



The History of the Spanish-American War

Charles River Editors

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“A splendid little war.” - John Hay, U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom, describing the war in a letter to Theodore Roosevelt

In 1898, one of Spain's last possessions in the New World, Cuba, was waging a war for independence, and though Cuba was technically exempted from the Monroe Doctrine because it was already a Spanish territory when the Monroe Doctrine was issued, many Americans believed that the United States should side with Cuba against Spain.

Initially, Republican President William McKinley wanted to avoid any wars, and for its part, Spain also wanted to avoid any conflict with United States and its powerful navy. However, Spain also wanted to keep Cuba, which it regarded as a province of Spain rather than a colony. Cuba was very important to the Spanish economy as well, as it produced valuable commodities such as sugar and also had a booming port at Havana.

All the while, American economic interests were being harmed by the ongoing conflict between Cuban nationalists and Spain. Merchants' trading with Cuba was suffering now that the island was undergoing conflict, and the American press capitalized on the ongoing Cuban struggle for independence, which had been flaring up time and again since 1868. In an effort to sell papers, the press frequently sensationalized stories, which came to be known as “yellow journalism.” During the run-up to war, yellow journalism spread false stories about the Cuban conflict in order to sell newspapers in the competitive New York City market.

Despite President McKinley's wishes to avoid a war, he was forced to support a war with Spain after the American navy vessel USS Maine suffered an explosion in Havana harbor. McKinley had sent the ship there to help protect American citizens in Cuba from the violence that was taking place there, but the explosion devastated the ship, which sunk quickly in the harbor. 266 American sailors aboard the USS Maine died.


Although the cause of the explosion was never determined, yellow journalists in the American press blamed Spain, claiming the ship was sabotaged. President McKinley was unable to resist popular pressure after a U.S. Navy report also claimed that the ship had been subject to an explosion outside of its hull which ignited powder magazines inside the ship. Later investigations proved inconclusive, but President McKinley was now forced to accept war with Spain.

Congress declared war, and the U.S. Navy began a blockade of Cuba and Puerto Rico. The U.S. Pacific fleet sailed to the Philippines, which were then a Spanish possession. Despite supply problems from operating so far from existing U.S. Naval bases, the U.S. fleet defeated the Spanish fleet in Manila.

The U.S. Army, meanwhile, landed 15,000 troops on Cuba to battle fewer than 2,000 Spanish regulars. New York politician Theodore Roosevelt, who had been advocating for war with Spain to support the Cuban revolutionaries, joined the U.S. Army and participated in its Cuba campaign, becoming well known for his participation with the “Rough Riders”. Despite the superiority of the Spanish rifles, they were overwhelmed by the number of U.S. Army forces supported by artillery and Gatling guns.

Although the Spanish fought the U.S. Army to a stalemate in Puerto Rico, Spain was forced to make peace after the U.S. Navy destroyed both its Pacific and Atlantic fleets. The military defeat in Cuba meant that Spain would have to give Cuba its independence, and the destruction of its navy meant that Spain would have to cede its overseas colonies to the United States. The United States subsequently gained possession of the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam, marking the true beginning of American imperialism.

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