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"A Striking Thing": Leadership, Strategic Communications, and Roosevelt's Great White Fleet

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The voyage of the U.S. Navy's "Great White Fleet" constituted an exercise in personal leadership on the part of President Theodore Roosevelt and in international leadership on the part of a United States announcing its arrival as a world power. Sixteen battleships, eight armored cruisers, six torpedo-boat destroyers, and associated auxiliaries steamed out of Hampton Roads in December 1907, embarking on a world cruise. The fleet rounded South America before standing out across the Pacific, stopping at a variety of ports of call along the way. It passed through Malacca, the Bab el Mandeb, Suez, and Gibraltar before returning home through the Atlantic. The vessels entered harbor in early 1909, allowing "TR" to conclude his presidency on a triumphant note.

The voyage was "a striking thing," to borrow the president's words, in more ways than one. The armada, the largest ever to attempt to circumnavigate the globe, demonstrated an unprecedented naval capability, defying military experts who pronounced such a feat of seamanship impossible. While at sea, the ships' crews honed their tactical proficiency, conducting gunnery practice and other exercises. While in port, they performed an important diplomatic function. And their exploits fired imaginations back home—which was precisely TR's intent.

Roosevelt advanced extravagant claims for the nautical enterprise he had superintended. "In my own judgment," he wrote in his autobiography, "the most important service I rendered to peace was the voyage of the battle fleet round the world." This is quite a statement, coming froma Nobel Peace Prize laureate. TR maintained that the cruise had invigorated the American national character, renewing Americans' enthusiasm for seafaring pursuits, and that it had done so while encouraging sea powers to police their geographic environs and discouraging them from imperial adventures in Asia and the New World.

It is worth revisiting this venture in American diplomatic and naval history now, precisely a century hence, when the U.S. Navy is again fashioning a maritime strategy predicated on American leadership. To gain some analytical purchase, I briefly review James MacGregor Burns's theory of leadership. I introduce the concept of "strategic communications," observing that the ability to persuade domestic and foreign audiences is essential to each mode of leadership Burns identifies. I then apply these concepts to the historical record, evaluating the accomplishments TR asserted for the Great White Fleet in his autobiography. My findings are at once of historical interest and of use for today's framers of maritime strategy.

Despite his reputation for bombast, TR executed his diplomatic duties with discretion, taking seriously the "speak softly" element of the West African proverb that inspired his "big stick" philosophy. His approach combined unbending resolve on matters of principle with compromise on less critical matters, leavening diplomatic discourses with tact and good humor. Wielded deftly, seagoing forces clearly make a useful instrument for this sort of statesmanship, beyond their primary mission of waging war at sea. It behooves naval leaders to understand how basic tenets of leadership pertain to maritime strategy—now, as in Roosevelt's day.

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