

San Francisco Examiner
May 21, 1898

Surrounding a Fleet

Not too much should be expected from the fact—if it were a fact—that we have the Spanish admiral “surrounded.” Under ordinary circumstances, the dearest hope of the strategist, afloat or ashore, is to get himself “surrounded” as speedily as he can. To be “surrounded” means to have cut the enemy in to, in three, or in four, as the case may be; and that the enemy cannot afford to permit unless each of his armies or fleets is stronger than the army or fleet which they surround. Strategy is the same in all ages, and on sea and land, and its fundamental principle is to bring the mass of your force into contact with fractions of your enemy. One way to accomplish that is to operate on interior lines—that is to say, get yourself “surrounded,” so that you will have a shorter distance to go in order to attack one of the enemy’s fractions than another fraction must travel in order to assist it. At sea this advantage is even greater than on land, owing to superior possibilities of secrecy in movement and consequent uncertainty of the enemy as to which fraction you may be moving against.

So, if the Spanish admiral were really “surrounded” in the Caribbean Sea his plight would not, unfortunately, be as pitiful as one would wish. He would be at a strategic disadvantage if mindful to run away; if intent on fighting, his chance of success would be distinctly better than if he had his antagonists all before him in a bunch.

In point of fact the Spanish admiral is not “surrounded.” The Caribbean Sea has, naturally, as many exits as entrances—say a half dozen. Of these we guard one: the Windward Passage, leading into the Atlantic, northward. The strait leading northwest between Yucatan and the western end of Cuba, into the Gulf of Mexico we do not hold and we do not need to hold, for the hostile fleet will not pass through it unless willing to fight Schley and the blockading squadron before Havana—and that is what we are supposed to desire. The notion that for the doubtful advantage of bombarding a city or two Cervera will sail into a “trap” with only two exits, one of which we already hold and the other of which Sampson would promptly close by a movement from the south of Cuba, is amusing, but for my part I prefer a ballet. Cervera will not enter the Gulf for any purpose but to relieve Havana by fighting whatever he may find there.

One of the “surrounding” squadrons is said to be composed of the “Oregon,” “Marietta” and “Buffalo,” with two or three auxiliary cruisers which have gone to meet them. This dubious flotilla is supposed to be stopping up, or about to stop up, all the easterly and southerly holes out of the Caribbean, including that by which the Spaniards went in. Of this it is sufficient to say that at the time of writing nobody in America knows within a thousand miles where the Oregon and her consorts are.

And, finally, it is not known that the Spanish fleet is in the Caribbean Sea.