

## Introduction to the Spanish- American and Philippine Wars

“IT HAS BEEN A SPLENDID LITTLE  
WAR; BEGUN WITH THE HIGHEST  
MOTIVES, *carried on with magnificent intelligence and  
spirit, favored by that fortune which loves the brave.*”  
—*John Hay, American ambassador to Great Britain, to  
Colonel Theodore Roosevelt after the Spanish-American War*

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SPAIN BEGAN ITS AMERICAN EMPIRE in 1492, when Christopher Columbus arrived in the West Indies. For nearly three centuries, Spain controlled vast areas in the Americas, but by the early nineteenth century Spain's power was waning and its colonies in the New World desired freedom. Inspired by the American Revolution and the French Revolution, people in Mexico and South and Central America revolted, and by 1825 freedom from Spain had been achieved. Spain's overseas empire was reduced to a few scattered islands. But it was not long until these islands also demanded their freedom from Spanish rule.

Cuba began its struggle for freedom in 1868, and rebels continued to fight until 1878, when a treaty was signed with the Spanish government. The treaty granted Cuba greater autonomy, but in reality very little changed. Cuban resistance revived in the 1890s under the leadership of José Martí, who had been living in exile in the United States. He returned to Cuba in 1895 to lead the resistance movement. This cry for independence caught the attention of the American people.

### **A Cry for Independence**

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States was greatly influenced by the idea of manifest destiny. Once the American West had been subdued, many Americans looked to spread their influence to other parts of the world. Cuba drew a great amount of American interest because of the profitable sugarcane industry. This interest in Cuba prompted many Americans to call for U.S. intervention on behalf of the Cuban rebels, but in 1895 President Grover Cleveland declared neutrality. Tensions between the United States and Spain grew as the American public became aware of the Spanish policy of reconcentration, or the forced relocation of Cuban citizens. Spanish general Valeriano Weyler, in an attempt to quell the rebellion, began moving the Cuban population to the center of the island, placing them under guard and instituting martial law throughout the island. Relations between the U.S. and Spain continued to decline until February 15, 1898, when an explosion on board the USS *Maine* sank the ship in Havana Harbor. “Remember the *Maine*” soon became the rallying cry as popular support for war spread through the American public. On February 25, 1898, Congress declared war, and three days later the U.S. Navy created a naval blockade around Cuba. As the crisis continued to escalate in Cuba, tensions escalated in other parts of the world.

Resentment of Spanish rule had been growing in the Philippines, where guerrillas had been fighting against the Spanish throughout the 1890s. Though the events in Cuba started the war, the first fighting took place in the Philippines. Commodore George Dewey left Hong Kong two days after war was declared, and on May 1, 1898, he engaged a Spanish fleet at the Battle of Manila Bay. The U.S. forces annihilated the Spanish fleet, but Dewey did not have the troop strength to begin an invasion. Filipino guerrillas controlled land operations until U.S. forces arrived in July 1898.

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While Dewey was subduing the Spanish in the Philippines, the Spanish admiral Pascual Cervera sneaked through the U.S. blockade around Cuba. He entered the port at Santiago de Cuba but was quickly discovered and trapped in the port. The U.S. sent troops to Santiago de Cuba under the leadership of General William Shafter. Shafter arrived in June of 1898 and landed his forces near Daiquiri-Siboney, where they were joined by five thousand Cuban revolutionaries led by Calixto Garcia. Shafter began a westward march toward Santiago de Cuba. As U.S. forces approached Santiago de Cuba, they discovered that the Spanish were entrenched in a strong defensive position on the San Juan Heights. Shafter formed three divisions to attack the heights, which were the last obstacle preventing the capture of Santiago de Cuba. The attack began on July 1, 1898. Spanish artillery caused major problems for advancing American troops, but American Gatling guns were finally able to drive the Spanish from their positions and U.S. forces took the heights. The attack was more costly than anticipated, and American casualties

reached 1,385 (with 205 dead). Shafter began a siege on the city of Santiago de Cuba, securing its surrender on July 17, 1898.

The loss in Cuba forced the Spanish government to enter peace negotiations, but while these negotiations were being held U.S. forces struck two more Spanish positions. General Nelson Miles led an expedition to Puerto Rico, where he encountered little opposition. U.S. forces also attacked Manila, but again they encountered little resistance. With the war essentially over, Spain agreed to end hostilities on August 12, 1898, and on December 10, 1898, Spain and the United States signed a peace treaty in Paris. The treaty granted independence to Cuba and ceded Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States. The U.S. also purchased the Philippine Islands from Spain for \$20 million. Approximately three thousand American lives were lost in the war, though the vast majority were lost due to infectious diseases rather than to combat.

## **A Second War**

American forces continued to fight in the Philippines for the next three years, as Filipino guerrillas fought for outright independence. The Filipinos fought bravely but did not have the necessary supplies to sustain the war effort. The conflict known as the Philippine War officially ended on July 4, 1902, though occasional skirmishes continued throughout the next decade. Another 1,037 American soldiers lost their lives in this conflict, bringing the total lives lost in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine War to roughly four thousand.

The United States worked to stabilize the government in the Philippines, eventually granting the Philippines independence in 1946, several decades after the war had ended. Guam and Puerto Rico, the other territories the United States gained in the war with Spain, remain U.S. territories to this day.