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Military Preparedness and Unpreparedness

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American war, M. Pierre Loti, member of the French Academy and cultivated exponent of the hopes and beliefs of the average citizen of continental Europe in regard to the contest, was at Madrid. Dewey's victory caused him grief; but he consoled himself, after watching a parade of the Spanish troops, by remarking: "They are indeed still the solid and splendid Spanish troops, heroic in every epoch—it needs only to look at them to divine the woe that awaits the American shopkeepers when brought face to face with such soldiers." The excellent M. Loti had already explained Manila by vague references to American bombs loaded with petroleum, and to a devilish mechanical ingenuity wholly unaccompanied by either humanity or courage, and he still allowed himself to dwell on the hope that there were reserved for America *des surprises sanglantes.*

M. Loti's views on military matters need not detain us, for his attitude toward the war was merely the attitude of continental Europe generally, in striking contrast to that of England. But it is a curious fact that his view reflects not unfairly two different opinions, which two different classes of our people would have expressed before the event—opinions singularly falsified by the fact. Our pessimists feared that we had lost courage and fighting capacity; some of our optimists asserted that we needed neither, in view of our marvelous wealth and extraordinary inventiveness and mechanical skill. The national trait of "smartness," used in the Yankee sense of the word, has very good and very bad sides. Among the latter is its tendency to create the belief that we need not prepare for war, because somehow we shall be able to win by some novel patent device, some new trick or new invention developed on the spur of the moment by the ingenuity of our people. In this way it is hoped to provide a substitute for preparedness—that is, for years of patient and faithful attention to detail in advance. It is even sometimes said that these mechanical devices will be of so terrible a character as to nullify the courage which has always in the past been the prime factor in winning battles.

Now, as all sound military judges knew in advance must inevitably be the case, the experience of the Spanish war completely falsified every prediction of this kind. We did not win through any special ingenuity. Not a device of any kind was improvised during or immediately before the war which was of any practical service. The "bombs enveloped in petroleum" had no existence save in the brains of the Spaniards and their more credulous sympathizers. Our navy won because of its preparedness and because of the splendid seamanship and gunnery which had been handed down as traditional in the service, and had been perfected by the most careful work. The army, at the only point where it was seriously opposed, did its work by sheer dogged courage and hard fighting, in spite of an unpreparedness which almost brought disaster upon it, and would without doubt actually have done so had not the defects and shortcomings of the Spanish administration been even greater than our own.

We won the war in a very short time, and without having to expend more than the merest fraction of our strength. The navy was shown to be in good shape; and Secretary Root, to whom the wisdom of President McKinley has intrusted the War Department, has already shown himself as good a man as ever held the portfolio—a man whose administration is certainly to be of inestimable service to the army and to the country. In consequence, too many of our people show signs of thinking that, after all, everything was all right, and is all right now; that we need not bother ourselves to learn any lessons that are not agreeable to us, and that if in the future we get into a war with a more formidable power than Spain, we shall pull through somehow. Such a view is unjust to the nation, and particularly unjust to the splendid men of the army and of the navy, who would be sacrificed to it, should we ever engage in a serious war without having learned the lessons that the year 1898 ought to have taught.

If we wish to get an explanation of the efficiency of our navy in 1898, and of the astonishing ease with which its victories were won, we must go a long way back of that year, and study not only its history, but the history of the Spanish navy for many decades. Of course any such study must begin with a prompt admission of the splendid natural quality of our officers and men. On the bridge, in the gun-turrets, in the engine-room, and behind the quick-firers, every one alike, from the highest to the lowest, was eager for the war, and was, in heart, mind, and body, of the very type which makes the best kind of fighting man.

Many of the officers of our ships have mentioned to me that during the war punishments almost ceased, because the men who got into scrapes in times of peace were so aroused and excited by the chance of battle that their behavior was perfect. We read now and then of foreign services where men hate their officers, have no community of interest with them, and no desire to fight for the flag. Most emphatically such is not the case in our service. The discipline is just but not severe, unless severity is imperatively called for. As a whole, the officers have the welfare of the men very much at heart, and take care of their bodies with the same forethought that they show in training them for battle. The physique of the men is excellent, and to it are joined eagerness to learn, and readiness to take risks and to stand danger unmoved.

Nevertheless, all this, though indispensable as a base, would mean nothing whatever for the efficiency of the navy without years of careful preparation and training. A war-ship is such a complicated machine, and such highly specialized training is self-evidently needed to command it, that our naval commanders, unlike our military commanders, are freed from having to combat the exasperating belief that the average civilian could at short notice do their work. Of course, in reality a special order of ability and special training are needed to enable a man to command troops successfully; but the need is not so obvious as on shipboard. No civilian could be five minutes on a battle-ship without realizing his unfitness to command it; but there are any number of civilians who firmly believe they can command regiments, when they have not a single trait, natural or acquired, that really fits them for the task. A blunder in the one case meets with instant, open, and terrible punishment; in the other, it is at the moment only a source of laughter or exasperation to the few, ominous though it may be for the future. A colonel who issued the wrong order would cause confusion. A ship-captain by such an order might wreck his ship. It follows that the navy is comparatively free in time of war from the presence in the higher ranks of men utterly unfit to perform their duties. The nation realizes that it cannot improvise naval officers even out of first-rate skippers of merchantmen and passenger-steamers. Such men could be used to a certain extent as under-officers to meet a sudden and great emergency; but at best they would meet it imperfectly, and this the public at large understands.

There is, however, some failure to understand that much the same condition prevails among ordinary seamen. The public speakers and newspaper writers who may be loudest in clamoring for war are often precisely the men who clamor against preparations for war. Whether from sheer ignorance or from demagogy, they frequently assert that, as this is the day of mechanics, even on the sea, and as we have a large mechanical population, we could at once fit out any number of vessels with men who would from the first do their duty thoroughly and well.

As a matter of fact, though the sea-mechanic has replaced the sailorman, yet it is almost as necessary as ever that a man should have the sea habit in order to be of use aboard ship; and it is infinitely more necessary than in former times that a man-of-war's-man should have especial training with his guns before he can use them aright. In the old days cannon were very simple; sighting was done roughly; and the ordinary merchant seaman speedily grew fit to do his share of work on a frigate. Nowadays men must be carefully trained for a considerable space of time before they can be of any assistance whatever in handling and getting good results from the formidable engines of destruction on battle-ship, cruiser, and torpedo-boat. Crews cannot be improvised. To get the very best work out of them, they should all be composed of trained and seasoned men; and in any event they should not be sent against a formidable adversary unless each crew has for a nucleus a large body of such men filling all the important positions. From time immemorial it has proved impossible to improvise so much as a makeshift navy for use against a formidable naval opponent. Any such effort must meet with disaster.

Most fortunately, the United States had grown to realize this some time before the Spanish war broke out. After the gigantic Civil War the reaction from the strain of the contest was such that our navy was permitted to go to pieces. Fifteen years after the close of the contest in which Farragut took rank as one of the great admirals of all time, the splendid navy of which he was the chief ornament had become an object of derision to every third-rate power in Europe and South America. The elderly monitors and wooden steamers, with their old-fashioned smooth-bore guns, would have been as incompetent to face the modern ships of the period as the *Congress* and the *Cumberland* were to face the *Merrimac.* Our men were as brave as ever, but in war their courage would have been of no more avail than the splendid valor of the men who sank with their guns firing and flags flying when the great Confederate ironclad came out to Hampton Roads.

At last the nation awoke from its lethargy. In 1883, under the administration of President Arthur, when Secretary Chandler was in the Navy Department, the work was begun. The first step taken was the refusal to repair the more antiquated wooden ships, and the building of new steel ships to replace them. One of the ships thus laid down was the *Boston*, which was in Dewey's fleet. It is therefore merely the literal truth to say that the preparations which made Dewey's victory possible began just fifteen years before the famous day when he steamed into Manila Bay. Every senator and congressman who voted an appropriation which enabled Secretary Chandler to begin the upbuilding of the new navy, the President who advised the course, the secretary who had the direct management of it, the ship-builder in whose yard the ship was constructed, the skilled experts who planned her hull, engine, and guns, and the skilled workmen who worked out these plans, all alike are entitled to their share in the credit of the great Manila victory.

The majority of the men can never be known by name, but the fact that they did well their part in the deed is of vastly more importance than the obtaining of any reward for it, whether by way of recognition or otherwise; and this fact will always remain. Nevertheless, it is important for our own future that, so far as possible, we should recognize the men who did well. This is

peculiarly important in the case of Congress, whose action has been the indispensable prerequisite for every effort to build up the navy, as Congress provided the means for each step.

As there was always a division in Congress, while in the popular mind the whole body is apt to be held accountable for any deed, good or ill, done by the majority, it is much to be wished, in the interest of justice, that some special historian of the navy would take out from the records the votes, and here and there the speeches, for and against the successive measures by which the navy was built up. Every man who by vote and voice from time to time took part in adding to our fleet, in buying the armor, in preparing the gun-factories, in increasing the personnel and enabling it to practice, deserves well of the whole nation, and a record of his action should be kept, that his children may feel proud of him. No less clearly should we understand that throughout these fifteen years the men who, whether from honest but misguided motives, from short-sightedness, from lack of patriotism, or from demagogy, opposed the building up of the navy, have deserved ill of the nation, exactly as did those men who recently prevented the purchase of armor for the battleships, or, under the lead of Senator Gorman, prevented the establishment of our army on the footing necessary for our national needs. If disaster comes through lack of preparedness, the fault necessarily lies far less with the men under whom the disaster actually occurs than with those to whose wrongheadedness or short-sighted indifference in time past the lack of preparedness is due.

The mistakes, the blunders, and the shortcomings in the army management during the summer of 1898 should be credited mainly, not to any one in office in 1898, but to the public servants of the people, and therefore to the people themselves, who permitted the army to rust since the Civil War with a wholly faulty administration, and with no chance whatever to perfect itself by practice, as the navy was perfected. In like manner, any trouble that may come upon the army, and therefore upon the nation, in the next few years, will be due to the failure to provide for a thoroughly reorganized regular army of adequate size in 1898; and for this failure the members in the Senate and the House who took the lead against increasing the regular army, and reorganizing it, will be primarily responsible. On them will rest the blame of any check to the national arms, and the honor that will undoubtedly be won for the flag by our army will have been won in spite of their sinister opposition.

In May, 1898, when our battle-ships were lying off Havana and the Spanish torpedo-boat destroyers were crossing the ocean, our best commanders felt justifiable anxiety because we had no destroyers to guard our fleet against the Spanish destroyers. Thanks to the blunders and lack of initiative of the Spaniards, they made no good use whatever of their formidable boats, sending them against our ships in daylight, when it was hopeless to expect anything from them.

But in war it is unsafe to trust to the blunders of the adversary to offset our own blunders. Many a naval officer, when with improvised craft of small real worth he was trying to guard our battle-ships against the terrible possibilities of an attack by torpedo-boat destroyers in the darkness, must have thought with bitterness how a year before, when Senator Lodge and those who thought like him were striving to secure an adequate support of large, high-class torpedo-boats, the majority of the Senate followed the lead of Senator Gorman in opposition. So in the future, if what we all most earnestly hope will not happen does happen, and we are engaged in war with some formidable sea power, any failure of our arms resulting from an inadequate number of battle-ships, or imperfectly prepared battle-ships, will have to be credited to those members of Congress who opposed increasing the number of ships, or opposed giving them proper armament, for no matter what reason. On the other hand, the national consciousness of

capacity to vindicate national honor must be due mainly to the action of those congressmen who have in fact built up our fleet.

Secretary Chandler was succeeded by a line of men, each of whom, however he might differ from the others politically and personally, sincerely desired and strove hard for the upbuilding of the navy. Under Messrs. Whitney, Tracy, Herbert, and Long the work has gone steadily forward, thanks, of course, to the fact that successive Congresses, Democratic and Republican alike, have permitted it to go forward.

But the appropriation of money and the building of ships were not enough. We must keep steadily in mind that not only was it necessary to build the navy, but it was equally necessary to train our officers and men aboard it by actual practice. If in 1883 we had been able suddenly to purchase our present battle-ships, cruisers, and torpedo-boats, they could not have been handled with any degree of efficiency by our officers and crews as they then were. Still less would it be possible to handle them by improvised crews. In an emergency bodies of men like our naval militia can do special bits of work excellently, and, thanks to their high average of character and intellect, they are remarkably good makeshifts, but it would be folly to expect from them all that is expected from a veteran crew of trained man-of-war's-men. And if we are ever pitted ship for ship on equal terms against the first-class navy of a first-class power, we shall need our best captains and our best crews if we are to win.

As fast as the new navy was built we had to break in the men to handle it. The young officers who first took hold and developed the possibilities of our torpedo-boats, for instance, really deserve as much credit as their successors have rightly received for handling them with dash and skill during the war. The admirals who first exercised the new ships in squadrons were giving the training without which Dewey and Sampson would have found their tasks incomparably more difficult. As for the ordinary officers and seamen, of course it was their incessant practice in handling the ships and the guns at sea, in all kinds of weather, both alone and in company, year in and year out, that made them able to keep up the never-relaxing night blockade at Santiago, to steam into Manila Bay in the darkness, to prevent breakdowns and make repairs of the machinery, and finally to hit what they aimed at when the battle was on. In the naval bureaus the great bulk of what in the army would be called staff places are held by line officers. The men who made ready the guns were the same men who afterward used them. In the Engineering Bureau were the men who had handled or wore to handle the engines in action. The Bureau of Navigation, the Bureau of Equipment, the Bureau of Information, were held by men who had commanded ships in actual service, or who were thus to command them against the Spaniards. The head of the Bureau of Navigation is the chief of staff, and he has always been an officer of distinction, detailed, like all of the other bureau chiefs, for special service. From the highest to the lowest officer, every naval man had seen and taken part, during time of peace, in the work which he would have to do in time of war. The commodores and captains who took active part in the war had commanded fleets in sea service, or at the least had been in command of single ships in these fleets. There was not one thing they wore to do in war which they had not done in peace, save actually receive the enemy's fire.

Contrast this with the army. The material in the army is exactly as good as that in the navy, and in the lower ranks the excellence is as great. In no service, ashore or afloat, in the world could better men of their grade be found than the lieutenants, and indeed the captains, of the infantry and dismounted cavalry at Santiago. But in the army the staff bureaus are permanent positions, instead of being held, as of course they should be, by officers detailed from the line, with the needs of the line and experiences of actual service fresh in their minds.

The artillery had for thirty-five years had no field-practice that was in the slightest degree adequate to its needs, or that compared in any way with the practice received by the different companies and troops of the infantry and cavalry. The bureaus in Washington were absolutely enmeshed in red tape, and were held for the most part by elderly men, of fine records in the past, who were no longer fit to break through routine and to show the extraordinary energy, business capacity, initiative, and willingness to accept responsibility which were needed. Finally, the higher officers had been absolutely denied that chance to practice their profession to which the higher officers of the navy had long been accustomed. Every time a warship goes to sea and cruises around the world, its captain has just such an experience as the colonel of a regiment would have if sent off for a six or eight months' march, and if during those six or eight months he incessantly practiced his regiment in every item of duty which it would have to perform in battle. Every war-ship in the American navy, and not a single regiment in the American army, had had this experience.

Every naval captain had exercised command for long periods, under conditions which made up nine tenths of what he would have to encounter in war. Hardly a colonel had such an experience to his credit. The regiments were not even assembled, but were scattered by companies here and there. After a man ceased being a junior captain he usually had hardly any chance for field-service; it was the lieutenants and junior captains who did most of the fieldwork in the West of recent years. Of course there were exceptions; even at Santiago there were generals and colonels who showed themselves not only good fighters, but masters of their profession; and in the Philippines the war has developed admirable leaders, so that now we have ready the right man; but the general rule remains true. The best man alive, if allowed to rust at a three-company post, or in a garrison near some big city, for ten or fifteen years, will find himself in straits if suddenly called to command a division, or mayhap even an army-corps, on a foreign expedition, especially when not one of his important subordinates has ever so much as seen five thousand troops gathered, fed, sheltered, manoeuvered, and shipped. The marvel is, not that there was blundering, but that there was so little, in the late war with Spain.

Captain (now Colonel) John Bigelow, Jr., in his account of his personal experiences in command of a troop of cavalry during the Santiago campaign, has pictured the welter of confusion during that campaign, and the utter lack of organization, and of that skilled leadership which can come only through practice. His book should be studied by every man who wishes to see our army made what it should be. In the Santiago campaign the army was more than once uncomfortably near grave disaster, from which it was saved by the remarkable fighting qualities of its individual fractions, and, above all, by the incompetency of its foes. To go against a well-organized, well-handled, well-led foreign foe under such conditions would inevitably have meant failure and humiliation. Of course party demagogues and the thoughtless generally are sure to credit these disasters to the people under whom they occur, to the secretary, or to the commander of the army.

As a matter of fact, the blame must rest in all such cases far less with them than with those responsible for the existence of the system. Even if we had the best secretary of war the country could supply and the best general the army could furnish, it would be impossible for them offhand to get good results if the nation, through its representatives, had failed to make adequate provision for a proper army, and to provide for the reorganization of the army and for its practice in time of peace. The whole staff system, and much else, should be remodeled. Above all, the army should be practiced in mass in the actual work of marching and camping. Only thus will it be possible to train the commanders, the quartermasters, the commissaries, the

doctors, so that they may by actual experience learn to do their duties, as naval officers by actual experience have learned to do theirs. Only thus can we do full justice to as splendid and gallant a body of men as any nation ever had the good luck to include among its armed defenders.