

Sampson-Schley Controversy

The Sampson-Schley Controversy grew out of differences of opinion over who should get credit for the July 3, 1898, victory of the American fleet in the Battle of Santiago de Cuba. Acting rear admiral William T. Sampson was in charge of the American naval force blockading the Cuban port of Santiago, but he did not anticipate that Spanish rear admiral Pascual Cervera y Topete's squadron would sortie. Sampson was en route to a conference with V Corps commander Major General William Shafter when the Spanish fleet emerged from the port.

Commodore Winfield Scott Schley was the ranking officer in the blockading squadron in the absence of Sampson and hoisted a signal for all ships to engage the Spanish. But the ships on blockade duty moved to attack the Spanish vessels on their own. At the sound of gunfire, Sampson's ship, the armored cruiser *New York*, turned back to rejoin the fleet but did not arrive until the end of the battle.

Although Sampson claimed credit for the victory in his report to the secretary of the navy, most newspaper reports gave Schley credit for the victory. Alfred T. Mahan argued that victory was due to Sampson's placement of the blockading force and that he deserved the praise.

After the battle, Sampson wrote a confidential report to Secretary of the Navy John D. Long that criticized Schley's actions in the weeks before the battle. When this report became known later, Schley's supporters accused Sampson of duplicity. These supporters grew resentful after both men were promoted to the permanent rank of rear admiral, but Sampson was advanced eight places on the navy list, while Schley was advanced six. Before the war when both were captains, Schley was senior by one. Now, as admirals, Schley was junior by one.

By this time, the Sampson-Schley Controversy was in full bloom, with newspapers, magazines, and individuals in and out of uniform offering their own views. Sampson and Schley did not participate in the dialogues. In November 1899, Secretary Long issued an order forbidding all officers on active duty to discuss the issue.

The supporters of Sampson eventually forced Schley to ask for a court of inquiry in 1901. The court held that Sampson's conduct was not under review, so only testimony directly concerning Schley was admitted. Schley's lawyer unsuccessfully argued that this was unfair because the actions of both officers were related. Sampson wanted to testify, but his health would not permit it. The court was critical of Schley's conduct prior to June 1, 1898, but said that he was self-possessed and encouraged others during the battle. President of the court Admiral George Dewey issued a separate opinion that dissented from five points at issue prior to the battle. In Dewey's view, Schley was in absolute command and was entitled to the credit for the victory. Many Americans agreed with Dewey. A number of organizations presented gifts of appreciation to Schley.

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Sampson, Schley, and Dewey were all dissatisfied for various reasons. Schley appealed to President Theodore Roosevelt for relief from the findings of the court. After studying the record and interviewing the surviving captains in the battle, Roosevelt said that most of the actions that the court censured took place before the battle. He argued that if these actions were censurable, Schley should not have been left in command. Therefore, his shortcomings were in effect condoned by Sampson. As for Santiago, neither Sampson nor Schley exercised command; it was a captain's battle. Roosevelt gave credit to Schley and the captain of his ship for their excellent record in the conflict except for a controversial loop of the ship at the start of the battle. Roosevelt concluded that there was no excuse for keeping this controversy alive. By 1917, the major participants had died, and the matter subsided. But the issues continue to be refought by historians and others almost any time the campaign in Cuba during the Spanish- American War is discussed. The controversy did a great deal of harm to the reputations of Sampson and Schley as well as to other naval officers and administrators.

Further Reading Dawson, Joseph G., III. "William T. Sampson and Santiago: Blockade, Victory, and Controversy." In *Crucible of Empire: The Spanish- American War and Its Aftermath*, edited by James C. Bradford, 47-68. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993. Langley, Harold D. "Winfield Scott Schley and Santiago: A New Look at an Old Controversy." In *Crucible of Empire: The Spanish-American War and Its Aftermath*, edited by James C. Bradford, 69-101. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993. West, Richard Sedgwick, Jr. *Admirals of American Empire: The Combined Story of George Dewey, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Winfield Scott Schley, and William Thomas Sampson*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1948.

Ken's Notes:

- *Mentioned in E. B. Porter's **Nimitz** whereby it peaked my interest.*
- *They used to say that rank among Ensigns & JGs was like virtue among whores; here it seems to be amongst the flags as well.*
- *I would like to know how the vessels conducted the fight. Naval Science at Ft Schuyler in the early 1950s taught it was the traditional Cap-the-Tee fight while this seems to suggest it was every ship for herself.*
- *More research required!*