

The Battle of San Juan Hill and El Caney

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MEMORANDUM FOR Faculty Advisor, Group Room R10, Fort Bliss, TX 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Battle of San Juan Hill/El Caney

1. Thesis Statement. The Battle of San Juan Hill/El Caney set the stage for the US to evolve from a frontier nation into a twentieth century world power.
2. Discussion. Historians will concur that the superpowers were led by Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal followed by Germany, Belgium, Japan, France, and Austria prior to 1898. By the end of 1898, the world would have one more, the United States.
3. Conclusion. The Spanish American War was the first time the United States fought on foreign soil and successfully started the dominance on the world. The military would improve its rifles by adopting a smokeless gun, so that shooting would not give their positions away as in the past. The United States also realized the need for a two-ocean navy to defend its borders. The Army realized the importance of support to the warfighter, specifically logistical lines for all classes of supply. The Army would change its uniforms to adapt to the different environmental conditions. Emergency medicine would evolve from the War and specifically receiving proper immunizations to avoid the common sickness and diseases of a given area. As some things needed to be changed and were changed, the fact of the tenacious, bold, and fearless American soldier has remained steadfast throughout the years. This has enabled the United States to become the world power and the Spanish American War was the launching pad for it.
4. Counterpoint. The opposing view would argue that Spain at this point and time was not a super-power. Over the last two hundred years their empire had been shrinking. Though Spain had a large Army, they chose not to engage them in any major battles of the Spanish American War. In addition, their Navy was old and obsolete and was destroyed in hours by the American Navy. Keep in mind that the United States was fighting approximately 100 miles from its border and Spain was over two thousand miles from their homeland.
5. Haines Award. We do not request that the Haines Award Selection Board consider this paper for the General Haines Award for Excellence in research. *Writing Research Papers*, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition By James D. Lester, is the guide used in the preparation of this research paper.



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OUTLINE

Thesis: The battle of San Juan Hill/El Caney set the stage for the US to evolve from a frontier nation into a twentieth century world power.

I. Introduction

- A. Identify world powers (1898)
- B. US Political posture
- C. Factors leading to US involvement in Spanish American War
- D. US Army (1898)

II. Battle of El Caney

- A. Background
- B. Commanders/Unit Designations
- C. Characteristics of units (personnel/equipment/uniforms/weapons/training)
- D. Battle of El Caney

III. Battle of San Juan Hill

- A. Background
- B. Commanders in charge of units
- C. Characteristics of units (personnel/equipment/uniforms/weapons/training)
- D. Battle of San Juan Hill

IV. Summary

- A. Results of conflict support thesis
- B. Opposing view

V. Conclusion: Evolution of Army/ lessons learned

## The Battle of San Juan Hill and El Caney

Did The Battle of San Juan Hill and El Caney set the stage for America's emergence as a world power? Historians will concur that before 1898, the superpowers were led by Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal followed by Germany, Belgium, Japan, France, and Austria. By the end of 1898, the world would have one more, the United States. Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, and Germany had vast empires around the globe. Empires did two things for these world superpowers:

1. The colonies provided natural resources and markets for trade, which provided great wealth.
2. Colonies provided projection platforms for their Armies and coal-refueling stations for their Navies to create global reach.

William McKinley defeated Grover Cleveland to become the 25th President of the United States in 1898. The United States borders stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. The United States in 1898 was in full recovery from a depression that had gripped the country for over 30 years, since the Civil War. The America of 1898 was motivated by a variety of forces that led to the involvement in the Spanish American War.

The most obvious force was "Yellow Journalism". Yellow Journalism is the practice of sensationalism, distorted stories, and misleading images for the sole purpose of boosting newspaper sales and exciting public opinion. The New York Journal led by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer of the New York World were the two main newspapers that manipulated public opinion, which pushed the United States into war with Spain. Many subscribers received papers in the mail, one to two weeks late. The newspapers changed colors from white to yellow, thus Yellow Journalism was born. Pulitzer and Hearst

exaggerated and fabricated stories on what was happening to the Cuban people. Hearst and Pulitzer printed that the Spanish told the United States to stay out and called President McKinley “weak” many Americans wanted to declare war on Spain and take what was left of its empire. President McKinley was forced to take some sort of action because of the increasing pressure from the American people. The USS Maine was sent to Cuba, to protect American property and for a show of force.

There were other forces also that led to the United States involvement in the Spanish American War. The American Civil War had been over for a little over a generation and the terrors of war were beginning to be forgotten. Camaraderie and tales of glory continued to be passed down from the older generation, via family stories, veteran’s reunions, and printed histories of military units. War was thought of as glorious by younger generations because of the war stories told to them by the older generations.

As the end of the nineteenth century approached, the United States was beginning to look at itself as a force in the world for the first time. The United States had strong beliefs in its own, now-proven, political system. Americans with their strong missionary Christian background felt a strong sense that it was on a righteous golden path. Americans were attracted to Cuba partially because of a desire to help people who reportedly faced very dire conditions; these same conditions made the American public feel they themselves were superior.

Additionally, another force was that the timing was right for worldwide colonialism. The colonialism exhibited by Europe had been going on for several hundred years, with Britain, Spain, and Portugal leading the way. The time of Empire building was at its peak. According to colonial powers, empire building was thought not only to be a way of making a



profit but a way to improve the lives of those in the colonies. These dual concepts of profit and social improvement were proven correct in practice, but were more often proven not to be true.

The United States at one point in history had been a colony of Great Britain. For this reason, there was a strong isolationist attitude. By the 1890's, the United States could no longer look internally for expansion. The country now spanned the continent and was feeling confined for the first time in its history.

The previous paragraphs covered several views and forces that literally set the stage for the United States to become a world power. The attitude and public opinion created by the media, a new generation looking to prove itself to the Civil War era and a strong sense that the United States was on the right path. These were the times of colonialism and the United States could not expand internally any longer. These factors led the United States into war with Spain.

For over four centuries, Spain had ruled over a vast and profitable overseas empire. By 1860, only Cuba and Puerto Rico remained under Spain's control. There was much unrest throughout Cuba. American sympathy for the cause of the Cuban Revolution grew, fuelled by the atrocious stories in the press. Unfortunately for Spain, these two colonies were within 150 miles of the Florida coast. The Spanish Empire was teetering on the brink and the United States gave it a shove.

The USS Maine blew up in Havana harbor and the disaster was blamed on Spain. On April 25, 1898, the United States declared war on Spain. Fortunately for the United States, the Spanish military was in terrible shape. The taking of what remained of Spain's dwindling empire was justified by the United States due to Spain's long history of colonialism, the

atrocities committed in centuries past, and the new manifest destiny attitude of the influential Americans.

Before the Spanish American War, the American Army was a small force under 28,000 men. Most of this force served in garrisons in the American West. The Army consisted of twenty-five infantry regiments, ten cavalry regiments, and supporting artillery batteries. The Army recently finished fighting the Indian Wars. Many of these troops had combat experience from these wars. Standards of both training and recruitment were very high and the Army was highly motivated. The regular Army was augmented with 115,000 men. These men were poorly equipped and trained; however, they were still useful in augmenting the regular Army in times of conflict. The National Guard's usual role was supposed to be disaster relief and policing in quelling civil unrest. In addition, it's important to note that the Army segregated its African American regular troops into Negro regiments, the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. All four regiments would see action in Cuba.

Following the declaration of war, the Army called for 125,000 volunteers to serve for two years. Recruiting offices across the country were full of young Americans looking for adventure and glory. National Guard units volunteered in mass, forming supplementary battalions to existing regular regiments. By August 1896, the regular Army had swelled to 56,000 regulars and 272,000 volunteers and guardsmen. These soldiers were organized into seven Corps, most of which saw service in Spanish American War.

The main problem with the American Army in 1898 was not in its men, but in logistical and command abilities. Corps and division sized formations had not been used

since the Civil War, and an Army administration built to deal with the supply and outfitting of 27,000 men was faced with ten times that number.

The Spanish Army had not fought a regular Army since the Napoleonic Wars. Spain had been involved with numerous guerrilla wars and civil insurrections. Spain had become an expert in counter-insurgency warfare. In both Spain and Cuba, the Spanish Army had performed well in the role as an anti-guerrilla force. Fortunately for the United States, Spain was not prepared for a war against a conventional opponent, the troops lacked proper artillery support, and experience in operating in large formations.

The war exposed other flaws in the Spanish Army. Spain's junior officers were often in their late teens and products of the Spanish military academy. The ratio of officers to soldiers was extremely high, averaging one officer to every six enlisted. This was four times higher than the United States Army. The soldiers were mostly in their early twenties and for the most part poorly educated and lacked initiative. During the war, they also displayed great courage and tenacity.

The Spanish Army was organized into regiments for administrative purposes only, the battalion being the standard tactical unit. A regiment consisted of two battalions of six companies each. Each company was supposed to have 160 officers and men, but in reality, they were often severely under-strength away from their homeland. A Spanish battalion consisted roughly of 1000 men.

There were roughly 160,000 Spanish troops in Cuba at the outbreak of the war. The troops were divided into 120 infantry battalions, 10 cavalry regiments, 18 artillery batteries, and 2 engineer battalions. The Spanish soldier was better outfitted than the American soldier. Their uniform was designed for tropics and their rifles were superior. Each infantryman



carried an 1893 Model Spanish Mauser rifle, a bolt-action weapon with a cartridge clip. It fired 7mm rounds and had a bayonet attached.

The stage for war between the United States and Spain was inevitable. There are many reasons why the United States declared war on Spain. Spain was trying to hold on to its last remaining colonies in the world. There is a brief description of the Armies of both sides. Now we will analyze the biggest battles of the Spanish American War, The Battle of El Caney, and the Battle of San Juan Hill. The United States had thrown its hat into the ring with the world super-powers.

The commanders for both the United States and Spanish played important roles in the Battle of San Juan Hill and El Caney. Major General William R. Shafter was the commander of V Corps and overall in charge for the American Army. Major General Joseph Wheeler led the Cavalry Division, but the day before the assault, he relinquishes command due to a fever. The following commanders assumed different commands due to the illness: Brigadier General Young took command of the Cavalry Division; Colonel Leonard Wood took command of the First Cavalry Brigade; and Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt took command over the Rough Riders. Brigadier General Jacob F. Kent was the commander of the First Division. The Spanish Army was commanded by Lieutenant General Arsenio Linares y Pombo, but after he was wounded in action Major General Jose Toral Vazquez took over his command.

The United States Army had certain characteristics, which made them unprepared for war. The country didn't have any large stock of arms, clothing, ammunitions, supplies, and equipment. President McKinley called upon the states for volunteers from the National Guard, which allowed the state authorities to organize the regiments to select their officers. The majority of American soldiers were volunteers who originated from all over the United States for

their part in, as Secretary of State John Hay called it, a "splendid little war." <sup>1</sup> Officers learned by trial and error in logistic and planning due to lack of experiences. The volunteer troops went into battle with only seven weeks of military training. The United States Army also formed an African American regular troop into segregated 'Negro' regiments. These soldiers were known as the 'Buffalo Soldiers'. The volunteers made up most of I, II, III, and VII Corps, while V Corps was mainly the regulars. Eventually, 16,300 men, 2,295 horses and mules, 34 artillery pieces, 4 Gatling guns and 89 journalists were sent to battle. The United States Army personnel had to fight in uniforms that weren't suitable for the environment. Some men received heat exhaustion due to blue flannel shirts, brown wool trousers, canvas leggings, heavy leather shoes, and a felt hat. Regular troops were armed with the Krag-Jorgensen bolt-action rifle, which was not reliable in the field. The cavalryman carried the Model 1896 Krag Carber. Volunteer infantry carried the Trapdoor Springfield Model 1873, an obsolete weapon that used black powder cartridges. Once the rifle was fired, a cloud of smoke could be seen and the enemy could determine the firer's position.

The Spanish Army faced some problems but was adequately prepared for the battle. The Spanish infantryman was dressed in lightweight cotton uniform with blue and white stripes, a straw hat and sandals or moccasins. Every infantryman carried an 1893 Model Spanish Mauser rifle, a bolt-action weapon with five-cartridge clip. The weapon fired 7mm rounds with great accuracy and had a knife-bayonet.

El Caney is a small village about six miles northeast of Santiago, Cuba. It was close to the reservoir that supplied water to Santiago, trenches and rifle pits, surrounded by barbed wire, supported its main defenses. El Caney consisted of wooden blockhouses to the west and north, a stone church, and its strong point, a stone fort, *El Viso*, which was on a hill about 450 yards

southeast of the hamlet. Three companies of the Constitution Regiment, one company of dismounted guerrillas, 40 soldiers of the Cuba Regiment, and 50 soldiers of the mobilized forces, totaling 520 men, were stationed here under the command of Brigadier General Joaquin Vara del Rey. As part of Santiago's outer defensive line, it was attacked and taken after a ten-hour battle on 1 July 1898, by the Second Division of the Fifth Corps.

By the end of June 1898, the Spanish had less than 10,000 troops at Santiago. They were unable to reinforce them because the Cuban insurgents harassed the convoy routes and the Navy blocked access to the Santiago Sea. Life in El Caney became hard with the last food arriving in Santiago during April 1898. The Spanish Army had a three tiered defense: an outer skirmish line that was not expected to hold against a determined US assault; an inner line of fortifications at El Caney, in addition to San Juan Hill, Kettle Hill and eight other fortified areas; and as a last defense, the city itself. The Spanish Army was criticized for the wide dispersal of troops, leaving only a small number of troops to block the most likely avenue of approaches.

The dismounted cavalry under General Wheeler and the infantry under General Lawton moved ahead of them, following the main routes to Santiago. General Wheeler's two brigades of dismounted cavalry made camp at El Pogo, to the northwest of Siboney and less than five miles from Santiago. This force included Colonel Henry Carroll's three regiments (3d, 6th and 9th US Cavalries) and the newly promoted Brigadier General Leonard Wood's brigade consisting of the 1st US Cavalry, the all-Black 10th US Cavalry, and Colonel Roosevelt's Rough Riders (1st US Volunteer Cavalry).

According to the plan of Major General William R. Shafter, El Caney would be attacked and taken within two hours by the 6,653-man Second Division under the command of Brigadier

General Henry W. Lawton, and then Lawton's force would join in the main attack on the San Juan Heights on 1 July 1898.

General Shafter did not use his naval force to its fullest, when the navy bombardment could have halted the Spanish buildup in San Juan and El Caney. He was unable to unload his transports and move equipment so he left his heavy guns and camping equipment behind. He received intelligence on 28 June, that reinforcements were enroute towards Santiago, so he decided to attack Santiago and hurried the plans for an assault. General Shafter believed that El Caney on the road to Guantanamo was of tactical significance. He thought that he could win El Caney in less than two hours, take San Juan Hill, and seize Santiago in one sweeping attack.

With Brigadier General William Ludlow's brigade on the U.S. left, Brigadier General Adna R. Chaffee's brigade on the right, and Colonel Evan Miles's brigade held in reserve in the center, the United States attack, which took the form of a semicircle, began at 6:35 a.m. CPT Allyn Capron's battery of four light artillery pieces opened fire on El Caney in preparation for the assault by General Lawton's infantry. Once Lawton's men took El Caney, they would move back to join the right flank of the main assault force of some 8,000 soldiers on the primary objective of the day, the battle for San Juan Hill.

The heavy shells of the Spanish guns began falling on the assembled American soldiers. One of the initial rounds struck a small house at El Pozo, instantly killing two Americans and wounding several more. Survivors, along with most of the main force, quickly sought cover as everything quickly turned from optimistic hopes of glory to the harsh realities of death and violence.

The advancing Americans found themselves facing snipers in the surrounding trees, fences to slow their progress, and that *perfect hailstorm of bullets* confronting them from the



front. At 10 o'clock the 17th Infantry, which had been held in reserve, was ordered forward to take a high embankment that was providing a tactical advantage to the entrenched Spanish. Lieutenant Colonel Haskell and his regimental quartermaster Lieutenant Dickinson led forward movement, advancing in front of their men. Four hundred yards from the Spanish line they stumbled upon occupied trenches, both falling quickly to enemy fire. Lieutenant Dickinson, the lesser injured, rushed back to the regiment where he found Company C advancing under Lieutenant Benjamin F. Hardaway. "The Colonel is shot!" he shouted, struggling to stem the flow of blood from his own wounded Arm.

Lieutenant Hardaway, Second Lieutenant Charles Roberts, along with Corporal Ulysses Buzzard sprang into the open to go to the rescue of their commander. Behind them followed four young Army privates, George Berg, Oscar Brookin, Thomas Graves, and Bruno Wende. In the fierce onslaught of enemy fire that met their valiant attempt to rescue their wounded Colonel, Berg and Brookins were quickly wounded but managed to drag their shattered bodies back to safety. The remaining five men reached Colonel Haskell, half dragging, and half carrying him to safety. Colonel Haskell's wounds were far too serious to save his life, but for their valiant effort to rescue their commander in the face of a withering enemy fire, all seven men would be subsequently awarded Medals of Honor. Throughout the day, both at El Caney and three miles south at San Juan Hill, other brave men would risk their lives for their wounded comrades.

The hill of El Caney was a tough, hard climb, over sharp, rising ground, which, were a man in perfect physical strength, he would climb slowly. Part of the charge was made over soft, plowed ground, a part through a lot of prickly pineapple plants and barbed-wire entanglements. It was slow, hard work, under a blazing sun and a perfect hailstorm of bullets. The steepness of the hill slowed the American charge along with the wave of fire coming from the fortified houses



as the Spanish picked off the Americans. As the Spanish shot, the first wave of Americans the next would quickly follow.

Even though Lawton's force was reinforced with the arrival of Brigadier General John C. Bates's Independent Brigade, the United States forces failed to carry the position; moreover, Lawton was ordered to break off the attack. The artillery fire failed to destroy the fortifications or demoralize the resolute Spaniards. Unable to dislodge or weaken the defenders with artillery, Lawton ordered his men (the 25th was assigned as a reserve unit) to advance into the open clearing and charge the Spanish entrenchments. By noon this first assault had overrun the Spanish entrenchments, but at a heavy cost. Capron's battery, which had been moved to within 1,000 yards of the Spanish positions, began to breach the walls of the stone fort.

While these battle-fatigued troops were resting, Lawton directed his reserves to proceed to the front line in preparation for a general assault on the Spanish fortresses. Advancing in a broad swarm, members of the 25th rushed through cactus, thick underbrush, and other obstacles. The accurate fire from Spanish sharpshooters inflicted heavy casualties among the regiment. Once reaching the shelter of a hollow in the hill, expert shooters fired several volleys into the defender's portholes, rifle pits, doors, and windows. Hoping their fire had weakened the defenders, the American troops made a general advance up the hill. The 12th and 24th Infantry took the stone fort shortly after 3:00 p.m., fighting continued until 5:00 p.m.

Having run out of ammunition, the Spanish forces, reduced to 80 effectives, retreated. They had sustained 235 casualties, including the deaths of Brigadier General Vara del Rey and his two sons. About 100 men managed to get back to Santiago, and 126 were taken prisoner. United States casualties included 81 dead and 360 wounded. As Lawton's division moved out

for the San Juan Heights at 8:00 p.m., the battle had produced a feeling of mutual respect between Spanish and American soldiers.

Although the Americans took El Caney, it was a costly victory. The Americans did not fight as a cohesive unit, command and control was a major failure. Over 520 Spanish troops fought bravely against ten times their number at El Caney. The defense at EL Caney caused Shafter to dig in, rather than to risk excessive casualties.

On this day, everything that could go wrong would. General Shafter fell ill and was relegated to his tent at his headquarters. The heavy smoke of the American artillery filled the skies and masked the locations of the enemy positions. In the jungle, Spanish soldiers sniped with impunity at the untested young Americans, quickly proving the advantages of smokeless gunpowder.

The Battle of San Juan Hill would be one of many events during the Spanish American War. On 12 June 1898, the United States Army was given orders to sail to Daiquiri. The American strategic plan was to establish a naval blockade of Cuba, neutralize the Spanish fleet, then transport an expeditionary force to the island. They were going to work with the Cuban insurgents to defeat the Spanish Army, capture at least one leading city, and force the Spanish to give up the struggle. San Juan Heights was the main objective. General Shafter's plan was on 1 July 1898 at 0600 hours; General Lawton's division would start the battle at El Caney and capture it in 2 hours. The Spanish resistance at El Caney was stronger than they expected. General Lawton's division would not capture El Caney in 2 hours but the other divisions were not aware. The two remaining division would march down the road from El Poso to Santiago for the attack on San Juan Heights. They would secure the Army's right flank and then move to the southwest to attack San Juan Heights. General

Sumner's dismounted cavalry would extend to the right of the road and attack the outlying Kettle Hill. The frontal assault would occur the same time with the reinforcements of General Lawton's division after arriving from El Caney. The two divisions would head on to Camino Real. This was a muddy narrow road so the men had to march two abreast rather than columns of four. The front of the column came under heavy fire from the Spanish within a mile of the San Juan River. Lieutenant Colonel Roosevelt was ordered to branch to the right and head upstream while waiting for further orders. Lieutenant John Pershing along with his unit the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry (Negro) regiment was just reaching the ford. As units moved toward the ford, it was slippery and muddy due to the blood of the dead and wounded soldiers. Over 400 men were killed and wounded at the ford (renamed 'the Bloody Ford')<sup>2</sup> The Spanish continued to fire on them while they were in the river. At 1305, the volunteers received the orders to advance in the assault on the hill but the regulars didn't get authorization. Roosevelt told the regular cavalryman to rush the entrenchments but they wouldn't, so Roosevelt and his unit passed them and they followed. Lieutenant Parker and his four Gatlings located in front of the Bloody Ford opened up heavy suppressive fire on the Spanish positions around the blockhouse. The American Army realized the Spanish dug their trenches on the topographical crest of the Heights, which shielded the Americans from the bullets. The Spanish were fleeing back toward Santiago. Roosevelt, the Rough Riders, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry advanced to the northern spur of San Juan Heights. The San Juan battle had 125 casualties and collectively 1,000 men wounded. The Spanish had 215 casualties and 375 wounded which became prisoners of war. The Spanish was unable to organize a counterattack. General Lawton's men joined the defenders the next day and helped to secure the American positions.

The Spanish American War was the first time in history the United States was engaged in a conflict on foreign soil. Other nations were unsure how the Americans would fare in the battle because it was only 33 years after the bloodiest war in the United States history, in which the country was torn apart and many Americans were killed. Spain and the United States signed a peace treaty on December 10, 1898, in Paris, France. The peace treaty marked the end of Spain's colonial empire and the creation of the United States as a world power that would expand its interest in Asia. The war helped speed the construction of the Panama Canal, which was completed in 1914 and was seen as vital to linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans for United States commerce and military activities. Spain gave control of Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines, which the United States annexed and eventually gave independence to Cuba and the Philippines. The US still has military presence in Cuba and the Philippines.

The opposing view would argue that Spain at this point and time was not a super-power. Over the last two hundred years their empire had been shrinking. Though Spain had a large Army, they chose not to engage them in any major battles of the Spanish-American War. In addition, their Navy was old and obsolete and was destroyed in hours by the American Navy. Keep in mind that the United States was fighting approximately 100 miles from its border and Spain was over two thousand miles from their homeland.

Another opposing view would argue that after the Spanish American War the United States would not be considered a world power after only one triumph close to the United States. The distance to fight from their homelands facilitated the logistical support in favor of the United States for personnel and supplies. This simple fact of distance to fight, should not be the overriding factor when determining the United States as a world power.



In conclusion, the Spanish American War was the first time the United States fought on foreign soil and successfully started the dominance on the world. The military would improve its rifles by adopting a smokeless gun, so that shooting would not give their positions away as in the past. The United States also realized the need for a two-ocean navy would be required to defend its borders. The Army realized the importance of support to the warfighter, specifically logistical lines for all classes of supply. The Army would change its uniforms to adapt to the different environmental conditions. Emergency medicine would evolve from the War and specifically receiving proper immunizations to avoid the common sickness and diseases of a given area. As some things needed to be changed and were changed, the fact of the tenacious, bold, and fearless American soldier has remain steadfast throughout the years. This has enabled the United States to become the world power and the Spanish American War was the launching pad for it.



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