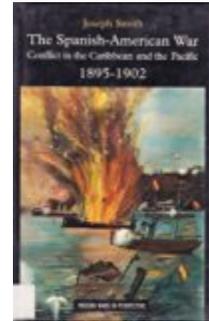


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph Smith. *The Spanish-American War: Conflict in the Caribbean and the Pacific 1895-1902* (Modern Wars in Perspective). London: Longman, 1994. \$39.80 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-04340-4; \$60.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-04300-8.

Reviewed by William Schell (Murray State University)
Published on H-LatAm (August, 1995)



Joseph Smith's account of the Spanish-American War is the oft-told tale of decadent Spain, hamstrung by internal politics, either to conciliate or suppress the Cuban insurgency of 1895 that threatened US investments on the island, leading, after the unexplained sinking of the USS Maine, to war and America's (reluctant?) acquisition of empire.

Smith's *Conflict in the Caribbean and the Pacific* is the third in the Longman Group series "Modern Wars in Perspective" billed as "an ambitious new series that offers wide-ranging studies of specific wars and distinct phases of warfare ... (intended) to advance the current integration of military history into the academic mainstream. To that end, the books are not merely campaign narratives, but examine the causes, course, and consequences of major conflicts, in their full international political, diplomatic, social, and ideological contexts. Would that it were so. Smith's workman-like book is, in fact, a traditional campaign narrative concerned mainly with strategy, tactics, and the politics of war.

The first chapter sketches the rotative pseudo-parliamentary factional politics of Spain's restored monarchy and of the disintegration of Spain's relationship with its "ever-faithful isle." Here, Smith's organization undercuts the fuller context that is the goal of the Longman series. Why begin with a discussion of Alfonso's caciquismo (local political bossism) and then return to the Ten Years War (1868-1878)? A better idea of the relationship between metropolitan and colonial could be had by linking the 1868 overthrow of Isabella II with the outbreak of Cuban revolt a month later, and the decision to end it by conciliation with the end of the bitter 2nd Carlist War (1872-1876) and the restoration of the

monarchy with Alfonso XII (29 Dec. 1874). In this context, Spain's policy of giving "financial assistance to unemployed Spaniards emigrating to Cuba" (p.2), and the phase-out of slavery beginning in 1880 (Smith gives the date of abolition as 1886, p. 4), come together to make sense. Having devoted a scant 4 pages to the "fuller context", Smith plunges into a discussion of the military aspects of the Spanish-Cuban War, 1895-1898 (pp. 7-27).

Remarkably, Smith completes his account of the Spanish-Cuban conflict without reference to the tremendous increase in American investment following the Ten Years War. He does not mention Henry Q. Havemeyer's American Sugar Company (the "Sugar Trust") that dominated the industry from 1888, nor the degree to which Yankee investors displaced the creole landed elite. This causes him to do some back-tracking and retelling. In chapter one he notes that the recession of 1894 was a major cause of the Cuban insurrection, but not until chapter two ("American Intervention") does he explain that the recession was the result of the "passage in the United States Congress of a new Tariff Act which unilaterally removed the duty-free status previously conferred on Cuban sugar" by the McKinley Tariff, the effects of which on Cuba are only implied (would students make the connection?). (p. 30)

Smith's coverage of US high diplomacy leading to intervention is solid, although it could use a hemispheric perspective, but his analysis of the impact of American investment on the Cuban economy and insurrectional politics is incomplete. He often cites Louis A. Perez, *Cuba Between Empires, 1878-1902* (U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), but he gives no indication of the extent or diversity of American investment or of the different attitudes

of American investors there with regard to the need for US intervention (for which, see Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898* (Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1936)).

Smith's best work by far is found in the five chapters in which he describes the naval and land operations of the Spanish-American part of the conflict in loving detail. (pp. 48-187). Briefly, Smith shows the match to have been relatively even. Spain's navy, which relied more on smaller, torpedo-equipped craft, was less up-to-date than the American with its Indiana-class battle-wagons, but hardly antiquated. Spain's Army was much larger (if scattered) and experienced the logistics of overseas warfare, while the US army was pathetic in both size and readiness. Both were inept but the US less so and, most of all, lucky.

I do question Smith's assertion that "the attack on the Philippines was not conceived as part of a grand design to establish an overseas American 'empire', but one of several means ... to force (Spain) to make peace over Cuba." (p. 77) I rather lean toward the "Large Policy" theory of Pratt that Smith seeks to debunk. Indeed, Smith later moves closer to Pratt's position. (p.182)

Smith is also rather soft on Admiral George Dewey, dismissing as "understandable" his stupid order to cut the Spanish telegraphic cable in Manilla harbor, also thereby cutting off his own communications. (p. 85). Instead, I suggest that Dewey's actions seem to confirm Gore Vidal's acid portrait of the "hero of Manilla" as presidential hopeful in *Empire* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 172-181.

Smith raises fascinating points with regard to culture

and war in his running discussion of how the Spanish concept of "pundonor" (dignidad or "face") affect diplomacy, strategy, and tactics. (pp. 29, 80, 156) For instance, Dewey was able to slip into Manilla Bay at night, undetected, because the Spanish admiral and his officers "faithfully attended a reception (that night). It is not known whether this was an example of Spanish absence of mind or unquestioning obedience to protocol." (p. 81) This is worth developing in the future with an eye (ear?) toward the moral language of Spanish military men such as Captain General Basilio Augustin who predicted a victory for Spain "as brilliant and complete as the righteousness and justice of our cause demands." (p. 80) In this regard, I recommend John Chasteen, *Heros on Horseback* (U. of New Mexico Press, 1995); Glen C. Dealy, *The Latin Americans: Spirit and Ethos* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); and Howard J. Wiarda, ed., *Political and Social Change in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

Although written in comfortable, accessible prose intended for the classroom, Smith's superficial analysis and his organization limit his book's value as a supplemental reading for World, American, or Latin American history. In spite of its ambitions, it seems to me to be too narrowly focused for other than a military history course, but its readability and the inherent interest students seem to have in the material may well off-set what I perceive to be problems.

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact reviews@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: William Schell. Review of Smith, Joseph, *The Spanish-American War: Conflict in the Caribbean and the Pacific 1895-1902 (Modern Wars in Perspective)*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=133>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.