

The Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War

Source A

For years before 1898 Americans had seethed about the situation in Cuba, an island only ninety miles off the Florida coast and a remnant of Spain's once mighty empire in the Americas. Cuban rebels had waged periodic wars for independence and the latest, starting in 1895, had caused huge damage to the extensive sugar and tobacco plantations owned by Americans on the island. The growing success of the rebels prompted the Spanish to crack down with a brutal policy of "reconcentration" – herding the Cubans into towns and cities and then stripping the countryside to deny food and shelter to the insurgents. ...

In the cities, diseased and starving Cuban victims of reconcentration turned to violence. That was why the *Maine* and its contingent of Marines were sent to Havana: to protect U.S. citizens and property amid the riots. Even today we still do not know why the *Maine* blew up. The immediate cause was an explosion in the powder magazine, but whether that was triggered by hostile action or, more probably, by a fire in the coal bunker, remains in dispute. What mattered in 1898, however, was what people believed had happened. Six weeks after the explosion, a U.S. naval court of inquiry concluded that "the *Maine* was destroyed by the explosion of a submarine mine, which caused the partial explosion of two or more of her forward magazines."

The court of inquiry said it could not establish who had planted this mine, yet the press and much of the country were convinced from the start that this was another atrocity perpetrated by the dastardly Spanish. War fever mounted, but President William McKinley could see many reasons to hold back. The United States was just pulling out of a deep economic depression; the army, mostly used for Indian fighting, was totally unready for a real war; and McKinley was both a sincere Methodist and a Civil War veteran, who told one warhawk, "I shall not get into a war until I am sure that God and man approve. I have been through one war; I have seen the dead pile up, and I do not want to see another."

To many Americans, however, his restraint seemed like cowardice. Economic interests and moral outrage alike seemed to demand war. Theodore Roosevelt [Assistant Secretary of the Navy] was sure "the *Maine* was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards" and he fumed that McKinley had "no more backbone than a chocolate éclair."

The president was burned in effigy; crowds chanted "Remember the *Maine*! To Hell with Spain!" Politically, McKinley felt he could hold the line no longer. On April 11, 1898, he sent a message to Congress setting out the crisis in Cuba and stating that "the destruction of the *Maine*, by whatever exterior cause, is a patent and impressive proof of a state of things in Cuba that is intolerable" The "only hope of relief," declared the president, "is the enforced pacification of Cuba. In the name of humanity, in the name of civilization, in behalf of endangered American interests ... I ask the Congress to authorize and empower the President to take measures to secure a full and final termination of hostilities between the government of Spain and the people of Cuba ... to secure in the island the establishment of a stable government ... and to use the military and naval forces of the United States as may be necessary for these purposes."

David J. Reynolds, *America, Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), pp. 238-39.

Source B

Historiographically, Samuel Flagg Bemis' classic work, *The Latin American Policy of the United States* (1967), is a place to begin. Bemis, a "founding father" of diplomatic history and a "nationalist" in his approach, presents his case for the most part in a positive fashion. According to him, the United States in modern times has behaved creditably by conforming with the requirements of the Monroe Doctrine and safeguarding the Western Hemisphere against European intrusions, no matter whether Latin Americans displayed much appreciation or not. His emphasis on the defense of security interests qualifies Bemis as a traditionalist. Yet he reacts against the excesses of public enthusiasm at the turn of the century and castigates the McKinley administration for unwisely indulging in imperialism. Happily for him, the experiment lasted only for a short while. He calls it a "great aberration."

Traditional versions of the War with Spain emphasize distinctive themes. They depict a hapless President McKinley as a weak-kneed, easily intimidated bungler who collapsed before the demands of an outraged public opinion and accepted an unnecessary conflict when sound diplomacy could have avoided it. Such renditions highlight the importance of humanitarian goals. The people of the United States, genuinely distressed by the barbarism of Spanish pacification techniques in Cuba, set for themselves the task of restoring peace to the island. They meant well and sent in an army to prove it. Similarly, after the war, they acted with the best interests of the Cubans in mind by conforming to the self-denying requirements of the Teller Amendment. They refrained from annexing the island outright and, instead, beneficently placed it under US supervision as authorized by the Platt Amendment.

Mark T. Gilderhus, 'US-Latin American Relations, 1898-1941: A Historiographical Review', in Robert D. Schulzinger (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to American Foreign Relations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 134-35.

Source C

The revolution in Cuba, which had gone on intermittently since 1868, was the proximate cause of the American decision to fight. For people alive in 1898 as well as for historians, the question of why President McKinley asked Congress to declare war against Spain on April 11, 1898, provoked argument. On one side were those who saw the burst of imperialism of the war as nearly accidental. According to this view, the president favored a peaceful resolution of the dispute with Spain, but he could not resist the incessant public demand for war. He opted for war only to preserve the unity of his party in the face of a clamor for a strong policy on the part of the sensational yellow press led by Joseph Pulitzer of the *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst of the *New York Journal*. The *World* denounced the cruelties of Spanish commander Valeriano Weyler, who had left "blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood! The old, the young, the weak, the crippled – all butchered without mercy." Hearst's *Journal* assailed "Weyler the brute, the devastator of haciendas, the destroyer of families, and the outrager of women." McKinley also listened to the voices raised by American businessmen who dreaded the prospect of the Cuban revolution endangering their belongings in the islands.

Robert D. Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 6th ed. 2008), p. 18.

Source D

Interpretations which depend upon mass opinion, humanitarianism, and “Large Policy” advocates¹ do not satisfactorily explain the causes of the war. Neither, however, does Mr Dooley’s² famous one-sentence definition of American imperialism in 1898: “Hands across th’sea an’ into somewan’s pocket.” The problem of American expansion is much more complicated and historically rooted than that flippancy indicates. George Eliot once observed, “The happiest nations, like the happiest women, have no history.” The United States, however, endured in the nineteenth century a history of growing industrialism, supposedly closing physical frontiers, rapid urbanization, unequal distribution of wealth, and overdependence upon export trade. These historical currents clashed in the 1890s. The result was chaos and fear, then war and empire. In 1898 McKinley and the business community wanted peace, but they also sought benefits which only a war could provide. Viewed from the perspective of the 1960s, the Spanish-American conflict can no longer be viewed as only a “splendid little war.” It was a war to preserve the American system.

Walter LaFeber, ‘That “Splendid Little War” in Historical Perspective’, *Texas Quarterly*, 11 (1968), p. 98.

Source E

McKinley’s scanty personal records mean that arguments about his motives (gender-based or otherwise) ultimately must be based on conjecture. But even though McKinley did not record his rationale, the debate over his backbone shows that gendered ideas about leadership limited the range of politically viable options available to him. McKinley’s backbone became a central issue in the debate over war because political activists, whether Republicans, Democrats, or Populists, believed that manly character mattered in politics. Men from across the country agreed that the character of the nation’s leaders attested to the acceptability of their policies, and following the *Maine* disaster, increasing numbers of men demanded a militant leader. Aware of the links between manhood, military prowess, and political power (indeed, eager to take advantage of them in the campaign of 1896), McKinley reached the logical conclusion that war was politically imperative. His decision to join the jingoes was less a reflection of his courage or cowardice, strength or weakness, than an acknowledgement that the political system he operated in would not permit any other course of action.

Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 106.

Source F

[By 1898] Spanish sovereignty in Cuba was coming to an end, or so it appeared. And appearances influenced outcomes. Of course, whether Cubans would have actually gone on to defeat Spain, then or thereafter, or even at all, cannot be demonstrated. What can be

¹ These included legislators such as Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924); strategists like U.S. Navy Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), author of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890); and members of the executive, especially Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1914), who served as Assistant Secretary for the Navy under President McKinley, fought with the “Rough Riders” in Cuba, and later went on to become president (1901-09).

² Mr Dooley was a fictional character created by the Irish-American satirist Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936), whose works can be accessed at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/d#a1559>

determined and documented, however, is that all parties involved had arrived at the conclusion that the days of Spanish rule in Cuba were numbered. This was the basis on which the vital policy decisions were made and actions were taken. ...

In early 1898 the McKinley administration contemplated the impending denouement with a mixture of disquiet and dread. If Spanish sovereignty was untenable, Cuban pretension to sovereignty was unacceptable. The Cuban insurrection threatened more than the propriety of colonial administration; it also challenged the U.S. presumption of succession, for in contesting Spanish rule Cubans were advancing the claim of a new sovereignty. For much of the nineteenth century the United States had pursued the acquisition of Cuba with resolve, if without results. The success of the Cuban rebellion threatened everything. In 1898 Cuba was lost to Spain, and if Washington did not act, it would also be lost to the United States. ...

Cuba was far too important to be turned over to the Cubans. Free Cuba raised the specter of political disorder, social upheaval, and racial conflict: Cuba as a source of regional instability and inevitably a source of international tension.

Louis A. Pérez Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 10, 12, and 13.

Source G

The Spanish-American War, which began in April 1898, demonstrated the amazing adaptability of American racism and its usefulness for empire building. ...

At least initially, American newspapers and many politicians painted the rebellious Cuban people as desperate victims of Spanish cruelty and abuse. ... Newspaper articles and editorial cartoons depicted the Spanish officials and soldiers as dark, seedy, and disreputable characters who thought nothing of killing children and raping women. The Cuban people usually found themselves cast in the role of a helpless and weak female, waiting for her chivalrous knight (the United States) to save her. ... The Cuban women in the editorial cartoons that filled American newspapers were usually strikingly beautiful, almost enticing. They were also noticeably whiter than the usual pictures of Latin Americans. ...

Yet, once American troops, officials, and reporters flooded into Cuba following the “splendid little war,” U.S. attitudes quickly hardened toward the “bronzed Europeans” they had just “liberated.” Americans were aghast to discover not heavily suntanned Europeans, but the same mixed “mongrel” race that they believed characteristic of every Latin American nation. Most important, they found that a large number of the brave Cuban rebels were, in fact, black. The change in the portrayal of the Cubans in the American media was immediate. Gone were the raven-haired damsels of the prewar period. A new stereotype now came to the fore. In truth it was a very old stereotype, modified for the Cuban experience: the typical Cuban was portrayed as an African American. ... By transplanting the African American stereotype to Cuba, American public opinion makers were suggesting that it was even more unreasonable to assume that the lazy, ignorant, vicious, backward Cubans could take upon themselves the mantle of self-government. ...

In the months leading up to the Spanish-American War the fate of the Philippines was not a main point of discussion. In fact, many Americans seemed somewhat surprised to learn that their nation had seized the islands from the Spanish – and intended to stay. ... Although the Filipinos had engaged in ongoing rebellion against Spanish rule, they never became “bronzed Europeans.” Almost immediately, the Filipinos were portrayed in the popular press and in speeches as tribal people, completely given over to savagery. ... In editorial cartoons, the Filipinos got roughly the same treatment as Cubans in one regard: cartoonists used African-American stereotypes to portray them as childlike and in need of discipline. Americans in the Philippines routinely referred to the natives as “niggers.” This image of Filipinos was gradually

modified, however, as the Filipino Insurrection (1899-1902) began to require more American troops and to result in more American deaths. Having easily transposed their views of African Americans onto the inhabitants of the Philippines, Americans took what was a logical step: they called on even older racial stereotypes of the Native Americans. The backward and primitive, yet stealthy and deadly Indian seemed a more appropriate template on which to redraw the Filipino. In just a short period, newspapers were describing the Filipino “braves” and comparing them to Apaches or Comanches. ...

U.S. forces subjected Filipinos, as savages, to brutal treatment with little hesitation. Testimony of American soldiers indicated a long list of tortures, inflicted on prisoners: brandings, beatings, shootings, strangling, and the infamous “water torture,” in which water was forced down a man’s throat until he could not breathe, or until his stomach became bloated with the fluid after which he would be punched and kicked until he talked or an internal organ burst. ...

The cost, in money and blood, of the war in the Philippines began to call into question America’s imperial destiny. A small but vocal group of Americans, who came to be known as the “anti-imperialists” raised serious doubts about whether America should even be in the Philippines.

Michael Krenn, *The Color of Empire: Race and American Foreign Relations* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), pp. 44-48.

Source H

In Asia, American help was given to another rebel movement against the Spaniards in the Philippines. When American rule replaced that of the Spanish in Manila, the rebels turned against their former allies and a guerrilla war began. This was the first phase of a long and difficult process of disentanglement for the United States from her first Asian colony. Administration after administration in Washington claimed that the Philippines was not yet ready for independence; their freedom would be exploited by other powers, it was held, and it was therefore best that the United States did not withdraw. In the Caribbean, it was the United States that at last brought the long history of Spanish empire in the Americas to an end. Puerto Rico passed to the Americans, and Cuba obtained its independence on terms which guaranteed its domination by the United States. American forces went back to occupy the island under these terms from 1906 to 1909, and again in 1917.

John M. Roberts and Odd A. Westad, *The History of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 6th ed. 2013), pp.

For Discussion

Using these sources and your own knowledge (a) analyze the historiographical debates about the causes of the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War; and (b) consider why the War might be seen as a definitive moment in the development of U.S. imperialism.