

US HISTORY
MR. WAGENBERG

LOOKING OUTWARD

Alfred T. Mahan was an outspoken supporter of a larger United States role in world affairs. The American people, he argued, were ambitious and would see that a powerful fleet was necessary for international trade. In this selection written in 1890, Mahan discusses this need.

Vocabulary: Before you read the selection find the meaning of these words in a dictionary:
temperament, alien, sluggish, ominous, prudent, inanition

For nearly the lifetime of a generation, American industries have been protected* until the practice has assumed the force of a tradition. At bottom, however, the temperament of the American people is essentially alien to such a sluggish attitude. Independently of all bias for or against protection, it is safe to predict that, when the opportunities for gain abroad are understood American enterprise will try to reach them. The importance of distant markets and their relation to our own production imply the recognition of the link that joins the products and the markets—that is, the carrying trade.[†] We need not follow far this line of thought before America's unique position becomes clear. Facing the older worlds of the East and West, America's shores are lapped by the oceans which touch the one or the other but which are common to her alone.

Together with these signs of change in our own policy there is a restlessness in the world at large which is deeply significant, if not ominous. There is no sound reason for believing that the world has passed into a period of peace outside the limits of Europe. Unsettled political conditions exist in Haiti, Central America, and many of the Pacific islands, especially the Hawaiian group. When combined with great military or commercial importance, these conditions contain dangerous germs of quarrel, against which it is at least prudent to be prepared.

Despite a superior geographical location, the United States is woefully unready to assert its influence in the Caribbean and Central America. We have not the navy. And, what is worse, we are not willing to have the navy that will weigh seriously in any disputes with those nations whose interests conflict with our own. We have not, and we are not anxious to provide, the defense of the Atlantic seaboard which will leave the navy free for its work at sea.

Whether they will or not, Americans must now begin to look outward. The growing production of the country demands it. An increasing volume of public sentiment demands it. The position of the United States, between the two Old Worlds and the two great oceans, makes the same claim, which will soon be strengthened by the creation of the new link joining the Atlantic and Pacific. The tendency will be increased by the growth of the European colonies in the Pacific, by the advancing civilization of Japan, and by the rapid peopling of our Pacific states.

The military needs of the Pacific states, as well as their supreme importance to the whole country, are yet a matter of the future. But this future is so near that provision should immediately begin to weigh their importance. To provide this, three things are needed: First, protection of the chief harbors by fortifications and coast defense ships. Second, naval force, the arm of offensive power, which alone enables a country to extend its influence outward. Third, it should be an unshakeable resolution of our national policy that no European state should henceforth acquire a coaling position within 3,000 miles of San Francisco—a distance which includes the Sandwich and Galapagos islands and the coast of Central America. For fuel is the life of modern naval war. It is the food of the ship. Without it the modern monsters of the deep die of inanition. Around it, therefore, cluster some of the most important considerations of naval strategy.

* Mahan is referring protective tariffs that increase the price of imported goods, so that American-made goods will be less expensive

[†] The carrying trade refers to the fleets of merchant vessels that carry products to markets overseas.

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READING REVIEW

1. Describe two reasons Mahan thinks the United States needs a strong navy.
2. What is the “link joining the Atlantic and Pacific” that Mahan was referring to?
3. Understanding Geography According to Mahon how does the geographic location of the United States influence its role in world affairs?