

Part II: The Spanish-American War

As the United States experienced dramatic changes in the 1880s and 90s, the island of Cuba, a colony of Spain, held renewed interest for many Americans. American presidents and average citizens alike had coveted Cuba for many years. In the years before the Civil War, many people hoped that Cuba would become another slave territory of the United States. President Polk, in 1848, had even offered to buy Cuba from Spain.

“...if an apple, severed by the tempest from its native tree, cannot but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its unnatural connection with Spain and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only to the North American union [the United States]...”

—John Quincy Adams, 1822

Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, was especially significant for policymakers in both Spain and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. For Spain, Cuba was the last major remnant of what had once been a huge empire in the New World. Nearly all of Spain’s possessions in the Western Hemisphere had gained independence in the 1800s, and Spain itself had sunk to the level of a third-rate European power. Nonetheless, the government in Madrid refused to consider granting independence to Cuba—“the Pearl of the Antilles”—or selling the island to another country.

At the time, the country with the greatest interest in acquiring Cuba was the United States. For many Americans, extending U.S. control over the lush island ninety miles from the tip of Florida seemed only logical.

“It is our destiny to have Cuba and it is folly to debate the question. It

naturally belongs to the American continent.”

—Stephen Douglas, 1860 presidential candidate

Revolution in Cuba

In 1868, a revolt against Spanish rule broke out in Cuba. Many of the leading rebels hoped eventually to join the United States after breaking free from Spain. U.S. President Ulysses Grant was open to the proposal, but his secretary of state persuaded him to keep the United States out of the conflict. After a decade of fighting and the loss of 200,000 lives, the Cuban rebels put down their arms. Spanish rule remained in place, although Spain pledged to allow Cuba limited self-government.

What were U.S. interests in Cuba?

With the revolt over, \$50 million worth of American investment flowed into Cuba. Most of it went into the island’s sugar industry, which represented four-fifths of the Cuban economy. The United States was also by far the largest consumer of Cuban sugar. In 1890, the United States removed tariffs on Cuban sugar entering the American market, making it less expensive to buy the sugar in the United States. The legislation boosted the fortunes of both the overall Cuban economy and American investors on the island. Cuban-American trade soon approached \$100 million annually.

The depression of 1893, however, affected the U.S. and Cuban economies. Pressure mounted in the U.S. Congress to cut back on imports and protect sugar producers in the United States. In 1894, the United States imposed a 40 percent tariff on sugar imports from Cuba. Cubans immediately felt the effects. As Cuba’s economy sputtered, the rebellion against Spain again gained momentum. This time, much of the funding and organization for the movement came from Cuban immigrants in New York and Florida. They helped to buy weapons and to smuggle them into Cuba



E.W. Kemble.

"Spanish Warfare"

aboard ships sailing from southern U.S. ports. Such expeditions were illegal under international law, and U.S. coastal patrols blocked most of them.

How did Spain respond to the Cuban revolt?

A full-scale revolt erupted in Cuba in 1895 and quickly engulfed the island. Spain responded even more harshly than in the first round of rebellion, sending more than 120,000 troops to fight an estimated 60,000 Cuban rebels. These rebels were also called nationalists, because they sought to free the Cuban nation from Spanish rule.

The military commander of the Cuban

nationalists, Maximo Gomez, used tactics that would shake the economic foundation of Spanish rule. He attempted to cut off Spanish garrisons, or military posts, in the cities from food supplies in the countryside. He ordered sugar growers to stop producing, and forbid small farmers from selling supplies to the Spanish. Gomez warned that the rebel military would severely punish violators. By 1898, Gomez had brought the Cuban economy to a standstill. Civilians paid a heavy price for his strategy.

Like the nationalists, the Spanish also saw economic control of the island as the key to victory. Unable to capture the nationalist forces, the Spanish sought to isolate them from the general population in the countryside so that non-rebels could not supply them with food or shelter. To that end, Spain's governor in Cuba, General Vale-

riano Weyler, herded hundreds of thousands of Cuban peasants into towns policed by Spanish troops. The "reconcentration" camps, as they were known, lacked adequate food, housing, and sanitation. Disease and starvation took a terrible toll, killing many thousands.

How did the press sway U.S. public opinion?

As the war in Cuba intensified, coverage in the American press increased. Often, Cuban nationalists living in the United States supplied the stories. Publishers soon found that news of the Cuban revolt sold newspapers. They were eager to print reports of Spanish

atrocities, real or fictitious.

William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, owners of two of the largest newspaper chains, competed fiercely for news about Cuba. Both men sent teams of reporters and artists to cover the revolt and generate support for U.S. intervention in the conflict. Religious magazines, particularly those published by Protestant denominations, likewise called for the United States to join the fighting on humanitarian grounds. Other publications argued that American property on the island was being destroyed in the fighting.

“No man’s life, no man’s property is safe. American citizens are imprisoned or slain without cause. American property is destroyed on all sides.... Cuba will soon be a wilderness of blackened ruins. This year there is little to live upon. Next year there will be nothing. The horrors of a barbarous struggle for the extermination of the native population are witnessed in all parts of the country. Blood on the roadsides, blood on the fields, blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood! Is there no nation wise enough, brave enough to aid this blood-smitten land?”

—*New York World*, a Pulitzer paper



How did Americans respond to events in Cuba?

Despite the calls for intervention in the press, Americans were divided about their country’s role in the Cuban revolt. Many Americans identified with the struggle of a small colony against its oppressive, European government. They were appalled by the atrocities they read about. The struggle of Cuba, which had a large black population, had gained particular sympathy in the African-American community. These groups hoped the United States would intervene militarily. On the other hand, many in the business community of the northeast wanted peace restored so their investments would no longer be threatened. Lastly, some American merchants advocated for intervention as the rebellion caused their trade to dry up.

Among the political leadership, advocates of full-scale war with Spain were in the minority, although they voiced their opinions loudly. Some called on the Monroe Doctrine, saying that Spain had no business meddling in the Western hemisphere. Others argued that a future Central American canal would be more profitable if the United States rather than Spain controlled nearby Cuba. Often Congressional support for strong action was tied to a religious conviction that America should help ease suffering abroad. Most Congressmen, however, sided with the cautious policy of President McKinley, who favored a peaceful settlement of the revolt.

How did the Spanish ambassador insult President McKinley?

In February 1898, two events turned American public opinion sharply toward favoring war. On February 9, the *New York Journal* published a private letter which the Spanish ambassador to the United States, Enrique Dupuy de Lome, had sent to a friend

\$50,000 REWARD.—WHO DESTROYED THE MAINE?—\$50,000 REWARD.
EXTRA NEW YORK JOURNAL EXTRA
 6 O'CLOCK A. M. AND ADVERTISER. 6 O'CLOCK A. M.

**THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS SPLIT IN TWO
 BY AN ENEMY'S SECRET INFERNAL MACHINE!**

Officers and Men at Key West Describe the Mysterious Rending of the Vessel and Say It Was Done by Design and Not by An Accident.

Front page of the *New York Journal*, a Hearst paper, February 17, 1896.

in Spain. The letter included a biting critique of the president.

“McKinley is weak and a bidder for the admiration of the crowd besides being a would-be politician who tries to leave a door open behind himself while keeping on good terms with the jingoes [extreme patriots who advocate an aggressive foreign policy] of his party.”

—Enrique Dupuy de Lome

Publication of the letter—and the incendiary newspaper headlines that accompanied it—provoked outrage in the United States. Many Americans took de Lome’s comments as an insult against their country. The Spanish ambassador quickly resigned and Spain apologized. Before the episode died down, however, a much more serious incident in Cuba’s Havana harbor stunned Americans.

How did Americans “Remember the Maine?”

On January 25, 1898, the battleship U.S.S. *Maine* dropped anchor in Havana harbor on a “courtesy” call. While Spain had little interest in hosting an American warship, peaceful visits by foreign warships were common in the late nineteenth century, and Madrid had no

choice but to welcome McKinley’s request to send the *Maine* to Cuba.

McKinley had two purposes for dispatching the *Maine*. First, the ship’s sailors would be in a position to protect and even evacuate American citizens living in Havana if a threat to their safety arose. Second, the warship’s presence gave McKinley added leverage in pressing Spain to reach a just settlement with the Cuban nationalists.

After passing three uneventful weeks in Havana harbor, the *Maine* was ripped apart by a tremendous explosion on the night of February 15. Two hundred and sixty American sailors died. Although the *Maine’s* captain, who survived the explosion, urged a careful investigation to determine the cause of the disaster, the American press immediately blamed the Spanish authorities. A new slogan—“Remember the *Maine*, to hell with Spain!”—swept the nation. *The New York Journal* even offered \$50,000 in exchange for the identity of the culprits. Within the McKinley administration, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt expressed certainty that “the *Maine* was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spanish.”

Throughout the spring of 1898 the McKinley administration considered the best course of action. Pressure mounted on McKinley

from both the public and Congress to respond to the situation. McKinley learned in March that many business leaders were now advocating war with Spain as a way to gain not just greater stability in world affairs, but also increased economic strength for the United States. Spain owned not just Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean but Guam and the Philippines in the Pacific. Victory in a war with Spain would likely mean that the United States would come to control strategic ports from which it could increase the lucrative trade with Asia.



War with Spain

Although McKinley had doubts about the cause of the *Maine* explosion, he did little to calm the war fever that was building in the United States. Without waiting for the results of the official investigation, he took steps to prepare the United States for war. On March 9, 1898, both houses of Congress unanimously approved the president's request to add \$50 million to the defense budget. U.S. investigators, working under intense political pressure, reported to the public on March 28 that the *Maine* had been sunk by an underwater mine. This news, combined with additional news that many business leaders now supported the war, gave McKinley the opportunity to take yet bolder measures.

When did the United States declare war?

Meanwhile, U.S. diplomats found Spain increasingly anxious to avoid war with the United States. They reported that the Spanish were prepared to dismantle the concentration camps in Cuba, as McKinley had earlier demanded. On April 9, Spain announced a truce in its campaign against the nationalists and pledged to expand the scope of Cuban

self-government. The United States was not satisfied. Leaders felt the only way the United States could get Spain out of Cuba, and get U.S. military and economic interests in, was war.

On April 19, responding to a request from President McKinley, Congress granted him the authority to go to war.

What were U.S. goals in Cuba?

Both McKinley and Congress wanted to present their stance strictly in terms of defending the rights of the Cuban people. To that end, Congress passed an amendment to the war resolution stating that the United States had no interest in asserting "sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control" over Cuba and promised to "leave the government and control of the island to its people" once peace was restored.

The amendment, named for Senator Henry Teller, addressed two sources of criticism. First, anti-imperialists worried that intervention in Cuba disguised a larger plan to acquire an American empire. Second, sugar growers in the South feared that the annexation of Cuba would leave them unable to compete with the island's sugar plantations.

The U.S. declaration left Spain with few choices. On April 24, 1898, Madrid declared war on the United States. The United States was not prepared for war, however. At the outset of the war, the U.S. Army numbered only 28,000 men. Most were stationed at remote posts in the southwest. In contrast, Spain had 150,000 tired but seasoned troops in Cuba. Thousands of American volunteers were needed to defeat the Spanish.

How did victory in Manila lead to an increase in volunteers?

Fortunately for the U.S. war effort, the U.S. Navy provided the country with an early taste of victory. Nearly two months before the war began, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt had instructed the commander of the Pacific fleet, Commodore George Dewey, to draw up plans to attack the Spanish fleet based in the Philippines. When Spain declared war, Dewey had already led the U.S. fleet from its home port in Hong Kong to the mouth of Manila harbor. On May 1, he attacked. Dewey's squadron first knocked out the Spanish cannons on shore, then sank every ship in the Spanish fleet.

Dewey's triumph sparked an outpouring of pride in the United States. In the months that followed, more than 220,000 volunteers signed up to fight the Spanish in Cuba. Among the most prominent of the volunteers was Roosevelt, who resigned from the McKinley administration to form a cavalry regiment. Joined by his friend Colonel Leonard Wood, an army surgeon who had been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, Roosevelt recruited primarily from the rugged territories of Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, as well as from North and South Dakota. The unit, nicknamed the "Rough Riders," also included a sprinkling of volunteers

from Ivy League colleges.

Arming, clothing, transporting, and training the volunteers taxed the capabilities of the army. The ships that had been assembled in Tampa, Florida to sail for Cuba even lacked space for the horses of the Rough Riders. Nonetheless, a U.S. force of seventeen thousand soldiers landed in southeastern Cuba on June 22, 1898.

Why did black Americans volunteer to fight?

Many black leaders saw the war as an opportunity to elevate the status of blacks in the United States. They hoped that black participation in the fighting would win the African-American community new respect and chip away at the wall of discrimination.

“In the eyes of the world the Negro shall grow in the full height of manhood and stand out in the field of battle as a soldier clothed with all the inalienable rights of citizenship.”

—*Illinois Record* (a black newspaper)

After the Civil War, military service had been one of the few avenues for advancement open to blacks in American society. The army's four all-black regiments (each comprised of four hundred to eight hundred troops) were ranked among the country's most elite units. Stationed mostly in frontier posts,



Charge of the Rough Riders, as painted by artist Frederic Remington.



U.S. troops in Cuba suffering from tropical diseases, by Charles J. Post.

black soldiers had a much lower rate of desertion and discipline problems than their white counterparts. Nonetheless, they were denied promotion into the officer corps.

How did black soldiers contribute to the U.S. victory over Spain?

When war was declared, the black regiments were among the first units to be mobilized. War Department officials assumed that black soldiers were better suited to Cuba's tropical climate and more likely to withstand tropical diseases. In the fighting, black soldiers earned widespread praise for their bravery.

In addition to the regular black units, thousands of black men offered to fight as volunteers. Initially, they were rejected by all but three states. In the second call for volunteers, five more states accepted black recruits. The African-American community also pressed for the inclusion of black officers, and in three states blacks were put in command of the volunteer units. At the same time, the War Department organized ten volunteer regiments made up of men who were presumed to be immune to yellow fever. Four of the regiments consisted of black soldiers led by black lieutenants. The black volunteers were not given

the chance to fight in Cuba. Only one black unit, a regiment from Massachusetts, saw action in the Caribbean, taking part in the invasion of the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico. Meanwhile, their uniforms seldom shielded them from discrimination at bases in the United States.

How did the United States win the war?

The Americans set their sights on Santiago, the principal Spanish garrison in Cuba, and steadily advanced against determined Spanish resistance. Casualties were heavy on both sides. Among the

U.S. forces, 10 percent of the troops involved in the offensive against Santiago were killed or wounded. Nearly all of the 345 Americans who died in battle during the entire war were killed in the Santiago campaign. (More than 2,500 U.S. servicemen died from disease, food poisoning, and accidents during the Spanish-American War.)

The decisive battles of the offensive took place on July 2, when the Americans captured two heavily fortified hills overlooking the road to Santiago. Spearheading the assault up Kettle Hill were Roosevelt's Rough Riders and two regiments of black soldiers. At the same time, other U.S. regiments charged San Juan Hill. By the end of the day, the Americans controlled the route to Santiago.

The following day, American warships met the Spanish Caribbean fleet outside of Santiago harbor. As in the Philippines, the Spanish ships were outgunned. They were either sunk or forced to shore. On July 17, the Spanish surrendered Santiago. The war in Cuba was all but over.

The swift course of the war as well as the overwhelming U.S. victory restored a

great deal of pride in Americans who had felt concern for their nation's status in the world. Americans were thrilled to learn of their military success. Some felt that the war's progress proved that the United States was no longer a bit player on the world stage but had demonstrated its position as a great world power.

Revolution in the Philippines

Half a world away in the Philippines, Spanish defenses in Manila were likewise crumbling. Although U.S. ground troops did not reach the Philippines until two months after Dewey's naval victory, once there they joined forces with Filipino rebels who had been fighting the Spanish since 1896.

What did Filipino nationalists demand?

As in Cuba, the struggle against Spanish colonialism in the Philippines had built up slowly. Initially, Filipino nationalists did not press for full independence. Instead, they called for political, economic, and religious reforms. Their demands included full equality before the law, local self-rule, freedom of the press, equal pay for equal work, and the return of land which Spanish religious authorities had taken from native Filipinos.

The first round of rebellion had ended in a stalemate in December 1897. The Spanish promised to make modest reforms and, in turn, the rebels agreed to a cease-fire. The leader of the nationalists, Emilio Aguinaldo, went into exile. In March 1898, the nationalists resumed their revolt, complaining that the Spanish had failed to live up to their promises. Their goal was now full independence. The nationalist cause received a boost when Dewey sank the Spanish fleet at Manila. Three weeks later, Aguinaldo returned to the Philippines to again take command of the struggle.

How did the war in the Philippines end?

The Filipino war for independence had aroused little interest in the United States. In late 1897, an appeal from Aguinaldo for U.S. support fell on deaf ears in the McKinley administration. President McKinley was scarcely

exaggerating when he later told a group of clergymen that, before Dewey's victory, he was not even sure where the Philippines were located.

Dewey was the first American to take the Filipino nationalists seriously. Although he destroyed Spain's naval capability, he realized that U.S. ground troops would not reach the Philippines for at least two months. Dewey saw Aguinaldo's forces as allies in the war against Spain, and supplied them with rifles, ammunition, and small cannons. Dewey's strategy, for which he was later criticized, was based on his experience as a Union soldier in the South during the Civil War. He recalled that freed black slaves were an asset in defeating the Confederacy.

“I said these people [the Filipinos] were our friends and we have come here and they will help us just exactly as the negroes helped us in the Civil War.”

—Commodore George Dewey

The main attack against Spain's defenses in Manila took place on August 13, 1898, one day after Washington and Madrid signed a preliminary peace treaty. A communications delay left both sides unaware of the agreement. From their positions outside Manila, U.S. and Filipino forces quickly trapped the Spanish. After a brief show of resistance, Spain's commander surrendered.

Following the Spanish Defeat

In line with the racial stereotypes of the day, most American leaders had little hope that the blacks and Asians who lived in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam could be a force for progress. At the same time, the Spanish were thought of as backward and cruel. Few expected that the inhabitants of these islands were capable of developing stable democracies on their own. Likewise, Americans worried that bringing the islands into the United States would threaten the American political system.

“Fancy the Senators and Representatives of ten or twelve millions of tropical people, people of the Latin race mixed with Indian and African blood;...fancy them sitting in the Halls of Congress, throwing the weight of their intelligence, their morality, their political notions, and habits, their prejudices and passions, onto the scale of the destinies of this Republic.... Tell me, does not your imagination recoil from the picture?”

—Carl Schurz, newspaper editor

Why were the Cuban rebels not included in the negotiations about the future of Cuba?

When the United States defeated Spain’s forces in Cuba, the Cuban rebels were not invited to confer on the surrender. On the whole, in fact, the United States ignored the Cuban rebels. Many in the administration and Congress felt that the rebels, most of whom were black, needed guidance in managing all of their affairs. After the Spanish defeat Congress looked again at the language of the Teller Amendment, which called for “pacification” before Cuban independence. Congress interpreted the term to mean that United States forces would need to remain as occupiers of Cuba until a stable government could be formed. As a result, American businesses returned to Cuba, taking over land and railroads and dominating the economy.

What happened to the Philippines?

The Philippines presented white Americans an even more alien picture than the Caribbean. Before the Spanish-American War, only a handful of Americans had been aware of the Filipino revolt against Spain. In the political cartoons that appeared in U.S. newspapers after the outbreak of fighting, Filipinos were often depicted as having African features.

William Howard Taft, the future president, referred to Filipinos as “little brown brothers.” While their cause won support in the African-American press, there was scant effort in white newspapers to explain the position of the Filipino nationalists.

Emilio Aguinaldo, the nationalist leader, had assumed that the United States meant to liberate the Philippines after the war. On May 24, 1898, he had proclaimed himself the head of a temporary revolutionary government and pledged to hold elections. He had even expressed his special gratitude to the United States.

“The great North American nation, the cradle of genuine liberty, and therefore the friend of our people, oppressed and enslaved by the tyranny and despotism of its rulers, has come to us manifesting a protection as decisive as it is undoubtedly disinterested towards our inhabitants, considering us as sufficiently civilized and capable of governing ourselves and our unfortunate country.”

—Emilio Aguinaldo

Despite Aguinaldo’s hopes for immediate independence, the preliminary treaty of August 12, 1898 said that Spain would permit temporary U.S. occupation of Manila until the status of the Philippines was determined in a final treaty. The preliminary treaty also said that Spain would relinquish all claims to Cuba, and give control of Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States. In the next few months, both the public and leaders in the United States would discuss what longer-term strategy to embrace.

Fall 1898: America at the Crossroads

Throughout the remainder of the summer and fall of 1898 the public discussed the peace treaty's terms and debated whether the United States should permanently annex territories as far away as the Philippines. President McKinley even went on a mid-western speaking tour in October to gauge public opinion on the issue. It was the Philippines—not Cuba—at the eye of the storm. At the conclusion of the war Congress had authorized the occupation of Cuba, but had failed to address the future of the distant Philippines and its nearly ten million people.

At the same time, U.S. and Spanish negotiators (no Filipinos) worked out the details of the final treaty in Paris. Of the five members of the U.S. peace commission President McKinley appointed, four were backers of expansion. It took several months for the negotiators to hash out a treaty. One of the proposed articles they discussed would add the entire archipelago of the Philippines to the United States as a colony.

Opponents of imperialism were outraged upon hearing this news. The various groups of anti-imperialists felt they should join forces to form the Anti-Imperialist League. This way they could more effectively project their message to the American people and to Congress, who would eventually be voting on the final draft of the treaty.

The anti-imperialists contended that the creation of a colonial empire would change the political system in the United States and alter the character of the nation. They were particularly concerned that annexation would mean the United States could no longer hold itself up as a government in power by the “consent of the governed,” a principle of the Declaration of Independence. Among the ranks of the anti-imperialists were former President Grover Cleveland, industrialist Andrew Carnegie, and labor leader Samuel Gompers.

“We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty and

tends toward militarism.... We insist that the subjugation of any people is “criminal aggression” and open disloyalty to the distinctive principles of our government.”

—Platform of the Anti-Imperialist League

Leading the fight for the annexation of the Philippines was a powerful coalition of politicians, businessmen, religious leaders, and military strategists. Within its ranks were Theodore Roosevelt, Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, and Indiana Senator Albert Beveridge.

“It is destiny that the world shall be rescued from its natural wilderness and from savage men.... In this great work the American people must have their part.”

—Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana

A third group, made up mostly of big businessmen and others concerned with commerce, favored retaining only the harbor of Manila so that the United States could gain a secure economic foothold in Asia. Advocates of this position did not like the idea of the United States becoming an imperial power, and predicted that annexation of all the islands of the archipelago would be costly.

“Can such markets be opened only by annexing to the United States the countries in which they are situated?... And as to coaling-stations and naval depots, can we not have as many as we need without owning large and populous countries behind them?”

—Carl Schurtz, former secretary of the interior

All segments of the debate influenced the negotiations for a peace treaty in Paris.