

The Spanish-American War

A. ORIGINS

1868-78. CUBA LIBRE! Movement begins. The Spanish imperial government is corrupt and authoritarian. A small clique of Spanish landowners living in Cuba or operating as “absentee” landlords exploits the labor of native workers and treats them terribly. This elite is backed up by the Spanish military.

U.S. government defends Cubans and protests Spain’s policies. Spain promises reform. None is forthcoming.

U.S. doesn’t do anything militarily – the army is too busy policing the South during Reconstruction (1865-1877) or fighting Indians in the West (1860s-70s).

U.S. offers to mediate between the colonial landlords and the angry Cubans – Spain rejects the offer.

1895. Cuban rebels take up a new strategy. To get rid of the Spanish, the rebels look to cut their source of revenue. BURN the sugar cane fields.

“Work is a crime against the Revolution! Blessed be the Torch!” –
Maximo Gomez

Revolutionaries want INDEPENDENCE, not AUTONOMY. They are willing to take a short term financial loss to achieve a long term political vision.

They have support in the east, but not in the west of Cuba. Many middle class Cubans are frustrated with the Spanish and the poor conditions on the island, but they are still willing to “go along to get along.” A revolution poses its own risks and they find the tactics of radicals like Gomez to be counterproductive.

The rebels do have support in the US, and they do all they can to cultivate more support, including sending propagandists to the US in hopes of influencing newspaper editors and politicians who could prove useful allies.

The “influencers” take care to tailor their message for an American audience. They play down their economic radicalism (which could result in American business interests being thrown out of Cuba). Instead, knowing the US government wants order restored in the region, the revolutionaries insist that only the expulsion of the Spanish from the island will bring order. What comes next, they do not say.

Latest American TARIFF (1894) helps the rebels’ cause, since it too undermines the Spanish sugar industry in Cuba – Spanish planters have less of a market in the U.S. because the high tariff (40%) makes sugar produced in the U.S. cheaper by comparison.

Some Spanish planters realize it may be time to cut their losses and go home.

February 1896 SPAIN RESPONDS to the burning of the sugar fields.

The government sends in General Valeriano Weyler to crack down. (Weyler is actually of Prussian background, but was born in Spain.) Known as “Butcher” Weyler, he institutes CONCENTRATION policy. Weyler puts people in camps to keep them away from sabotaging the fields and to keep them away from the influence of the revolutionaries. Leave the camp, and you get shot. Pent up in overcrowded cities, BETWEEN 100,000 and 400,000 civilians die of hunger or disease.

WHY IS THIS A STUPID POLICY?

1. Alienates professional middle-class Cubans who would have been satisfied with home rule (autonomy) rather than independence. The middle class now sides with the rebels/revolutionaries. “Average” middle-class people have become radicalized.
2. Deprives Spanish planters of their labor and diverts military protection from the field to the cities – so you’ve alienated the middle class AND the wealthy planters.
3. Spurs outrage in the United States and produces louder demands among US public for Cuban independence -- but granting independence to the Cubans will lose face for the Spaniards who may have been ready to back off anyway.

By the end of 1897 even the Spanish loyalists in Cuba want Weyler out.

Re-concentration has undermined Spain's financial argument for staying in Cuba, while also broadening the support of the Cuban rebels. This makes staying in Cuba more difficult.

B. WHAT IS THE U.S. POSITION?

The President's Position:

William McKinley strongly opposed U. S. intervention in Cuba. As a Civil War vet, he had "SEEN THE BODIES STACKED UP LIKE CORDS OF LUMBER." Like most combat veterans, he finds war abhorrent and knows full well the horrors that accompany it. He wants a peaceful solution to the Cuban crisis.

On a more practical level, he also knows:

the US army is in shambles;

US generals are relics;

no logistical infrastructure to launch an invasion from Florida to Cuba

The US might be more powerful than Spain on paper, but the nation had not fought a foreign war since the 1840s (the Mexican War) and McKinley, opposed to war on principle already, was not going to enter a war he could conceivably lose.

McKinley wants ORDER restored. McKinley is pro-Cuban, but he also will not officially recognize the rebels as belligerents since this could lead the US into war with Spain.

He does not want Cuban independence, he wants Spain to implement reforms that will improve conditions for the Cubans. If they are unable to do so, they should relinquish sovereignty over the island and let the Cubans govern themselves.

If Spain cannot restore order, McKinley wants to **MEDIATE** the dispute between the Cubans and the Spanish

He condemns Spanish for breaking earlier promises that they would reform their ways and treat the Cubans more humanely.

NOVEMBER 1897

New Spanish government removes Weyler and agrees:

1. to end re-concentration policy
2. to release US prisoners stuck in Cuba
3. to allow US to supply humanitarian aid to the Cubans (McKinley gives \$5000 of his own money)

Spanish minister: "All motive for irritation has disappeared." At this point, Spain is hoping to make clear to McKinley that it does not want war.

McKinley relieved that war might be avoided

The Position of the Press:

Penny press seizes on the sensational aspects of the Cuban story. William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer vie for most outrageous "Spanish atrocity" stories.

Some atrocities are...exaggerated. For example, a single Cuban general died in battle twelve times, committed suicide, and was poisoned.

Hearst sends artist FREDERIC REMINGTON to "draw" the war.

Remington reports back → "All is peaceful. No war to draw."

Hearst tells him → "You supply the pictures. I'll supply the war."

BUT THE PRESS HARDLY DRAGS THE U.S. INTO WAR.

Its influence has been exaggerated in the history text books.

No one in the heartland reads the Hearst papers, but people there are still angry at the Spanish treatment of Cubans and pressure McKinley to "do something." On the other hand, areas where the Hearst and Pulitzer papers have significant circulation numbers do not prove to be any more "pro-war" than other regions.

Also, Americans were very idealistic, had supported popular revolutions in Hungary (1849) and Greece (1820s). It's not surprising that they would support one so close to home. The question, however, is not

whether people support the Cuban revolution, but whether they support direct US military intervention in Cuba to help achieve Cuban independence from Spain. In late 1897, it is far from clear that the majority would support this step, regardless of how much the “yellow press” was beating the drums for American intervention.

Those who do support US military involvement do so because the Cuban revolution appeals to their sense of “mission” or “duty.”

Those disgusted with “politics as usual” and the increasingly commercial nature of the US – in which people focus only on the bottom line and making money – see support of the Cuban “cause” as an opportunity for a new MORAL RENEWAL.

Time to take up our DUTY as MEN just as the Civil War generation had done. The press does not create this desire to do one’s “manly duty” – it’s already in the culture. The press does, however, make the case that Cuba is where American men could most immediately perform their “manly duty.” That said, the press exercises little influence over McKinley’s decision making process....at least for the time being.

The Position of “Big Business”

WAS U.S. INTERVENTION IN CUBA “A BIG BUSINESS CONSPIRACY”?

In a word, NO.

Most corporate leaders who have the President’s ear adamantly opposed the war. They fear instability that war would produce will jeopardize the ongoing economic recovery from 1893 depression.

Also, the notion of “Big Business” acting with one mind is more myth than reality. Companies no doubt looked after their own interests and bottom lines, but doing so often put them in conflict with other companies. For example, in the sugar industry, companies that own large sugar cane and sugar beet farms do not want the US to enter the war and – perhaps, in time – take control of Cuban sugar cane production. This would glut the market with an oversupply of raw, unrefined sugar and drive down their prices and profits. On the other hand, the sugar refining companies do support US intervention in hopes that US control of Cuban sugar cane will provide them more supply and enable them to expand their refining businesses. So, in

just one industry, there can exist sharply contrasting opinions.

Finally, claims that McKinley was “under the thumb” of Big Business were exaggerated. “Dollar” Mark Hanna, a wealthy industrialist, had managed McKinley’s winning presidential campaign in 1896, and the president’s political enemies claimed Hanna now controlled him and his administration’s policies. McKinley, in their telling, was tied to Hanna and Hanna was calling the shots. [See political cartoon of Hanna and McKinley in the powerpoint.] Historians who have investigated such claims find them unpersuasive. McKinley was calling the shots, though, like many effective politicians, he allowed Hanna to be seen as the public face of the administration so, if and when criticism came, Hanna, not McKinley would bear the brunt of it.

What’s more, Hanna himself personally OPPOSED American military intervention in Cuba for much the same reasons as many wealthy and powerful businessmen: it would destabilize the economy and possibly damage the ongoing economic recovery.

Ironically, big business opposition, based on realism, fuels the idealism of the CUBA LIBRE! Movement.

If business opposes war, it must be a good and righteous cause. Along these lines, many idealistic, anti-business Americans join in the chorus for war. They are encouraged and incited by interventionists (known as “JINGOES”) like Theodore Roosevelt who declares that America would go to war against Spain in defense of the Cubans whether Big Business liked it or not.

The Position of the “Jingoes”

Most well-known of the jingoes, Theodore Roosevelt, declares President McKinley, who opposes war, “has the backbone of a chocolate éclair.”

To add insult to injury, Roosevelt is not in the opposition party, he is in McKinley’s cabinet! He is criticizing his boss.

Roosevelt and other jingoes use gendered language – are you a man or not? Are you “yellow”?

They believe war can be “invigorating” and “cleansing.” By turning white-collar middle managers into soldiers, war will restore the

nation's masculinity. It will also precipitate a moral renewal – the U.S. goes to war for a righteous cause, not for material gain.

The notion of Americans fighting selflessly for a “good cause” and not selfishly for money or power appealed to the public. It still does.

In this sense, the “Gender” argument employed by the jingoes did have some traction with American men who might otherwise not have been especially interested in supporting a revolution in Cuba.

WAR CLOUDS GATHER – January to April 1898

[The dates are less important than knowing the order in which these events occurred.]

January – riots in Havana; Spanish loyalists fight Cuban rebels.

These loyalists know that if Spain gives Cuba autonomy, the revolutionaries will deprive the loyalists of their jobs and status. They also fear they will become the targets of the radicals' violent impulses.

Among those who fear the withdrawal of the Spanish are some Afro-Cubans who side with Spain because the Spanish government had abolished slavery in 1886. Much as the freedmen side with the Republican party in the US (since the Republican Lincoln had freed them), the Afro-Cubans side with their Spanish liberators.

Most importantly, however, the continuing riots suggest that disorder, rather than order, is in the future for Cuba.

McKinley doesn't want war, but must do something to show the US will not tolerate further disorder on the island.

He sends the battleship USS Maine on a “good will” mission to Havana harbor in Cuba, hoping that doing so will show his administration's “toughness” without committing it to war.

In response, the Spanish foreign minister makes a remark that proves prescient: “That ship might, through some mischance, bring about a conflict”

February 8 – release of the “DeLôme Letter”

The Spanish ambassador to the US, Enrique Dupuy DeLôme, had sent a letter to the Spanish government a few months before (December 1897) in which he ridiculed McKinley as weak and indecisive. He advised the Spanish government that there was no need to negotiate with the Cuban rebels for fear of US intervention. DeLôme suggested all the reforms Spain had promised months before were just a ruse and that McKinley is weak and easily tricked. The Americans, under McKinley, would not have the courage of their convictions.

The American State Department learned of the letter shortly after it was sent and demanded DeLôme's resignation. The Spanish government complied and DeLôme was fired. The entire exchange was kept private.

On February 8th, however, the *New York Journal*, owned by William Randolph Hearst, printed an English translation of the leaked DeLôme letter under the banner headline: "The Worst Insult to the United States in Its History." By that night, the entire nation knew the contents of the letter and McKinley quickly demanded a public apology from Spain. A week later, on February 14th, the Spanish government did indeed apologize.

Still, the letter, now public, constituted a direct challenge to the nation as well as to McKinley's manhood. It marked yet another step toward war, as it became increasingly difficult for McKinley to make the case for continued peaceful diplomacy.

February 15

A day after Spain's apology for the DeLôme letter, the USS *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor. The American press launched an immediate cry for war. Given that he knew Spain was still reluctant to go to war, McKinley doubts the Spanish are responsible for sinking the *Maine*. He wants to determine all the facts before acting impulsively and bringing the nation into war. He needs a "cooling off" period, so he appoints a "blue ribbon" committee to investigate the incident and report back its findings within a month.

March 17

Vermont Senator Renfield Proctor, who had shared the President's skepticism about war, had gone to Cuba to see for himself what were the conditions there. On March 17th, he delivers a speech in the Senate reporting his findings that

shocks and horrifies both the Senators and the American public. Penniless and out of work, many Cubans are starving to death. Something must be done, Proctor concludes.

Proctor was no jingo, he was “sane” and “reasonable” – so the speech carries even more weight. If Proctor thinks the US should go to war, maybe it should?

March 28

To McKinley surprise, the Committee concludes the *Maine* was destroyed by a mine. In essence, it points the finger of blame at Spain.

The Press cries: “REMEMBER THE MAINE! TO HELL WITH SPAIN!!”

But was it a Spanish mine?

McKinley is skeptical. It's not in Spain's interests to provoke a war it might well lose.

Did the rebels blow up the ship to provoke the US to enter the war on their side?

Probably not. Many of the rebel leaders believed they could rid Cuba of the Spanish without asking for American military assistance. If the Americans intervene, they may not leave. The rebels don't want the Americans simply to replace the Spanish. They want Cubans to govern Cuba.

In fact, as we now know, nobody blew up the Maine. It exploded from within. Gun powder and coal dust in close proximity to the boilers made for an explosive situation. And the Maine exploded.

Nonetheless, the Maine's explosion pushed McKinley closer to intervention. He found it difficult to resist public opinion.

At this point, it makes sense to step back and assess the situation from several points of view....

CUBAN rebels think they're on the brink of winning. They won't back down, negotiate a cease fire, or compromise. They increase their

demands on Spain.

SPANISH realize they can't completely put down the rebellion, but can probably maintain the status quo, violent and disorderly as it may be. The Spanish queen regent realizes she doesn't have to yield and won't yield for fear that her government and the monarchy itself will fall.

Furthermore, public opinion in Spain won't accept the surrender of Spanish Cuba to the Cuban rebels. Yet the Spanish don't want to stay. They need an honorable way out – much better to lose a war to the Americans than have the Cubans kick them out.

UNITED STATES McKinley is under great pressure, even from some members of his own party who had previously opposed intervention. Midterm elections are coming up in November and McKinley's hesitancy is making him and the Republican party look weak. They want the President to act and stop waffling, for fear that his indecisiveness could result in their loss of Senate and House seats. The Democrats, previously opposed to war and, more broadly, any kind of aggressively expansionist US foreign policy, have now changed their tune. Aware that public opinion is moving toward a pro-war position, the Democrats abandon their principles and hasten to get on the popular side of the argument. They criticize the "weakness" of McKinley and the Republicans (without directly calling for war). Cynical, yes. But also effective.

In criticizing the administration, its political enemies continue to push the "gender" argument: are you a man or not?

McKinley sits up nights contemplating his next move. He will ask Congress for authority to use the armed forces. He does not explicitly ask Congress for a declaration of war, because he doesn't want war. He repeats his terms to avoid war to the Spanish, convinced they don't want war either. Even so, last minute talks about an armistice (brokered by the Pope!) fall through.

April 19

Congress declares war. McKinley agrees.

WAR FOR CUBA BEGINS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Admiral Dewey, commander of the US fleet in the Pacific, had been told to be ready to leave Hong Kong to attack the Spanish in the Philippines

should war be declared. When word comes that war has been declared, the British ask Dewey to take the fleet out of Hong Kong since they intend to remain neutral. The Brits have no interest in provoking the Spanish (or their more powerful allies in Europe.)

1 MAY – DEWEY’S FLEET STEAMS INTO MANILLA BAY

The Spanish have laid mines in the harbor to deter Dewey from attacking their fleet. The mines have no fuses, and are thus ineffective. Dewey targets the Spanish fleet and declares, “You may fire when ready, Gridley!” (a line that American schoolchildren will soon know by heart.)

The Spanish fleet is wiped out in a matter of hours. The Americans even had time to take a break for lunch.

Eight US sailors wounded, one seriously, from flying wood splinters of exploding Spanish ships; otherwise no American casualties. The U.S. wins an astonishingly quick victory.

It takes some time for news of Dewey’s decisive victory to reach Washington, however, since the Spanish had managed to cut the communication lines back to the US – but when the news does reach the American public, everyone, it seems, is now “pro-war.” Even businessmen heave a sigh of relief, convinced that victory will be easy and quick.

And, in Admiral Dewey, the US has its first hero of the war, who was celebrated in song:

OH DEWEY WAS THE MORNING UPON

THE FIRST OF MAY

AND DEWEY WAS THE ADMIRAL DOWN

IN MANILLA BAY

AND DEWEY WERE THE REGENT’S EYES THOSE

ORBS OF ROYAL BLUE

AND DO WE FEEL DISCOURAGED? I DO NOT

THINK WE DO!

New babies were named after him; as was candy “Dewey’s Chewies”; and a laxative (unclear why). Had his wife not been a Catholic, one irreverent observer commented, Dewey might have been nominated for president.

ACROSS THE WORLD, THE FIGHT BEGINS IN CUBA

Much as McKinley had predicted, however, the first days of the war prove to be a logistical nightmare. How to move 17,000 men from Florida to Cuba? Not enough transport boats. People left waiting in unbearable Florida heat. Others are stuck in a bottleneck as the railroads in the South prove inadequate for shipping tons of men, weapons, and equipment efficiently.

Soldiers’ uniforms were stuck in a railroad depot for weeks -- wool uniforms left over from the Civil War; not particularly comfortable in Cuba during the summer.

Those who finally made it to Cuba suffered exposure to tropical diseases and terrible sanitary conditions which proved devastating. If the conditions didn’t kill the men, the food they were given could. “Embalmed” canned beef intended to feed the US soldiers was, as one soldier wrote home, “DISGUSTING IN TASTE EXCEPT TO THE MAGGOTS WHO GOT TO IT BEFORE THE SOLDIERS DID.”

(Of the 5400 US soldiers who died in the Spanish-American War, only 345 of them were killed in battle. The rest died from disease.)

Teddy Roosevelt, who had secured a military commission and raised a band of “rough riders,” was one of the first men to land in Cuba, but even he suffered an indignity when his horse was unloaded from the ship and promptly turned the wrong way and paddled out to sea – never to be heard from again. Luckily, Roosevelt brought a spare.

Once the battles began in earnest, Army leadership was also poor – ex-Civil War generals, some Confederate, are old and not entirely on top of the situation.

(One ex-Confederate general, perhaps reliving past glories, seemed confused as to who the enemy was. He charged up San Juan Hill yelling,

“WE’VE GOT THE DAMN YANKEES ON THE RUN!”)

Initially, things proved so disorganized on the Americans’ Cuban front, that a “sure thing” victory almost seemed in jeopardy. Perhaps the only thing that saved the unprepared Americans was that the Spanish army was in even worse shape.

All of this said, however, there was no shortage of spirit among the American soldiers.

Incredible response to the call for enlistments → The US War Department had estimated it would need to recruit 200,000 men; 500,000 volunteer.

At Cornell University, you even got college credit if you fought in the war.

Everyone volunteered – blacks, Indians, Wild West performers, Harvard types out to prove their manhood, Southerners out to prove their loyalty.

THE “CHARGE” UP SAN JUAN HILL AND QUICK VICTORY

This “martial spirit” was demonstrated during the famous charge up San Juan Hill (actually Kettle Hill) during the early days of the war. [See powerpoint slides of famous paintings capturing the moment.]

At the head of the company of Rough Riders, Theodore Roosevelt charges into a hail of bullets, sword drawn, shouting, “Come on, boys! Are you afraid to stand up while I am on horseback?”

Spanish troops, many of them barefoot teenagers who don’t want to be there anyway, can’t figure out these Americans.

The Americans charge into rifle fire coming at them from higher ground, and having reached the top of the hill, as one young Spanish prisoner of war later recalled, “THEY TRIED TO CATCH US WITH THEIR HANDS!”

Among the Americans, it seemed, there was more than enough testosterone to go around.

One distinction of Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" was the relaxation of segregation. Blacks and whites fight on equal terms and often together. Roosevelt himself praises the courage of his black soldiers:

"HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR THAT NEGRO CAVALRY, THE ROUGH RIDERS WOULD HAVE BEEN EXTERMINATED."

Within five months, the Spanish surrender. It was a "SPLENDID LITTLE WAR," declared the US Secretary of State.