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# Voices of the Past

Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation's Educational Series

## SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

### Highlights:

- By 1898 the American public was becoming increasingly concerned about Spain's brutal tactics and treatment during Cuba's decades-long struggle for independence.
- President William McKinley ordered the *USS Maine* to Havana harbor in January 1898. On February 15<sup>th</sup>, an explosion sank the *Maine*. Most Americans blame Spain, and the incident lead to a declaration of war against Spain.
- A few months and notable battles later, the United States and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris.
- The treaty freed Cuba and gave possession of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the United States.

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## The Spanish-American War: Manifest Destiny Goes Abroad

**(Cuba, Puerto Rico & Philippines, 1898-1899)** In the closing years of the 19th century, the United States began to emerge as a world power. With the conquest of North America nearly complete, attitudes in the U.S. changed to become much more tolerant of foreign adventures. The changes, wrought by the industrial revolution and evolving social norms, contributed to a new willingness to engage in imperialistic expansion. This new version of Manifest Destiny arose from strategic and economic concerns and appeals to religious and emotional sentiments.

Ninety miles off the southern coast of Florida, the people of the island nation of Cuba were engaged in a decades-long struggle against their Spanish colonial masters. After

several failed attempts to control the insurgents, the Spanish government reacted by sending a new military commander to Cuba to conduct a brutal crackdown on the independence movement. Captain-General Valeriano Weyler attempted to isolate the rebels from the population by herding women, children, and old people from the countryside into detention camps and garrisoned towns, causing the death of thousands of civilians from disease and starvation. Weyler's methods gave newspapers in the United States an opportunity to make sensationalistic attacks on Spanish policies. They portrayed the war in Cuba as a struggle between the "butcher" Weyler and high-minded patriots struggling bravely for freedom from Old World authoritarianism.



The *Maine* sank on February 15, 1898 due to a large explosion while in Havana harbor. Public outcry fueled the nation to "Remember the Maine" and seek war with Spain. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, Spanish-American War Miscellaneous Collection.



Soldiers of the U.S. Volunteers clean their rifles. Although the new rifles were less prone to fouling than the older back powder weapons, they still required careful cleaning and care. A well-cared for rifle is less likely to jam or misfire in the heat of battle. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, Spanish-American War Miscellaneous Collection.

As the situation grew worse, recently elected President William McKinley tried to avoid war with Spain. McKinley sent the battleship USS *Maine* to Cuba to protect American civilians. The ship lay at anchor in Havana harbor from January 1898 until February 15, when a large explosion rocked the *Maine*, killing 266 U.S. Sailors and sending the ship to the bottom. Sensational and wildly inaccurate reporting on the part of several American newspapers stirred public opinion to a fevered pitch. By the end of April, both sides had declared war and open hostilities began.

The U.S. Army was little prepared for war. During the quarter of a century preceding 1898, the Army averaged only about 26,000 officers and men, most of who were scattered widely across the country in company and battalion-size organizations. The Army had little training or experience in the operations requiring units larger than a regiment, had no mobilization plan, lacked a well-organized command staff, and had no experience in joint operations with the U.S. Navy.

War fever soon led Congress to authorize a rapid increase in the size of the Army. By the war's end in August 1898, the regular Army had expanded to 59,000 men, and the Volunteer forces numbered 216,000 men, for a total of 275,000. Most of these men, regulars and volunteers, had little or no prior military experience.

The loosely conceived U.S. strategy was to maintain a naval blockade of Cuba while Cuban forces fought against Spanish troops on the island. Planners believed that this would eventually lead the Spanish to surrender, at which point American forces could come ashore and take over without ever having to fire a shot.

But by mid-April 1898, the public demand for action was too strong to ignore, and Secretary of War Russell M. Alger ordered the regular infantry regiments to move to New Orleans, Tampa, and Mobile and prepare for an immediate assault on Cuba.

Meanwhile, the Navy moved quickly to engage the Spanish fleet in the



Soldiers from Company M, 2nd Regiment, Illinois Volunteers display their equipment while encamped. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, Spanish-American War Miscellaneous Collection.



Colonel Teddy Roosevelt and his "Rough Riders" at San Juan Hill, Puerto Rico, 1898. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, Spanish-American War Miscellaneous Collection

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Philippines. In less than two months, the Spanish fleet was destroyed and the Philippines declared independence from Spain.

The first U.S. troops hit the beaches in Cuba east of Santiago on June 23 and moved towards the city and the surrounding ridges. The heat, humidity, and tropical diseases took their toll as the Soldiers began attacking against strong defensive Spanish positions. Theodore Roosevelt, a Lieutenant-Colonel at the time, became famous for leading the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, also known as the “Rough Riders”, on their victorious charge up Kettle Hill on July 1, 1898. Roosevelt’s victory paved the way for the capture of San Juan Hill shortly afterwards. Much of the heaviest fighting was done by the famed “Buffalo Soldiers” of the 10th Cavalry.

Short on supplies and under heavy pressure, the Spanish realized that their defeat was imminent. The Spanish fleet in Santiago hastily attempted to flee to the open sea, but was intercepted and destroyed by the U.S. fleet. Unable to continue the fight, Spain’s hold over Cuba slipped away. On July 16, Spanish commanders in Cuba signed the unconditional terms of surrender demanded by the McKinley administration. The terms provided for the surrender of 11,500 troops in Santiago and 12,000 more in the general vicinity of the city. A formal surrender ceremony took place on the following day.

Spain and the United States signed the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898. According to the terms of the treaty, Spain allowed Cuba to become an independent state, ceded Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States, and accepted \$20 million in payment for the Philippines. As a result of the Spanish-American War, the United States would enter the 20th century as a global colonial power.

## Adapted from:

Chapter 15. *American Military History*, Volume 1. “Emergence to World Power 1898-1902.” U.S. Army Center of Military History. <http://www.history.army.mil/books/AMH-V1/ch15.htm>.



Cuba 1898. American forces land at Cuban port to bolster local troops fighting against Spanish forces. The United States defeated the Spanish on land and at sea in a matter of months. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, Spanish-American War Miscellaneous Collection.