



# 123 YEARS SINCE THE SINKING OF THE USS *MAINE*: WHAT DID THE LOSS OF ONE SINGLE SHIP SUPPOSE?

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In Cuba they craved for independence while in Spain they said “¡EL DESASTRE!” It was more of a disaster than they thought in the Caribbean as the Spanish-American War opened the path to a new stage of colonialism: the protectorate era, a.k.a. American Imperialism. In February 1898 the USS *Maine*, an American ship, blew up while it anchored in Havana. This was initially believed to be a Spanish attack. The reason for the explosion was never made clear. Maldwyn A. Jones attributes the disproportionate effects of the sinking to the decade’s heightened nationalism that reigned in the United States. An ideology determined by the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine motivated the patriotic escalation and “[t]he American people embarked upon it to free a colonial people from Old World oppression” (1995, 400). The USS *Maine* became a symbol of this ideology despite the somehow aleatory nature of the event and the war was fueled by cries exclaiming, “Remember the *Maine!*” (ibid).

Interestingly, as in Hawaii was the case in Cuba, American protectionism was what ignited the discontent. The implementation of the Wilson–Gorman tariff by the Americans deprived the Cubans of their market for selling sugar and the colony was thrust into misery. Guerrilla uprisings followed and so did the subsequent harsh repression of the Spaniards through a concentration camp policy (Jones 1995, 400). John Quincy Adams, who was the Secretary of State in the Monroe administration,



admitted earlier that Cuba was essential to American national interests (qtd. in Cervera Fantoni 309). It is not clear if he referred to economic or ideological interests. Regardless, the island did not reach the much advocated (by the Americans) independence. After the war was won, the military occupation that was imposed in Cuba through the Teller Amendment to aid the country in its way to independence did not finish. Originally, its purpose was “only to restore order and government to that island” (Willard Crompton 2009, 57). It was the implementation of the Platt Amendment which set the precondition to the American withdrawal, establishing provisos like not allowing Cuba to make treaties with powers other than the United States (Jones 1995, 404).

Contrary to Jones, Louis A. Jr. Perez contends that rather than being a by-product, economic interests were always perceivable in the decades preceding the protectorate era. In his words, “the U.S. imperial enterprise proceeded more like spasms of purposefulness” (1986, xv). After the Cuban venture, Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States by Spain. The former never accepted its becoming either independent or a new state in its own right. In 1915 the United States imposed a military occupation in Haiti followed a year later by the Dominican Republic. The interventions were justified on the grounds that the countries disorder would bring European presence to the hemisphere; which the Corollary ideology was determined to prevent (Blassingame 1969, 27). However, a closer look into the history of the Caribbean reveals that American intervention often had hegemonic motives: “as a means and an end of hegemony, the defense of capital interests served as the cornerstone of U.S. policy” (Perez 1986, xvi). Further, when these territories have aimed to escape the influence of their powerful neighbour (such was the case with the Haitian revolution or later the communist regime in Cuba) they were marginalised in the workings of the economic system leading to impoverishment.



Haiti was, “the greatest producer of wealth in the Caribbean in the eighteenth century, became and remains one of the Caribbean’s and the world’s poorest states” (Wallerstein 2002, 15). As such, what should we be discussing with regards to the *Maine*? Solely the real reason for her sinking? Rather, this paper recognises that the Caribbean has almost always been – and still is – under colonial regimes whose trepid transformations we should aim to identify. And as has been shown, one of these transformations started with the USS *Maine*.

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