

## Week One" The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst and Alfred Thayer Mahan

Teddy Roosevelt's well documented veneration for martial glory must be seen against the backdrop of his times—a bellicose period in our history. Congressmen, newspapermen, Harvard intellectuals, and many social scientists agreed with Teddy that war was a “bully” undertaking, one that would promote manly virtues in the citizenry and fulfil the Anglo-Saxon racial destiny to dominate the world. (“Race” was a word used rather loosely in that aggressive era.) There was much fretting about the decline of honor, chivalry, and masculine prowess in America—after all, we had not had a really good, rousing bloodletting in over thirty years. It was high time to remedy that deficiency. Without a stirring call to arms, America would become “flabby,” and would lose its “fighting edge.” (These were two of Teddy's favorite complaints about the new materialistic “Gilded Age” in America.) Worst of all, men were becoming “effeminate,” and lacking in “the spirit of the wolf”—another of Roosevelt's go-to charges against the peace advocates of his day. Roosevelt was hardly a lone voice calling from the wilderness as he pounded the drums—the winds of war were blowing all across the land during the 1890s. And it didn't matter much to TR *who* we fought; at different times he opined that we should have a nice little dust-up with Chile, Germany, or even Great Britain. (*England???* She had fifty battleships to our three at the time! No matter, said TR—even a defeat would “harden us,” and ready us for the next conflict. Besides, even in defeat we could probably seize Canada.) No *casus belli* was too trivial to attract Teddy's notice: the important thing was to open the gates to the temple of Mars.

The imperialist bloc in Congress, led by Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, joined the chorus. Lodge was Roosevelt's closest friend and proved an astute political mentor to the younger man. Lodge preferred the term “expansionism” or “the large policy” to the term imperialism, which smacked too much of brutal old-world militarism. (Americans have always bristled at the charge of “imperialism.” During the Cold War the Russian charge of American imperialism raised our collective hackles. When we invaded small countries in the Caribbean, or Southeast Asia, we hotly denied that we were pursuing selfish, imperial aims. We were simply trying to defend freedom, or uplift the poor nations of the world.)

The renowned naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, author of the seminal work *The Influence of Sea Power on History* and another close associate of Roosevelt, helped provide the intellectual rationale for war. His enormously persuasive magnum opus helped convince Americans to build a huge two-ocean navy, one that would be capable of projecting national power across the globe, from the Mediterranean to the shores of Asia. Mahan drew extensively on the Social Darwinist notions that were “in the ether” during the late nineteenth century. Great Britain provided his prototype and inspiration. Here was a small island-nation that became a major world power due to the strength of the Royal Navy. The English used her military might to carry out “the white man's burden” of carving up and dominating the “savage” peoples of the earth, and not incidentally fattening her coffers in the bargain. Surely America, with our vastly superior resources, could do as well and join in the race for empire. For TR, Lodge, and Mahan, world dominance was the prize, and while the cost would be high, we would surely recoup our expenses by the rewards to be gained. Teddy and Lodge quoted Mahan the way William Jennings Bryan quoted Scripture, and to much greater effect. Soon Congress was voting large naval budgets—although never as much as Roosevelt thought necessary.

Now all that was needed was a suitable excuse to “let slip the dogs of war.” (This was a highly literate triumvirate, one that would have no trouble coming up with the right passage from Shakespeare.) The Cuban Revolution of 1895 supplied the convenient pretext. In that year rebels in Spain’s last new world colony rose up in defiance of that tottering, senile empire and initiated a guerrilla war against General “Butcher” Weyler’s army of occupation. Like all such conflicts, it was a dirty, brutal conflict with heinous atrocities perpetrated by both sides. The war could have gone on indefinitely, and in all probability would not have caused the United States any real problems. After all, there had many such uprisings against the Spanish regime over the past fifty years, and Americans had never seen the need to intervene. Why should this rebellion be any different?

Enter William Randolph Hearst, owner of the *New York Journal* and (along with Joseph Pulitzer) pioneer in the arts of “yellow journalism.” Hearst knew a good story when he saw one. When he ran the *San Francisco Examiner* for his father, he specialized in sensational coverage of hotel fires, grisly murders, and sexual violence. Business boomed. After taking over the *Journal*, Hearst hired the highly successful editor of his rival Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper *The World*, which specialized in “crime, underwear, and pseudo-science.” Soon the *Journal* was running stories with headlines like ‘He Hiccoughed For Five Days!’ and “White Woman Among Cannibals.” New Yorkers gasped with delight when they read about “Pretty Annette’s Gauzy Silk Bathingsuit,” and “The Frightful Dreams of a Morphine Fiend.” Circulation of the *Journal* rose from 20,000 to 150,000 in less than a year under Hearst’s leadership. But nothing would match the allure of tales of slaughter and rape coming out of Cuba. Hearst sent newsmen to the island to cover the conflict, and they obliged their employer by sending back (mostly fictionalized) reports of “Cuban Disciples of the Devil Have Hideous Midnight Orgies,” and “Wild Negroes On The March: Snakes Are Their Gods.” Again, subscriptions to the *Journal* soared. When the U.S. battleship *Maine* was sent to Havana to keep order, Hearst sniffed an opportunity to score the journalistic coup of the century. An American military intervention in the Cuban war would provide endless tales of “Fiendish Spanish Cruelty In Cuba,” and “U.S. Troops Fight Alongside Machete-Wielding Amazon Women!” When *The Maine* exploded in Havana harbor under mysterious circumstances, Hearst seized his opening. He demanded a war, and Congress—whipped into a Jingoistic frenzy by such reporting—gave him one. Secretary of State John Hay called it “a splendid little war;” TR said, in effect, “It will do.” America had started down the primrose path of imperial adventure that later would take us into such wars of choice as Viet Nam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.