Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

We hear of Guantanamo in the news frequently these days, and probably will for the foreseeable future, but what is its history; why do we own it?

For Europeans, the first mention is by Columbus, who anchored there on his second trip to the New World in April, 1494. He was impressed enough by its geography that he named it *Puerto Grande* (large, or impressive port).

In 1741, while England was at war with Spain, a British admiral, with 61 vessels, took possession of the facility, and retained it for the duration of hostilities. Before and after this the harbor had been the lair of the pirates plying the Windward Passage.

Guantanamo Bay has an area of fifteen square miles and is protected by dust-brown, scrub-covered mountains shielding it from observation or bombardment by sea, and sheltered from the force of hurricanes. It is relatively isolated from the rest of Cuba; the town of Guantanamo is 14 miles inland and the town of Santiago was 40 miles to the west.

The Spanish continued to rule Cuba among growing discontent by the Cubans. A main point of contention was that Spain had not abolished slavery there until the 1880s, and the populace was racked by disease, malnutrition, ignorance and Spanish cruelty. As the nineteenth century wound down, there was an open revolt in progress in Oriente *[eastern]* Province, and because of this, the Spanish had to maintain a 7,000 man army there.

Then came the Spanish-American War. The United States was in an expansionist mode, and because Spain held several pieces of real estate scattered around the world that we coveted, and at the same time did not have a powerful military, she attracted the attention of the United States. Because of the mounting tensions, Spain had dispatched several of her larger warships to the New World, primarily Cuba. This move immediately prompted members of our government to introduce scare tactics to the American public; every large port along the Atlantic coast was thought to be at risk by these Spanish warships. Nervousness and downright fear spread up and down the coast.

In May 1898, the US Navy located the Spanish Navy at anchor in the northern Cuban port of Santiago; a blockade was immediately established. By an urgent cable to the American consul at Kingston, and thence by fast steamer to the coast of Cuba, Secretary of the navy John D. Long sent the American commanding admiral, Winfield Scott Schley, his orders: "Unless it is unsafe for your squadron, Department wishes you to remain off Santiago"; then another phrase, whose consequences would bear heavily on American foreign policy over 110 years later – *"Can not you take possession of Guantanamo, occupy as a coaling station?"*

Exactly six weeks before the thought of occupying Guantanamo Bay had entered the minds of Secretary Long and his Naval War Board – in fact five days before war was even declared on Spain – the Navy Department had ordered the Marine Corps to organize a battalion for service in Cuba. This battalion was to be equipped with the most up-to-date weaponry On June 7, three US warships entered the harbor of Guantanamo and effectually immobilized the one Spanish warship there (she had only 7 rounds of ammunition left on board). With Spanish military presence removed, the American commander was approached by the Cuban guerrilla

leaders, who announced that their forces held all of the western side of the bay, and they said that their forces were at the disposal of the Americans. This was the beginning of a period of cooperation between the United States and the Cuban people.

As the war with Spain wound down, tensions between the Americans and the Cubans intensified, because some of their leaders feared that by getting rid of Spain as an overlord, they might very well come under the rule of the Americans. This feeling was not as strong in Oriente Province, as the US Navy had maintained good relations with the natives.

In February 1903, when Cuba's new government had attained independence, an agreement was reached between American President Theodore Roosevelt and Cuban President Tomas Estrada Palma, leasing to the United States *in perpetuity*, for $2,000 a year in gold, Guantanamo and another site, Bahia Honda, which was abandoned nine years later. (It lies just 50 miles west of Havana on the north coast of Cuba, facing Florida!)

In the spring of 1903, Washington appropriated $100,000 to set up the Guantanamo naval base; a joint Cuban-American commission, sitting aboard the U.S.S. *Olympia*, Dewey's flagship at Manila, laid out the exact boundaries of the U.S. reservation; the Navy formally took over on Dec. 10 1903.

From a strategic point of view, the new acquisition was very useful. With the completion of the Panama Canal it became more so. For Guantanamo Bay flanks the Windward Passage, through which sails more than half the Atlantic traffic entering and leaving the Caribbean.

Marines stationed there were sent into Mexico in 1914, to Haiti in 1915 and to Santo Domingo in 1916; they were in and out of Cuba as governments rose and fell. A Marine brigade stationed there during WWI prevented Germany from becoming involved in the Caribbean.

During WWII, Guantanamo became the focal point in submarine and convoy operations. As the Navy gradually won the submarine war, action slackened, but training forged ahead. Before the war's end, more than 200 warships got final shakedown training at Gitmo.

Until the advent of Castro's revolution, our tranquil tenancy of Guantanamo was taken for granted as a symbol of common interests between Cuba and the United States. Since then, while loudly attacking our presence at Guantanamo and persistently harassing the base, the Cuban Communists always stopped short of that ultimate provocation which might justify reprisal.

Today, when the base is mentioned in the press, it usually has to do with the detainees from the war on terrorism. The purpose of this article is to inform you of how and why we are there, not to attempt to explain what our national policies are.

Historic Bytes
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