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Bookshelf

Spoiling for a Fight

Teddy Roosevelt and the clamor to rout Spain from Cuba

By

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Col. Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders volunteer cavalry regiment in 1898, after taking San Juan Hill near Santiago, Cuba. Library of Congress

Having exalted war and pushed hard for building up the nation's military strength, Navy Assistant Secretary Theodore Roosevelt in April 1898 became one of the million Americans who rushed to answer President William McKinley's call for 125,000 volunteers to liberate Cuba from Spanish tyranny. War was necessary, Roosevelt believed, less for the sake of the Cubans than for America to fulfill its manifest destiny to become a great power. But Roosevelt's friends thought he was mad to volunteer. "He thinks he is following his highest

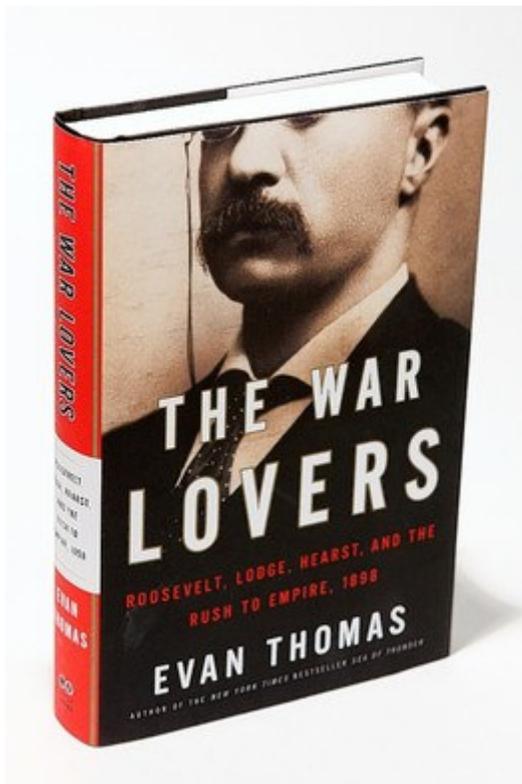
ideal," Navy Secretary John Long wrote in his diary, "whereas, in fact, as without exception everyone of his friends advises him, he is acting like a fool."

Roosevelt, who was 39 and would be leaving behind an ailing wife and their five children, tried without any of his usual bombast to explain his decision. "I don't want to be shot at any more than anyone else does; still less to die of yellow fever," he wrote in a letter. Nor did he wish to abandon his family. But he sought, he said, to do "my duty as I see it." Honor obliged him to do his part: "One of the commonest taunts directed at men like myself is that we are armchair and parlor jingoes who wish to see others do what we only advocate doing." He also desired—strongly, if silently—to make up for the Civil War draft-dodging of his revered father, for whom he was named. Theodore Sr., in deference to his wife, whose brothers were fighting for the Confederacy, had paid a substitute to take his place in the Union Army.

The War Lovers

By Evan Thomas

Little, Brown, 471 pages, \$29.99



Roosevelt's passion for the Spanish-American War is at the heart of "The War Lovers," Evan Thomas's vivid, insightful and readable account of the conflict and, more broadly, of America's "rush to empire," as his subtitle has it. Mr. Thomas skillfully uses three "hawks"—Roosevelt, Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge and newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst—as well as two prominent "doves," House Speaker Thomas Reed and Harvard philosopher William James, to tell the story. The author discounts the humanitarian motive championed by the war's supporters; his sympathies are clearly with the anti-war faction.

Roosevelt, Lodge and Hearst did their best to bring on the war but "did not by themselves cause" it, Mr. Thomas notes. After the sinking of the U.S. battleship Maine in February 1898, Americans were in a "war fever" to take revenge on the Spanish (even though, as later became evident, Spain was most likely not responsible) and to free Cuba from the Spanish yoke (though Mr. Thomas insists that liberation wasn't really a concern). President McKinley—a Civil War veteran who at his 1897 Inauguration warned against "wars of conquest"—had not been enthusiastic about going to war over Cuba; he shifted only after public opinion did.

Like Roosevelt, Hearst can fairly be called a "war lover." He may or may not have uttered the notorious instruction "you furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war" to his newspaper artist in Cuba, but the publisher certainly looked on war as a wonderful circulation-builder. Yet for all the infamous exaggerations and fabrications about Spanish barbarities published by the "yellow press," including Hearst's New York Journal, the main thrust of the reporting about Cuban suffering at the hands of the Spanish was accurate, Mr. Thomas observes. It was incomplete, however. As historian T. Harry Williams has noted, Cuban suffering at the hands of Cuban insurgents—who were the ostensible object of American support—went almost entirely unreported.

Henry Cabot Lodge, the Massachusetts senator, was older than Roosevelt and Hearst, and though he was also a hawk, he may not have been quite the bloodthirsty "war lover" that Mr. Thomas strains to make him. Lodge's first reaction to the sinking of the Maine was quite mild, and he admitted how hard it was for him "not to cry out for peace at any price" when his son was going off to the war. But if not the most unbridled of Mars's followers, Lodge was the most influential. "He was the president's closest national security and foreign policy adviser from Capitol Hill," Mr. Thomas writes. "More than anyone, he was responsible for America's sudden (if somewhat accidental) emergence as an expansionist power."

Under the sway of naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan, Lodge for years had advocated not only a large navy but what he called a "large policy," in which the U.S., seizing certain strategic islands, would control the Caribbean and parts of the Pacific. Sea power, he maintained, "is essential to the greatness of every splendid people." By the end of 1898, with the brief war over, the U.S. had occupied Cuba and (in a separate action) annexed Hawaii, as well as taken possession of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. In the case of the Philippines, the possession was contested: A brutal three-year war against Filipino insurgents soon commenced.

In "First Great Triumph" (2002), the late diplomat-historian Warren Zimmermann's brilliant history of this momentous turning point, when the U.S. became an imperial power, Zimmermann argued that America's entrance onto the world stage was "not an aberration" but rather "a culmination"—its expansion overseas following from its previous expansionism overland. Still, as Mr. Thomas writes: "When the fighting in Cuba was finished and the troops came home (save for the ones being sent to the Philippines), most Americans were ready to pull back and live in prosperous and peaceful isolation"— and Congress soon became reluctant "to enlarge the fleet or even maintain it." Retirement from the world wouldn't last long, of course. Two world wars and the rise of the Soviet threat made sure of that.

So was the "splendid little war" (as it was famously called) *justified*? Mr. Thomas makes a strong case that it wasn't. Even so, Roosevelt's prediction, when he was on a troopship bound for Cuba, that America's success would be "the first great triumph in what will be a world movement," proved correct, to the eventual benefit of countless millions.

—Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."

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