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## **The Spanish-American War: The Leap Into Overseas Empire, Part 1**

**by Joseph R. Stromberg**

The Spanish-American War, whose centennial we observe this year, was a short war, a popular war, and a rather cheap war, both in lives and money. It was, as John Hay, soon to be secretary of state, put it, "a splendid little war." It was, however, fraught with long-range consequences. As an easy, successful war fought by professional soldiers and volunteers (not by conscripts), the war quickly entered the history books as a sort of youthful fling, an exuberant expression of a young America waking up to its potential as a world power and to its (alleged) global responsibilities. One immediate result of the war was the American-Philippine War (or as the United States called it, the Philippine "Insurrection"), which was much less happy and which disappeared from national memory until the ill-fated Vietnam War, to which it bore a certain resemblance.

The forces behind the Spanish-American War were numerous. The Panic of 1893 and the ensuing economic depression energized populist and socialist critics of the existing order. In turn, the critics alarmed northeastern business interests who, remembering the Paris Commune of 1870, saw their corn-fed or working-class opponents as harbingers of revolution. But an alternative to the radical farmers' and workers' solutions for the country's perceived problems had been coming together for some time before 1893. From the 1880s, politicians, businessmen, academics, and missionaries began formulating a new global "Manifest Destiny," a doctrine of the necessity and goodness of the assertion of American power in the wider world.

One might think that having put down so many forces in the 1800s - Mexicans, Confederates, Mormons, and Indians - within its vast continental domain, the American government would have been content merely to oversee this vast realm and to allow the forces of its (internally) free market to generate prosperity for the citizenry. Such a policy had insufficient appeal for many well-placed people who perhaps found it too peaceful, too boring, too bourgeois, too economic.

Would-be geostrategists such as Captain Alfred Mahan argued that no nation had ever been great without superior naval power, although he did not explain why Americans needed to be great in that sense. Mahan and other "navalists" demanded - and were beginning to get - a proper modern "blue water" navy. Missionaries wanted American power available to promote their overseas activities. Fashionable theorists combined self-satisfaction with Darwinism to prove that Anglo-Saxons - the

Americans and the British - were uniquely qualified to dominate and uplift the whole planet. (The Americans had to learn their part, however.)

Another justification for what came to be called "expansionism" rested on faulty or self-interested economic analysis. This was the notion that the U.S. economy was suffering from "overproduction" (and possibly its evil twin "underconsumption"), and that only foreign markets could provide a cure. The American government would have to apply political and military power and pressure abroad to guarantee access for American goods and investment capital in all possible markets.

Allied to this analysis was Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that republican liberty and individualism had somehow depended on the existence of a moving frontier into contiguous land. With the "disappearance" of the frontier in the 1890s, a substitute frontier had become necessary to preserve the American way of life. Those who wanted government to find and protect markets combined Turner's argument with their own, defining the substitute frontier as consisting of foreign markets.

Ohio governor William McKinley emerged as the leader of a sophisticated group of Republican statesmen who backed an integrated program of neomercantilism to restore and sustain prosperity. This program included reciprocity treaties to buy entry into specific foreign markets (rather than wholesale sacrifice of the protective tariffs so dear to the Republican soul); shipping subsidies; greater naval power; an isthmian canal to be built in Nicaragua or Panama; and whatever else might foster U.S. economic penetration of new markets, especially those of Asia, and above all, China. Key Republican leaders such as McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, and John Hay agreed on this "large policy."

In the election of 1896, McKinley easily defeated populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan, who called for unlimited, inflationary coinage of silver and for tariff reduction. As it took office, the new administration confronted the popular Cuban revolution against Spanish rule, which had broken out in 1895. This rebellion disrupted trade and threatened American investments (and even lives) in Cuba. It was a problem and an opportunity. McKinley and his advisors wanted to settle the Cuban problem so as to get on with state-supported trade expansion. At the same time, a successful war with Spain could lead to cession by Spain to the United States of key properties in the Pacific Ocean, especially the Philippine Islands, which would make ideal jumping-off points - coaling stations and military outposts - to the markets of East Asia. This possibility was not lost on the administration.

Spanish forces in Cuba resorted to counterinsurgency warfare in an attempt to retain control, herding the civil population into centers of *reconcentración* to keep them from supporting the rebels. Thousands died. Cuban propagandists understandably exploited real Spanish atrocities while "yellow journalists" in the American press made others up. Popular and congressional outcry put pressure on the administration to intervene for Cuban independence.

McKinley had his own timetable, however, and conducted negotiations with Spain in which new demands followed every Spanish concession, until Spain was left with the choice of either granting complete independence to Cuba or fighting the Americans over the difference between Cuban "autonomy" and "independence." The DeLôme Letter (the Spanish ambassador's private criticisms of McKinley - intercepted and published by pro-Cubans) and the spontaneous explosion of the USS *Maine* in Havana Harbor worsened relations. In early April 1898, with Spain still reluctant to quit

Cuba, McKinley asked Congress for a declaration of war. The war itself was brief and sometimes comic.

Army regulars, volunteers, and mismatched supplies piled up at Port Tampa. The troops sought recreation in Tampa's nightspots and the officers drank at Henry B. Plant's hotel. The War Department began fidgeting about getting the army to Cuba while it was still fit to fight. In the Far East, Commodore George Dewey, set on course by a telegram from the overeager undersecretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt, engaged the antiquated Spanish fleet at Manila on May 1, destroying it with little effort. Closer to home, U.S. forces landed in Cuba on June 22. They kept the Cuban rebels at arm's length and conducted a purely American war against the Spanish forces, effectively hijacking the cause of Cuban independence. On July 17, Spanish surrender ended the fighting in Cuba.

After the land battle of Manila on August 13 (fought - like the Battle of New Orleans - after the warring powers agreed to an armistice), United States forces eyed their sometime "allies," the Philippine insurgents, warily across the lines. (As in Cuba, Spain had a rebellion on its hands in the Philippines before the Americans came on the scene.) In the meantime, the United States had annexed the Hawaiian Islands by a subconstitutional dodge - the congressional joint resolution (which gave us Texan annexation in 1845 and, more recently, the NAFTA "agreement") - and seized Guam and the Ladrones (Marianas) from Spain. McKinley told his peace commissioners that the United States *must* have Manila and its harbor, but by mid November he was insisting on all the Philippine Islands.

In the end, the United States took Guam, the Marianas, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, and gave Spain \$20 million for the lot. Cuba became an American protectorate - and the working model of informal imperial control. The president had to use all his leverage to get the Senate to ratify the final treaty (on December 10) over the protests of those who did not want the new burden of overseas possessions - possessions not exactly contemplated by the original Constitution. As many said at the time, the United States now had its "India." Rudyard Kipling, the great fount of pro-imperialist crumbo, even wrote a poem on "the White Man's Burden" to welcome the United States to the club of real powers.

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