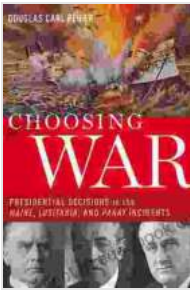


# **Presidential Decisions In The Maine, Lusitania, and Panay Incidents: A Study of Diplomatic Crises and the Path to War**

The history of the United States is marked by a series of pivotal incidents that have tested the limits of presidential power and shaped the course of American foreign policy. Three such incidents, occurring in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, stand out as particularly significant: the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor in 1898, the torpedoing of the RMS Lusitania by a German U-boat in 1915, and the bombing of the USS Panay by Japanese aircraft in 1937. These events, each of which resulted in the loss of American lives and raised the specter of war, provide a unique window into the decision-making processes of three presidents—William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, respectively—and the impact of these events on public opinion, diplomatic relations, and the outbreak of war.

## **The Sinking of the USS Maine**

On February 15, 1898, the USS Maine, an American battleship anchored in Havana harbor, exploded and sank, killing 266 sailors. The cause of the explosion was never definitively determined, but public opinion in the United States quickly blamed Spain, which ruled Cuba at the time. The sinking of the Maine galvanized the American public for war, and President McKinley, who had been reluctant to intervene in Cuba, was forced to act. On April 25, 1898, the United States declared war on Spain, marking the beginning of the Spanish-American War.



## Choosing War: Presidential Decisions in the Maine, Lusitania, and Panay Incidents by Douglas Carl Peifer

★★★★☆ 4.4 out of 5

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McKinley's decision to go to war was based on a number of factors, including the public outcry over the sinking of the Maine, the desire to protect American economic interests in Cuba, and the belief that the United States had a moral obligation to help the Cuban people achieve their independence. McKinley also believed that a war with Spain would be a relatively short and easy conflict, and that it would help to unite the country after the divisive Civil War.

The Spanish-American War was a watershed moment in American history. It marked the end of Spain's colonial empire in the Americas and the beginning of the United States' emergence as a global power. The war also had a profound impact on the American presidency. McKinley's decision to go to war without a clear understanding of the causes of the Maine explosion set a precedent for future presidents to act unilaterally in times of crisis.

### **The Torpeng of the RMS Lusitania**

On May 7, 1915, the RMS Lusitania, a British passenger liner, was torpedoed by a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland. The sinking of the Lusitania, which resulted in the deaths of 1,198 people, including 128 Americans, outraged the American public and brought the United States to the brink of war with Germany.

President Wilson, who had initially pledged to keep the United States out of World War I, was forced to reconsider his position after the sinking of the Lusitania. Wilson sent a series of diplomatic notes to Germany, warning that the United States would hold Germany accountable for any further attacks on American ships. In February 1917, after Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war. The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917.

Wilson's decision to go to war was based on a number of factors, including the sinking of the Lusitania, the belief that Germany was waging a war against civilization itself, and the desire to protect American economic interests. Wilson also believed that the United States had a moral obligation to help the Allies defeat Germany.

The United States' entry into World War I had a profound impact on the conflict. The American Expeditionary Force, under the command of General John J. Pershing, played a major role in the Allied victory. The war also had a significant impact on the American presidency. Wilson's decision to go to war without a clear understanding of the costs and risks involved set a precedent for future presidents to act unilaterally in times of crisis.

## **The Bombing of the USS Panay**

On December 12, 1937, the USS Panay, an American gunboat, was bombed and sunk by Japanese aircraft in the Yangtze River near Nanjing, China. The bombing of the Panay, which resulted in the deaths of two American sailors, occurred during the Second Sino-Japanese War, which had begun in 1937.

President Roosevelt, who had initially sought to avoid war with Japan, was outraged by the bombing of the Panay. Roosevelt sent a series of diplomatic notes to Japan, demanding an apology and reparations. In addition, Roosevelt ordered the United States fleet to reinforce the Pacific Fleet in order to deter any further Japanese aggression.

Roosevelt's decision to take a hard line against Japan was based on a number of factors, including the bombing of the Panay, the belief that Japan was becoming increasingly aggressive in the Pacific, and the desire to protect American economic interests in China. Roosevelt also believed that the United States had a moral obligation to help China resist Japanese aggression.

The bombing of the USS Panay was a turning point in American foreign policy. Roosevelt's decision to take a hard line against Japan set the stage for the outbreak of World War II in the Pacific. The war began on December 7, 1941, when Japanese aircraft attacked Pearl Harbor.

The sinking of the USS Maine, the torpedoing of the RMS Lusitania, and the bombing of the USS Panay were three pivotal incidents that tested the limits of presidential power and shaped the course of American foreign policy in the early 20th century. These events provide a unique window into the decision-making processes of three presidents—William McKinley,

Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, respectively—and the impact of these events on public opinion, diplomatic relations, and the outbreak of war.

In each of these cases, the president was faced with a difficult decision that had no easy answers. McKinley had to decide whether to go to war with Spain over the sinking of the Maine. Wilson had to decide whether to go to war with Germany over the sinking of the Lusitania. Roosevelt had to decide whether to go to war with Japan over the bombing of the Panay. In each case, the president made the decision that he believed was in the best interests of the United States.

The decisions made by McKinley, Wilson, and Roosevelt had a profound impact on the course of American history. The Spanish-American War marked the end of Spain's colonial empire in the Americas and the beginning of the United States' emergence as a global power. World War I was one of the most destructive conflicts in human history, and the United States' entry into the war helped to tip the balance in favor of the Allies. World War II was an even more destructive conflict, and the United States played a major role in the Allied victory.

The decisions made by McKinley, Wilson, and Roosevelt also had a significant impact on the American presidency. The precedent set by these presidents to act unilaterally in times of crisis has been followed by subsequent presidents. As a result, the president of the United States has become one of the most powerful figures in the world.

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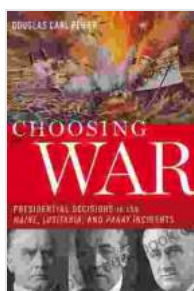
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Image of the RMS Lusitania: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons \*

Image of the USS Panay: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

## Further Reading

\* Bailey, Thomas A. "The Sinking of the "Maine"" (1940). \* Davis, Kenneth S. "The Lusitania Sinking" (1995). \* Ferrell, Robert H. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Sinking of the Panay" (1991). \* Kennedy, David M. "Over Here: The First World War and American Society" (1980). \* Morgan, H. Wayne. "America's Road to War: From the Spanish-American War to World War II" (2002). \* Trask, David F. "The War with Spain in 1898" (1981). \* Wiltz, John E. "From Isolation to War: America's Foreign Policy in the 1930s" (1968).



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