movements of foreign nations. Mahan used the example of India, the possession of which had given England both wealth and a strong military position in the Indian Ocean. Protecting India required England to have a strong navy and, to create a highway to India, colonial and strategic possessions in the Mediterranean. It was for this reason that England possessed both Gibraltar and the Suez Canal.⁴⁸ The constant development of the navy, ever larger in response to England’s own needs (and to the challenges posed by its neighbors and competitors) was necessary for the successful administration of colonial India.

Mahan constantly stressed the importance of naval armament because a navy represented not only power to protect but power to rule. Navies, Mahan remarked, “can be felt where national armies cannot go.”⁴⁹ More sophisticated than ever before, navies provided defense, communication, transportation, and the protection of trade. Most important of all, navies gave their nations a chance to secure peace. For this reason, Mahan applauded the military buildup of the Western powers, convinced that it was diminishing the likelihood of inter-European combat. With their gaze on colonialism and imperialism, the Western nations were able to participate in healthy competition without destroying each other. Armament—not the pacifism of men like Norman Angell—created true humanitarianism.⁵⁰ Mahan wrote, “The most beneficial use of a military force is not to wage war, however successfully, but to prevent war, with all its suffering,

expense, and complications of embarrassments.”⁵¹ Mahan’s balance of powers, however, did not adequately deter violence in non-Western states.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, CONSCIENCE, AND THE LIMITS OF LAW

Throughout his writings, Mahan argued consistently that there is a strong correlation between national policy and public opinion. As a nation follows a certain interest because its citizens demand it, so will a nation carry out a certain policy if the people think it has a responsibility to do so. Moral responsibility stems from a conviction that a certain position is morally right. It moves the nation to transcend politics based solely on calculation and instinct, to rise to questions of right and wrong. Mahan stated that “to regard the world as governed by self-interest only is to live in a non-existent world,” adding that the causes of war were now based on convictions of good and evil, though interests certainly remained.⁵² At first glance, this statement seems to contradict the centrality of national interest in international affairs as outlined in *Influence of Sea Power upon History*. Mahan resolved this ambiguity by explaining that an issue of national interest, especially one concerning tension with other nations, “gradually assumes the aspect of a right and a wrong.”⁵³ There are two important points to be made here. First, questions of right and wrong are based on the feelings of the citizenry and are decided by a majoritarian consensus; right and wrong, therefore, are not necessarily absolutes. Second, questions of right and wrong are sometimes not independent of national interest. Hence, part of the tension between national interest and moral responsibility is resolved by the fact that both derive from the sentiments of the people.

Mahan’s moral subjectivity and the importance he gives to public opinion are products of his Protestantism. Mahan believed in the supremacy of the individual conscience in questions of what is right and wrong. He argued further that the individual has not only the right to *hold* a belief but also a moral duty to *act* on that belief. Mahan begins his spiritual autobiography, *The Harvest Within*, by emphasizing the relationship between the roles of exteriority and spiritual interiority. In particular, he emphasizes the role of intentionality: “the moral and spiritual value of acts depends upon the motive.”⁵⁴ This point is central to Mahan’s political writings. If individuals or nations are to make a moral decision, they must do so freely and without coercion. Morality cannot be forced by an alien, exterior force; rather, an act is moral only when it is deliberated and acted on freely and without compulsion.

Although Mahan did not articulate the distinction, he used the term “moral responsibility” in two different ways: the moral responsibility a nation has to itself, on one hand, and on the other, the moral responsibility a nation has to the

human race. First and foremost is the duty the nation has to itself, to maintain its own conscience. On these moral matters, which are especially prominent in international affairs, the nation needs to stand by its own understandings, its own reasoning capacities, not allowing other nations to interfere with its policies and beliefs. The nation's exercise of reason forms the basis of Mahan's condemnation of international arbitration and, more generally, his reservations about international law. Second, the nation has a moral responsibility to contribute to the progress of humankind. Western nations, like America, ought to act out of beneficence toward weaker nations, peoples, and indigenous groups that "require" exposure to Western culture and Christianity. The single greatest example of this perceived feeling of responsibility was the divine and covenantal charge that many Americans, including Mahan, believed they had assumed in acquiring the Philippines.

To actualize moral responsibility, force often is needed. Force in and of itself is neither innately evil nor incompatible with Christianity. "Force," Mahan argued, "must be used for the benefit of the community, of the commonwealth of the world."⁵⁵ Since there is no ultimate earthly arbiter or judge to determine the rightness of an action, it is the right of the nation itself to decide what it ought to do. Like individuals, nations have consciences, and although the conscience of any given nation can—and may—be misguided, the nation still has a right and duty to follow it. Mahan wrote, almost as a theologian might, that "even if mistaken, the moral wrong of acting against conviction works a deeper injury . . . than can the merely material disasters that may follow upon obedience."⁵⁶ Consequently, it is better to commit a wrong act with a good intention than to do a good act for a wrong reason. This supremacy of conscience for Mahan undoubtedly derives from his Protestantism, but whereas Christianity assigns conscience to the individual, Mahan allocates it to the nation. Conscience, according to Mahan, is a gift from God and cannot be violated. If a nation defiles its conscience, it abandons its supreme reasoning tool.⁵⁷ This reasoning, however, has a tremendous social and political implication: such emphasis on conscience leads to subjectivity. The parallel and connection between Mahan's conception of conscience and his conception of national interest are unmistakable. They both rest on the presupposition that a competing nation has no right to enforce its morality over another nation except by means of force. Since different national consciences inevitably disagree on important issues, disputes among nations are natural in and integral to international affairs—hence, the need to arm, in case of war.

Since Mahan held that national conscience needs to be in accordance with the judgment of an individual nation, his political thought was naturally suspicious of international law and was opposed adamantly to arbitration. International law, according to Mahan, did not guarantee moral decisions: "Law, itself, which its

extreme advocates desire to see installed in place of war, is, in last analysis, simply force regulated—a most desirable end—but inadequate for the very reason that it is only a manifestation of a power which is manifold in its exhibition.”⁵⁸ If law is only regulated force, it has no inherent moral value. Law, in general, is simply conventional because the majority of its premises are utilitarian and arbitrary. Though law may advance justice occasionally, it is not certain to pronounce the correct verdict. Since international law cannot be changed easily, it is an unreliable arbiter in particular scenarios. Furthermore, Mahan claimed, “the positiveness inherent in the very idea of law, its lack of elasticity, renders it too frequently inadequate to the settlement of certain classes of disputes, because in them an accepted law exists, decision in accordance with which would simply perpetuate injustice or sustain intolerable conditions.”⁵⁹ Positive international law, in other words, is an inelastic universal principle unsuited for specific events. Consequently, adherence to international law creates dysfunctional scenarios in which a nation is hindered from doing what it thinks is moral.

Mahan was especially critical of arbitration, which many of his contemporary American and European intellectuals desired to be required by international law. His case against arbitration was twofold. First, Mahan argued from the perspective of conscience. Conscience, not positive law, is the supreme medium through which God communicates. Arbitration, then, is an act “of submitting to an impartial third party a question, not of interests, nor of facts, but of right and wrong, and therefore of conscience.”⁶⁰ Bluntly put, arbitration is the forfeiture of conscience: “Fidelity to conscience,” Mahan wrote, “implies not only obedience to its dictates, but earnest heart-searching, the use of every means, to ascertain its true command.”⁶¹ Conscience, therefore, sometimes prohibits following a law. Mahan, drawing on then-senator William Seward’s famous denouncement in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Act, stated that there is a higher law than the Constitution, one that must be interpreted individually. By extension, the Fugitive Slave Act represented, for both Seward at the time and Mahan later, a grave offense to the higher law and consequently was not to be followed.⁶² If a citizen has a conscientious right to defy a positive domestic law, then surely a nation has the right to defy a positive international law. Mahan used this line of reasoning to attack arbitration. If an international arbiter or legislative body decreed an unfair verdict or issued an unjust decree, a nation ought to have a right to disobey that law simply on the grounds that acceptance would violate its conscience. This decision to reject the arbiter’s judgment was unlikely to go unpunished by the international community, leading quite easily to war—unnecessarily, in Mahan’s view.

Second, Mahan criticized arbitration from the perspective of sovereignty. Even if a nation benefits from arbitration in the short term, it risks threats to its national sovereignty. Mahan wrote that “law, strictly so called, presupposes a lawmaker;

and for international law the lawmaker has not yet come into existence.”⁶³ Mahan feared that some sort of international body would have to be developed to give arbitration teeth, causing American citizens to be subject in certain cases to foreign rule. Justice would not be guaranteed from this foreign rule; in fact, Mahan doubted altogether the feasibility of justice in such a case, because all nations have their own interests. In the modern world—interconnected even in Mahan’s time—all nations have interests that could prejudice specific decisions. Arbitration, consequently, was hopelessly idealistic and naive; it does not erase the eternal realities, constants arising from nature itself: competition, national interest and self-interest, force, and greed. Proponents of arbitration, he argued, did not recognize its potential for tyranny. To express the futility of arbitration, Mahan compared it to the perceived tyranny of the medieval papacy over kingdoms—a sharp jab from a devout high Anglican.⁶⁴ As in the Middle Ages, he claimed, arbitration would be decided by an arbitrary power motivated by its own biases and interests and overriding the consciences of nations.

After dismissing arbitration as an unreasonable assault against national sovereignty and the denial of national conscience, Mahan proceeded to argue that it would hinder America’s ability to make sound moral decisions. He used the example of the Spanish-American War. Had a third party arbitrated between Spain and the United States, he was sure, American intervention in Cuba would have been condemned, because an arbitrator would likely have applied existing positive law.⁶⁵ Positive law, however, would have been unable to address the many wrongs and injustices committed in Cuba by Spain, which according to Mahan was an oppressive, feudal, and cruel power. Mahan held sincerely that there was nothing unjust about America’s decision to intervene in Cuba—freeing Cuba from Spanish tyranny was a legitimate end. To deny America such an opportunity to follow its conscience and to liberate Cuba was to deny America’s conscience and sovereignty. Moreover, it was more than likely that international reprisals against American involvement in the Spanish-American War would have stemmed from selfishness and various European interests, not from moral concern for the oppressed.

THE APPLICATION OF MAHAN’S IDEAS TO THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC

Mahan’s grappling with the problems of international affairs and geopolitics pushed him to reject the policy of American isolationism in a world of rapidly advancing imperialism. Mahan was an imperialist, but he was an *American* imperialist. He was well aware of the limits of his nation’s armed forces and of how little interest his commercial-minded countrymen had in warfare. Mahan’s policy

positions reflected the tension between following public opinion and promoting causes contrary to public opinion. Consistent with his philosophy, Mahan did not call for any imperial project comparable to those of Britain or France, not only because such a project would be beyond America's capabilities but also because it would not be in accordance with public opinion.

Having taken the pulse of the Republic, Mahan supported the principle of reciprocity advanced by Secretary of State (1881 and 1889–92) James G. Blaine. Mahan defined reciprocity as the abandonment of “exclusive interest, which is the citadel of protection, to embrace that of mutual benefit, the cornerstone upon which the advocates of freedom of trade rest their argument.”⁶⁶ At first glance, the principle seems to be in sharp contrast with Mahan's emphasis on competitive national interest. Yet reciprocity is pursued not for its own sake but out of national interest. It opens up markets, especially non-Western markets, and allows competition among nations to flourish without risk of bloodshed. Moreover, reciprocity permits a Western nation, such as the United States, to spread its core values with other, less developed nations. Of America's increased engagement with foreign nations Mahan wrote that “what the nation has gained in expression is a regenerating idea, an uplifting of the heart, a seed of future beneficent activity, a going out of self into the world to communicate the gift it has so bountifully received.”⁶⁷ It was this understanding of reciprocity that later formed the basis of his support for the Open Door policy, by which America benefited from trade with China (national interest) while also fulfilling its duty to humankind by promoting Western civilization and propagating Christianity (moral responsibility). Reciprocity, in this light, is charity with interest. It does not imply equality between the interacting nations or peoples, but it does provide—when the United States is involved—material and spiritual benefit by virtue of economic access to American goods and cultural access to Christianity.

As his adherence to the principle of reciprocity demonstrates, Mahan was concerned with economic, cultural, and political influence but not necessarily dominion. Mahan took different stances on how to promote American influence. Owing to his emphasis on particularity, Mahan's policy positions are not formulaic and rigid; his reasons for particular stances on given issues varied according to the nuances of specific policy positions. On issues like the canal across the Central American isthmus, influence in the Caribbean, the annexation of Hawaii, and control over the Persian Gulf, Mahan's concerns were based primarily on national interest. However, on two very important matters—the Monroe Doctrine and the Spanish-American War—his policies were based on both national interest and moral responsibility. These two examples highlight how Mahan's stances integrated the two concepts.

The Monroe Doctrine

Mahan stressed, from the publication of *Influence of Sea Power upon History* until his death, the crucial importance of the Monroe Doctrine. He stated bluntly that the Monroe Doctrine was a “product of interest.”⁶⁸ Mahan valued particularly the practicality of the Monroe Doctrine, arguing that it was the product of prudent reflection on American security. Before its promulgation by President James Monroe, the early Republic had suffered various assaults on both land and sea by the European colonial powers. Mahan wrote, “Not reason only, but feeling, based on experience of actual inconvenience, suffering, and loss—loss of life, and loss of wealth, political anxiety, and commercial disturbance—conspired to intensify opposition to any avoidable renewal of similar conditions.”⁶⁹ Although its bedrock claim—that no European power was free to recolonize lost colonies or gain new ones—had remained consistent in the nineteenth century, Mahan argued, the doctrine had to be expanded and developed to address America’s contemporary interests; it had been founded in part on the basis of interest, and the interests of nations change.⁷⁰ Mahan asserted forcefully, especially in his writings on the construction of the isthmian canal, the importance of continuing to assert the Monroe Doctrine in support of contemporary concerns. He warned repeatedly that with the completion of the canal, Europe would be tempted to attain new territories in the Americas that could threaten American superiority in the Caribbean as well as control over the canal. It was, therefore, in the American interest to have a navy strong enough to deter European colonization in the region.⁷¹

If national interest formed the (elastic) foundation of the Monroe Doctrine, it was force that upheld its implementation. The Monroe Doctrine, in other words, was only as strong as the American navy made it.⁷² In Mahan’s thought, however, force was not applied simply in the pursuit of interest but also in the promotion of moral responsibility. First, Mahan argued that the Monroe Doctrine was a declaration of America’s moral conscience. America, therefore, reserved the right to intervene in Latin and South America if its conscience compelled it to intervene. Mahan received worldwide attention on this issue while serving as an American delegate at the first Hague conference. There, consistent with his political philosophy, Mahan made a provocative stand against article 27 of the conference’s declaration, which stated, “The Signatory Powers consider it their duty, in case a serious dispute threatens to break out between two or more of them, to remind these powers that the permanent Court of Arbitration is open to them.”⁷³ Mahan perceived in this proposed language a clear violation of national conscience, in that it called for third-party intervention in American affairs within South America, perhaps even paving the way for destruction of the Monroe Doctrine itself. Mahan, with the support of the majority of the American delegation, requested

and received an addendum explicitly stating that article 27 was not applicable to the Monroe Doctrine.⁷⁴ Not a single nation at the conference dared to object to the request.⁷⁵

Second, the Monroe Doctrine was based on moral responsibility in that it assisted the nations of South America in maintaining their own self-determination. America, Mahan wrote, has “a common sympathy with peoples struggling for relief from a very real oppression.”⁷⁶ In opposition to those European nations who desired to take back parts of South America, the U.S. position was “sustained by policy and by a conviction of rightfulness.”⁷⁷ Legitimate concern for Central and South America, Mahan insisted, did enter into America’s calculation in upholding the Monroe Doctrine. Mahan’s view protected the self-determinism of the various countries of South and Central America; with the notable exception of the lands annexed as a result of the Spanish-American War, it did not call for American colonialism there. He did not claim that America had “quasi suzerainty” over South America, as England did over its colonies.⁷⁸ By treating South American nations as sovereign nations, Mahan claimed, the United States occupied higher moral ground than its European competitors, who would have disregarded South and Central American self-determinism altogether.

The Spanish-American War and the Acquisition of the Philippines

Mahan’s position on the Spanish-American War highlighted how a nation can be motivated simultaneously by both national interest and moral responsibility. Mahan claimed that Cuba’s “deliverance from oppression [had been] the object of the war.”⁷⁹ America had had a moral goal in the war. While it may have had certain interests in the possession of Cuba—an island only ninety miles away from American coastline—its actions had been based also on nobler sentiments. In short, the United States had seen a nation suffering under an unjust authority and, finding this tyranny repulsive, had followed its conscience and uplifted its neighbor from the “generally iniquitous character” of Spain.⁸⁰

The war having culminated in the liberation of Cuba and the Philippines, Mahan believed that America was embarking on a new chapter in its history, one of colonialism. Mahan reflected on the moral responsibility America had to its new dependencies. Colonialism, Mahan wrote, is “novel to us; we may make blunders; but, guided by [the example of British] experience, we should reach the goal more quickly.”⁸¹ Mahan did not shy away from the fact that the United States had been formed as a result, in effect, of British colonialism. Moreover, he did not believe that America’s experience with British colonialism provided a sufficient reason to oppose colonialism. Rather, it had the potential to be a great colonial power itself precisely because it had been ruled by a colonial power, making it more sensitive to possible abuses. Mahan warned that if America “sees in its new responsibilities,

first of all, markets and profits, with incidental resultant benefit to the natives, it will go wrong. Through such mistakes Great Britain . . . lost the United States.”⁸² Genuine care and consideration needed to be shown to the people of its new dependencies. Mahan stressed that it would be bad policy to create unnecessary tension with its colonies, especially the Philippines.

This newfound moral responsibility with respect to the Philippines certainly was not without consideration of interest, for it was in the nation’s interest to have a stable and productive colony. Mahan went so far as to declare that the two concepts do not need to be separate: the “interest of the nation is one with its beneficence.”⁸³ From the standpoint of interest, there are two clear reasons why he supported the acquisition of the Philippines. The first was that it was compatible with the foundational propositions of his naval philosophy. Colonialism was a natural corollary of production and naval power. Possession of the Philippines, Mahan hoped, would stimulate the American navy to develop and expand. The second reason was geopolitical. Mahan believed that “enlightened self-interest demands us to recognize not merely, and in general, the imminence of the great question of the farther East, which is rising so rapidly before us, but also specifically, the importance to us of a strong and beneficent occupation of adjacent territory.”⁸⁴ Mahan both feared and respected the Far East, especially Japan. Hence, America’s occupation of the Philippines would have a twofold effect. It would force the East to recognize America as a formidable power; an Eastern power expanding its territory would have to do so in light of America’s presence in the Philippines. Moreover, the Philippines gave America better access to the Far Eastern markets.

REFLECTIONS ON MAHAN’S POLITICAL THOUGHT

With the advent of the United Nations and increased internationalism, Mahan’s political thought seems to have been rejected by contemporary U.S. policy making. Yet in fact Mahan’s influence may be today more pertinent than it may appear at a glance. By 1893, when Frederick Jackson Turner declared the end of the American frontier, Mahan had already (in 1890) identified the new American frontier: the sea.⁸⁵ The history of the twentieth century, with its world wars, and of the early twenty-first, with its globalization, shows that Mahan was correct. The sea is a perpetual frontier—there are always new markets and new modes of expansion. For the most part, Mahan favored peace and negotiation (though as the Philippines experience showed he was open to coercion and force). This point, however, needs to be tempered with the realization that had Mahan been a British or German subject he most certainly would have given quite different advice to his countrymen. Ultimately, the decision between acting from national interest and acting from moral responsibility rested on the nuances of the particular moment.

Mahan's political thought was based on a combination of national interest and moral responsibility. Although the former is concerned with calculation and appetites, whereas the latter derives from principles of morality, Mahan was able to reconcile the two concepts by arguing that both derive ultimately from the national will. Their actualization rests equally on the ability of the nation to make its own decisions. Mahan held consistently that since there can be no earthly arbiter, decisions about whether an action is just, moral, necessary, or useful must be left solely to the individual nations making them.

However, a significant international problem emerges: if individual nations are viewed as the only just arbiters, decisions from national interest might be called—quite inappropriately—judgments of conscience. That is, there arises the danger of national interest subsuming conscience. Under the banner of conscience or moral responsibility, nations might declare war or commit acts of aggression when, in truth, it is only their interests that are being served. Mahan does not resolve this tension; his thought is based on the conviction that moral truths of right and wrong can be determined only on the basis of the feelings of individual nations. Mahan falls short of moral relativism, though, because he acknowledges openly that nations may err. But nations have the *right* to err; other competing nations hoping to interfere cannot speak infallibly or unbiasedly, are motivated by their own selfish interests, and would object if other nations interfered in *their* own business. By stressing the importance of determination by the individual nation whether its own actions are moral, Mahan was attempting to avoid the international tyranny of nations disguising their own interests as matters of conscience and responsibility. Mahan's concern for the potential dangers of arbitration is genuine and shows, contra the judgments of Hofstadter and Beard, that Mahan was neither a trigger-happy imperialist nor a rambunctious school-boy but a sober-minded observer of world affairs.

NOTES

1. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1955), pp. 3–12.
2. This theme is fleshed out in Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998).
3. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).
4. Richard W. Tuck, *The Ambiguous Relationship: Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1987), pp. 1–6, 101–108.
5. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, 5th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1894).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
7. Robert Seager II, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and His Letters* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1977), p. 215.

8. W. D. Puleston, *Mahan: The Life and Work of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1939), p. 159.
9. William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma, 1947), p. 13; Charles Carlisle Taylor, *The Life of Admiral Mahan* (London: John Murray, 1920), pp. 66, 70, 73.
10. Sadao Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2006), pp. 3–44.
11. Puleston, *Mahan*, p. 207.
12. Norman Angell, “The Great Illusion: A Response to Captain A. T. Mahan,” *North American Review* 195 (1912), p. 772.
13. Charles Beard, “Giddy Minds and Foreign Quarrels,” *Harper’s Magazine* 179 (September 1939), pp. 338–39, quoted in George R. Leighton, “Beard and Foreign Policy,” in *Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal*, ed. Howard K. Beale (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 166–67 [emphasis added].
14. Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948; repr., New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 446.
15. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1963); Walter LaFeber, “A Note on the ‘Mercantilistic Imperialism’ of Alfred Thayer Mahan,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 48, no. 4 (March 1962); Charles D. Tarlton, “The Styles of American International Thought: Mahan, Bryan, and Lippman,” *World Politics* 17, no. 4 (July 1965); Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World before the War, 1890–1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).
16. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Some Neglected Aspects of War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1907), pp. 25, 28, 30.
17. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan*, ed. Robert Seager II and Doris D. Maguire (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1975). The index is in the third volume.
18. Montesquieu’s quote is in Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905), vol. 1, p. 27.
19. Philip A. Crowl, “Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), p. 450.
20. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *From Sail to Steam* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), p. 277.
21. Mahan, *Influence*, p. iv.
22. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Administration and Warfare: Some General Principles with Other Essays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1918), p. 250.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
24. Baron de Jomini, *Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1862), p. 16.
25. These three words are used in several of Mahan’s books and often interchangeably.
26. Mahan, *Influence*, p. 89.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
28. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1902), p. 84; Mahan, *Neglected Aspects*, p. 88. Mahan discusses the will of the German people in *The Interest of America in International Conditions* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1910), p. 172.
29. Mahan, *Interest of America in International Conditions*, p. 42.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
31. Mahan, *Naval Administration*, p. 137.
32. Mahan, *Influence*, p. 1.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effects upon International Policies* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1900), p. 30.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
41. See Herbert Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” in *Seven Essays Selected from the*

- Works of Herbert Spencer* (London: Watts, 1907), pp. 7–34.
42. Mahan, *Naval Administration*, p. vii.
 43. Mahan, *Problem of Asia*, p. v. Mahan, like certain of his contemporaries, believed that “races” (the Latins, Germans, Chinese, etc.) had different characteristics.
 44. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
 45. *Ibid.*
 46. *Ibid.*
 47. LaFeber, *New Empire*, p. 91.
 48. Mahan, *Influence*, pp. 82–83; Mahan, *Problem of Asia*, pp. 27–28; Mahan, *Retrospect*, p. 183.
 49. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Armaments and Arbitration: The Place of Force in the International Relations of States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912), p. 66.
 50. See Angell, “Great Illusion,” pp. 754–72.
 51. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Lessons of the War with Spain and Other Articles* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1918), pp. 286–87.
 52. Mahan, *Armaments*, pp. 153, 126.
 53. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
 54. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Harvest Within: Thoughts on the Life of the Christian* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1909), p. 13.
 55. Mahan, *Armaments*, p. 117.
 56. Mahan, *Neglected Aspects*, p. 31.
 57. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–32, 36–37, 39.
 58. Mahan, *Armaments*, p. 106.
 59. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
 60. Mahan, *Neglected Aspects*, p. 57.
 61. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 62. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 29.
 63. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
 64. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1897), p. 224.
 65. Mahan, *Armaments*, p. 48.
 66. Mahan, *Retrospect*, p. 19.
 67. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
 68. Mahan, *Naval Administration*, p. 372.
 69. *Ibid.*, p. 360.
 70. *Ibid.*, pp. 407–408.
 71. Mahan, *Armaments*, p. 177; Mahan, *Influence*, p. 42.
 72. Mahan, *Armaments*, p. 105.
 73. Seager, *Alfred Thayer Mahan*, p. 411.
 74. *Ibid.*, p. 412.
 75. Taylor, *Life of Admiral Mahan*, pp. 98–99.
 76. Mahan, *Armaments*, p. 101.
 77. *Ibid.*
 78. Mahan, *Naval Administration*, p. 396.
 79. Mahan, *Lessons*, p. 26.
 80. *Ibid.*
 81. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
 82. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
 83. *Ibid.*
 84. *Ibid.*, pp. 245–46.
 85. See Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *American Progressivism: A Reader*, ed. Ronald J. Pestritto and William J. Atto (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 67–89.