Remember the Maine! - Causes of America's War with Spain

By Toni Lee Robinson

Whether the U.S. was ready or not, there was a war waiting in the wings. The drama was taking place in some exotic islands just off the southern edge of the U.S. Cuba and Puerto Rico had long been colonies of Spain. The Spanish empire had once cut a proud swath through many regions of the world. Now, these small, poor territories and the Philippines, halfway around the world in Asia, were all that was left.

The islands were pulsating with discontent. Cuba had been a hotbed of strife for several years. A guerrilla force of Cuban natives was waging a bloody war against the Spanish overlords. A long struggle called the Ten Years’ War had ended in 1878. Still, the conflict ebbed and flowed. First one side and then the other won territory. Again and again, the Cuban rebels would strike and fade away into the countryside. While they rarely won a major victory, it seemed they couldn’t be beaten.

As things stood, Spanish General Valeriano Weyler realized, the uprising would never be put down. The rebels could count on the people of the countryside for supplies and refuge. General Weyler had a solution to the problem. He used his army to force the villagers from their homes. The Spanish army moved thousands of men, women, and children from outlying areas into camps in the cities.

Conditions in the camps were horrible. Many thousands of people died of disease and starvation. During this time, the Spanish ruled with an iron fist. Suspected rebels were shot. Even those thought to be in support of the revolt were killed, most without trials.

Among those executed were 53 crew members of the Virginius, a vessel flying the American flag. The ship had been captured in October, 1873, by the Spanish. It was suspected of running guns to Cuban rebels. The ship was taken in Jamaican waters and brought to Cuba. Only the intervention of a British warship stopped the executions of the rest of the crew.

U.S. newspaper publishers were eager to bring this and other events of the war to light. They printed gory details of the bloodshed and injustice. Over their breakfast tables, Americans learned all about the violence in Cuba. Some of what they learned might not have been true. Publishers weren’t above embellishing and inventing to keep the public riveted. Sensational stories sold papers.

The reports also prompted some serious soul-searching. Was Cuba’s fight for freedom a good enough reason for Americans to go to war? On the one hand, injustice was running rampant. Innocent people were dying. On the other hand, Spain’s power was dwindling. The rebels were wearing them down. Chances were, sooner or later, Spain would give up and grant Cuba its freedom.

As Spain faded, though, a new possibility presented itself. A stronger country could overpower her and bully its way in. A fierce foreign military within striking distance wasn’t a pleasant prospect for the U.S. Meanwhile, the Cuban people were struggling for freedom, an ideal dear to the heart of Americans.

The climate of public opinion in the U.S. began to tilt toward war. Then, in February of 1898, Americans learned of the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine. The Maine had steamed into the harbor at Havana, Cuba, less than a month earlier. The battleship had been sent to protect American interests during the upheaval taking place on Cuban soil.

Late in the evening on February 15, an explosion tore the battleship apart. Its bow, where most of the 375-man crew was sleeping, sank immediately to the bottom of the harbor. Two hundred seventy-four men died. More than fifty were injured.

A naval inquiry concluded that the explosion was caused by a mine. The navy panel couldn’t pin the guilt on any one group. Spain, however, controlled the harbor. If agents of that nation hadn’t planted the mine, it was said, they had allowed it to be planted by someone else. U.S. newspapers screamed for war with Spain. The public agreed. Later, "Remember the Maine!" would be a battle cry for
rallying U.S. soldiers.

(Actually, a hundred years and four investigations later, it has yet to be proven what happened to the Maine. Some people have insisted the blast was an accident, while most agree with the navy's findings about a mine. Who planted the mine is still as much a mystery as it was in 1898. Some experts argue that the Cubans had more to gain by planting the mine than the Spanish. After all, the explosion was sure to bring the U.S. into the conflict on the side of the rebels.)

In April, President McKinley asked Congress to send U.S. troops to Cuba. Congress agreed. They passed a resolution declaring Cuba a free nation. Spain must leave Cuba, they said, and the U.S. military would do whatever it took to chase them out. Congress also vowed that the U.S. had no intention of placing any claim on Cuba after Spain was ousted. These provisions had been formulated by Senator Teller of Colorado. They were passed as the Teller Amendment. The U.S. was at war.

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Questions

1. Describe the state of the Spanish Empire in 1898.

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2. Explain the origins of the conflict in Cuba. Who was fighting? Why?

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3. The Spanish army forced Cubans into concentration camps in the cities because:
   A. Disease was a constant danger in the rural areas.
   B. They wanted the Cubans to have better educational opportunities.
   C. The population of the cities was falling and they needed workers.
   D. People living in rural areas had been giving refuge and supplies to rebels.

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4. True or false. In 1898, Americans were ill-informed about events in Cuba because U.S. newspapers refused to print the stories of violence and injustice.
   A. False
   B. True

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5. What was the meaning of the cry, "Remember the Maine!"?

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6. List the three theories about what happened to the Maine.

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7. The Teller Amendment:
   A. Declared Cuba a free country and committed U.S. forces to forcing Spain out.
   B. Insisted on reparations from Spain to compensate for the Maine
   C. Urged Spain to negotiate with Cuba for fair treatment of the colony
   D. Declared that the U.S. would invade Spain.

8. In your opinion, what was the most compelling reason the U.S. went to war with Spain? Was it a valid reason? Why or why not?

Describe the government and culture of Cuba today. What signs are there of the fact that the country was once a colony of Spain?
Imagine you know of someone who is being treated badly on a day-to-day basis. What would you do?