East Texas and the Coming of the Spanish-American War: An Examination of Regional Values

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Most historical accounts of the Spanish-American War rank it among the nation's most popular and least politically divisive conflicts. Declared in the wake of the destruction of the *USS Maine* in Havana Harbor, and after years of press reports detailing human atrocities against Cuban civilians by the Spanish military, the nation marched in unison to support President William McKinley's call for war against Spain in April 1898. Within three months after the declaration of war, over 100,000 volunteers from all parts of the country answered the president's call to arms: another 100,000 answered a second call before the end of the year. First-hand accounts of American heroism and patriotism, superiority in battle, and iron determination to succeed from America's most famous veteran of the war, Theodore Roosevelt, helped popularize the conflict in the public mind for future generations. Even President McKinley capitalized on the popularity of the war, proclaiming that the unity of the American people indicated that the sectional divisions borne from the Civil War had been healed at last as both North and South rallied in defense of the nation against a common foe. With so little apparent public animus toward the Spanish-American War, it is no wonder that generations of Americans have grown to understand the conflict with Spain as America's "Splendid Little War." Recently, a television movie on the Roughriders reinforced the popular themes associated with the war almost a century after the Treaty of Paris.¹

These popular accounts suggest a vital consensus on the question of war in the aftermath of the explosion of the *Maine*, but too often they ignore the complexity and diversity of public attitudes on larger questions regarding the use of power by the central government, the proper role of the United States in foreign affairs, and the ultimate fate of territories acquired in a foreign war. More important, the South's near unanimous support for the president's war message belied the region's deeply held cynicism toward the conduct of foreign affairs by the McKinley Administration. The residents of East Texas, like those in other parts of the South, only rallied in support of war after responsibility for the explosion of the *Maine* was placed on Spain. A more protracted examination of their discourse reveals that deeply-held values and traits shaped the region's world view prior to the crisis of 1898. Their world view differed substantially from the one held by most Americans because it was based on an historical memory of defeat, occupation, and humiliation at the hands of a foreign invader. Furthermore, America's quest for empire posed serious challenges to the region's system of race control because it could lead ultimately to the expansion of the power of the central government, the creation of a large standing army, and the introduction of millions of non-whites into the American body politic. Consequently, when East Texans supported McKinley's
call for war against Spain, they did so to avenge the loss of the Maine and to end the slaughter in Cuba, not to embark on a war for empire.²

As the revolution in Cuba entered into its third year in 1897, public attitudes in the South became increasingly critical of Spain's conduct. According to reports in newspapers across the nation, Spain's General Valereano Weyler acted with impunity and with no consideration of due process to torture, maim, and kill thousands of civilians suspected of conspiring with the rebels. He also was vilified in the press for his refusal to take prisoners and for using the garrote against his enemies. Even worse in the court of public opinion, horrific tales emerged regarding “The Butcher’s” reconcentration camps where hundreds of thousands of Cubans lived in squalid, filthy conditions with little food, medicine, or care. Stripped of their possessions, reconcentrados were forced to leave their homes and relocate in these camps because Spain could not control large sections of central Cuba. The American consul general in Havana, Fitzhugh Lee, corroborated some of the stories about the camps after he visited one near Havana and found several thousand people packed in an area the size of a few city blocks. Despite the flood of atrocity stories, the president maintained strict neutrality toward the conflict in Cuba and promised to prosecute those who sought to provide either men, money, or materiel to either belligerent.³

In an attempt to seize the initiative on the Cuban question from the president and capitalize on public support for the Cuban rebels, congressional Democrats introduced a resolution in the spring of 1897 recognizing Cuban belligerency. The author of the resolution, Alabama Senator John T. Morgan, reiterated his outrage at Spain's conduct toward Cuban civilians who had had “their rights, liberties, and lives ... placed under the power of a brutal authority....” American recognition of the rebels, Morgan contended, would lead to better Spanish treatment for Cuban rebels and provide them a better chance to throw off the yoke of tyranny with the material support of American sympathizers. After its passage in the Senate, Joseph Bailey of Texas, leader of the House Democrats, proposed to carry the Morgan Resolution through the House. On May 20, however, Republican Speaker Thomas Reed blocked a vote on the measure. Reed, like many other congressional Republicans, supported the president's policy of non-recognition and understood the potential embarrassment a long, protracted debate over the Cuban question could cause the Administration.⁴

In a raucous two-hour debate that followed Reed's decision, Southern congressmen led a scathing attack against the president's handling of affairs in Cuba. Bailey suggested that McKinley ignored his own party's platform favoring the recognition of the Cuban rebels not because conditions have changed ... but because powerful influences have been exerted to prevent your proceeding. The stock gamblers have become alarmed, and they would rather see their country insulted than to have their operations disturbed ... preferring, as you always have, the interests of wealth above the rights of humanity, you are endeavoring to evade and postpone this [Cuban] question.⁵
The specter of the “money power” and its corrupting influence over national politics had been one of the critical issues during the presidential election in 1896 and it continued to infuse Southern public discourse over the ability of the McKinley Administration to conduct foreign affairs. To be sure, the actions of Speaker Reed symbolized the arrogance and abuse of power feared by many Southerners, fear derived both from the South’s historical mistrust of the GOP and the party’s strong allegiances to Wall Street. During the spring of 1897, newspapers and public figures across the South railed against Reed’s refusal to consider the resolution recognizing Cuban belligerency. Congressmen John Sharp Williams of Mississippi and Joseph Wheeler of Alabama blasted Reed’s actions citing familiar themes – the humanitarian obligation of the United States to intervene on behalf of people struggling for liberty and, most important, the malignant influence of the “money power” over foreign policy. Williams, speaking on the floor of the House, launched into a diatribe against Republicans who, he asserted, had fallen under a “plutocratic influence” that prevented them from carrying out the public will. The inaction of the United States, as directed by the McKinley Administration, Williams continued, reflected poorly on the “sad change in character of the Anglo-Saxon race, which previously rallied to the cause of liberty.” Thus far, he exclaimed, American policy toward Cuba reflected only the subordination of the nation’s democratic goals and moral values to the corrupting influence of big business. In closing, Williams thundered from the House floor,

For a nation ... to come to the conclusion ... that the only thing to be considered in their relations with the other nations of the earth is the money question, the trade question, the effect on stocks and bonds, and the disturbance of business, carries degradation so far that I do not believe any man was ever gifted with power to express the contempt that a real man ought to feel for it.a

The rhetoric of Williams, Wheeler, Bailey, and others expressed the widespread support for the recognition of the Cuban rebels shared by many Southerners. In trying to comprehend the Cuban question, Southerners often recalled their region’s history during the American Revolution and the Civil War and compared the Cuban insurrectos to heroes from their own past – George Washington, Nathaniel Greene, Jefferson Davis, and Robert E. Lee. Such comparisons made sense within the context of their history. In each case, Southerners fought for the cause of freedom and liberty against a more powerful foe and against long odds. Furthermore, in the case of the Civil War, the South sought official recognition from foreign powers in its war against the North. That the South was denied official recognition, lost the Civil War, and found itself at the mercy of an oppressive, brutal tyrant, added weight to their argument that Cuban liberty could only be insured with American recognition.b

Beyond the historical comparisons, though, there was the prevalent opinion that Spain’s vile conduct in Cuba had created a humanitarian disaster just ninety miles from America’s shores. As an Anglo-Saxon and profess
Christian nation, the United States had an obligation to end the horrible slaughter. One East Texas editor proclaimed, "Spain is and has been at all times a proud, arrogant, crafty, cruel and selfish government - a plunderer ... that has made the Island of Cuba the scene of murder, pillage, robbery and outrage." Spanish General Valereano Weyler bore the brunt of hostile Southern opinion for his policy of reconcentration. Commonly referred to in the press as "the Butcher," Weyler was accused of horrible atrocities against the civilian population. In one of the most caustic editorials to appear in the East Texas press, an editor condemned him as "the butcher of the sick and starving ... who had already lived long enough to cause untold agonies among the defenseless. It is to be regretted that he has not been felled to the earth by some patriot's macheta."

Public attitudes in East Texas on the subject of Cuba paralleled those found in other similar parts of the South, but differed substantially from those found in some coastal communities. From the beginning of the Cuban Revolution in 1895, commercial interests in the South's major port cities - Charleston, Mobile, New Orleans, and Galveston, to name a few - discouraged American actions likely to lead to war with Spain. While sympathetic to the Cuban rebels, important business and commercial interests in these communities feared the impact a war with Spain would have on local economies. The Panic of 1893 left Southern business leagues and chambers in an anxious mood. A sudden shock to the economy, such as a foreign war, might plunge the national and regional economy into another period of malaise. More specifically, war with Spain raised the possibility of a Spanish naval blockade of such major ports as Charleston, New Orleans, and Galveston, and the possible suspension of coastal commerce. At its worst, war might lead to naval bombardment and the destruction of the South's largely defenseless port cities. Although many business groups seriously overestimated Spain's ability to wage a naval war, they represented the opinion of some Southern commercial and entrepreneurial interests who believed that continued economic growth and recovery should take precedent in establishing foreign policy prerogatives toward Cuba.

Apart from the predictable fears held by commercial groups in the South's port cities, other Southern business leaders saw in the Cuban crisis an opportunity to expand American power and influence abroad forcibly. The most vocal among them - so-called New South prophets - understood the question of war with Spain in the context of a larger plan to acquire an isthmian canal, preferably in Nicaragua, to facilitate the transportation of Southern commodities to foreign markets. Their goal to create a wealthier, more economically diversified South also depended on the ability of the national government to use its military and economic power to acquire insular possessions as overseas colonies that could serve as markets for Southern products. A foreign war, they argued, might cripple commerce for a time, but it would pave the way for permanent, sustained economic growth in the future. Consequently, New South prophets relished the prospect that a war with Spain would result in annexation and statehood for Cuba with the addition of a
potential market of several million Cubans eager to buy Southern textiles, coal, and iron. While an important voice in the urban South, the views of these prophets appeared to have little impact on foreign policy discourse in most parts of the rural South, including much of East Texas.10

By the end of 1897, the combined weight of interventionists placed extraordinary pressure on McKinley to abandon strict neutrality and take more direct action relative to Cuban affairs. Unswayed by his critics, McKinley reiterated his sympathy with native Cubans’ desire for self-government without officially recognizing the belligerent rights of the rebels. In an address to Congress, the president acknowledged the brutality of Spain’s past actions, but urged Congress and the public to give the new Spanish ministry time to implement dramatic reforms. Along with promising to remove Weyler from command in Cuba, Spain also had agreed to implement a plan to give the Cuban people limited autonomy within the Spanish Empire. Limited autonomy, McKinley hoped, would bring a quick end to the war without the need for direct American intervention.11

McKinley’s call for patience evoked considerable criticism after the collapse of the Liberal Ministry’s reform efforts in January 1898. The removal of Weyler and the installation of a new Autonomist regime led to a series of bloody riots in Havana sponsored by the military and the business elite. Both of these groups remained loyal to Spain and threatened to resist the autonomy plan with force. Even more disturbing for the government in Madrid, rebel leaders also refused to support the autonomy plan. The leaders of the Cuban revolution quickly dismissed the idea of limited autonomy as unacceptable; only Cuban independence would end the war. Although the Liberal Ministry remained committed to their reform agenda in the face of widespread opposition on the island of Cuba, McKinley found it increasingly difficult to resist the calls for war that came from all parts of the United States.12

In response to the riots in Havana, McKinley ordered a U.S. warship to Havana Harbor in January 1898. Although his consul-general in Cuba, Fitzhugh Lee, expressed concern that an American warship would raise tensions between the United States and Spain, the president believed it important to show the American flag in Havana as a show of friendship. The pleasant diplomatic exchanges between Madrid and Washington, however, betrayed the growing sense of frustration felt by the leaders of both nations. At the same time McKinley promised Madrid more time to carry out its reforms, he dispatched additional naval vessels to the Florida Keys. With the explosion of the *USS Maine* on February 15 and the loss of over 260 American sailors, the prospects for peace faded. In the opinion of many historians, it was this single event that made the Spanish-American War inevitable.13

In the months leading up to the explosion of the *Maine* and the declaration of war in April, public discussion in East Texas on the Cuban question approximated the views and opinions expressed in other parts of the South. As stated earlier, people in East Texas seemed to hold a deep humanitarian concern for Cuban rebels. Their sympathies stemmed not only from their concern
over alleged atrocities against innocent Cuban civilians and the senseless death of thousands in the brutal reconcentration camps, but also from the ease with which they identified the heroes of the Cuban revolution fighting for liberty with heroes from their past. Southern racism toward non-whites, however, produced a qualified commitment to the cause of Cuban liberty. While supportive of the insurrectos, Southerners often asserted that the rebels lacked the requisite racial composition to govern themselves successfully. In an East Texas paper, Judge B.S. Grosscup stated that “the character of the population of Cuba is such as to render it incapable of satisfactory self-government. The same characteristics which render her unfit for self-government, preclude the possibility of considering her as possible material for a state in our union.”

The result of Southern white racism was an almost schizophrenic attitude toward the Cuban rebels. At once sympathetic to their human needs and laudatory of their accomplishments on the battlefield, Southerners’ belief in Anglo-Saxon or white superiority prevented them from embracing the rebels as equals. Southerners’ humanitarian concerns for the rebels squared comfortably with the region’s long history of paternalism and sense of noblesse oblige that guided master-slave relations in the antebellum period. Insurrectos success on the battlefield required more careful elaboration in public discourse. In numerous articles in the Southern press, the accomplishments of the Cuban rebels often were measured by Spain’s gross incompetence. While praising the rebels for their victories, Southerners often made it clear that they occurred against a less than worthy foe.

Historic anger, bitterness, and frustration toward the Republican Party also complicated the South’s world view in 1898. As the nation readied for war, East Texans, like the Democratic majority from the rest of the South, questioned the motives and objectives of McKinley. Since his inauguration, Southerners who expected a more aggressive foreign policy and direct American intervention in Cuba to end the war had been disappointed by the president’s inflexible policy of neutrality. As the tide of public opinion appeared to shift toward intervention and even war, Southern Democrats suspected the Administration of rejecting the public will in favor of Cuban bondholders, Wall Street, and big business. More damning, in the aftermath of the explosion of the Maine, McKinley continued to counsel patience. While Southerners and many Americans viewed the incident as a casus belli, the president seemed unwilling to act without the approval of “big money.”

Editors of East Texas newspapers damned McKinley and Republicans during the period between the time of the Maine disaster and the declaration of war. Reports leaked from the Naval Court of Inquiry suggested that the cause of the explosion was external in origin. Under the circumstances, the editor of the Beaumont Weekly Enterprise accurately observed, “the question which is now in the minds of the people is what will the administration do?" If the government did nothing, the editor continued, “every self respecting American will hide his head in shame.” Other newspapers in the region contained similar expressions of outrage. Repeatedly, East Texans, like others
from across the South, wondered why McKinley had not acted to avenge the loss of the *Maine* and uphold the honor of the United States. Following personal insults against him by Spanish Foreign Minister Enrique Dupuy deLome, and years of dealing with the repercussions of a humanitarian crisis in Cuba, the president appeared to be restrained by a powerful political force—namely Wall Street—that had consistently opposed intervention in Cuba and war. A disenchanted East Texas editor summed up the popular position by stating

> The honor, manhood, and Christian civilization of this country are in question; and if President McKinley has not the necessary spinal column, let him take a back seat while Congress does its duty. The man or body of men standing today in the way of the execution of the will and voice of the American people, are doomed. There are some things a thousand times worse than honorable warfare.ª

Southerners’ overwhelming support for McKinley’s declaration of war on April 20, 1898, concealed the region’s anxiety about the motives of Republicans in Washington and the implications of a war with Spain. Exacerbating those fears was the continued refusal of congressional Republicans and McKinley to recognize the belligerent rights of the Cuban rebels. To Southerners and other critics of the Administration, the refusal to recognize the rebel government indicated that Washington had larger designs on Cuba than simply liberating the island from Spain. It appeared that the Administration planned to use the war as a pretext for conquering Cuba and annexing it to the United States.

It is easy to understand the reaction of East Texans to the crisis in Cuba and the Spanish-American War, given the region’s history and traditions. Although the press provided regular news accounts of events in Washington, Madrid, and Cuba, people in the region ultimately comprehended those events within a framework of deeply held ideals and values. The South’s historical memory of slavery, Civil War, destruction, defeat, and occupation profoundly affected the way Southerners viewed the world. To many Southerners, including those in East Texas, intervention in Cuba should be on a limited scale for limited goals—exact vengeance for the *Maine* and ending the slaughter of innocent Cubans. It should not be a war waged at the behest of Northern financial interests with the Republican Party serving as their proxies. It should not lead to a protracted American occupation of foreign soil against the will of the native population, and it should not become a war for empire in which colonies were created and administered by a vast, powerful, imperial bureaucracy. Most important, the war should not lead to the annexation of millions of non-white people who could use the expanded power of imperial Washington to undermine and destroy “Jim Crow” in the South. Consequently, Southern support for McKinley’s declaration of war against Spain came with numerous qualifications based on the region’s unique past—a past that suggested that a foreign war pursued by a Republican administration could do irreparable harm to the character and nature of the republic and produce profound social and racial unrest for the South.
NOTES


7 Discussion of historical memory and support for recognition of Cuban belligerency from Marshall Schott, "The South and American Foreign Policy, 1894-1904: Regional Concerns During the Age of Imperialism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1995), pp. 77-78.

8"Spain is and has been..." from Bonham News, August 20, 1897, p. 2. "The butcher" from Honey Grove Signal, October 8, 1897, p. 2. Similar editorials in Brenham Weekly Banner, November 4, 1897, p. 6, and November 18, 1897, p. 6, and, Honey Grove Signal, December 17, 1897, p. 2.


Histories dealing with the explosion of the Maine are numerous. For examples, see Walter Millis, The Martial Spirit (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931), John Dobson, America's Ascent: The United States Becomes a Great Power, 1880-1914 (DeKalb, Illinois, 1978), and David Trask, The War with Spain in 1898.


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"See Bonham News, August 20, 1897, p. 2. Other racist expressions are found in Pine Bluff Commercial, August 2, 1897, p. 2. The influence of race on Southern attitudes toward Cuba is discussed in Tennant McWilliams, New South Faces the World (Baton Rouge, 1988).