The Spanish-American War

Adapted from "The Spanish-American War, 1898 (see http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/gp/90609.htm)" and "U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895–1898 (see http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/gp/100724.htm)," by the U.S. Department of State.

Figure 1. The wreck of the U.S.S. Maine in the Havana harbor angered the American public and sparked the war with Spain.

The Spanish-American War of 1898 ended Spain’s colonial empire in the Western Hemisphere and secured the position of the United States as a Pacific power. U.S. victory in the war produced a peace treaty that compelled the Spanish to relinquish claims on Cuba, and to cede sovereignty over Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the United States. The United States also annexed the independent state of Hawaii during the conflict. Thus, the war enabled the United States to establish its predominance in the Caribbean region and to pursue its strategic and economic interests in Asia.
The war that erupted in 1898 between the United States and Spain was preceded by three years of fighting by Cuban revolutionaries to gain independence from Spanish colonial rule. From 1895-1898, the violent conflict in Cuba captured the attention of Americans because of the economic and political instability that it produced in a region within such close geographical proximity to the United States. The long-held U.S. interest in ridding the Western Hemisphere of European colonial powers and American public outrage over brutal Spanish tactics created much sympathy for the Cuban revolutionaries. By early 1898, tensions between the United States and Spain had been mounting for months. After the U.S. battleship Maine exploded and sank in Havana harbor under mysterious circumstances on February 15, 1898, U.S. military intervention in Cuba became likely.

On April 11, 1898, President William McKinley asked Congress for authorization to end the fighting in Cuba between the rebels and Spanish forces, and to establish a “stable government” that would “maintain order” and ensure the “peace and tranquility and the security” of Cuban and U.S. citizens on the island. On April 20, the U.S. Congress passed a joint resolution that acknowledged Cuban independence, demanded that the Spanish government give up control of the island, foreshowed any intention on the part of the United States to annex Cuba, and authorized McKinley to use whatever military measures he deemed necessary to guarantee Cuba’s independence.

The Spanish government rejected the U.S. ultimatum and immediately severed diplomatic relations with the United States. McKinley responded by implementing a naval blockade of Cuba on April 22 and issued a call for 125,000 military volunteers the following day. That same day, Spain declared war on the United States, and the U.S. Congress voted to go to war against Spain on April 25.

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The future Secretary of State John Hay described the ensuing conflict as a “splendid little war.” The first battle was fought on May 1, in Manila Bay, where Commodore George Dewey’s Asiatic Squadron defeated the Spanish naval force defending the Philippines. On June 10, U.S. troops landed at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and additional forces landed near the harbor city of Santiago on June 22 and 24. After isolating and defeating the Spanish army garrisons in Cuba, the U.S. Navy destroyed the Spanish Caribbean squadron on July 3 as it attempted to escape the U.S. naval blockade of Santiago.

On July 26, at the behest of the Spanish government, the French ambassador in Washington, Jules Cambon, approached the McKinley Administration to discuss peace terms, and a cease-fire was signed on August 12. The war officially ended four months later, when the U.S. and Spanish governments signed the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898. Apart from guaranteeing the independence of Cuba, the treaty also forced Spain to cede Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States. Spain also agreed to sell the Philippines to the United States for the sum of $20 million. The U.S. Senate ratified the treaty on February 6, 1899, by a margin of only one vote.

The McKinley Administration also used the war as a pretext to annex the independent state of Hawaii. In 1893, American residents of the Hawaiian Islands had led a coup against native Queen Liliuokalani and established a new government. They promptly sought annexation by the United States, but President Grover Cleveland rejected their requests. In 1898, however, President McKinley and the American public were more favorably disposed toward acquiring the islands. Supporters of annexation argued that Hawaii was vital to the U.S. economy, that it would serve as a strategic base that could help protect U.S. interests in Asia, and that other nations were intent on taking over the islands if the United States did not. At McKinley’s request, a joint resolution of Congress made Hawaii a U.S. territory on August 12, 1898.

**Yellow journalism and the coming of war**

Yellow journalism was a style of newspaper reporting that emphasized sensationalism over facts. It was one of many factors that helped push the United States and Spain into war.

The term originated in the competition over the New York City newspaper market between major newspaper publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. At first, yellow journalism had nothing to do with reporting, but instead derived from a popular cartoon strip about life in New York’s slums called Hogan’s Alley, drawn by Richard F. Outcault. Published in color by Pulitzer’s New York World, the comic’s most well-known character came to be known as the Yellow Kid, and his popularity accounted in no small part for a tremendous increase in sales of the World. In 1896, in an effort to boost sales of his New York Journal, Hearst hired Outcault away from Pulitzer, launching a fierce bidding war between the two publishers over the cartoonist. Hearst ultimately won this battle, but Pulitzer refused to give in and hired a new cartoonist to continue drawing the cartoon for his paper. This battle over the Yellow Kid and a greater market share gave rise to the term “yellow journalism.”

Once the term had been coined, it extended to the sensationalist style employed by the two publishers in their profit-driven coverage of world events, particularly developments in Cuba. Many in the United States called upon Spain to withdraw from the island, and some even gave material support to the Cuban revolutionaries. Hearst and Pulitzer devoted more and more attention to the Cuban struggle for independence, at times accentuating the harshness of Spanish rule or the nobility of the
revolutionaries, and occasionally printing rousing stories that proved to be false. This sort of coverage, complete with bold headlines ("Spanish Cannibalism" and "Amazon Warriors Fight for Rebels") and creative drawings of events, sold a lot of papers for both publishers.

"REMEMBER THE MAINE"

The peak of yellow journalism, in terms of both intensity and influence, came in early 1898, when a U.S. battleship, the Maine, sunk in Havana harbor. The naval vessel had been sent there not long before in a display of U.S. power and, in conjunction with the planned visit of a Spanish ship to New York, an effort to defuse growing tensions between the United States and Spain. On the night of February 15, an explosion tore through the ship’s hull, and the Maine went down. Sober observers and an initial report by the colonial government of Cuba concluded that the explosion had occurred on board, but Hearst and Pulitzer, who had for several years been selling papers by fanning anti-Spanish public opinion in the United States, published rumors of plots to sink the ship. When a U.S. naval investigation later stated that the explosion had come from a mine in the harbor, the proponents of yellow journalism seized upon it and called for war. By early May, the Spanish-American War had begun, with cries of “Remember the Maine! To hell with Spain.”

The rise of yellow journalism helped to create a climate conducive to the outbreak of international conflict and the expansion of U.S. influence overseas, but it did not by itself cause the war. Hearst famously told two bored reporters in Cuba to be patient, saying “You furnish the pictures, I’ll provide the war!” — but other factors were more important in leading to war. The papers did not create anti-Spanish sentiments out of thin air, nor did the publishers fabricate the events to which the U.S. public and politicians reacted so strongly. Influential figures such as Theodore Roosevelt had led a drive for U.S. overseas expansion since the 1880s. Still, the coming of the war showed that the press had the power to influence public opinion and reaction to international events.

On the web

The Rough Riders

http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/9274

Teddy Roosevelt’s “Rough Riders” drill at Tampa, Florida, during the Spanish-American War, 1898. Advertisements for this 1903 motion picture said “A charge full of cowboy enthusiasm by Troop ‘I,’ the famous regiment, at Tampa, before its departure for the front.”

The Spanish-American War in Motion Pictures

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sawhtml/sawhome.html

Early motion pictures show troops, drills, parades, and reenactments of battle scenes. From the Library of Congress.

The Spanish-American War in U.S. Media Culture

http://chnm.gmu.edu/aq/war/

A “hypertextual essay” about the relationship between the war and newspapers, photography, and film.

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