

## "Destruction of the Battleship Maine"

Carroll County Times article for 19 April 1998

By Jay A. Graybeal

On February 15, 1898, Havana Harbor was rocked with the violent explosion of the Battleship Maine, described by one witness as a "bursting, rending, crashing sound of immense volume." When the survivors were counted they numbered only 85. The ship was a complete loss and 265 of her crew were dead or missing. The U.S. Navy convened a Court of Inquiry and Spanish officials also sought to find a cause of the disaster. The results of both investigations were published in the April 2 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper:

### "DESTRUCTION OF THE MAINE

The Official Report of the Board of Inquiry Submitted to Congress.

#### THE SPANISH VIEW OF THE DISASTER

On Monday Mr. McKinley submitted a message to Congress, transmitting the report of the court of inquiry upon the wreck of the Maine. The report is a long one, but the following summary is sufficient to give complete knowledge of it:

#### THE REPORT

First-The court finds that at the time of the explosion the Maine was lying in from five and one-half to six fathoms of water.

Second-The discipline aboard the ship was excellent; everything was stowed away, according to orders-ammunition, guns, stores, &c. The temperature of the magazines at 8 p.m. was normal except in the after 10-inch magazine, and that did not explode.

Third-The explosion occurred at 9:40 o'clock on the evening of February 15. There were two explosions, with a very short interval between them. The ship lifted on the first explosion.

Fourth-The court can form no definite opinion of the condition of the wreck from the divers' evidence.

Fifth-This part of the report contains technical details of the wreckage, from which the court deduces that a mine was exploded under the ship on the port side.

Sixth-The explosion was due to no fault of those on board.

Seventh-This section contains the opinion of the court stating that the explosion of the mine caused the explosion of the ship's two magazines.

Eighth-The court declares that it cannot find evidence to fix the responsibility.

The report is unanimous and is signed by all the members of the court. It does not refer to the existence or non-existence of mines in the harbor of Havana except in the specific finding that a mine was exploded under the ship and the opinion that

the explosion of the two magazines was caused by the explosion of a mine.

The report, as a whole, is a formal, dispassionate recital of facts and bears the stamp of that strict officialism which marks naval procedure. It is brief, not exceeding 1,800 words, and among the eight parts goes to the greatest length under the second heading, which deals with the discipline and order of the ship. This the court specifies with extreme minuteness, the least detail of the condition of everything on board being given.

#### MAGAZINES NOT THE SOURCE

The normal temperature of the large forward magazines at 8 o'clock-only an hour and forty minutes before the explosion-is said to dispose of the question of accidental combustion within these magazines. The court holds that these magazines did not explode from internal causes, but that the explosion of the mine under the port side of the ship caused them to explode. This will explain the remarkable destruction wrought, the explosion thus being shown to have combined the force of a mine without and two magazines within.

The finding that the ship was lifted on the first explosion indicates an external source and one of tremendous power to be able to lift a battle ship weighing thousands of tons.

The character of the wreckage, technically described in the fifth part of the report, from which the court deduce that a mine was exploded under the ship on the port side, sustains that view taken by some experts soon after the disaster that the force of the explosion was exerted from port to starboard.

The inability of the court to find evidence to fix responsibility makes that report extremely guarded in expression. Neither Spain nor the Spanish are mentioned in the document.

#### THE SPANISH VIEW

WASHINGTON, March 28.-A full synopsis of the report of the Spanish naval commission which investigated the destruction of the battle ship Maine was given out tonight. It is taken from a copy of the original report, which is now on its way here from Havana, the synopsis being cabled in the meantime and today placed in the hands of this government. The conclusions reached are directly opposite to those in the report of the court of inquiry submitted to Congress today. The synopsis is as follows:

"The report contains declarations made by ocular witnesses and experts. From these statements it clearly deduces and proves the absence of all those attendant circumstances which are invariably present on the occasion of the explosion of a torpedo.

"The evidence of witnesses comparatively close to the Maine at the moment is to the effect that only one explosion occurred; that no column of water was thrown in the air; that no shock to the side of the nearest vessel was felt, nor on land was any vibration noticed, and that no dead fish were found.

"The evidence of the senior pilot of the harbor states that there is abundance of fish in the harbor, and this is corroborated by other witnesses. The assistant engineer of works states that after explosions made during the execution of works in the harbor he has always found dead fish.

"The divers were unable to examine the bottom of the Maine, which was buried in the mud, but a careful examination of the sides of the vessel, the rents and breaks in which all point outward, shows without a doubt that the explosion was from the inside.

"A minute examination of the bottom of the harbor around the vessel shows absolutely no sign of the explosion of a torpedo, and the fiscal (judge advocate) of the commission can find no precedent for the explosion of the storage magazine of a vessel by a torpedo.

"The report makes clear that, owing to the special nature of the proceedings followed and the absolute respect shows for the extra territorial idea of the Maine, the commission has been prevented from making such an examination of the inside of the vessel as would determine even the hypothesis of the internal origin of the accident. This is to be attributed to the regrettable refusal to permit of the necessary co-operation of the Spanish commission, both with the commander and crew of the Maine and the different American officials commissioned to investigate that causes of the accident, and later on with those employed in salvage work."

The report finishes by stating that an examination of the inside and outside of the Maine, as soon as such examination may be possible, also of the bottom where the vessel rests, will prove that, supposing that remains of the wreck will not be totally or partially altered in the process of extraction, the explosion was undoubtedly due to some interior cause."

Despite the lack of concrete evidence of Spanish sabotage, American went to war with Spain. Following "the Splendid Little War", she emerged a world power with new possessions stretching from the Caribbean to the Philippines.

Photo caption: Local reformer Mary B. Shellman (center) portrayed Cuba with Denton Gehr as Uncle Sam and Georgia Buckingham as Columbia, to promote the cause of Cuba Libre (Free Cuba) in a play at the Westminster Odd Fellows Hall in c. 1898. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Richard N. Gehr.