American History

Source: Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much about History* (2003)

Spanish-American War Timeline: **1898**

**January 25:** The U.S. battleship *Maine* arrives in Havana Harbor. Its stated purpose is to protect the interests of Americans who are being brutalized by the Spanish governor, according to reports in the tabloids.

**February 9:** A private letter by Spain’s ambassador to the United States is published in Hearst’s *New York Journal* in which President McKinley is characterized as feebleminded, provoking a wave of indignation, fanned by the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers.

**February 15:** The battleship Maine mysteriously explodes while anchored in Havana harbor, resulting in the deaths of 260 crew members. The newspapers and war hawks soon trumpet, “Remember the Maine! To hell with Spain!” as a battle cry. The source of the blast is said to be an external explosion. While the Americans claim the blast was caused by a mine in the harbor, Spanish authorities assert it was an internal explosion, perhaps in the heavily loaded ship’s magazine.

**March 9:** By unanimous vote, Congress appropriates $50 million “for national defense” and the country moves toward a war footing.

**March 27:** President McKinley offers Spain several conditions to avert a war that is widely desired by the banking and military interests of the country. The conditions include negotiations with Cuban rebels, revocation of concentration camps, and U.S. arbitration to settle the rebel question in Cuba. While Spain seems to express willingness to negotiate and accept McKinley’s conditions, war hawks continue to apply pressure.

**April 11:** McKinley delivers a “war message.” Fearing peace with split his party, he ignores Spanish peace overtures as the call for war is pressed by the Hearst and Pulitzer papers, Henry Cabot Lodge in Congress and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt.

**April 19:** Congress adopts a war resolution (the Teller Amendment) calling for Cuban independence from Spain and evacuation of Spanish forces from the island. The measure asserts that the Unites States is uninterested in exerting control over the island, and the coming war is depicted as a war of “liberation” of a western colony from a European power, which will allegedly permit the Cubans to “determine their fate.”

**April 20:** To prevent the use of diplomatic channels to avoid a war, the Spanish ambassador’s passport is returned before he can deliver the U.S. ultimatum. A day later, Spain breaks off diplomatic relations with the United States.

**April 22:** Congress passes the Volunteer Army Act, which calls for organization of a First Volunteer Cavalry—a “cowboy cavalry” that the press will christen Rough Riders. Resigning his post as assistant secretary of the navy and chief instigator of war within the McKinley Administration, Theodore Roosevelt takes a commission as Lieutenant colonel of the brigade, which is commanded by Leonard Wood. Hundreds of applications for the Rough Riders come from tall over the country, and Roosevelt will draw on Ivy Leaguers as well as cowboys. The U.S. Navy begins a blockade of Cuban ports, and a Spanish ship is captured in the first actual encounter of the war.

**April 23:** McKinley issues a call for 125,000 recruits.

**April 24:** Spain declares war on the United States.

**April 25:** The United Sates declares that a state of war exists as of April 21, that day Spain broke off diplomatic relations.

**May 1:** While Cuba is the focus of hostilities, the United States launches a surprise attack on the Philippines. Commodore (later Rear Admiral) Dewey’s Asiatic Squadron has been preparing for this attack for some time, at the secret order of Theodore Roosevelt. In a seven-hour battle outside Manila Bay, where the outdated and outgunned Spanish ships have maneuvered to avoid civilian casualties, the United States sinks all the Spanish ships, killing more than 300 Spanish, at a loss of no American ships and incurring only a few wounded. With a quick and easy victory under its belt, America’s hawkishness quickly explodes into outright war fever.

**May 12:** The United States bombards San Juan, Puerto Rico.

**May 19:** With American assistance, the Philippine guerrilla leader Emilio Aguinaldo arrives in Manila (capital). At the same time, back in Cuba, the Spanish fleet moves into Santiago Harbor.

**May 25:** The first American troop ships leave for Manila. McKinley calls for another 75,000 volunteers.

**May 29:** The American fleet blockades the Spanish fleet in Santiago Harbor.

**June 10:** A force of 647 marines lands at Guantanamo Bay, beginning the invasion of Cuba.

**June 22:** Nearly 20,000 American troops arrive at the fishing village of Daiquiri, eighteen miles east of Santiago.

**June 24:** Led by Joseph Wheeler, formerly of the Confederate cavalry—who occasionally lapses in battle and calls the Spanish Yankees—and Leonard Wood, 1,000 regular army and Rough Riders accompanied by several war correspondents, win the first land battle of the war at Las Guasimas, Cuba. In his first action, Roosevelt is accompanied by two major war correspondents and is already being marked as a hero.

**July 1:** The battles of El Caney and San Juan Jill. Against much smaller Spanish forces, Americans take heavy casualties in the major pitched battle of the war. An American balloon sent aloft to observe Spanish troop placements simply gives the Spanish gunners a perfect indication of American positions. More than 6,000 U.S. soldiers suffer 400 casualties at El Caney against a Spanish force of only 600. At San Juan Heights, confusions and delayed orders result in severe U.S. casualties as Spanish guns rake the waiting troops. Colonel Theodore Roosevelt finally takes the initiative, leading an assault first on Kettle Hill and a second charge on San Juan Heights. After successfully taking San Juan Heights, the American forces have command of Santiago below. But the American position is very weak. They are short of supplies, and casualties are heavy. Yellow fever and malaria have already begun to take their toll, as the Spanish defenders had expected. Roosevelt himself writes to Henry Cabot Lodge, “We are within measurable distance of a terrible military disaster.” After the battle of San Juan Heights, 1,572 Americans are dead, or wounded, but Roosevelt achieves instant war-hero status.

**July 3:** Against his own belief that he is risking certain defeat, Spanish Admiral Cervera is ordered to break through the American blockade of Santiago Harbor. After the battle, the Spanish fleet is utterly destroyed. There is one American dead, another wounded.

**July 4:** In the Pacific, American troops take the deserted Wake Island.

**July 8:** Admiral Dewy takes Isla Grande near Manila.

**July 10:** With the destruction of the Spanish fleet guarding Santiago, U.S. troops launch a final attack on the city. By agreement with the Spanish command, there will be no resistance.

**July 17:**  Santiago surrenders to American forces, and the U.S. flag is raised over the government building.

**July 25:**  The town of Guánica in Puerto Rico is taken by U.S. troops.

**July 26:** Through the French ambassador, Spain requests peace terms. The “splendid little war” ends after three months of fighting. McKinley announces the following terms: independence is granted to Cuba; the United States takes control of Puerto Rico; the United States will occupy Manila until further negotiations.

**August 9:** McKinley’s terms are accepted by Spain, and a protocol of peace is signed.

