

Spanish-American War



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The Spanish-American War, waged in Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico from April to August 1898, was the result of a combination of a severe and prolonged political crisis in Cuba and the increased desire of late-nineteenth-century America for overseas expansion. By the time the conflict was over, the United States had acquired a small empire and the status of a world power.

Background

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, several factors came together in the United States to promote the idea of overseas expansion. There was a growing concern for new markets and new sources for raw materials. The up-and-down economy of the late 1800s, during which major depressions hit with some regularity (often accompanied by violent confrontations between labor and management), convinced many that perhaps the answer to the nation's economic ills was the expansion of foreign trade. Foreign markets could absorb the country's industrial and agricultural overproduction, while at the same time providing much-needed raw materials for America's growing industrial base. Two of the most promising areas were Latin America and the Far East, particularly China.

To penetrate those markets the United States would need a strong navy to protect American commerce. Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan was the most noted publicist for this point of view, arguing in books and articles that a strong navy was essential to the security and future growth of the nation. In the Pacific this would mean the establishment of a series of coaling and supply stations across the ocean. Such stations were eventually established in Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, and American Samoa. In addition, a canal through Central America—long desired—would now be a necessity. And such a canal would mean a greater U.S. presence in the Caribbean and Central America.

There were other factors at work as well. The late nineteenth century marked the height of the missionary

movement among America's Protestant churches. The desire to spread the gospel to the "heathens" around the globe was powerful, and the missionaries sent far and wide often served as unofficial agents for American business and political penetration. At the same time the idea of social Darwinism was in vogue, which argued that the "fittest" among the human race would emerge to lead and to perpetuate it. It became, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, the British poet for imperialism, the "white man's burden" to uplift their "little brown brothers." By implication social Darwinists believed it was also necessary to bring a new vigor and aggressiveness to the Anglo-Saxon race, in order to meet the challenge of racially inferior, but more numerous, peoples. Among some American males, caught in the throes of the new industrial America, there grew a belief that masculinity was becoming a thing of the past. With no wildernesses to be conquered or wars to be fought, the martial spirit that had defined American manhood for so many years was fading away. Perhaps foreign adventure would reinvigorate America's diminishing manliness.

Crisis in Cuba

While these developments were unfolding in the United States, a crisis had evolved in Cuba. The United States, which had long coveted the island, had tried earlier in the century, just after the Mexican-American War, to buy Cuba or coerce Spain into giving it up. In 1868 rebellion broke out on Spain's "ever-faithful isle." The Ten Years' War that followed devastated the colony. U.S. investors quickly filled the economic vacuum, and Cuba proved to be an economic bonanza. By the 1890s the United States had over \$50 million invested in Cuba, and annual trade with the island—mostly in sugar—was over \$100 million. Best of all the United States had no overhead associated with its involvement in Cuba. Spain handled administration and policing, but was so weak and inefficient that U.S. businessmen and traders

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did not feel unduly constrained. In 1895 revolt broke out anew; this time it was more powerful and more destructive. Spanish troops, led by General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, established concentration camps into which they herded Cuban civilians to deprive the rebels of recruits and supplies. The rebels responded with a scorched earth policy. Inevitably American properties were damaged in the growing conflict.

President Grover Cleveland and his successor, William McKinley, watched with concern but declared the United States neutral in the war. Many Americans disagreed with the policy. As they had with other wars for independence in Latin America, many U.S. citizens expressed initial enthusiasm for the rebels. Cuban lobbyists in the United States worked tirelessly to whip up support and to gain recognition for the rebellion. American newspapers, particularly those of Joseph Pulitzer (*New York World*) and William Randolph Hearst (*New York Journal*), were quick to sense a dramatic story. The “yellow journalism” of late-nineteenth-century America sensationalized the events in Cuba, treating the rebellion against Spain as a David-versus-Goliath battle. The Spanish were portrayed as venal, licentious cowards and weaklings who were nevertheless capable of tremendous cruelty. Stories of rape, mutilation, and torture abounded. The Cuban revolutionaries were pictured as heroic freedom fighters and as “bronzed Europeans” not much different from their North American neighbors. Editorial cartoons were fond of portraying the struggle as one in which villainous, immoral Spaniards tried to take advantage of virtuous and defenseless damsels. The Spanish commander quickly became “Butcher” Weyler.

Presidents Cleveland and McKinley and most of their advisers took a more cautious stance. The situation in Cuba was becoming intolerable, but U.S. policy was conflicted. Few doubted that Spain was primarily responsible for the war; its weak and corrupt administration of the island was notorious. Yet there were few willing to side with the rebels—an unknown group of nationalists (and possibly radicals) of uncertain racial cast. The United States had, it appeared, four options. First, it could intervene militarily and annex the island. The uncertainties of war (especially the reactions from other European nations) just as the nation was climbing out of a depression, and the antipathy toward assimilating the Cuban population into Anglo-Saxon America, made this a dubious choice. Second, the United States could side with the Spanish in

putting down the revolt. This solution was unlikely to have any long-lasting impact. Spain was weak and growing weaker; the rebels were obviously not going to give up the struggle. Endless warfare and instability would be the results. Third, the United States could side with the rebels. But while rebel success was more likely, there were problems. American officials distrusted the rebel leadership—would it protect American investments and trade? In addition Spain, realizing the hopelessness of its situation, might, rather than fight, sell the island to a more powerful European nation, such as Germany or England. Finally, the United States could do what it eventually did—remain neutral; press the Spanish to grant reforms to quiet the revolt; and warn the rebels that American property and lives must be respected.

The Course of the War

The American position held out the slim hope that perhaps the status quo ante might obtain in Cuba. Spain’s inability (or unwillingness) to grant real reforms or deal effectively with the deteriorating situation, and the rebels’ dismissal of the limited reforms Spain did grant, soon led to a crisis for American diplomacy. In February 1898 a letter written by the Spanish minister to the United States, Enrique Dupuy de Lôme, was leaked to the American press. In it he declared that McKinley was “weak and a bidder for the admiration of the crowd.” Americans seethed at the insult. A few days later an even more dramatic event occurred. In January 1898 President McKinley had ordered the battleship USS *Maine* to Havana Harbor, perhaps to protect American lives but more likely to send a message to both the Spanish government and the rebels about U.S. concerns. On 15 February 1898 the ship exploded, killing more than 250 servicemen. Although the explosion was likely the result of an onboard accident, many Americans (and U.S. newspapers) quickly jumped to the conclusion that Spain was behind the incident.

McKinley prepared the country for war. In the Far East, U.S. naval vessels were ordered to prepare for attacks on the Spanish colony of the Philippines if war broke out. The president sought and received funds to buttress the nation’s weak military forces. American business interests pushed McKinley for a decision, arguing that the uncertainty was bad for the economy. McKinley made several more efforts to push the Spanish into changing their policies in Cuba, but it was too late. On 11 April 1898, McKinley asked Congress for a declaration of war. The

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war resolution passed, but not without debate. Several congressmen urged that a declaration of Cuba's independence be attached, but McKinley rejected this. The war would not be fought to "free" Cuba. In place of the defeated amendment, the Teller Amendment (introduced by Senator Henry M. Teller), which stated that the United States had no territorial designs on Cuba, was passed.

The war was quick and decisive. On 1 May, Commodore George Dewey's forces soundly defeated the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay in the Philippines. In July the Spanish fleet in Cuba was destroyed, with the loss of one American sailor. The refurbishment of the U.S. Navy, which had begun during the administration of Chester A. Arthur, had paid off.

The U.S. ground war was run somewhat less efficiently. The first difficulty was in forming a reasonable American fighting force out of a fairly dilapidated institution. In the thirty years since the end of the Civil War, the army had been used mostly in combating Native Americans on the frontier, but even those battles had basically ended nearly a decade before. There was no shortage of recruits; more than a quarter-million American men would join the armed forces before the brief war ended. These recruits, however, were outfitted with heavy winter uniforms, and forced to use outdated weapons and consume awful rations. American military leadership also was suspect. The commander of U.S. ground forces in Cuba, Major General William R. Shafter, was out of shape and lacked much martial spirit. He became the butt of numerous jokes and sarcastic songs among his troops. Training the new men and finding adequate transport for them (this was to be America's first overseas war) went on for weeks, with little discernible progress.

Fortunately the Spanish were at least as poorly supplied, and lacked much spirit to fight and die so far from home. There were, nevertheless, several sharp battles in Cuba, especially around Santiago following the landing of U.S. troops in late June. The most famous battle was the attack by Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders on San Juan Heights, in June 1898. By the middle of July, the fighting in Cuba was basically over. More devastating than warfare to the U.S. troops was disease, particularly yellow fever. In July, McKinley ordered the seizure of the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico. By August the war was over. The United States had lost nearly three thousand men, more than twenty-five hundred of them dying from disease and accidents. For a relatively small

price the United States had acquired Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. America had cleared a European power out of the Caribbean (and away from the route of the contemplated canal) and had obtained a base of operations near the valued China market.

Results

Exactly what territory the United States had acquired was somewhat unclear. There was little discussion of actually annexing the areas as parts of the United States. The initial enthusiasm for the Cuban rebels in American newspapers had changed. Reports from U.S. servicemen and officials in Cuba indicated that large numbers of the rebels were black or of mixed racial heritage. Almost overnight the "bronzed Europeans" began to be portrayed in editorial cartoons with the same "Sambo" stereotypical qualities the media used to portray African Americans. Accounts of the Philippines and Puerto Rico elicited the same reactions. Indeed, many of the so-called anti-imperialists in the United States used the racial issue as the basis for their stance: the peoples of those areas were unassimilable. These same perceptions, however, also argued against granting Cubans, Filipinos, and Puerto Ricans independence. These peoples were seen, at best, as mischievous children; at worst, as racial inferiors incapable of self-government. Americans worried that independence would mean anarchy, which in turn would invite foreign intervention. For the time being, at least, the three areas would exist in a constitutional limbo—not exactly colonies, not exactly territories, and not independent nations by any stretch of the imagination.

In the Philippines the American presence led to violence. Rebels, who had been fighting the Spanish for some time before the arrival of the United States, turned their wrath on the new occupiers. In three years of brutal warfare beginning in February 1899, more than four thousand Americans were lost, and fifteen thousand rebels died in the fighting. By the time the insurrection ended in 1902, thousands of other Filipino civilians had died of hunger and war.

The ratification of a peace treaty in early 1899 brought to a close the "splendid little war," as the U.S. ambassador in London, John Hay, described the Spanish-American War. Almost instantly the United States had entered the circle of imperial powers, with an empire that stretched from the Caribbean to the shores of Asia. As the United States soon discovered, especially in the Philippines, the price of empire could be high.

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Further Readings

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Source: *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Nineteenth Century*. 3 vols. Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001.
