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# What We Learned...

## From Manila Bay, 1898

By Joseph F. Callo

In 1890 naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote, “When the opportunities for gain abroad are understood, the course of American enterprise will cleave a channel by which to reach them.” In the late 19th century, explained Mahan, the United States faced inexorable economic pressures. Compounding these were powerful geopolitical factors, including the nation’s growing confidence in international

Maine in Havana Harbor on Feb. 15, 1898, which prompted the U.S. declaration of war against Spain on April 25.

In the western Pacific, the Philippines—embroiled in its own insurrection against Spain—became a naval focus of the Spanish-American War. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, a proponent of Mahan’s sea power theories, played a key role leading up to the Battle of Manila Bay.



Tensions culminate as USS *Olympia* takes on Montojo’s Spanish fleet in Manila Bay.

matters. A contemporary editorial in *The Washington Post* summed it up: “A new consciousness seems to have come upon us.... We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people.”

Tensions between America and Spain mounted as the United States expanded its influence in the Caribbean. Cuba, in the midst of a rebellion against Spain’s heavy-handed colonial rule, was the nexus of this stress. The sensationalist press played on the obvious strains, alarming Americans anxious to protect their Cuban commercial interests. Tipping the scales was the sinking of the battleship USS

In fact, it was a cable sent by Roosevelt—even before the declaration of war—that started Commodore George Dewey on his course to Manila Bay. Roosevelt’s orders to Dewey, a protégé of the aggressive Admiral David Farragut, were permissive: “Your duty will be to see that the Spanish squadron does not leave the Asiatic coast and then [to initiate] offensive operations in [the] Philippine Islands.”

In late April, Dewey gathered his nine-ship Asiatic Squadron and headed to the Philippines, the reported location of Spain’s Pacific Squadron, led by Rear Adm. Patricio Montojo y Pasarón. He found it anchored at the south end

of Manila Bay, backed by the province of Cavite and a cluster of small islands. All things considered it was a well-chosen defensive position, though with only limited protection from available shore batteries. Dewey pitted his four protected cruisers and two gunboats against Montojo’s two unprotected cruisers, five smaller ships and five engaged shore batteries. Montojo was outgunned by a wide margin, and Dewey’s crews were considerably better trained and more motivated than Montojo’s.

After the Spanish fleet and shore batteries opened fire, Dewey famously addressed Charles Gridley, flag captain aboard USS *Olympia* (see P. 22), saying, “You may fire when you are ready, Gridley.” The American gunners systematically decimated Montojo’s force and silenced the Spanish shore batteries. The cover line on a special edition of the *New York Journal* reporting the action shouted: SURRENDERS! DEWEY’S FLEET TAKES MANILA.

Shortly after the Battle of Manila Bay, Washington annexed the Philippines, thus becoming a key player in the western Pacific, a position ultimately reinforced in World War II.

### Lessons:

- Mahan was correct about sea power and America’s global aspirations.
- If you anticipate war, marshal your resources sooner rather than later.
- When choosing a defensive anchorage, keep within range of protective shore batteries.
- Steel warships with steam engines are preferable to wooden warships with sails.
- Past glory, no matter the scope, counts for little when the shooting starts.
- Superior firepower, training and audacity can trump the best defenses.
- One significant victory can alter the military and political balance of power in a hemisphere. **MF**