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# Power, Domestic Politics, and the Spanish-American War

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/05/21/power-domestic-politics-and-the-spanish-american-war/>

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The American account of the 1898 Spanish-American War emphasizes the Cuban fight for independence and America's speedy victories in the Caribbean and the Pacific, which the soon-to-be Secretary of State John Hay described as "a splendid little war." Meanwhile, the Spaniards dubbed these events "the disaster of '98," a label that shows the psychological magnitude of their empire's disintegration.[1] Because it cemented Spain's fall and the United States' rise to power in the Western Hemisphere, this war supports power transition theory, which predicts that wars will happen when rising powers like the U.S. clash with status quo states seeking to retain their power, like Spain. However, Spanish leaders knew they could not win this war, which presents a puzzle: did the U.S. actually pursue a war to achieve regional hegemony, and if so, why did Spain choose to fight a costly and humiliating war rather than settle its disputes more peacefully? This paper will argue that the changing balance of power increased the chances of war because democratic politics drove the U.S. towards a revisionist power transition, while the troubles of Spanish democracy drove Spain to defend the status quo.

To demonstrate the importance of the balance of power, this paper will first examine the existing literature, including theories about power transitions and the democratic peace, to form a hypothesis about why these two democracies went to war. Second, it will perform a case study of the war to show why the U.S. went to war despite the reluctance of its own president, and why Spain went to war despite having clear reasons to avoid it. Finally, this paper will find that democratic politics may serve as a causal mechanism for power transition theory, which suggests that future wars may occur between democracies under the correct international conditions.

## Literature Review and Hypothesis

Scholars have explained the Spanish-American War using various theories, including the roles of changes in the balance of power, Spanish and American democracy after the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine*, military misperceptions, and the economic interdependence between the U.S. and Cuba. However, debate continues over the precise relevance of domestic politics in leading the U.S. to declare war rather than settle the Cuba dispute peacefully, as well as over how a war involving 1898 Spain fits into narratives of its fading imperialist might and theories about the democratic peace. From these debates, one can derive the following hypothesis about the causes of war between democracies: when the balance of power in an international system is shifting, war becomes more likely when leaders' domestic political outcomes depend on a favorable national outcome in the international system. This paper will review the relevant social science literature before verifying this hypothesis with a case study of the Spanish-American War.

As scholars have noted, power transition theory attributes this war to the regional balance of power in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to power transition theory, wars often occur when a "dissatisfied state achieve[s] power parity with the dominant country" of an international system and "make[s] demands for changes to the status quo," which are resisted by those countries that benefit from the current international system.[2] In his article on dyadic rivalries, Geller concludes, "Status quo challengers rather than defenders are the more probable war initiators," while noting that in the Spanish-American war, the U.S. contested the Western Hemisphere status quo. In this case, Spain, a fading imperial power, wished to maintain its Cuban colony, but the U.S. had a far superior military power.[3] Ray's

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comparative case study correspondingly indicates that a strong revisionist state will push for war while a strong status quo state may accept a non-war solution.[4] Lastly, Lemke and Reed's empirical study concluded that democracies rarely fight each other because they tend to be satisfied with the status quo,[5] but that the Spanish-American War requires an explanation for why a constitutional monarchy and a republic might choose war. Moreover, these theories all explain why the U.S. entered an armed conflict, but they have done less to answer this paper's question, which asks how and why a very weak status quo power like Spain would choose to expend resources by resisting militarily.

As Lemke's article suggests, scholars often frame their discussion of the war's causality in terms of Spain's status as a democratizing country, although they disagree on how the Spanish regime fits into a theory of war between democracies. In an article discussing the democratic peace theory, which claims that democracies rarely go to war with other liberal democracies, David Lake marks the Spanish-American War as a notable exception to the rule.[6] On the other hand, Peceny argues that Spain did not have a democracy, but rather a democratizing country, with universal male suffrage and a strong free press in the cities, but problems with rigged domestic elections in regions dominated by rural elites. [7] At the same time, political scientist John Owen argues that the U.S. did not view Spain as a true democracy, which may have helped domestic elements in the liberal United States push their leaders to a war against Spain.[8] Lastly, Baker suggests that Spanish Liberal leaders had difficulty dealing with opposition by nationalist and conservative civilian groups, as well as by the Spanish military, who disagreed with Prime Minister Práxedes Mateo Sagasta's appeasing responses to U.S. disapproval of Spain's conduct in Cuba.[9] All three arguments offer possible mechanisms for why democratizing or borderline democratic countries might go to war more readily than consolidated democracies.

Likewise, on the U.S. side, scholars have contended over the extent to which the pressures of democratic politics pushed President William McKinley and his cabinet towards war, especially after the sinking of the *Maine* on February 15, 1898. Historian Louis Pérez criticizes much of the past century's historiography on the Spanish-American War for painting the *Maine* incident, in which the American public attributed the ship-sinking explosion to Spanish deception, as "a presumed random *casus belli*, of unverifiable if not unknown origins, seemingly an instance of bad timing at a bad place, and of such momentous consequences." [10] Along this vein, Ray argues for the importance of "bellicose" public opinion, which believed Spain to be autocratic rather than democratic, in overriding the more pacific tendencies of McKinley and his Republican businessmen supporters.[11] However, Hamilton disputes Ray's claim and asserts that the political defection of some Republicans to support the Democratic minority's opposition to McKinley's dovish approach sufficed to propel the U.S. to war.[12] In both cases, the American democratic process played a major role, but disagreement continues as to just how democratic domestic politics can produce armed conflict.

Finally, other factors such as Cuban-American economic ties and Spanish misperceptions serve as alternate explanations for war that modify the prevailing power-related and domestic-democratic accounts. For instance, Peceny suggests that the U.S. went to war "to pursue its economic interests, which were considerable and direct in Cuba....Exporters supported the war to dismantle the colonial preferential tariffs that kept their goods out of Cuba." [13] Ray largely dismisses the role of "expansionist, imperialistic interests" and concludes, "A majority of business interests did oppose war with Spain over the Cuban issue until very late in the game," [14] but he acknowledges the change in business interests prior to the war. Simultaneously, misperceptions may also have played a role in Spain's decisions. Baker observes that some Spanish generals apparently believed that Spain might win, despite what scholars later determined to be a 12 to 1 power disadvantage, while others in Spain assumed that the U.S. had no interest in peace.[15] These factors do not discount the role of domestic politics, but do take the focus off the domestic politics' democratic nature.

When applying these aspects of the literature to this case study, this paper will look for the following conditions to determine whether this paper's hypothesis has merit. First, if the U.S. was truly a revisionist power seeking to attain regional hegemony through war, then its elites would demonstrate an awareness of the U.S.'s power level in their rhetoric, policies, and behavior. The case would also support power transition theory if Spain's policies and political discourse revealed a fear of losing the status quo, and if its leaders preferred to fight rather than appease the U.S. In addition, if the states' domestic, democratic structures promoted war, then the evidence will show that popular

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opinion or party politics strongly influenced the states' choices, possibly in spite of the wishes of its leaders. If the evidence does not support these hypotheses, then a better explanation may lie in the other causal theories presented by the literature. If these hypotheses are true, then the results of this case study may have implications for how today's political scientists can predict the effects of power shifts and democratic institutions on future sources of potential regional conflict.

## The Spanish-American War: A Case Study in War

The history of the Spanish-American War features two striking ironies. First, the U.S. went to war with Spain even though President William McKinley actively sought to avoid an armed conflict. Second, Spain went to war with the U.S. even though, as is obvious in hindsight, it had a hopeless disadvantage in military and naval power. The historical facts suggest that both sides had understood the war's potential outcomes and stakes for years prior to the actual conflict. However, American party politics promoted a bid for American regional hegemony, while the uncertainties of a weak Spanish democracy gave its elites reason to fear the consequences of losing its existing status as an imperial power.

For many in the U.S., the condition of the international system in 1898 confirmed their long-standing belief that regional dominance lay in America's manifest destiny. U.S. leaders had long geared their policy toward James Monroe's 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which declared that the U.S. "could not view any interposition by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the U.S." [16] By the 1890s, the increasingly powerful U.S. had taken a more aggressive stance, as suggested by the words of Richard Olney, Grover Cleveland's Secretary of State: "To-day the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines this interposition." [17] Public opinion polls implied that the U.S. might, if it wished, drive the deplorable, imperialist Spaniards out of the region altogether. [18] McKinley's own Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt, planned for naval war against Spain. When war later arrived, he promoted an expansionist U.S. policy: "I earnestly hope...that peace will only be made on consideration of Cuba being made independent, Porto Rico [*sic*] ours and the Philippines taken away from Spain." [19] Other European countries also maintained minor colonies in the Americas, but the U.S. had a clear interest in affirming its regional power by challenging Spain.

Although McKinley opposed armed conflict, many Americans who took a hard line against Spain on the Cuban issue put political pressure on Congress. On the one hand, the Republican McKinley had the support of Republican businessmen, as the U.S. had a \$30 million investment in Cuban trade. These businessmen either favored remaining uninvolved in the Spanish-Cuban conflict or supporting Cuban autonomy within the Spanish Empire, and they lobbied influential senators such as Henry Cabot Lodge to support peace. [20] On the other hand, McKinley had many foreign policy opponents. The Democratic Party used the fact that public opinion supported Cuban independence to wear away at the Republicans, who held a majority in both legislative chambers. McKinley also preferred to mollify rather than defy the "jingoist" members of his own party, including a group informally led by Roosevelt, several Republican senators, and Senator Lodge himself. These groups disapproved of the poor humanitarian situation in Cuba, which William Randolph Hearst's press had enthusiastically reported, and they regarded the Cuban rebels as "Cuban patriots" trying to overthrow imperial "cruelty and oppression." [21] McKinley avoided calling attention to the war in the first year of his presidency, but his policy preferences did not necessarily align with his party's politics.

Unlike President McKinley, who sat at the helm of an increasingly successful country despite his inability to shift the opinions of his public, Prime Minister Sagasta and the regent Maria Cristina ruled over a weakened empire and unstable political situation. Spain lost nearly all of its territory in the Americas during the Spanish American wars of independence of the early nineteenth century, and by January 1898, the once great empire consisted of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines in Asia, and a few holdings in Africa. [22] At home, Spain had only recently established a constitutional monarchy after a series of civil wars. [23] When the Cuban War of Independence broke out in 1895, Spain faced the loss of yet another colony at a time when it was on average forming a new parliamentary government every two years. A failure to maintain peace in the colonies could have led to a fruitless power struggle between the Liberal and Conservative parties, or even worse, major public unrest led by the Socialist Party, as indeed occurred in 1896 and 1897. [24]

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Domestic factions within Spain disagreed over how it should react if the U.S. should decide to get involved. Because they recognized the extent of U.S. power, Spanish authorities sought to reduce the U.S.'s disapproval over the Cuban war while still preserving their colonial rule. As a sign of his willingness to meet U.S. demands, in 1897, Sagasta agreed to Cuban autonomy and negotiations for a Cuban-American trade agreement.[25] Meanwhile, some within the Spanish press suggested they give up on the Cuban colony entirely; one article in *La Época* suggested that the government should not "charge forth to foreign war without being absolutely certain that all pacific measures compatible with national dignity are exhausted." [26] On the other hand, elites such as Miguel Correa y García, the Minister of War, believed that surrendering Cuba might cause insurrection in Spain itself, even though he acknowledged that victory against the U.S. was unlikely.[27] When faced with the unappealing choice between a costly, humiliating war and an even more humiliating surrender, Spanish officials hoped to escape a war through cooperation with the U.S. but acknowledged the possibility of war.

The sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine* on February 16, 1898, served as the proximate impetus for war, lighting the tinder created by a recent diplomatic incident and the American political situation. A scant week earlier, Hearst's *New York Journal* had published an intercepted letter by the Spanish minister Enrique Dupuy de Lôme, who called McKinley "weak and a bidder for the admiration of the crowd, besides being a would-be politician who tries to leave a door open behind himself while keeping on good terms with the jingoes of his party." [28] Although the horrified Spanish government enforced de Lôme's resignation, and although his description contained a grain of truth about McKinley's foreign policy bind, the U.S. nevertheless responded with anger, as Republican congressmen proposed legislative initiatives such as the recognition of Cuba.[29] The *Maine's* destruction gave further encouragement to hawkish political elements, including Democrats like William Jennings Bryan, who called for war: "The sufferings of [Cuba's] people cannot be ignored unless we, as a nation, have become so engrossed in money-making as to be indifferent to distress." [30] This jab at the big business elements of the Republican Party indicated that opponents to the McKinley Administration anticipated an unprecedented opportunity for political gain in the upcoming election, should the president fail to act decisively.

Echoing American belligerence, the Spanish army promoted a surprisingly optimistic assessment of their odds, as well as a deep suspicion of Sagasta's conciliatory Liberal policies. The 1896 military campaign of General Valeriano Weyler had failed to end the Cuban insurgency, but Weyler remained confident that an offensive force of fifty thousand men would suffice to defeat the Americans. Furthermore, Admiral George Dewey's fleet had the capacity to trounce the Spanish navy in the Philippines, but Navy Minister Segismundo Bermejo ignored Admiral Pascual Cervera's reservations and told the Council of Ministers on February 16 that an offensive blockade might defeat the American navy. As the war later showed, the army could indeed hold its own, but American ships nearly destroyed the entire Spanish navy.[31] The military's assessment directly contradicted the gloomier predictions of many Spanish civilian leaders, but it formed a powerful elite coalition in favor of war.

As the lead-up to the declaration of war indicated, both sides saw the domestic factions for peace falter under the weight of the belligerent opposition. Observers reported McKinley as breaking down into tears at the prospect of war, and McKinley later expressed the opinion that "if he had been left alone, he could have concluded an arrangement with the Spanish Government under which the Spanish troops would have withdrawn from Cuba without a war." However, Congress passed a joint resolution on April 19 supporting Cuban independence and offering the possibility of armed intervention, a committee of Republican congressmen warned the President that a failure to act might mean a failure in the upcoming midterm elections, and even Republican businessmen fell reluctantly into line.[32] Similarly, in March 1898, Maria Cristina quietly promoted a scheme that Sagasta had proposed in 1897, to sell Cuba rather than go to war, but no party leaders agreed to back her, the military press loudly condemned the idea, and the Queen Dowager soon abandoned the plan.[33] In both countries, domestic politics left no room for a peaceful settlement, so McKinley ordered a naval blockade on April 22, and Spain declared war the next day. Congress passed a declaration of war on April 25, opening theaters both in the Caribbean and in the Pacific, near the Philippines.[34]

## Discussion of Findings

The evidence suggests that the sinking of the *Maine* triggered the onset of war because domestic elements in the U.S. saw an opportunity to achieve hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, while a weak Spanish democracy tried to

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avoid unrest and civil-military tensions by maintaining Spain's status quo position as an American empire. The democratic natures of both countries contributed significantly to decisions for war, because they forced state leaders to bow to the factions that formed their electorate. McKinley wished to avoid Republican defeat in the upcoming presidential election, while Sagasta and Maria Cristina feared that their weak democracy could neither crack down domestically nor withstand humiliation in Cuba. The Spanish-American War thus demonstrates a way in which the domestic politics of democratic regimes, whether democratizing or strongly institutionalized, may combine with power transition theory to make war possible, or even likely, between democracies.

In this case, democratic forces in the U.S. supported a war for hegemony partially because the U.S., a revisionist state, had already overtaken Spain, the status quo state, in strength, such that the power transition had already happened in relative power, if not yet in sovereign territory. For the most part, both Spain and the U.S. had sensed for years ahead of time that a war loomed on the horizon, and that America would likely win any direct military confrontations. On the U.S. side, this intuition empowered the Democrats, a minority political party, and American jingoists to join forces, the former in search of a way to discredit McKinley's dovish policies and the latter because they wanted the U.S. to gain preeminence in the Western Hemisphere. By pointing to the public's preference for war, these groups harnessed the specter of the upcoming midterm election to bully the president into action. The American domestic dispute over how to handle the Cuba problem therefore amplified existing structural factors in the international system, and the domestic alliance of Democrats and jingoists became a cause for hegemonic war.

Similarly, the Spanish side provides evidence against the invincibility of democratic peace theory and support for the preeminence of power-based concerns, although Spain's status as a democratizing rather than a democratic country may have increased the likelihood of war. The Spanish domestic response highlights how partisan opposition and deteriorated civil-military relations derailed the attempts of Spanish leaders to avoid their premonitions of disaster. In 1896, some members of the Cabinet of Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo even proposed American mediation as a way of avoiding war with the U.S., because they feared rural uprisings, the Socialist Party, and opposition to the war in Cuba by members of the Republican and Liberal Parties. However, Cánovas, fearful of the army's reaction, overruled their proposal.<sup>[35]</sup> Spain's relatively free press also allowed the military's hawkish, overoptimistic press to flourish, and the lack of civil-military coordination suggests the weakness of Spanish democracy. Finally, the U.S. uproar against the perceived tyranny of Spanish rule gave power to the aggressive rhetoric of American jingoists. As shown by the weakness of the Spanish regime, democratizing countries may have a greater tendency toward war than fully democratic countries, but mainly because democratic institutions undermine the ability of elites to maintain a stable, status quo regime without placating opposing factions such as the military.

When compared to the importance of democratic politics, economic interdependence and military misperceptions had relatively low impacts on the American and Spanish decisions for war. In the first case, businessmen failed to influence U.S. senators such as Lodge to support peace, while Sagasta's offer of a Cuban-American trade agreement showed that American industrialists did not need war to promote their business interests. In the second case, the Spanish military's misperceptions about the navy's ability to stand up to U.S. forces did encourage many military officials to oppose Sagasta's peace-inclined policies, despite the warnings of some admirals. However, the inability of Sagasta, Maria Cristina, and other civilian leaders to overrule military dissent suggests that poor civil-military relations and the previously mentioned weaknesses of Spanish democracy played a far larger role in 1898 than the misperceptions of its generals. Economic interdependence ran as a countercurrent to the drivers of war, while misperceptions increased the likelihood of war, but both factors had as much effect as pebbles in a stream when compared to the broader current of domestic politics and changes in the balance of power.

The Spanish-American War's lessons serve not only to validate existing theories about the causes of war, but also to shine light on future foreign policy problems. Democratic peace theory may not apply in all cases because democracies contain a framework through which domestic opposition may express dissent and push countries toward hegemonic war, just as American jingoists wanted American dominance in the Western Hemisphere, and Spanish leaders hoped to maintain their empire to avoid rebellion. Preventing future wars may require a particularly close examination of democratizing countries, where civil-military relations are weak, and leaders need a swifter, stronger assurance of peace than the conflicted Spanish government ever received to bypass hawkish groups. However, full democracies may also go to war. As the Spanish-American War shows, policymakers should not

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depend in the short-term on the pacifying effects of democracy to avoid war when systemic, power-based considerations have significantly reduced the likelihood of peace. Instead, democratic institutions may have formed a key causal link between leaders' desire to stay in power domestically and the increase in the probability of war that power transition theory predicts.

## Conclusion

The war concluded in favor of the Americans, as anticipated, but without destroying the Restoration regime, as Spanish leaders had feared. The fighting lasted from April until August 12, at which point Spain, having lost most of its navy, authorized Jules Cambon, the French ambassador in D.C., to sign a protocol that ended hostilities. On December 10, the two countries signed the Treaty of Paris, in which Spain relinquished control of Cuba and ceded Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the U.S., in return for \$20 million.[36] The U.S. had taken its first step towards a more assertive foreign policy, where it would dominate and intervene in the Western Hemisphere when it saw fit. Meanwhile, other than the loss of its empire, the effects in Spain were profound rather than dramatic. Calls for reform increased, and the two-party political system fractured into a multiparty system that weakened the Restoration regime.[37] The power transition in the Americas concluded without further hostilities on Spain's part, although the U.S. would take steps elsewhere to consolidate its new position as the sole American power.

The Spanish-American War fails to support strict interpretation of democratic peace theory, and instead provides an instance in which two democracies, under the right geopolitical conditions, went to war because their people or their political factions demanded it. This causal mechanism links systemic and state-level analyses of war to show how the international system affects domestic politics, and how domestic politics in turn causes state leaders to make decisions based on states' relative power positions. In 1898, this feedback loop caused the peace-inclined leaders McKinley and Sagasta to lead their countries to war, but the lessons of the Spanish-American War may well apply to future transitions in the balance of power, regardless of whether or not the rival countries operate under a well-established democratic regime.

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[1] David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 428, 471.

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[5] Lemke and Reed, 160.

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[10] Louis A. Pérez, Jr., "The Meaning of the *Maine*: Causation and the Historiography of the Spanish-American War," *Pacific Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (1989): 295.

[11] Ray, 194.

[12] Richard F. Hamilton, *President McKinley, War and Empire*, vol. 1, *President McKinley and the Coming of War, 1898* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 233-234.

[13] Peceny, 423.

[14] Ray, 186.

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[15] Baker, 357-358.

[16] Message of President James Monroe at the commencement of the first session of the 18th Congress (The Monroe Doctrine), December 12, 1823, Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990, National Archives, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=23>.

[17] Quoted in May, 40.

[18] Hamilton, 109.

[19] Trask, 72-73, 171-172.

[20] Hamilton, 107-111, 125.

[21] May, 120-122; Hamilton, 113-114, 230-231.

[22] William S. Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 175-181.

[23] John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain over Cuba, 1895-1898* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 7.

[24] Peceny, 418; Baker, 199-203.

[25] Offner, 71.

[26] Baker, 362.

[27] Baker, 358.

[28] Quoted in Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 137.

[29] Offner, 120.

[30] May, 146.

[31] Offner, 12, 195-196; Baker, 357-358.

[32] Hamilton, 118-119.

[33] Baker, 378-381.

[34] Hamilton, 117.

[35] Baker, 200-204.

[36] Trask, 435-483.

[37] Baker, 401-436.

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*Date written: 4/2012*