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ONE WAR FROM TWO SIDES The Cuban Assessment of U.S.-Cuban Relations

Wars play a large part in forming national myths and memories, the material of national identity. What historians say forms a part of the national memory, and often reveals some of its myths. The historiography of the Spanish-Cuban-American War is a useful case in point.

People in the United States had significantly different perceptions of the Spanish-Cuban war from people in Cuba. The U.S. public learned of the war in Cuba through the press and from the Cuban Junta in New York, both of which presented highly colored and romantic pictures of the struggle. The realities of a largely guerrilla war were played down or concealed. Thus when the U.S. army arrived in Cuba, its men expected to find ranks of Cuban infantry in formation, cavalymen on fine horses, proper uniforms, much dashing activity. The new arrivals were quickly disillusioned by the Cuban Liberation Army. It was ragged, ill-equipped, and mostly black, at a time of acute racism in the United States. Worse yet, it played no visible role in the Battle of San Juan Hill, the only major engagement in which the Americans fought.¹

Cubans, however, were aware of their own contributions, of which most Americans were ignorant. They had worn down a large Spanish army through an epic three-year struggle against great odds, leaving a weakened enemy for the Americans to face. They had played an essential role in scouting for their new allies. Fifteen hundred Cubans had secured the Americans' landing beaches. Another Cuban force blocked thousands of Spaniards at Holguin and Guantanamo from joining in the defense of Santiago. Cubans were justly proud of this record, and regarded themselves as equals of the U.S. forces which had so recently arrived.²

1. See Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931); David Trask, *The War With Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981); and Frank Freidel, *Splendid Little War* (Boston: Little Brown, 1958).

2. See David F. Trask; and Louis A. Perez, Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

The U.S. army had a different view, which was soon communicated to the U.S. public by the swarm of newspaper correspondents who accompanied the army. They felt that the Cubans had done almost nothing to help them, and that the defeat of Spain was entirely their doing. They therefore denied the Cubans any role in the victory ceremonies at Santiago and Havana, and denigrated them in their reports to their government. Ignoring the Cuban Republic, Washington established a U.S. military government which ruled the island for almost four years, then reduced Cuba to a U.S. protectorate under the Platt Amendment of 1901. The North Americans saw the new “free” Cuba as created by them, not by the Cubans, and therefore subject to proper guidance from the U.S. after the war.³

Given these beginnings, a gulf between the Cuban and U.S. perceptions of the war was inevitable. However, despite Cuban desires to reclaim their own history, it took over a generation to produce a full-fledged school of nationalist historians. Prominent members of the first cohort of this school were Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, Herminio Portell Vila, Ramiro Guerra y Sanchez, and Manuel Marquez Sterling. Since Roig is perhaps the most influential of this early group, let us trace the development of his interpretation of the war.

The tone of Roig’s approach was evident in a 1923 speech which was reprinted as a pamphlet. He said then that it was ridiculous for ceremonial speakers to keep saying that Cuba owed the U.S. an eternal debt of gratitude. In a famous thrust, he jeered that “It really is an eternal debt, because we are always paying it.”⁴ In a 1922 study of the Platt Amendment, Roig concluded that the American people had wanted to liberate Cuba but that President McKinley had perverted U.S. policy from Cuban freedom to colonial control. By the 1940s Roig, influenced by Portell Vila, had elaborated this idea into an economic interpretation.⁵ The people of the U.S. had had a generous impulse to rescue Cuba, but McKinley and his successors were under the influence of bankers, investors, and industrialists, and the real object of the Platt Amendment was to exploit the Cuban economy for the benefit of U.S. capitalists. By

3. See Perez, *The War of 1898*; and David Healy, *The United States in Cuba, 1898-1902* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963).

4. See Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *Análisis y consecuencias de la intervención norteamericana en los asuntos interiores de Cuba* (La Habana: Imprenta “el Siglo XX,” 1923).

5. See Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *La Enmienda Platt: Su interpretación primitiva y sus aplicaciones posteriores hasta 1921* (La Habana: Imprenta “el Siglo XX,” 1922); and *1895 y 1898: dos guerras cubanas* (La Habana: Cultural, 1945). For the further development of Roig’s thinking, see *Cuba y los Estados Unidos, 1805-1898* (La Habana: Sociedad Cubana de Estudios Históricos e Internacionales, 1949); *Cuba no debe su independencia a los Estados Unidos* (La Habana: Sociedad Cubana de Estudios Históricos e Internacionales, 1950); and *El Presidente McKinley y el Gobernador Wood máximos enemigos de Cuba Libre* (La Habana: Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana, 1960).

1945, Roig also argued that Cuba had won its war with Spain, whose government was about to arrange a surrender. The U.S. had intervened, he said, not to free Cuba but to head off real Cuban independence.

Meanwhile Portell Vila, Roig, and others had come to posit a continuing, thirty-year struggle for Cuba's freedom; the Spanish-Cuban-American War was not a mere episode, but a part of a long-sustained effort. The main components of this effort were an earlier Cuban uprising, the Ten Years' War of 1868-1878; an interval of organizing, educating, fund-raising, etc., culminating in Jose Marti and the Cuban Revolutionary Party; and finally, the war of 1895-1898, a Cuban national struggle supported by a popular majority. Thus the Cubans themselves earned their independence through prolonged struggle, before the U.S. came in and stole it by creating a protectorate. This "prolonged struggle" interpretation developed over time, but by the late 1930s Portell Vila was using the concept of a single revolution of 1868-1898.⁶

A final addition to the anti-U.S. case evolved from the work of Portell Vila, Guerra y Sanchez, Fernando Ortiz y Fernandez, and others, who began to claim that the U.S. had blocked social reform in Cuba. Based on the general spirit of Jose Marti's writings and on wartime promises made to the Cuban army's many black recruits, Portell Vila asserted that the Cuban Revolution would have given land to the people, abolished sugar monoculture, and brought democracy and social justice. The U.S., however, refastened a colonial economy on the island for its own profit, especially in sugar culture.⁷

This Cuban story of the war was largely completed by the 1940s at the latest. Its main tenets found some exposure in the U.S. only a good deal later, particularly in the work of Philip Foner and Louis Perez, Jr., after a lag of thirty or forty years. Before the 1970s most U.S. historians paid little attention to Cuban scholarship. My own first book, *The United States in Cuba, 1898-1902*, was a revised version of my 1960 PhD dissertation on the first Cuban occupation. Its Cuban sources consisted of nine secondary works and two documentary collections, a total too slight to pass muster today. Of the three publisher's readers, one noted the weakness but thought that the focus on U.S. policy-making excused it, while another was more critical but approved the book for publication anyway. Of the half-dozen full-scale scholarly reviews after its publication in 1963, two noted the "soundness" of my research, one favorably mentioned the fact that I had actually used some Cuban sources, and only one

6. See Herminio Portell Vila, *Historia de Cuba en sus relaciones con los Estados Unidos y Espana*, vol. 3 (4 vols., Habana: Biblioteca des historia, filosofia, y sociologia, 1938-1941); and Roig de Leuchsenring, *La Guerra Libertador Cubana de los Treinte Anos* (1952).

7. See Portell Vila; Ramiro Guerra y Sanchez, *La expansion territorial de los Estados Unidos* (Habana: Cultural, 1935); and Fernando Ortiz Fernandez, *Contrapunteo Cubano del tabaco y el azucar* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1940).

stated that the Cuban sources were inadequate. Such a paucity of Cuban sources in a similar work today would rightly draw thunderbolts. The Castro Revolution annexed the nationalist history of Roig, Portell Vila, and the rest, now claiming a one hundred year struggle for true independence. The Castroites added the abortive revolution of 1933 and their own 1959 revolution. Fidel, they said, had brought not only real independence but the social reform supposedly blocked after 1898. The Castroite version of the Cuban story was fully spelled out in the early days of the revolution, and later in books like a 1975 work by Ramon de Armas entitled *La Revolucion pospuesta*.⁸

The U.S. view of the Spanish-Cuban-American War is less linear than the Cuban, eventually characterized by divergence and fragmentation. For several decades after 1898, however, the prevailing tone of U.S. historians was idealistic: the U.S. went to war to free Cuba, and did so, period; the Platt Amendment was needed to protect Cuban democracy from internal or external threats. There was also a strain of triumphalism. In a 1909 work, French Ensor Chadwick saw a century of racial strife between the U.S. and Spain for the domination of the New World. The U.S. was practical, innovative, energetic; Spain was traditional, conservative, proud but lacking energy. The U.S. represented the future, Spain the past. Writing in 1927, James Ford Rhodes found the U.S. record in Cuba a proud one. The U.S. had prepared the Cubans for civil government, conquered yellow fever, established a better school system, and done much else for Cuban society. The Americans had kept their promise to Cuba by extending the benefits of a higher culture. Rhodes' conclusions were those most widely accepted at the time.⁹

The first serious dissent from these views came in the 1920s. A group of leftist scholars including Leland Jenks, Scott Nearing, and Joseph Freeman began to analyse the Cuban episode in terms of economic imperialism and dollar diplomacy.¹⁰ The liberal left was then in the process of critiquing all of U.S. history through economic interpretations, led by Charles A. Beard, Harold U. Faulkner, Harry Elmer Barnes, and others. The same critique was soon applied to foreign policy, where the Cuban case was seen as an early

8. For examples of Foner's and Perez's views, see Philip S. Foner, *The Spanish-Cuban-American War and the Birth of American Imperialism, 1895-1902* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); and Louis Perez, Jr., *Cuba Between Empires* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983).

9. French Ensor Chadwick, *The Relations of the United States With Spain: Diplomacy* (New York: Scribner's, 1909); James Ford Rhodes, *The McKinley and Roosevelt Administrations* (New York: Macmillan, 1922). See also Henry Watterson, *History of the Spanish-American War* (New York: Werner, 1898).

10. Leland Jenks, *Our Cuban Colony: A Study in Sugar* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1928); Scott Nearing and Joseph Freeman, *Dollar Diplomacy: A Study in American Imperialism* (New York: Heusch, 1925).

example of overseas economic exploitation through expansionist means. This approach peaked in the later 1920s and the depression-ridden 1930s, but was swept away by the Second World War and the ensuing Cold War. With patriotism and anti-communism ascendant, leftist history lost much of its appeal both in and out of academia, though it never entirely died out. However, the U.S. scholars' economic interpretations had a strong influence on such leading Cuban historians as Roig de Leuchsenring and Portell Vila.

The New Left movement of the 1960s and 1970s revived the economic interpretation of American history, but with new formulations. William A. Williams, the most notable prophet of this revival, held that the mushrooming U.S. economy had required economic expansion over ever-widening areas. To meet this need, Washington attempted to create an "Open Door World," in which American economic penetration could operate everywhere on its own terms. Much, if not most, of U.S. foreign policy since the Civil War could be explained by the ongoing effort to create such a world. The Cuban episode was therefore only the first step in what became a global process. While Williams and others at first applied the new approach broadly, Walter LaFeber's *New Empire* focused more closely on Cuba and the expansionism of the late nineteenth century.¹¹

The economic interpretation of the Cuban episode was challenged almost from its birth. It was specifically attacked in 1936 by Julius Pratt, who asserted that the rise of U.S. expansionism had owed little to economic influences. The need for foreign markets and investment areas, he said, was proclaimed by intellectuals, journalists, and politicians, not by the business community. His research, he believed, showed that business leaders were mostly opposed to anything that would lead to war with Spain, for fear that such a war would block recovery from the depression of 1893-1897. After war was certain, however, a large section of the business world joined the war movement and sought to convert it to its own purposes. In the end, therefore, business interests had tended to *endorse* war and expansion, but they had not *caused* them.¹²

Pratt's work was later disputed in LaFeber's *New Empire* and other New Left studies. LaFeber granted that the business community came late to expansionism, but claimed that its last-minute conversion was vital to the decision for war and empire. When all hung in the balance, economic interests

11. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1959); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963). See also Williams, *The Roots of Modern American Empire* (New York: Random House, 1969).

12. Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936).

had decided the issue, he claimed. This renewed battle continues, and is still one major focus of discussion of the nation's first Cuban adventure. Over the years the argument has gained in variety and complexity, but the basic issues remain.

The economic interpretation of the Spanish-Cuban-American War has always had to contend with a very different approach, which might be called the "popular war" thesis. From 1898 on, most accounts of the war stressed its popularity with the U.S. public, and emphasized the role of popular emotion in bringing it about. Over the years French Ensor Chadwick (1909), James Ford Rhodes (1927), Samuel Flagg Bemis (1943), Ernest May (1961), and David Trask (1981), to name a few, have emphasized this point. In 1961 Ernest May described a "nameless, formless, and seemingly leaderless public opinion" that stampeded politicians before it.¹³

Many blamed President William McKinley for succumbing to popular pressure, arguing that his diplomacy was yielding success even as he abandoned it. For some time McKinley was widely perceived as weak; as Theodore Roosevelt said in another connection, McKinley "had no more backbone than a chocolate éclair." Some scholars defended him, but most agreed on the central role of public opinion in the coming of war. This view made the war *political* in motivation rather than economic: political leaders feared to oppose the mass emotion lest they alienate the voters. The Democratic party consciously sought to discredit the Republicans as callous and cowardly in the face of Spanish atrocities in Cuba, and in time the president and Republican congressional leaders came to feel that they must accommodate the demands of an aroused public.

Richard Hofstadter offered a variation on the "popular war" interpretation in 1952 in the form of a psychological explanation. A "psychic crisis" arose in the 1890s, he concluded, arising from an economic depression, the social dislocation resulting from industrialism, a new radicalism, and fears for the future. People tended to react to extreme frustration by acts of aggression, he argued, and thus the mood that led to war.¹⁴

The "popular war" thesis received its most recent and thorough expression in John Offner's *An Unwanted War*, which holds that both the U.S. and Spanish governments were prisoners of politics, forced into war against their will by public pressure. Offner's argument is directly challenged in

13. Ensor Chadwick; James Ford Rhodes; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1943); Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1961); David F. Trask (1981).

14. Richard Hofstadter, "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines," in *America in Crisis*, edited by Daniel Aaron (New York: Knopf, 1952).

Louis A. Perez, Jr.'s, *The War of 1898*. Perez charges that the McKinley administration took advantage of public outrage over the *Maine* explosion to initiate a long-sought intervention in Cuba. The wave of public emotion was not the cause of the intervention, according to Perez, but merely offered the occasion for a calculating Washington to act.¹⁵

The two main lines of analysis of the causes of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, therefore, can be broadly categorized as economic versus political. But further debate and research saw more focus on specific questions. One leading issue throughout was McKinley's role in the coming of war. McKinley had no visible Cuban policy before he became president, then simply called for an end to the disturbance. After that he has been variously seen as a weak-willed puppet of public opinion (à la Walter Millis), a scheming tool of big business (à la New Left), or a shrewd, realistic policy-maker altering his stand to meet new developments (à la Lewis Gould).¹⁶

As for McKinley's supposed last-minute abandonment of a successful diplomatic effort to end the war in Cuba, critics point out that Spain's concessions stopped short of granting Cuban independence, the Cubans' sole demand. With the both sides standing fast on that issue, how could continued diplomacy have helped?

Were the Cubans really on the verge of victory when the Yankees intervened? Facing an empty treasury, low morale, and a failing war effort, the Spanish government was actively seeking a compromise solution in Cuba. But the army refused to consider letting the island go, threatening revolt, and public opinion was mixed. Certainly the McKinley administration did not believe that a Spanish defeat was imminent; it feared a long-term stalemate, with its attendant disruption and destruction. Objectively speaking, the Cubans lacked the artillery and other resources to challenge Spain's hold on cities and towns. The Spanish troops may have been able to hold on indefinitely in their fortified cities, though ravaged by disease. The question, therefore, of when or how the war might have ended without U.S. intervention is still wide open.

To pick another issue, was the Revolution of 1898 really a vehicle for social reform, as Cuban revisionists have claimed? John Offner says no, not after Jose Marti was killed at the war's outset. Tomas Estrada Palma's New York Junta represented the creole elites, not the masses. The Cuban leaders had no

15. John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain Over Cuba, 1895-1898* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Louis A. Perez, Jr., *The War of 1898*.

16. Walter Millis; Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982).

agreed domestic agenda in 1898, and Cuban politics after the war was dominated until 1933 by the former officers of the Cuban Liberation Army, who adopted a harsh anti-Negro policy. It is hard to find any sign of real social reform in any of this. The U.S., however, did favor a sugar-based Cuban colonial economy and supported measures to promote it. Therefore U.S. influence was an obstacle to social transformation—if such a thing had been likely in Cuba.

These examples will serve to show the nature and range of scholarly debate in the U.S. over the Spanish-Cuban-American War and its results. Most of the central questions remain open. However, Cuban arguments, while not necessarily accepted, have finally gotten attention. U.S. scholars no longer argue the purity of U.S. acts and motives in Cuba, or do so with serious reservations. Most of them are familiar with the work of leading Cuban historians. While the 1898 war is central to the Cuban sense of the nation's past, it is less so in the United States, but as a significant part of a larger debate about the U.S. role in the world it continues to attract considerable scholarly attention. While still in substantial disagreement, Cubans and North Americans are focusing on similar issues. Perhaps the future may see them come closer together, and air their differences face to face. The differences might remain, but our perceptions of one another might change for the better.