

The Spanish-American War:
Military History and the Crowding Effect of Empire Historiography¹

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With the enlivening of American pursuits toward global authority in the twenty-first century, interest in the origin of this pastime has prompted scholars to examine the Spanish-American War of 1898. Members of several different academic communities – not only military historians – have probed that period of the United States’ growth. The central idea for most of these studies is the problem of imperialism: Is the U.S. an empire, and if so, what can we learn from the Spanish-American War? Historians generally recognize the war as the dawn of The American Empire. The historiography of the Spanish-American War has two major deficiencies that affect the practice and usefulness of military history. Historians have produced little solid military analysis – strategic, operational, or tactical. There is also a paucity of Spanish-perspective pieces (in English-language historiography, at least). The first problem is more far-reaching and endemic, and the latter is symptomatic of a deeper analytical issue.

There are three main approaches to the Spanish-American War: Imperialism studies, which deal less with the military aspects of the war than its implications for statecraft and international relations; political analysis, which investigates the causes and effects of the war in the political arena; and military didacticism, which looks for lessons that would benefit the profession of arms. While the last school of thought is most obviously useful for (and composed of) military historians, the first two also merit discussion because they address the parameters within which military action takes place. The solution to the first problem – lack of military analysis – will most likely come from the military didacticism school, and the international relations and political schools can best solve the second – lack of Spanish perspective. Remedying these problems in Spanish-American War historiography is important to the field of military history because its largest audience, the professional military community, is less likely to seek out and digest the political and international studies which dominate the topic. Military professionals most likely shy away from analyzing The Spanish-American War because the matter of imperialism is intrinsic, wrapped tightly with foreign policy, and the military doesn’t like to deal with foreign policy.

The contributors to the imperialism studies school of Spanish-American War historiography take two approaches: Analysis of contemporary thought and analysis of imperial evolution. Adam Cooke, Piero Gleijeses, and Christina Burnett typify the analyzers of contemporary thought. Historians find this approach rich, because it can go many directions. Cooke traces the evolution of Charles Francis Adams, Jr.’s ideas on American imperialism: from anticipation in 1890, to protest in 1898, and finally, acceptance in 1904. Charles Adams was a descendant of President John Adams, and an imminent New England politician. Cooke’s work is an overview of the incubation of empire in American thought during the time when the ground-breaking maneuvers toward empire were taking place.² While a minority of politicians tried to build a groundswell of opposition to imperialism, journalists made waves, too. Historians commonly indicate the press as one of the main sources of momentum for the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, and Gleijeses argues that the press also articulated the voice of dissent. He provides an important counterpoint to the seemingly unstoppable

² Adam Cooke, “‘An Unpardonable Bit of Folly and Impertinence’: Charles Francis Adams, Jr., American Anti-Imperialists, and the Philippines,” *The New England Quarterly* 83 (June 2010): 337-338.

force of turn-of-the-century American imperialism.³ The imperialist/anti-imperialist debate also found its way into the legal sphere. Burnett, who is a lawyer, focuses her study on the legal aspects of empire building and the unique situation American leaders faced in rectifying their pursuit with the constitution. She shows that not only the policy-makers and military addressed the ramifications of early American imperialism, but the courts did too.⁴ The question at hand at the turn of the twentieth century was whether the Constitution “followed the flag”: Did America’s new territories have the same opportunities as the contiguous territories to become states? The Supreme Court’s Insular Cases of 1901-1905 have been interpreted as the creation of “Constitution-free” zones in new imperial holdings, but Burnett argues that the purpose of the cases was to make an easy way out - a severable tie to the new territories (rather than making them outright colonies or states). This is important for the discussion of U.S. imperialism because it is also an indication of American paternalism (the view that America is responsible to administer justice throughout the world), which crops up in political historiography. The issue of imperialism was addressed by contemporary politicians, journalists, and lawyers, and is exemplified by a robust and diverse historiography on the subject.

Michael Dunne, George Steinmetz, and Paul MacDonald have undertaken the analysis of imperial evolution. Historians have termed the twentieth century “The American Century,” and Dunne explores the “Great Debates” occasioned by several junctures in U.S. foreign policy. He first addresses the Spanish-American War and the question of whether traditional American policies were still relevant in its aftermath. Each of the major wars of the twentieth century serve as subsequent mile stones for Dunne, and he weighs the interaction of America’s internal forces and external pursuits. Dunne puts the Spanish-American War in a continuum of Great Debates and shows that imperialism is an ongoing process.⁵ Steinmetz delivers stoutly sourced work. He is not focused on the Spanish-American War’s military aspects *per se*, but he does offer perspective on the social features of empire. He also makes the comparison between American and German imperialism, which is another useful angle and a departure from the popular American/British or American/Roman evaluations.⁶ MacDonald only mentions the war in passing, but gives an excellent overview of imperialism

³ Piero Gleijeses, “1898: The Opposition to the Spanish-American War,” *The Journal of Latin-American Studies* 35 (Nov. 2003): 718.

⁴ Christina Burnett, “United States: American Expansion and Territorial Deannexation,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 72 (Summer 2005): 797.

⁵ Michael Dunne, “U.S. Foreign Relations in the Twentieth Century: From World Power to Global Hegemony,” *International Affairs* 76 (Jan. 2000): 27-30.

⁶ George Steinmetz, “Return to Empire: The New U.S. Imperialism in Comparative Historical Perspective,” *Sociological Theory* 23 (Dec. 2005): 353-354.

historiography. MacDonald organizes and explains the various schools of thought on American empire, and should be the starting point for any research on the subject.⁷

By virtue of its broad scope, the imperialism studies school of Spanish-American War historiography has the largest pool of evidence from which to draw. The school has an oblique usefulness for military history, because it doesn't directly address the traditional issues of warfare, but it is relevant insofar as wars are intricately tied to sociopolitical cause and effect. Imperialism scholars often arrive at conclusions that are antithetical to the self-perpetuating patterns of thought in the military (and by extension, the military history community), because they usually describe the negative aspects of force. This creates a good balance in the greater historiography of war and empire, though.

The political analysis school of Spanish-American War historiography includes Jeffrey Engel, Nick Kapur, and Mark Peceny. This school focuses on the political reasons for certain events, and generally centers on individual decision-makers. In the case of the U.S., this is usually the President. Kapur deals with President William McKinley's role in allowing the Spanish-American War to take place. He revises the *en vogue* idea that Congress and a whipped-up American public bullied McKinley into war. By addressing the president's values, rather than merely his personal characteristics, Kapur also provides a cultural angle on the war.⁸ This school of historiography has a link to the imperialism studies school, insofar as political leaders were aware of their role in promoting imperialism. Theodore Roosevelt had an idea (which he began to develop prior to the Spanish-American War) that political leaders have a responsibility to their nations and that stronger powers may remove other countries' unfit leadership for the good of civilization. Engel extrapolates this idea and its implications for American policy in the decades following Roosevelt's presidency. He uses prodigious primary source material, focusing on Roosevelt's personal correspondence, and balances it with the most recent work on the subject.⁹ Engel shows the seed of imperialist thought prior to the war, indicates that the war fertilized the seed and confirmed Roosevelt's paternalist idea, and presents the fruit of America's overseas efforts in the twentieth century as the logical progression of the ideal. Not all of the political analysis school is this direct. Peceny drifts toward philosophy in his "constructivist interpretation" of the war. He argues that historians can best understand the Spanish-American War through "constructivist" theories which focus on the power of global norms and shared identities in the international system."¹⁰ Immanuel Kant described a "liberal pacific union," in

⁷ Paul MacDonald, "Those Who Forget Historiography Are Doomed to Repeat It: Empire, Imperialism, and Contemporary Debates about American Power," *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009): 56-57.

⁸ Nick Kapur, "William McKinley's Values and the Origins of the Spanish American War: A Reinterpretation," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 (March 2011): 36.

⁹ Jeffrey Engel, "The Democratic Language of American Imperialism: Race, Order, and Theodore Roosevelt's Personifications of Foreign Policy Evil," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 19 (2008): 685.

¹⁰ Mark Peceny, "A Constructivist Interpretation of the Liberal Peace: The Ambiguous Case of the Spanish-American War," *Journal of Peace Research* 34 (Nov. 1997): 416.

which democracies never war with each other, and Peceny notes that the Spanish-American War is an exception. This work is an example of the Spanish-American War's gravitational pull on disparate fields of the academy. If peace scholars can derive obscure philosophical implications from the conflict, there is surely a vast amount of work to be done in the realm of pure military history.

The political analysis school has a great deal of primary source material from which to draw, particularly in the case of presidential studies. Through his use of Roosevelt's papers, Engel provides an example of the rich information waiting to be mined in presidential archives alone. Peceny, as an outlier in the political analysis school, pulled his work from a robust field of statecraft studies and peace scholarship. Just as Burnett and her study of U.S. imperialism's legal history find a place in the broader imperialist historiography, Peceny takes an unlikely but useful position in the analysis of the Spanish-American War's political history.

The military didacticism school of Spanish-American War historiography focuses on deriving lessons for the profession of arms from the military experience in the war. This is the least vibrant of the three schools. T.R. Brereton, Jack Schulimson, and John Smith exemplify the school. No work typifies the didactic approach to the Spanish-American War more than Brereton's. His short biographic piece on Arthur Wagner, the father of army "lessons learned," makes the point that the army learned its lesson about lesson-learning in the Spanish-American War. The practice (more often merely *theory*) of applying examples from previous combat to present and future doctrine is practically unavoidable in today's U.S. military. This article indicates that the war's legacies were the opening of American empire and the professionalization of the U.S. military.¹¹ Schulimson provides a concise explanation of military professionalism and the war's role in validating several decades of Marine renewal. His article in the *Journal of Military History*, as a case study of the Marines in the nineteenth century, shows their development and subsequent usefulness in the Spanish-American War: "Despite a somewhat rocky start at Guantanamo, the Marine 1st Battalion proved itself in combat. By seizing the heights on Guantanamo, it provided a safe anchorage for Navy ships. In effect, the Marines seized and protected an advance base for the fleet blockading Santiago."¹² The study is also helpful because it shows the role of the military in American culture during that era. Some revisionist perspective on the Spanish-American War fits tidily into the didactic school. John Smith explains that the war wasn't as "splendid" as historians sometimes make it seem: The U.S. military wasn't ready, the effort was fraught with inter-service rivalry, and the aftermath of governing newly acquired territories was messy.¹³ Smith's article is a balanced work on the temptation to mythologize victory. He also examines the trend in historiography, in the wake of the

¹¹ T.R. Brereton, "First Lessons in Modern War: Arthur Wagner, the 1898 Santiago Campaign, and U.S. Army Lesson Learning," *The Journal of Military History* 64 (Jan. 2000): 96.

¹² Jack Schulimson, "Military Professionalism: The Case of the U.S. Marine Officer Corps, 1880-1898," *The Journal of Military History* 60 (Apr. 1996): 240.

¹³ Joseph Smith, "The 'Splendid Little War' of 1898: A Reappraisal," *History* vol. 80 no. 258 (Feb. 1995): 23-24.

Vietnam War, to view the Spanish-American War as a U.S. effort to impede popular revolution in Cuba and the Philippines.¹⁴

While Smith (and Schulimson, to a lesser degree) addresses operational history, for the most part the school of historiography most closely tied to the military experience fails to cover the strategic and tactical maneuvers of the war. The didactic school does an excellent job of showing the professional development of the pre-war military, but falls short on analyzing the action in depth.

The majority of scholarship on the Spanish-American War centers on the issue of imperialism – with good cause. The turn of the twentieth century was a time of imperial land-grabs by most of the world powers, and the U.S. was caught up in the fever of globalism after having consolidated its North American area of influence with the end of the Indian wars in 1890. Merely focusing on the quest for empire (complex as that subject is) does not adequately cover the military history of the Spanish-American War though. Works that concern the political sphere are subordinate to the historiography of empire. Those efforts to explain the domestic climate and foreign relations strategy of American leaders are important to a full-bodied understanding of the war, but like the empire studies, are also incapable of filling the void of pure military history. Military historians have proffered a tiny amount of work on the conflict (compared to the vast studies of most U.S. wars), but there is more to do. Historians could make an argument that the Spanish-American War was short, and thus merits less study than major conflicts like the First World War, but that falls short, too. Despite the brevity of the war in 1898, it had far-reaching consequences for the regions that the U.S. seized, and for the American psyche – perhaps to the same degree that the Civil War or Vietnam changed the American outlook. The volume of discussion about empire attests to that fact.

The lack of Spanish-perspective works indicates a U.S.-centric bias in Spanish-American War historiography. The reason for this may be that the body of work on the war simply is not fully developed. Until the conflict's military history becomes richer in general, it is probably too much to expect Spanish-perspective histories with any degree of frequency or quality. The scarcity of this work may have another cause: Perhaps there is little primary Spanish-language source material. The sudden and drastic loss of empire would create a shocking effect on Spain, and it is possible that little was written in Spanish about the war. There are at least two sides to every war, however, and the problem still stands.

Based on these problems, military historians of the Spanish-American War will meet difficulty. The task of bolstering this body of work is not impossible though – in fact, historians have a lot of things going for them. The extra-military studies of the conflict can serve as guides and resources for historians who seek to create works on “war and society” or incorporate global strategy into the background of operational histories.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

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