Spanish-American War Essay, Research Paper

In the late 1890s, the US was just beginning to establish themselves as a world power. In April of 1898 the congress had begun to demand for Cuban independence from Spain. The Americans had begun to become upset with Spain after the Battleship Maine was sunk in the Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898. Although unclear whether or not the Spaniards actually sunk the ship, the yellow journalists of the time used propaganda to make it look as if the Spanish sunk the ship, and caused the general American public to want a war. The Spaniards had murdered and tortured thousands of Cubans in order to maintain power and control on the island. On April 11, President William McKinley asked Congress if they could use force to intervene in Cuba with their desire for independence and Spain s reluctance in the issue.1 On April 19, Congress declared Cuba free and independent, and insisted on Spain s removing of their forces from Cuba. Two days later, Spain ended all diplomatic relations with the United States, which resulted in Congress declaring a state of war four days following that event on April 25. The Spanish-American War had started, which would cause the United States to emerge as a world power.

The first part of the war took place in the Pacific Ocean near the Philippines, in America s campaign to annex Philippines. The Americans utilized their powerful navy of four 1st class battleships and one 2nd class battleship, along with many cruisers and other warships which amassed to become three times as large as the Spanish Navy.2 The Spanish on the other hand, only had one 1st class battleship, which was never even active in the war due to necessary repairs, leaving seven flagships to defend against the American Navy, all the while being less equipped than their American enemies. This situation was not very good for the Spanish and allowed for the Americans to achieve a rather easy victory in obtaining Philippines. Admiral Commodore George Dewey led the American navy, and the Spanish Navy was led by Rear Admiral Patricio Montojo y Pasaron in Manila Bay.3 Although the Spanish put up a fight, they were no match for the Americans, and were completely destroyed with the US Navy suffering only a few wounded and none dead, and no damage to any ships.4

The American citizens were ecstatic over the victory in the Pacific, and many people went to volunteer in the army. The way in which the government handled these excess volunteers nearly cost the country in the war overall. They grouped the new troops into regiments of their own, without the leadership of established soldiers to lead them, and so there were nearly 223,000 volunteers thinking that they were already veterans. These troops were not well enough trained to fight against the 155,000 highly trained Spanish soldiers in Cuba. The Americans also did a poor job of feeding, sheltering, and keeping the soldiers healthy during the war, as 2,565 men died of disease.5 Even though the American army appeared disorganized, the leaders had a plan to win the war with. Their objective was to capture Havana, which was the center of all Spanish authority in Cuba. The Americans stationed the regulars (soldiers who were in the army before the declaration of war) in New Orleans, Mobile, and Tampa during the time period when new volunteers were training. A group of these regulars were placed under the command of Major General William Shafter and their goal was to go from Tampa to Cuba and bring supplies to Cuban rebels. The Americans also were planning on utilizing their Navy in the Atlantic to blockade Cuba and prevent the Spanish from receiving supplies from Spain. This plan would later change though as situations occurred during the war, as all war plans will be modified during a war do to minor setbacks or advances as a result of movements by the enemy.

Even though the Americans destroyed the Spanish fleet in the Pacific Ocean, they had a much stronger Navy in the Atlantic, with the majority located in the Cape Verde Islands. This fleet set sail for Cuba once the Americans set up their blockade, and the Spanish wanted to break up this blockade by sending Admiral Cervera with an armada of four cruisers and three torpedo boats. Rear Admiral William Sampson was the American Naval Blockade commander with three battleships, two cruisers, and many smaller ships. A fourth battleship would arrive later on in the war.6

While the Spanish were on their way to Cuba, a rumor broke out that the Spanish were going to attack the East coast, which caused Sampson to send a powerful fleet to Virginia as a precaution. While Sampson was chasing Cervera s fleet, the Spanish ships were in search of fuel, and so Cervera led them to Santiago de Cuba, where the American Navy in turn trapped them. The United States could not send in the Navy into the port of Santiago for fear of the ground guns operated by Spanish, which could do heavy damage to the American fleet. The Americans than decided to attack Santiago from the land, as they determined that it was imperative to capture Santiago and destroy the Spanish fleet without losing a single Naval ship because of their strained relations with other foreign powers in the world.7

On May 30, 1898, General Shafter was stationed in Tampa with some regulars, and he received a letter from Washington DC instructing him to go towards the area of Santiago with a group of soldiers and destroy the garrison of soldiers located there along with the Spanish fleet. Shafter headed over at first with 18,000 troops, but there was a rumor of some Spanish ships patrolling the area, and the troop transports had little defense and had to wait at sea until the area was inspected, and by the time the troops finally arrived in Cuba there were 17,000 troops remaining.8 Theodore Roosevelt and his group of Rough Riders did survive, and they would be very important in the Battle of San Juan Hill. The Cuban rebel leader General Calixto Garc a agreed to help clear 300 Spanish soldiers out of the town of Daiquir . The goal was for the US troops to capture the Morro Castle and forts at Socapa, but this required a trek up a 230 foot cliff to a fort, which had already resulted a massacre of the British back in the 18th century, and General Shafter was reluctant in allowing this mission, so the Americans decided to land 15 miles east of Daiquir . By June 22, 1898 the landings on the island had begun.

The Spanish officer in charge in the Santiago province was Lieutenant General Arsenio Linares who had 36,000 troops at his disposal in his area but perhaps made a poor decision in withdrawing his troops from Daiquir , in anticipation of a major battle defense around Santiago. This allowed the Americans to land around 20,000 men in Cuba without a shot being fired to drive them away. The only loss was five horses that drowned. The Americans set up a base at Siboney, and the first land battle of the short war was fought at Las Guasimas where 2,000 Spanish soldiers had been stationed to delay the Americans. The battle was lead by Brigadier General Joseph Wheeler for the Americans, a confederate army veteran, who led the Yanks to a somewhat victory, in which the Americans had more casualties, but the Spanish were the ones who retreated, allowing the Americans to now hold Siboney as their base and Las Guasimas as a good setup position on the road to Santiago.

The Americans had a slow-down of movement at the Siboney base, partly due to General Shafter s developing of a sickness, preventing him from even riding a horse. During this time, General Linares also began to make a formidable defense structure at El Caney and San Juan, both of which would become major battle points. Shafter s plan had been to capture El Caney, leave some troops there and then move on to capture San Juan while General Garc a took the Cubans to blockade the road west from Santiago, which would prevent Spanish reinforcements from arriving at the battle.

At El Caney, the Spaniards put up and incredibly strong fight, led by Spanish General Joaquin del Rey, firing against the Americans with more advanced rifles, and causing the Americans to take much longer to capture the little town, which stalled the assault on San Juan Hill. The town of El Caney was not captured until late in the day, when the blockhouse was finally captured, and later on General del Rey was shot down.9 The town s capture now allowed the Americans to began the assault on San Juan.

The Americans wanted to attack San Juan in order to be able to easier obtain Santiago, which was an important port. The hills of El Caney and San Juan were important hills outside the city, which were necessary to have to take over the city. Once San Juan Hill was taken, the American Navy could begin their assault on Santiago through their navy, in what was going to be a joint naval and army effort.

The battle at San Juan started off slowly, with the volunteers becoming panicked as the Spanish fired many volleys into the direction of the Americans. The group became disorganized until Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders arrived at the battlefield, and there led the Americans on a dramatic charge into San Juan Heights and Kettle Hill, which was an easy victory, unlike San Juan Hill which lied to the Americans side. Roosevelt was an inspirational figure to the volunteers, as he was well known throughout America and was a leader of the Rough Riders. Although an easy victory at San Juan Heights and Kettle Hill, San Juan Hill and its huge cliff was a different battle.

There was an open plain which led to San Juan Hill, which was guarded well by the Spanish, and there was little effort to storm the fort until Lieutenant John Parker led a batter of three Gatling machine guns which slowly began to drive the Spaniards off their spots in the trenches of San Juan Hill. Eventually the Americans climbed the cliff, and were it not for the Spaniards misfiring there may have been many American casualties, but nevertheless the Americans reached the top and the Spaniards fled. The United States army now controlled all of San Juan Hill, which signified an open road to Santiago. The army did not know that the Spanish had a great defense force built up around Santiago, which would nearly cause General Shafter to retreat five miles back.

San Juan Hill was a major turning point in the war, in that the regulars helped to lead the volunteers into better soldiers, as when the Rough Riders regrouped the volunteers and allowed the troops to capture San Juan Heights. All told, about 1,071 Americans were wounded or killed, 375 among cavalry in the San Juan battle.10 The battle was also important in increasing morale when John Parker took up the courage to cross an open plane under Spanish fire in order to capture the San Juan Hill. The Americans had been having trouble crossing the plain, and John Parker utilized his courage to begin the final charge up the cliff. Without his efforts, the battle at San Juan Hill may have last many more days, which could ve resulted in numerous amounts of American lives lost in the battle.

Following the acquisition of San Juan Hill on July 1, the Americans went on to struggle a little before winning the war. Due to the loss of over 1,000 troops who were injured in the battle of San Juan, the Americans were left with a rather thin line of troops. The Navy then got involved, which was another major event in the war. The Spanish Armada tried to escape from the Bay, even with the American Navy waiting. On July 3, 1898, the American Navy destroyed the rest of the Spanish fleet in the Cuban area, which allowed for an easy takeover of Santiago. Once the Spanish fleet was destroyed, the American Navy directed their attention to the city of Santiago, and began to bombard them. With this bombardment, the American army started to bomb Santiago as well with their artillery. The bombardment started on July 10, and by July 17 the Spanish garrison at Santiago had surrendered to the Americans.11 This surrender ended the Cuban campaign, and began the Spanish plea for peace.

The Americans did commit one last war effort, as they invaded Puerto Rico on July 25 and there were a few minor battles there, but nothing major, as the Treaty of Paris was signed on December 10, which officially ended the war. In between the signing of the treaty and the invasion of Puerto Rico, not much fighting occurred, as it was mostly negotiations. The final battled occurred on August 9 in Puerto Rico, and three days later a truce was signed. The truce officially ended the war.

The war with Spain allowed the United States to become a world power and establish new territories such as Guam, Philippines, and Cuba. As early as December of 1897 President McKinley had been planning on attacking the Philippines if war was declared with Spain.12 The entire war was completed in a 10-week time span, and the United States suffered only 345 casualties through battles.13 Although the war was primarily dominated by the Americans, without the takeover of San Juan Hill, Santiago would have been much harder to conquer. Without the leadership of the Rough Riders, San Juan Hill may not have been conquered, and a different result may have come out of the war. Even people such as J.P. Morgan had supported the war, saying that it would help American Capital. Many other big corporation men such as Rockefeller, John Gates, and John Jacob Astor also supported the war, and told President McKinley how they felt.14 The Spanish-American War is a major point in American history, which showed how powerful the country is and led to a great 20th century.