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Remember the Maine!

How a "splendid little war" put the United States on the map as a world power

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

On January 25, 1898, the USS *Maine* sailed into the harbor of Havana, Cuba. The battleship was to anchor there for an unspecified time and had the vague assignment of protecting American interests. In fact, the presence of the *Maine* was a challenge to the Spanish rule of Cuba. Spain would have had every right to protest the American transgression—but the weak European power chose not to provoke a war it would certainly lose. Yet, three weeks later, on February 15, the USS *Maine* was blown apart by an explosion; the ship and 260 of its crew were lost. A faulty boiler was most likely the cause, but America preferred to blame Spain. In a matter of months, Spain had surrendered its empire, America emerged as a world power, and the U.S. secretary of state described it all as "a splendid little war."

To the American public, the war could have been a Victorian melodrama: a fair Cuban damsel in the clutches of a snarling Spanish villain but rescued by the noble American hero. Indeed, this was how American newspapers depicted the conflict, and the underlying story was fairly accurate. Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines were the last remnants of the Spanish Empire. That empire once extended

from Colorado to Tierra del Fuego, but Spanish misrule had lost most of its colonies to rebellion.

Worse, Spain had learned nothing. It was as repressive and corrupt as ever. In response, Cuba was in continual revolt; since 1835, there had been 11 attempts to overthrow Spain. The first 10 had proved heroic failures. However, the latest rebellion, beginning in 1895, had a strategy to goad American intervention: the destruction of the tobacco and sugar crops. Between 1894 and 1896, Cuba's tobacco crop decreased from 450,000 bales to 50,000. Its sugar exports dropped by 80 percent. Depriving America of its pleasures was tantamount to an act of war.

In 1896, the United States Congress passed resolutions supporting the rebels and demanding Spain's withdrawal from Cuba. Despite the demand, which proved popular with the American public, President Grover Cleveland would not be coerced into a war. His successor, William McKinley, was also reluctant. The decorated veteran of the Civil War said, "I have been through one war. I have seen the dead piled up, and I don't want to see another."

But the war had already begun, at least in the American press. The newspapers were competing with one another to report the latest Spanish outrage in Cuba. The accuracy of the reports was irrelevant. This was the age of yellow journalism, and facts were never allowed to ruin a good story. To cover the atrocities in Cuba—or concoct them—*New York Journal* publisher William Randolph Hearst assigned writer Richard Harding Davis and artist Frederic Remington. There is a popular account of Hearst's assignment to Remington: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." Davis, a novelist as well as a reporter, showed no qualms about writing fiction. One of his most sensational reports told of an American citizen, "a refined young woman stripped and searched by brutal Spaniards."

Left: American troops boarding transport steamer during the Spanish-American War. Above: A masterpiece of propaganda: artist Frederic Remington's front-page sketch for William Randolph Hearst, of Spanish officials strip-searching an American woman tourist in Cuba.

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Remington provided the accompanying sketch. We see a beautiful, naked woman surrounded by those leering Latin satyrs. So what if the story was untrue? Remington had drawn a masterpiece of propaganda: an irresistible appeal to patriotism and prurience.

And in this fevered atmosphere, the USS *Maine* was ordered to Havana. A month after the explosion, the U.S. Navy's board of inquiry concluded that a Spanish mine sank the ship. Modern scholars doubt it. Would Spain, a poor nation of 19 million, provoke a rich industrial power with a population of 72 million? A modern American fleet was but hours from Cuba, ready to blockade its ports and destroy any meager reinforcements that Spain could send across the ocean. Strategically and materially, Spain was hopelessly inferior; it would never have dared to start the war. But in the spring of 1898, America was not so analytical and rational. A rallying cry resounded across America: *"Remember the Maine! To Hell With Spain!"*

On April 20, the United States confronted Spain with an ultimatum. If Spain did not immediately agree to Cuban independence, America would undertake a "forcible intervention." Spain responded, four days later, with a declaration of war. Ironically, the first major battle in the crusade to free Cuba was fought in the Philippines. In the early morning of May 1, an American flotilla of four cruisers and two guns sailed into Manila Bay. The Spaniards were taken by surprise; their anchored fleet was a collection of old and unarmored ships. After the first two hours of battle, noting the feeble Spanish defense, American Commodore George Dewey suspended the attack so

that his men might have breakfast. Afterward, the Americans resumed the battle and destruction of the Spanish fleet. Spain lost eight ships and control of Manila Bay; one American sailor died of heat stroke. Manila itself was besieged. An army of Filipino insurgents, supported by the Americans, was surrounding the city. Throughout July, American soldiers landed in the Philippines, tightening the siege of Manila. Its fall was inevitable, only a matter of time or negotiation.

The war in Cuba began in mid-June when the American army landed near Santiago, the island's second largest city. An American fleet blockaded Santiago's harbor while the army advanced on the hills that surrounded the city. The Spanish army had dug in and established a good defensive position on San Juan Hill. On July 1, the Americans attacked. Accompanying the American troops was Richard Harding Davis. If a shameless propagandist, he was also a heroic correspondent. He was there at "the charge up San Juan Hill" and described how…

They walked to greet death at every step, many of them, as they advanced, sinking suddenly or pitching forward in the high grass, but the others waded on, stubbornly, forming a thin blue line that kept creeping higher and higher up the hill. It was as inevitable as the rising tide.

In his reports, Davis made special note of one American officer: a New York socialite, Harvard scholar and former cowboy who was second-in-command of a cavalry regiment known as the Rough Riders. For once, Davis was not exaggerating. Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt would return to New York, be elected governor and within three years be president of the United States.

With the Americans on San Juan Hill and the surrounding heights, Santiago was at the mercy of U.S. artillery. The Spanish fleet was ordered not to surrender; so on July 3 its four cruisers and two destroyers sailed out on a quixotic venture against an American fleet of five

battleships and two cruisers. All the Spanish ships were sunk or run aground. One American was killed in the battle; 300 Spaniards died and 1,800 were captured. Two weeks later, the city of Santiago surrendered. On July 24, Spain asked for a cease-fire;

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an agreement was signed on August 12. However, the news arrived a day late in the Philippines; on August 13 a combined force of Americans and the Filipino insurgents had captured Manila.

So ended the "splendid little war"—an absolute American triumph. Spanish and American diplomats met in Paris to negotiate the peace treaty. Spain signed away the last of its empire, ceding Cuba, Guam and Puerto Rico to the victor. It sold the Philippines for $20 million ($560 million today). While ostensibly liberating Cuba, the United States had acquired its own empire. But President McKinley could rationalize this windfall. "Territory sometimes comes to us when we go to war in a holy cause. Shall we deny to ourselves what the rest of the world so freely and justly accords to us?"

America had emerged as a world power, and relished its strength and

Theodore Roosevelt gained fame during the Spanish-American War as a "Rough Rider." Illustration by Udo J. Keppler; July 27, 1898.

importance. In the ensuing decade, America established itself as the champion of free trade in China, the impartial arbiter of the Russo-Japanese War, and the engineer and master of the Panama Canal. The Great White Fleet, a force of 16 battleships, demonstrated America's reach by sailing around the world.

The United States did honor its commitment to Cuba, recognizing the island in 1902 as an independent republic. Yet America insisted on a few unique prerogatives: until the 1930s the United States had the right to military intervention, and Cuba could not enter into any treaties without American approval. As for the other acquired colonies, a restless Filipino population was pacified by both military force and the promise of eventual independence; that was finally granted in 1946. Puerto Rico and Guam are still American territories.

The age of imperialism is over, but a sense of global responsibility remains. President Theodore Roosevelt said, "Even if we would, we cannot play a small part."