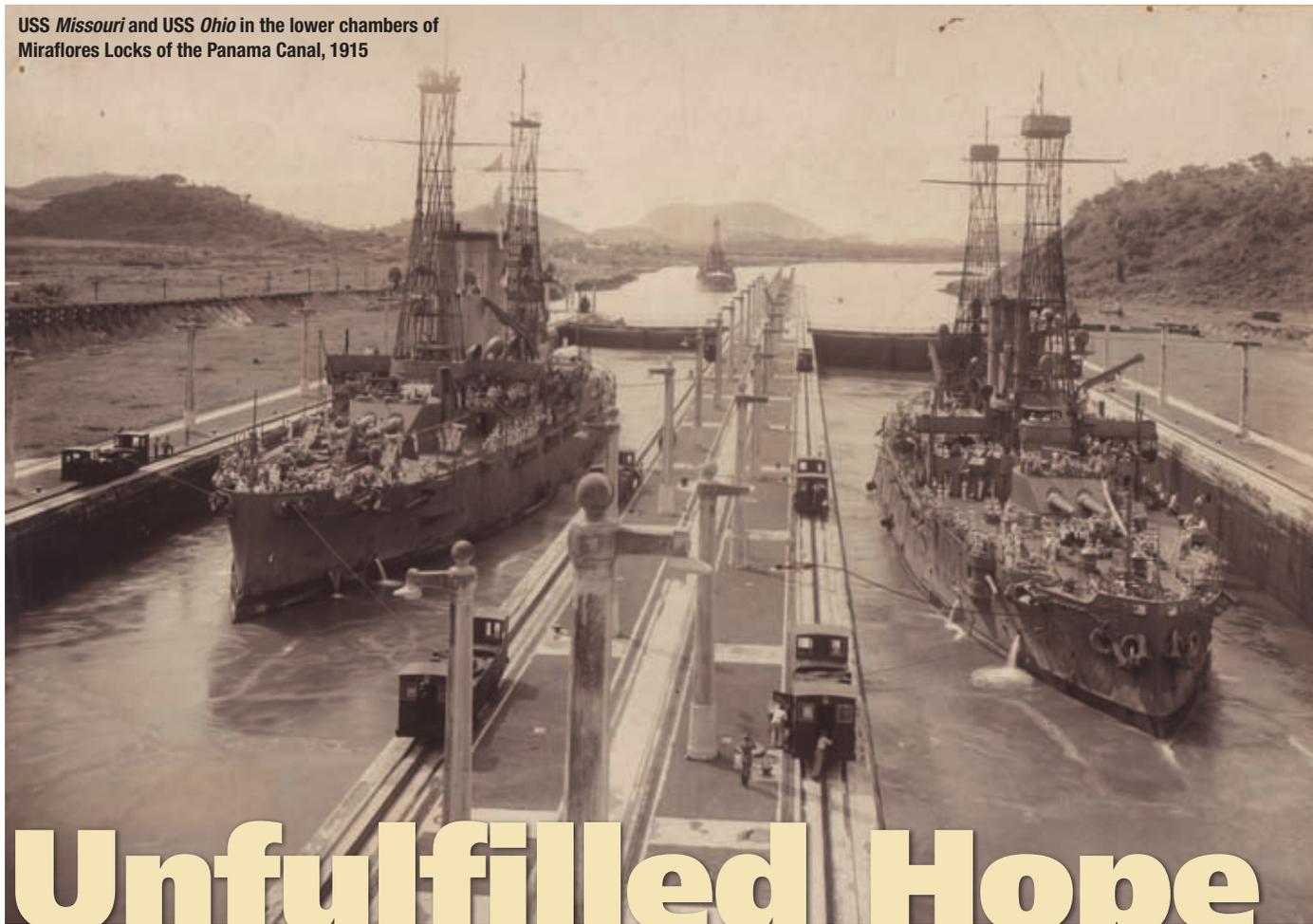


USS *Missouri* and USS *Ohio* in the lower chambers of Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal, 1915



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Unfulfilled Hope

The Joint Board and the Panama Canal, 1903–1919

By JASON R. GODIN

It is a fundamental principle,” wrote Acting Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt to Secretary of State Robert Lansing on May 1, 1919, “that the foreign policy of our Government is in the hands of the State Department. . . . It is also an accepted fact that the foreign policy of a government depends for its acceptance by other nations upon the naval and military force that is behind it.”¹ In an effort to add military muscle to civilian diplomacy, the future President submitted with his memorandum an organizational chart prepared by the Naval War College. Together,

the documents outlined a new “joint plan making body” composed of representatives from the State Department, Army General Staff, and Navy General Board. In the end, however, the civilian Service secretaries never translated the inter-agency plan into institutional practice. The Secretary of State failed to acknowledge the memorandum, appearing never to have opened it.

Ironically, Secretary Lansing’s inaction proved the culmination of an unfulfilled hope that was born over 15 years before. In

an effort to avoid the inter-Service rivalry displayed at the Santiago campaign in Cuba during the 1898 Spanish-American War, Secretary of War Elihu Root and Secretary of the Navy William Moody created in July 1903 an inter-Service body called the *Joint Army and Navy Board* “for the purpose of conferring upon, discussing, and reaching common conclusions regarding all matters calling for the cooperation of the two Services.”² More commonly called the *Joint Board*, its creation marked the first formal attempt to permanently institutionalize

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Members of Navy's General Board also served on Joint Army-Navy Board in early 1900s



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cooperation and coordination between American military Services.

While this institutional ancestor to the Joint Chiefs of Staff showed early promise as a war-planning agency responsive to immediate national security threats, in the end it failed to translate such rapid, integrated Service coordination into lasting practice. This characteristic was most apparent in the formulation of U.S. military strategy regarding the Panama Canal. Members of the Joint Board never developed long-term, unified military strategies for defending and managing the isthmian Canal. Prior to World War I, the admirals and generals who comprised the board additionally antagonized their civilian superiors through a unilateral decision to change its statutory authority and recommendations for a military-only Canal Zone government.

Toward a Canal and Regional Influence

Prior to the creation of the Joint Board, European powers such as Great Britain, France, and Germany jockeyed to secure construction rights to a short, safe water route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. For its part, the United States continued to adhere to the 1823 Monroe Doctrine and secured a series of bilateral treaties beginning in the mid-19th century. Together, these diplomatic successes gained the United States a principal position in determining the fate of a Central American canal.

Like Washington's Caribbean policy in general, the Monroe Doctrine underpinned American diplomacy when it came to securing

influence over a Central American canal. Beginning in 1823, U.S. diplomats viewed any European attempts to intervene in and control Latin American affairs in the Western Hemisphere as a threat to national security. Yet because the United States was a relatively weak military power, diplomacy served for the next 25 years as the only viable instrument for addressing security concerns in the Caribbean and Central America.

The first U.S. foreign policy advance toward securing a voice in the management of what became the Panama Canal occurred a quarter century after the Monroe Doctrine was adopted. Signed by the United States and Great Britain on April 19, 1850, the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty stipulated that neither nation would exclusively control any trans-oceanic canal built in the region. While no tangible gains were made, the treaty clearly marked a diplomatic victory for the United States.

resulting diplomatic environment remained in effect for close to 50 years.

By the turn of the century, the diplomatic climate changed as the United States expanded its official position regarding possession of the isthmian passage. As the commercial and strategic value of a canal became clear, Washington demanded exclusive rights to owning and controlling any future waterway. In February 1900, Secretary of State John Hay approached British Foreign Minister Sir Julian Pauncefote with the first of two treaties outlining new stipulations regarding a canal. Known as the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty I, it allowed the United States exclusive jurisdiction over any future isthmian passage. While popularly supported in principle, the final treaty in fact met strong opposition in the Senate. The legislators refused to ratify the treaty because it did not contain provisions allowing the United States

Acting Secretary of the Navy
Franklin D. Roosevelt



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to fortify the canal. The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty restrictions and unwanted British involvement in construction remained.

Such diplomatic setbacks proved short lived. By November 1901, the United States and Great Britain returned to the negotiation

the Monroe Doctrine underpinned American diplomacy when it came to securing influence over a Central American canal

Signing the agreement affirmed the Monroe Doctrine, an action that recognized the importance of the United States as a Western Hemisphere power. By signing the accord, Great Britain, at that point possessor of the most far-reaching maritime empire, assured that any future diplomatic considerations for a Latin American canal would include U.S. participation. The treaty provisions and the

table to discuss new terms. Struggling in South Africa with the Boer War and facing the prospect of a Russian advance into Asia, British diplomats gradually agreed to the proposals American diplomats had outlined in the first Hay-Pauncefote talks. The Hay-Pauncefote Treaty II nullified provisions of the longstanding Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, and guaranteed all canal protection and traffic rights to the

United States. A product of British diplomatic necessity, Hay-Pauncefote II represented “the conscious British recognition of the eventual United States supremacy in the Western Hemisphere.”³ By the end of 1901, Washington had achieved international recognition as the primary administrator of any Latin American isthmian passage.

With the issue of sole jurisdiction over administration settled, attention next turned to location. An 1899 Isthmian Canal Commission appointed by President William McKinley set the parameters of the discussion, deliberated between sites in Nicaragua and Panama, and recommended in its November 1901 final report that Nicaragua, rather than Panama, provided the best site. The commission concluded that while a Nicaraguan canal would cost more, Nicaragua had fewer entangling treaty stipulations with neighboring nations, and selecting it over Panama avoided diplomatic dealings with Colombia.

By early 1902, a sharp White House–Senate debate became part of the canal discussions. Beginning March 29 and continuing for 19 days, Senate Democrats pushed for a Nicaraguan route while President Theodore Roosevelt and his Senate Republican colleagues in the minority called for a Panamanian passageway. In the end, the Panama position prevailed, as evidence surfaced in June of recent heavy volcanic activity along the Nicaraguan route. Roosevelt signed the Spooner Act into law on June 28, 1902. The legislation authorized the President to spend \$40 million to purchase the French property rights in the area, negotiate with Colombia, and build a canal in Panama.

Civil war in neighboring Colombia added urgency to the deliberations. Torn by internal strife, Bogotá found itself in a precarious bargaining position. Washington

17. The terms stipulated that Colombia authorize the French *Compagnie Nouvelle* to sell all rights and concessions to the United States. Bogotá also conceded to Washington exclusive construction and protection rights for a waterway along with a canal zone up to 15 miles wide. Hay-Herrán provisions additionally granted a 100-year lease, which could be renewed unilaterally by Washington. It also authorized the United States “in cases of unforeseen or imminent danger” to intervene unilaterally in Colombian affairs in the name of canal defense. Not surprisingly, the treaty incited vehement opposition among Colombian officials.

With title in hand, the United States sought to further strengthen its position in the region. On November 6, 1903, the U.S. Government recognized Panamanian independence, and 12 days later made the recognition official by signing the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. The accord also affirmed U.S. canal-building rights. Through skilled and opportunistic diplomacy, the United States now held a dominant position for controlling an isthmian waterway across Latin America.

Defending and Managing the Isthmian Passage

While American diplomats took comfort from their string of successes, military strategists acted with urgency. High-ranking Army and Navy officers on the Joint Board planned together for possible military contingencies in the region. Five weeks after signing the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, the Joint Board convened in Washington and recommended a military response should war erupt between Panama and Colombia. Writing to the Secretaries of War and the Navy, the board’s presiding officer, Admiral George Dewey, advised that in the event of war the United States

military planners illustrated much about the state of inter-Service relations in the early 20th century. The Dewey memoranda to the civilian Service secretaries demonstrated that, given a clear and immediate threat to national security, generals and admirals working together could find a military response predicated on an integrated force approach. Success in the Joint Board contingency plans outlined by Dewey required that land forces secure surrounding railways on shore while warships simultaneously controlled the Canal. Service parochialism gave way to cooperation when faced with a pressing threat abroad.

Joint Board minutes and records, however, revealed that short-term recommendations noted for their unified Service dimension never translated into standard operating procedure over time. Not until 6 months later did the first hint of any substantive war planning concerning Latin America appear again. Even then, contingency recommendations flowed from the individual Services. The inter-Service body returned to action when it advised during the second week of June 1904 that both the Army General Staff and Navy General Board begin study on how the United States could most effectively “intervene in the affairs of an independent country in the West Indies or on the mainland of Central or South America” should it become necessary under the terms of the Monroe Doctrine.⁴

For almost the next 2 years, the generals and admirals remained silent regarding the Panama Canal. Finally in April 1906, Dewey reported to Secretary of War William Taft and Secretary of the Navy Charles Bonaparte that the Joint Board resolved that both ends of the Canal should be fortified. As the passage neared completion, its defenses began to concern civilian policymakers and military strategists alike.

Yet how to protect the isthmian passage remained a relatively low-priority issue. A crushing Japanese naval victory over the Russians at Tsushima in 1905, combined with a 1906 San Francisco School Board referendum that segregated Chinese and Japanese students in public schools, strained U.S.-Japanese diplomatic relations to a point where many Americans leaders in 1907 perceived war as imminent. Dismissing Panamanian laborers on the Canal as ungrateful yet law-abiding locals who numbered fewer than 50,000, U.S. military leaders attached a greater strategic significance to the Japanese threat across the Pacific than to management issues in Panama.

Hay-Herrán provisions authorized the United States to intervene unilaterally in Colombian affairs in the name of canal defense

policymakers recognized the weakness and capitalized quickly on the opportunity. The Colombian government appealed on September 11, 1902, for U.S. officials to mediate a settlement of its civil war. Eight days later, the United States seized the Panama Railroad. The American-dominated talks culminated with the Hay-Herrán Treaty, signed January 22, 1903, and ratified by the Senate on March

should occupy—by force if necessary—the railroad, the Canal, and the Yavisa mining storage facilities near the Panama-Colombia border. Dewey closed his reports by advising immediate occupation of the Yavisa facilities.

Hostilities never materialized between the two Latin American countries in December 1903. However, in light of such military inaction abroad, the actions of American

The Joint Board finally returned to Canal defense in May 1910, when it considered and approved the seacoast armament recommendations as outlined by the Panama Fortification Board. Created in October 1909, the Fortification Board consisted of six Army officers and two Navy officers appointed by their respective Service Secretaries. Major

Since 1910, American Presidents and their policymakers instead concerned themselves increasingly with the political instability in Mexico. By June 1911, Francisco Madero, a rich landowner from northern Mexico, headed what became a national revolt and removed Porfirio Díaz from office. Madero, however, did not hold power for long. Within 6 months,

staff, however, again never suggested any substantive change to the defensive measures protecting the Canal. According to the May 5, 1913, meeting minutes, the generals and admirals referred to “the possibility of a Japanese attack on the Western termini of the Panama Canal, and possible means of meeting such an attack,” but recommended no measures to meet such a threat.⁷

Ten days later, events occurred that assured the Joint Board never would completely resolve the issue. In response to a rising fear of a Japanese advance against the Philippines, the members unanimously recommended moving the cruisers USS *Saratoga*, *Cincinnati*, *Albany*, *Rainbow*, and *Helena* immediately from the Yangtze River in China. Besides suggesting the movement of ships, the generals and admirals decided the Joint Board had authority “to initiate, as well as to act on subjects referred to it.”⁸ Originally empowered to function solely as an advising body, the eight officers attempted, without the knowledge or consent of the civilian superiors they were to advise, to grant the board an unprecedented authority to act independently.

This unilateral change ultimately antagonized relations with two highly influential civilian policymakers. During the morning of May 17, 1913, Admiral Bradley Fiske, a vocal naval member of the Joint Board, appealed to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels to follow the board’s advice concerning the deployment of ships. Daniels rejected the military counsel. Shortly after Fiske’s departure, according to the Navy Secretary, a reporter from a large newspaper entered his office and asked if he “had approved the action of the Joint Board of taking all ships on the Pacific Coast and sending [them] to Hawaii or Manila.”⁹

Following the meeting, Daniels immediately went to the White House and informed President Wilson of the unforeseen developments pertaining to the Joint Board. Wilson responded by stating that the Joint Board “had no right to be trying to force a different course.” The President concluded by warning that “if this should occur again, there will be no General or Joint Boards. They will be abolished.”¹⁰

Wilson’s anger never really subsided, and from that point on Joint Board influence in formulating military strategy declined significantly. Yet even after such a sharp rebuke from their Commander in Chief, the board members continued to deliberate on issues

the officers attempted, without the knowledge of the civilian superiors they were to advise, to grant the board authority to act independently

General Leonard Wood, Army Chief of Staff, presided. In addition to Wood, all but one of the remaining military officers who served on the Fortification Board also served on the Joint Board.

Reporting their findings directly to Secretary of War Jacob Dickinson, the Army and Navy members of the Fortification Board found in April 1910 that both sides of the Canal contained strong geographical positions “for defense against land operations of an enemy force.” The board recommended that the War Department garrison 12 coast artillery companies, 4 infantry regiments, 1 field artillery battalion, and a cavalry squadron for peacetime Canal Zone seacoast armament defenses, with wartime reinforcements dispatched according to enemy deployments. It estimated the peacetime cost of such a garrison at \$14 million a year.⁵

Volatility to the South

Military leaders ultimately found that the combination of nature, expensive coastal fortifications, and Army troops constituted an incomplete defense against an invasion from the west. According to the Committee on Land Defenses, a subcommittee of the Panama Fortification Board, a large enemy force could land on either the Atlantic or Pacific side of the Canal Zone, but topographical conditions— heavy rainfall and jungle terrain—made operations after an amphibious landing on the Atlantic side “extremely unfavorable.” Given the right conditions, however, the committee concluded that the area around the Pacific end could be penetrated and the opening of the Canal seized.

As the Fortification Board findings raised the issue of the vulnerability of the Panama Canal, U.S. decisionmakers made no effort to improve defenses for over 2 years.

one of his former generals, Victoriano Huerta, ousted him from office, then captured and assassinated him.

At virtually the same time Huerta assumed power in Mexico, Woodrow Wilson entered the White House. Horrified by the Madero killing, Wilson refused to grant diplomatic recognition to the Huerta regime. Consequently, the United States ceased the shipment of military arms to Mexico. Yet as American businesses appealed for intervention, the clouds of war loomed. Facing such bloody revolution to the south, the Joint Board began immediate contingency planning for operations against Mexico in April 1912, again marginalizing the Panama Canal defense question.

Not until March 1913 did U.S. military leaders again raise the problem of defending the Canal. According to a report by the U.S. Army War College, the size of the garrison stationed in Panama should be determined by calculating the number of troops needed “to resist attack of a force which could be landed from a fleet such as one of the great powers might be expected to have at sea.” Rather than finally seizing the initiative offered by the Army to increase and modernize Canal defenses, the generals and admirals of the Joint Board reacted to this report with relative indifference, suggesting blandly that it was “most desirable” to conduct joint Army-Navy maneuvers “in order that, if they exist, defects in the scheme of fortification and defense of the Isthmus may be rectified with the least delay.”⁶

The Board Drops the Ball

Two months later, the Joint Board explicitly identified Japan as the great power the U.S. Army War College referred to in veiled terms. The inter-Service consultative

President Theodore Roosevelt with Secretary of the Navy Charles J. Bonaparte, 1906



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relating to the Panama Canal. However, the character of their debate changed. In rare amended minutes, it is clear that the generals and admirals concerned themselves more with who should govern the Canal Zone than how it should be governed.

During the meeting of October 9, 1913, Admiral Dewey commented to the Joint Board that “war being imminent,” insular possession governments “should be in the hands of the Army.” Brigadier General William Crozier responded, “the President . . . goes farther, in that it is always to be under the Army.” Captain H.S. Knapp, board recorder, noted that the subject was “discussed at length” until a “general consensus of opinion seemed to be that the government should always be a military one.” The discussion ended with Dewey insisting simply that there be “no civilian control.”¹¹

The All-Military Option

During this time, the Navy General Board recommended that a single U.S. military Service

administer all government matters within the Canal Zone. The governor would be an Army officer charged directly with command of troops and fortifications. The director of operations and maintenance of the Canal, the second-highest government official, would be a Navy officer responsible for all Navy-related personnel and materiel in the zone. Two assistants under the command of the director of operations and maintenance—an officer from either the Army Engineering Corps or Navy Civil Engineering Corps—would control the waterway and railway respectively. When Captain Knapp read the November 1, 1913, endorsement to the Joint Board as a whole, Admiral Dewey referred the matter to a subcommittee composed of Knapp and Brigadier General W.W. Wotherspoon.

This “all-military” option encountered strong civilian opposition. Colonel George Goethals, chairman of the Isthmian Canal Commission, informed the Joint Board that Congress believed commercial interests dictated the need for an isthmian canal long before any demands of military strategy.

Senators and Representatives thus strongly resisted a purely military jurisdiction in the Canal Zone. Goethals stated that the commission believed the President should not be “limited in his selection to either of the military branches of the Service, but that he could select a civilian” to serve as chief administrator for the Canal Zone.¹²

Civil-military debate over managing the isthmian passage continued into the following year, but without the Joint Board. By January 1914, the board still could not reach a collective recommendation, and the promising Army-Navy consensus of 2 months earlier evaporated. The Wotherspoon-Knapp subcommittee had yet to submit its final report. Influential Army generals, recognizing the impotence of the Joint Board, began voicing their opinions outside the organization. The Army War College Division became one such forum for Army response. The Army agreed with the Navy insofar as Canal administration and operations were primarily military affairs that required military consideration alone. The president of the Army War College concluded that the Army Corps of Engineers should maintain and operate the Canal. Absent the governor, the next highest Army officer should assume the functions of the office. Under the Army plan, the Navy would be relegated to a supporting role.

Army leaders also refuted civilian criticisms by arguing that the Panama Canal embodied a military necessity as much as a maritime commerce highway. General Leonard Wood opined that the Canal “partakes of the character of a well-guarded and secure defile connecting our Atlantic seacoast and interests in the Caribbean Sea with our Pacific seacoast and possessions in the Pacific Ocean.”¹³ Defending and managing the whole commercial American empire required strongly protecting and militarily administering one of its most militarily vital parts—the isthmian pass.

While civilian policymakers and military strategists deliberated Canal Zone management, the shadow of war in Europe began to influence discussions. In June 1914, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee opened hearings on how the United States should react to the possibility of a German-run Nicaraguan canal. Although the hearings were not open to the public, national newspapers reported that Nicaraguan ambassador General Emiliano Chamorro testified that Germany was willing to pay more than \$3 million for a canal route. On August 5, 1914, as World War I began in

Europe, U.S. and Nicaraguan diplomats signed the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, wherein Nicaragua allowed the United States 99 years to establish a naval base on the Gulf of Fonseca, thus negating a rival waterway.

The last notable action involving the Joint Board concerned a Panama Canal Zone submarine base. In late July 1916, as war raged in Europe, Secretary Daniels informed the Joint Board that the Navy's General Board had recommended that a submarine base be stationed at the Atlantic side. The naval consultative body called for a primary submarine base with a 20-boat capacity at Coco Solo Point, and an auxiliary base with a 10-boat capacity on the Pacific side at Balboa Harbor. The Joint Board concurred, recognizing submarines as "an essential element of the defense of the Canal Zone, including the Canal itself." The generals and admirals together found submarines a necessary resource to counter possible amphibious assaults. By 1917, civilian policymakers heeded the military advice and constructed a peninsular submarine base at the recommended site.¹⁴

Contingency planning following the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty suggested a highly responsive Joint Board, an inter-Service consultative body attuned to the environment facing American diplomats. With speed and efficiency, the generals and admirals provided their civilian superiors with an integrated force plan of action should war occur between Colombia and the newly independent Panama.

Yet in the end, such war planning initiative succumbed to periods of neglect. A dismal state of affairs followed, and such inattention ultimately proved symptomatic of the Joint Board's inability to translate short-term actions into long-term procedures. The board failed to agree on concrete plans on how to manage and defend the Canal Zone. As Secretaries of State John Clayton, John Hay, and William Jennings Bryan successfully garnered diplomatic rights for the United States to construct a waterway across Latin America, the generals and admirals fumbled the two most basic tasks assigned to them.

When it came to determining how best to defend the Canal, the board tabled discussion on the subject for 3 years. While understandable considering the potential for war across the Pacific with Japan in 1907, and continued instability immediately south in Mexico beginning in 1910, not until the spring of 1910 and the final report of the Panama Fortification Board manned by its own members did the

Joint Board resume any serious discussion on Canal Zone defense. Even as the volatile diplomatic conditions calmed, the inter-Service consultative body never questioned the susceptibility of the natural and artificial defenses to foreign amphibious assault until two and a half years later. Fortunately, no enemy attacked the Panama Canal during World War I, and a Japanese challenge to U.S. interests in the eastern Pacific never escalated into a real threat.

The Joint Board failed equally when dealing with management of the Canal Zone. Its strict adherence to a military-only government antagonized Congress. Exacerbated by the board's attempt in 1913 to expand its statutory authority, civil-military antagonism reached the point that the U.S. Army War College president and Army Chief of Staff addressed civilian criticism by outside means. Such civil-military acrimony confirmed that in the early 20th century, the goal for the Joint Board to permanently institutionalize inter-Service cooperation and coordination remained an unfulfilled hope. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Memorandum, Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Secretary of State, May 1, 1919, cited in Ernest R. May, "The Development of Political-Military Consultation in the United States," *Political Science Quarterly* 70 (June 1955), 167.

² Navy Department General Order No. 136, July 18, 1903, Joint Board [hereafter JB] 301, Nonserial Documents, roll 2, M 1421, Records of the Joint Board, 1903–1947, National Archives Microfilm Publications, Washington, DC; Army Headquarters General Order No. 107, July 20, 1903, JB 301, Nonserial Documents, roll 2, M 1421, Records of the Joint Board, 1903–1947, National Archives Microfilm Publications, Washington, DC.

³ J.A.S. Grenville, "Great Britain and the Isthmian Canal, 1898–1901," *American Historical Review* 61 (October 1955), 48.

⁴ Meeting minutes, June 10, 1904, JB 301, roll 1, M 1421; memoranda, Dewey to the Secretaries of War and Navy, June 24, 1904, JB 325-16, roll 9, M 1421.

⁵ Meeting minutes, April 25, 1910, and May 31, 1910, JB 301, Roll 1, M 1421; memorandum, Captain Stanley D. Embick to the Adjutant General, April 23, 1910, JB Panama Canal File, serial 73, roll 12, M 1421; "Report of the Panama Fortification Board," Captain Stanley D. Embick, August 12, 1910, JB Panama Canal File, serial 73, roll 12, M 1421.

⁶ Memorandum, Brigadier General William Crozier to Major General Leonard Wood, March 25, 1913, JB Panama Canal File, roll 12, M 1421; memorandum, Dewey to SECWAR and SECNAV, May 6, 1913, JB Panama Canal File, serial 7, roll 12, M 1421.

⁷ Meeting minutes, May 5, 1913, JB 301, roll 1, M 1421.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Diary entry, May 17, 1913, in *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913–1921*, ed. E. David Cronin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 67–68.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Meeting minutes, October 9, 1913 (amended), roll 1, M 1421.

¹² Memorandum, George W. Goethals to Major General Leonard Wood, November 15, 1913, JB Panama Canal Files, serial 10, roll 1, M 1421.

¹³ Memorandum, Major General Leonard Wood to the Secretary of War, January 17, 1914, JB Panama Canal File, serial 10, roll 12, M 1421.

¹⁴ Memorandum, JB senior member to the Secretaries of War and the Navy, November 14, 1916, JB Panama Canal File, serial 47, roll 12, M 1421; Paolo E. Colletta and K. Jack Bauer, eds., *United States Navy and Marine Corps Bases, Overseas* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 80.



C-Class submarines moored alongside USS Charleston in Panama Bay, 1916