

1898

Teddy Roosevelt  
and the Rough Riders  
at the top of San Juan  
Hill, Cuba, July 1898



# 'Remember the Maine! To Hell With Spain!'

How the United States emerged from the Spanish-American War as a true global power

BY ANTHONY DEBALMA

**O**n the night of Feb. 15, 1898, as most of the men aboard the USS *Maine* were asleep in their bunks, a huge explosion ripped apart the steel hull of the American warship and sent it to the bottom of the harbor in Havana, Cuba.

Even today, 115 years later, it's not clear what caused the explosion that killed 266 sailors and Marines. But there is no doubt that the sinking of the *Maine* contributed mightily to the start of the Spanish-American War two months later.

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"Remember the *Maine*! To Hell With Spain!" became a popular slogan that, combined with sensationalized newspaper reporting, stirred resentment against the fading Spanish empire and built fervor for establishing an American empire around the world.

Although the fighting lasted just 10 weeks and wasn't much of a military contest, the Spanish-American War is a pivotal moment in U.S. history, signaling the emergence of the United States as a global power and ushering in what came to be known as the "American century."

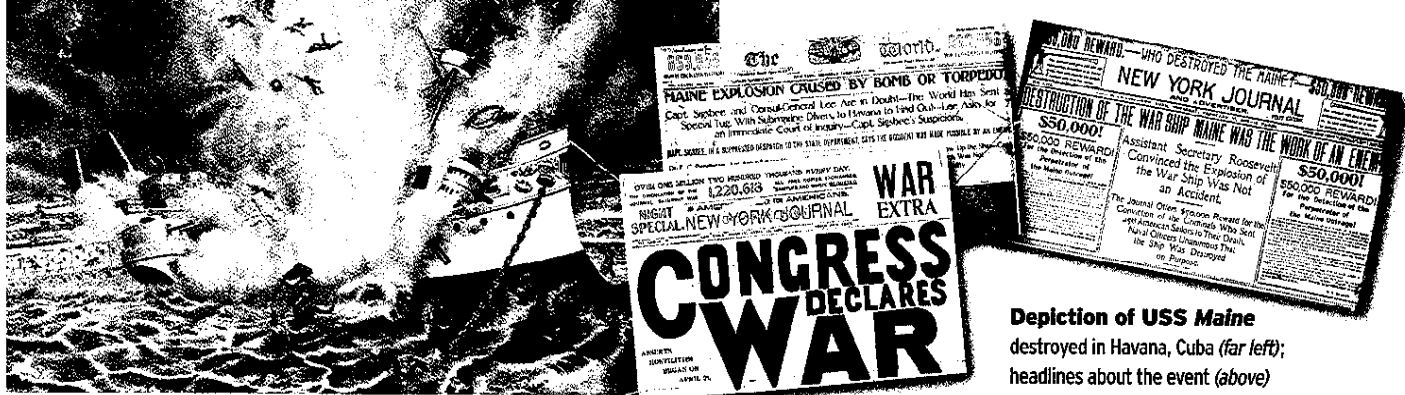
"It is a turning point that marks the first time American expansion goes overseas," says Louis A. Pérez Jr., a professor



THEY LAST BELOW.  
No longer will brutal Spain be supported by outraged colonies.

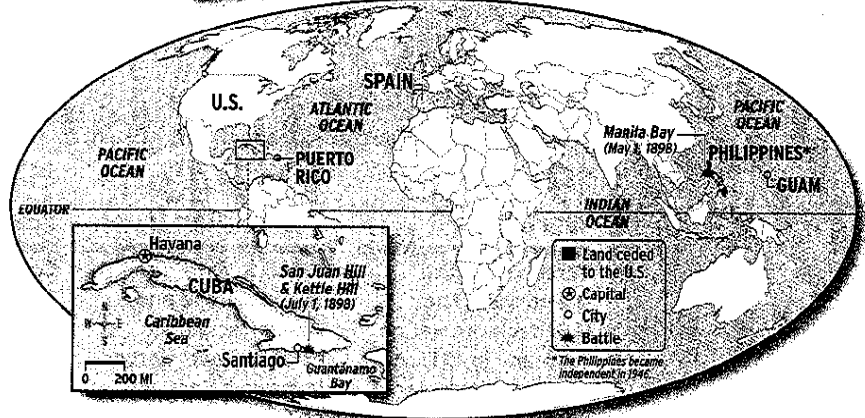
An American cartoon from 1898 showing Uncle Sam finishing off the Spanish empire

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (TOP); THE GRANGER COLLECTION; GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)



Depiction of USS Maine destroyed in Havana, Cuba (far left); headlines about the event (above)

at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of *The War of 1898*. Pérez says the Spanish-American War triggered an intense debate in the United States about what some saw as the contradiction between American democracy and intervention in the affairs of other countries. More than a century later, we're still debating America's role in the world and whether the U.S. should serve as the world's police officer (see *Timeline*, p. 18).



**Causes of the War**

There is still no definitive answer to what caused the explosion that sank the *Maine*, but many Americans in 1898 were convinced that Spain was responsible. While tensions had been building for some time between the two countries, there had been no outright conflicts between them.

The cause of much of the antagonism was the situation in Cuba—one of Spain's oldest colonies, claimed by Christopher Columbus on his first voyage in 1492. The Cubans began an unsuccessful 10-year revolt in 1868 against Spanish rule. When another rebellion erupted in 1895, Spain sent a new military leader whose harsh treatment of the Cuban people was reported in gory detail in American newspapers like *The New York Journal* and *The New York World*.

The sensationalized stories from Cuba were examples of what came to be known as "yellow journalism." Americans sympathized with Cuba's struggle for independence, which many felt resembled America's own fight for freedom against the British more than a century earlier.

There was another reason for the intense interest in Cuba. Every U.S. presi-

dent since John Quincy Adams (1825-29) had worried that Cuba, just 90 miles from Florida, could become a strategic threat if it fell into the wrong hands. Spain's continued presence there was a glaring exception to the Monroe Doctrine—a policy introduced by President James Monroe in 1823 that said the U.S. would step in if a European power interfered in the affairs of North or South America.

By 1898, the Spanish empire that had once included territory on five continents from Africa to the coast of North America had been reduced to just Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, the Spanish Sahara, a few islands in the Atlantic and Pacific, and the Philippines. Filipinos, like Cubans, were fighting for independence.

As resentment against Spain intensified, President William McKinley (1897-1901) initially rejected the idea of intervening in Cuba. McKinley knew that the U.S. was not prepared for war. Its army was small, and since the Civil War ended in 1865 had fought only in Indian skirmishes in the West.

Still, many felt that with the nation already stretching across North America, the restless American spirit needed another frontier to conquer. Theodore

Roosevelt, who was then assistant secretary of the Navy, openly supported war. "I should welcome almost any war," Roosevelt said, "for I think this country needs one."

Under increasing pressure to act, President McKinley had ordered the *Maine* to Havana to protect the sizeable American investments in Cuba's sugar, tobacco, and mining industries. The battleship's sinking provoked greater resentment of Spain, and on April 25, 1898, Congress approved a declaration of war.

The first major battle was waged in the Philippines, where Commodore George Dewey led American naval forces against Spain's aging Pacific fleet in Manila Bay. Dewey destroyed most of the slower, wooden-hulled Spanish ships in just six hours.

Dewey's victory energized America as it prepared to send troops to Cuba. Worried about yellow fever, the Army believed that blacks, because of their roots in countries with warm climates, had a natural immunity to the mosquito-borne disease. It recruited large numbers of African-Americans, calling them the "immunes."

Some Americans were so eager to fight that they couldn't wait to join the

# MAJOR U.S. WARS & INTERVENTIONS AFTER 1898



## 1917-18 World War I

Three years into the conflict, the U.S. declares war on Germany in 1917. An armistice is declared a year later.

## 1941-45 World War II

The U.S. enters the war in Europe and Asia after Japan attacks Pearl Harbor in Hawaii; Germany and Japan surrender to Allied forces in 1945.

## 1950-53 Korean War

Communist North Korea invades South Korea in 1950. U.N. forces, led by the U.S., defend the South, while China backs the North. The war, in which 36,000 Americans die, ends in a stalemate.

## 1960s-75 Vietnam War

The U.S. sends troops to aid South Vietnam in its war against Communist North Vietnam, which is supported by the Soviet Union and China. By 1975, 58,000 Americans have died.

regular army, which required several months of training. Theodore Roosevelt resigned from the Navy and organized a group that included college students and Southwestern cowboys and ranchers, many of whom already knew how to shoot rifles and ride horses. He called them the Rough Riders.

Spain had the disadvantage of trying to fight a war from across the Atlantic, while the U.S. could send troops from Florida to Cuba in a day. American Marines stormed Guantánamo Bay on the eastern shore of Cuba in June (establishing a U.S. presence that continues to this day), while the main invasion force landed about 20 miles east of Santiago, Cuba's second-largest city.

Roosevelt led the Rough Riders in an attack against dug-in Spanish troops outside Santiago. The scene was painted by American artist Frederic Remington,

although not quite accurately. Roosevelt and his volunteers didn't charge up San Juan Hill, as Remington depicted, but up nearby Kettle Hill. They later joined troops that had already engaged the Spanish at San Juan Hill.

It mattered little. Roosevelt's reputation as a war hero was established. (After the war, when McKinley ran for re-election, he chose Roosevelt as his running mate. And when McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Roosevelt became president.)

Following decisive defeats in Santiago and the Philippines, Spain surrendered on July 17. Peace talks in Paris in December led to the final dissolution of the old empire. Spain granted Cuba its independence. It ceded the islands of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean and Guam in the Pacific to the U.S., and sold the Philippines to the U.S. for \$25 million.

The leader of the Filipino insurgents, Emilio Aguinaldo, initially welcomed the

Americans as liberators. But when the U.S. kept control of the nation, Aguinaldo began attacking American troops. The insurgents were defeated after three years, but the war cost the lives of 4,000 Americans and set off a ferocious debate at home about American imperialism. The U.S. didn't grant the Philippines independence until after World War II.

Although Cuba won its independence from Spain in 1898, American troops remained there until 1902. After withdrawing, the U.S. still claimed the right to intervene in Cuban affairs if the country got into financial or political difficulty.

Brief though it was, the Spanish-American War had lasting repercussions. In a letter to Roosevelt, Secretary of State John Hay referred to it as "a splendid little war." The easy victory over Spain forced European powers to take seriously America's threats to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. President Roosevelt then took steps that made the Monroe Doctrine even more far-reaching.

**'I should welcome almost any war.'**

**—TEDDY ROOSEVELT**

TIMELINE LEFT TO RIGHT: BETTMANN/CORBIS; MONDOORI VIA GETTY IMAGES; LARRY BURROWS/TIME & LIFE PICTURES; THE MONROE DOCTRINE: DAVID WALKER/TIME & LIFE PICTURES; WORLD WAR II: HUGHSON/GETTY IMAGES; ROOSEVELT: GILCHRIST/GETTY IMAGES; SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR: CONRANT TERRY; ANDRIEUX SAINT-GEROISE/ANONYMOUS THROUGH CORBIS



## 1989-90 Panama

The U.S. invades Panama to overthrow military dictator Manuel Noriega, who'd been indicted on drug trafficking charges in the U.S. Noriega's forces are crushed, and he eventually surrenders.

## 1990-91 Persian Gulf War

The U.S. leads a multinational coalition against Iraq after Iraq invades Kuwait; Iraq surrenders, but Saddam Hussein (above) is left in power, setting the stage for another war a decade later.

## 1994-95 Bosnia

Yugoslavia breaks apart. The U.S. bombs Bosnia, a former Yugoslav republic, to prevent ethnic cleansing by Serbs and sends troops as part of a NATO peacekeeping force.

## 2003-11 Iraq

Claiming Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, a U.S.-led coalition invades and overthrows Saddam Hussein. No such weapons are ever found.

## 2001-present Afghanistan

After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. invades Afghanistan to root out Al Qaeda terrorists and the Taliban. President Obama says most of the 66,000 U.S. troops now there will leave by 2014.

Known as the Roosevelt Corollary, the new policy put all the nations of North, South, and Central America on notice that the U.S. would intervene in any country that showed "chronic wrongdoing" that might make it possible for a European power to take over.

### Vietnam, Iraq, & Afghanistan

Many Americans opposed the idea of the U.S. becoming an imperial power. "Anti-imperialists" believed that controlling overseas colonies contradicted America's traditional policy of non-intervention in world affairs, and would lead the nation into endless conflicts.

Many scholars see parallels between what happened in the wake of the Spanish-American War and more recent American interventions abroad, from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan. In some cases American troops sent to help settle conflicts were not welcomed with open arms, leading to long wars that divided America and drained its resources.

"The similarities are eerie," says Pérez, the author and scholar. "If you look at some of the texts of anti-imperialist speeches, you would think they are talking about Iraq and Afghanistan," not the Philippines and Cuba.

The 1898 war also left issues that are unresolved to this day. The fate of Puerto Rico's status, for example, was the subject of a nonbinding referendum in November. A majority of Puerto Ricans favored changing the island's status from a U.S. commonwealth to the 51st state (see p. 21).

Then there's Cuba, whose relationship with the U.S. has been troubled since 1898. For decades after the war, Washington supported Cuban dictators whose corruption and ruthlessness stoked resentment against the U.S. that Fidel Castro used to gain support for his rebel movement in the 1950s. In 1961,

two years after Castro seized control of Cuba and began to align it with the Communist Soviet Union, he ordered the alteration of a soaring monument to the victims of the *Maine* that had been erected on the Havana waterfront in 1926. Busts of presidents McKinley and Roosevelt were chiseled out, and a bronze American eagle was removed.



Fidel Castro in 1959

Castro added a new bronze plaque that summed up the resentment still felt by some Cubans about the Spanish-American War. In Spanish, the inscription reads: "To the victims of the *Maine* who were sacrificed by the voracity of the imperialists and their desire to gain control of the island of Cuba. February 1898-February 1961." •

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