
Reviewed by James A. Baer¹

Editor Brad K. Berner has compiled documents from a variety of sources to provide multiple perspectives on the Spanish-American War. The eight chapters span pre-war years, beginning in 1895, to post-war developments stretching until 1901. The documents include letters from Spanish and US soldiers (including young Carl Sandburg), diplomatic correspondence, military proclamations, newspaper articles and later reflections. They represent the points of view of Spaniards, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos and Americans. Berner has an introduction that identifies three significant aspects of this conflict. The Spanish-American War, he writes, was a mass-media war, driven by newspapers and newly introduced newsreels that reflected technological as well as entrepreneurial changes in the United States. Second, the war, initiated as a civilising mission to liberate Cubans from Spanish domination, became a war of empire, changing the role of the United States on the world stage and making President McKinley ‘the first modern commander-in-chief’ (p. 6). And, third, Berner states that it was a war of race that brought additional people of colour under US control. The tangled history of race in the United States guided American troops abroad. ‘American soldiers, engaged in what would become a bloody three-year war with Filipino nationalists, began to call the Filipino insurgents “niggers”’ (p. 8).

Kalman Goldstein, in the foreword, says Berner has ‘revealed what have become the unintended guiding parameters of our foreign affairs ever since’ (p. xiii). However, this thesis remains undeveloped, except for occasional allusions, such as pointing out that the US war against Filipino insurgents was ‘America’s first Southeast Asian war’ (p. 213), without specifically mentioning Vietnam. Each chapter has a short introduction that provides context for the documents to follow, and a paragraph to introduce each individual document. These commentaries are helpful in identifying the issues to be addressed, although sometimes the document provides little additional information beyond that already stated.

The value of this book is the breadth of coverage. Some histories of the Spanish-American War often focus on narrow topics: Theodore Roosevelt and Admiral Dewey are two key individuals often studied. However, the claim in the foreword that this war is less studied (p. ix) is exaggerated as there are a number

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¹ James A. Baer is Emeritus Professor of History at Northern Virginia Community College.
of histories of the war in Cuba, naval battles, and debates about US imperialism and the subsequent insurrection in the Philippines.

This volume encompasses all of these topics and more, giving the reader a view of the war from the Spanish and US perspective, including those who opposed the war. There are letters from African American soldiers, Cuban and Filipino nationalists and war correspondents that give the reader a first-hand glimpse of war. Government documents include the obvious, such as the declaration of war, armistice, peace treaty and the Platt Amendment. In addition, there are court-martials and charges regarding the actions of military leaders.

Chapters 3–6 focus on the war itself, addressing ‘The War at Home’ (Chapter 3), ‘The War in Cuba’ (Chapter 4), ‘The War in Puerto Rico’ (Chapter 5) and ‘The War in the Philippines’ (Chapter 6). Most of the documents come from contemporary accounts, although The Little War of Private Post was published in 1960 and the warning of Ramón Betances is from The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History, published in 1973. It is helpful to have so many documents to peruse, although there are no new revelations about the war or its impact on the United States or its newly-acquired possessions. In some ways, it is this very diversity of sources and perspectives that strengthens and yet weakens the book. The documents are easy to read and bring the reader into the period as the events unfold. Yet, there are so many points of view that the reader needs more from the commentaries and the themes of a mass media war, a war of empire and a race war get lost in the details.

There are a few examples of topics that do not add to the focus of the book. The editor explains that a German fleet entered Manila Bay after the defeat of the Spanish with the intention of gaining advantages in the Philippines for Germany. However, this episode and the background of the German Kaiser’s desire for expansion into the Pacific in Von Bülow’s memoirs do little to clarify the importance of the US naval victory and subsequent events in the Philippines.

A weakness of this book is the lack of a substantial conclusion to develop the themes set forth. The documents provide examples of how events in this war established parameters for US foreign affairs and that this was a war of gaining empire for the United States and losing empire for Spain. There are examples from the Spanish press, although most reflect the positions of political parties, and the relative importance of the media in Spain and the United States could be explained more fully. In addition, issues of race relating to African American soldiers give witness to the racism of the era, but there is less discussion about race within Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. These are good topics and are addressed, albeit unevenly, in the documents. However, the editor should have given the reader more guidance within the book, and especially at the end, to clarify these themes.