The Spanish-American War

Terms & Names
yellow journalism
U.S.S. Maine
Spanish-American War
Rough Riders
Platt Amendment
Anti-Imperialist League
Luis Muñoz Rivera

Main Idea
Independence movements in Spanish colonies led to the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Why It Matters Now
U.S. involvement in Latin America and Asia expanded greatly after the Spanish-American War.

One American’s Story
José Martí was forced to leave Cuba in the 1870s, when he was still a teenager. In those years, the Caribbean island was a Spanish colony, and he had spoken out for independence. Martí later described the terrible conditions that existed under Spanish rule.

A Voice From the Past
Cuba’s children...suffer in indescribable bitterness as they see their fertile nation enchained and also their human dignity stifled...all for the necessities and vices of the [Spanish] monarchy.
José Martí, quoted in José Martí, Mentor of the Cuban Nation

After being forced out of Cuba, Martí spent much of his life in the United States. In 1892, he was elected to lead the Cuban Revolutionary Party. At the Party’s headquarters in New York City, Martí began to plan a revolt against Spain that began in 1895.

Martí’s lifelong struggle for Cuban independence made him a symbol of liberty throughout Latin America. In this section, you will read how U.S. disapproval of Spain’s treatment of Cubans led to the Spanish-American War.

Rebellion Against Spain
The Spanish empire was crumbling at the end of the 19th century. Spain had once controlled most of the Americas, including land that became part of the United States. By the 1890s, however, it owned only a few colonies. Among them were the Philippine Islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico. (See the maps on page 263.) Many of the inhabitants of these colonies had begun to demand independence.

Cubans had revolted against Spain several times in the second half of the nineteenth century. Each time, Spanish soldiers defeated the rebels. In 1895, an ongoing economic depression had increased Cubans’ anger over Spanish rule, and they rebelled again. José Martí, who had helped to organize the rebellion from New York, returned to Cuba. He was killed in a skirmish with Spanish troops shortly after, but the revolt continued.
Spain sent General Valeriano “the Butcher” Weyler to crush the rebels. Weyler’s methods were harsh. He forced many Cubans from their homes and placed them in camps guarded by Spanish troops. Thousands died of starvation and disease in the camps.

The revolt in Cuba caused alarm in the United States. Business leaders were concerned because the fighting disrupted U.S. trade with Cuba. Most Americans, however, became outraged when the press began to describe the brutality of Spanish officials. Two New York City newspapers, in particular, stirred up people’s emotions.

The World, owned by Joseph Pulitzer, and the New York Journal, owned by William Randolph Hearst, were battling for customers. Both owners were able to attract readers by printing stories that described—and often exaggerated—news about Spanish cruelty. This sensational style of writing was known as yellow journalism. It was named after “The Yellow Kid,” a popular comic strip that ran in the two New York papers.

The United States Goes to War

William McKinley, the U.S. president in 1898, did not want war. “I have been through [the Civil War],” he told a friend. “I have seen the dead piled up, and I do not want to see another.”

Even so, public opinion—stirred up by sensational newspaper reports—forced McKinley to take action. He demanded that Spain halt its harsh treatment of Cubans. Spain did bring General Weyler home, but conditions remained severe.

In January 1898, McKinley sent the U.S.S. Maine to Cuba. Riots had broken out in the capital, Havana, and the battleship was dispatched to protect U.S. citizens. Then, the following month, the Maine exploded and sank in Havana’s harbor, killing 260 sailors.

No one knows what caused the explosion. Most historians today believe that it was an accident. For example, a spark might have set off an explosion in the ship’s coal bunker. Even so, Americans blamed Spain.
“Remember the Maine!” became a call to arms. On April 20, 1898, President McKinley signed a congressional resolution that called for Cuba’s independence and demanded a withdrawal of Spanish forces. He gave Spain three days to respond. Spain refused, and the Spanish-American War began.

The War in the Philippines

The United States went to war to fight for Cuban freedom. But the first major battle of the Spanish-American War took place in a Spanish colony on the other side of the world—the Philippine Islands. Many Filipinos, as the inhabitants of the islands were called, had also revolted against Spanish rule in the 1890s.

Before the war began, the Filipino independence movement had attracted the attention of Theodore Roosevelt. At that time, Roosevelt was assistant secretary of the navy. He put a fleet of American ships in Hong Kong on alert. Their leader, Commodore George Dewey, prepared his forces and made contact with the head of the Filipino rebel forces, Emilio Aguinaldo (eh•MEE•lyoh AH•gee•NAHL•doh).

When the war began, Dewey set out for Manila, the Philippine capital, where part of the Spanish fleet was located. The battle in Manila Bay began early on the morning of May 1, 1898. By a little past noon,
Dewey’s forces had destroyed the Spanish fleet. About 380 Spanish sailors were dead or wounded. No Americans died. U.S. troops, aided by Filipino rebels, took control of Manila in August.

Dewey became an instant hero in the United States. Thousands of babies born at the time of the victory in Manila Bay were named for him, and a chewing gum called “Dewey’s Chewies” became popular.

The War in the Caribbean

When the Spanish-American War began, the U.S. Army had only 28,000 men. Within four months, over 200,000 more joined up. Among the new recruits was Theodore Roosevelt, who had resigned from the Navy Department to volunteer.

Roosevelt helped to organize the First United States Volunteer Cavalry. This unit was nicknamed the Rough Riders. Its recruits included cowboys, miners, college students, New York policemen, athletes, and Native Americans.

In June, the Rough Riders and about 16,000 other soldiers—nearly a quarter of them African American—gathered in Tampa, Florida. They then set out for Santiago, a Spanish stronghold in southern Cuba. When the Rough Riders arrived, their dark-blue wool uniforms were too hot for the Cuban climate. Also, many of the soldiers came down with tropical diseases. Even so, they fought their way toward Santiago.

In order to gain control of Santiago’s port, American troops had to capture San Juan Hill. They attacked the Spanish on July 1.
African-American soldiers from the Tenth Cavalry began to drive the Spanish back. Roosevelt and the Rough Riders joined them as they rushed forward and captured the hill.

Two days later, American ships destroyed Spain's fleet as it tried to escape Santiago Harbor. On July 17, the city surrendered. A week later, U.S. forces took Puerto Rico. Finally, on August 12, 1898, Spain signed a truce. To U.S. Secretary of State John Hay, it had been “a splendid little war.” For Spain, four centuries of glory had come to an end.

**Results of the War**

Although the war had been fought over Cuba, U.S. leaders demanded that Spain give up other colonies after the war—including Puerto Rico, the island of Guam, and the Philippines. Spain had no choice but to agree. The final peace treaty was signed in Paris in December 1898.

One of the most difficult questions for U.S. leaders after the war was what to do with the Philippines. Filipinos had fought alongside Americans during the war and believed that Spain's defeat would bring them independence. But President McKinley eventually decided that the Philippines should become an American colony.

Filipinos were bitterly disappointed. Led by Emilio Aguinaldo, they began to fight against their new colonial rulers. American troops sent to put down the resistance were not able to restore order until 1902.

The United States was also reluctant to grant Cuba complete independence. First, Cuba had to add the **Platt Amendment** to its constitution. This gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs anytime there was a threat to “life, property, and individual liberty.” Cuba also had to allow a U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay.

Puerto Rico became an American territory. The United States set up a government and appointed the top officials. Puerto Ricans had little to
say in their own affairs. Only in 1917 would the United States agree to make Puerto Rico a self-governing territory and grant U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans.

The Anti-Imperialist League

U.S. treatment of Spain’s former colonies after the Spanish-American War disappointed many people in the United States.

Several well-known Americans, including businessman Andrew Carnegie, reformer Jane Addams, and writer Mark Twain, joined with others to form the Anti-Imperialist League. Members of the League believed that Americans should not deny other people the right to govern themselves.

The voice of the Anti-Imperialist League was lost, however, in the roar of popular approval of the Spanish-American War.

Many Americans hoped that their nation would surpass the glory of the old Spanish empire. In the next section, you will read more about how the United States continued its involvement overseas.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty. . . . We regret that it has become necessary in the land of Washington and Lincoln to reaffirm that all men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

From the Platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League

LUIS MUÑOZ RIVERA
1859–1916

Luis Muñoz Rivera devoted his life to obtaining self-government for Puerto Rico—first from Spain and then from the United States. After Spain granted Puerto Rico self-rule in 1897, Muñoz Rivera joined the government. He resigned and renewed his struggle when Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory. Muñoz Rivera died just before the United States granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship and a large measure of self-government.

In what ways did Muñoz Rivera use his leadership skills to help his country?