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Momentum Towards War: The Sinking of the Maine and the War of 1898¹

Introduction

“Remember the Maine and to hell with Spain” was a powerful rallying cry for jingoists who favored American intervention in the Cuban insurrection that began in 1895. For generations American school children have been learning that the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine* in Havana harbor in February 1898 inspired an American declaration of war against Spain, resulting in the conflict that would dramatically transform the United States role on the world stage. While the latter point is indisputable, why the United States went to war with Spain in 1898 and what Washington hoped to achieve as a result are questions that are very much open to debate. In fact, these issues have been and continue to be the subject of vigorous debate among scholars of American foreign relations.

The War of 1898 marked a significant realignment of nineteenth century American foreign policy. Since the Revolution, American leaders had dutifully insulated the Republic against potential conflict or alliance with the powers of Europe and concentrated the focus of American energy on continental expansion. Even though the

¹ This article is drawn from the first chapter in a forthcoming book on turning points in modern U.S. foreign relations to be published by Lynne Rienner Publications.

risk entailed in fighting the declining power of Spain was, in 1898 limited, the war established the U.S. as a force to be reckoned with by the Great Powers of Europe. No longer was the U.S. content to limit itself to continental expansion; by defeating Spain, occupying Cuba, and acquiring the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico, the United States took a very deliberate and visible step onto the world stage.

This departure from the nineteenth century norm was neither as dramatic nor as unprecedented as it might appear. There were antecedents for this apparent sudden projection of American power. The massive growth of the American economy after the Civil War established the foundation for an increasingly aggressive U.S. foreign policy, manifested in the decades before 1898 in a more assertive application of the Monroe Doctrine² and a growing commercial and strategic interest in the Pacific. Before 1898 the U.S. took only tentative steps in these directions, and ones on which there was often no clear consensus. While support in the United States for war with Spain was not universal, the conflict created sufficient nationalist momentum to carry the day for those who advocated a broader American foreign policy over those who remained loyal to ideals of Washington's Farewell Address.³ The sinking of the Maine was a significant factor in shaping that nationalist momentum.

Major Debates and Divisions

The U.S declaration of war against Spain in April 1898 brought to an end a debate that had been at the forefront of American politics since the outbreak of an insurrection in

² Issued by President James Monroe in his annual address to Congress in 1823, this doctrine claimed the Western Hemisphere to be off limits for the imperial powers of the Europe and sowed the seeds for the principle of American hegemony in the region.

³ In his Farewell Address to the nation, George Washington warned future generations to safeguard republican ideals by avoiding entangling alliances and essentially remaining aloof from the imperialist politics of Europe.

Cuba in 1895. For three years Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill, and the public at large, had wrestled with the issue of whether or not the United States should intervene and, if so, in what capacity. The Cuban crisis was the dominant foreign policy issue during the successive presidential administrations of Democrat Grover Cleveland and Republican William McKinley and in the fiercely contested presidential and congressional elections of that time period. The narrow debate over the U.S. response to the Cuban insurrection was symptomatic of broader debate between imperialists and anti-imperialists (or isolationists) concerning America's role in the world. This broader debate reached its conclusion during negotiations over the terms of settlement with Spain following American victory in the War of 1898. Although the fate of Cuba had drawn the U.S. into the war, it was the capture and occupation of the Philippines that precipitated a decisive showdown between the imperialists and the anti-imperialists.

Imperialists versus Isolationists

The late nineteenth century was characterized by fierce competition among the powers of Europe for territorial acquisition in Africa and Asia. The era of new imperialism coincided with growing competition among industrializing nations for markets and resources and the rising importance of nationalism as a force in shaping the internal affairs of these nations. Industrial technology fuelled the growing naval and military power of the imperialist states and limited the ability of non-industrialized societies to resist their seemingly insatiable demand for territory. The emotive power of nationalism contributed to the intensity of the competition between imperialist states and made public opinion an important factor in the race for territorial acquisition, even in states where representative government was limited. In those countries where mass

suffrage was introduced in the late nineteenth century public opinion played a pronounced role in this imperialist urge. The internal dynamics created by industrialism and nationalism contributed to what Rudyard Kipling would call “the White Man’s Burden,” the notion of “civilizing” mission that infused the western imperialism of this period,

Although the United States was caught up in this imperialist surge, “American imperialism was not simply a copy of the European original.”⁴ There were important quantitative and qualitative differences in the American experience of empire. For a start, the United States experiment with formal imperialism was both short lived and territorially limited. After the War of 1898, the U.S. turned to less formal means of establishing hegemony in Central America and the Caribbean and extending its influence across the Pacific. To a large extent this is a reflection of the fact that imperialism was a much more divisive factor in American politics than in the countries of Europe. In the 1870s and 1880s, as the Europeans engaged in competition for territory in Asia and the scramble for colonies in Africa, sentiment for imperialism began to stir in some quarters in the United States. However, those who opposed imperialism, whether on ideological or practical grounds, remained a formidable force in American politics up to 1898.

Notable figures like the historian John Fiske and protestant clergyman Josiah Strong were among the most vocal proponents of a global civilizing mission for the United States. Fiske’s writings on the existence of a racial hierarchy and the ascendant role of people of Anglo-Saxon descent in shaping world civilization were reflective of much of the pro-imperialist sentiment in nineteenth century America. Strong echoed

⁴ Frank Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 10.

these sentiments in his widely read 1885 publication *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, where he added the force of divine ordination to America's mission and wrote that God "is preparing mankind to receive our impress."⁵ Such ideas were consistent with earlier, popular notions of "Manifest Destiny" and were representative of a broad body of opinion that subscribed to the belief that the United States, guided as it was by pure principles of republican government, was exceptional among the countries of the world. The influence of race, religion, and the mission to civilize are evident in the writings of naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, one of the most forceful and influential exponents of the imperial vision in this period. In his famous book *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (1890) Mahan held up the British Empire and its powerful navy as a model for the United States. For Mahan, imperialism was not just ideologically desirable; it was imperative in an age when naval technology negated the security that geography had long afforded the United States.

Fiske, Strong, and Mahan were members of a social elite whose influence on public policy was disproportionate to their numbers. Although it is hard to gauge public opinion in this era before the advent of polling, there is considerable evidence to indicate that only a small percentage of the general public paid any attention to foreign policy or adopted positions on foreign policy issues before 1898.⁶ Thus the elite, who were vocal and active on these issues, came to constitute the "foreign policy public." Although public opinion, stirred by the jingoistic yellow press, undoubtedly played a role in influencing the debate over American involvement in Cuba, the framework for the debate

⁵David Healy, *U.S. Expansionism: The Imperialist Urge in the 1890s*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 38.

⁶Ernest May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of the America as a Great Power*, (Harcourt Brace, 1961).

had been established much earlier by ideas that emanated from this foreign policy elite. The ideas contained in the writings of Fiske, Strong, and Mahan found practical outlet in the activism of men like Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt. Lodge, a Senator from Massachusetts, and his close friend Theodore Roosevelt, who would serve as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the first administration of President William McKinley, were both vocal public proponents of naval expansion and espoused the view that the United States must enter the race for empire or suffer the consequences that would result from an extension of European power in the Pacific or the Western Hemisphere. During the debate over Cuba, Lodge and Roosevelt were the chief advocates of what historians have dubbed “the large policy,” arguing that the U.S. should not only go to war with Spain but that it should also avail itself of the opportunity to extend American influence in the Caribbean and the Pacific.⁷

Lodge and Roosevelt were among the loudest voices calling for annexation of Hawaii in 1893 following the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by a revolutionary government led by American expatriate sugar growers. The bloodless coup was actively supported by the American Minister to Hawaii and was quickly followed by a bill of annexation put before Congress by the lame duck Republican administration of Benjamin Harrison. However, before the treaty was taken up for ratification, Democrat Grover Cleveland ascended to the White House and, decrying the role played by the United States in the Hawaiian affair, immediately blocked annexation. Although the imperialists praised the aggressiveness of Harrison and condemned what they saw as the weakness of Cleveland, the President was not alone in his concerns over Hawaiian annexation.

⁷ A modern parallel might be found in the role of the neo-conservatives in shaping George W. Bush’s policy towards Iraq.

Influential figures such as Carl Schurz, a German-born editor and politician, combined racial, ideological, and strategic arguments to build a case against expansion. Schurz and others contended that the annexation of non-contiguous territories such as Hawaii would undermine the political integrity of the United States by violating the anti-imperialist principles of republican government. Furthermore, the prospect of adding tropical states and people of alien races and religions caused alarm among segments of the white elite, many of who also argued that the acquisition of far flung territories would make the United States more difficult to defend.⁸

If “Hawaii demonstrated the absence of consensus on overseas expansion,” the Venezuela crisis of 1895 served to underline the contradictory tendencies in American foreign policy in this period.⁹ At issue was the disputed border between Venezuela and British Guyana, and British pressure on the Venezuelans to settle the border in its favor following the discovery of gold deposits in the region. The United States intervened calling for arbitration, but in effect pressing the British to back off their claims. Grover Cleveland’s secretary of state, Richard Olney, justified Washington’s intervention on the grounds that “the United States is practically sovereign on this continent and its fiat is law.”¹⁰ What became known as the Olney Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine demonstrated a clear intent on the part of the United States to pursue an assertive foreign policy in the western hemisphere. Cleveland rationalized the position in anti-imperialist terms, noting the U.S. obligation to ward off European territorial designs in the western

⁸ Healy, 215-217.

⁹ Ninkovich, 12.

¹⁰ May, 40.

hemisphere, but the Olney Corollary could just as easily be used to support a claim of American hegemony in the region.

The Cuban Question

Cuba, just eighty miles off the coast of Florida, had long been an object of American interest when a rebellion erupted against Spanish rule there in 1895. An earlier rebellion lasting from 1868 to 1873 had excited considerable interest in the United States and brought the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant to the brink of intervention and annexation. Despite the enticing prospect of Caribbean ports and the logic of the Monroe Doctrine, Grant backed down in the face of pressure from members of Congress and the foreign policy elite who feared the implication of acquiring a tropical territory with a mixed race population and a culture deemed impossible to assimilate. At the outbreak of the second Cuban rebellion American interest in events on the island was initially fairly limited. However, as the insurrection dragged on and the Spanish application of force received growing attention in the pages of American newspapers and on the floor of Congress, the passion of the American public was increasingly aroused and the debates of the Grant era resurfaced on Capitol Hill. As Ernest May points out, by 1898 the country was in a state of “hysteria” and pressure for intervention was coming from a variety of sources.¹¹

From the outset the Cleveland administration adopted a cautious approach to the Cuban rebellion. The rebels, under the leadership of General Maximo Gomez, were limited to the use of guerilla tactics, and there was hope in Washington that the Spanish would quickly restore order on the island. American investments, primarily in sugar

¹¹ May, 133-147.

plantations, amounted to 50 million dollars and the prevailing view among these investors was that a speedy end to the fighting would best serve the interests of business. Senior pro-business politicians such as Senators March Hanna, Nelson Aldrich, and Orville Platt gave voice to a non-committal policy on the part of the United States. Cleveland shared the fears of these Senators that American entanglement in Cuba would threaten the United States' "large pecuniary stake in the fortunes" of the island.¹² The Cleveland administration's initial response to the crises was to invoke American neutrality laws. It was a position that was more important in appearance than in fact. Although Cleveland was clearly attempting to establish a policy of non-intervention, sympathy for the Cuban cause quickly grew to such an extent that this profession of neutrality did little to prevent a steady flow of arms from the United States to the rebels.

This mounting pro-Cuban sentiment reflected a variety of developing factors. From the beginning of the Cuban insurrection, imperialists among the foreign policy elite called for a more pro-active American response. Meanwhile a Cuban junta conducted a well-organized and effective lobbying campaign to push public opinion and sentiment in Washington towards a pro-Cuban and anti-Spanish policy. Finally, the plight of the Cuban people at the hands of "tyrannical" Spain became a cause célèbre among the yellow press, and in particular the rival newspapers of publishing giants William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Historians often use the story that Hearst dispatched the artist Frederick Remington to Cuba with the instruction, "you furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war," to illustrate the role of the popular press in fomenting

¹² Ninkovich, 22.

support for war.¹³ Although these forces developed from impulses that were often contradictory, American imperialism and nationalism on the one hand and Cuban nationalism on the other, they combined to shape a public mood increasingly at odds with the policies of the Cleveland administration. Nowhere was this more apparent than on the floor of the United States Congress.

Support for a pro-Cuban policy crossed party lines; both Republicans and Democrats endeavored to gain advantage from the issue in the lead up to the 1896 elections. Efforts by Congress to push for recognition of the Cuban belligerency were blocked by Cleveland, but as the situation in Cuba deteriorated pressure to intervene mounted. In 1896 the Spanish government, led by Conservative Prime Minister Antonio Canovas, facing a mounting domestic crisis arising from the Cuban insurrection, dispatched General Valeriano Weyler to the island with orders to bring a decisive military conclusion to the insurrection. Weyler's *reconcentrado* policy, designed to isolate the rebels by concentrating the civilian population in Spanish controlled towns, proved disastrous both in terms of its ineffectiveness as a tool in winning the war and in terms of its impact on American public opinion. Weyler's tactics were widely denounced in the American press and on the floor of Congress as concrete evidence of the evils of Spanish tyranny.

In the spring of 1896 Cleveland approached Spain about the possibility of mediating the conflict and floated a solution of autonomy for Cuba. Spain was racked by dissension, however, and the very future of the Spanish regency hung in the balance over the issue. Neither Canovas, nor the man who would succeed him, Praxedes Sagasta, the

¹³ Ibid, 26.

leader of the Liberal Party, could afford to alienate nationalist elements and invite the possibility of widespread political unrest by admitting defeat in Cuba or seeming to cave in to American pressure. The Spanish position was clear; Cuba was an internal Spanish affair and any effort by the United States to intervene would be interpreted as a threat to Spanish sovereignty.¹⁴ However, pressure for intervention continued to mount in step with the deteriorating situation in Cuba. Lurid reports of atrocities reported in the yellow press and recounted in Congress, were confirmed by Fitzhugh Lee, the special envoy dispatched by Cleveland to report first hand on affairs in Cuba. Lee painted a very pessimistic picture and put an end to any hopes Cleveland might have still entertained that Spain could restore order on the island any time in the near future. Faced with the reality of Lee's assessment, in December Cleveland warned Spain that, issues of sovereignty aside, if the situation in Cuba continued to deteriorate the United States might be driven to intervene by "higher obligations, which we can hardly hesitate to discharge."¹⁵

Within a year after the outbreak of the rebellion the United States had shifted slightly from a policy of non-intervention to probing the Spanish on the issue of arbitration. Cleveland's December statement, though, appeared to promise further U.S. intervention unless Spain demonstrated clearly its ability to restore order on the island. Cleveland was a lame duck President when he made this pronouncement and so it now fell to his successor, Republican William McKinley, to decide on a future course of action for the United States. McKinley entered the White House with a pro-business

¹⁴ John Offner, *Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain Over Cuba, 1895-1898*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Ninkovich, 24.

reputation, often seen as an explanation for his initial caution with regard to Cuba. However, the momentum towards intervention that had begun under Cleveland gathered pace under McKinley. Although McKinley decried the impact of “jingo nonsense,” he quickly had to come to terms with political pressure arising from the Cuban crisis. Prominent Republicans such as Elihu Root and Henry Cabot Lodge warned that failure to take action with regard to Cuba could have disastrous consequences for the party by handing the political initiative on the issue to the Democrats. Root raised the ominous specter of “the elevation of Silver Democracy to power” if the President were to engage in “fruitless attempts to hold back...the momentum of the people bent upon war.”¹⁶

The Cuban revolution became the dominant foreign policy issue in the McKinley administration to a large extent because it had “explosive potential as a domestic issue.”¹⁷ Congress was set to debate a resolution calling for good offices to secure Cuban independence and, as the war in Cuba dragged on with no resolution in sight, Americans with economic interests on the island became progressively more concerned. Hearst and Pullitzer competed for copy on the latest Spanish outrages, particularly where the lives and property of American citizens were concerned, and in so doing continued to stoke the fires of public opinion. Reports in late 1896 of the murder of rebel leader Antonio Maceo at the hands of Spanish forces who he had approached under a flag of truce were widely reported and inspired anti-Spanish demonstrations in towns and cities across America.¹⁸ However, McKinley also had to deal with the international dimension of the Cuban

¹⁶ Ibid. The term “Silver Democracy” is a reference to the populist wing of the Democratic Party that embraced the cause of tying the nation’s currency to silver in an effort to address the tight money supply, which they argued favored big business to the detriment of America’s small farmers.

¹⁷ May, 120.

¹⁸ Ibid, 79.

revolution. When he took office, rumors were circulating that one or more of the European powers might choose to intervene in support of Spain; certainly the major powers were keeping a watchful eye on United States and the position it chose to adopt with regard to Cuba. The Cuban crisis provided another test of the Monroe Doctrine, which Secretary of State Richard Olney had so forcefully restated during the Venezuela crisis.

McKinley therefore had to balance a variety of concerns in formulating a Cuban policy, not least of which was the fact that the influential conservative wing of his own party remained cool on the idea of American intervention. Though he was open to counsel from within his cabinet and from influential members of Congress, McKinley was very much in charge of the formulation and direction of Cuban policy and he chose initially to follow a policy of cautious engagement. The President publicly stated that the United States wants “no wars of conquest” while at the same time he urged Congress to appropriate funds for the relief of the victims of the *reconcentrado* policy and informed the Spanish of U.S. concerns regarding the excesses of the Weyler policy.¹⁹ McKinley was not, however, in a hurry to commit the United States any further. The ideal solution would be a settlement that could satisfy the growing sentiment in the U.S. for the rebel cause without a breach of U.S.-Spanish relations. McKinley briefly entertained the idea of purchasing Cuba from Spain but came to rely instead on the hope that the Spanish government would concede autonomy to the rebels. When Canovas’s reform agenda of 1897 failed to entice the rebels to the negotiating table, McKinley dispatched Stewart Woodford on a special mission to Madrid to push for further concessions.

¹⁹ Ibid, 120.

Woodford's arrival in Spain coincided with the collapse of the Conservative government and the accession to power of Sagasta and the Liberals. The new Spanish government took the dual steps of issuing a more comprehensive reform program that offered the Canadian model of autonomy for Cuba and recalling the controversial Weyler. Cautious engagement appeared to be paying dividends and McKinley publicly lauded Spain's initiatives. However, he still left the option open for American intervention in "the near future" if these initiatives failed to bear fruit, noting that America might be compelled to "end the war by imposing a rational compromise between the contestants."²⁰ Hopes for such a compromise occurring without American intervention quickly faded as the rebels made clear their intention to settle for nothing less than complete independence. The Sagasta government was facing an angry backlash from nationalists in Spain for the limited concessions it had already made, so the likelihood of a negotiated settlement appeared remote in the extreme. With McKinley on record as committing the United States to playing some role in resolving the crisis in Cuba, a military and diplomatic stalemate between the rebels and Spain left little room for anything else but an escalation of American involvement.

Although the Sagasta reforms temporarily quieted public agitation in the U.S. over Cuba, riots in Havana in January 1898 heightened fears of anarchy on the island and led to a resurgence of Congressional interest. Fears for the safety of American citizens in Cuba prompted McKinley to post the U.S.S. *Maine* to Havana harbor. The *Maine*'s arrival in Havana harbor coincided with the public release in the U.S. of a private letter written by the Spanish minister in Washington, Dupuy de Lome, in which he

²⁰ Ibid, 126.

characterized McKinley as “a weak bidder for the admiration of the crowd” whose Cuba policy reflected his desire to placate jingoists in his party.²¹ The De Lome letter had come into the possession of the Cuban Junta who eagerly passed it on to the press. Its publication succeeded in fuelling anti-Spanish sentiment and energizing momentum for U.S. intervention in Cuba. Although Washington and Madrid endeavored to smooth over the controversy with the resignation of De Lome and the solicitation of an apology, there was a flurry of Congressional activity including resolutions in both the House and Senate calling on the administration to release consular reports on the *reconcentrado* policy and the status of Cuban autonomy. The McKinley administration was well aware that these reports highlighted the failure of the Sagasta reforms and the devastating impact of the *reconcentrado* policy and as such would provide ammunition for interventionists. If, as John Offner contends, McKinley gave his tacit support to these resolutions then the President “had taken an important step towards war.”²²

Fast on the heels of the De Lome crisis came the sensational sinking of the *Maine*. The American public responded with shock to the news of the deaths of 264 sailors and two officers, but his mood quickly gave way to anger. The *Maine* disaster provided the first tangible link for many Americans between the United States and events in Cuba. The perception that the U.S. had been attacked sparked an upsurge of patriotic sentiment and contributed to a shift in emphasis away from Cuban independence and towards war *against* Spain. It was a critical moment in the unfolding crisis. All indications are that the McKinley administration, cognizant of the importance of Cuba as a domestic political issue, was moving towards intervention. The *Maine* incident did not cause the United

²¹ Ibid, 137.

²² Offner, 123.

States to declare war on Spain but it contributed greatly to creating the environment in which such a declaration became possible. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a special closed-door, day-long session on the incident and the general mood in Congress was “intense and threatening.”²³ There were several theories about what had caused the *Maine* to sink, but the most popular theories, widely disseminated in the American press, involved Spanish mines or torpedoes. Although McKinley deferred taking action until a U.S. Naval board was complete, his decision to ask Congress in March for a \$50 million appropriation for national defenses was a clear indication that his policy of cautious engagement was giving way to direct intervention.

By the time the naval board’s bulky report reached Washington in March 1898 with its conclusion that a Spanish mine had sunk the *Maine* the nation was already primed for intervention.²⁴ The mood in the United States had changed perceptively since the beginning of the year and after the conclusions of the Navy report were made public, momentum for war appeared unstoppable. Pressure for intervention had become an increasingly bi-partisan issue and even the conservative pro-business wing of the Republican Party had shed its early skepticism on the issue. One of the most influential pro-business Republicans, Senator Redfield Proctor of Vermont, undertook his own fact-finding mission to Cuba and upon his return in March delivered a speech to Congress that set the Cuban rebellion in terms that appealed to the essence of American exceptionalism. The central issue for the United States in Cuba according to Proctor was neither “the

²³ Ibid, 126.

²⁴ The cause of the explosion that sunk the *Maine* remains an issue of controversy. The 1898 Naval board inquiry conclusion stopped short of accusing the Spanish of deliberate sabotage and intimated that a floating mine was responsible for the explosion. More recent investigations of the *Maine* incident, however, point to the strong possibility that the ship sank following a boiler room explosion.

barbarity practiced by Weyler nor the loss of the *Maine*...but the spectacle of a million and half people, the entire native population of Cuba, struggling for freedom and deliverance from the worst misgovernment of which [he] ever had knowledge.”²⁵ The Proctor speech, coming as it did from a senior Senator with no history of jingoism, added huge moral weight to an interventionist cause already gathering momentum after the *Maine* disaster.

The Decision for War

The impact of the Maine tragedy severely restricted McKinley’s room for maneuver. Up to the beginning of 1898 he had pursued a policy of cautious engagement that charted a middle path between those in the U.S. who favored American intervention in Cuba and those that opposed such a move. McKinley had moved slowly from urging a Spanish resolution to the problem to endorsing autonomy for Cuba. Like his predecessor, he had staved off pressure to recognize the belligerency or publicly endorse independence. McKinley’s policy was aided by the iron grip over the House in Representatives exercised by Republican Speaker Thomas B. Reed, who displayed little enthusiasm for a more proactive U.S. policy towards Cuba. However, in the charged atmosphere of the spring of 1898 Reed could no longer rein in the interventionists in Congress, and McKinley was compelled to increase the pressure on Spain. The McKinley administration drafted an ultimatum urging Spain to call an armistice in Cuba, open negotiations with the insurgents with possible American arbitration if required, and provide relief for the *reconcentrado* population. If these conditions were not met, the United States reserved the right to intervene.

²⁵ Offner, 134.

Both the Spanish and American governments made some final efforts to resolve the crisis short of war. Although the lines of communications were often unclear, the U.S. probed for Spanish concessions through the official channel of Woodford and the unofficial channel of Archbishop John Ireland, working through the Vatican and Catholic Austria but neither bore fruit. Although there was considerable sympathy among the monarchs of Europe for the plight of the Queen Regent, Maria Cristina, the European powers saw little value in aiding Spain, particularly if it meant antagonizing the rising power of the United States. Spain for its part, despite significant nationalist pressure on the Sagasta government not to appear to be giving in to American pressure, willingly abandoned the disastrous *reconcentrado* policy and forty-eight hours before McKinley was due to address Congress Madrid called a cessation of hostilities in Cuba. However, by this point it was too late. The rebels would settle for nothing short of complete independence while Madrid would offer nothing more than limited autonomy. The President faced mounting pressure to outline a strategy for breaking the deadlock.

On April 11, 1898, President McKinley went before Congress and asked for the power “to take measures to secure a full and final termination of hostilities between the Government of Spain and the people of Cuba,” including the use of military force.²⁶ Consistent with McKinley’s general conduct of foreign policy, his war message was vague and couched in terms designed to leave the President with some degree of flexibility, even to the extent of prolonging negotiations. Notably absent from his address was any commitment to the recognition of Cuban independence implying the U.S. desired a free hand to determine the fate of the island in the event of war. McKinley

²⁶ May, 158.

left it to Congress to find meaning in his words during the subsequent ten days of debate. Eventually the Senate and House co-sponsored a joint resolution demanding that Spain relinquish sovereignty over the island and authorizing the President to use force in the event that it did not. However, the addition of the Teller Amendment, pledging that the U.S. would not assume sovereign control over Cuba, contrasts sharply with absence of such a commitment in McKinley's war message and highlights the fact that although there was broad consensus for war, there was no common vision supporting the goals of armed intervention.

Few Spanish officials were under any illusions about Spain's chances of victory in a conflict with the United States. Yet the patriotic backlash against U.S. action, together with the determination of the Cuban rebels to hold out for complete independence, and the failure of Madrid to entice meaningful European diplomatic intervention on its behalf, left the Spanish government little option but to accept war. In fact, there were those in Spain who saw defeat at the hands of the United States as the only honorable way of resolving the Cuban crisis, which for so long had hung like an albatross around the country's neck. Few Spaniards, however, anticipated the devastating ease with which the United States inflicted defeat on Spain or the eventual extent of Spanish territorial losses in the conflict. American technological superiority was a decisive factor in the war, and it was particularly telling in the naval arena. Not only did the U.S. completely destroy a Spanish fleet outside Santiago harbor but, in the biggest surprise of the war, Commodore George Dewey, following a contingency plan drawn up

in 1896, sailed into Manila Bay and in short order wrested control of the Philippines from Spain in a surprisingly easy naval victory.²⁷

These decisive naval victories laid the foundation for American victory in little over three months of fighting. John Hay, who at the time was the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, captured the ebullient mood of the country in his now famous description of the conflict as a “splendid little war.” The war was a coming out party for a rising power and it helped to heal old fractures in American society dating from the Civil War and more recent ones arising from what Richard Hofstadter termed the “psychic crisis” of the late nineteenth century. According to Hofstadter’s thesis the pressure arising from immigration, labor and agrarian unrest, economic depression, and a host of other internal factors inspired a war to restore a national order.²⁸ While there can be little doubt that the war inspired a new spirit of nationalism in America, victory over Spain raised a whole new set of questions about American identity.

Aftermath and Impact

The United States was now presented with the opportunity of joining the ranks of the imperial powers. While the Teller Amendment prevented American annexation of the Cuba, no such stipulation applied to Puerto Rico and the Philippines, the other territories captured from Spain. A furious debate now ensued between the imperialists and anti-imperialists, but while the former had been thwarted during the Hawaiian crisis of 1893, they were not to be denied now. Indeed arguably the most telling sign that the Cuban crisis had transformed the national scene was the absence of significant controversy accompanying the decision of Congress to annex Hawaii in July 1898, at the

²⁷ Ninkovich, 26.

²⁸ Paterson, 351.

height of the war with Spain. Imperialism was suddenly in the ascendancy and it was personified by the larger than life figure of Theodore Roosevelt, whose exploits with the all-volunteer Rough Rider regiment at San Juan Hill in Cuba had elevated him from the margins of American politics to the status of national hero. The escalation of the Cuban crisis had suddenly thrust imperialists like Roosevelt and Lodge to center stage.

The McKinley administration quickly determined that Spain should surrender Cuba and Puerto Rico following the cessation of hostilities. This was in keeping with express wishes of Congress and the spirit of the Monroe Doctrine that gave a degree of international legitimacy to American actions. The thornier issue of what to do with the Philippines was deferred until treaty negotiations began. The United States had several options. The conquering American fleet could sail out of Manila Bay and leave the archipelago under Spanish control or, alternatively, Washington could throw its support behind Emilio Aguinaldo and Filipino independence movement. The first idea was discounted largely because the war had been couched in terms of a struggle against Spanish tyranny while the latter was given very little serious consideration with McKinley ultimately concluding that independence would result in “misrule over there worse than Spain’s was.”²⁹ McKinley and his advisers toyed with the idea of keeping only a portion of the islands, perhaps just Luzon with the strategically valuable Manila Bay, or maybe even relinquishing control of the islands to a third power. The President feared the political backlash that might result from not gaining some strategic advantage from Dewey’s victory and strategic disadvantage that would result from a stronger power

²⁹ May, 253.

than Spain acquiring the territory. Ultimately “the issue came down to an all-or-nothing choice” and McKinley elected to opt for “outright colonial possession.”³⁰

McKinley famously informed a group of Methodist ministers visiting the White House in 1899 that he reached his decision regarding the Philippines only after several nights of contemplation during which he “prayed [to] Almighty God for light and guidance” and thus inspired he concluded that the United States had an obligation to “uplift and Christianize” the Filipinos.³¹ This providentially inspired sense of mission was wholly consistent with the spirit of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. It also, however, echoed the racially infused logic of Fiske and Strong and the great power imperialism favored by Lodge and Roosevelt. The importance attached to Manila reflected the influence of naval strategists like Mahan, who served on the Naval War Board advising the President. In sum, all the arguments made earlier in the century for American empire were now to be found in the motives guiding American policy towards the Philippines after the War of 1898. Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris signed with Spain in December 1898 Spain ceded not only Puerto Rico and the Philippines to the United States, but also the Pacific island of Guam. The United States had chosen to embrace imperialism.

Organizations like the Anti-Imperialist League bore testimony to the existence of dissent against this new direction in American foreign policy. However, the failure of the anti-imperialists to muster sufficient support to block the annexation of the Philippines underlined the momentum shift in American foreign policy that had taken place over Cuba. The anti-imperialist lobby included numerous high profile figures such as Carl

³⁰ Ninkovich, 34.

³¹ May, 252-253.

Schurz, Grover Cleveland, William Jennings Bryan, Mark Twain, and Andrew Carnegie, but their motives were as disparate as their backgrounds and they rarely presented a united front.³² During the debates over the Treaty of Paris anti-imperialist arguments about the dangers posed to the sanctity of the American republic by a policy of imperialism appeared anachronistic in contrast to the energizing spirit of America's newly acquired power. Indeed the contrast between ageing anti-imperialists such as Schurz on the one hand and youthful imperialists like Roosevelt on the other lends credibility to the concept that the transformation of American foreign policy in this period reflected in part a "generational paradigm shift."³³

Certainly there would be no turning back. Although the Philippines would be the last formal colony acquired by the United States, the same logic that led to the decision to annex the islands would guide American foreign policy through the early decades of the twentieth century. In the Caribbean and Central America the U.S. took on the role of regional hegemon, forcefully exerting its influence at the expense of the European powers and the regional republics. In the Pacific too the U.S. sought to exert greater influence, a path that would set it on an ultimate collision course with the era's other new power, Japan. The War of 1898 had presaged the emerging power of the executive branch in American politics, a development that became fully apparent with elevation to the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt in 1901. Roosevelt's war hero status earned him a place on William McKinley's reelection ticket in 1900 and when the president was assassinated soon after being returned to office, the former Rough Rider and champion of

³² Robert Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900*, (McGraw Hill, 1968).

³³ Roskin, Michael, "From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: Shifting Generational Paradigms and Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, 89:3, (Autumn 1974) 563-588.

the imperialist cause found himself in the Oval Office. Under his leadership the Monroe Doctrine would be transformed from a passive to an aggressive canon, the U.S would force through the construction of Panama Canal effectively turning the Caribbean into an American lake and making the U.S. a two-ocean power, and the United States would assertively stake out a place for itself on the world stage. The age of America as an insular state impervious to the lure of great power politics had vanished as surely as if it had gone down to the bottom of Havana harbor with the U.S.S. *Maine*.