

LESSON 6 Why Did President McKinley Ask for a Declaration of War Against Spain in April 1898?

On April 11, 1898, President McKinley addressed Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Spain. This lesson presents two viewpoints of why he did this.

Historian A

(1) The Spanish-American War was a key event in American imperialism. As such, it is important to understand how the United States became involved in the war. It is clear from the records left to us that President McKinley was pushed into the war by jingoists (militaristic patriots who frequently want war) and the press. The President did not really want war, but he was too weak-willed to stand up against the popular demand for military action.

(2) When McKinley entered the presidency in March 1897, he was surrounded by a group of expansionists, including Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, and Captain Alfred T. Mahan. These men wanted a large navy, a string of naval bases, and territorial and trade expansion.¹ When the situation in Cuba worsened, President McKinley had already been advised to pursue expansionist policies.

(3) Meanwhile, the Spanish were having great difficulty ruling Cuba in the 1890s. The United States had passed the Wilson-Gorman Tariff in 1894, which put a 40-percent duty (tax) on sugar from Cuba. The sugar plantations were ruined, and since Cuba's economy depended almost completely on sugar, the whole economy fell apart. The Cuban people suffered greatly, and a rebellion against the Spanish soon resulted.² The Spanish, under General

Weyler, were forced to use harsh measures, such as herding Cuban people into *reconcentrados* (concentration camps), to suppress the revolt.

(5) As bad as the Spanish actions were, they were not sufficient to cause the United States to declare war—countries frequently use violence and cruelty to crush revolutions, but other governments do not declare war on them. Besides, many Americans realized that the rebels were just as harsh as the Spanish.

(6) The yellow press escalated (increased) the Cuban situation into a declaration of war. The newspapers in New York City competed for readers, because the more readers a paper had, the more it could charge for advertising. Readers could be gained through sensational stories, and many such stories could be written about the rebellion in Cuba. Day after day, Americans read about General Weyler's atrocities (tortures, killing of civilians, war crimes) toward Cuban men, women, and children.³ Graphic drawings were also included. Much of what was written was exaggerated or distorted—the yellow press was more interested in selling papers than in printing the truth. As William Randolph Hearst told an artist in 1898, “furnish the pictures; I'll furnish the war.”⁴

(7) American public opinion against Spain was inflamed in February 1898 by two events. First, a letter by the Spanish minister, de Lôme, was published in a New

[continued on next page]

Historian B

[continued from previous page]

York newspaper. In it, de Lôme referred to McKinley as a weak man who was a “bidder for the admiration of the crowd.”⁵ Second, the American battleship *Maine* was blown up in Havana (Cuba) Harbor, killing 260 Americans. Americans immediately believed that the Spanish had torpedoed the ship. The American press had a field day with these two events, whipping up public outrage to new heights.⁶

(7) Faced with this public pressure, McKinley sent Spain a series of harsh demands on March 27, 1898. Except for a few minor points, the Spanish agreed to the demands.⁷ By this time, however, McKinley was being pressed by the jingoists to declare war. Moreover, McKinley did

not want Congress to take the initiative in declaring war, since it would look like he, the President, was a weak leader. If McKinley looked weak, his Republican Party would be hurt in the upcoming fall Congressional elections.⁸

(8) So McKinley ignored the Spanish concessions and went before Congress on April 11, 1898, to lead the country into war. In reality, McKinley did not lead the country at all; he allowed himself to be pushed into an imperialistic war by public opinion and an elite group of militaristic patriots. As Senator Spooner said, “The President could have avoided war, but the press and jingoists were too strong and the fall elections were too near.”

Endnotes for Historian A

¹ Henry Cabot Lodge, “Our Blundering Foreign Policy,” *The Forum*, Vol. XIX (March 1895), pp. 14-17:

“In the interests of our commerce and of our fullest development we should build the Nicaragua Canal...control the Hawaiian Islands and maintain our influence in Samoa....When the Nicaragua Canal is built, the island of Cuba...will become to us a necessity.”

Alfred T. Mahan, “The United States Looking Outward,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. LXVI (1890), pp. 821-23:

“Whether they will or not, Americans must now begin to look outward. The growing production of the country demands it. An increasing volume of public sentiment [feelings] demands it.”

² Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, eighth edition (New York, 1969), p. 451:

“The American tariff of 1894, by placing relatively high duties on sugar, visited the island with economic prostration [reduced to helplessness]. Early in 1895, the unhappy Cubans unfurled the flag of rebellion.”

³ *New York Journal*, February 23, 1896, 27: 1, 2, 3:

“It is not only Weyler the soldier—but Weyler the brute, the devastator of haciendas [homes], the destroyer of families, and the outrager of women—pitiless, cold, an exterminator of men....”

New York World, May 17, 1896, 1:8, 2:1:

“Blood on the roadsides, blood in the fields, blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood! The old, the young, the weak, the crippled—all are butchered without mercy.”

⁴ There is a story that Hearst said this to the artist Frederick Remington. J. R. Winkler, W. R. Hearst (New York, 1928), p. 144.

⁵ J. B. Moore, *A Digest of International Law* (Washington, 1906), VI, 176.

⁶ For example, Hearst’s newspaper printed the headlines:

“THE WARSHIP MAINE WAS SPLIT IN TWO BY ENEMY’S SECRET INFERNAL MACHINE”

“THE WHOLE COUNTRY THRILLS WITH WAR FEVER”

⁷ McKinley’s demands on March 27, 1898, were (summarized by the author of this book): First: Armistice (truce) until October 1.

[continued on next page]

Endnotes for Historian B

[continued from previous page]

Second: Immediate ending of reconcentrado policy.

Third: The President of the United States to be the final arbiter (judge) between Spain and the Cuban rebels, if terms of peace are not settled between Spain and the Cubans by October 1.

Within the next two weeks Spain announced an armistice and an end to the reconcentrado policy. This was all Spain could be expected to do, under the circumstances.

⁸ Letter from Senator Henry Cabot Lodge to President McKinley:

“[I]f the war in Cuba drags on through the summer with nothing done we shall go down in the greatest defeat [in the fall elections] ever known.”

Historian B

(1) The causes of the Spanish-American War have been studied by historians for years. While a number of interpretations have been advanced, the common view is that President McKinley was a weak leader who was pushed into war by a small number of jingoists and the yellow press. Close examination of the causes of the war, however, shows that the common view is mistaken. President McKinley was actually a strong leader who knew what he wanted—he did not need public opinion to push him into war.

(2) The theory that a group of influential jingoists was a key factor in the war is wrong. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and other jingoists actually had little influence with McKinley—much less than Assistant Secretary of State William R. Day, Senator William B. Allison, and several other men (none of whom were jingoists).¹ How then could the jingoists have talked McKinley into war?

(3) Likewise, the theory of yellow journalism does not explain the war. The president can ignore public opinion if he chooses. It must be remembered that newspapers could not create public opinion on the war issue but only shape pre-existing opinion. Historians have mistakenly taken seriously William Randolph Hearst’s statement that he would furnish the

war. Hearst exaggerated his own role in what he considered to be a “splendid little war.”

(4) President McKinley’s clear-cut goals show that he, not the jingoists or yellow press, was in control of United States policy. The president was worried about German expansion, but could do little about it while American interests and energies were focused on Cuba.² Thus, McKinley wanted the difficulties between Spain and her colony resolved. As long as the hostilities in Cuba continued, the United States looked weak.

(5) McKinley tried to resolve the conflict in Cuba without war by submitting a proposal to Spain calling for Cuban autonomy (self-government). The de Lôme letter undermined his efforts for a peaceful solution, but not because de Lôme said the President was weak. Rather, the letter showed that Spanish promises of reform in Cuba were not being carried out—Spain was telling the United States one thing but doing another.³

(6) When the battleship *Maine* was blown up, the American public clamored for war. President McKinley set up a naval board of inquiry to study the incident—he was not being herded into war. If the destruction of the *Maine* was the reason for war, why was it; two months before the United States acted?

[continued on next page]

Historian B

[continued from previous page]

(7) In late March McKinley sent a series of stiff demands to Spain. Spain's response to the demands has been misinterpreted by historians. While Spain seemed to concede to most of the demands, in reality she did not. Most importantly, Spain would not, agree to independence for Cuba.⁴ This was the central point in McKinley's program.

(8) In light of evidence (the de Lôme letter) showing that the Spanish had

negotiated in bad faith, and in light of the lack of agreement on McKinley's main demand, war could scarcely be avoided. What led to, the Spanish-American War was not the jingoists and yellow press, but rather, President McKinley's conscious policy⁵ of independence for Cuba. To this the Spanish could not, and would not, agree.

Endnotes for Historian B

¹ Horace Samuel and Marion Galbraith Merrill, *The Republican Command, 1897-1913*, (The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), p. 1:

“At the beginning of 1897, President William McKinley and a coterie [small group] of senators, called ‘The Four,’ constituted the top command [of the Republican Party]. The four were Nelson W. Aldrich of Rhode Island, Orville H. Platt of Connecticut, William B. Allison of Iowa, and John C. Spooner of Wisconsin. [Later Theodore Roosevelt, Joseph G. Cannon, and William Howard Taft joined the group.]

“No other Republicans wielded the great power over policy, legislation, nominations, and appointments that these eight [including McKinley] possessed.”

² Germany sent warships into Haiti in the winter of 1897, defied the Monroe Doctrine, and announced plans to build new warships for the Caribbean and South Atlantic. Germany also took over part of China in November 1897, but the United States could do nothing about it as long as Cuba occupied so much of its attention.

³ There was evidence in de Lôme's letter showing that neither Spain's announced reforms in Cuba, nor Spain's negotiations for a trade pact with the United States were being carried out sincerely.

“Without a military end of the matter nothing will be accomplished in Cuba. [This indicates that he felt Spain should defeat the Cuban rebels rather than reform the island.]

“It would be very advantageous to take up *even if only for effect*, the question of commercial relations [with the United States].” Emphasis added. (This shows that he wanted Spain to discuss commercial relations merely to improve Spain's image in the United States.)

Letter from Enrique Depuy de Lôme to Don Jose Canaljas (a friend of de Lôme), December 1897, from *Foreign Relations of the United States* (1898), p. 1007.

⁴ McKinley's demands were that Spain:

First: Declare an immediate armistice (truce) lasting until October 1.

Second: Permanently abolish the reconcentrado policy.

Third: Permit the President to mediate (help the Spanish and Cubans come to an agreement) if a settlement between Spain and the rebels was not reached during the armistice.

The third demand involved Cuban independence, since McKinley, as mediator, could require it. Both the Spanish and the Americans realized that the third demand was the most important.

Spain agreed to the first two demands, but McKinley wondered about Spain's sincerity. Then Assistant Secretary of State Day asked the Spanish whether they were ready to grant Cuban independence. The answer was no. So actually, the Spanish reply to the United States demands was completely unsatisfactory.

[continued on next page]

Endnotes for Historian B

[Continued from previous page.]

⁵ One event which shows that the President, not the jingoists or yellow press, was in control of events was a speech on Cuba given by Senator Redfield Proctor. The republican from Vermont, who had just returned from a tour of Cuba, inflamed the American public with his speech describing the terrible cruelties practiced by the Spanish and calling for Cuban independence.

Stories at the time make it seem likely that McKinley had sent Senator Proctor to Cuba and approved his speech before its delivery. The President was as much in control of public opinion as was the yellow press.



Historian A

1. The main point of Historian A is:

- A. The Spanish gave in to American demands, so President McKinley should not have asked for a declaration of war.
- B. The Spanish-American War was a key event in American history.
- C. President McKinley was pushed into war by the *jingoists* and the yellow press.
- D. The destruction of the *Maine* forced President McKinley to ask for a declaration of war.

2. What is the unstated assumption in the second paragraph? (See **Assumptions** in the “Guide to Critical Thinking” (Unit 1) pp. 15-16 for the steps for identifying unstated assumptions.)

3. Determine the type of reasoning (cause and effect, comparison, generalization, or proof) and key question for each of the following sections taken from Historian A, then decide how well the argument answers the key question. Boxes have been provided for your answers and the first one has been done for you.

- a. “The United States had passed the Wilson-Gorman Tariff in 1894, which put a 40-percent duty (tax) on sugar from Cuba. The sugar plantations were ruined, and since Cuba’s economy depended almost completely on sugar,

[continued on next page]

[continued from previous page]

the whole economy fell apart. The Cuban people suffered greatly, and a rebellion against the Spanish soon resulted.” (Paragraph 3)

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered
Cause-and-Effect	Is there a good connection between the cause and the effect? (p.5)	The author does show a connection by explaining that Cuba was dependent upon sugar exports.

- b. “The yellow press escalated (increased) the Cuban situation into a declaration of war.” (Paragraph 5)

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

- d. “Day after day, Americans read about General Weyler’s atrocities (tortures, killing of civilians, war crimes) toward Cuban men, women, and children.” (Paragraph 5)

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

- f. “If McKinley looked weak, his Republican Party would be hurt in the upcoming fall Congressional elections.” (Paragraph 7)

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

[continued on next page]

[continued from previous page]

7. Determine the type of reasoning (cause and effect, comparison, generalization, or proof) used in the following.

- a. “The theory that a group of influential jingoists was a key factor in the war is wrong. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, and other jingoists actually had little influence with McKinley—much less than Assistant Secretary of State William R. Day, Senator William B. Allison, and several other men (none of whom were jingoists). How then could the jingoists have talked McKinley into war?”

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

- b. “The president was worried about German expansion, but could do little about it while American interests and energies were focused on Cuba.”

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

- c. “If the destruction of the *Maine* was the reason for war, why was it two months before the United States acted?”

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

[continued on next page]

[continued from previous page]



General Questions

8. Given the relevant information in the box below, compare the evidence in endnote 4 (paragraph 7) for Historian B with endnote 7 (paragraph 7) for Historian A. Which viewpoint is stronger regarding Spain's reply to United States demands?

Relevant Information

A mediator is someone who brings the two sides in a dispute together to help them discuss their differences, but does not decide on a solution to the dispute.