

“ALL men who feel any power of joy in battle,” runs the most memorable sentence in Theodore Roosevelt’s “*Rough Riders*,” “know what it is like when the wolf rises in the heart.” Through most of his 40 years he had managed to control this prowling aggression. Big-game hunting and a variety of strenuous sports relieved most of the physical pressure, while politics and writing served as outlets for his need to wage ideological warfare. He boasted that he was primarily a “literary feller,” but an analysis of the books he wrote before 1898 shows that every one of them dealt with ways to establish mastery.

Even in the hypermasculine context of the late 19th century, Roosevelt’s prose was notable for its violence, especially against men he considered not red-blooded enough, such as “the filthy little atheist” Thomas Paine and Henry James, “that little emasculated mass of inanities.”

James, at least, could give as good as he got, calling T.R. “the mere monstrous embodiment of unprecedented and resounding Noise,” not to mention “a dangerous and ominous jingo.” The last phrase reflected the fears of many Americans, as the new century loomed, that a clique of young imperialists — Roosevelt prominently included — was bent on making the United States a colonial power. These plotters had been inspired by the quasi annexation of Hawaii in 1893 to look for other islands that would perfect the nation’s defenses and confirm its supremacy. No prize glowed more alluringly in their eyes than “the Pearl of the Antilles,” Cuba.

Richest colony in the world, lush with sugar cane and fragrant with tobacco, it lay just a skiff’s ride south of Key West, offering the United States Navy a necklace of magnificent harbors from which to command the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. Geographically, economically, strategically, it was a virtual adjunct of the American continent. And in 1895 the moment came when Cubans themselves were ready to throw off Spanish rule, if the *norteamericanos* would only assist.

On Feb. 24 of that year, a long-fomented rebellion broke out in the eastern part of the island, to Roosevelt’s wild excitement. The rebellion spread and strengthened despite brutal reprisals by Spanish authorities, who did not hesitate to scorch the countryside and force most of the rural population into “reconcentration” camps. A steady flow of arms and money was funneled to the insurrection from revolutionary headquarters in New York (where, coincidentally, T.R. was now police commissioner), but the United States government did not become involved until early 1896, when Congress passed a resolution in support of Cuba Libre.

President Grover Cleveland and his Republican successor, William McKinley, stood as bulwarks against the rising tide of popular hostility toward Spain. They both felt that they had no right to interfere in the sovereign affairs of another state — unless and until American interests were threatened. When T.R. joined the McKinley administration as assistant secretary of the Navy on April 19, 1897, American war fever had temporarily abated.

Not until January 1898 did McKinley authorize the first show of naval might in Cuban waters. Riots by Spanish loyalists in Havana put the lives and property of American citizens at risk, and the battleship *Maine* was ordered south on a “friendly” visit of indefinite duration. She was by no means the biggest or

Edmund Morris is the author of “*Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*.” This essay is adapted from his introduction to the new Modern Library edition of “*The Rough Riders*.”

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most lethal weapon in the United States arsenal, but nevertheless packed 17 big guns and a heavy cargo of torpedoes. She dropped anchor in Havana harbor on the 25th.

Meanwhile, American popular newspapers had been waging a constant propaganda campaign against the “butchers” who ruled Cuba. The effect of this “yellow press” agitation upon McKinley has been much exaggerated. Like all business-minded conservatives, he feared any disruption in the political status quo. He also had moral reservations about foreign military adventure, and felt that his fiery young appointee in the Navy Department was too war hungry by half. Roosevelt was already agitating for a commission in the event of any American invasion of Cuba.

This hotheadedness did not alarm McKinley so much as T.R.’s relentless efforts to concentrate the deployment of United States warships for possible blockade duty off Cuba and the Philippines, and to have them all fueled, rearmed and ready for instant action. “When war comes,” Roosevelt wrote to Navy Secretary John D. Long, “it should come finally on our initiative.”

Long had to remind T.R. that such an initiative was highly unlikely. A new, liberally inclined government was now installed in Madrid, and many of the previous regime’s cruelest disciplinarians had been recalled from Cuba. What happened at 9:40 p.m. in Havana harbor on Feb. 15, 1898, was one of those freak concatenations of physical, political and temporal factors that precipitate fate and change history. The *Maine* blew up with such violence that 254 men died instantly, as blackened bits of steel shrapnel flew in all directions and the entire bay incandescenced for several seconds. To this day the cause of the explosion is a matter of conjecture.

Whatever the truth, there was no doubt in the American popular mind next morning that Spain was responsible, and that Spain must pay. T.R. girded his loins for battle. “The *Maine* was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards, I believe.” In consequence, they must be expelled from the Western Hemisphere, not to mention the Far East. Waiting only for one of Secretary Long’s frequent absences from the Navy Department, T.R. fired off a peremptory cable to Adm. Thomas E. Dewey, commander of the Far Eastern squadron in Hong Kong: “KEEP FULL OF COAL. IN THE EVENT OF A DECLARATION WAR

SPAIN, YOUR DUTY WILL BE TO SEE THAT THE SPANISH SQUADRON DOES NOT LEAVE THE ASIATIC COAST, AND THEN OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS IN THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS.” Dewey later characterized this message as “the first step” toward America’s long and painful experiment with colonization in the Philippines.

President McKinley tried with increasing anguish to quell the war fever rising nationwide and in Congress. But he proved eventually powerless, and Congress sent him an act of war effective on April 21. Two days later Theodore Roosevelt was offered command of the first of three new regiments “to be composed exclusively of frontiersmen possessing exclusive qualifications as horsemen and marksmen.”

More than 10 years before, T.R. had dreamed of leading a troop of “harum-scarum roughriders” into war. But now, with surprising levelheadedness, he declined the honor. He told the secretary of war that his limited experience as a captain in the New York National Guard did not qualify him for regimental command yet. He therefore accepted the lieutenant-colonelcy of the First Volunteer Cavalry, commanded by a professional soldier, Col. Leonard Wood. On May 12, he left for the regimental muster camp in San Antonio.

Six months later, as a war hero and newly elected governor of New York, T.R. began to dictate the triumphant story of how he had achieved his “crowded hour,” having victoriously commanded the *Rough Riders* in battle and purged his bloodlust at the crest of San Juan Hill. In doing so, he by no means waited for others to advertise his achievement.

Modern-day readers of “*The Rough Riders*” will notice, as did contemporary critics, that Roosevelt has a fondness for the personal pronoun that borders on the erotic. (It was rumored that typesetters of the first edition had to send out for an extra supply of the letter “I.”) But there is something engaging about the boyishness of his vanity, the force and clarity of his prose and the acts of bravery he truthfully narrates.

Whether or not he deserved the Medal of Honor for leading that famous charge up San Juan Hill is a matter almost as vexed as the mystery of the *Maine*. T.R. was under no doubt whatsoever, and the frenzy with which he campaigned to get it is one of the few blots on his exemplary public record. At present, President Clinton is deciding whether to award him the medal posthumously, over the objections of the secretary of the Army.

PERHAPS the final word should rest with that wisest and funniest of all American dialect satirists, Finley Peter Dunne’s “Mr. Dooley.”

In 1899 Dunne published a review of “*The Rough Riders*” that made such sublime fun of its egocentric style that even T.R. was amused. (The two men became fast friends as a result, and when Roosevelt became president he used to recite it to White House dinner guests, with his hand on Dunne’s shoulder.) Here is the opening paragraph. Mr. Dooley is addressing his friend Mr. Hennessy in a Chicago saloon:

“Well, sir, I jus’ got hold iv a book, Hinnissy, that suits me up th’ handle, a gran’ book, th’ grandest iver seen. . . . ‘Tis ‘Th’ Account in th’ Destruction iv Spanish Power in th’ Ant Hills,’ as it fell fr’ m th’ lips of Tiddy Rosenfelt an’ was took down be his own hands. Ye see ‘twas this way, Hinnissy, as I r-read th’ book. Whin Tiddy was blowed up in th’ harbor iv Havana, he instantly con-cluded they must be war. He debated th’ question long an’ earnestly an’ finally passed a jint resolution declarin’ war. But there was no wan to carry it on. What shud he do? I will lave th’ janial author tell th’ story in his own wurruds.”

And so will we. □