



# The Spanish-American War: The United States Emerges as a World Power

*By Curtis Jerry Smothers*

## The Road to War

### Spain's Last American Colony

By the late nineteenth century, Spain's once-vast empire had diminished. Nearly all of its possessions in the Western Hemisphere had gained independence, leaving only Cuba and Puerto Rico under Spanish control. Cuba, located less than 100 miles from Florida, was especially important because of its rich sugar industry and strategic location at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico.

### Cuba's Fight for Independence

The Cuban people had long sought independence. Their first major revolt, the Ten Years' War (1868–1878), ended unsuccessfully, but the desire for self-government never disappeared. In 1895, Cuban revolutionaries launched another rebellion against Spanish rule.

Spain responded by sending General Valeriano Weyler to crush the insurgency. Weyler's harsh "reconcentration" policy forced hundreds of thousands of Cuban civilians into concentration camps where disease, starvation, and poor sanitation claimed thousands of lives.

## **Yellow Journalism Fans the Flames**

American newspapers published vivid and often sensational accounts of the suffering in Cuba, sometimes exaggerating or embellishing events in what became known as *yellow journalism*.

New York newspaper publishers William Randolph Hearst, owner of the *New York Journal*, and Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World*, competed fiercely for readers with dramatic headlines, emotional illustrations, and stories emphasizing Spanish brutality.

Although not all of their reporting was inaccurate, their coverage helped arouse public sympathy for the Cuban rebels and increased pressure on the McKinley administration to intervene.

## **The De Lôme Letter**

Relations between Spain and the United States deteriorated further in early 1898. On February 9, a private letter written by the Spanish minister in Washington, Enrique Dupuy de Lôme, was published in an American newspaper. The letter insulted President William McKinley as weak and indecisive, provoking widespread outrage.

## **Remember the *Maine***

Only six days later, tragedy struck. On **February 15, 1898**, the battleship *USS Maine* exploded while anchored in Havana Harbor, killing 266 American sailors. Although the true cause remains uncertain even today, most Americans immediately blamed Spain. Newspapers fanned public anger with the famous slogan:

**"Remember the Maine! To Hell with Spain!"**

## **America Declares War**

President William McKinley initially sought a peaceful solution, but pressure from Congress and the public became overwhelming. On April 11, he asked Congress for authority to intervene in Cuba. Congress responded by adopting the **Teller Amendment**, pledging that the United States would not annex Cuba after the conflict.

On April 21, the United States imposed a naval blockade of Cuba. Spain declared war two days later, and on **April 25, 1898**, Congress formally declared that a state of war had existed since April 21.

A conflict that would last barely four months had begun.

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## Battles of the Spanish-American War

### Dewey's Victory at Manila Bay

The war's first major battle occurred halfway around the world.

On **May 1, 1898**, Commodore **George Dewey** led the U.S. Asiatic Squadron into Manila Bay in the Philippines. In one of the most decisive naval victories in history, Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet without losing a single American sailor in combat.

His calm command, *"You may fire when ready, Gridley,"* became one of the most famous quotations in American military history.

The victory gave the United States control of Manila Bay and demonstrated the effectiveness of the modern steel navy that strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan had long advocated.

### American Troops Land in Cuba

The principal land campaign took place around Santiago, Cuba.

American troops landed near Santiago in late June. Many were inexperienced volunteers who struggled with inadequate supplies, poor sanitation, and tropical diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. More soldiers ultimately died from disease than from enemy fire.

### The Battle of San Juan Heights

On **July 1**, American forces attacked the fortified heights overlooking Santiago. The fighting centered on **San Juan Hill** and neighboring **Kettle Hill**.

### Buffalo Soldiers and the Rough Riders

Although Theodore Roosevelt and his volunteer **Rough Riders** became legendary for their charge, they were only one part of a much larger assault. African American regiments known as the **Buffalo Soldiers** played a crucial role, fighting with discipline and courage in helping capture the heights dominating Santiago.

### The Destruction of Spain's Caribbean Fleet

Spain's Caribbean fleet remained trapped inside Santiago Harbor.

On **July 3**, Admiral Pascual Cervera attempted a desperate breakout. Waiting outside was the U.S. Navy.

Within hours, every major Spanish warship had been destroyed or driven ashore. The victory eliminated Spain's naval presence in the Caribbean and effectively sealed the fate of Santiago.

The city surrendered on **July 17**.

## **The Puerto Rico Campaign**

The final campaign began on **July 25**, when General Nelson Miles landed American troops in Puerto Rico. Resistance proved relatively light, and the campaign ended shortly before the war itself came to a close.

## **The Armistice**

On **August 12, 1898**, Spain and the United States signed an armistice ending hostilities.

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# **Aftermath: The United States Becomes a World Power**

## **The Treaty of Paris**

The conflict officially ended with the **Treaty of Paris**, signed on **December 10, 1898**. Spain relinquished control of Cuba, ceded Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States, and sold the Philippines to the United States for \$20 million.

The treaty effectively dismantled what remained of Spain's once-great colonial empire.

## **America Acquires an Overseas Empire**

For the United States, however, the consequences were far-reaching. The nation suddenly possessed overseas territories stretching from the Caribbean to the Pacific. American naval bases and coaling stations now supported a global maritime presence, and the country emerged as an important participant in international affairs.

## **The Imperialism Debate**

Not everyone celebrated America's new role. A vigorous **Anti-Imperialist League**, whose members included Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie, argued that ruling overseas colonies contradicted the nation's democratic principles.

Their concerns seemed validated almost immediately when Filipino nationalists, who had expected independence after Spain's defeat, resisted American rule. The resulting Philippine-American War proved longer and far bloodier than the Spanish-American War itself.

## **Theodore Roosevelt's Rise**

The war also launched the political career of Theodore Roosevelt. His exploits with the Rough Riders made him one of the nation's most celebrated heroes, helping propel him to the governorship of New York, the vice presidency, and eventually the presidency after the assassination of William McKinley in 1901.

## **A "Splendid Little War"**

Secretary of State John Hay famously described the conflict as **"a splendid little war."** Militarily, it had indeed been swift and successful. Historically, however, its consequences were enormous. In just four months, the United States had defeated an aging European empire, acquired overseas possessions, and taken its first decisive step onto the world stage as a global power.

## **A Turning Point in American History**

The Spanish-American War marked the end of one empire—and the beginning of another nation's rise as an international force.

It transformed the United States from a nation primarily concerned with continental expansion into one with strategic interests spanning two oceans. The victories at Manila Bay and Santiago demonstrated American industrial strength, naval power, and military potential. At the same time, the debates over imperialism that followed revealed the tensions between America's democratic ideals and its growing role as a colonial power.

Though the war lasted only about four months, its impact would shape American foreign policy well into the twentieth century. It stands as one of the pivotal turning points in U.S. history, signaling the nation's emergence as a major world power.