

Why Did the United States Fight Spain in 1898?

The United States went to war against Spain because of longstanding foreign affairs interests as well as immediate domestic political events. From the early days of the Republic, North American politicians considered Cuba's geographic position as vital to the United States. The island was located ninety miles from Florida and commanded important seaways connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. When Spain lost most of its Central and South American colonies, some U.S. leaders worried that Great Britain or France might gain control of Cuba and menace the United States. During the 1850s, some North Americans believed that the United States was destined to annex the island. After the Civil War, these earlier concerns became less important but remained as basic concepts that influenced later affairs.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, Cuba became an important producer of sugar cane and tobacco. Toward the end of the century, North American investment, particularly in plantations, mills, and mines, rose rapidly in Cuba. By 1895 North American businessmen had invested up to 50 million dollars in Cuba, and by 1893, commerce between the mainland and the island exceeded 100 million dollars. For the United States, Cuba was an important market for industrial goods and a source of raw sugar, tobacco, and various minerals; for Cuba, the United States was the essential importer of over 90 percent of sugar produced on the island (1).

Despite growing economic ties with Cuba, many North Americans were prejudiced against Spaniards and Cubans. U.S. scholars and textbooks depicted Spain as degenerate, with Catholic inquisition cruelties, a corrupt monarchy, and a backward economy (2). In addition, many North Americans were prejudiced against people of African descent, and about one third of Cuba's population was African.

Another change in Cuba was the emergence of insular nationalism. In 1868 some Cubans began fighting for independence, and at the end of three decades, this goal became an irreconcilable conflict between Cuban nationalists and Spanish imperialists. The final fight for independence broke out in 1895: General Máximo Gómez, head of the Cuban army, lacked sufficient personnel and munitions to wage a conventional war against Spain's larger army. Controlling no

seaport, Gómez could not import large amounts of ammunition and medicine. Therefore, he divided his army into small units and directed them to destroy the island's economy, believing that eventually Spain would grow weary of war and withdraw from the island. Avoiding large Spanish forces and traditional battles, the insurgents instead attacked small Spanish units and outposts, and they burned cane fields and mills. Gómez's forces, based in eastern Cuba, rapidly spread the war to the western shores of Cuba (3).

Surprised by insurgent successes, the Spanish countered with harsh military repression. Spain sent General Valeriano Weyler Nicolau together with more than two hundred thousand troops to Cuba, while enlisting about eighty thousand local Cuban volunteers. Weyler erected fortifications around the major cities and towns, and controlled two fortified roads running from North to South across the island. The Spanish troops began clearing much of the western third of the island, but they were unable to drive the Cuban insurgents from the central war zone. Because Cuban peasants were aiding the insurgents with food and information, the Spanish relocated several hundred thousand villagers to the defenses of towns and cities. The Spanish then burned the unoccupied homes and fields. Since Spain was not prepared to feed and house the reconcentrated population, tens of thousands of *reconcentrados* eventually starved, sickened, and died. By 1898 both Washington and Madrid believed that some four hundred thousand Cuban civilians had died, about one fourth of the island's population, and that many more were vulnerable (4).

In 1897-1898 no one could foresee an early end to the Cuban-Spanish war. Cuban insurgents, about forty thousand strong, controlled the mountainous eastern third of the island and much of the countryside in central Cuba, but lacked the personnel and munitions to mount sustained assaults on Spain's fortified towns and cities. During three years of campaigning, many Spanish soldiers fell ill and died from disease, and only about sixty thousand remained fit for combat. Although supported by thousands of local volunteers, the Spanish forces were inadequate to defeat the widespread insurgency. In addition, Spain's political resolve to send more soldiers to Cuba had nearly come to an end, yet the Spanish government and its



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military leaders were unwilling to quit the island. Tens of thousands of *reconcentrados* suffered while both Cuban and Spanish soldiers continued to lay waste to the island.

The United States soon felt the 1895 eruption of war, and the events in Cuba and Spain triggered a series of U.S. responses that culminated in military intervention. Initially, commerce collapsed followed by mounting U.S. property claims against Spain. It soon became apparent that many North Americans sympathized with the insurgents and favored Cuban independence. Reliable reports of horrific Cuban civilian suffering increased U.S. public criticism of Spain.

Grover Cleveland, the first president to consider the Cuban war, proclaimed U.S. neutrality, urged Spain to seek a political settlement, and condemned Gómez's scorched earth tactics that destroyed and threatened U.S. investments. In time, the Cleveland administration became convinced that Cuba would fare better under Spanish sovereignty that would provide more safety and stability on the island; moreover, Cleveland did not believe the insurgents had a functional and responsible civilian government. Republican legislators, on the other hand, led the Congress in passing pro-Cuban resolutions; these, however, were non-binding on Cleveland's administration. The division between Cleveland, a Democrat, and the Republicans in

Congress led to the Republican Party's close identification with Cuban independence. However, the intense competition of the 1896 presidential campaign momentarily diverted national attention from Cuba. After the election, President Cleveland, troubled by a military stalemate in Cuba and alarmed by rising *reconcentrado* deaths, warned Spain that if its military efforts appeared to be futile, then the United States would intervene (5). Thus, Cleveland established humanitarianism as a justifiable basis for U.S. intervention.

When William McKinley became president in March 1897, his views on Cuba were unknown (6). Although his political party and many congressional supporters championed Cuban independence, most business leaders who had supported the Republican victory wanted peace with Spain. The new president, unlike Cleveland, soon decided that peace on the island would most likely come from ending Spanish rule in Cuba. A reliable report of terrible Cuban suffering prompted McKinley to demand that Spain follow civilized

warfare and adopt sufficient political and economic reforms to bring a quick end to the insurrection.

As tension between the United States and Spain mounted, an assassin murdered the Spanish prime minister. A new Spanish government, headed by Práxedes Sagasta (a critic of the previous regime) initiated many reforms. During the fall of 1897, Sagasta recalled General Weyler, nearly ended the flow of soldiers to Cuba, increased relief for starving Cubans, allowed some *reconcentrados* to return to their homes, and offered autonomy to Cuba. The McKinley administration welcomed Sagasta's reforms (7).

Sagasta's initiatives, however, encountered major obstacles. The Cuban insurgents flatly rejected autonomy and continued fighting. Many Spanish officers and nationalists also opposed a political settlement; on 12 January 1898 Spanish officers in Havana led rioters in attacks on the offices of newspapers that supported autonomy. Although Spain quickly restored order, the McKinley administration feared that future riots might turn anti-American; moreover, hope for a Spanish-Cuban political settlement had faded. The United States had been concentrating naval ships in preparation for a possible conflict with Spain, and McKinley decided to send the *Maine* from Key West to Havana Harbor to protect Americans.

Two unexpected events in February greatly increased the likelihood of U.S. intervention. The Spanish minister in Washington, Enrique Dupuy de Lôme, had written a private letter that criticized McKinley and treated Sagasta's reforms as insincere. Publication of the letter resulted in a brief diplomatic storm that ended with the resignation of Dupuy de Lôme and an apology from the Spanish government. On 15 February, the *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor with a loss of 266 crew members. The cause of the disaster was unknown; spontaneous combustion in the coal might have ignited the powder magazines, but many Americans suspected Spanish treachery. Sensational journals charged that Spaniards had triggered the explosion (8). McKinley cautioned the public to reserve judgment until the United States Navy investigated the wrecked ship and determined the cause of its destruction. It took six weeks for the naval board of inquiry to report on the *Maine*. During this time details of the "secret" investigation regularly leaked to the press, and the public quickly learned that the naval inquiry members believed an external explosion, probably a mine, set off an internal explosion of the ship's magazines and caused the disaster. The naval board did not know who was responsible for the external explosion, however (9).

While the nation waited for the official naval report, both the McKinley administration and the Spanish government sought a diplomatic solution that would prevent war. McKinley considered buying Cuba, but key senators opposed this, and Spain was not interested in a sale; McKinley displayed his condescending attitude toward the Cubans when he never asked them what they thought of a U.S. purchase. A more promising initiative was a proposal for a cease-fire. Spain and the United States explored the possibility of an armistice in the fighting on the island to allow time for Spanish-Cuban peace negotiations, but the proposal failed amid details. Spain wanted the Cubans to ask for a cease-fire, and the Cubans, suspecting Spanish trickery, were unwilling to stop fighting. Spain thought the United States should force the Cubans to end the war; the United States lacked the leverage to persuade the Cubans to lay down their arms, and it refused to join Spain in suppressing the Cubans. McKinley asked the Spanish government to offer an armistice that would provide for six months of Spanish-Cuban negotiations, and if these failed, Spain should accept U.S. arbitration; the Spanish government refused. By the end of March, with fighting continuing and negotiations fruitless, hopes for a diplomatic settlement lapsed.

The final weeks of diplomatic negotiations were accompanied by a rapidly rising demand in the United States for military intervention. On 17 March Senator Redfield Proctor described to the Senate the horrible conditions in Cuba that he had recently observed. His dramatic speech convinced many businessmen and religious leaders that the United States had a humanitarian

duty to use military force, if necessary, to end the fighting in Cuba (10). During the following ten days the official naval report on the *Maine* became public. With large numbers of Americans angry and vengeful, many Republican legislators worried that if the McKinley administration did not act quickly and decisively, Democrats would seize the Cuban issue and win the November elections. These Republican congressmen opposed McKinley's diplomatic plan of an armistice followed by six months of negotiations; this would drag out a Cuban solution until October, and the outcome was uncertain. Thus, Republican legislators wanted the administration to champion the Cuban cause, even if this meant war with Spain. It was widely accepted that a war would be a quick and easy U.S. victory. When McKinley continued to seek an armistice, more than one hundred Republican House members caucused and threatened to join with Democrats in voting for war; dissident Republicans joined by the Democrats would form a House majority.

With diplomatic negotiations going nowhere, Republican House members in rebellion, and public outrage evident, McKinley decided

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@Reconcentrados, by W. A. Rogers. (*Harper's Pictorial History of the War With Spain* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899], 137.)

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Explosion of the *Maine* in Havana Harbor. (Nathan C. Green, *The War With Spain and Story of Spain and Cuba* [Baltimore: International News and Book Co., 1898], 64.)

to turn the Cuban issue over to Congress. He still hoped that Spain, faced by an unwinnable war, would relent, and at the last moment, 9 April, Sagasta's government offered a suspension of hostilities in Cuba. Spain, however, did not offer independence, and the Cuban insurgents quickly rejected Spain's offer. McKinley wanted additional time for negotiations, but several influential Republican congressional leaders refused to delay further. Thus, McKinley reluctantly turned the Cuban problem over to Congress, asking for authority to intervene to end Cuban suffering, to protect U.S. life and property, to restore commerce, and to end the constant threat to peace that agitated the United States.

In the end, diplomacy failed due to internal politics; each party to the negotiation lacked flexibility and the desire to compromise. McKinley lost control of Congress to Republicans who demanded intervention; Sagasta's government faced rigid military officers and threats of civil war that prevented Spain from abandoning Cuba; and the Cuban insurgents would accept nothing less than complete independence from Spain.

When Congress considered the Cuban issue, a difference emerged between McKinley and some influential Senate Republicans over the objectives of war. A Senate majority favored recognizing the Republic

of Cuba. McKinley objected for several reasons: he did not want the U.S. Army to come under Cuban sovereignty when it invaded the island; he thought that recognition might hurt U.S. claims against Cuba for property the insurgents had destroyed; and most significantly, he lacked confidence in Cuban leaders' ability to restore and maintain peace on the island. During the Senate debate, Senator Henry M. Teller offered an amendment, proposed by Cuban lobbyists, that asserted a U.S. intention to leave Cuba after the war. Teller's amendment did not recognize the Cuban Republic, but it promised Cuban independence; both the Senate and the McKinley administration accepted Teller's formula (11). Congress then passed a set of resolutions permitting U.S. military intervention in the Spanish-Cuban conflict. As a result, Spain broke diplomatic relations; the United States began a naval blockade of Cuba; and Congress set the official start of the war as 21 April 1898.

The war lasted less than three months, for in nearly every clash, U.S. arms prevailed. On 1 May the United States Navy sank a Spanish fleet in Manila harbor, and on 3 July another fleet off Santiago de Cuba was destroyed. The United States Army invaded Cuba, Luzon, and Puerto Rico, and obtained the surrender of Santiago de Cuba while the navy seized Guam. One day after a peace

protocol was signed, the Spanish surrendered Manila to U.S. forces. Holding the military upper hand, the United States dictated the peace. Without consulting the Cubans, Puerto Ricans, or Filipinos about peace terms, the McKinley administration decided to remove Spain from the New World. It required Spain to leave Cuba and demanded Puerto Rico as an indemnity of war. McKinley asked for an island, eventually Guam, in the Ladrones (Marianas). The McKinley administration, however, was undecided about the future of the Philippines, so McKinley asked that the United States Army occupy and control Manila until a peace conference could determine the disposition of the islands. With Spanish military forces in retreat and facing ever greater losses, Spain reluctantly accepted McKinley's terms, and on 15 August the two nations signed a protocol that led to an armistice.

Although fighting stopped between United States, Cuban, and Spanish forces, it continued between Philippine insurgents and the Spanish. Filipino nationalists, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, rapidly took control of Luzon and successfully invaded several islands in the central portion of the archipelago. By the time the United States and Spanish peace commissioners met on 1 October in Paris to negotiate a treaty, Aguinaldo's forces were advancing in the Philippines, and he was forming a permanent government for the entire archipelago; at the same time, there was increasing friction between the Filipino nationalists and the American occupation forces stationed in Manila. Moreover, Germany and Japan had revealed their interest in acquiring some or all of the Philippines, while Great Britain urged Washington to annex the entire archipelago (12).

Within the United States most Americans expected the McKinley administration to keep Manila and many advocated taking all of the islands. Following a political tour of the Midwest in October, McKinley decided that the public and the Senate would support a treaty securing the entire archipelago. Because the United States had not conquered the Philippines, McKinley offered twenty million dollars for internal improvements that Spain had made in the islands. The final peace treaty consisted of the 15 August protocol provisions and the financial settlement for the Philippine Islands. After a closely contested Senate debate, senators voted fifty-seven to twenty-seven, thereby narrowly providing a two thirds majority for the treaty.

In sum, there were irreconcilable differences between Cuban nationalists and Spanish colonialists that left no room for a negotiated political settlement. The three-year war for independence caused U.S. economic losses and the death and suffering of hundreds of thousands of Cuban people. By the spring of 1898 there was no diplomatic resolution to the conflict and no end in sight to the fighting. Many Americans, prejudiced against Spain and sympathetic to Cuba, were angered over the destruction of the *Maine*; the approaching national election galvanized congressional Republicans to seek military intervention. McKinley, who had long considered U.S. military intervention as a possibility, put the best face on the use of force by justifying it as necessary to secure humanitarian ends and U.S. interests. The president removed Spain from the New World and prepared for a long-term U.S. presence in Cuba that would exclude the European powers. □

Endnotes

1. See Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); and Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).
2. Richard L. Kagan, "Prescott's Paradigm: American Historical Scholarship and the Decline of Spain," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (April 1996): 423-446; Gerald F. Linderman, *The Mirror of War: American Society and the Spanish-American War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974).
3. For details of the war, including Cuba, Spain, the United States, and the Philippines, see David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981).
4. A United States Army census of 1899 estimated that 235,000 Cubans died from the insurrection, most of them civilians; that was over one eighth of the island's population.
5. For more on the Cleveland administration, see Gerald G. Eggert, *Richard Olney: Evolution of a Statesman* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974).
6. For more on McKinley's presidency, see Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980).
7. For more on diplomacy, see John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain over Cuba, 1895-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
8. Some historians believe that sensational journalism played a central role in creating U.S. war hysteria. For example, see Marcus W. Wilkerson, *Public Opinion and the Spanish-American War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1932). The Cuban facts, however, published in the traditional press and government documents needed no sensational exaggeration to inflame public opinion.
9. See Hyman G. Rickover, *How the Battleship Maine Was Destroyed* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, Naval History Division, 1976). Rickover concluded that there was no external mine and that the explosion originated within the *Maine*, probably in the coal bunkers.
10. For more on business and religious opinion, see Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1936).
11. Philip S. Foner, *The Spanish-Cuban-American War and the Birth of American Imperialism, 1895-1902*, 2 vols. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
12. For more on the Philippines, see Ephraim K. Smith, "William McKinley's Enduring Legacy: The Historiographical Debate on the Taking of the Philippine Islands," in *Crucible of Empire: The Spanish-American War and Its Aftermath*, ed. James C. Bradford (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1993).

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