U.S. Intervention in Cuba, 1898: Interpreting the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War

As Spain, the United States, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines approach the centenary of the 1898 war, scholars in all of these countries are revisiting the event that drew the United States into the Caribbean and Pacific as never before, elevating it to global-power status in an imperialist age (1). The war raises questions of U.S. power, intentions, core motives, ideology (including gender-based, age-based, and race-based thinking), decision making and leadership, politics, and public opinion (2). By emphasizing recent interpretations, this article suggests ways to tackle the key questions and contexts of the U.S. role in the multinational 1898 war. The long title—Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War—is used here in order to represent all of the major participants and to identify where the war was fought and whose interests were most at stake.

Historians have studied the 1898 war in four contexts, or what might be called levels of analysis: international, regional, national, and individual. A comprehensive understanding of U.S. foreign relations requires an analysis of all four parts and of their interrelationships.

International Context

First, the international level of analysis allows us to explore the characteristics of the international system, the distribution of power within it, and structural shifts over time. The central question is: which states possess the major instruments of power in the world system (3)? The answer helps to explain why the United States went to war in 1898. Most historians agree that the international system underwent a significant transformation in the late nineteenth century.

Paul Kennedy demonstrates in his influential book, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (1987), that as power shifted in the international system, the United States claimed an increasingly higher station, its international interests growing at the expense of others. A certain momentum set in: impressive industrial growth at home begot expansion abroad which, in turn, produced foreign interests, which then had to be protected by containing, coopting, or removing threats. On the other side of the expansion coin, then, was defense or containment, and hence war and intervention. As scholars have shown, the very anarchy of the international system created insecurity for the great powers and compelled interventionist policies (4).

The rise of the United States as a world power derived from its gains in the world economy. Between 1870 and 1900, the U.S. share of world manufacturing production climbed from 23.3 to 30.1 percent, making it by far the supreme industrial nation. The U.S. economic growth rate (1870-1913) raced at 5 percent. In 1890, moreover, the United States ranked second (behind only Russia) in population.

Rich agricultural land, plentiful raw materials, nationwide transportation and communications systems, technological advances, neighboring states that posed no threats, insulating oceans that deterred foreign threats, the availability of domestic and foreign capital, a large labor force constantly refueled by immigration—all helped lift the United States to the status of both regional and world power. As its power grew, the United States became increasingly interested in China, where the open-door policy was in the making; in the Pacific, where Hawaii was drawn into the U.S. vortex; and especially in Latin America, where U.S. influence flowed most dramatically.

The impressive ascent of the United States in the international system and the imperialists' vigorous rivalry for spheres of influence, particularly evident in Asia and Africa, gave real urgency to American participation in the great-power game—an urgency that infused the war of 1898. The United States feared that it might be left out of the international race for territory and especially that other imperialists would cut them off from the markets necessary to America's economic health. It seemed urgent to Americans that they act boldly in international relations or suffer economic—and hence social and...
political—distress at home.

Frederick B. Pike brings to our attention another dimension of the international competition—the importance of the symbol of great-power status. Americans, proud and boastful about their new olympian position, very much sought international recognition of their first-class accomplishments; they wanted to be thought of as a great people. Americans craved stature at the top of civilization's heap; that is one reason why they strutted at world's fairs when their industrial machinery won scores of blue ribbons (5). Not to become active on a global scale seemed to admit to an inferior status.

**Regional Context**

The second level of analysis evident in the recent work of historians is the regional. In this category historians strive to identify the peculiar regional characteristics that may explain U.S. behavior, assuming that geographical location or place in the international system matters. Regional identity helps define any nation's security, vulnerability, freedom of choice, cultural, political, and economic ties, and the historical patterns that have shaped decisions and events.

Walter LaFeber's *The American Search for Opportunity* (1993) skillfully develops the regional context for understanding the 1898 intervention in Cuba (6). Provocatively challenging conventional wisdom, he asks: Did the United States search for order in the late nineteenth century (a common theme in the historiography), or did it seek power and opportunities and quite willingly tolerate, if not initiate, the disorder that U.S. interventions and wars stimulated (7)? He claims that “order” stood low on the U.S. list of priorities. Instead, he argues, the United States often welcomed or stimulated disorder when that seemed the best way to expand for both land and commerce. In Cuba's case, only after trying diplomacy and reluctantly choosing war, did the United States seize the moment presented by chaos to strengthen its sphere of influence in Latin America.

By 1898, the United States largely dominated the Western Hemisphere, turning it into a dependent region in uneasy relationship with a towering hegemon (8). The United States saw the Western Hemisphere as a system or unit—unique, different, and vital to U.S. security and prosperity and in need of constant vigilance and control. Latin America was seen as a "natural market" for U.S. goods, and as fertile ground for implanting American core values of democracy and constitutional government in order to develop nations modeled after the United States, which would become allies of the United States (9).

One of the consistent goals of U.S. foreign policy in the nineteenth century was the eviction of European influence from the Western Hemisphere. The United States-sponsored Pan American movement in the 1880s, for example, sought to rally Latin America around the United States in order to blunt the "competitive European metropole powers" (10). In the crisis over Venezuela, the message rang loudly: get out and stay out. The war against Spain in 1898, then, lay in regional context as the latest decision to oust Europe from the Western Hemisphere.

Another feature of U.S. regional policy informs our view of the 1898 war: the U.S. refusal to consult with Latin Americans about their affairs. In this, the United States revealed a self-righteous disregard for the rights and sensibilities of small nations. In the Venezuelan crisis, for example, the United States altogether excluded Venezuelans from the negotiations with the British that settled the boundary dispute. "Once the war [against Spain] began," John L. Offner reminds us in his *An Unwanted War* (1992), "McKinley cut the Cubans out of wartime decisions and peacemaking negotiations..." (11). In 1898 and after, it is telling how infrequently U.S. officials consulted Cuban leaders about Cuba's future.

Louis A. Pérez's *Cuba and the United States* (1990) establishes the extent to which the United States valued Cuba as a key link in the U.S. sphere (12). Geography and proximity explain much, of course. As President McKinley said in 1898, the United States had special interests in Cuba because "it is right at our door" (13). Pérez states that Americans eyed Cuba as a strategic site in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico, a market, supplier, rich investment territory, and cultural outpost. "North Americans considered Cuba essential to the politico-military security of the United States," he writes, and "Cubans looked upon the United States as vital to the socioeconomic well-being of the island" (14).

Above all else, Pérez argues, the United States sought to prevent Cuba's sovereignty from being transferred from Spain to anybody else—including radical Cubans vowing revolution against propertied interests. The nineteenth-century goal of the United States, he argues, was always to control Cuba’s sovereignty; when Spain would not sell the island and could not reform it, the United States intervened in 1898 to halt a nationalistic revolution or social movement that threatened U.S. interests.

Pérez’s thesis carries weight because of the policies the United States followed in Cuba after intervention, during the occupation and Platt Amendment periods. Some scholars still stress as primary motives American humanitarianism, respect for the principle of self-determination, and a sense of moral responsibility to stop the bloodletting and to end Spain’s brutalization of Cuba and the crippling reconcentration policy (15). If so, however, how is it that self-determination became such a sullied principle after U.S. entry into war, as the United States imposed a protectorate on Cuba that included the sovereignty-denying Platt Amendment (16)? Pérez’s interpretation gains further support from the theme that the United States never hesitated to meet challenges from Europeans or from Latin Americans in the region in the late nineteenth century.

The Pérez thesis of intervention to forestall a potential Cuban social revolution also holds up well when linked to the history of U.S. ideas about revolution. Especially in the tumultuous 1890s, American leaders feared social upheaval at home; they feared domestic radicalism, sometimes sending federal troops to break labor strikes. But long before the 1890s, Americans had turned cool toward revolutions, however much they might cite the "spirit of 1776." The violence of the French Revolution after 1793 proved "traumatic" for Americans (17). The Latin American revolutions of the early nineteenth century disappointed Americans who doubted that Latins could govern themselves and honor liberties. Although the revolutions of 1848
buoyed Americans, the 1871 Paris Commune's taking of private property alarmed them.

By the 1890s, then, argues Michael H. Hunt, Americans saw the "perilous potential of revolution" (18). By that he means that U.S. leaders feared that Cubans, Filipinos, and others could damage U.S. interests, strategic and economic. More than ever, foreign revolutions carried the potential of stepping outside the bounds of an acceptable revolution. As Hunt explains, an acceptable revolution for the United States had to meet certain criteria: a minimum of disorder, a safeguarding of property rights, and moderate, constitutional political change. Under these conditions, of course, few if any revolutions would win U.S. favor. And that is the point. Social revolutions had become anathema. In the late nineteenth century, as the world tilted more toward revolution, the United States had become a stalwart anti-revolutionary power, especially in Latin America, especially in Cuba.

**National Context**

The third context is the national context, and by considering it we add other dimensions essential to understanding 1898. In this category, historians primarily identify domestic or internal characteristics to explain foreign-policy decisions. If we ask who holds power in the international and regional arenas, we also ask who had power in the nation itself. Each nation reacts differently to the prevailing features of the international system and regional setting according to its peculiar domestic order.

LaFeber's work, again, is instructive here, for he carefully outlines the intersections of U.S. industrial growth, ideology, the devastating economic depression and social unrest of the 1890s, and the emergence of the political alliance of Republicans and businessmen that dominated U.S. politics until 1912. This partnership of business and the Republican Party won the presidential election of 1896 that put the expansionist McKinley in the White House and advocated a muscular foreign policy, the active search for foreign markets, and a large navy as a major instrument of imperial power. At the top was a small elite that had three components: intellectuals, executives of major industrial and financial corporations, and the upper echelon of the executive branch of the federal government.

Possessing educational experience, these "cosmopolitans" concentrated decision making at the top. They were "system-makers" in the sense that they "integrated" various groups under their leadership (19). The cosmopolitans were empire-builders, and they utilized what McCormick calls "functionals" to advance their objectives—that is, missionaries, the big-navy lobby, merchant capitalists, financial adventurers, consumer-goods manufacturers, and agrarians (20). The cosmopolitans and functionals cooperated to build a national consensus for overseas marketplace expansion, empire, and ultimately war. They created what Emily S. Rosenberg has named "the promotional state"—a federal government committed to assisting American entrepreneurs who wished to trade and invest abroad (21).

Scholarship on the influence of the jingoistic yellow press and
public opinion has shown that neither compelled the United States to war. This view contrasts with the statement of David F. Trask, in his 1981 military history of the war, that "the people, acting out powerful irrational impulses, dictated the decision of April 1898" (22). Trask was no doubt influenced by Richard Hofstadter’s "psychic crisis" thesis. That is, America’s old-stock Anglo-Saxon, Protestant leaders reacted irrationally to the nation’s domestic problems (including urban chaos, labor violence, and agrarian protest) and then relieved their anxieties by going to war against Spain (23). In this interpretation of the so-called "realists," the key to the story is emotionalism, irrationality, or thoughtlessness (24).

The press, argue others, only reinforced attitudes shaped by other influences (25). And although the New York journalist William Randolph Hearst cooked up exaggerated stories, there were enough reports of real horror from U.S. official sources to arouse outrage against Spanish actions. "Had there been no sensational press..., the American public nevertheless would have learned about the terrible conditions in Cuba... [and] would have wanted Spain to leave...," writes John Offner (26). To argue, moreover, that public opinion, agitated by dramatic events, such as the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine (27), pushed reluctant leaders into war is to perpetuate the questionable interpretation that emotion rather than design caused the war.

In the national context, ideology figures prominently. An integrated set of ideas prevailed in the United States and they conditioned the environment in which decisions were made. Besides anti-revolutionary sentiment there was Social Darwinism, with its emphasis on evolutionary social and economic change and the survival of the fittest, which Americans, as Anglo-Saxons, defined as themselves. Factor in Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis, which aroused fears that America’s frontier at home was closing, necessitating a new frontier abroad if the American people were to sustain the very essence of their national character.

A male ethos also held a place in the constellation of American ideas (28). The language of U.S. leaders was weighted with words such as "manly," "manliness," and "weakling." American leaders often described other nations as effeminate—unable, in contrast to a macho Uncle Sam, to cope with the demands of world politics. "Examination of gendered overtones of so much foreign policy language and symbolism," Emily S. Rosenberg has written, helps us to discover chronological links between claims of masculinity and assertions of national power (29). The gendered imagery of the 1890s so prevalent in American language, moreover, helps us to understand how Americans thought in terms of hierarchy. Women, people of color, and nations weaker than the United States stood low on the power hierarchy because they were disparaged as "emotional, irrational, irresponsible, unbusinesslike, unstable, childlike" (30). And hence they were considered dependent, justifying U.S. hegemony.

Probably the most compelling component of the American ideology, as Hunt demonstrates, was racism or race thinking—a "national preoccupation" (31). He explores this topic at length in his book on ideology, joining other scholars who find the question of racism central to the history of the United States and to understanding U.S. behavior in international relations (32). Americans judged other peoples by ranking them in a "hierarchy of race." African Americans and Native Americans sat at the bottom of the hierarchy; at the top stood white Americans of Anglo-Saxon heritage. In the middle came Latinos, the Spanish-speaking peoples of color in Latin America who, it was said, had suffered so much under Spanish rule that they had lost an ability to govern themselves. Americans attributed traits of uninhibited sexuality to Latin males, often sketched as dark-skinned, half-breed brutes and savages—dishonest, deceitful, conning, and corrupt.

The unrelenting American contempt for Latin Americans, extant at a time of flourishing racism in the United States, facilitated the expulsion of Spain from the Caribbean and the subjugation of Cuba after intervention. Such thinking conditioned the U.S. decision-making environment of 1898 toward domination in significant ways. First, those who presume to be superior do not negotiate with those they deem inferior; diplomacy is thus downgraded, and war is elevated as an instrument of policy. Second, superiors expect to win wars against inferiors; so war becomes an attractive method to gain foreign-policy objectives and to civilize a retrograde world.

**Individual Context**

We turn, finally, to the **individual context**, where historians have concentrated on President William McKinley and the imperialists who surrounded him. Many historians analyze American foreign relations at this level simply because individuals **make decisions**. Individual leaders decide whether or not to negotiate; they manage or mismanage the foreign-policy process; they do or do not have the political expertise to handle Congress; and their different styles of diplomacy shape results. In the national, regional, and international settings, of course, some individuals have stood out as particularly influential, and therefore historians try to discover what made them tick by looking at personality traits, ideology, political ambitions, prejudices, family background, and more (33). President William McKinley made the day-by-day, hour-by-hour decisions that plunged the United States into war in 1898. We must contend with him.

The view of McKinley that historians held for a long time judged him a poor leader; he buckled under pressure. Spineless and reactive, McKinley swayed with the breezes of public opinion stirred up by sensationalist newspapers; he cowered before manipulative business leaders, politicians, and members of Congress; and he lost control of events. Walter LaFeber, Lewis L. Gould, and John Offner, among others, have posited a sharply different interpretation (34): McKinley dominated American foreign relations. As a military man in the American Civil War, attorney, member of the U.S. House of Representatives, governor of Ohio, and a recognized authority on tariff policy and reciprocity, McKinley brought impressive experience to the presidency. He orchestrated foreign policy from the White House with the first efficient communications system, and he made Congress follow his foreign policy. He was, perhaps, the first modern president.

Most scholars agree that McKinley personally wanted to avoid war, that he reluctantly chose it after trying other alternatives to end the Cuban crisis, including purchasing Cuba from Spain for three hundred million dollars. This buy-out effort suggests that independence was never McKinley’s primary objective. That he adamantly
refused to recognize the insurgency or the republic and showed little sympathy for *Cuba Libre* also indicates that McKinley did not endorse outright independence. The president, it seems, had two goals in 1898: to remove Spain from Cuba and to control Cuba in a manner yet ill-defined. When the Spanish (and the Cubans) balked at a sale and when diplomacy failed in the face of the belligerents’ rejections of compromise, McKinley opted for war. War became the only means to oust Spain from Cuba and to control the island.

LaFeber thinks that these two goals were driven by McKinley’s need to improve the American economy, and that the president listened to members of the business community, who finally concluded that war was necessary. Offner, on the other hand, argues that McKinley simply wanted to free Cubans from a cruel imperial master and that the president acted primarily as a party loyalist; that is, he and Republican Party leaders understood that if they did not wage war against Spain they would lose control of Washington to the Democrats. United States politics determined the American course of action. Offner denies the thesis that what drove McKinley’s policy before April 1898—before the war decision—was the desire to control Cuba, but Offner confirms it after the decision. He speaks of a sudden reversal of U.S. attitude during and after April 1898, a rapid shift from humanitarianism and domestic political needs to imperial calculations. Such remarkable shifts are seldom evident in history, and in this case the thesis of abruptness neglects the decades-long U.S. push into Latin America and the Pacific that the international and regional contexts demonstrate.

**Conclusion**

A key question remains that intersects with all four contexts, and the literature falls short of a definitive answer. Had the war between Spain and Cuba reached a stage of stalemate by spring 1898? That is, could neither side have won the war, as Offner asserts but Pérez denies? If the answer is that there was a stalemate, then historians are pointed toward the school of thought which holds that it would have been difficult for McKinley, however patient a leader, to have resisted the urgent economic and political pressures to intervene. In short, the lack of Spanish-Cuban compromise made war inevitable. On the other hand, if the answer is that the Cubans were winning and that no stalemate existed, then we are pointed toward the provocative interpretation that the United States intervened in order to prevent a Cuban victory that would have ensured island independence and thereby damaged U.S. economic interests, undermined U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and slowed the United States’ rise to world power. As the one-hundredth anniversary of the 1898 war approaches, we are likely to see more probing of this question.

**Endnotes**

1. This article grew from the author’s paper on U.S. historiography presented to a conference on the 1898 war at the Instituto de Historia de Cuba and Universidad de Havana in Cuba, 29 June-1 July 1994. An earlier version of this article appeared in *The History Teacher* 29 (May 1996): 341-361.


4. This is the thesis of Michael Mandelbaum, The Fate of Nations: The Search for National Security in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


18. Ibid., 105.


20. Ibid., 204-211.


30. Ibid., 33.


33. For the insights that the field of psychology can bring to the study of decision making, see Richard H. Immerman, “Psychology,” in Hogan and Paterson, Explaining, 151-164.

34. Lewis L. Gould, The Spanish-American War and President McKinley (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982).