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## THE CUBAN REBELLION

*April 1898*

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**F**or the past three years, the people of the United States have been intensely concerned about the island of Cuba off the southern coast of Florida. In 1895, only 17 years after the failure of a bloody, 10-year revolt, the Cuban people launched another desperate war for independence from their Spanish masters.

Aside from the fact that this war flares so close to the U.S. border, Americans have good reason to be wary of the Cuban crisis. U.S. citizens own a considerable share of the Cuban plantations, which produce more sugar than any other place in the world. Many Americans depend on the thriving trade between the United States and Cuba for their livelihood.

Nor is the U.S. interest in Cuba likely to fade as long as an active group of Cuban nationals in the United States is fanning the flames of freedom. These Cubans have effectively conveyed a heartbreaking picture of their suffering under Spanish rule.

Over the past three years, public opinion in the United States has steadily swung in favor of the Cuban rebels. While taking no part in the conflict, the U.S. government has urged Spain to relax its grip on Cuba. While insisting that the United States has no business interfering in Cuba, Spain has made grudging concessions to the Cubans.

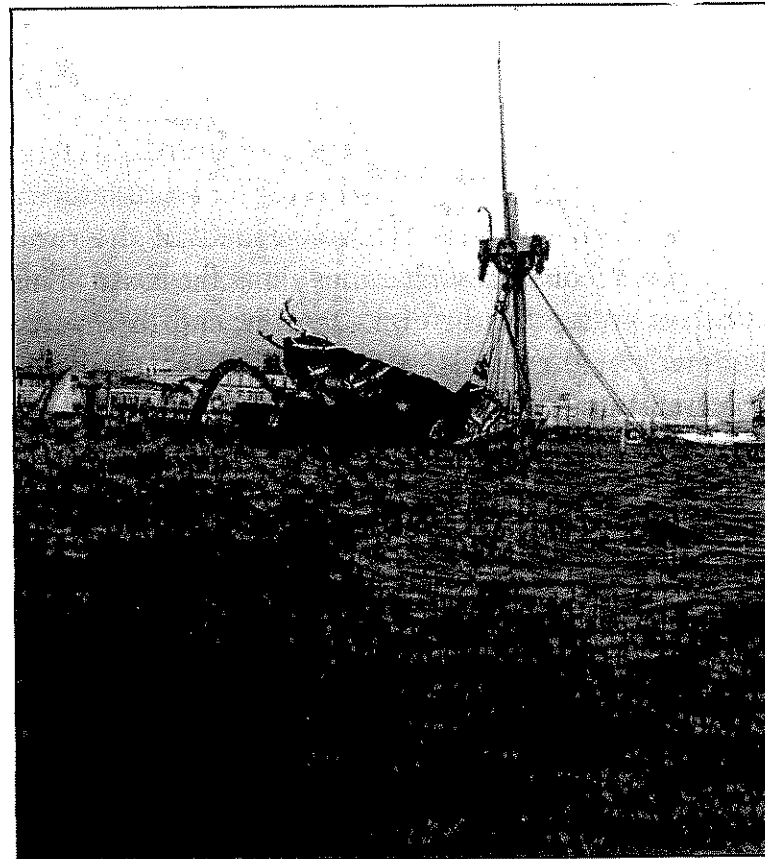
In February, a shocking incident raised the Cuban situation to the crisis stage. An American battleship, the USS *Maine*, exploded while docked in Havana, Cuba, on a peaceful mission. At least 260 American sailors died in the blast. Two weeks ago, a U.S. naval court concluded that a submerged mine caused the blast. Spain is the obvious suspect in this apparent act of murder and sabotage, and many Americans are now calling for war against Spain.

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## BACKGROUND

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The Spanish flag once flew over the lands from the southern parts of North America to South America. But the nation long ago lost its status as a major world power. Centuries of mismanagement and bad fortune have robbed Spain of its wealth and its colonies, and Cuba and the small island of Puerto Rico are all that remain of



*After the battleship Maine exploded in Havana harbor on February 15, 1898, "Remember the Maine!" became a popular slogan that was used to promote hostility toward Spain.*

the once-proud Spanish empire in the Americas. Shamed by their fall from power, the Spanish cling fiercely to the last of their possessions. Despite the strain this puts on their meager national treasury, they have committed a quarter of a million soldiers to defending Cuba.

The outgunned Cuban rebels have fought an effective fight-and-hide (guerrilla) campaign against Spain. The Spanish concluded that the best way to stop the rebels was to cut off their support in the local villages and farms. Under General Valeriano Weyler, Spanish forces burned crops and homes, then herded all the rural Cubans into concentration camps along the coast. This ruthless policy has brought famine and disease to hundreds of thousands of Cuban civilians. Reliable observers estimate that at least 200,000 from a total population of 1.5 million have died in these concentration camps.

Horror stories of these camps have triggered American outrage against Spain. Resentful of American criticism, the Spanish people argue that the United States invented the disastrous practice of fighting a civil war during its own. The Spanish also point out that the rebels themselves have been burning plantations and Spanish property for years. Nonetheless, under U.S. pressure, Spain has recently made humanitarian concessions. It has agreed to allow Cuba some sort of self-rule under the Spanish flag and has finally agreed to disband the concentration camps. The Cubans, though, insist on complete freedom from Spain.

Spain has reason to fear American involvement in Cuba. The fortunes of the United States have risen as dramatically as those of Spain have fallen. Within a century, the U.S. has expanded from a struggling collection of states on the eastern seaboard to a wealthy nation that spans the width of the continent. Most observers are

convinced that Spain is no match for the United States in warfare.

The Spanish, however, hope that aid from their allies will even the odds. The major powers of Europe—Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia—generally sympathize with Spain in the Cuban conflict. Germany, which arrived late on the colonial scene, is especially interested in picking up some foreign territory and might be tempted to work out a deal with Spain. So far, however, none of the European nations have indicated its intent to support Spain militarily.