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REMEMBER THE MAINE

by Tom Miller

To learn the story of the USS *Maine*, pull up a rickety wooden chair with me at Dos Hermanos, a dockside bar on Avenida del Puerto in Havana's sprawling harbor district. If you had been out with pre-Lenten celebrants at Dos Hermanos on February 15, one hundred years ago, you would have seen a shiny American battleship dominating the bay. Cuba, then fighting for its independence from Spain, had drawn the world's attention for the tenacity of its guerrilla forces against a sophisticated European power. Off and on for three decades the notion of "Cuba Libre," a free Cuba, had motivated the country's intellectuals, campesinos and slaves. The intermittent war attracted a youthful Winston Churchill, an aging Clara Barton, and a host of other foreigners for a firsthand look at insurgency and its ghastly consequences.

The harbor was busy in early 1898. Since its arrival three weeks before, the *Maine* had been moored to buoy No. 4 between a Spanish ship, the *Alfonso XII*, and a German squarerigger, the *Gneisenau*. Earlier that February 15, the *City of Washington*, a Ward Line steamer full of Americans, had arrived and anchored about 300 yards away. Bars like Dos Hermanos were full of sailors, dockhands, international traders and the habaneros-- Havana residents--who catered to them. Spain had recently given a measure of autonomy to Cuba, a move that satisfied neither the liberationists, who demanded full independence; the Spanish merchants, who benefited from colonialism; or the occupying army, which ceded power reluctantly. Gen. Ramon Blanco, who had been installed by Spain as Cuba's governor-general only three months earlier, replacing the repressive Gen. Valeriano Weyler, had a thankless task. He and his underlings received the *Maine* with politic cordiality. His men gave Capt. Charles D. Sigsbee and his officers a case of Spanish sherry, locally rolled cigars and box seats to the bullfights. At Dos Hermanos and other bars, Spanish wine flowed.

On board the *Maine* that Tuesday night, sailors danced to an accordion in the starboard gangway; elsewhere a crewman plucked the strings of a mandolin. Shortly after 9 o'clock you might have heard C.H. Newton, the *Main 's* bugler from Washington, D.C., blow taps. The handsome ship bobbed listlessly, its nose pointing slightly northwest, its imposing 100-yard length visible from stem to stern for all Havana to see. The three-year-old vessel, despite its rank as a "second-class" battleship, was well-known within the military establishment. "I wish there was a chance that the *Maine* was going to be used against some foreign power," Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt had written a month earlier, "by preference Germany--but...I'd take even Spain if nothing better offered."

At 9:40 P.M. the *Maine's* forward end abruptly lifted itself from the water. Along the pier, passersby could hear a rumbling explosion. Within seconds, another eruption--this one deafening and massive--splintered the bow, sending anything that wasn't battened down, and most that was, flying more than 200 feet into the air. Bursts of flame and belches of smoke filled the night sky; water flooded into the lower decks and quickly rose to the upper ones. Some sailors were thrown violently from the blazing ship and drowned in the harbor. Others, just falling asleep in their hammocks, were pancaked between floors and ceilings fused together by the sudden, intense heat. Still more drowned on board or suffocated from overpowering smoke. In all, 266 of the 350 men aboard the *Maine* were killed, including bugler Newton.

"I first noticed a trembling and buckling of the decks," Pvt. William Anthony of Albany later recalled, "and then this prolonged roar." Lt. Comdr. Richard Wainright remembered he felt "a very heavy shock, and heard the noise of objects falling on deck. I was under the impression that we were being fired upon." Marine sergeant Michael Mehan was "fired overboard--lifted clear off the gangway." Each survivor had his own horrific tale--of inching along dark hallways in rapidly rising water, of gases and smoke, and grasping for lifelines tossed by the hastily assembled rescue crew of the *Alfonso XII*. The wonder is not that 266 died but that 84 actually survived. "From the waters and from the ship came the heart-rending cries of our men, 'Help me! Save me!'" recollected the *Maine's* chaplain, John Chidwick. "Immediately I gave them absolution."

From Dos Hermanos you could feel the explosion. As the air thickened and lights went out, people instinctively streamed toward the dock. The explosion hit with such force that Havana's power plant was temporarily knocked out. Firemen rushed to the harbor. The foreign press, a chummy and highly competitive bunch, emerged from its lair at the Hotel Inglaterra coffee shop and raced to the waterfront. Two of them got by harbor guards by claiming to be ship's officers.

Captain Sigsbee, who had been in his cabin in the aft section of the ship at the time of the blast, groped his way to the deck, assessed the damage and ordered all hands into the lifeboats. When he finally stepped into one himself, he was the last to leave the sinking ship. The dreadful explosion had taken place less than one hour earlier, but the aftermath seemed to hang in time. Sigsbee went straight to the *CITY OF WASHINGTON*, where Spanish officials rushed to offer help. There he scribbled a telegram to Washington with the most important words of his life:

"*Maine* blown up in Havana harbor at nine forty tonight and destroyed. Many wounded and doubtless more killed or drowned....Public opinion should be suspended until further report....Many Spanish officers including representatives of General Blanco now with me to express sympathy." The captain tried to sleep on the Ward Line steamer, but moans from injured sailors in a makeshift sickbay and explosions from his own ship's magazines kept him awake most of the night.

The *Maine* was in Havana, officially, on a mission of friendly courtesy and, incidentally, to protect American lives and property should the need arise. Yet the visit was neither spontaneous nor altruistic; the United States had been eyeing Cuba for almost a century. "I candidly confess," wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1809, "that I have ever looked upon Cuba as the most interesting addition that can be made to our system of States." The following year President Madison warned Great Britain to keep its hands off the island. And in the late 1820s, John Quincy Adams declared that Cuba had become "an object of transcendent importance to the commercial and political interests of our Union." He likened the island to an apple that could fall from its native tree and "gravitate only towards the North American Union."

Cubans were wary of the *Maine's* presence in their harbor. For many, then as now, the ship came to symbolize unwarranted intrusion. But the islanders already had the Spanish to contend with. Spain's strategy in 1896-97 under Governor-General Weyler was simple: round up everyone in the countryside and herd them into military townships. This, Weyler reasoned, would deprive the insurgents of support. The results of his plan were catastrophic. Cubans lived in concentration-camp conditions--severe crowding, almost no food, and rampant disease. Untended crops throughout the country went to waste as thousands starved; many died. Americans learned of this inhumanity with increasing horror and sympathized squarely with Cuba Libre. Despite Weyler's ruthless approach, however, the persistent Cuban insurgents were close to exhausting the superior Spanish land forces when the *Maine* arrived on its "friendly" mission. "We're here," says a marine aboard the *Maine* in Elmore Leonard's new novel, *Cuba Libre,* "in case it looks like the Cubans are gonna take over their own country before we get a chance to do it ourselves." Spain's shameful strategy, coupled with our long-time lust for Cuba, produced ideal conditions for the United States to enter the fray. Our destiny was manifest; the apple finally looked ready to fall.

The day after the explosion, Spanish authorities offered to bury the dead at Havana's Colón Cemetery, a plan Captain Sigsbee and U.S. Consul General Fitzhugh Lee readily accepted. Neither logistics nor climate lent themselves to storing or shipping unidentified mutilated corpses. Flowers and wreaths smothered the coffins lying in state at the municipal palace in the hours before the cortege made its way through the streets of Havana. Gen. Maximo Gómez, who commanded the Cuban revolutionary army, sent condolences. So did Queen Victoria.

The sheer magnitude of the explosion and its aftermath, coupled with Captain Sigsbee's admonition that the public not rush to judgment, created a bubble of suspended opinion in the States. Newspapers initially reported the catastrophe without elaboration, leaving blame and lurid detail for another day. At first, President William McKinley and Secretary of the Navy John Long considered the possibility that the ship's destruction was due to an accident. It could well

have been an internal problem; explosions from faulty wiring and self-igniting coal had plagued the Navy for years. But the bubble of suspended judgment soon burst. On February 17, William Randolph Hearst's New York JOURNAL headlined, "THE WAR SHIP *MAINE* WAS SPLIT IN TWO BY AN ENEMY'S SECRET INFERNAL MACHINE." It showed drawings revealing how an explosive device had been planted beneath the *Maine* and how it was detonated from shore. Joseph Pulitzer's New York WORLD gave readers a choice--"*MAINE* EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO?"-- and immediately sent divers to Havana "to learn the truth." The New York HERALD and the JOURNAL, which offered a $50,000 reward for evidence of a mine, were eager to send their own underwater investigative teams. Reporters in Havana were on top of the story, and their editors in the States were determined to squeeze every drop of tragedy possible from their coverage.

From Havana's Hotel Inglaterra, Charles Sigsbee, now a captain without portfolio, composed a second message to the Navy brass the day after the explosion--this one coded: "Probability the *Maine* destroyed by mine, perhaps by accident. I surmise that her berth was planted previous to her arrival; perhaps long ago. I can only surmise this."

The United States and Spain immediately established investigatory panels; diplomacy was their first casualty. The harbor and its waters were Spain's, and the Spanish restrained American divers from nosing about. The *Maine's* mangled torso was American, and the United States restricted Spanish efforts to get a good look. No Spaniards testified before the American inquiry, headed by Capt. William T. Sampson; no American Navy personnel appeared before the Spanish board, led by Capt. Pedro del Peral.

The United States had not fought on foreign soil since the Mexican War in the late 1840s. All the catalysts that bring on war were in place--land to be grabbed, money to be made, diplomatic trump cards to be played, wrongs to be righted, influence to be widened, evil to be avenged and a military ready to be mobilized--all these the *Maine's* explosion galvanized. President McKinley--spineless as "a chocolate éclairs," wrote Teddy Roosevelt--wanted to wait until the formal inquiry into the tragedy was concluded before calling for war against Spain, but he was about the last American with that much patience. The families of sailors killed on the battleship urged the President to jump into the fracas. Throughout America, eager teenagers asked where they could enlist. Newspapers fed the fever as congressmen were deluged with letters calling for revenge on Spain. Governor Culberson of Texas sent Rangers to guard the Mexican border against an invasion by “Spanish sympathizers.” Maine's Governor Llewellyn, fearing attack by Spain, asked for Navy cruisers to defend his jagged 4,500 mile coastline. Behind the scenes Spain refused to sell Cuba outright to the United States. Consul General Lee called for eventual annexation, beginning with occupation. Havana could sniff the foul scent of impending war.

The investigations into the explosion took myriad factor into account. Since neither a geyser of water erupted nor hundreds of dead fish floated to the surface immediately after the blast, it was likely an onboard accident. But to contradict this, the magazines and bunkers were at normal temperature that evening, which mean the explosion probably come from outside. Were bits of a mine found on the muddy harbor floor? Could divers detect a major hole in the

hull? Did other ships feel shock waves? Naval experts from around the world stepped forward to volunteer their own conjectures.

The Sampson investigation results came back within a month: the blast was not accidental; a mine had exploded beneath the *Maine*. The four Navy jurists were careful to add, however, that no evidence had "been obtainable fixing the responsibility for the destruction of the *Maine* upon any person or persons." Despite this disclaimer, given public opinion, they might as well have proclaimed Spain guilty of mass murder. Meanwhile, McKinley, in office just a year and mindful that his Republican-majority Congress was up for reelection in less than nine months, asked for $50 million to beef up the military. At the same time, Spain's' Captain Peral stitched together his country's evidence, convincing but circumstantial, that the Maine was destroyed by the proximity of its magazines to its coal bunkers—in other words, an internal explosion.

Reaction to the *Maine's* destruction took many forms. Americans grieved, opened up their hearts and wallets to *Maine* widow and orphans, sought solace in religion—and came up with money-raising schemes. Even before the investigations were complete, a Johnstown, New York, glove-maker suggested breaking up what was left of the *Maine* into mementos. "The wood," he wrote, "could be made into canes." The Siegel-Cooper department store asked the government for the *Maine's* scrap to cut into "souvenirs, buttons, scarf pins, watch charms, medallions . . . and many other attractive trinkets"—all income to be turned over to *Maine* widows and orphans. A Montana lawyer asked his congressman where to send the $444.25 that a local band had raised at a benefit for *Maine* families.

"Remember the *Maine*!"—a slogan first given notoriety by the press—became the five most common syllables in America. It was printed on peppermint lozenges, buttons and posters; it appeared in theaters on Friday night and churches on Sunday morning. Newsstands sold toy *Maines* made of highly flammable material; one light and whoosh! "Shop windows and family sitting rooms," noted historian Margaret Leech in The Age of McKinley, "enshrined pictures and models of the lost battleship." In Havana, the menu at the Plaza de Luz restaurant included "chicken fricassee à la *Maine*."

On April 25, 1898, Congress formally declared war on Spain. Sea battles at the Santiago de Cuba harbor and land battles just outside Santiago at El Caney and San Juan Hill followed, On May 1, George Dewey defeated the Spanish Navy at Manila Bay (SMITHSONIAN, March 1993). By summer's end, Spain had ceded Cuba, along with the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam, and had ceased to be a sea power. It was, wrote U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain John Hay, "a splendid little war." But when Spain surrendered Cuba, it was not to the long-suffering insurgent forces that had held it at bay; it was to the United States, which had been there only a few months. Despite having coordinated its troops with the U.S. campaign, and not withstanding its contributions to American military strategy, Cuba was shunted aside, the leaders of its decades-long struggle for independence reduced to spectators.

The *Maine* grew as a symbol in American culture, one as easily understood in Midwestern cornfields as in the boardrooms of industry. Literally hundreds of songs were written about the

ship and its fate, most of them titled “Remember the *Maine*.” Some were vengeful, others sang of a sailor’s dying request, still others simply mourned.

The Advisory Committee for Battleship *Maine* Relief Fund handled requests from the families of the 266 *Maine* dead. Relatives wrote letters pleading poverty, and the committee sent money, usually $50 per victim. U.S. consuls overseas often acted as intermediaries for immigrant families of Irish, Norwegian, German or other nationality whose sons had sewed on the *Maine*. “All my happiness, all my hopes went down with the *Maine*,” a German-immigrant mother wrote of her 26-year-old sailor son.

The casualties who had been buried in Havana were disinterred at the end of 1899 and reburied at Arlington National Cemetery. Captain Sigsbee was reunited with his men for a time, escorting their caskets from Havana to their final resting place overlooking the Potomac. “There was no note of triumph in the grim scene,” the *New York Times* observed of the burial ceremony. Pioneer filmmaker Albert Smith shot three minutes of the procession, then rented his silent footage to an opera house where an orchestra accompanied the powerful images.

The ship’s assistant engineer, John R. Morris, committed suicide a few years later. His friends claimed his anguish sprang from a secret he held that the explosion was due to defective electrical wiring and not a Spanish mine. Other theories abounded. A New Yorker maintained that the motive for blowing up the *Maine* was robbery, and claimed to know how much money was stolen and where it was buried. Sailors were said to have been smoking off-limits in the lower decks. Rumors of mines planted by loyal followers of the sacked General Weyler were not uncommon around Cuba; the U.S. consul at Matanzas, 6o miles east of Havana, said he had learned of a plot to blow up the *Maine* a couple of days before the explosion and immediately notified the consul general in Havana.

It was impossible to forget the *Maine*; its carcass lay in Havana Harbor protruding above the water, a grisly tourist attraction and a macabre reminder of the war. Over the years a stream of suggestions flowed into the Navy Department regarding ways to dispose of the ship’s remains. A Kansas lawyer wanted it preserved until the Panama Canal was completed, then towed to San Francisco for display there. Another fellow suggested that the *Maine* be beached along the Havana shoreline. “It will be an interest to tens of thousands of American travelers.” Despite efforts to prevent looting of the battleship’s carcass, a Havana merchant a few blocks from the Dos Hermanos bar advertised that in his store shoppers could sit in actual chairs from the *Maine*. In 1903 the Cuban government told the United States that the ship was a menace to navigation and requested that it be removed. Frustrated when the United States did nothing, Cuba let out bids for the ship’s removal. One Joseph De Wyckoff landed the contract, paying the Cuban treasury a $2,500 good-faith deposit. He solicited investors at one dollar a share: “We invite your attention to the financial possibilities of this undertaking, as well as to the patriotic and sentimental features of it.” In the end, nothing came of De Wyckoff’s grandiose scheme.

The *Maine* assumed the status of exotica, its identity borrowed from war, foreign shores and death, patriotism, sacrifice and valor. The American public, however, like the Cuban

government, grew wary of its location. Congress finally got the hint and in March 1910 authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to dispose of the twisted hulk. The Corps stayed at Havana's Plaza Hotel and scratched their heads over how best to get rid of the ship. Their solution: build an immense cofferdam around the *Maine*, pump out the water surrounding the ship and then dewater the ship itself. Next they would make the *Maine's* skeleton seaworthy, and finally flood the cofferdam so a tugboat could haul the carcass into international waters, where it would sink peacefully to the bottom of the sea.

The elliptical cofferdam consisted of some 20 interlocking cylinders driven deep into the harbor bottom. By mid-1911, after more than half a year of construction, workers began to pump water out of the enclosure. By the time they were done examining the wreckage, they had found parts of skeletons from some 70 more of the *Maine* dead. They also discovered Newton's bugle.

It was an unprecedented engineering feat, and during the two years between the authorization and its realization a curious sideshow played out back home. The Navy allowed *Maine* survivors and families of deceased crew men to apply for relics from the ship, which, as workers progressed on the grand plan, accumulated considerably. Cities and war veterans groups could likewise petition for newly uncovered *Maine* remains.

Letters came in from across America: heirs, Spanish War veterans groups, municipalities—they all wanted a piece of the *Maine*. Kansas City, Kansas, wanted "a memento to use in our parks." Sheldon, North Dakota, got a six-inch shell; Yonkers, New York, a pair of binoculars. Watt Cluverius, a midshipman who survived the *Maine*, asked for a revolver. The commander in chief of the United Spanish War Veterans asked for a thousand pounds of scrap brass and bronze to melt down into individual plaques.

Press coverage was remarkably tame, considering its original role in creating a symbol out of the *Maine*. The best it could do was "FIRST BONES ARE FOUND ON *MAINE*," in the *Havana Post* of June 20, 1911. When reports filtered north that pencils and rubber bands had been found, Eberhard Faber, the owner of a Brooklyn pencil plant, wrote the Secretary of the Navy: "I feel very confident that some of these goods were of my manufacture, and I would esteem it a great favor if I might be enabled to obtain these goods." A Cuban diver found a ring from the Naval Academy's class of 1895 belonging to Darwin Merritt, an engineer who had drowned on board. The diver surreptitiously pocketed it and later, at a Havana café, sold it to an American reporter. The journalist returned it to the family, who gave it to the Naval Academy.

Captain Sigsbee's effects seemed to withstand the years well. Corps workers came up with his inkwell, derby hat, typewriter and shaving mug. They also located his pipe, overshoes, chamber pot and handcuffs. Some *Maine* relics ended up at the Naval Academy or at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.; a few wound up in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. The ship's main mast is at Arlington National Cemetery perched next to the burial site of 229 *Maine* sailors. Its foremast stands 30 miles away on the waterfront in Annapolis. For this reason Navy people like to say that the *Maine* is the longest ship in the world.

Cubans had been under three flags—the Spanish, the American and their own—between the *Maine's* explosion and the effort to raise the ship. The postwar U.S. military occupation lasted until May 1902, but a treaty called the Platt Amendment, forced on Cuba by Congress, allowed the United States to send in troops whenever it wanted. It did on a few occasions, and the Platt Amendment wasn't abrogated until 1934. Meanwhile, as shipbuilding became more sophisticated and analysis increasingly exhaustive, more and more postmortems acknowledged that the *Maine's* destruction could have been self-inflicted.

The Navy undertook a second inquiry in late 1911, this one headed by Adm. Charles Vreeland. He and the four others on his team had the enormous benefit of inspecting the damage to the hull, the plates and the remaining bulk heads firsthand. But despite the added advantage of a dry autopsy, the panel concluded—as Sampson's underwater effort had 14 years earlier—that the explosion was external.
Vreeland's findings did, however, subsume and occasionally correct the data and inferences of the earlier board.

On March 16, 1912, with the cofferdam opened and the *Maine* cabled to the tugboat *Osceola*, the storied ship began its final trip. If you had returned to your seat at Dos Hermanos, you would have had a ringside view. Beginning at sunrise, a cannon boomed every half-hour from La Cabaña fortress at the entrance to the harbor. Coffins carrying the remains of the newly found sailors were loaded onto the
USS *North Carolina*, in town to bring the bones back to Washington and, with the USS *Birmingham*, escort the *Maine* on its final journey to sea. At 2:30 P.M., the seaward procession began. The hulk of the *Maine*, roses covering what remained of her deck, was towed in front of an estimated 8o,ooo habaneros, past private yachts and out into the Gulf of Mexico. Beyond the three-mile limit, the *Osceola* drifted to a halt and a crew boarded the *Maine* to prepare it for burial. Johnny O'Brien, a local port captain who had achieved renown for his role as a filibusterer during the insurrection against Spain, was the last to leave the sinking ship. "Some thought that the *Maine* appeared to struggle against her fate," he later wrote, "but to my mind there was not only no suggestion of a struggle but in no way could she have met a sweeter or more peaceful end."

But the story of the *Maine* did not end here. Although its fate came to represent our entry into the Spanish-American War, it has become clear to historians that had the *Maine* not exploded, some other reason would have catapulted us into the struggle for supremacy in Cuba.

Over the years, a succession of Cuban governments paid tribute to the victims of the *Maine*. In early 1925, during the closing months of President Alfredo Zayas' administration, Cuba dedicated a monument to those who died. It consisted of two tall marble columns with an American eagle perched on top. At the base was a plaque listing the dead. Gen. John J. Pershing, then 65, spoke at the ceremony. A year and a half later a vicious hurricane blew through Havana with winds of more than 100 miles an hour. It sank boats, brought about the

deaths of some 400 Cubans—and destroyed the *Maine* monument. A new eagle was sculpted, this one more aerodynamic, and a new monument went up.

Cuba became a convenient land for foreigners to invest and vacation in, and Americans did plenty of both. One year into Franklin Roosevelt's first administration, in a curious series of communications that involved FDR, his ambassador to Spain and the U.S. Naval Academy, the United States acknowledged that no proof existed that the Spanish blew up the *Maine*. In those days, Cuba celebrated "*Maine* Day" every February, and the U.S. ambassador would "hold forth at great length," according to a 1941 guidebook, "about the close ties that bind the two republics." Meanwhile, Dos Hermanos held its own as a popular watering hole. Foreigners such as Isadora Duncan and Federico García Lorca visited, and one could always find a lively mix of businessmen, artists, politicians, sailors and prostitutes drinking downstairs or eating at its rooftop dining room. As for Charles Sigsbee—"the Captain" to the public, "Foxy" to his family—he lived to 78, believing to the end that a mine blew up his ship. (His descendants, eligible for plaques from melted-down *Maine* bronze, have recently petitioned the Navy for 11 of them to be distributed among the current generations of his family.)

That would wrap up the *Maine* story were it not for two men of enormous ego, both bruised by the American military establishment—Cuban president Fidel Castro and Adm. Hyman Rickover of the U.S. Navy. In the closing weeks of the Eisenhower administration, just after the United States broke off relations with Cuba, the Cuban Council of Ministers called for the "imperialist eagle with all its tragic symbolism, vassalage, and exploitation" to be taken down from atop the *Maine* monument. A new inscription would go up, dedicated "To the Victims of the *Maine*, Sacrificed for Voracious American Imperialism in its Efforts to Take Control of Cuba."

The night of May 1, 1961, two weeks after beating back a U.S-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs, the Castro government sent a crane out to topple the *Maine* monument eagle. But the eagle was a tough old bird and clung tenaciously to its perch. After a night of huffing and puffing, the crane had dislodged only half of the bird. The next day it managed to get the rest of the eagle; but before the bird could be hauled away, someone made off with its head. Both halves of the body are now on display at Havana's Museum of the City, in the same building where the *Maine* dead lay in state in 1898. As for the eagle's head, it is mounted on the wall of the snack bar at the U.S. Interests Section—our unofficial embassy in Havana.

In Washington, Hyman Rickover, assuming the broad authority vested in a Navy admiral, took it upon himself in the 1970s to reinvestigate the *Maine* explosion. He had become intrigued with the ship's fate after reading a newspaper article on the subject and gathered together a panel of first-rate historians and engineers. After an exhaustive investigation and reexamination of the evidence, the team reached a definitive conclusion: the *Maine's* death was self-inflicted. This unintentional suicide was likely the result of a coal bunker fire, they found, but whatever its cause, it was absolutely clear that an external force—a mine or torpedo—was not responsible. When the 1976 Rickover report was rereleased in 1995, principals from the original team affirmed their earlier conclusion and added more supporting evidence. There are still some who take issue with that conclusion, maintaining that an external

blast was to blame. The plausibility of that and other explanations, cobbled together by a fact here, an assumption there, keeps the ultimate truth of how the *Maine* blew up elusive.

Within Cuba today two schools of thought about the *Maine* circulate. The first is widespread and almost entirely wrong. A ninth-grade history text says the *Maine* arrived "on the pretext of a friendly mission ... but the reality was something else—the presence of the boat formed part of a vast plan of warfare." *Granma International*, a weekly newspaper published by the country's Communist Party, has spoken of the *Maine* as a "U.S. warship exploded by the United States . . . in order to create a motive for intervention" and of "260 sailors, the majority of them black" who died "while the officers, all white, were safe on shore." Writers and building guards and dozens of others along Havana's seaside boulevard and elsewhere solemnly assured me of this. It is Cuba's conventional wisdom. The fact is, only 22 of the victims were black. As for the 26 officers, all but four were aboard.

The other, little-circulated but more knowledgeable point of view was articulated by Comdr. Gustavo Placer, a retired naval officer who taught at Cuba's Academy of the Armed Forces. Placer, a military historian in his 50s, joined me for a slow, strong coffee at Dos Hermanos, where a clear view of the *Maine's* position is now obscured by an enormous waterfront building. "Could it have been the Spanish?" he asked rhetorically. "I rule that out because no one puts mines in their own port. There were military and cargo ships at anchorage and there was no state of war. There was no advance notice the *Maine* was coming, and you must remember, the United States was not Spain's enemy, Cuba was. It would have been suicidal for Spain to plant a mine beneath the *Maine*. Could it have been Cuban insurgents? Well, why? How? They didn't have the technical ability, and they were busy fighting a war of independence. They wanted military aid from the Americans, yes, but not military intervention. Also, the Spanish Navy was all over the place.

"Could the United States have done it? The *Maine* was one of the biggest of its fleet. America was already prepared for war; it did not need a pretext. Could someone have hidden a bomb on board without it being discovered or anyone knowing? That conspiracy is extremely unlikely." Placer spoke like a prosecutor summing up his case. "No one has ever claimed responsibility or motive, from any side," he emphasized. "You notice that Sampson got promoted to admiral soon after he released his investigation. He was evidently rewarded for his conclusion. To call an internal accident an external explosion became the pivotal justification for war. The 1911 inquiry had to reach a similar conclusion or the rationale for the entire war would have sunk." Placer had read the Rickover report and agreed with its conclusions about the cause of the fateful blast.

Leaving Dos Hermanos, the retired commander and I walked through Havana's narrow downtown streets to a shop where I could buy a nautical map of the harbor. I told him about the eagle's head at the U.S. Interests Section and quoted the end of the printed account next to the head: "Let us hope that some day this battered head can be again joined with its body and wings in a gesture of friendship."

At this Placer broke his military bearing and let out an ironic laugh. “They just don’t understand what the eagle represents, do they?”

When you scrape away all the emotional barnacles from the *Maine*, you’re left with a battleship that was in the first generation of steel vessels fired by coal rather than propelled by wind. Design flaws during this transition brought on a number of accidents, including ones involving self-igniting coal.

When I screened film footage of the *Maine* going down for the last time, I turned the knob to change its speed, then reversed history by making the ship, with its enormous American flag, come back out of the water. Tinkering with the *Maine’s* role in history has given it prominence for a hundred years now. And as we enter the second century following the explosion, controversy has not yet abandoned the ship. After the bodies recovered from the *Maine* were buried in Havana, parts still occasionally floated to the harbor’s surface. Those remains, largely unidentified, were buried at a Key West, Florida, cemetery. Just last year, on the eve of the centennial, the U.S. government decided to sell off the *Maine* plot, complete with the buried bones. Groups in Key West are protesting this decision. Some people, it seems, just won’t let you forget the *Maine*.

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Tom Miller has written about the Southwest and Latin America for more than 25 years. His most recent book is *Trading with the Enemy: A Yankee Travels Through Castro’s* Cuba (Basic Books).