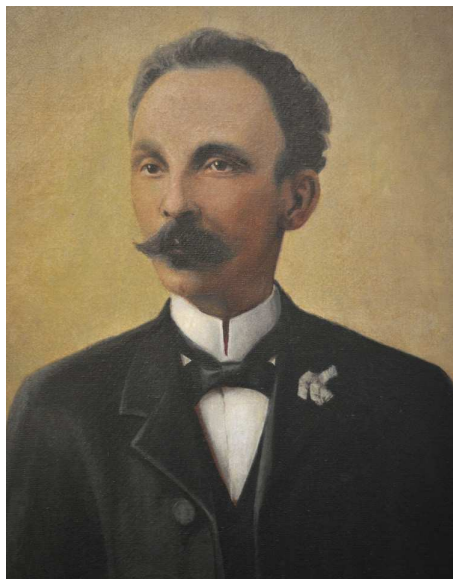


## 4.3 The Spanish–American War

The 1896 presidential election brought a new political alignment into play and saw the anti-imperialists lose ground. William McKinley's victory initiated a stronger central government that supported industrialization, protective tariffs, and territorial expansion. In 1898 this posture carried the United States to war with Spain. The conflict began as a humanitarian intervention to dissolve the brutal control of the Spanish in Cuba. It ended with the United States gaining political and economic control of Cuba, fighting a war in the Philippines, and acquiring territories in Guam and Puerto Rico. The Spanish–American War allowed America to flex its muscles in the Caribbean and the Pacific and to demonstrate its dominant role in the Western Hemisphere.

### The Cuban Independence Struggle

The problems with Spain began on the island of Cuba, which lies just 90 miles south of the Florida Keys. Cuba had been a territory of Spain since the 16th century. It was one of the last remnants of the once mighty Spanish empire in the New World, and the Cuban people had struggled for independence for many years. The United States supported a free Cuba in principle because it would eliminate the presence of a European power so close to its shores. During the 1890s alone the Cubans made three separate bids for independence, finally achieving success with the aid of their American neighbor.



Adam Eastland/age fotostock/SuperStock

**José Martí, an accomplished poet, viewed the Cuban struggles against Spain as similar to the American Revolution.**

José Martí (1853–1895), one of the Cuban revolutionaries, traveled to America to gather money, weapons, and troops to support Cuban independence. A noted author and journalist, Martí's essays and poetry gained an international reputation, and he traveled widely throughout Europe, South America, and the United States to press the Cuban cause. Through his writings and his organization of an international Cuban revolutionary committee, Martí became one of the most visible spokesmen for freedom. He returned to Cuba in 1895 to continue the struggle for independence in his homeland.

The Cuban situation was made more difficult in 1894 when the **Wilson–Gorman Tariff** established a 40% duty on all Cuban sugar entering the United States, causing an immediate crisis in the Cuban economy and increasing Cubans' resolve to win independence from Spain. Sugar had long been exempted from import duties, but the Panic of 1893 and continuing economic depression led to a decline in tax revenue. Removing sugar from the exempt list had been an effort to bolster government income, but it had the inadvertent result of sparking the uprising in Cuba.

One year later the revolution commenced under Martí's leadership. Spain sent 100,000 soldiers to quell the insurgency. Many in the United States were outraged, and support for the Cuban cause gained strength (Perez, 1998). American investors in Cuba also clamored for support and protection of their investments. Martí became one of the first martyrs to the Cuban cause, as a Spanish bullet killed him in one of the war's early skirmishes (Hoganson, 1998).

Public support for American involvement in the Cuban independence struggle was rooted in humanitarian and business concerns. In his first annual message to Congress in December 1897, McKinley detailed the inhumane treatment of the Cuban people by the Spanish military. Thousands of Cubans were "herded in and about the garrison towns, their lands laid waste and their dwellings destroyed" (McKinley, 1897, p. 6). Innocent villagers held in concentration camps faced unsanitary conditions and were provided with few provisions. As much as a quarter of the Cuban population died of disease or starvation (Miller, 1970).

Business interests in the United States also encouraged aid for the Cubans. During a downturn in the Cuban economy in the 1880s, American investors had gained control of its vast sugar estates and sugar mills. Cuba grew economically dependent on the U.S. market, sending as much as 90% of its exports to America. Investors had a vested interest in the outcome of the Cuban conflict.

## Yellow Journalism

American newspapers spread the word about atrocities in Cuba. Competition between New York City newspaper publishers William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer fed Americans' outrage with what came to be known as **yellow journalism**. The papers printed sensational stories about Cuban atrocities in their bids to boost sales and circulation. Both Hearst and Pulitzer owned dozens of competing newspapers and benefited heavily from exposing the Cuban news.

The genre had several important characteristics, including large multicolumn headlines, diverse front-page topics from politics to society, heavy use of photographs and charts to accompany the text, experimental page layouts and some attempts at color, reliance on anonymous sources, and self-promotion for the newspapers. Most important were the reporters and their crusades against the corruption they saw in government and business (Campbell, 2001).

Hearst and Pulitzer perfected yellow journalism with their depictions of cruel Spaniards acting against the freedom-seeking people of Cuba, helping spur American resolve for war (Gilderhus, 2000). Although some stories were completely fabricated, there was truth to some of the inflammatory stories—like Spanish military leaders forcing women, children, the old, and the sick into concentration camps, where they quickly died from disease and starvation.

The newspapers used salient quotes from public figures to enhance their position on the war. Theodore Roosevelt, assistant secretary of the navy and a strong advocate of the coming war, was quoted saying, "It was a dreadful thing for us to sit supinely and watch her death agony. It was our duty, even more from the standpoint of National interest, to stop the devastation and destruction" (as cited in Cirillo, 2004, p. 6).

## The “Splendid Little War”

McKinley dispatched the **USS Maine**, one of the navy’s battleships, to Cuba to reinforce the rebels’ cause and also to show support for American interests on the island. On February 15, 1898, while anchored in Havana Harbor, the *Maine* suffered a devastating explosion in which 266 of its 354-member crew died. Americans immediately blamed Spain for the apparent attack. In the U.S. press, the headline “Remember the *Maine*!” screamed for military retaliation and spurred support for the war. McKinley attempted a diplomatic resolution, but it quickly failed, and on April 11 he sought congressional authorization to go to war with Spain and establish an independent, stable government in Cuba.

Seven days later the United States announced that it regarded Cuba as a free nation, and Congress gave McKinley the power to remove the Spanish from the island. However, Congress appended its joint resolution supporting war with the **Teller Amendment**, which assured the Cuban revolutionaries that America would support their independence and did not intend to colonize the island. Crucially, the amendment made no mention of Spain’s other colonial possessions. On April 22, 1898, Spain issued its own declaration of war against the United States. The Spanish–American War had commenced.

The U.S. Army controlled fighting in Cuba. Though it was a strong fighting force, some referred to the preparation for war as a “comic opera” (Gilderhus, 2000, p. 20). For example, many of the soldiers sent to the hot Cuban climate were outfitted with gear suited for the cold and snow. Rations were poor and medical services inadequate. Many soldiers became seriously ill or died as the result of tainted meat and other rations. Because the army failed to change rations to meet the tropical conditions of Cuba and lacked refrigeration, much food spoiled. In other cases rations were of poor quality and led to much complaint. Despite these obstacles, the United States dominated.

Theodore Roosevelt left his position as assistant secretary of the navy to serve as second in command of the First Volunteer Cavalry, known as the **Rough Riders**. Roosevelt believed that the western fighters and cowboys that filled the unit’s ranks were the best type of men to take into battle, and there was no doubt that he sought the most intense action for himself. In his account of the war, Roosevelt said, “I had determined that, if a war came, somehow or other, I was going to the front” (Roosevelt, 1899, p. 5).

### Exploring History through Film: The Rough Riders

After the U.S. declared war against Spain, Theodore Roosevelt helped raise a volunteer regiment for the war. The unit, officially the U.S. 1st Volunteer Cavalry, was colloquially known as the “Rough Riders.”

#### The Rough Riders

From Title: *The Spanish-American War: A Conflict in Progre...*

(<https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=100753&xtid=8335>)



#### Critical Thinking Questions

- How did the members of the Rough Riders reinforce ideas about the American West?
- How did they reinforce stereotypical character traits associated with men?

He got his wish when his storming of the Spanish troops at San Juan and Kettle Hills became one of the war’s turning points. In August 1898 Spain surrendered, and Roosevelt’s actions made the front pages of newspapers in the United States. Overnight, he became the war’s hero and among the most famous men in America.

Secretary of State John Hay called the conflict “a splendid little war” (as cited in Thayer, 1915, p. 337) because it removed





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**Theodore Roosevelt, center, and his Rough Riders captured San Juan Hill from the Spanish in what would be a turning point of the war.**

Spanish presence from the Western Hemisphere and marked the emergence of the United States as a power on the world stage. Beyond the struggle in Cuba, Hay, Roosevelt, and other expansionists saw the conflict as an opportunity to gain a foothold outside the Western Hemisphere. As a result, fighting quickly spread to other areas of the globe where Spain claimed colonial possessions. A few days into the conflict, the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet, commanded by Commodore George Dewey, destroyed the Spanish Pacific Squadron off the coast of the Philippines. Like Roosevelt, Dewey quickly became a national hero.

The Hawaiian Islands, annexed to the United States by the McKinley administration just a few months before, played a vital role in the attacks on the Philippines, providing the United States an important outpost in the Pacific for resupply and fueling. Control of the Philippines, in turn, gave America better access to China and its vast markets.

## American Experience: Buffalo Soldiers and the Battle of San Juan Hill

One of the most decisive actions of the Spanish–American War, the Battle of San Juan Hill, occurred July 1, 1898 on the San Juan Heights east of Santiago, Cuba. The U.S. Fifth Army Corps was charged with overtaking the Spanish troops' fortified position. Charging into the face of incoming fire, many fell before the ranks split. The Rough Riders charged Kettle Hill, bravely making it to the top of the hill first. Other troops took San Juan Hill soon after.

The American press published sensational reports and widely credited the Rough Riders under the command of Theodore Roosevelt for the victory. The future president quickly became a national hero. Press reports at the time also assigned recognition to members of other U.S. units that fought alongside the Rough Riders, but their service has slipped from the nation's collective memory. Soldiers from the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments belonged to units of African American troops known as **Buffalo Soldiers**, who fought bravely alongside their White counterparts in Cuba.

During the fighting at San Juan Hill and nearby Kettle Hill, Buffalo Soldiers intermixed with Rough Riders to make the famous but uncoordinated charge. American casualties were greater than those of the Spanish, but at the end of the day, the U.S. forces gained the position. Immediately after the war Roosevelt told an African American journalist that he could wish for "no better men beside me in battle than these colored troops showed themselves to be" (as cited in Nalty, 1986, p. 77). He later remarked, "no one can tell whether it was the Rough Riders or the men of the 9th who came forward with the greater courage to offer their lives in service of their country" (as cited in Buckley, 2001, p. 152).

Despite Roosevelt's early praise, it was a very difficult war for African Americans, who not only had to endure challenging battlefield conditions but also faced intense racial hatred from their White



Courtesy Everett Collection

**This photograph shows Buffalo Soldiers ready for action in the Spanish–American War. Along with Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, they helped secure an important American victory at San Juan Hill.**

commanding officers. Even Roosevelt later changed his story to say that the African Americans only demonstrated bravery because White officers led them. He wrote an article for *Scribner's Monthly* in 1899 in which he said that the only way he could convince some of the African American troops to fight was through coercion with his pistol (Astor, 2001). It was another example of the hope and despair that African Americans faced—hope in fighting valiantly for their country and despair at returning to racism once home.

Although African Americans fought in every American war, they were not enlisted in the regular army until after the Civil War. Congress then created four units that came to be known as the Buffalo Soldiers. The troops were dispatched to the Great Plains and the Southwest, where they kept peace among the Native Americans and American settlers. Buffalo Soldiers also acted as the nation's first park rangers at Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks. Their units were segregated and in almost all cases governed by White officers. In the humid Cuban summer, the soldiers dealt with intense heat, rain, and an outbreak of yellow fever. Some soldiers from the 24th Infantry acted as nurses tending to ill soldiers, but the others saw combat action (Sutherland, 2004).

African American soldiers continued to serve the U.S. military proudly, but their units remained segregated and their opportunities for promotion remained limited. African American troops finally gained equal footing in the military after President Harry S. Truman signed an executive order in 1948, banning segregation in the military.

### For further reading, see:

Johnson, E. A. (1970). *History of Negro soldiers in the Spanish–American War*. New York: Johnson Reprint. (Original work published 1899)

Leckie, W. H. (1967). *The Buffalo Soldiers: A narrative of the Negro cavalry in the West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Schubert, F. N. (2009). *Black valor: Buffalo Soldiers and the Medal of Honor, 1870–1898*. New York: Roman & Littlefield.

## America's Instant Empire

As a result of the Spanish–American War, Cuba gained independence and the United States eliminated Spain's influence in the Western Hemisphere. The United States also expanded its empire. Under the terms of the December 1898 **Treaty of Paris**, America annexed Puerto Rico and Guam and, in a clause that the Spanish initially regarded with shock, claimed the Philippines. Spain reluctantly accepted the terms—and \$20 million in compensation.

This instant empire was met with a great deal of opposition in the United States. Opponents decried Philippine annexation for reasons as varied as the economic costs, Republican ideals about liberty, and racist fears of social and cultural amalgamation. Although public response to the victory over Spain and the new American empire was not universally negative, it did “inaugurate two decades of public debate in the United States about the proper relationship between liberty and power” (Anderson & Cayton, 2005, p. 339).

American forces remained in Cuba until 1902, where they attempted to build an infrastructure of roads and educational and medical facilities. With the **Platt Amendment**, named for Republican senator Orville Platt from Connecticut, the United States also attempted to force its economic will on the Cubans. The measure prevented Cuba from signing treaties with other nations, restricted its national debt, and formally gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuba to preserve its independence. It also forced Cuba to lease the land at Guantánamo Bay to the United States for use as a naval base. Grateful for help in overthrowing Spanish rule, and under immense pressure from the Americans, the Cubans reluctantly agreed to these terms (Suri, 2010).

## Guerilla War in the Philippines

McKinley quickly overcame any ambivalence over acquiring the Philippines, which he later described as “being dropped in our laps” (as cited in Shirmer & Shalom, 1987, p. 22). In his mind there was no alternative to annexation. He believed returning the islands to Spain would be “cowardly and dishonorable” (as cited in Shirmer & Shalom, 1987, p. 22), but at the same time he argued the Filipinos were not ready for independence. He argued that annexation was necessary to bring Filipinos into the fold of Christianity and civilization, but he neglected to note that many residents of the islands were already Christians and that many were members of the Roman Catholic Church. Left without protection, he worried that America’s imperial rivals, namely France or Germany, would intervene and claim the country. McKinley’s assumption that Filipinos were not Christian reflected imperialistic ideology that “natives” must be brought into the modern era through colonization.

McKinley and other advocates of expansion also saw China as the next trading frontier, and the location of the Philippines positioned the United States well to enter Asian markets. McKinley rarely spoke so openly about U.S. motives, however. Instead, he publicly proclaimed it was America’s duty to “uplift and civilize and Christianize” (as cited in Rusling, 1903, p. 17) the Filipinos.

The expansion of the American empire into the Philippines came at a heavy cost. American imperialists, eager for a foothold near the Asian continent, soon found the Filipino people unhappy with the results of the Spanish–American War. Even before it started, they had been fighting for their own independence against the Spanish, and many fought alongside Americans; when the Treaty of Paris gave Americans control of their island nation, their hatred readily transferred.

In their attempt to push the Americans from their shores, the Filipinos initially waged a guerilla war, using raids, ambushes, and mobile tactics to simultaneously fight and elude the stronger U.S. military force. In their efforts to end the resistance and avoid high casualties, American troops engaged in ruthless warfare. American brutality in the Philippine–American War compared to Spanish treatment of the Cubans, sparking cries of hypocrisy among anti-imperialists. American soldiers even used a form of water torture known as water cure, in which individuals were forced to ingest large quantities of water in a short period of time. African American soldiers among the U.S. forces were particularly conflicted about the mistreatment of Filipinos because many identified with the plight of these dark-skinned people who fought so hard for their freedom. The African American press railed against African American soldiers fighting other people of color. The *Kansas City American Citizen* urged against imperialism, calling it a “blight on the manhood of the darker races” (as cited in Mitchell, 2004, p. 64).

Anti-imperialists hoped for a public outcry, but they were disappointed. Despite some prominent voices among the opposition, most Americans strongly favored annexing the Philippines. Prospects for trade easily overcame fears of the burden of maintaining and incorporating an empire. The war for control of the Asian nation lasted until 1902 and resulted in the deaths of 4,325 U.S. soldiers. The losses of the Filipino people were dramatic. They suffered the deaths of 16,000 soldiers in battle and as many as 200,000 civilians due to disease and violence (Tucker, 2009).

For the American military leaders, one thing became clear from these interventions: The United States needed to improve its military. McKinley gave this job to Elihu Root, who, as a well-known corporate lawyer and trust regulator, had an unusual background for this position. But Root brought his skills in reforming organizations to the military (Rossini, 1995). By 1903 Root had increased the size of the military fourfold, established the National Guard as a reserve force, and created the Joint Chiefs of Staff to advise the president. This staff arrangement was better suited to coordinate efforts among the several branches of the military, all of which now reported to the Secretary of War (today’s Secretary of Defense).



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**Elihu Root, appointed secretary of war by President William McKinley, reformed the American military using his knowledge of corporate organization.**