



Poster depicting the charge of San Juan Hill, c. 1901

A Splendid Little War

*There may be an explosion any day in Cuba
which would settle a great many things.
We've got a battleship in Havana harbor...*
Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, 1898

AT 9:40 IN THE EVENING on February 15, 1898, the battleship *USS Maine*—anchored placidly in Havana harbor—suffered a massive explosion, sinking the vessel and killing 250 officers and crew. The American government immediately blamed the explosion on a Spanish mine, despite the ship's surviving captain reporting that the cause was an onboard accident.

The U.S. had been seeking to annex Cuba since before the Civil War, with Southern expansionists hoping to make it a slave state. The secret *Ostend Manifesto* of 1854—written by President James Buchanan—even called for the U.S. to seize Cuba by force if the Spanish refused repeated offers to sell.

The plan was thwarted when it was leaked to the press, causing outrage among anti-slavery states, and the intervening Civil War postponed further attempts at annexation.

But by the late 1890s, Cuban rebels were fighting against harsh Spanish rule, and powerful newspaper publishers like Joseph Pulitzer and William R. Hearst were once again agitating for U.S. intervention, promoting sensationalist anti-Spanish propaganda which competing newspapers derided as 'yellow journalism.'

In January, 1898, Theodore Roosevelt—then Assistant Secretary of the Navy under President William McKinley—ordered the *Maine* to sail to Cuba to protect U.S. business interests, despite knowing the move would be seen as a provocation by the Spanish. In reality, Roosevelt's primary motive was establishing a justification for a major expansion of the country's navy.

Roosevelt also coveted Cuba, and had no qualms about using the navy to secure it. Proclaiming “*no accomplishment of peacetime quite so great as the supreme triumph of war,*” he had confided to a friend, “*I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one.*”

The Secretary of the Navy was in poor health, leaving most major decisions to Roosevelt, and after the sinking of the *Maine*, Roosevelt ordered the navy to blockade Cuba and the Spanish Philippines.

McKinley—who Roosevelt derided as having ‘the backbone of a chocolate éclair’—resisted calls for war, but with the tabloid press sounding the battle cry ‘Remember the *Maine*, and to hell with Spain!’, Congress declared war two months later. One editor wrote rapturously, “*The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people.*”

The war was over in just ten weeks, with the Spanish Navy sunk and American forces capturing Cuba, as well as the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. The ambassador to the U.K. congratulated Roosevelt, gleefully declaring it ‘a splendid little war.’

In the end, however, McKinley’s caution was warranted. The U.S. annexed the Philippines, planning to make it a colony, but rebels encouraged to join the war drew the nation into a bloody three year conflict.

Together, the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars claimed about 7,000 American, 15,000 Spanish, and a staggering 200,000 to a million Filipino lives—most of the latter civilians lost to war-induced famine and disease.

Even cold-blooded war profiteers like Andrew Carnegie were compelled to denounce the war’s widespread atrocities, and satirist Mark Twain suggested the design for the new Philippine flag simply copy the Stars and Stripes, only with the stars replaced by a skull and cross-bones.

The war was all but over when Roosevelt himself volunteered to join the fray, with the tabloid press dutifully reporting his heroics as the horse-mounted leader of the Rough Riders at the Battle of San Juan Hill.

In reality, the so-called ‘battle’ was only a minor skirmish, fought on foot, with the Spanish outnumbered by about 15 to 1. Nonetheless, Roosevelt’s record as a war hero elevated the relatively unknown politician first to a governorship, then the vice presidency, and finally to the presidency in 1901 after the assassination of McKinley—all within a span of just three years.

The declaration of war against Spain had disavowed any intention to permanently occupy Cuba, and it was granted independence in 1902, but the U.S. continued to impose restrictions on the government, prohibiting alliances with other countries, assuming a perpetual lease of Guantanamo Bay, and reserving the right to intervene in future disputes—which it repeatedly found ‘necessary’ over the following decades.

But the U.S. didn’t need to retain actual military control of the country. American business interests soon dominated Cuba’s sugar and other vital industries, and the corruption and collusion of successive governments would ultimately lead to the 1959 revolution and the rise of Castro. (The U.S. retained control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, granting the latter independence only in 1946.)

The cause of the explosion that sank the *Maine* has never been definitely proven, but an extensive U.S. naval investigation in the 1970s concluded that the likely cause was an onboard explosion, caused by the spontaneous combustion of coal dust stored in a bunker adjacent to the five tons of gunpowder in the ship’s magazine.

In other words, an onboard accident, just as the ship’s captain had reported.