

Manhood, Chivalry, and McKinley's Reluctant Decision for War

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Why did *Cuba libre* strike such a powerful chord in the United States? The leading explanation offered by historians is that humanitarian sentiments and democratic principles of self-government underlay the broad backing commanded by the Cubans. This explanation clarifies why Americans sided with the Cuban revolutionaries over their Spanish opponents, but it does not account for the depth of Americans' commitment to the Cubans, for destitute and disfranchised residents of the United States failed to provoke a comparable outpouring of support. As one pro-labor essayist noted. "The poor in the tenement houses of our cities are in worse extremes than the down-trampled population of Cuba, but what patriot suggests war to free them?"

The sympathy extended to the Cubans seems particularly incongruous when race is added to the picture. In the late nineteenth century, white Americans frequently invoked racial beliefs to justify denying self-government to people of color. Why, then, were so many white Americans distraught over the Cubans' political status? Sen. Orville H. Platt (R, Conn.) drew attention to this incongruity when he pointed out that men who did not seem outraged at the news of a recent lynching in Texas (in which a man was covered with kerosene and burned to death on a public platform in the presence of seven thousand cheering witnesses) were now "shedding tears over the sad fate of Maceo [a mixed-race Cuban general]." Although there was some debate over the whiteness of the Cuban revolutionaries, it was quite clear that whatever they were, "Anglo-Saxons" they were not. Taken as a whole, the Cuban revolutionaries undoubtedly had more African blood than their Spanish rulers. Given the racial prejudices, poverty, and political injustice tolerated within the United States, it appears that something more than humanitarian sympathy and democratic principles lay behind the outpouring of support for the Cubans.

The key to the Cubans' appeal can be found in the numerous press accounts that treated them and their cause sympathetically: many of these portrayed the Cuban revolutionaries in chivalric terms. [The historians] Michael Hunt and Amy Kaplan have considered one aspect of this in their respective studies of U.S. foreign policy and romance novels. Both find that nineteenth-century Americans often viewed Cuba metaphorically, as a maiden longing to be rescued by a gallant knight. Strange though it may seem, this interpretation fit into a larger chivalric understanding of Cuban affairs, for favorable accounts also characterized the Cuban revolution as a heroic crusade that merited the fraternal assistance of American men. In their effort to cast the Cuban revolution in chivalrous terms, sympathizers did not stop at presenting it metaphorically—they also portrayed real Cuban men and women as if they were the protagonists of one of the adventure-filled romance novels that were so popular at the time. The tendency to depict Cuban revolutionaries as if they were the heroes and heroines of a chivalric drama helps explain why so many white

Adapted from Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 44–51, 54–57, 61–62, 64, 68, 99, 101–106, Copyright © 1998 by Yale University Press. Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press.

Americans were well-disposed toward the mixed-race Cubans. To many Americans, chivalric standards represented the highest ideals of manhood and womanhood. Hence, the Cubans' positive gender images deflected attention from negative racial stereotypes.

If it seems odd that Americans strongly sympathized with the Cubans, it seems especially odd that they insisted on viewing a national liberation movement in chivalric terms. They did so because of domestic concerns: sympathizers looked to the Cubans as models of gallantry because they feared that chivalric standards were endangered within the United States. Many of those who fretted about a decline in chivalry regarded the assertive [politically active and suffrage seeking] New Woman as evidence of that decline, for at the heart of chivalry was the juxtaposition of feminine vulnerability and masculine power. An essay in *Popular Science Monthly* illustrates this conviction: "We know that the tenderness, affection, and sympathy which are the essential grace and charm of womanhood, as well as the courage, disinterestedness, and chivalric sentiment which form the nobility of manhood, have sprung from that very relation of strong to weak, protector and protected, which have for ages subsisted among all the civilized races." In the chivalric paradigm, women were the protected, men the protectors. Women were, in the words of the antisuffragist Helen Kendrick Johnson, "the inspiring force," men, "the organizing and physical power." Because the chivalric paradigm enshrined men's monopoly on political power, women who pushed for a greater public role seemed to pose a fundamental challenge to the standard. . . .

Because American women seemed ever less inclined to assume the role of an appreciative audience for male exploits, aspiring American knights and women who preferred pedestals to politics turned to Cuban women as models of femininity. In contrast to activist American women, Cuban women often appeared to be ideal romantic heroines. Americans found evidence for this view in narratives that described Cuban women as natural "home-bodies" and "chaste spouses and slaves to duty." Those who fretted about assertive New Women were captivated by reports that Cuban women, "the most feminine and simple women in the world," spent their time worshipping their husbands rather than meddling in men's affairs. As the *New York Tribune* reported, "The 'New Woman' is altogether unknown in Havana. There is not even a woman's club there. In fact, in this regard the city is actually medieval." Their image as acquiescent, traditional women made Cuban women seem to be perfect feminine foils for assertive American women. . . .

Although some sensational tales of the Cuban revolution described Cuban Amazons who fought alongside men, the chroniclers of the Amazons were careful to note that it was only the exigencies of war that turned Cuban women into fighters: ordinarily they were extremely feminine. The author Nathan Green effusively described Cuban women's fury in battle but then depicted the women as pitiful wrecks as soon as the fighting was over. "While the fighting lasts they show no emotion," he wrote, "but when the last shot is fired, I have seen women throw themselves on the ground and give way to a delirium of grief." . . .

If the first reason for the chivalric paradigm's powerful appeal was apprehension about the assertive New Woman, the second had to do with American men. Those who bemoaned the decline in chivalry often held American men partially accountable, their logic being that if men had upheld their side of the chivalric pact, then

women would not be so eager to enter public life. According to this line of thought, the seeming decline in gallantry reflected a deterioration in manly character. Rep. John S. Williams (D. Miss.) drew attention to men's failings when he exclaimed. "In this latter end of the nineteenth century, men seem to think not only that 'the age of chivalry has gone,' but that this magnificent piece of humanity that God has created and which we call man . . . is nothing but a miserable money-making machine. . . . Poetry goes out from him; imagination ceases to exist with him. Chivalry is dead; manhood itself is sapped." . . .

To men frustrated by the standardized routines of an ever more industrialized society, Cuban men represented adventure and male display. To those disturbed by the prospect of degeneracy in a world of civilized comforts, Cuban men stood for a hardier manhood. And, perhaps most important, to those concerned about the civic virtue that American democracy was thought to rest upon, Cuban men seemed ideal citizens: fraternal-minded men willing to sacrifice themselves for a noble cause. Recognizing the appeal of such chivalric attributes as respect for women, martial prowess, and honorable objectives, sympathetic authors did their best to make the revolutionaries' story appear, as one article put it, "more like the wonders of a romance than like the authentic annals of our time." . . .

According to the conventions of chivalric novels, only a fiend would deny such heroic men that which they so valiantly struggled to attain. Cuban sympathizers did not disappoint these expectations in their descriptions of the Spaniards. Their critical assessments of the "proud Castilians" led numerous American readers to conclude that Spanish men, once known for the chivalry, had degenerated since the days of Don Quixote. The author Stephen Bonsal contributed to the Spaniards' degenerate image in his book *The Real Condition of Cuba To-Day* (1897). "It is not alone in prowess or in success that Spanish arms have fallen since the days they fought the Moors," wrote Bonsal, ". . . The decay has been even more strongly marked in the decadence of their chivalry." The most glaring evidence of Spanish men's decadent chivalry was the atrocities they committed against helpless civilians. American publications commonly presented the Spanish-Cuban War as a war waged against noncombatants, primarily women and children. As Davis said in reference to the Spanish policy of reconcentration, "In other wars men have fought with men, and women have suffered indirectly because the men were killed, but in this war it is the women, herded together in towns like cattle, who are going to die, while the men, camped in the fields and mountains, will live."

If the shocking stories of starved and butchered civilians that frequently appeared in pro-Cuban newspapers left any doubts about the Spaniards' chivalry, stories that depicted the Spanish soldiers as sexual predators worked to put these doubts to rest. One chronicle said that during General Valeriano Weyler's command (Weyler was in charge of the Spanish forces in Cuba from 1896 to 1897), "women dared not leave their homes. In many cases they were dragged out by the Spanish and by the drunken rabble of the town, who had license given to them at the same time that protection was withdrawn from the homes." Similarly, the author James Hyde Clark maintained that licentious Spanish soldiers violated and then killed "scores of young women," and Green contended that Weyler used his women prisoners in orgies, forced women to dance naked before his troops, and raped daughters in front of their parents. Accounts of bestial Spanish rapists paralleled the contemporary image,

assiduously promoted by white supremacists, of dark-skinned rapists. But gender and racial stereotypes were at odds with each other in these stories from Cuba, for it was the white, Germanic Weyler and his Spanish associates who apparently brutalized women and the mixed-race Cuban men who respected them. . . .

Building on the many stories of victimized Cuban women, writers who endorsed the Cuban cause characterized the colonial relation between Spain and Cuba as one of lustful bondage. These accounts portrayed the entire island as a pure woman who was being assaulted by Spain. One such narrative described Cuba as "a country that Spain has never loved, but has always wished to hold in bondage for lust and brutality." A drama on the Cuban revolution (presented in Yiddish to enthusiastic audiences in the Bowery) based its plot on this allegory: it featured a dastardly Spanish villain who tried to force himself on an attractive Cuban maiden. The political cartoons that depicted Cuba as a ravished woman also promoted the idea of rape as a metaphor for the Spanish colonial endeavor. To add to the drama of the story, sympathizers played on Cuba's sobriquet, Queen of the Antilles, in their pleas on behalf of the revolution. "'Queen of the Antilles!' Beautiful Cuba! For ages she has writhed under the oppression of the haughty Castilian," exclaimed one pro-Cuban account. Picturing the Spaniards as unchivalrous ravishers made their power seem immoral and illegitimate—a challenge to the principles of chivalry, which held that true women should be venerated and protected. It made the Spanish presence in Cuba appear to be an insult to the honor of Cuban women and the Cuban men charged with protecting them. . . .

Although the seemingly chivalrous Cuban cause captured Americans' imaginations because of domestic concerns, the chivalric paradigm had powerful foreign policy implications. By casting the Cuban revolution in metaphorical terms, it helped Americans make the leap from sympathizing with individuals to opposing Spanish colonial power. By making Spanish power seem thoroughly corrupt, the paradigm suggested that humanitarian aid or limited political reforms were inadequate to settle the Cuban issue. It thus helped jingoes build their case for U.S. military intervention. This was no accident. The chivalric understanding of the Cuban revolution appealed to people who were not jingoes, but jingoes embraced chivalric imagery and metaphors with singular enthusiasm. They turned to the chivalric paradigm to deepen American's interest in Cuban affairs and to propose a course of action for the United States. . . .

To further implicate the United States in the unfolding Cuban drama, jingoes declared that the United States was more than a spectator—that it had a role in the romance. After the *New York Journal* reported that the Spaniards had strip-searched three Cuban women on an American vessel, jingoes called for recognition of Cuban belligerency, even for U.S. intervention, to end such unchivalrous deeds. Rep. David A. De Armond (D, Mo.) was one of the jingoes who pressed for a strong response. "Young ladies stripped and searched on board an American vessel by Spaniards, bearded, booted, and spurred!" he exclaimed in his plea for action. What made the strip-searches particularly offensive was not so much their effects on Cuban women—after all, the press reported more horrifying stories of rape and murder—but that they occurred on American ships. Jingoes presented them as insults to American men's ability to protect the honor of women. Senator Allen made this clear when, after describing the strip-search, he said he found it "absolutely humiliating" that the

Spanish could commit such atrocities while American leaders "sit idly and supinely here." Richard Harding Davis, the writer who broke the story, agreed. Even after admitting that a female detective, not male soldiers, had stripped the young women, he continued to regard it as a grave affront to American honor. The true issue, he said, was that the demonstration of Spanish power on the American ship undercut the dignity of the United States. Davis was so ashamed by the incident that he cited it as grounds for intervention in the Spanish-Cuban War.

As they voiced their outrage over the nation's reluctance to protect victimized Cuban women, jingoes were mindful of the sympathy shown by a number of American women for the beleaguered Cubans and particularly for Cuban women. The same interest in women's well-being that led thousands of American women to join temperance and purity crusades in the 1880s and 1890s contributed to American women's empathy for their Cuban "sisters." Women who sympathized with the Cubans made their sentiments known in a variety of ways, starting with letters to political leaders. A *Christian Herald* leaflet that implored mothers to "think of the wretchedness of these poor, heart-broken mothers of Cuba" motivated one woman to write her senator to urge him to do something to end the suffering on the island. Women also indicated their views from the galleries of Congress. Perhaps most noticeable were the members of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), who applauded congressmen who made assertive speeches on Cuba. Some of the women who sympathized with the Cubans were in political leaders' own households. A handful of prominent political wives in the nation's capital made their sympathies clear by establishing the National Relief Fund in Aid of Cuba. Other political wives expressed their positive feelings for the Cubans more discreetly in Washington social functions. . . .

[But] by appealing to American men to take a stance in favor of chivalric principles, jingoes couched the Cuban issue as one for men to resolve. The emphasis they placed on brotherhood and male honor helped to keep women on the sidelines of the Cuban debate. The chivalric paradigm implied that American women should plead on behalf of their Cuban sisters but that they should not lead rescuing crusades, much less fraternal expeditions. These, it implied, were men's responsibility. Indeed, according to the paradigm, the Cuban issue was nothing less than a test of American manhood. If American men were truly chivalrous, they should enter the lists.

Significantly, when jingoes held up American men as knightly rescuers, they often wrote Cuban men out of the romance. They implied that intervening American men would take the place of Cuban men who were unable to protect Cuban women because they were at the front, had been killed, or lacked the ability to do so. By removing Cuban men from the picture, the rescue paradigm sketched a hierarchical relation between the United States and Cuba. Viewing relations with Cuba as a chivalric rescue implied that the maidenly Cubans would submit to American governance just as the heroines of chivalric novels voluntarily submitted to their heroic rescuers. The rescue paradigm thus lent itself to imperial ambitions for Cuba as well as to the jingoes' desire to foster chivalric relations between men and women. . . .

On the night of February 15, 1898, the U.S. battleship *Maine*, which had been sent to Havana to protect American citizens after an outbreak of riots, exploded and sank in Havana harbor. Two hundred and sixty-six men died in the disaster. President

[William] McKinley responded to the crisis by appointing a court of naval inquiry. The court's report, submitted on March 25, attributed the explosion to an external source. Although the commission admitted that it could not determine who was responsible, suspicion came to rest on Spain. Not only did Spain have a reputation for perfidy, but, to many Americans, it appeared that only the Spanish government had the technological capabilities to commit such an act. Americans were outraged at the thought of the Spaniards striking in the dark without giving the sleeping crew a chance to fight. "Splendid sport, indeed! How chivalric!" exclaimed one senator, who, well-versed in the chivalric paradigm for understanding the Spanish-Cuban war, interpreted the incident as yet another manifestation of Spanish treachery.

Americans who blamed the disaster on Spain regarded it as a challenge to American men, particularly because Spain refused to apologize or offer reparations and instead suggested that the men of the *Maine* were at fault. Sen. Richard R. Kenney (D, Del.) captured the leading sentiment of the day in his response to the supposed Spanish insult: "American manhood and American chivalry give back the answers that innocent blood shall be avenged, starvation and crime shall cease, Cuba shall be free. For such reasons, for such causes, American[s] can and will fight. For such causes and for such reasons we should have war." . . .

As he contemplated how to respond to the sinking of the *Maine*, McKinley faced a number of issues: humanitarian concerns, the interests of American businessmen in Cuba, the impact of a war on the entire American economy, and the potential for coaling stations and strategic bases. Added to these were concerns for his reputation and credibility as a leader and the implications of his image for his party. McKinley suffered the constraint of being a first-term president in a political system that valued a military style of manliness in its leaders. McKinley was deeply sensitive to public opinion. As he assessed the tenor of the war debate, he undoubtedly realized that his perceived cowardice in foreign affairs was undermining his credibility as a leader, that it threatened to sink his administration along with the *Maine*.

The president had good reason to be apprehensive about charges of cowardice because, regardless of his youthful Civil War record [(he had served as an Army officer)], he was not universally esteemed as a great military hero or a forceful leader. The up-and-coming Theodore Roosevelt was not alone in thinking that despite his military record, McKinley was "not a strong man." The sedate McKinley did not embody the new standards of active, athletic, aggressive manhood. He had never enjoyed hunting, and when he tried fishing once as president, in his frock coat and silk hat, he capsized the boat and ruined his shoes and pants. The clean-shaven McKinley was the only president between Andrew Johnson and Woodrow Wilson not to have a beard or mustache, signs of masculinity. . . .

Besides appearing physically soft, McKinley appeared to lack the independence central to manliness. His opponents ridiculed him as a puppet of Marcus A. Hanna, who had risen to the Senate after running McKinley's campaign. A joke of the time questioned whether Hanna would still be president if McKinley died. Detractors accused McKinley of being a tool of his Wall Street advisers. "Take my word for it," said Representative [William] Sulzer, "the American people will never consent to be governed by any man who is not big enough to own himself." McKinley seemed not only overly dependent on Hanna and other wealthy backers, but also incapable of managing his own finances. Nineteenth-century men were expected to provide for

their families, but McKinley had gone bankrupt in 1893. Although his Republican biographers maintained that McKinley had handled his business failure in a "manly way," their praise was defensive. . . .

A calculating politician, McKinley no doubt realized that he needed to demonstrate he still had backbone lest he lose his ability to lead a political system that equated military valor and leadership. Highly conscious of public opinion, he surely knew that many American men thought war was necessary to defend American honor and avenge the dead sailors from the *Maine*. In Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike were citing their constituents' eagerness to fight. Rep. Joseph Wheeler (D, Ala.) announced that the "chivalrous men who fought in that terrible conflict from 1861 to 1865, and their equally noble sons, inspired as they are by the fame earned by their sires, all stand ready to place their lives and treasure on the altar of duty." . . .

Assurances that men were eager to fight made efforts to avoid war seem incongruous with manly sentiment. If the masses of American men wanted to fight, why didn't McKinley? A *New York Journal* cartoon that depicted McKinley in a bonnet and apron futilely trying to sweep back a stormy sea conveyed the spreading (and, to McKinley, threatening) conviction that if the president countered the will of American men, he would become as politically potent as a feeble-minded old woman.

In addition to worrying about losing the respect of the masses of American men, McKinley worried about losing leadership to Congress. After McKinley's message of March 28, the *Washington Post* reported that the president was afraid he would not be able to prevent Congress from acting on its own. On March 30 the *Post* noted, "If the President desires to lead the procession . . . he will be accorded every opportunity of doing so. If not, the ranks will be closed and the President will be under the necessity of falling in behind." Congressmen underscored the point that the president must act or lose his stature as a leader. In a letter of April 4, Sen. Joseph B. Foraker (R, Ohio) said that Congress had been waiting for the president to take the lead on the war issue, to no avail. The president, said Foraker, "disappointed all of us very seriously with his message about the *Maine* disaster and we made up our minds that we would not wait on his any longer." "The responsibility is now on Congress," said Sen. Marion Butler (Pop., N.C.) on April 12. "We must remove the humiliation that is upon us as a nation."

As Congress grew increasingly restive, even the president's erstwhile supporters began to question the manliness of his policies. Senator [John C.] Spooner commented that "we have borne the methods of Spain in Cuba with patience approaching pusillanimity. We can tolerate it no longer." Republicans begged the administration to make war for party survival. McKinley could appear to exhibit backbone by searching for a peaceful settlement for a while, but he could not hold back indefinitely. He knew that if Congress took the initiative in pressing for war, he might not regain his stature as a leader. A president who reluctantly followed the ranks into war would find it difficult to regain the confidence of men who interpreted politics in terms of military metaphors.

It is difficult to determine the degree to which McKinley's need to maintain his manly image affected his decision to push for war because he did not record his reasoning. He wrote few letters, left almost no personal papers, and said little in conversation.

But friends believed that McKinley did not want war. They viewed him as a man who deeply desired peace. McKinley's associates were convinced that the president was pushed into war to satisfy Congress and public opinion. Senator [William E.] Chandler believed that the president advised delay because he was unwilling to give a war message to a Congress he knew would accept nothing else. Chandler attributed the president's increasingly bellicose attitude toward Spain to "the rising temper of the country and Congress especially." Although Chandler did not mention the aspersions on McKinley's manhood, these were an important component of the country's "rising temper." Placing the assaults on the president's manliness in the larger context of a political culture based on military manhood leads to the conclusion that the need to appear manly to an aggressive constituency helped make war seem politically necessary to the president.

On March 30 McKinley burst into tears as he told a friend that Congress was trying to drive the nation into war. He remembered the Civil War as a horrible conflict and had hoped that international arbitration would replace war as a means of settling international disputes. McKinley did not want war, but neither did he want to wreck his presidency. Aware of his growing reputation as a spineless leader and recognizing that Republican legislators would be unwilling to go along with a new peace initiative, McKinley drafted a message in early April that put the Cuban matter into the hands of the infamously bellicose Congress.

After McKinley delivered his message on April 11, jingoes continued to criticize him for his refusal to resoundingly cry for war. As one critic said, everybody except "the bankers and the ladies felt a sense of shame in reading the message of the President." Such calumny discouraged McKinley from seeking a last-minute solution to the crisis. On April 19 Congress submitted a resolution to the president authorizing him to intervene to end the war in Cuba. McKinley felt he had no choice but to sign, although he knew the resolution would surely lead to war. Spain immediately severed diplomatic relations with the United States. On April 22 the United States imposed a naval blockade of Cuba; on April 24 Spain declared war; and on April 25 McKinley asked Congress to declare war. Congress did so eagerly, pre-dating the start of war to April 21.

McKinley's scanty personal records mean that arguments about his motives (gender-based or otherwise) ultimately must be based on conjecture. But even though McKinley did not record his rationale, the debate over his backbone shows that gendered ideas about leadership limited the range of politically viable options available to him. McKinley's backbone became a central issue in the debate over war because political activists, whether Republicans, Democrats, or Populists, believed that manly character mattered in politics. Men from across the country agreed that the character of the nation's leaders attested to the acceptability of their policies, and following the *Maine* disaster, increasing numbers of men demanded a militant leader. Aware of the links between manhood, military prowess, and political power (indeed, eager to take advantage of them in the campaign of 1896), McKinley reached the logical conclusion that war was politically imperative. His decision to join the jingoes was less a reflection of his courage or cowardice, strength or weakness, than an acknowledgement that the political system he operated in would not permit any other course of action.