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Abstract

Alfred Thayer Mahan formulated his concept of sea power while reading a history book in an English gentleman’s club in Lima, Peru. This concept became the foundation for his celebrated The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1680-1783. However, Mahan never properly identified the “English Club” in his autobiographical writings. This note briefly describes the Phoenix Club (its proper name) and portrays the situation in Peru when Mahan first envisioned his concept of sea power.

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Introduction

By his own account, Alfred Thayer Mahan formulated his concept of sea power in late 1884 while stationed in Peru with the South Pacific Squadron, in the final days of the War of the Pacific between Chile, Peru, and Bolivia. He had been pondering history and strategy ever since he had been invited by Commodore Stephen B. Luce to join the new Naval War College that he was standing up. Luce’s direction to Mahan followed his radical plan for the college: use history to explain and guide the development of naval tactics and strategy, as opposed to simply teaching gunnery and giving sailing instructions. As Mahan recounted in his autobiography many years later, he was in what he referred to as the “English Club” of Lima, Peru, reading a history of Carthage’s long overland invasion of Rome (and its eventual defeat by the Romans), when he was struck with the insight that command of sea was crucial to a nation’s military and economic power. On his return to the United States, he fully developed this thesis into the now-classic work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1680-1783*. Almost as soon as it was published in 1890, it captured the imaginations of leaders around the world, helping shape the policies of the newly emerging powers of Germany and Japan, and buttressing the muscular naval strategies of Britain and the United States.

Mahan never properly identified that “English Club” where he found inspiration, nor have later historians and biographers. The purpose of this note is to briefly describe the Phoenix Club (to give the “English Club” its proper name), and to paint a picture of the situation Mahan found himself in, when he first envisioned his concept of sea power.

*Alfred Thayer Mahan, 1894*  
(Naval Historical Center, Photo NH48058)
The War of the Pacific began in 1879 as a trade dispute between Bolivia and Chile over the rights to rich deposits of nitrate and guano along the arid Atacama coast, exported as the valuable raw material for fertilizers and explosives. Peru honored a secret treaty with Bolivia and entered the fray. The first year of the conflict was marked by a series of naval battles between Peru and Chile, as each side attempted to establish maritime superiority prior to fully engaging its army. By the end of 1879 Bolivia had ceased fighting and Chile had sunk or captured Peru’s ironclads, leaving the way clear for an invasion of Peru. From 1880 through 1881 Chilean troops advanced through Peru to the capital of Lima, sustained all along the way by their unfettered navy, while Peruvian troops were increasingly cut off from their own support. By January 1881 Chilean troops occupied Lima, remaining until 1883 when fighting ceased (a truce was signed in early 1884). During this occupation, the Chilean army dismantled the infrastructure of the city, including bridges and railroads, as well as removing books, sculptures, and works of art from libraries and museums, and then shipping the lot back to Chile.¹

Mahan in Lima

Alfred Thayer Mahan was a forty-three-year-old navy captain with a relatively undistinguished career when in August 1883 he was called to command the steam sloop Wachusett lying at anchor off Callao, the main port of Lima. During the War of the Pacific, the United States had joined European powers in maintaining a naval presence in Peru to protect their foreign nationals and economic interests. It was not a prestigious assignment, and Wachusett was a twenty-year-old ship in bad shape. Mahan was not happy with either the ship or its mission, being suspicious of foreign entanglements in general, and disliking South America in particular. Wachusett sat idle off Callao for months on end, occasionally shuttling to Chile or Ecuador, but otherwise the officers and crew had few duties except to keep the aging ship in repair.²

But if *Wachusett* was in bad shape, shore leave gave Mahan little to look forward to. Lima was in physical ruin, due to the systematic looting of the capital by the occupying army, as well as to the general economic malaise. He managed to find some respite from this sorry state of affairs at the Phoenix Club on Callejón de Petateros (now the Pasaje Olaya) on the south side of the Plaza de Armas, the very heart of the city where the cathedral is located. Formed by British expatriate business leaders, the Phoenix Club was established in 1879 upon the ashes of the short-lived Traveller’s Club (from whence came the name). It was not a propitious moment – hostilities with Chile were just beginning, and Callao was under threat of blockade – yet right from the start it had over 100 members. The house they had rented in the center of Lima was hardly luxurious compared with gentlemen’s clubs in Britain, but it was a home away from home for the expatriate British population of Lima and Callao, at times a refuge from the increasingly chaotic scenes in those war-torn cities. Under the presidencies of men such as Edmund l’Anson and Percy L. Batchelor, the Phoenix Club carried on throughout the war and subsequent occupation, in spite of the wholesale exodus of many of its members-- bankers, railroad magnates, and shipping tycoons--who had seen their profits dry up and therefore left the country. Still, the remaining members were devoted to the workings of the club, generously donating books and other material to the small library on the premises. From time to time the club opened its doors to other English-speaking visitors, including American naval officers.\(^3\)

**Genesis of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History***

With little to do aboard *Wachusett*, Mahan and his officers would frequently take the creaking but still-functioning steam railroad the eight miles from the port of Callao to Lima. On the hour-long trip, they would have witnessed the last of the Chilean troops, who were preparing to depart the city and finally left in late 1883. The station was just a few blocks north of the Plaza de Armas, and they would comfortably spend the day at the Phoenix Club, taking the train back to Callao late in the day. In September 1884, while anchored off Guayaquil in Ecuador, Mahan received a letter from then Commodore Stephen B. Luce that would change his fortunes and set him thinking about the role of sea power.

Luce was forming a Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, based on a radical concept for his day: history was the prime medium from which to develop the study of tactics and strategy, and was essential to comprehending the

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3. Phoenix Club, *75th Anniversary*, unpublished pamphlet (Lima, Peru, 1954). Note that the Phoenix Club still exists today, though in a different location, on calle Santa Luisa 205 in San Isidro. Its few remaining historical records are composed almost entirely of meeting minutes and press articles, and do not mention Mahan (or other visitors) by name.
interrelationships between strategy, diplomacy, and national power.\textsuperscript{4} Luce was looking for officers who not only understood basic gunnery and tactics, but also had the historical background to analyze these interrelationships. Mahan had recently demonstrated this latter skill with an historical analysis of the navy in the Civil War, \textit{The Gulf and Inland Waters}, and he was precisely the kind of officer Luce was looking for.\textsuperscript{5} In July 1884 Luce wrote Mahan, inviting him to join the faculty; the letter took two months to find him, and he heartily accepted by the first post back. Luce specifically asked him to prepare and deliver a series of lectures on naval history, naval tactics, and the evolution of tactics, using historical lessons as a basis for decision making. So upon his return to Lima in November, while waiting for his official orders to come through, he took a month’s absence and began poring over historical books to shore up his own weak knowledge of history.\textsuperscript{6}

Lima was singularly devoid of such historical resources due to the ravages of war, so Mahan found those books in the library of the Phoenix Club, and while

\begin{itemize}


\item Seager, \textit{Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and his Letters}, 143-44.
\end{itemize}
seated in the adjacent reading room, he found his inspiration. Mahan, in his autobiography, recounted how that inspiration struck:

I cannot now reconstitute from memory the sequence of my mental processes; but while my problem was still wrestling with my brain there dawned upon me one of those concrete perceptions which turn inward darkness into light – give substance to shadow. The Wachusett was lying at Callao, the seaport of Lima, as dull a coast town as one could dread to see. Lima being but an hour distant, we frequently spent a day there; the English Club extending us its hospitality. In its library was [Theodor] Mommsen's *History of Rome*, which I gave myself to reading, especially the Hannibal episode. It suddenly struck me, whether by some chance phrase of the author I do not know, how different things might have been could Hannibal have invaded Italy by sea . . . instead of by the long land route; or could he, after arrival, have been in free communication with Carthage by water. This clew, once laid hold of, I followed up in the particular instance.8

This train of thought set him on the path to developing a general thesis based on historical events. Six months later, Mahan cited Mommsen in describing to Luce his first thoughts of “the effect of navies and the control of the sea upon great or small campaigns.”9 By the time Mahan arrived at the Naval War College in late 1885, he had sufficiently fleshed out his ideas to create a series of lectures on the subject; when he later synthesized those lectures into *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, he used the work of Mommsen, first discovered in that distant library in Peru, to introduce the importance of sea control to a nation's supremacy.10

**Conclusion**

The concept of sea power was born in the mind of Alfred Thayer Mahan while in the reading room of the Phoenix Club in Lima, Peru. With Theodor Mommsen's *History of Rome* as the catalyst for his thoughts, Mahan saw clearly the role of sea power in warfare and strategy. Those ideas became fully formed in his groundbreaking work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, which argued for powerful navies to command the oceans, providing the inspiration for the great naval buildup of the early twentieth century, in turn spawning the two world wars that defined our modern history.

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