

# Example of argumentative essay on statement of the issue 3

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Did Terrorists Sink the Maine?

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## ABSTRACT

The USS Maine sank in Cuban waters on February 15, 1898 under mysterious circumstances, kicking off the Spanish-American War. In this paper, the possibility of terrorist complicity in the sinking of the Maine is explored.

## STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

On February 15, 1898, the USS Maine suddenly suffered a catastrophic explosion while docked in Havana Harbor, Cuba. The ship had been sent there to guard American interests while the Cubans staged a revolution against Spain; with the ship gone and nearly 300 soldiers killed, Spain became the scapegoat. Theories abound regarding what exactly sank the Maine, but there are also those who believe that the sinking was the work of terrorists. While the most likely explanation has been reached that the USS Maine was destroyed by either a mine or an engine malfunction, it was not the responsibility of terrorists; rather, the Spanish government, either by accident or on purpose, set the mine that sank the Maine.

## ANALYSIS

In order to determine who might have sank the Maine, it is important to discuss what happened to it. On February 15, an explosion occurred on the Maine around 9: 40 PM; this was shown to have been caused by exploding powder charges and other ordinance on the ship. This ordinance was meant for the six and ten-inch guns, but that night they exploded and tore apart the front end of the ship<sup>1</sup>. The wreckage that remained sank quickly, reaching the harbor bottom in minutes. This led to the deaths of 266 officers, as most

of the crew were asleep when the explosion happened - this was nearly three-quarters of the Maine's crew. Only 89 men lived after the explosion.

## **SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR**

The most important bit of fallout from the explosion of the USS Maine was the journalistic and public relations aftermath, which directly led to the beginning of the Spanish-American War. When the ship sank, William Randolph Hearst helped to sway popular opinion toward blaming the event on the Spanish; using yellow journalism and muckraking, he managed to create the impression that Spain had performed the deed as an act of war. With that in mind, the United States declared war on Spain, engaging in years of fighting over an incident that had not been proven to be the fault of the presumed guilty party<sup>2</sup>.

With this in mind, theories regarding the source of the explosion were rampant, most of which were blamed on the Spanish government. However, there were also threats of intervention by Spanish revolutionaries and terrorists<sup>3</sup>. In light of the US intervention in Cuba, the Spanish revolutionaries resented their inability to gain full independence. In the event that the USS Maine was truly the work of an outside force, that may have been reason enough for a terrorist attack on a Naval ship. The weak political relationship between the US and Spain was set off by this explosion, and the excess of blame that was placed on the Spanish helped to spur years of armed conflict.

## INVESTIGATIONS

A number of investigations were conducted into the sinking of the Maine, all of which provide either inconclusive evidence, or evidence of accidental causes to the Maine sinking. First, there was the Spanish inquiry performed by Del Peral and De Salas in 1898; according to the Department of the Navy, " Technical experts at the time of both investigations disagreed with the findings, believing that spontaneous combustion of coal in the bunker adjacent to the reserve six-inch magazine was the most likely cause of the explosion on board the ship" 4. They also observed that a mine explosion would have left a column of water that was unseen; the calm wind of that day would have meant a mine could have only been activated through electricity, but there were no cables found. Furthermore, a water explosion would have left dead fish; none were to be seen. Finally, Mine explosions do not typically set off munition stores.

Shortly after the Spanish inquiry, the United States ordered a naval inquiry led by Captain Sampson and in cooperation with the Spanish government of Cuba. In their investigation, they had concluded that a mine had blown up the Maine; this made the forward magazines combust and blow up the forward third of the ship. In their investigation, they found many witnesses that had heard two explosions right next to each other; the first was presumably the mine, and then the second was the magazines exploding shortly afterward. Also, some of the keel was bent inwards, implying an external explosion. Despite this, the inquiry was " unable to obtain evidence

fixing the responsibility for the destruction of the Maine upon any person of persons" 5.

In 1911, a second Court of Inquiry was convened, this time under Rear Admiral Vreeman, to find the bodies of some of the Maine victims and to look at the cause more thoroughly. While they agreed with the Sampson inquiry that an external explosion caused the wreck, it was not in the same place that the previous inquiry had stated. Also, the aforementioned inward bending of one of the frames was blamed on the ordinance exploding, not a mine<sup>6</sup>.

In 1974, the investigation headed by Admiral Hyman G. Rickover commenced. Launched privately, he collected information from the time period and the specifications of the ship itself. Having researched all of this, Rickover also concluded with the Spanish inquiry that the spontaneous combustion of coal caused the explosion<sup>7</sup>. The final investigation to date was done by National Geographic in 1998, in order to use the latest computer technology (including computer modeling) to gather more information about the sinking. According to this investigation, " while a spontaneous combustion in a coal bunker can create ignition-level temperatures in adjacent magazines, this is not likely to have occurred on the Maine" 8.

None of these investigations yield evidence of terrorist activity on the Maine, nor any activity of any state or non-state actor that led to the destruction of that ship. There are typically two conclusions reached by these many and

well-researched investigations: either an ill-placed mine caused the ignition of the weapons stores, or the aforementioned spontaneous combustion of coal was the culprit. Regardless of cause, no evidence can be found of actual culpability regarding the explosion; therefore, it cannot be definitively said that it was the work of terrorist groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the evidence and the points presented, it must be concluded that there was no terrorist intervention on board the Maine. During the multiple investigations that ensued, the common conclusions were that spontaneous combustion of coal led to the explosion, or an ill-placed mine did so (though there is nothing conclusive to assert that claim). Either way, even if it was the actions of the Spanish government, that would be the actions of a sovereign government and not a non-state actor or resistance movement, which is the typical definition of a terrorist. As such, it cannot be said that terrorists sunk the USS Maine.

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