

# CUBA – A RETROSPECT

BY

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FROM HIS BOOK

UNDER THREE FLAGS IN CUBA

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**THE WAR THAT ERUPTED IN 1898** between the United States and Spain was preceded by three years of fighting by Cuban revolutionaries to gain independence from Spanish colonial rule. From 1895–1898, the violent conflict in Cuba captured the attention of Americans because of the economic and political instability that it produced in a region within such close geographical proximity to the United States. U.S. victory in the war ended Spain's colonial empire in the Western Hemisphere and secured the position of the United States as a Pacific power, producing a peace treaty that compelled the Spanish to relinquish claims on Cuba, and to cede sovereignty over Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the United States. The United States also annexed the independent state of Hawaii during the conflict. Thus, the war enabled the United States to establish its predominance in the Caribbean region and to pursue its strategic and economic interests in Asia.

The Spanish forces surrendered at Santiago on July 17th; then on the 26th, at the behest of the Spanish government, the French ambassador in Washington, Jules Cambon, approached the McKinley Administration to discuss peace terms and a cease-fire was signed on August 12th. The war officially ended four months later, when the U.S. and Spanish governments signed the Treaty of Paris on December 10th, 1898.

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As Spain relinquished her sovereignty over Cuba, the Island passed under the military rule of the United States. After many weeks' delay, negotiations for peace between the two nations ended satisfactorily; the Spanish army folded its tattered banners, and withdrew from the land that would soon have proved its grave. They left a desolate desert, a monument of ruin, despair, pestilence, and death, to the magnanimous victor morally pledged to stand sponsor to the Free Cuba that is to arise on the blood-soaked ashes of the Island.

After the inhabitants returned to Santiago, many families looked with joy for the reunion with dear ones, long absent in the field. But General Shafter, for no substantial reason, prohibited Cuban soldiers from entering the city in which many of them had been born. At the capitulation the Cubans were not represented, despite the aid they had gratuitously given. When the British saved Bekwai from Prempeh, the king furnished contingents to General Scott for scouting and transport. Every one of those savages was enrolled at once, and received regular pay and rations, and after due warning against looting, the king and his followers were given a

place of honour in the ceremonies when Kumassi capitulated. By such tact England rules some millions of savages just emerged from cannibalism, by a few companies of native soldiers and a score of white officers. She has learned by bitter experience that firm kindness is cheaper and more efficacious than a battery of Gatlings.

Shafter's lack of such insight and tact nearly proved costly in Cuba. "By the exclusion of our leaders and flag from today's ceremony we feel as the patriots under Washington would have felt had the allied armies captured New York, and the French prohibited the entry of the Americans and their flag," remarked one Cuban. Garcia withdrew his forces and marched against Holguin, and the bitterness among the people in the city was increased by the arbitrary orders of Shafter, and the conduct of the rough element of one or two regiments. Kissing women on the street may be harmless horse-play, and it was mere curiosity that prompted the soldiers to enter private houses and roam around, but Latins do not understand these things.

Senor Ros, the autonomist civil governor of Santiago Province, was asked to retain his position after American occupation. A moderate Cuban, for years a resident in America, trusted by all parties and factions, he was the one man likely to aid the United States in the reconstruction of eastern Cuba. His first act was to discharge from office some notorious Spanish officials of the old regime. Perhaps he exceeded his authority: General Shafter certainly thought so. Sending for the governor, Shafter, in the presence of a crowd, coarsely berated him as a presumptuous rascal. Mr. Ros, in quiet dignity, turned and tendered his resignation. Representative of the conservative element of the Cubans, the breach was serious, and only the withdrawal of Shafter and the appointment of General Wood averted further disorder and a threatened rupture.

The unjust attitude of a section of the American press also caused dangerous irritation in Cuba. The action of a few Negro desperadoes during the war were taken as texts for wholesale condemnation of the Cuban race. I well remember sitting in a Cuban camp one cool August night, talking with the officers, educated gentlemen to a man. A copy of the "Army and Navy Register" of July 23rd was produced, and in English, which three-fourths of the officers there understood, a captain read: "The Cubans insurgents felt, when Santiago capitulated, that they should be privileged to sack the city and gratify their lust for robbery, greed, and generally riotous living. They have been refractory since General Shafter refused them the consummate gratification of their dreams, the slaughter of the Spaniards and seizure of everything Spanish." At the close of the article no one spoke. Then one officer sprang to his feet, and in an impassioned harangue called all to swear to fulfil their oath, "Independence or Death," and face the latter before submitting to such American intolerance.

The Cubans have remained magnanimous, though, and desire only the return to peaceful industry. After the continued cruelty of Spain, they have evinced no desire for reprisals, Spaniards have been respected as no Tory was respected during the Revolution, and the Cuban today stands ready to join the Spaniard in the building of a mutual country. When Pinar del Rio and Sancti Spiritus surrendered, the insurgents took charge of the cities on behalf of Americans, and not one outrage or injustice was reported.

General Wood soon perceived the danger and injustice of treating the Cubans as a conquered people. His kindly tact and firm discrimination then had a marked effect. Calling in the insurgent leaders, he asked for their co-operation. They were completely won over by his genuine Americanism; their men had soon stacked their arms, and showed their ability and desire to work, being employed at road-making and sanitary improvement. Deserving Cubans were placed in all public offices, schools were reopened, and in a few weeks the filthiest, most distracted corner of Cuba was as clean and orderly as an American city. The avidity of the younger element to attain the education so long debarred was surprising, and all the schools were soon filled to overflowing. By the latest reports, the regularity of attendance has been sustained, the Cuban officials have without exception proved satisfactory. Official dishonesty has disappeared, and the administration of the Eastern Department shows positive proof of the ability of the Cuban for self-government under the guidance of the United States.

Through the blockade, and during the weary negotiations for peace, when anarchy reigned in Cuba, the residue of the reconcentrados and hundreds of the lower classes in the cities succumbed to privation. During the first seven months of '98 there were 17,760 deaths in Havana, against 2224 births, from a population of little over 230,000. With such a death rate the extinction of the Cuban race would soon have been assured. When the Evacuation Commissioners had completed their work, and the Army of Occupation was moved to western Cuba, the aspect grew more hopeful. General Blanco returned to Spain, Castellanos assumed command, and as the Spanish troops were mobilised in the large cities, the smaller towns, freed from restraint, invited the insurgents to enter. Thus dozens of towns practically came under Cuban administration. At this time four-fifths of the people in the cities were starving.

When the insurgents had disbanded, I realised, as never before, how the Cuban male population had disappeared during the war. Today the Cubans are being criticised as a mongrel race. The best blood in the Island is soaked in the soil; the backbone of the Island, the white farming class, has disappeared. Cuban women are nursing the offspring they have been forced to bear to their hated oppressors. Thousands of the people are so reduced that they can scarcely crawl. As the Spaniards withdrew, I travelled through the districts they evacuated. Space forbids the horrible details of the trip, which was cut short in Matanzas by an impromptu brawl with a

Spanish colonel. I was forced into this fight by Carchano, later court-martialled by Blanco for flogging naked reconcentrados, and received a ball in the chest, which was extracted by a Spanish surgeon, who showed me much kindness.

The military government in Cuba has achieved much: but as far as the restoration of Cuba is concerned, it has accomplished little. The army officers have done splendid work, but it has yet to be proved that a military training fits men for the reconstruction of a system of jurisprudence suitable for a Latin society, the administration of the revenue, or dealing with the intricate economic and financial problems and the adjustment of currency, to be faced by the people in Cuba.

But if political reconstruction has been slow, the vast improvement in sanitation accomplished by the army will prove of lasting benefit to Cuba. General Ludlow has carried out a crusade against disease and dirt in Havana, undoubtedly the filthiest city in the world. The accumulated offal of ages has been removed from the towns and cities, and sanitary regulations enforced for the first time in history. The work of cleansing the capital was aided by the unfinished system of drainage and the splendid water supply. The bulk of the houses, built in Moorish style, boasted a foetid cesspool under the centre courtyard, from which all rooms open. Numbers of these lacked connections with the main sewers, which emptied through open culverts into the harbour and sea. During the war many houses contained a family in each room, with no sanitary appliances: the offal and refuse were thrown into the street beyond. Hundreds of tons of waste have now been destroyed, new sewer connections put in, and the worst quarters of the city demolished entirely. This cleansing has reduced the death-rate to regular proportions, yellow fever during the past summer has been unprecedentedly scarce, and when the projected canal is cut, to flush out the vast cesspool, Havana harbour, the city, quaint and beautiful despite the dirt, will become a Mecca for winter tourists.

It is now the twin pillars of capital and labour that are needed in the Island. Maso's project of inducing restricted immigration from the Canary Islands and northern Spain will solve the latter difficulty, if placed into effect; and to the former, while America financiers may still be cautious, English capitalists are winning contracts, obtaining options and making effective arrangements for aggressive investment. The notorious carpet-baggers have returned to Spain; and through the Paris treaty, Spaniards residing in the Island are to have equal rights with Cubans for one year, after which they must proclaim their citizenship or become aliens.

For the future one can say little. The United States is morally pledged to give the Cubans independence. Today Cuban obedience is enforced by a power too strong to be resisted but any form of enforcement ultimately creates resentment. That obedience will be willingly given to the acknowledged superiority of America, when the Cuban realises that the

betterment of his Island, not the selfish wishes of politicians and the greed of financiers, is concerned therein. The Cuban will not hear of forcible annexation; it will precipitate insurrection. But tactful administration today, sustained by Cuban officials elected by the people, will assuredly foster the desire of the people to become an integral portion of the United States.

The Cubans desire the right to live free, and a voice in shaping their destiny. The revival of industry is so slow that the Cuban fails as yet to appreciate the altered and improved conditions, and he knows nothing of his political future. Time will work out all these things, but none of this can come until the future policy of the Government is definitely settled. The intelligent Islander today desires independence under American protection. Annexation by force he will resent; but with Cuban institutions founded, and the Island pronounced free and independent, he will desire the closest ties with the United States, if not admission in some form to the Union.

