Pop-Up Case: Explosion of the USS Maine in 1898

After the mysterious explosion of the USS Maine in Havana, Cuba, the United States has decided to go to war with Spain. President William McKinley and his advisors now need to decide how to intervene against Spanish colonial rule in Cuba and what U.S. war aims should be.

Use the following historical case to spark discussion and help students think through what they would do if they were decision-makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

By the 1870s, tensions between the United States and Spain were growing. Once a vast empire, Spain had lost much of its overseas territory over the nineteenth century, leaving Cuba as one of its last remaining footholds in the Western Hemisphere. But Madrid’s grasp had begun to slip there as well. Starting in 1868, Cubans waged three successive liberation wars, culminating in the 1895 Cuban War of Independence. Spanish forces acted harshly to suppress the Cuban rebellion, including by forcibly relocating hundreds of thousands of Cuban civilians to concentration camps and practicing scorched-earth tactics to starve the rebels of supplies. More than two hundred thousand Cuban civilians died as a result of this recentration policy. U.S. journalists brought the story of Cuban liberation to American readers, stoking widespread sympathy for the Cuban cause and outrage toward the Spanish empire. As the war dragged on, public outrage began to spur calls for U.S. intervention on behalf of the Cubans.

Although public interest in Cuba was mainly humanitarian, the United States had economic interests in the island as well. In the wake of a massive depression in 1873, the United States sought economic opportunities to aid recovery. Spain’s waning power in Cuba gave U.S. businesses a chance to invest there, particularly in the island’s sugar and tobacco industries. Consequently, the U.S. and Cuban economies grew increasingly interconnected. By the 1890s, U.S. investments in Cuba amounted to roughly $50 million, and nearly 95 percent of Cuban sugar exports went to the United States. Some Americans feared that continued Cuban imports would hurt certain domestic producers. However, most U.S. policymakers were more concerned that instability in Cuba would endanger U.S. investments and harm the overall U.S. economy. Intervention, therefore, offered an opportunity to protect U.S. economic interests and strengthen ties with a newly independent Cuba by aiding in the defeat of Spanish forces.

Policymakers also had strategic interests in Cuba, particularly as the United States looked to expand its influence in the Western Hemisphere. Cuba presented a strategically valuable location for a naval outpost. An expanded U.S. naval presence in the Caribbean could protect regional trade and aid U.S. efforts to develop a canal through Nicaragua or Panama to connect trade routes in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Spanish domination over Cuba, though, curtailed the United States’ ability to advance its political and strategic ties with Cuba. Some policymakers hoped that the removal of Spanish control in Cuba could enable a long-term U.S. presence in the region. Others, however, worried that intervention in Cuba was not worthwhile. In addition to the immense cost of a war, the United States had no way to ensure that intervention would lead to an independent Cuba friendly to U.S. interests. Policymakers, therefore, needed to consider how to prioritize various U.S. interests to determine how Washington’s relationship with a newly independent Havana would look.

Decision Point: Set in April 1898

The USS Maine—an American battleship sent to protect U.S. interests in Cuba—has exploded in Havana Harbor, killing 260 American sailors. Although the source of the explosion is unknown, the blast has sparked a media frenzy as U.S. observers accuse Spain of orchestrating the incident and demand retribution. Diplomatic efforts with Spain following the explosion have failed, and public fury is growing, leading the William McKinley administration to conclude that intervention in Cuba is now inevitable. Congress has approved the intervention, with an amendment forbidding any U.S. attempt to annex Cuba. With the United States on the path to war, President McKinley has convened his cabinet to determine what the United States’ aims should be and how best to pursue them. Policymakers will need to consider and prioritize the varying U.S. interests in Cuba and weigh the costs and benefits of pursuing those interests.

Cabinet members should consider any combination of the following policy options:

- Intervene for humanitarian purposes by aiding the Cuban resistance unconditionally to force Spanish withdrawal. This option most directly appeals to U.S. public sentiment and would be favorable to the Cuban resistance, but it forgoes opportunities to secure advantageous economic arrangements and advance strategic naval expansion in the region.
- Intervene for economic purposes by deploying forces to protect U.S. investments and aiding Cuban forces in the hope of cultivating a favorable postwar trade relationship and continued U.S. investment in Cuba. This option would protect U.S. economic interests in Cuba but could face opposition from competing U.S. industries. Additionally, the United States cannot guarantee that Cuban independence leaders will desire economic ties with the United States.
- Intervene for strategic purposes by strongly supporting Cuban forces in the hope that Cuban leaders will be favorably disposed to allow a U.S. naval base on the island. Control of a Cuban harbor would allow the United States to project power throughout the Caribbean and facilitate the construction of a canal through Central America to expand trade. However, garnering the goodwill necessary to achieve this outcome is not guaranteed and could require more robust involvement in the war than other options.
- Take limited action in retaliation for Spain’s suspected involvement in the USS Maine explosion by launching one or more isolated attacks on Spanish forces. This option would not aid Cuba or expand U.S. economic or strategic interests but would signal U.S. focus on preserving domestic interests and appease public desire for retribution against Spain.

Additional Resources:

1. "A Floating Torpedo Destroyed the Maine," article in the San Francisco Call (February 18, 1898)
2. Message from President William McKinley to Congress Regarding the Cuban Civil War (April 11, 1898)
3. Letter from José Martí to Manuel Mercado (May 18, 1895)

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U.S. history pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies examining foreign policy decision-making in U.S. history. Designed with a U.S. history survey course in mind, the cases do assume some pre-existing knowledge for context, but there is sufficient detail in the case to fuel a lively discussion.

For historical cases, a post-discussion debrief is crucial. After a simulation, it is important to give students a chance to step out of character and reflect on the conversation: what was difficult about the decision, what was troubling about its implications. It is also important to discuss what decision was actually made.

There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and are looking for some tips, the introduction to this page from Model Diplomacy has some great links. If you cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here and here). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

**Gauge reaction:**
If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

**Whiparound:**
Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

**Simple simulation:**
If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. You could consider assigning students certain perspectives or opinions to encourage debate. For example, different students or groups could prioritize the military, economic, and diplomatic considerations of the case respectively, and use their assigned perspectives to inform their arguments.

*Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students focus on the policy issues and do not try to simulate the personality of particular historical figures.*

**Think-Pair-Share:**
This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

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