

Chapter 3

The U.S, Cuba, and the Platt Amendment

When the United States declared war on Spain in April, 1898, it announced its intention to free Cuba. By the time the fighting ended in August of that year, the U.S. had occupied Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. For the next three years the U.S. maintained troops in Cuba while preparing it for self-government. Under American supervision, the Cuban people elected a convention to write a constitution that the U.S. insisted should be amended. The amendments forced on the Cubans included giving the U.S. a base on that island country as well as the right to intervene when the Cuban government could not protect life, liberty, and property. These provisions, embedded in the Cuban constitution, helped secure a major role for the U.S. in Cuban affairs, a role that lasted about sixty years. This chapter will ask whether the United States actually had the right to limit the freedom of the Cuban people, or whether its imposition on their freedom was uncalled-for.

A Splendid Little War

Since Admiral Cervera, commander of the Spanish fleet, did not think it was capable of beating the



Artists' version of US Marines landing

U.S., he pleaded with superiors in the war department not to be sent to Cuba. He was overruled and ordered to the New World. Upon arriving in the Caribbean, his ships were out of coal and they barely limped into Cuba's Santiago harbor. Spotted by the U.S. fleet under Admiral Sampson, Cervera was quickly blockaded in the harbor and his ships were unable to help Spain's cause during the Spanish-American War.

With no Spanish ships to harass American troop transports, the U.S. Army, under General Shafter, set sail for Cuba. They landed safely and completed unloading in 5 days. With help from Cuban forces, an Army of some 17,000 Americans accompanied by 89 reporters advanced toward Santiago, 20 miles away. Two hills, El Caney and San Juan Hill overlooked the road to Santiago. Using a for-runner of the machine gun known as the grating gun, U.S. soldiers continued their advance. The hills were taken by a cavalry regiment, personally recruited and led by Lt.

Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and known as the Rough Riders. Roosevelt's famous charge was partially responsible for this colorful leader becoming President of the United States three years later. The daring attack was described by the well-known war correspondent Richard Harding Davis:

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*There were a few men in advance, bunched together, and creeping up a steep hill, the tops of which roared and flashed with flame. It was a miracle of self-sacrifice and a triumph of bull dog courage which one watches with breathless wonder.*¹¹

Heroic as it was, this cavalry charge would not have succeeded if the Spanish had placed their guns closer to the top of the hill. That would have allowed them to shoot directly down at the Rough Riders and not over the tops of their heads. The odds also would have been considerably against the future President if the 13,000 Spanish soldiers in Santiago had been on the top of the hill and not in the nearby city.

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

Even with his success on San Juan and El Caney, General Shafter's position was not good. An outbreak of yellow fever and food poisoning (which killed 13 times more soldiers than were killed by Spanish bullets) cut down the effectiveness of his soldiers. Fortunately the Spanish were in a worse position. Admiral Cervera was ordered to break out of Santiago harbor. He set sail on July 3, 1898 and was immediately hammered by a vastly superior American fleet under Admiral Sampson in a battle that was as one-sided as Dewey's victory at Manila harbor.

With the destruction of Cervera's fleet the Spanish forces in Cuba were left with no way of receiving either supplies or reinforcements. Thus Spain felt it had no choice but to surrender its army of 200,000 men to a far

smaller force of American and Cuban soldiers. The date of the surrender was July 16 1898 Two weeks later, Puerto Rico also fell into U.S. hands. For the United States it had been, as Secretary of State John Hay bragged, 'a splendid little war.'

Putting Cuba Back Together Again

With the fighting over, the major responsibility of American troops in Cuba was to restore local rule and re-establish an orderly society. There was much that needed doing. The island's economy had been all but destroyed during three years of guerrilla attacks by Cubans and brutal retaliation by the Spanish. Much of the damage was repaired under the able leadership of General Leonard Wood. His record of achievement deserves noting:

... food and clothing were furnished to thousands of families. A rural police force was organized. The guerrilla army was disbanded, and its members shared a \$3,000,000 bonus provided by the United States. Courts, city and town governments, and customs services were re-organized. Prisons were cleared and most political prisoners were released. Landholders received help cultivating their fields, and sugar production was quickly resumed. Cattle were imported and sold on easy terms to farmers. Harbors were dredged, and docks built. Highway and railway projects were begun. Public schools, almost non-existent under Spanish rule, were increased. The University of Havana was re-opened.

¹¹Quoted in Jack Cameron Dierks, *A Leap to Arms: The Cuban Campaign of 1898* (J.B. Lippincott Company: Philadelphia, 1970), p. 107

The most noteworthy accomplishment was the eradication of yellow fever. For fifty years this dreaded disease caused an average of 751 deaths each year in Havana. Working together a U.S. doctor, Walter Reed, and a Cuban physician, Carlo Finley, identified a type of mosquito that carried the disease and cleared out its breeding places. Within three years, the disease was virtually eliminated.¹²

The Platt Amendment

The United States also helped the people of Cuba write their own constitution. Delegates to a constitutional convention were elected by Cubans who had fought against the Spanish. They wrote a document similar to the U.S. Constitution. The Cuban constitution provided for an elected president, two houses of congress, and a supreme court as well as a bill of rights.

Though generally pleased with the decisions made at this convention, the U.S. Congress felt that Cuba was not completely ready for independence. Congress felt a guarantee was needed to ensure that Cuba would maintain a special relationship with the United States. A list of eight special provisions for the Cuban constitution was drawn up by the Congress of the United States. Several of these articles, known as the Platt Amendment, are listed below:

- *The government of Cuba may never enter into a treaty that will tend to reduce the independence of Cuba*
- *The said (Cuban) government shall not assume any public debt that it can not repay with ordinary revenues.*
- *U.S. may exercise the right to intervene for the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty.*
- *Cuba shall sell or lease to the United States lands necessary for a coaling or naval stations (now, Guantanamo).*
- *Cuba will include the foregoing provisions in a permanent treaty with the United States.*¹³

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Summarize the ways the U.S. helped Cuba
2. Take the position of a Cuban *or* U.S. patriot and explain why you feel the U.S. was right or wrong to insist that Cuba add the Platt Amendment to its constitution. Consider:
 - a. Whether the U.S. had come into Cuba in order to help the Cubans or to benefit themselves;
 - b. Whether Cubans were ready for self-government; and
 - c. Whether the U.S., as a consequence of the aid and assistance it had given Cuba, had the right to exercise control over the Cuban people.
3. After reading the epilogue on the following page, decide if the events described prove that the Cubans were right or wrong in their opposition to the Platt Amendment?

¹²quoted in Hubert Herring, *A History of Latin America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961) pp. 407–08

¹³ Quoted in James V. Gantenbein, ed., *The Evolution of our Latin American Policy* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), pp. 488–89.

Epilogue

Cubans opposed the provisions of the Platt Amendment. They claimed it gave far too much power to the United States and deprived Cubans of their independence. Cubans pointed out that the American colonists would not have accepted a treaty like the Platt Amendment had it given France the same power over the U.S. The U.S. countered that it was a better judge of what was good for the Cuban people than the Cubans and that, unlike the American colonies, Cuba had no experience in self-government before its revolution. But, the U.S. was not able to convince the Cubans that they needed guidance from the United States. So at the convention, the Cubans were told that the U.S. would not remove its troops until Cuba had agreed to the Platt Amendment. Faced with such logic, the delegates by a close vote agreed to make the Platt Amendment part of their constitution.

Once Cuba accepted the Platt Amendment and an independent government was elected, U.S. troops left. A friend and supporter of the United States, Estrada Palma, became Cuba's first president. Palma served from 1902-06 in a term marked by continued progress in recovering from war damage and a capable and honest administration. Palma negotiated a trade treaty with the U.S. providing that Cuba be granted a 20% tariff reduction for sugar exports. In exchange, goods from the United States would be granted a similar tariff reduction in Cuba. The mutual agreement tightened an economic link between the U.S. and Cuba with far-reaching consequences. American investments in Cuba increased vastly, and eventually 40% of the Cuban economy was controlled by US citizens, a fact deeply resented by many Cubans.

At the end of Palma's term, irregularities in the election proceedings brought on another revolution. American intervention was requested and supplied. This created a precedent for many more U.S. interventions into Cuban affairs, long after the U.S. agreed to repeal of the Platt Amendment in 1934.