

# 1898: The Spanish-American War

## Context

Cubans fought several wars to free themselves from Spanish colonial rule, including 1868-1878, 1879-1880 and 1895-1898.<sup>12</sup> In 1898, Cubans were on the brink of finally winning their independence. The U.S. government agreed to respect Cuba's sovereignty and promised they would not step in.

"On January 24, [1898] on the pretext of protecting the life and safety of Mr. Lee, U.S. consul in Havana, and other U.S. citizens in the face of street disturbances provoked by Spanish extremists, the Maine battleship entered the bay of Havana."<sup>13</sup>

## Pretext Incident

On February 15, 1898, a huge explosion sank the U.S.S Maine killing 266 of its crew.<sup>14</sup>

In 1975, U.S. Admiral Hyman Rickover's investigation concluded that there was no evidence of any external explosion. The explosion was internal, probably caused by a coal dust explosion. The ship's weapons and explosives were dangerously stored right next to its coal bunker.<sup>15</sup>

## Follow Up

The Maine's captain cautioned against assumptions of an enemy attack. The press denounced him for "refusing to see the obvious." The *Atlantic Monthly* said anyone thinking this was not a premeditated, Spanish act of war was "completely at defiance of the laws of probability."<sup>16</sup> Newspapers ran wild headlines: "Spanish Cannibalism," "Inhuman Torture," "Amazon Warriors Fight for Rebels."<sup>17</sup> Guillermo Jimenez Soler notes: "U.S. intervention in the war was preceded by intensive press campaigns which incited jingoism, pandering to the most shameless tales and sensationalism and exacerbated cheap sentimentality. Joseph Pulitzer of *The World* and William Randolph Hearst from *The Journal*, the two largest U.S. papers... carried their rivalry to a paroxysm of inflaming public opinion with scandalous, provocative and imaginary stories designed to win acceptance of U.S. participation in the first of its holy wars beyond its maritime borders."<sup>18</sup>

U.S. papers sent hundreds of reporters and photographers to cover the apparent Spanish attacks. Upon arrival, many were disappointed. Frederick Remington wrote to Hearst saying: "There is no war .... Request to be recalled." Hearst's cable replied: "Please remain. You fur-



## DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY.

<p><b>\$50,000!</b></p> <p><b>\$50,000 REWARD!</b></p> <p><b>For the Detection of the Perpetrator of the Maine Outrage!</b></p> <p><small>The New York Journal offers a reward of \$50,000 CASH for information furnished to it which will result in the detection and conviction of the perpetrator of the explosion of the Maine. The reward will be paid in full to the person or persons who shall furnish the information. The reward will be paid in full to the person or persons who shall furnish the information. The reward will be paid in full to the person or persons who shall furnish the information.</small></p>	<p>Assistant Secretary Roosevelt</p> <p>Convinced the Explosion of the War Ship Was Not an Accident.</p> <p>The Journal Offers \$50,000 Reward for the Conviction of the Criminals Who Sent 258 American Sailors to Their Death.</p> <p>Naval Officers Unanimous That the Ship Was Destroyed on Purpose.</p>	<p><b>\$50,000!</b></p> <p><b>\$50,000 REWARD!</b></p> <p><b>For the Detection of the Perpetrator of the Maine Outrage!</b></p> <p><small>The New York Journal offers a reward of \$50,000 CASH for information furnished to it which will result in the detection and conviction of the perpetrator of the explosion of the Maine. The reward will be paid in full to the person or persons who shall furnish the information. The reward will be paid in full to the person or persons who shall furnish the information. The reward will be paid in full to the person or persons who shall furnish the information.</small></p>
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NAVAL OFFICERS THINK THE MAINE WAS DESTROYED BY A SPANISH MINE



William Randolph Hearst

nish the pictures, I'll furnish the war." For weeks, Hearst's *Journal* dedicated eight pages a day to the explosion.<sup>19</sup>

Through ceaseless repetition, a rallying cry for retaliation grew into a roar. "In the papers, on the streets and in...Congress. The slogan was 'Remember the Maine! To hell with Spain.'<sup>20</sup> With the U.S. public and government safely onboard, the U.S. set sail for war and launched an era of 'gunboat diplomacy.' Anti-war sentiments were drowned out by the cries for war. On April 25, 1898, the U.S. Congress declared war on Spain.

## Real Reasons

Within four months "the U.S. replaced Spain as the colonial power in the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico, and devised a special status for Cuba. Never again would the U.S. achieve so much...as in that 'splendid little war,' as...described at the time by John Hay, future secretary of state."<sup>21</sup>

Historian Howard Zinn says that 1898 heralded "the most dramatic entrance onto the world scene of American military and economic power.... The war ushered in what Henry Luce later referred to as the American Century, which really meant a century of American domination."<sup>22</sup>

## Footnotes:

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| 12. Ed Elizondo, "History of the Cuban Liberation Wars," Oct.2, 2001.      | 15. Michael Rivero, "Dictatorship through Deception," <i>New Republic Forum</i> , Dec. 24, 1999. | 18. Soler   |
| 13. "Emergence of the U.S. as a world power," <i>Granma</i> , Aug.7, 1998. | 16. Rivero   | 19. Buschini  |
| 14. Bill Sardi, "Remember the Maine! And the Other Ships Sunk to Start a   | 17. J. Buschini, "Spanish-American War," Small Planet Communications, 2000.                      | 20. Buschini  |
|  |  | 21. Soler   |
|  |  | 22. Howard Zinn, "History as a Political Act," <i>Revolutionary Worker</i> , December 20, 1998. |

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# What Happened Aboard the U.S.S Maine?

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By Shannon Jones

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**B**y 1897, large sections of big business were clamoring for war with Spain. In October, Theodore Roosevelt, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy for President William McKinley, sent a wire to Admiral George Dewey advising him to prepare for an attack on the Spanish fleet in the Philippines pending developments in Cuba.

On the pretext of protecting U.S. citizens, in fact there was no such threat, the President ordered the Battleship Maine to Key West, Florida, where it could sail to Cuba at a moments notice. When conservative Spaniards attacked a Havana newspaper office on Jan. 12, McKinley provocatively sent the Maine to Havana.

The Spanish bent over backwards to avert war and accepted U.S. explanations that the powerful warship was on a "courtesy call." Its officers were treated with all due respect.

On February 15, just as the Maine prepared to leave, a huge explosion tore apart the ship. Two officers and 266, of the 354, crew died. The Spanish helped rescue the survivors and expressed shock at the tragedy.

To this day, no one knows for sure what caused the explosion. The Spanish had no motive for provoking a war, given the huge military and industrial preponderance of the U.S.

Without one shred of evidence, the U.S. press assumed the Spanish were to blame. When Hearst heard of the explosion he declared, "This means war." His *New York Journal* headline read, "The War Ship Maine was Split in Two by an Enemy's Secret Infernal Machine." The front page carried a drawing of the ship riding atop mines and showed wires leading to a Spanish fort guarding the harbor.

A commission hastily assembled by the U.S. concluded that a mine had destroyed the ship. The assumption, though not explicitly stated, was that the Spanish were responsible.

The slogan "Remember the Maine" became the battle cry of U.S. militarists. The U.S. issued a series of ultimatums, demanding that Spain

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Was the explosion a deliberate provocation by U.S. militarists or their agents to foment war with Spain? William Chanler, of the U.S. House of Representatives, claimed responsibility for the explosion in a conversation with U.S. ambassador William Bullitt in the early 1930's.

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## Button with battle cry for the Spanish-American War

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cede sovereignty over Cuba. Despite the fact that Spain capitulated to most U.S. demands, McKinley received authorization from Congress to use military force. On April 23, Congress adopted a resolution declaring that a state of war existed with Spain.

Within months, Spain was defeated. The U.S. obtained virtually all of Spain's colonies, including Cuba, the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico. The U.S. next turned against its supposed allies, the Philippine insurrectionists. After crushing their revolutionary movement, the U.S. established a brutal colonial administration to rival the Spaniards.

What did happen aboard the Maine? The facts all but rule out an attack by the Spanish. Not only did the Spanish have no motive, but circumstantial evidence makes it highly unlikely that an external device such as a mine or a torpedo destroyed the ship.

An independent report conducted by the Spanish made the following significant points:

- (1) A mine would almost certainly had to be detonated by electricity since the Maine was stationary and did not run into an explosive device. However, no wires were found.
- (2) No column of water was seen, though one would have been likely if a mine had exploded.
- (3) There were no dead fish in the harbor, as would be expected if an external explosion had occurred.

Further, the Maine entered Havana with virtually no advance notice, making it unlikely that anyone could have planted a mine in the ship's berth.

If the explosion was not caused by a mine, then it was triggered by something inside the ship. One hypothesis raised by the U.S. Navy, but soon discarded in light of war hysteria, was that a coal bunker fire detonated a reserve magazine. Many in the navy had questioned the wisdom of placing ammunition next to the coal, given the significant danger of accidental fire.

In 1976, U.S. Admiral Hyman Rickover published a report asserting that a fire in the coal bunker most likely had caused the explosion on the Maine. However, there is another possibility that deserves consideration. Was the explosion on the Maine a deliberate provocation by U.S. militarists or their agents to foment war with Spain? If accidental, the blast was extremely fortuitous for the U.S. Without an overt act on the part of Spain, McKinley would have been hard pressed to justify military action.

British historian Hugh Thomas, in his book *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (1971), cites William Astor Chanler, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, who had connections to Roosevelt, as a suspect in the bombing of the Maine. Chanler and his brothers were involved in smuggling arms to the Cuba insurrectionists. He reportedly claimed responsibility for the explosion in a conversation with the U.S. ambassador William Bullitt in the early 1930's. Chanler died shortly afterwards in Paris.

Source: Excerpt, "The press and U.S. militarism — a lesson from history," *World Socialist Web Site*, August 21, 1998. <[www.wsws.org/news/1998/aug1998/main-a21.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/news/1998/aug1998/main-a21.shtml)>