

A Match is Nothing Without a Fuse; A Fuse is Nothing Without a Bomb: Starting Two Wars, 1898-1899

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FootNotes

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The Spanish-American War is a relatively forgotten war in American history. The most

remembered wars—the Revolution, the Civil War, World War II, Vietnam—absorb much of our attention and leave smaller wars, even “a splendid little war” in the shade.^[1] The two things that are perhaps most remembered from the Spanish-American war are Teddy Roosevelt’s charge up San Juan Hill with the Rough Riders, and, before that, the explosion of the warship USS *Maine* in Havana harbor in February 1898.

That explosion, which caused mass public outrage in the United States, is usually remembered as the cause of the war between the United States and Spain. The U.S. took the explosion as an act of deliberate sabotage (“dirty treachery,”

Theodore Roosevelt fulminated) by the Spanish, aimed at destroying one of the most modern warships in the American fleet, and killing 260 of her crew.^[2] When the official report came out in early April 1898 confirming that assumption, the outrage erupted even more, pushing a reluctant McKinley towards war.^[3] Wall Street fell on the news as investors saw war as imminent, and even this reaction was targeted for criticism. As one newspaper put it, Wall Street was the “the colossal and aggregate Benedict Arnold of the Union and the syndicated Judas Iscariot of humanity.”^[4] McKinley caved to the pressure, and submitted a bill to both houses of Congress that would demand Spain leave Cuba and give him permission to use the necessary military force if they refused. The vote was 311-6 in the House and 42-35 in the Senate. McKinley had his war.

But the vote in the Senate reveals something interesting. While the public outrage was real, support for the war within the United States was not quite as uncomplicated as it might have seemed. Despite the outrage, despite the newspaper fulminations, the Senate almost refused McKinley’s request for a war, passing only by a four vote margin (i.e. if four votes had switched from positive to negative, the vote would have failed). There was something else going on under the surface that bubbled up in the Senate and almost prevented the start of the war.



Choices and Inevitability

The Spanish-American War is one of those wars, like World War II, where the immediate cause seems absolutely clear. Like the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the explosion of the *Maine* has gone down as the definitive cause of war. But the difficulty with such a clear cause of war, with such a clear *choice* about going to war, is that it obscures the way in which that choice was the product of a series of choices along the way, each of which guided both the United States and Spain down the path to war. The decisions made after the *Maine* explosion came after a long series of decisions, ones that happened over the course of years, if not decades. By the time McKinley made his fateful decision in April 1898, people—both grand and ordinary—had already made multiple choices for war.

I should note, before I explore further, that going to war was not inevitable. Historians have long been attracted to the idea of historical inevitability, dabbling in the Whiggish ideal of progress or the Marxist ideal of communism, but the pendulum has now swung strongly to the sense that historical actors have the agency to make meaningful choices. That even the choice about going to war with Spain in 1898 was not inevitable is illustrated by the Senate vote, given the four vote margin. Having a series of choices makes each one less critical, but that is not the same thing as them being irrelevant or predetermined.

The Global Choice

By the late 19th century, Spain was a failing empire. After her peak in the 15th and 16th centuries, Spanish imperial fortunes had steadily declined. By the 1890s, Spanish possessions were a fraction of their former selves, around 260,000 square miles in size from a height of nearly eight million square miles, the bare skeletal remains of the empire that had once run much of the world. Weakness abroad was paralleled by weakness at home. Political misfortunes had undercut Spain's governments throughout the century, and by the 1890s, the dynasty was exhausted. Worse, the current King of Spain, Alfonso XIII, was a child who had come to the throne as an infant. He was a weak king, and his regent, his mother Maria Cristina, a weak queen. The monarchy was failing and was therefore reluctant to *look* weak, lest it be overthrown by its domestic opponents. Any more loss of empire would become a serious domestic issue. The result was a conscious decision—a choice—to resist any further reductions in Spain's imperial possessions. This choice was not based on economics or anything else fundamental. Spain's colonies no longer gave it substantial resources of any kind. It was a simple political calculation that had less to do with the interests of Spain than with those of Alfonso XIII.

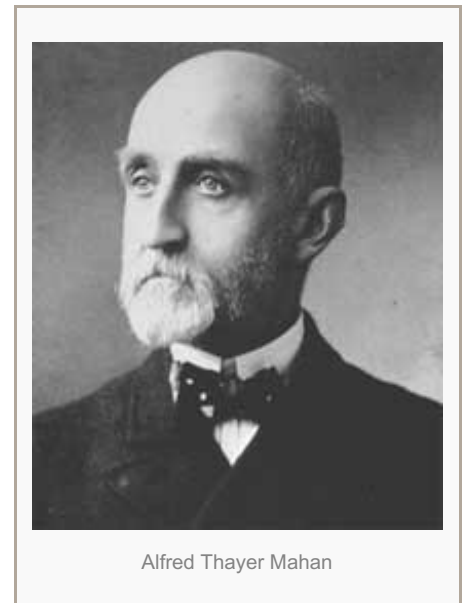
By contrast, the United States was a growing power in the late 19th century, resurgent after the cataclysm of the Civil War. By the 1890s, the U.S. economy was the largest in the world, one that outshone even Britain, the imperial power that had supplanted Spain. More, the Manifest Destiny of the 19th century made many Americans—both elite and ordinary—believe that the U.S. was the chosen nation of the world, a sense that was confirmed for them by the conquest of the western half of the continent. With the driving of the golden railway spike in Utah in the 1880s, connecting the first transcontinental rail line, Americans believed that the frontier had closed, and America had become the dominant continental power.^[5]

Added to that new power was a growing sense within the United State of the rest of the world, driven by the rise of new mass newspapers. Advances in printing technology had allowed newspapers to be published much more cheaply, and the result was an explosion of news reading, an explosion that reached much further down into the public than ever before. People read about the world around them, and connected it to their own interests. Here again, there was a choice to be made. Would the United States stay isolated in the Western Hemisphere, avoiding “foreign entanglements” as George Washington put it? Or would it continue to expand and become a global power, one that took its place on the stage of world powers? Would Manifest Destiny go from being about the continent to being about the world?

There were ideological frames pointing in both directions, though the weight was probably towards the global side. Social Darwinism, which had achieved popularity among all the imperial powers and the United States, posited a

racial hierarchy, with the most “successful” races at the top because of their natural superiority. Here was scientific racism, and it pushed people to continue expanding, as a way of continuing to demonstrate their superiority. Theodore Roosevelt, a rising politician in 1890s America, was a particular proponent of Social Darwinism, and thought that Anglo-Saxons were among the “dominant” races of the world.^[6]

How should such dominance be managed? In the 1880s-1890s, an American naval officer, Alfred Thayer Mahan, answered the question of how to do global expansion. Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power on History* argued that control of the sea was the critical factor in world power.^[7] The nations with powerful navies were the ones who would run the world. To be a world power meant being a naval power. Mahan’s analysis—like Social Darwinism—struck a chord with many Americans. Roosevelt wrote a letter to Mahan where he said, “I can say with perfect sincerity that I think [your book is] very much the clearest and most instructive general work of the kind...I wish...that the whole book could be placed where it could be read by the navy’s foes, especially in Congress.”^[8] Nor was Mahan only popular in the U.S. His work became a global sensation, especially in places like Britain, because it confirmed for them what they were already doing. Now, they had an analytical foundation for their naval spending. Even revisionist powers got in on the act: Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany had the book translated into German and gave copies to all his naval officers.^[9]



Fighting against these pro-global forces in the United States were long-standing ideas about America’s role in the world. From the beginning, there had been a certain powerful strain of American thinking that believed that the U.S. should remain aloof from global concerns and focus on building itself. The classic statement of that was President Washington’s farewell address of 1796, where he warned that “Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.”^[10] Washington spoke of alliances in particular, but much American thinking expanded that warning to include involvement with issues outside the United States in general. This belief was allied to a sense that America was supposed to be an *example* of greatness to the rest of the world, but not someone actively exporting that greatness. The United States was to be a “shining city upon a hill,” as Jonathan Winthrop put it in 1630, visible to the rest of the world, but aloof.^[11]

These strains came together in the 1890s in a determined effort to resist American expansionism, and prevent the U.S. from becoming an empire like the European powers.^[12] The anti-imperialism of the day was a peculiar coalition, numbering among them Northeasterners, comfortable with their global trade, and Midwesterners, focused on agriculture and all its issues. The Anti-Imperialist League, founded late in the 1890s, had as members a former U.S. President in Grover Cleveland, a robber baron of the old school in Andrew Carnegie, and a labor leader in Samuel Gompers.^[13] This was hardly the standard set of alliances within U.S. politics. Nor were they really the pure ideologues I have suggested above—much of Gompers’ resistance to imperialism came from a worry that a flood of foreign labor—Chinese and Filipino particularly—would undercut labor advances in the United States. Nonetheless, it was strong strand within American politics, and one that stood against Roosevelt’s sense of global destiny. Still, if anti-imperialism was a substantial movement, it was not the winning one, and the U.S. government, first under Benjamin Harrison, then under William McKinley, began building a navy that reflected Mahan’s analysis. The choice was for global power, and that meant warships, large, armored, and steam-powered, to assert American primacy.

The Caribbean

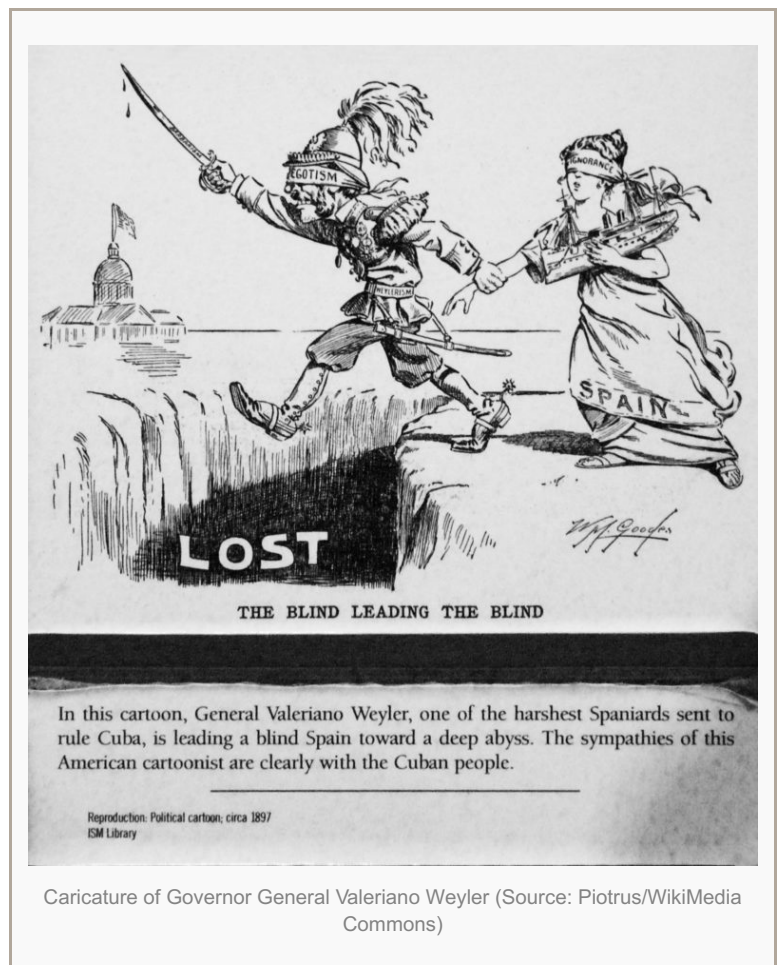
This choice meant everything for the Caribbean because it highlighted the central strategic dilemma of the United

States. America had coasts on both the Atlantic and Pacific, separated by the extended length of Central and South America. Where to put its new navy? Base it on the Pacific coast, and the Atlantic coast was vulnerable to attack before the navy could reach it. Base the navy on the Atlantic coast, and the Pacific coast faced a similar vulnerability. Split the navy between the two coasts, and the U.S. faced the possibility of being defeated piecemeal before it could concentrate its forces. The only answer—and it was one that American strategists understood quickly—was to shorten the time of passage between Pacific and Atlantic. That meant a canal somewhere across the narrowest portions of Central America, one that would sidestep the long and arduous passage southward. A canal meant that American ships would not have to wave to the South Pole as they passed through the difficult Straits of Magellan, but instead could reinforce each coast relatively quickly. But to build such a canal was not enough. The canal would mean nothing if the Caribbean was not an American-controlled sea. Anything less meant that American access to the canal would be threatened. Essentially, Mahan meant that Spain had to go from the New World. Even the last remnants of her empire, especially Cuba and Puerto Rico, would have to be American owned, or at least American controlled. The strategic choice to build a strong global navy meant that Spanish possessions in the Caribbean were suspect.

There was also a humanitarian choice in the Caribbean. The Spanish—not willing to give up on their control—had met uprisings in Cuba with great and continuing brutality. In the 1890s, Governor General Valeriano Weyler used counterinsurgency techniques to try and crush the Cubans, including the reconcentration (*reconcentrado*) of Cuban civilians into camps to separate them from the insurgents. Though this tactic was a reasonably effective military one, the forced uprooting of Cuban civilians and their suffering in badly-managed Spanish camps were a political disaster for the Spanish. Spanish opposition parties denounced the treatment and the American press had a field day. Here was a humanitarian crisis close to home, and one that the new media could use to drive sales. One of the most important publishers, William Randolph Hearst, saw this situation as the basis for an American intervention. At one point, he was said (perhaps apocryphally) to have telegraphed one of his photographers in Cuba, “You furnish the pictures, I’ll furnish the war.”^[14] The public agreed—and there was strong popular sentiment that the U.S. should take a hand. This is often painted as “yellow journalism,”

in which strident newspapers manipulated the United States into war. The truth is more complicated. The newspapers were certainly aggressive and loud, but they were retailing a message with which the public agreed. The papers did not create the warlike mood; they merely satisfied it. Such public outcry led McKinley to start pushing the Spanish to resolve the situation in Cuba. As he said to the Spanish ambassador, “Spain’s inability to restore peace entails upon the United States a degree of injury and suffering which can not longer be ignored.”^[15] The Spanish tried. They recalled Weyler and sent a more conciliatory Governor General, who offered the Cubans self-government within the Spanish Empire.

The final choice thus came down to neither the Spanish nor the Americans. If the Cuban resistance had accepted self-government, it seems likely that the U.S. and Spain might well have avoided war altogether. But the Cubans



had their own agency and their own ability to choose. They were themselves actors in this long trudge to war, and actors who read the situation with some sophistication. The Cubans aimed for “Cuba Libre” not for some marginal version of it that still answered in some way to Spain. They thus refused the Spanish offer, and the rebellion continued, waiting unknowingly for the arrival of the great armored cruiser named for America’s 23rd state.

Choices

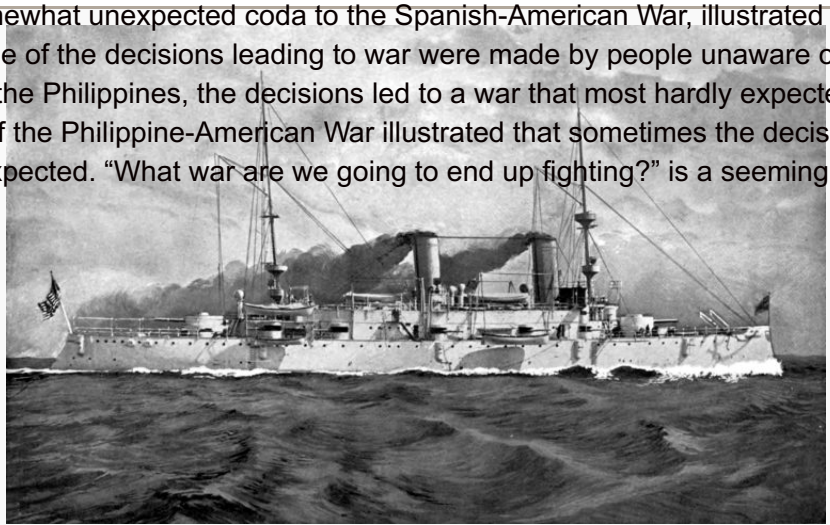
What this account has revealed is the number of choices made along the way that shaped the path to war. McKinley’s choice after the sinking of the *Maine* was just the last one, the end of a whole long line of decisions that created the Spanish-American War. Those choices had been made at the global level, at the hemispheric level, and at the regional level of the Caribbean. They had been made by Spanish, by Americans, and by Cubans, made by elites and by the public. They had been driven by ideology, by greed, by weakness, and by political calculation. This assortment of choice had meant that by the time McKinley came to contemplate war with Spain, his options were significantly constrained. That is perhaps the most important lesson of this examination of the start of the Spanish-American War: *that the people making the choice for war are often not or not just the leaders of the nations.* Sometimes, those making one of the long sequences of choices that lead to war are an ordinary soldier or sailor who forgot to vent the coal bunker on his ship; often, those making a choice for war are not even aware that they are doing so. This was true in the Spanish-American War, and it is true in many of the wars that the United States has fought.

Coda—The Philippines

William McKinley was somewhat surprised to discover that he was starting a war that spanned the globe rather than one confined to the Caribbean. The reason for that was Teddy Roosevelt’s aggressiveness. Roosevelt was, as we have seen, a committed global expansionist, and he believed that the U.S. should control not only the western hemisphere, but become one of the world’s great imperial powers. In the 1890s, that meant getting access to the markets of China, and getting to China meant finding harbors for the American navy to sail across the vast Pacific and close on East Asia. One of the few remaining Spanish possessions, the archipelago of the Philippines, would be perfect for that, especially its deep-water bay at Manila. Roosevelt, then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy, thus arranged for a like-minded friend, George Dewey, to take command of the American Asiatic Fleet, near China, and when war with Spain loomed, he told Dewey that upon declaration of war, Dewey should attack the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay. Roosevelt made this decision while Secretary of the Navy John Long was out sick and when Long returned, he said that “in my short absence, I find that Roosevelt...has come very near to causing more of an explosion than happened to the *Maine*.”^[16] But Long, ailing and infirm, did not countermand Roosevelt’s order. Thus, when war was declared, Dewey sailed to Manila and sank the Spanish fleet there.

Suddenly, McKinley had another decision to make. What to do with the Philippines? There were still Spanish forces there, there was a Filipino insurgency restarting, and other imperial powers started sniffing around in the aftermath of the U.S. victory. McKinley waffled, but sent troops, who successfully defeated the rest of the Spanish forces and gave the U.S. control of Manila. Here again, we see the chain of decisions building. Roosevelt’s initial decision to send Dewey’s fleet and McKinley’s decision to send troops started to build a commitment by the U.S. to taking the Philippines, a commitment McKinley decided in the fall of 1898 to honor by negotiating the purchase of the Philippines from the Spanish as part of the peace negotiations. Here, though, the end of one war fed the beginning of another, because the resurgent Filipino revolutionaries, who had been encouraged by the United States to fight the Spanish, suddenly found themselves handed from one imperial master to another. Like the Cuban revolutionaries, that was not acceptable to them, and it led early in 1899 to a clash between U.S. and Filipino forces that started an entirely new war for the United States, across the globe in a place that few Americans knew of before 1898. Arthur MacArthur, one of the American officers in the Philippines, talked of getting some knowledge of the place from a visitor’s guide which, among other things, “advised all travelers to carry coffins, as few returned alive from Manila.”^[17]

American involvement in the Philippines, a somewhat unexpected coda to the Spanish-American War, illustrated the flip side of the start of that war. In that war, some of the decisions leading to war were made by people unaware of the consequences of what they were doing. In the Philippines, the decisions led to a war that most hardly expected, in a place few knew. In some sense, the start of the Philippine-American War illustrated that sometimes the decision for war is taken, but the war that results is unexpected. “What war are we going to end up fighting?” is a seemingly odd question to be asking at the start of conflict, but, it turns out, a necessary one.



Painting of the USS Olympia, the flagship of Admiral George Dewey USN at Manila Bay during the Spanish-American War

- [1] John Taliaferro, *All the Great Prizes: The Life of John Hay, From Lincoln to Roosevelt* (Reprint ed. Simon & Schuster, 2014), 330.
- [2] Quoted in Louis A Pérez, “The Meaning of the Maine: Causation and the Historiography of the Spanish-American War,” *Pacific Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (1989): 293-322.
- [3] In reality, the explosion seems to have been caused by a buildup of bunker gas in one of the coal bunkers. See Hyman George Rickover, *How the Battleship Maine Was Destroyed* (Washington: Naval History Division, Dept. of the Navy : for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1976).
- [4] The Sacramento *Evening Bee*, 11 March 1898, quoted in Julius Pratt, “American Business and the Spanish-American War,” in *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 14, 2 (May 1934), 163-201.
- [5] Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year* (1893): 199-229 is the founding document of the frontier is closed school of thought. The essay is less important as an analysis of the actual history of the 19th century frontier and more important as a piece that reveals American *perceptions* that the frontier was closed.
- [6] Quoted in Thomas G Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (LSU Press, 1992), 11.
- [7] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1890).
- [8] Quote is from May 12, 1890 in H.W. Brands, ed., *The Selected Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 72. Useful on Roosevelt’s thinking about the Navy is J. Marolda Edward, *Theodore Roosevelt, the U.s. Navy, and the Spanish-American War* (Macmillan, 2001)..
- [9] Paul M Kennedy, “Mahan Versus Mackinder. Two Interpretations of British Sea Power,” *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 2 (1974): 39.
- [10] http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp, accessed February 21, 2017.
- [11] <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm>, accessed February 21, 2017.

[12] It should be noted that these anti-imperial forces mostly did not have an issue with the conquest of the west and the domination of the western hemisphere.

[13] Gompers supported the war with Spain before changing his mind, so he was hardly a convinced anti-imperialist. Nonetheless, the combination of he and Carnegie is a fascinating one.

[14] There's a good discussion of the quote, and its perhaps mythical nature in David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 127.

[15] NA, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 550.

[16] David F. Trask, *The War With Spain in 1898* (Reprint ed. University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 111.

[17] Quoted in William Thaddeus Sexton, *Soldiers in the Sun* (Harrisburg, PA: The Military Publishing Company, 1939), 20.