

The Spanish-American War Saw the U.S. Become a World Power

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Theodore Roosevelt leads the Rough Riders during their charge up San Juan Hill in Santiago de Cuba, on the southern coast of Cuba, in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. The decisive battle allowed the United States to take Cuba from Spain. From Library of Congress

The Spanish-American War was a brief war that took place in 1898. It was a fight between the United States and Spain.

The war was an important turning point for both countries. It led Spain to give up part of its empire in North and South America. It also made the United States a world power, with new territories in the western Pacific and Latin America.

Cubans search for independence

The war grew out of the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain. Cuba was then a Spanish colony. The people of Cuba wanted to break free of Spanish control, just as the United States had broken free of British control.

A Cuban uprising, a series of protests, began in February 1895. Spain's efforts to squash the uprising were very harsh. Soon, many Americans began calling on the U.S. government to help the Cubans.

Anger at Spain grew even stronger when a United States battleship, the USS Maine, mysteriously sank in a Cuban harbor. The big ship went down in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, on February 15, 1898. It had been sent to Cuba to protect American citizens there.

On April 9, Spain announced a ceasefire, or a temporary period of peace, in its war with the Cuban rebels. Spain also offered Cuba limited powers of self-government.

However, these actions did not quiet calls for the United States to step in. Soon afterward, lawmakers in the U.S. Congress declared Cuba's right to independence. They demanded that Spain remove its armed forces.

Congress authorized the use of U.S. armed forces to make sure Spain left the island. At the same time, it assured the Cubans that the U.S. had no plans to take over Cuba.

Spain declared war on the United States on April 24. The next day, the U.S. declared war on Spain.

The war that followed did not last long. Spain was not at all prepared for war with the United States. Only a small portion of its army and navy was in the Americas.

Some of Spain's forces were stationed in the Philippines, which Spain also controlled. On May 1, 1898, Commodore George Dewey led U.S. battleships into Manila Bay in the Philippines. U.S. forces quickly destroyed the anchored Spanish fleet.

The war comes to an end

The Spanish Caribbean fleet under Admiral Pascual Cervera was harder to track down. However, it was finally located in Santiago de Cuba harbor on the southern coast of Cuba. U.S. forces under the command of General William Shafter then landed on the coast east of Santiago. They slowly advanced on the city in an effort to force Cervera's fleet out of the harbor.

Shafter's forces included both regular troops and volunteers. Among the volunteers were future President Theodore Roosevelt and his 1st Volunteer Cavalry, the "Rough Riders."

On July 3, Cervera led his ships out of Santiago and tried to escape. However, his fleet was quickly overtaken. In the battle that followed, all of Cervera's ships came under heavy fire from U.S. guns. Soon, his entire fleet was beached, with the ships burning or sinking.

On July 17, Cervera surrendered to Shafter and the war came to an end.

The Treaty of Paris was signed on December 10, 1898. Under its terms, Spain gave up all claim to Cuba. It also gave Guam and Puerto Rico to the U.S., and transferred control over the Philippines to the United States. While today Guam and Puerto Rico are still U.S. territories, the Philippines became an independent country in 1946.

1. How was the Spanish-American War an important turning point for Spain and the USA?

What did the two countries lose or gain during the war?

