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### What started the Spanish American War?

Although the sinking of the USS Maine is regarded as the start of the Spanish-American war. I believe that several more important factors lead-up to the conflict. The true cause for the U.S. to become involved was Cuba's close proximity to the U.S., and economic interests in Cuba. "Yellow journalism" was also an important factor. Because of yellow journalism Americans and politicians alike, were transfixed on the crisis in Cuba. Cuba had fought the Spanish for 3 years in revolution in an attempt to end a 400 year long colonial rule by Spain. In an attempt to protect US citizens and economic interests in Cuba, the USS Maine was dispatched to Havana.

Cuba is a large Island land mass approximately 300 miles off the coast of Florida in the Bahamas. At the time before the US became involved, Cuba was in the midst of a 400 year Spanish Colonial rule. Which goes all the way back to 1492, and began after Christopher Columbus's famous voyage across the Atlantic. Cuba's close proximity to the US is believed to be an important factor that would lead to US involvement.

"The war that erupted in 1898 between the United States and Spain was preceded by three years of fighting by Cuban revolutionaries to gain independence from Spanish colonial rule. From 1895–1898, the violent conflict in Cuba captured the attention of Americans because

of the economic and political instability that it produced in a region within such close geographical proximity to the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

For three years before the sinking of the USS MAINE in Havana, US citizens and Lawmakers were receiving news of instability and a fight for independence in Cuba. “The Cuban struggle for independence had captured the North American imagination for years and newspapers had been agitating for intervention with sensational stories of Spanish atrocities against the native Cuban population. Americans came to believe that Cuba's battle with Spain resembled United States's Revolutionary War. This continued even after Spain replaced Weyler and said it changed its policies, and the North American public opinion was very much in favor of intervening in favor of the Cubans.”<sup>2</sup> During the 1890's something that would be called “yellow journalism” was used to cover the news coming from Cuba. American newspapers, in an effort to compete with each other, had begun a habit of over embellishing and exaggerating the news in an attempt to sell more papers. “Pulitzer and Hearst(newspaper publishers) are often adduced as a primary cause of the United States' entry into the Spanish–American War due to sensationalist stories or exaggerations of the terrible conditions in Cuba.”<sup>3</sup> “It's been suggested that a major reason for the U.S. war against Spain was the fierce competition emerging between Joseph Pulitzer's New York World and William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal”, Joseph E. Wisan wrote in an essay titled “The Cuban Crisis As Reflected In The New York Press” (1934). He stated that “In the opinion of the writer, the Spanish–American War would not have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/spanish-american-war>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Cuba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Cuba)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow\\_journalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_journalism)

occurred had not the appearance of Hearst in New York journalism precipitated a bitter battle for newspaper circulation." <sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, the USS Maine was sent to Cuba to protect American assets during the revolution that was happening there. It was also intended to be a show of force. At the time the U.S. was still attempting to solve things in Cuba diplomatically with Spain. And talks between the U.S. and Spain continued even after the sinking of the Maine in Cuba. Spain was even notified beforehand that the Maine would be porting in Havana.<sup>5</sup> Once harbored in Havana the Captain of the Maine, Sigsbee, even invited Spanish officers to come aboard the Maine socially, as a show of the friendly intentions of the Maine's presence.<sup>6</sup>

"At 9:40 on the evening of February 15, 1898, the *USS MAINE* sank in Havana Harbor after suffering a massive explosion. While President McKinley urged patience and did not declare that Spain had caused the explosion, the deaths of 250 out of 355 sailors on board focused American attention. McKinley asked Congress to appropriate \$50 million for defense, and Congress unanimously obliged. Most American leaders took the position that the cause of the explosion was unknown, but public attention was now riveted on the situation and Spain could not find a diplomatic solution to avoid war."<sup>7</sup>

After the explosion that sank the Maine, interestingly the Spanish who were present in the Harbor aided the survivors. After the dust from the explosion had settled Spanish officers visited with Captain Sigsbee, who had made it to shore, to express their condolences.<sup>8</sup> Captain

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Cuba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Cuba)

<sup>5</sup> *The story of two wars*; Russell, Henry B. (Henry Benajah), 1859-1945.

<sup>6</sup> *The story of two wars*; Russell, Henry B. (Henry Benajah), 1859-1945.

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish%E2%80%93American\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish%E2%80%93American_War)

<sup>8</sup> *The story of two wars*; Russell, Henry B. (Henry Benajah), 1859-1945

Sigsbee notified the Navy that from his estimation it might well have just been an accident.<sup>9</sup> However, this event ended up being the tipping point that would lead to war. In response to the sinking of the Maine, the president asked congress for \$50 million dollars for defense. The budget was granted and the U.S. then demanded freedom for Cuba. Unable to settle things diplomatically, on April 21, 1898 President McKinley ordered a blockade of Cuba and four days later on April 25, 1898 the U.S. declared war.<sup>10</sup>

The Spanish-American war is sometimes described as a one-sided conflict. One American politician, Secretary of State at the time, John Milton Hay, described the conflict as a “splendid little war.”<sup>11</sup> In terms of actual combat during the war, there were just two defining battles which occurred. In May 1898, a U.S. naval squadron encountered an anchored Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, Philippines. This would become known as the “battle of Manila bay”. The anchored Spanish fleet was destroyed and 370 Spanish were killed vs. 10 American sailors lost in the battle. In the next battle U.S. troops again found another Spanish fleet anchored in a harbor, this time in Santiago, Cuba. With cavalry riding into the city, and the American navy waiting outside, the Spanish fleet attempted to escape from the harbor. Outflanked, the Spanish Fleet was destroyed on the rocks. The Spanish lost more than 300 killed and 150 wounded out of 2,227 men, or approximately 22% of the fleet. 1,800 officers and men were taken prisoner by the Americans and roughly 150 returned to Santiago de Cuba. The American fleet lost only one killed and one wounded.<sup>12</sup> This last battle would signal the end of the war and result in the Spanish surrender and the signing of the “Treaty of Paris”.

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<sup>9</sup> *The story of two wars*; Russell, Henry B. (Henry Benajah), 1859-1945

<sup>10</sup> <https://loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/intro.html>

<sup>11</sup> *The American Promise*, Roark, Johnson, Furstenberg, Stage, Igo

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/spanish-american-war>

Some theorized that the US was involved in order to protect economic assets that were already in place in Cuba. This is precisely the reason the USS Maine was deployed to Cuba. “The United States watched with interest as Cuba struggled for independence. The United States had millions of dollars invested in businesses in Cuba and there were many U.S. citizens in residence there. The U.S. also traded goods with Cuba.”<sup>13</sup>

Other theories suggest that the US intervened out of a desire to itself control Cuba, or atleast to gain the strategic Island for its own personal gain, instead of acting to liberate Cuba. One piece of evidence that does back this theory, is that the US attempted to purchase Cuba in a secret meeting with Spain in 1896 before the US took military action.

“The Spanish-American War lasted only a few months and was over when Spain signed a peace treaty giving the United States control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippine Islands, and Guam. Cuba, however, became an independent country rather than a U.S. territory.”<sup>14</sup>

So ultimately with Cuba being handed its sovereignty after the war had ended, we can probably rule out that US involvement was purely an act of American colonialism. So I believe the main factors that lead to the US involvement are; Cuba’s close proximity to the U.S., and “yellow Journalism” that sparked public interest in Cuba’s plight. The sinking of the Maine was the tipping point that enabled the U.S. to become fully involved. “Remember the Maine!” became a popular slogan that was used in the U.S. to justify the war.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [https://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/s-a\\_war/s-a\\_war1.htm](https://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/s-a_war/s-a_war1.htm)

<sup>14</sup> [https://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/s-a\\_war/s-a\\_war1.htm](https://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/s-a_war/s-a_war1.htm)

<sup>15</sup> *The American Promise*, Roark, Johnson, Furstenberg, Stage, Igo