

# 1898: A War of the World

Louis A. Pérez, Jr.

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**E**ighteen-Ninety-Eight has loomed large in national discourses of the twentieth century. The war had far-reaching consequences, immediately and in the decades that followed. Something of an imperial succession occurred in 1898, whereby the United States replaced Spain both in the Pacific, with the acquisition of the Philippines and Guam, and in the Caribbean, with the possession of Puerto Rico, the temporary occupation of Cuba, and the acquisition “in perpetuity” of the Guantánamo Naval Station.

All parties involved have come to understand 1898 as a watershed year, a moment in which outcomes were both definitive and decisive, at the same time an end and a beginning: that special conjuncture of historical circumstances that delineates one historical epoch from another. Special, too, in that the passage from one historical condition to another was discernible, even as it was happening.

United States historiography commemorates 1898 as the moment in which the nation first projected itself as a world power, whereupon the United States established an international presence and global prominence. Spanish historiography has looked back upon 1898 as “*el desastre*”—“the disaster”—the end of a five hundred-year-old New World empire, after which Spain plunged into decades of disarray. For Cuba and the Philippine Islands, 1898 represents a complex point of transition from colony to nation, in which the pursuit of sovereignty and separate nationality assumed new forms. For Puerto Rico, the transition was even more complicated, with central elements of nation and nationality persisting unresolved well into the next century.

The historical literature on 1898 in the United States has assumed vast proportions. It includes monographs and memoirs, published documents and unpublished dissertations, biographies and bibliographical guides, books, articles, and anthologies of all descriptions. The discussion of 1898 in various forms has loomed large in virtually every single U.S. history textbook of the last hundred years. In Spain, as the essay by Sylvia Hilton suggests,

1898 is something of a national preoccupation.

For all the importance traditionally accorded to 1898 (and indeed that consensus has been one of the more notable characteristics of the historiography), generations of scholars have treated the war with ambivalence, uncertain as to where exactly to situate it. They have presented it sometimes as a war of expansion and other times as an accidental war, an inevitable war or perhaps an unnecessary one, a war induced by public opinion or one instigated by public officials.

This ambivalence is itself a product of a larger ambiguity that contemplates the motives and purpose of 1898 and leads to larger discourses on the nation: specifically, the way a people arrange the terms by which they choose to represent themselves. The meaning of 1898 is ambiguous precisely because of the way historical narratives understand the nature of the nation. Far from detracting from the historical accounts, ambiguities shed light on the historiography as a form of national narrative. They provide a way to gain insight into the cultural determinants of historical literature. Modes of historical explanation have thus been simultaneously fitted within and derived from the moral hierarchies of the nation, fashioned to represent the ideals to which the nation professed dedication. The telling of 1898 has served as a means of self-affirmation and self-interrogation. Historical narratives, both popular and professional, have served as discourses on what the nation is, or perhaps more correctly, what the nation thinks itself to be.

The year 1898 occupies a special place in U.S. historiography. In one sense, the historical literature has assumed the proportions of a literary genre almost unique to this subject. This is best captured in the representations of the war through such phrasings as “Remember the *Maine!*” and John Hay’s proposition of a “splendid little war.” In another sense, the scholarship reflects the ways that the policy paradigms of 1898 have shaped the dominant historiographical formulations of the war. These paradigms have converged, interacted, and assembled the familiarities by which we remember the war.

Representations of 1898 also serve to delineate a larger debate about the place and purpose of the United States in world affairs. Issues such as expansion, military conquest, colonial administration, and imperialism surface into full view, even if not often acknowledged in mainstream historiography.

The expansion of national history onto an international stage has been a slow and complex undertaking. Early on, the scholarship recognized 1898 and its aftermath as having global proportions, events that implicated the peoples of Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean in direct and decisive ways. United States historiography has represented the place of others largely by the creation of the Other, people who as a result of ignorance or innocence (or perhaps mischief or malice) failed to appreciate the good that the Americans sought to visit upon them. In the United States, scholars looking at U.S. actions abroad have generally shared assumptions about motive and intent, which they usually saw as generous and well-meaning. At the receiving end, where the analysis of the United States' purpose is often measured by actions and consequences, conclusions have typically been less charitable.

Few historiographical propositions have persisted as unchanged and unchallenged as the interpretations of 1898, many of which were first formulated as a function of the war. It began in the United States with the very construction of the conflict as the "Spanish-American War," which immediately suggested the purpose and identified the participants of the war. The representation of the war has undergone various renderings—the "Spanish War," the "Hispano-American War," the "American-Spanish War"—before arriving at the "Spanish-American War." All of these terms shared a common exclusion of Cuban participation, palpable evidence of the power of dominant narratives to define the forms by which the past is recovered, recorded, and received.

Slowly these constructs have yielded to a fuller and more inclusive rendering of the war and its participants, suggested most immediately in the name by which the war is known. Benjamin R. Beede employed "Spanish-Cuban/American War" in his encyclopedia *The War of 1898 and U.S. Interventions, 1898-1934*, explaining that this usage was meant to convey "the fact that the war in Cuba had been largely won by the Cuban revolutionaries before [the] U.S. intervention." Thomas Paterson used "Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War," he explained, "in order to represent all the major participants and to identify where the war was fought and whose interests were most at stake." In recognition that the Cubans "already had the Spanish armies so hard pressed," Gilbert Lycan suggested that the war "should not be called the 'Spanish-American War,' but the 'Cuban-Spanish-American War.'" Samuel Flagg Bemis entitled his chapter on 1898 as the "Cuban-Spanish-American War," and explained in his prefatory comments: "On the fiftieth anniversary of Cuban independence occurred a symposium of Cuban historians met to commemorate the battle of Santiago, where American soldiers had assisted Cuban veterans to turn decisively the tide to victory over Spain in 1898. The war, declared the Cuban scholars, was a Cuban-Spanish-American War, not merely a Spanish-American War as historians in the United States and elsewhere had been calling it. The corrective is well

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pointed. It was in truth a Cuban-Spanish-American War, and henceforth so it should be called" (1).

The centennial of 1898 provides the occasion to dedicate this issue of the *Magazine* to the war in its multiple and multifaceted perspectives. We have made an effort to include a wide representation of perspectives, thereby inviting a reconsideration of the immediate impact and long-term implications of a conflict that implicated Asia, the Western Hemisphere, and Europe, and may have indeed transformed the world in ways that were both profound and permanent. □

#### Endnotes

1. See Benjamin R. Beede, *The War of 1898 and U.S. Interventions, 1898-1934: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1994), xi; Thomas G. Paterson, "United States Intervention in Cuba, 1898: Interpretations of the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War," *The History Teacher* 29 (May 1996): 341; Gilbert L. Lycan, *Twelve Major Turning Points in American History* (Deland, FL: Everett, 1968), 112; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Short History of American Foreign Policy and Diplomacy*, rev. ed. (New York: Holt, 1964), 275.

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