

“WE ARE NOT PREPARED FOR WAR!”

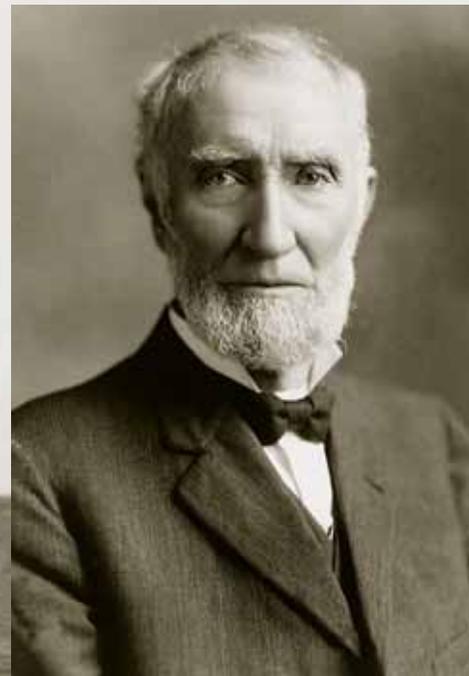
As the 19th Century came to a close, the United States Navy found itself woefully unprepared for combat. The easiest solution to this vexing problem was to buy warships from other nations

BY GENE T. ZIMMERMAN

On Sunday evening, 6 March 1898, Joseph Cannon, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, was ushered into President W. McKinley's White House office. The urgent call requesting his immediate presence at the White House was no surprise to “Uncle Joe” Cannon. Every passing day since the second-class battleship USS *Maine* had blown up in Havana Harbor, he had seen the pressure mount for the President to declare war on Spain. Thus he was prepared for a President acquiescing to the congressional firebrands.

However, the President's state of mind was not good,

Joseph “Uncle Joe” Cannon pushed hard to get President McKinley to appropriate more money for the US Navy.



and Cannon was surprised to see the normally calm McKinley pacing the floor in short, nervous strides. The reason wasn't long in coming. “We are not prepared for war,” said the President, turning to Cannon. “Who knows where this war will lead us; it may be more than a war with Spain.” The President realized that war was

inevitable, and that the country must prepare for the conflict while there was time. But he was

involved in peace negotiations with the Spanish Government, and it would cause European accusations of double-dealing should he put the country on war footing. And finding that he couldn't get up the new appropriations at an earlier date, he asked if Cannon would.

Cannon, who had already determined that there was a \$50 million surplus in the Treasury, agreed on the condition the President would prepare the bill. He watched



McKinley then walk over to the table and using a blank telegraph message sheet, write “for national defense, \$50 mil-

lion.” To Cannon, “It wasn't a bill nor a message nor an estimate, but it was the President's memorandum as to what he wanted done, and I put the slip of paper in my pocket.”

Joe Cannon hurried back to his hotel suite to prepare the necessary bill that evening. The following day it was introduced to the Committee, passed, and was put on the House floor where it received applause. On 9 March, it came up for a vote in both houses and was passed unanimously. The bill was then rushed to an anxious President who signed it immediately.

President McKinley had not worried about the bill's passage after a Monday discussion with Whitelaw Reed had convinced him that the conservative vote, in Reed's words, would support “purchases of ammunition and even of warships.” Thus, instructions had been immediately passed down the line to the Secretary of the Navy to get going.

Secretary of the Navy John Long and his brash assistant, Teddy Roosevelt, may not have been Washington's most



USS *San Francisco* (C-5) arrived at Gravesend on 18 March 1898 to escort the USS *New Orleans* to its new home. However, the crew found everything in the *New Orleans* to be labeled in Portuguese.