

## Chapter 1

### Cuba Libre!

**C**uba libre [Spanish for 'free Cuba'] was the 1898 battle cry for Americans fighting against Spain in order to help this tiny colony win its independence. Although the U.S. succeeded, in the same war that it fought to free Cuba, the U.S. took control of the Philippines and Puerto Rico. In addition, while the U.S. helped Cuba recover from years of war damages, it also made Cuba promise to allow America to intervene in its affairs if they felt Cubans weren't governing their own country well enough. These actions helped to complicate Cuban-American relations for the next one hundred years. Many people believe that the U.S. did nothing for Cuba but help itself to Cuba's wealth. On the other hand, most Americans believe the U.S. policies regarding Cuba have been generous and helpful. In this chapter you will have the chance to look at the relationship from a Cuban as well as a North American perspective.

#### Tactics of a Revolution

The Cubans lived under Spanish rule from shortly after Columbus's first visit until 1898. During the last decades under colonial rule Cuba was Spain's only colony in Latin America. Cubans staged two major rebellions against the government of Spain. The first one lasted for ten years, from 1868-78. Over 200,000 Cubans lost their lives in a bitter struggle which ended with Spain's promise to give Cubans the right to rule themselves. But Spain failed to live up to its promises, and for freedom-loving Cubans all the fighting and dying had been in vain.

One of the Cuban patriots who had fought in this revolution was Jose Marti. Marti came to the U.S. after the failed revolution and devoted the rest of his life to freeing his country. His poetry, his speeches, his talks, and his fund-raising were all devoted toward 'Cuba Libre!.' After years of preparation, Jose Marti and a close companion, Maximo Gomez, secretly landed in Cuba, but Marti was killed soon afterwards and Gomez was left alone to carry out their plans.

Since Gomez did not have the military support needed to attack Spanish armies directly, he decided to use the tactics of guerrilla warfare. His men would make lightning attacks on Spanish outposts and then retreat before reinforcements could arrive. In addition, Gomez ran a campaign of mass destruction. By burning fields, destroying sugar mills, and other private property, Gomez hoped to make Cuba so unprofitable that Spain would leave.

At first, the Spanish tried to negotiate with Gomez, but the guerrilla leader remembered what had happened in 1878 and refused. In response, the Spanish brought in General Weyler, known as 'the Butcher,' and gave him a command of 200,000 soldiers. Weyler forced Cuban peasants from their homes and put them in compounds called reconcentrados. Although they were more like concentration camps, Spain claimed the measures were merely a way of protecting the population from being forced to join the guerrilla army.

## Reporting a Revolution

Events in Cuba were reported in US newspapers which were engaged in a war of their own for customers and subscribers. Many of the reports used in what was called 'Yellow Journalism,' were exaggerated; some, perhaps, not even true. True or not, these reports helped create a climate of opinion that led to a declaration of war against Spain. Read the following and decide what the US government should do in response to President McKinley's request (see end of chapter) for a declaration of war against Spain.

April 12, 1897

3 cents

## ***NEW YORK WORLD***

### **AMERICANS TORTURED AND SLAIN IN CUBA**

April 15, 1897

3 cents

## ***NEW YORK WORLD***

### **GEN. WEYLER TRYING TO KILL OFF THE BREED**

Havana, Cuba April 14

And he travels about the island not as a General at the head of his troops, but as a military despot visiting well fortified cities that he may gloating over the misery

misery he has brought. Mothers of Cubans and their daughters are his favorite victims

November 7, 1987

3 cents

## ***NEW YORK WORLD***

### **HORRORS OF INDIA'S PLAGUE NOW SURPASSED IN CUBA**

Havana, Cuba, Nov. 6

30,000 non-combatants, chiefly women and children have perished within a few weeks,

You would sicken at the sight of these innocents dying at the hands of Spanish butchers, well versed in the art of killing

## The Controversy Over the Maine

War with Spain might have been avoided if the USS *Maine* had not been sunk while on a good-will mission in Havana, Cuba. War might have been avoided also if the Spanish had not been suspected of sinking this battleship. The disaster cost the lives of 260 American officers and enlisted men. President McKinley urged his countrymen to remain calm while an investigation into the cause of the sinking was completed. The report concluded that the explosion had been triggered by an external force, possibly a torpedo or a mine. The major evidence for this conclusion was the "way the keel and bottom plating were

driven upward to form an inverted V." Another investigation, conducted by the Spanish, concluded that the explosion came from within the ship. Their major supporting evidence stemmed from the lack of dead fish or a column of water, usually associated with underwater explosions. The cause of the explosion, the Spanish report claimed, was a spontaneous combustion of coal dust in the ship's coal bins, which in turn ignited its ammunition."

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

<sup>1</sup> The Spanish report on the cause of the explosion was sent to President McKinley on April 2, 1898. By that time, Americans were too excited

by events in Cuba to spend much time in careful investigation. An editorial in the New York World reflected as well as informed what the public opinion was at that time.

*A nation that will consent to have its ships blown up by submarine mines without demanding and enforcing instant reparation has no business with a navy. It should confine itself to growing crops, building railroads, gambling in stocks and running Sunday schools.*

*The destruction of the Maine by foul play should be made the occasion of ordering our fleet to Havana and demanding proper amends within forty-eight hours, under a threat of bombardment*  
<sup>2</sup>

## The Proctor Report

About the time news of the USS *Maine* had made headlines throughout the country, a respected Senator, Redfield Proctor, traveled to Cuba on a fact-finding mission. Known for his honesty and objectivity, he gave the American people a report that had great influence on public opinion:

*All the country people in the four western provinces, about 400,000 in number, remaining outside the fortified towns when Weyler's order was made, were driven into these towns and these are the reconcentrados.*

*Their huts are about 10 by 25 feet in size and are crowded together very closely. They have no floor but the ground, no furniture, and little clothing. The commonest sanitary provisions are impossible. Conditions are unmentionable in every respect. Torn from their homes, with foul earth, air, water, and food, no wonder that one-half have died, and that one-quarter of the living*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oz.net/~markhow/pre-dred/blowup.jpg>

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Daniel M. Smith, ed., *Major Problems in American History* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1964), pp. 288-89

# Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

*cannot be saved. ... Little children are still walking about with arms and chest terribly emaciated, eyes swollen, and stomach bloated to three times the natural size. The doctors say these cases are hopeless. ...*

*I went to Cuba believing that the newspapers had exaggerated the cases of starvation and suffering. I could not believe that out of a population of 1,600,000, two hundred thousand had died within these Spanish forts from actual starvation. To me the strongest appeal (for war) is the entire native population of Cuba is struggling for freedom and deliverance from the worst misgovernment of which I ever had knowledge.<sup>3</sup>*

## A Call to Arms

On April 11, 1898, shortly after the Proctor Report, President McKinley asked Congress for the power to stop the bloodshed in Cuba. Among the grounds for such intervention, the President listed the following:

*First: In the cause of humanity and to put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible miseries now existing there, and which the parties to the conflict are unable or unwilling to stop or mitigate.*

*Second: We owe it to our citizens in Cuba to afford them that protection and indemnity for life and property which no government there can or will afford..*

*Third: The right to intervene may be justified by the serious injury to the commerce, trade, and business of our people •*

Toward the end of his war message, the President informed Congress that Spain had proposed that the controversy over the Maine incident (whether it was a Spanish mine or an internal explosion that sunk the ship) be resolved by experts in an impartial investigation. The President also reported that the Queen of Spain had directed the Commander in Chief in Cuba 'to stop the fighting' but had not told him how long this cease-fire would last. Having given reasons for the U.S. to go to war and reasons for not going, President McKinley let Congress decide what to do:

*This fact along with every other pertinent consideration will, I am sure, have your just and careful attention in the solemn deliberations upon which you are bound to enter. <sup>4</sup>*

## The Teller Resolution

Eight days later, the U.S. House and Senate were prepared to vote on a declaration of war on Spain. Senator Henry Teller drew up a resolution accompanying such a declaration. It would commit the U.S. to free Cuba and pledge the United States not to keep or govern it:

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Merrill Peterson and Leonard Levy, *Major Crisis in American History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), pp. 174-76

• McKinley was referring to the fact that \$50 million of Americans' property had been destroyed, and that the U.S. lost \$70 million in trade

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Edmund Traverso, *The Spanish American War A Study in Policy Change*, Unpublished Amherst Project Unit, pp. 8-10.

*First: That the people of the Island of Cuba are, and of right ought to be free and independent.*

*Second: That it is the duty of the United States to demand and the Government of the United States does hereby demand that the government of Spain at once relinquish its authority and government in the island of Cuba and withdraw its land and navy forces from Cuba and Cuban waters.*

*Third: That the President of the United States be, and hereby is, directed and empowered to use the entire land and navy forces of the United States to carry these resolutions into effect.*

*Fourth: That the United States hereby disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise ... control over said island ... [and] to leave the government and control of the island to its people.<sup>5</sup>*

## **Suggested Student Exercises:**

1. Based on your reading, what are the concerns about events in Cuba that might lead a reasonable American citizen to want to go to war? Does this include the sinking of the *USS Maine*, the De Lome letter, the atrocities committed by both sides, the destruction of American property and interruption of US trade, or any other reason?
2. Carefully re-read McKinley's war message, the Proctor Report, and the Teller Resolution. Do you think the U.S. should have declared war on Spain in 1898 for the purpose of freeing Cuba even if it meant the US would leave control of the island to the Cuban people? Why or why not?

---

5. *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.