

Jim Crow Laws and the Spanish-American War

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Introduction

Jim Crow segregation and the Spanish-American War belong to different histories, yet studying them together exposes a major contradiction in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. At home, Southern governments were restricting Black citizenship through disfranchisement, segregation, unequal public services, economic coercion, and racial violence. Abroad, the United States entered the 1898 war with Spain amid claims about Cuban liberation, strategic interests, public pressure, and an expanding vision of national power. The comparison does not make domestic racial caste and overseas war identical. It shows that ideas about liberty, citizenship, race, and political capacity were being contested simultaneously. The Reconstruction Amendments had formally abolished slavery, established national citizenship, and prohibited race-based voting discrimination, but those guarantees were narrowed through law and violence. Meanwhile, Cuban revolutionaries had already fought for independence from Spain before U.S. intervention, and the war ultimately placed Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines under U.S. control while Cuba entered a constrained independence (Foner, 1988; U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The decade therefore combined democratic language with unequal power.

Reconstruction's Retreat and the Construction of Jim Crow

Jim Crow did not emerge automatically from emancipation; it was constructed through political choices that weakened the practical meaning of Reconstruction. Black men voted, held office, built schools and churches, and participated in biracial political coalitions after the Civil War. White supremacist organizations and politicians responded with intimidation, fraud, economic retaliation, and eventually laws that restricted political participation. Poll taxes, literacy tests, complicated registration procedures, white primaries, and selectively administered rules reduced Black voting power while often preserving formal race-neutral language. Segregation then extended across railways, schools, hospitals, public accommodations, neighborhoods, and other institutions. The Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) upheld Louisiana's railway segregation statute and gave constitutional protection to the doctrine later summarized as "separate but equal," although

equality was rarely enforced in practice. Jim Crow also relied on lynching, employment exclusion, convict leasing, and local customs enforced through violence (Library of Congress, “Jim Crow and Segregation”). African Americans resisted through journalism, litigation, institution building, migration, political organization, and movements that eventually helped secure the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Cuba, Public Pressure, and the Road to War

The Spanish-American War developed from Cuba’s long struggle against Spanish colonial rule rather than from a crisis created solely by the United States. Cuban revolutionaries renewed their independence war in 1895, and Spain responded with military campaigns and reconcentration policies that produced severe civilian suffering. Americans followed events closely because Cuba was geographically near, U.S. businesses had commercial interests there, and many citizens sympathized with independence. Newspapers associated with William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer used sensational reporting that amplified stories of Spanish brutality, but “yellow journalism” was one influence among several rather than a complete explanation for war. In February 1898, publication of the de Lôme letter damaged Spanish-American relations, and the USS *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor soon afterward, killing more than 260 U.S. sailors. Public suspicion focused quickly on Spain, yet the precise technical cause of the explosion remains disputed. The slogan “Remember the Maine” converted uncertainty into political pressure. President William McKinley pursued negotiations, while Congress and public opinion moved increasingly toward intervention.

War, Black Military Service, and Overseas Expansion

Congress demanded Spanish withdrawal from Cuba in April 1898 and adopted the Teller Amendment, which disclaimed an intention to annex the island. Fighting occurred in both the Caribbean and Pacific. U.S. naval forces defeated Spain at Manila Bay, while U.S. troops fought in Cuba alongside Cuban forces; disease killed more American soldiers than combat did. African American regular Army units, including soldiers later known collectively as Buffalo Soldiers, participated in major operations despite facing segregation and discrimination at home. Their service highlighted an obvious contradiction: Black troops fought in a war publicly associated with liberation while many Black citizens were being denied voting rights and equal protection within the United States. The Treaty of Paris ended the war in December 1898. Spain relinquished sovereignty over Cuba and ceded Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States, while the United States acquired the Philippines for \$20 million (Library of Congress, n.d.). Filipino resistance then developed into the Philippine-American War. The results made the United States a more significant overseas power and intensified domestic debate over empire, consent, constitutional rights, and self-government.

Race, Citizenship, and the Limits of Republican Ideals

The strongest connection between Jim Crow and the aftermath of the Spanish-American War lies in debates over who was considered capable of full political participation. Domestic [White supremacy](#) justified Black disfranchisement and segregation through claims that equal citizenship threatened social order. Overseas, some imperial advocates used racial and paternalistic arguments to claim that colonized populations required American supervision before self-government. The legal situations were different: Black Americans were citizens within the constitutional system, whereas Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and Cuba occupied distinct territorial or international positions. Nevertheless, racial hierarchy shaped public arguments in both settings. The Insular Cases later created constitutional distinctions for U.S. territories that allowed unequal treatment outside the incorporated states. Linking these histories therefore reveals how democratic ideals can coexist with legal categories that restrict political equality. It also highlights the agency of people often marginalized in national narratives: African Americans contested Jim Crow, Cuban revolutionaries fought Spanish colonialism, and Filipino nationalists resisted U.S. rule. The period cannot be understood solely through decisions made in Washington or by white Southern governments.

Conclusion

Jim Crow and the Spanish-American War illuminate different but intersecting struggles over citizenship, race, liberty, and power during the 1890s. Jim Crow developed through a deliberate retreat from Reconstruction, combining disfranchisement, segregation, economic pressure, judicial approval, and violence to restrict Black citizenship. The Spanish-American War emerged from Cuba's independence struggle alongside U.S. strategic, humanitarian, commercial, and political concerns, and its consequences extended American power into the Caribbean and Pacific. The uncertain cause of the USS *Maine* explosion, the role of sensational journalism, Black military service, and the acquisition of overseas territories all complicate simple narratives of liberation. Studied together, the histories expose the tension between national claims about freedom and the unequal political arrangements that existed at home and abroad. They should not be collapsed into one story, because their legal contexts and affected populations differed. Their analytical connection lies in the recurring question of who could claim rights, who exercised coercive power, and how institutions reconciled republican language with racial hierarchy and imperial expansion.

Works Cited

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