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RELATED ENTRIES

African-American Manhood; Agrarianism; Character; Chivalry; Civil Rights Movement; Civil War; Dueling; Guns; Hunting; Minstrelsy; Patriarchy; Property; Race; Slavery; Victorian Era; Violence; Whiteness; White Supremacism; Wright, Richard

—Ted Ownby

SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

The Spanish-American War, fought in 1898 between the United States and Spain over interests in Cuba, was triggered by an alleged Spanish attack on the U.S. battleship *Maine*. The war occurred during the Gilded Age (1873–1900), a period of changing definitions of middle-class masculinity. Since the mid-nineteenth century, American middle-class men had been articulating new definitions of masculinity (associated with the notion of a “strenuous life” by contemporaries and described as a “passionate manhood” by historians) that emphasized the body, martial virtues, and military discipline. At the same time, the United States began to emerge as a world power that sought to emulate European colonial powers. The Spanish-American War, referred to at the time as a “splendid little war,” lasted a mere four months, yet it reflected an important convergence of new articulations of masculinity and U.S. foreign policy.

Prior to the outbreak of the war, American men had begun to voice increasing concerns over both their manliness and the status of the United States as an emerging world power. The emergence of the “new woman” in the late nineteenth century appeared to challenge men’s position of power in public life, while urbanization and industrialization seemed to undermine middle-class American manhood by separating men from nature and removing physical exertion from their working lives. Meanwhile, the scramble for

colonies among European nations after 1889 and the publication of Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea-Power Upon History* (1890), which linked national greatness to control over trade, military strength, and colonial possessions, awakened fears among some American men that the United States was too weak to compete with the European nations that were carving out large territorial empires in Africa and Asia. For American men afraid of having become “soft” at home and abroad, the Spanish-American War presented an opportunity to assert national strength and reinvigorate white, middle-class masculinity.

American support for the Cuban resistance against Spain served as a defense of an ideal of male chivalry and well-ordered gender relations at home. By idealizing Cuban men as “gallant revolutionaries” and Cuban women as models of chaste femininity, American supporters of a war with Spain depicted Cuba as a society that still defined masculinity and gender relations in terms of an early-nineteenth-century notion of republican manhood and a nineteenth-century, middle-class “cult of domesticity.” The events surrounding the arrest and liberation of Cuban activist Evangelina Cisneros in 1897 reflected the convergence of U.S. concerns regarding masculinity, gender relations, and foreign policy. The daughter of a prominent Cuban family, Cisneros had been arrested by Spanish authorities on the suspicion that she had aided the resistance. *The New York Journal* and its publisher, William Randolph Hearst, arranged Cisneros’s subsequent rescue and transport to the United States. The Cisneros affair allowed prointerventionists in the United States to cast Cuba in the role of the damsel in distress. By aiding Cuba, American men upheld their own revolutionary republican traditions, which suggested that manhood must be earned and supported male patriarchal control over both the household and the nation.

Not all Americans, however, were eager for war. Initially, President William McKinley tried to remain neutral and resolve the conflict through arbitration. As a result, McKinley and his policies became embroiled in American debates over the nature of manhood, war, and political leadership. McKinley’s critics, such as Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, called him “Wobbly Willy” and accused him of lacking the physical ability to enforce his demands—a severe accusation at a time when American men increasingly saw the body as the core of male gender identity. McKinley’s supporters, however, saw the president’s arbitrationist stance as a sign of his moral stamina, sound character, and manly resolve and courage. After the *Maine* incident, however,

McKinley found that his arbitrationist position became impossible to uphold and he declared war on Spain. As a result of the United States' victorious intervention, McKinley was praised for his manly leadership during the conflict.

In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, American men felt reinvigorated as forceful rulers abroad and at home. Validating a masculinity grounded in military discipline and martial valor, the war abetted a larger process of reconciliation in the nation, which was still divided by memories of the Civil War, bringing northern and southern men closer together under a banner of a shared manly citizenship.

Wartime events contributed to a shift in middle-class understandings of manliness. Whereas nineteenth-century American men had understood male identity in terms of a stable and static inner self, the Spanish-American War fostered the emergence of new notions of middle-class masculinity as an identity constructed and enacted by men themselves. The career of Theodore Roosevelt, who created himself as the archetype of the vigorous and aggressive, yet civilized and chivalric, white man, is an example. Educated at Harvard, Roosevelt resigned at the outset of the war from his post as assistant secretary of the navy and led the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry—known as the “Rough Riders”—to Cuba and up San Juan Hill in a uniform designed and tailored to his specifications. Recognizing the political value of Roosevelt's military service and the virile masculinity the public had come to associate with him, New York senator Thomas Collier Platt offered him the Republican Party nomination in the 1898 New York gubernatorial election. In 1900, McKinley (whose initial reluctance about going to war Roosevelt had publicly attacked) chose him as his vice-presidential candidate.

Just like the prointerventionists, anti-interventionists such as Senator George Frisbie Hoar of Massachusetts made important contributions to ongoing debates over the nature of masculinity and its place in American society and politics. They promoted values such as manly honor and self-restraint, arguing that Spain was an inferior adversary, unworthy of being engaged in combat by the United States. Additionally, anti-interventionists introduced new ideas about manhood based on a dispassionate application of professional expertise and a faith in institutional forms and arrangements, such as treaties—a definition of masculinity that would gain currency during the Progressive Era (1890–1915) and the 1920s.

The Spanish-American War served as a catalyst for new definitions of manhood that emerged after the Civil War. Perceived as an opportunity to reinvigorate American manhood, the war gave rise to an ideal of manliness grounded in

physical vigor, combative qualities, and physical aggressiveness, while its opponents argued for a manliness based on professionalism and middle-class respectability. After 1900, new emphases associated with Progressive Era reforms—such as professionalism, efficiency, and a renewed emphasis on middle-class respectability—tempered the aggressive masculine impulses fostered by the war.

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RELATED ENTRIES

Chivalry; Citizenship; Cult of Domesticity; Gilded Age; Heroism; Imperialism; Industrialization; Middle-Class Manhood; Militarism; Military; Nationalism; Passionate Manhood; Politics; Professionalism; Progressive Era; Roosevelt, Theodore; Strenuous Life; Violence; War; Whiteness

—Thomas Winter