

6 The Spanish-American War of 1898

In January 1898, the Caribbean island of Cuba was fighting against Spain to gain independence. The U.S. battleship *Maine* made a “friendly visit” to Cuba to protect Americans and their property on the island. Many Spanish thought it showed that the United States supported the rebel Cubans.

On the night of February 15, a huge explosion destroyed the ship. It sank in minutes and killed 260 crew members. The cause of the blast is still unknown, but many angry Americans blamed the Spanish.

Two New York City papers—the *New York Journal*, owned by *William Randolph Hearst*, and the *New York World*, owned by *Joseph Pulitzer*— were competing for readers and profits. They used the explosion of the *Maine* as a tool in their battle. They exaggerated what happened in order to get New Yorkers to buy more papers. Newspaper headlines of “Remember the *Maine*!” and articles called for the United States to declare war against Spain. Today we call this exaggerated storytelling *yellow journalism*.

President *William McKinley* did not want to rush into war, but the press and public opinion were against him. Finally, he declared war against Spain in April 1898. The Spanish-American War started in the Philippine Islands in the Pacific Ocean — halfway around the world. The Philippines were also a Spanish colony. After a brief battle, the Spanish surrendered the islands to the U.S. Navy on May 1, 1898. Back in Cuba, U.S. Cavalry troops, called *Rough Riders*, under the leadership of *Theodore Roosevelt*, won the Battle of San Juan Hill. The United States destroyed the Spanish fleet two days later.



Rough Riders
in action at the
Battle of San
Juan Hill