Episode 1,163: The Spanish-American War: Watershed in U.S. Foreign Policy

Guest: CJ Killmer

WOODS: I don't remember the last time I got into a nice, juicy, historical episode, and you'd think as a historian I would do more of that, so I'm glad we're talking about the Spanish-American War. Really a watershed in American history. It's of course 1898, and I'm trying to set the stage. I have to remember that I have probably one-fifth of people who listen who are not listening from the United States, and I don't want to just assume everybody knows American history. Not even Americans know American history. Why would I just take for granted that everybody would know?

KILLMER: Sure.

WOODS: But we're talking about a very short conflict of just a few months but that had long-lasting repercussions, ideologically and otherwise. So how about we set the stage for the — well, let's see. The thing is, for years, there had been people who had wanted to get some kind of foothold in Cuba, and throughout the 1890s, there had been people in the U.S. administration who had been arguing that — at least in the foreign policy community, if you can call it that — saying that what the United States needs is a forward presence in the Pacific. If we're going to be a country like the other countries in the world, we're going to need naval stations and coaling stations and we're going to need to protect our commerce as it goes to Asia. And that means that we can't just be the dinky old country we've been up to now. We have to assert ourselves.

So that's kind of the ideological backdrop of American involvement in the Spanish-American War. But how would you set the stage for us as you're describing this conflict?

KILLMER: Well, I refer to them as the "large policy clique" or the "large policy cabal," these guys who are sort of like in a lot of ways — not in every respect, but in a lot of ways they're like neocons ahead of their time. And their actual term for this was the large policy; at least, that's one of the terms that they used. And yeah, the idea is the United States needs to start behaving more like one of the European imperial powers, especially the British, so the idea is territorial expansion, overseas colonies, neomercantilist kind of economic strategies, sort of force other countries to buy the stuff that America back then used to make, and naval build-up, all that sort of thing.

And they are mostly a younger generation of guys, sort of like the rising next generation in the 1890s, where you had the older generation of people like Grover Cleveland or Speaker of the House Thomas Brackett Reed who were more skeptical of a lot of these ideas. But then you had this younger generation, most famously Henry Cabot Lodge and Teddy Roosevelt,

among others, who were pushing this idea that it's time for the United States to really get much more involved in overseas expansion and navalism and all this sort of thing.

And they had a variety of justifications for this, kind of basic jingoism. They had a strong belief in the manly virtues of war, that your society becomes sort of decadent and even effeminate if you don't get into wars often enough. They had an idea kind of derived from Frederick Jackson Turner that the frontier has ended in the continental U.S. and so we need new frontiers, so we have to go overseas to find them. And then arguments, again, like neomercantilist ideas, that we need foreign markets. And then also on top of that, there's a strong racialist element of Anglo-Saxonism, where they kind of say, well, we're the other great Anglo-Saxon power aside from the British Empire, and so the United States needs to be more like the British Empire. And really in a lot of ways, the idea is that the U.S. and the British should kind of between them rule the world.

So that's the ideological backdrop, and of course Teddy Roosevelt is famously like a super over-the-top almost caricature of a warmonger. And throughout the 1880s and 1890s, he was looking for a fight pretty much any way he could get it. He didn't even particularly care with whom or over what, so ultimately where he was able to get his way is in regards to war with Spain over Cuba.

WOODS: Just so people know, what was Teddy Roosevelt's position at this time in the government?

KILLMER: Well, in 1897, he was able to make some kind of behind-the-scenes deals and things and get himself appointed as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, which sounds like a fairly obscure, innocuous job, but actually ended up, especially in his hands, having a surprising amount of pull behind the scenes. And from what we can tell, William McKinley, who was the president under whom T.R. was Assistant Secretary of the Navy — William McKinley wanted some elements of the large policy but was a little bit reluctant about actually going to war.

And he actually had some reservations. When people like Henry Cabot Lodge started pushing Teddy Roosevelt to be Assistant Secretary of the Navy, McKinley expressed some reservations. He kind of knew T.R. had this reputation as a jingo, and there's actually documents where T.R. tells people to kind of then relay to McKinley this idea — he says, "I have no preconceived plans or ideology" — something like that — "that I plan to put in place." Now, of course, that's the complete opposite of the truth. It's as ridiculous as if John Bolton was like, "Well, you know, I'm coming in as National Security Advisor with a blank slate. I don't have any preconceived ideas of what I'm going to do."

So he comes in as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and, number one, the Secretary of the Navy at the time, a guy named John Long, was almost sort of like an absentee Secretary of the Navy. He was somewhat elderly and had some health issues and may have also been a hypochondriac, and so he was out of the office a lot, especially in the summer, leaving Teddy Roosevelt in charge. And Teddy Roosevelt took advantage of this to the hilt. He just went to town putting in place all the policies at the Navy Department that he wanted, promoting the more aggressive commanders, making all sorts of war plans, some of which had to do with things like Cuba and the Philippines. So he's again kind of like a neocon. He gets into this seemingly obscure appointed position and then just goes to town kind of putting in place a lot of the pieces for war.

And one thing that maybe we'll speak about a bit more in a little bit is that one of the jobs of Assistant Secretary of the Navy at the time was overseeing the Office of Naval Intelligence, which is America's oldest intelligence agency, by the way. And so Teddy Roosevelt at this seemingly obscure job actually had an enormous amount of ability to influence foreign and naval policy.

WOODS: All right, let's talk about then the, let's say, precipitating factors, the events that helped to contribute to the ability of those who wanted war to get what they wanted. And of course, one of them has to do with what happened with the *Maine*. And when you read in your textbook, there's a fairly innocuous explanation of what happened with the *Maine*, but I wonder how certain we really are. I mean, they were doing research into what happened with the *Maine* — I mean, they've probably done more recent stuff, but at least as late as the 1980s. That was as far — I haven't checked it recently, but they were looking into this question. What did you find on the subject of the *Maine*? First of all, what happened? What was the actual event? And are we really certain about what the cause of it was?

KILLMER: The short answer is no. On the evening of February 15th, 1898, the *USS Maine*, which had been recently dispatched from Key West down to Havana in response to some disturbances going on in Cuba at the time — and you know, ostensibly it was sent down there to kind of keep an eye on American interests down there. And so it's parked in Havana Harbor at a time, by the way, when the Spanish government was bending over backwards to try to avoid triggering American intervention. All of a sudden, on the night of February 15th, 1898, an explosion happens, the *Maine* sinks, and most of the crew is killed. There was an explosion that happened that then in turn sparked off the powder magazine in the ship, and its location was such that it was right adjacent to the enlisted quarters in the ship, and so the vast majority of the enlisted men in the crew were killed, either immediately or shortly thereafter.

By the way, when the explosion happened, Spanish sailors from nearby in the port immediately rushed over and started saving the Americans who were in the water and everything, so it doesn't exactly look like they were try9ing to attack Americans, especially considering, again, that the Spanish government was trying very hard to avoid provoking American intervention at the time. So we have close to 300 sailors and Marines killed in this event, and this becomes one of the key things that really increases tensions, and within about two months, the United States is going to go to war against Spain.

WOODS: I remember an episode of — now, this may be before your time. I think you're a little bit younger than I am. But there was an episode of *All in the Family* — you know that show, *All in the Family* with Archie Bunker and all that?

KILLMER: Yeah.

WOODS: There's an episode where Archie's going back to school, and so he's got to learn history, and Edith is going to quiz him on some of the questions. And one of the questions she feeds him is, "The United States went to war with Spain over Cuba in 1898, even though Spain had already given in to all our demands." And Archie says, "Oh, that's false. That couldn't be true." And she says, "I'm sorry, Archie, but it's true." Well, let me ask you: is that true?

KILLMER: It's mostly true. Now, real quick, what happens is that Spain offers to have a joint inquiry to try to figure out what actually happened to the *Maine*. The U.S. government, under the pressure of people like Teddy Roosevelt, refuses and insists upon an America-only investigation. This is known as the Sampson Board of Inquiry. And this commission rules that the explosion that triggered the subsequent explosion of the magazine on the *Maine* was caused by a mine, an underwater mine that was detonated. This is then seized upon by people like Teddy Roosevelt as, see, it must have been the Spanish then.

And then there's also the fact that, at the time, the Spanish — like I said, they're trying to avoid American intervention. The whole thing makes no sense. But even at the time, one of America's leading naval experts on explosive ordnance and this sort of thing, a guy — I think his name was Philip Alger. He quickly started saying publicly that he believed the *Maine* was an accident, because there was a faulty design of the ship where the coal bunkers right next to the powder magazine and the ship was using a particular kind of coal that actually is prone to spontaneous combustion. And so this expert says no, it's pretty much obviously an accident. And then this Sampson Board of Inquiry rules no, it was a mine. So right away, you've got a very questionable situation. And then subsequent investigations into the *Maine* have produced some contradictory rulings.

But back to your question about the Spanish were giving into American demands, they actually were — the only demand that they would not give into 100% was to give Cuba complete, 100% independence. The Spanish government politically could not do that, and so what ended up happening was the Spanish started caving to most of America's demands regarding Cuba. And then what seems to have happened was enough people in positions of power in the U.S. government decided they wanted a war one way or another so that when the Spanish started caving to a lot of America's demands, they simply upped the demands and they said: no, now we insist that you give Cuba immediate, 100% independence. And like I said, the Spanish simply could not do that, and so then you end up getting war.

WOODS: Now, the U.S. was complaining that the way the Spanish was dealing with rebellion on the island was brutal and was inhumane, and so they had a humanitarian argument to go on, as they so often do. So what are your thoughts about that in particular?

KILLMER: Well, it's absolutely true that the Spanish were doing some nasty things in Cuba against this rebellion that started in 1895. No question. There were atrocities. There was the policy of reconcentración, which was basically rounding up a lot of civilians into horrible prison camps, where many of them died due to the horrible conditions, etc. No question.

However, there's some moral problems to Team America kind of getting up on its high horse and wagging its finger self-righteously at the Spanish for this. Number one, main Spanish general who had instituted this policy, a guy named Weyler, was an outspoken fan of American general, William Tecumseh Sherman, and basically claimed that he had gotten the idea for the reconcentración policy from how Sherman had run the American wars in the west against the Indians after the Civil War. So you know, there's a certain level of hypocrisy if you're going to condemn the Spanish for doing these horrible things in Cuba while not mentioning that, oh, they got the tactics from what you did to the American Indians.

And then there's also the fact that the Cuban Insurrectos did some horrible things themselves. They would decapitate prisoners sometimes with machetes. They would sometimes bury Spanish prisoners alive in order to save bullets. So you know, they would use torture and

these sorts of things, so it's not like the other side, the Cuban rebels weren't also engaged in some nasty atrocities. So again, it's very modern in a way, where the United States gets really, really up on its high horse about something that Assad does and never mind all the nasty things that, say, for example, the Saudis, who are America's friends, are doing. So there's this staggering level of hypocrisy.

WOODS: All right, now let's think about the actual war itself. So you've got complaints about Spanish mistreatment of people in Cuba. You have the *Maine*. What about the De Lôme letter?

KILLMER: Yeah, that was another one that kind of amped up tensions, because De Lôme was the Spanish ambassador to the United States at the time, and he had written these letters where he had kind of been a bit mean towards McKinley and had called him something like a low politician who just caters to the mob or something like that. And these letters get stolen and then end up in the hands of William Randolph Hearst, the yellow press baron who was of course gunning for war very hard in his *New York Journal* newspaper. And so this comes out.

And now De Lôme immediately resigns and heads back to Spain, but there was a sense among the warmongers like Teddy Roosevelt — there was this big idea about manliness and honor and all that, and the idea is: well, we've caught this Spanish diplomat insulting our president, and if McKinley doesn't do something back over this, then it shows that our president is weak and not strong and whatever. I believe it was in regard to this that Teddy Roosevelt basically said that McKinley has the backbone of a chocolate eclair —- so, you know, fighting words by the standards of back then, I guess.

WOODS: All right, before we carry on, just a brief message.

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So the war happens. It's actually accomplished by means of a declaration of war, so there is something quaint and old-fashioned about it.

KILLMER: Right.

WOODS: It goes on for not very long. Now, we're not even getting into what happens afterward, which of course stretches on for several years, which is the putting down of the Philippine insurrection. That's a separate matter, because the U.S. acquires the Philippines as a result of the war. But the war itself, let's just — I mean, we could go into the details of it, but I'd rather go into the consequences and what it all means. Or actually, you know what? There is one aspect of it, though, that gets overlooked a lot and that your recent podcast episode on this, which is quite lengthy and detailed and great — you talk about the Office of Naval Intelligence. Now, that's some juicy stuff. Before we get into anything further, let's talk about that.

KILLMER: Okay. The Office of Naval Intelligence or ONI I think is in a lot of ways one of the most overlooked aspects of this story and of a lot of American history for the past 130 years or so. The Office of Naval Intelligence is America's oldest intelligence agency. It was started in 1882, so it's 65 years older than the CIA, for example. And there's interesting connections between Teddy Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, the Office of Naval Intelligence, and this war and the *USS Maine* that I stumbled across by accident, because I started reading some

books about the Office of Naval Intelligence because I realized it was more important than anyone seems to notice. I kept coming across references to it being involved in things that you wouldn't expect.

Like when you hear Office of Naval Intelligence, you think, oh, they're just sort of keeping tabs on what other countries' fleets are up to and all that. And they're doing that, but they do all kinds of other stuff that seems kind of strange. Like for example, I found out that back during World War II when the United States made its alliance with the Italian and Italian-American mafia, that ONI was involved in that, that ONI people were meeting with Lucky Luciano during World War II to ally the U.S. government in what's known as Operation Underworld. And I was like, that's pretty weird.

So I was reading into the history of ONI, and I realized that the guy who was the head of ONI during the time that Teddy Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy was a guy named Richard Wainwright. And Richard Wainwright was head of ONI for a while, and then near the end of 1897, beginning of 1898 — I forget exactly when — he suddenly gets transferred to the *USS Maine* and is second in command of the *USS Maine* when it explodes. And I thought: huh, that's kind of an interesting detail. That's an interesting coincidence. I wonder if there's anything else going on there. And so I started to dig into connections between ONI and Teddy Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge and the *USS Maine*, and here's some of the things I found — and anyone who wants to get even more detail on this, listen to this podcast. It's Episode 160 of my podcast:

That, first off, before Teddy Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Commander Charles H. Davis, Jr. was head of ONI for a while. He was literally the brother-in-law of Henry Cabot Lodge. Then we have another guy who served before Teddy Roosevelt's tenure at the Navy Department as head of ONI, a guy named French Chadwick or F.E. Chadwick. And he then was on the American panel of the Sampson Court of Inquiry that investigated the *Maine* and ruled it had been blown up by a mine.

Then there's, like I said, Richard Wainwright, who was head of ONI when Teddy Roosevelt was at the Navy Department and that happened to be second in command of the *Maine* when it blew up. And then there's the fact that the guy who was the captain of the *USS Maine*, who was a guy named Charles Sigsbee, he was later head of ONI. A few years later, he's head of ONI, and he's head of ONI from 1900 to 1903, which of course coincides with Teddy Roosevelt's presidency somewhat. Then there's the fact that one of the later examinations of the *Maine* that occurred in 1911, known as the Vreeland Board of Inquiry, was chaired by a guy named Charles Vreeland, who just before this was also head of ONI. So these are just some of the connections, and at some point, you have to say: is this all coincidence, or is it possible that ONI might have had a much more significant role in getting this war going than anyone realizes?

WOODS: Yeah, now that — see, that's like a Rothbardian bit of historical digging that you just did there. That's worthy of the master himself.

KILLMER: Well, that's a hell of a compliment.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, well, absolutely deserved. Now, given that I don't do podcast episodes that are as long as, for example, some of the ones that you do and some of the ones you do and some of the Dan Carlin stuff, still, I want to at least give people a sense of what the

precipitating factors were, what the ideological climate was, some interesting details about it, but then now also jump ahead to some of the consequences.

Because you could have seen this going either way, because given the incredible brutality of the campaign against the Philippine insurrection — which happens after the war because when it becomes clear that the United States acquires the Philippines from Cuba but then does not grant it its independence, well, then, they have a fight on their hands, and it's a fight that's carried out in ways that are not, shall we say, edifying for the American student today — you could imagine that there would be enough of an outcry that Americans would say: this is so foreign to our traditions, we've got to get out of this empire-building business just as quickly as we got into it. You could imagine that. Or you could imagine Americans getting accustomed to it and this being the watershed turning point where the U.S. winds up — or I should say the U.S. government — winds up sticking its nose into the affairs of countries all over the world. It seems like it's the second one that wound up happening. So can we say something about the long-term significance of this conflict?

KILLMER: Yeah, I think you're definitely right on that point, that it ended up really being much more of a turning point in American history than a lot of people realize. And the acquisition of the Philippines and a few other outposts far away led to then America butting heads with other imperial powers. Like for example, the American presence in the Philippines and then trying to have more of a presence in some fashion in China leads to ultimately rivalry and war with Japan, which it's hard to imagine America going to war with Japan had it not gotten that foothold in Asia. And similar things in other parts of the world in terms of tensions with other countries, it drastically increases the tendency of the U.S. government to get involved in more and more conflicts in Latin America and the Caribbean than it used to, the so-called Banana Wars of the early 20th century.

And yeah, it just has this effect on the American mind, I think, when you have enough generations go by under this sort of arrangement, and it kind of just normalizes the whole idea of imperialism and the whole idea of what today we would consider America being the world police and all that. As time goes by, it's just normalized in the minds of people who come up knowing nothing differently.

And the American press is a major factor in this. If you look at the newspapers of Hearst and Pulitzer and all that, they bear a huge responsibility, not just for getting this specific war going, but for just treating this as if it's the new normal and doing things like downplaying American atrocities in the Philippines and all that sort of thing. These same outlets who were in some cases literally fabricating Spanish atrocity stories in regard to Cuba in order to create a *casus belli*, they then many of them try to hush up reports that come out of American misbehavior in the Philippines. So yeah, the jingoes won, is the basic story. And this kind of sets the stage then for World War I, World War II, and everything since. And it also in a lot of ways, the way that the U.S. government goes to war becomes in a lot of ways a template based on how it went to war against Spain.

WOODS: Let's also talk about a point you make toward the end of your podcast episode on this, that this war is one in which we see what we might call the American foreign policy playbook being written. That is to say, you start off with some humanitarian claim and then maybe there's some outrage like the sinking of the *Maine* or this or that. It's just one thing leading to another, leading to another, leading inexorably toward war. And part of that

tends to be the escalation of U.S. demands. And again, I don't mean U.S. like we in America, because you and I have no influence over this. I'm talking about the U.S. government.

KILLMER: Right.

WOODS: They inflate the demands. So can you take these parts, these moving parts that join together to create this war, and show how they create a kind of a template for future conflicts?

KILLMER: Yeah, it definitely seems like it's a template and they keep using the same template over and over and over again, because it keeps working. So you know, why bother being creative and coming up with a new playbook? So yeah, you start off with justifications, and the justifications are never the real reasons for the war, the reasons for the elite to want the war.

So it's usually there is a leader or a ruler or a government that is somehow bad to their own people, and again, never mind the fact that a lot of times what they do that's bad might be something that the U.S. government does or has done or something that some of America's close allies do or have done. You turn a blind eye towards that and like, no, this is uniquely evil what this regime or this leader is doing. So you demonize that.

Very often, you also tack onto this that this uniquely scary regime is trying to get or has gotten or is using some sort of special category of no-no weapon. So you know, if you slaughter civilians with incendiary chemicals, that's bad, but if you kill civilians with chemicals that are inhaled, that's somehow like extra-special bad. And so we can sort of paper over if you drop a bomb that kills a bunch of civilians, you can kind of, *Oh well, this is collateral damage. It happens*. But if someone supposedly kills some people with chemical weapons, then like that's a whole next-level separate category. And believe it or not, even with the Spanish in the 1890s, there was an element of this where they kind of implied that the Spanish had used like a special kind of weapon to blow up the *Maine*. There was a little bit of that going on.

And then also another connection to the Office of Naval Intelligence, they were creating — during the months leading up to American war with Spain, the Office of Naval Intelligence was creating reports saying that the Spanish had way more military capabilities than they did and way more aggressive of intentions than they did. And they actually had something where they said that the Spanish were developing some sort of magnetic weapon to use against American battleships, believe it or not.

So you demonize the regime for doing bad things, potentially you accuse it of having gotten or used or threatening to use some sort of special weapons. Meanwhile, there's always ulterior motives of territorial aggrandizement or something like that or resources that you want to control or something like that that's much more cynical that average people would probably not rally behind, and that's usually the real reasons for the war.

So that sets the stage, and then very often, there is some sort of like a spark, some sort of a triggering incident, whether it's the *Maine*, whether it's Pearl Harbor, whether it's the Gulf of Tonkin or whatever. By the way, think about how many of America's wars were precipitated

by a naval incident of some sort. It's almost all of them. It's almost all of them. And maybe there's something to that point as well.

So you get this sparking incident, which very often is something that's very questionable. It's not clear what happened. It's not clear if it was an accident or it's not clear if it may have even in some cases been a false flag. It's something that is very, very sketchy looking, but it's important to the government and their lapdogs in the press that they don't wait for a thorough investigation. They don't wait to really try to figure out what actually happened. No, you jump to conclusions and you immediately start pinning whatever happened on whoever it is that you want to fight, and you rely on the press to be your willing accomplices in doing this.

And then you might run into the situation — which often happens because the United States is a very powerful, wealthy country and has been for a long time. I was thinking about it not too long ago. The last time the United States was David as opposed to Goliath, the last time the U.S. government was the scrappy underdog in a war that I can think of was the War of 1812. Every other war since then, the United States has had massive advantages in size and wealth and all that. So as a result, very often when the U.S. government is gunning for a war, the country in the crosshairs is actually going to try to bend over backwards to accommodate most American demands. And that's where you get to the point where, if you want to still get a war, you just start making more and more demands on them until eventually you demand something that ultimately they simply can't do.

So one way or another, you play this playbook and you get your war. And then of course you may run into the problem of what happens if the war goes on and it becomes blatantly obvious to everybody that the reasons they gave for the war happening are simply not true. Well, then you just change the reason for the war part way through. So when it becomes obvious, for example, that Saddam Hussein doesn't have weapons of mass destruction, then you turn it into: well, we're trying to spread democracy and help school kids in Iraq get a better education and we're doing this and that humanitarian thing. You just kind of change the reason for the war in the middle of it. And then when it's over, you simply kind of sweep it under the rug and say: there's nothing to see here. There's no lessons to learn; let's not focus on this.

So most Americans don't know much about the Spanish-American War. They don't know about the Philippines War. There's an attitude of just sort of sweeping it under the rug because it might make you sad to learn all these dark little bits of American history. It might ruin the patriotic metanarrative that you're normally given in most history outlets in the mainstream.

WOODS: Well, that is going to do it for us for today. I want to urge people to check out your full episode. It's episode number — which one again?

KILLMER: 160.

WOODS: 160 of the *Dangerous History Podcast*, which people can find of course in iTunes, the usual places, but also at ProfCJ.org. That's your website, is that right?

KILLMER: Yes, and you'll also get there if you just type in DangerousHistoryPodcast.com.

WOODS: Oh, you can do that as well. All right, so a couple of different ways, but of course I'll link to the podcast and your site at TomWoods.com/1163 for this episode. I'm not sure, as I think back on it, that I've ever talked about the Spanish-American War on this entire show after 1,163 episodes. You did it after 160, but I'm glad you came on, because that is filling an important gap. And if people go and listen to your whole episode, their minds are going to be super-duper blown and I am sure they are going to be a fan for life of the *Dangerous History Podcast*. Thanks so much for your time.

KILLMER: Thank you very much for having me.