

Cuba: Dawning of American Imperialism

The Spanish-American War

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1976, being America's 200th anniversary—with all the commercial pomp and whitewashed historical hoopla that's riding along with it—would be the ideal year to miss entirely and go abroad.

Between television's "Buy-Centennial Minutes" and the countless newspaper and magazine articles extolling our so-called grand and glorious history, it's going to be kind of hard to keep our food down and our spirits up.

This being the case, we'd like to place the farcical celebration in its proper perspective and present our own Bicentennial Moments—moments in American history we weren't taught in school, moments far more revealing than the patriotic rubbish our textbooks and teachers threw at us.

The sinking of the U.S. battleship *Maine* in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898 and its devastating consequences mark one of innumerable low points in America's 200-year old history.

Although no concrete, or even circumstantial, evidence was ever uncovered to link the explosion aboard the *Maine* with the Spanish government, the United States leapt at the opportunity to accuse its rival of perpetrating the deed.

All too anxious to enter the Cuban-Spanish War in hopes of annexing Cuba after its impending liberation, imperialist America was able to distort facts and manipulate the loss of the *Maine* and 266 of its crewmen into an excuse for jumping into the thick of the fray.

The result was America's virtual domination of Cuba's affairs from 1898 until the revolution of 1958—60 years of oppressive neo-colonialism.

Birth of American Imperialism

As Jacksonian Laissez-Faire was succeeded by the individual entrepreneur in U.S. economic life around the 1880's and 1890's, American business interests began to see Cuba as a prime plum ripe for the picking. Corporations popularized the hypothesis that foreign markets provided the ideal solution to America's recurring and deepening domestic economic crises and consequent dangers of political and social unrest, and Cuba was to be the first victim.

Confronted thus with the unavoidable emergence of the imperialist stage of U.S. economic development, American businessmen and politicians began openly and enthusiastically speaking of territorial expansion. Senator Albert J. Beveridge said: "American factories are making more than the American people can use American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us; the trade of the world must and shall be ours."

Theodore C. Search, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, insisted that "Many of our manufacturers have outgrown or are outgrowing their home markets and the expansion of our foreign trade is their only promise of relief."

Most comprehensive in his view of the expanding American market was Charles A. Conant, one of the country's first corporation intellectuals. He commented that "New markets and new opportunities for investment must be found if surplus capital is to be profitably employed...if the entire fabric of the present economic order is not to be shaken by a social revolution."

Conveniently for the American pro-annexationists, Cuba in 1895 was engaged in its second war for independence from Spain. Although the U.S. officially declared political neutrality, it privately sold arms to Spain while blocking all attempts at rebel aid from American supporters. Under the presidency of Grover Cleveland, America was biding its time, waiting patiently for the proper moment to step in and annex Cuba.

As Cleveland's term of office drew to a close in December of 1898, the time to intervene appeared near. In a final address to Congress, Cleveland followed an appeal for Cuban autonomy with a mysterious warning to Spain to wrap up the conflict before a new situation arose "in which our obligations to the sovereignty of Spain would be superseded by higher obligations, which we hardly hesitate to recognize and discharge."

The higher obligations were obviously to American business.

McKinley Supports Intervention

With William McKinley as President in early 1897, it was at long last acknowledged that autonomy would not be accepted by the Cuban insurgents and that only outright independence would lead to a conclusion of the Spanish-Cuban crises. As for the U.S., McKinley saw military intervention as the only solution.

Eager to involve America in the war in hopes of dislodging Spain and slipping into Cuba, McKinley dispatched the battleship *Maine*, among others, to Key West in December, 1897, supposedly to protect American life and property in Cuba. Less than a month later, on January 25, 1898, the *Maine* sailed into Havana Harbor, much to Spain's displeasure. Spain interpreted the action as evidence of America's preparation for war and countered with its own fleet of torpedo boats and torpedo destroyers.

On February 15, 1898, disaster struck. At 9:30 in the evening the forward section of the *Maine* suddenly exploded and burst into flame, killing 266 men.

Although a majority of the officials of the Navy department saw the explosion as an accident caused presumably by spontaneous combustion in the coal bunkers near the ammunition room, the theory was far from generally accepted.

The Spanish authorities held their own investigation immediately and found nothing to substantiate any idea of an external explosion. On February 27, the court asked for American cooperation in questioning the survivor's of the *Maine*, but was rebuffed. Instead, the United States held its own investigation.

While the Court of Inquiry weighed its evidence, U.S. newspapers had already come to their own conclusions—Spain was directly responsible for the sinking of the *Maine* and war should be declared post haste to avenge the victims.

Hearst's *New York Journal* especially came out in favor of declaring war, devoting eight pages daily to the *Maine* disaster, resulting in its circulation skyrocketing from 416,885 on January 9th to 1,036,140 on February 18th.

The *Journal* pulled out all stops in its war-mongering, writing that "the *Maine* was destroyed by treachery" and was "split in two by an enemy's secret infernal machine." It even went so far as to publish fake interviews with authorities who swore that the Spanish were directly responsible for the *Maine*'s destruction.

Well in the forefront of the vicious and spurious accusations against Spain, the *Journal* was responsible for the single most memorable slogan of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, "Remember the Maine, To Hell With Spain," later abbreviated to simply "Remember the *Maine*."

Other "yellow" journals voiced similar sentiments elsewhere around the country. A headline in the *Kansas City Star* read "We saw the Torpedo...A Maimed Seaman's Story."

Disgustingly racist in his approach to the situation, *Star* editor William A. White wrote "As between Cuba and Spain there is little choice, Both crowds are yellow-legged, garlic-eating, dagger-sticking treacherous crowds—a mixture of Guinea, Indian and Dago, one crowd is as bad as the other. It is folly to spill good Saxon blood for this kind of vermin."

Sinking Excuse for Annexation

The *Maine* incident was exactly what the pro-annexationists had hoped for. Fitzhugh Lee, American consul-general in Havana, quickly backtracked on a previous statement that the explosion was an accident and said instead that he was convinced the explosion was an external one most probably caused by a Spanish torpedo. His recommendation was that as soon as the Court of Inquiry verified his conclusion, the U.S. occupy Cuba as the initial step towards annexation.

Most vocal in his assessment of the situation, Lee expressed the conviction that “American capital and enterprising spirit would soon ‘Americanize’ the island and immigration would be so great that when the matter of annexation came up, the Cuban people would not be a factor in deciding the problem...”

After an aborted attempt by McKinley to convince several senators that America should purchase Cuba outright, he confided to friends that war with Spain was, in fact, inevitable.

50 million dollars was soon allocated for the impending war with the assistance of Joe Cannon, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. For an alleged “peace-at-any-price” president, McKinley had managed to lead America headlong into the Cuban-Spanish War, under the guise of humanism no less.

As expected, the two courts of inquiry reached wholly different decisions concerning the *Maine*. The Spanish court concluded that the explosion originated in the front of the ship with no evidence to support any theory of an external cause. Without the cooperation of the U.S. government, even after the war, the specific source of the explosion was never actually discovered.

In the States, however, the Court of Inquiry convinced itself that the explosion was indeed of an external nature caused by a submarine mine. Although Spain was never directly accused in the report and no recommendations were made by the court, the conclusion was inevitable.

On April 25, 1898, a declaration of war against Spain was asked for by McKinley and granted by joint resolution. By August 13 of the same year the Spanish-Cuban-American War had ended and the U.S. had its foothold in Cuba.

For more information read: *The Spanish-Cuban-American War and the Birth of American Imperialism* by Philip S. Foner; Monthly Review Press or *Corporations and the Cold War* by David Horowitz; Monthly Review Press.

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