

“Remember the *Maine*” and U.S. Freedom of the Press

By Arnold August, March 2012

The eventual U.S. decision to interfere in Cuba’s liberation process on the eve of its victory in 1898 was a complicated one for Washington. This was especially the case taking into account that the president at the time, McKinley (a Republican), was not in favour of going to war. One of the factors that swung the balance in favour of military intervention was the destruction of the USS *Maine* in Havana Harbour on February 15, 1898. Certain elements of the ruling circles and newspaper magnates favoured U.S. intervention.

The historical background of the 1898 intervention consisted of the Spanish reconcentration policy. In 1896, there transpired a desperate last-ditch attempt to avoid the inevitable collapse of Spanish rule. The new Spanish Governor for Cuba, General Weyler, in order “to deprive the insurgents of their support in the countryside ... implemented the most drastic measure of his ‘war-with-war’ policy: a [reconcentration] decree ordering the rural population to evacuate the countryside and relocate to specially designated fortified towns.” All the farm tools and land were destroyed. It is estimated that 300,000 Cubans were pushed into these reconcentration camps. “The policy led eventually to mass deaths. It was designed to [do so].”¹

The attitude in the official U.S. press was “horror.” On a regular basis, dozens of newspapers sharply criticized the Spanish occupation and its effects, such as the reconcentration. This mass media effort was initiated in 1897 and continued until 1898, and even later.²

In 1898, the role of the media consisted in exploiting the explosion of the USS *Maine*. A total of 262 U.S. crewmen and two officers were killed in the blast. It was never clear why the U.S. sent this ship into the harbour, but a show of force to impress the Spanish, as well as the Cuban insurgents, was among the reasons given. The explosion took place at a time when some sections of the U.S. elite, supported by the media monopolies, especially William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer of the *World*, were involved. They took up the task of pressuring a very reluctant President McKinley to go to war with Spain. The goal was to capture Cuba, while blaming Spain for the explosion. Spain vehemently denied it. There was no proof at all that Spain was responsible, while even the most conservative commentators were of the opinion that it was dubious: the U.S. was itself responsible, as this incident provided Washington with a pretext.

At best, the U.S. was to blame because of a defect in the ship's construction. For example, *Newsweek* wrote in 2008 that the explosion was "thought to be the work of a Spanish torpedo, [but was] actually the fault of a badly designed coal bunker."³ Even U.S. historian Jack McCallum, who is rather sympathetic to the U.S. domination of Cuba, wrote about the USS *Maine*: its "mission ... was somewhere between dubious and intentionally inflammatory, [it] blew up under mysterious circumstances, and Congress, the press, and public opinion united to paint McKinley into a corner. America had contemplated absorbing Cuba for most of the nineteenth century."⁴

Despite the lack of any proof that Spain was responsible, on February 17, 1898, the *New York Journal* headlined that the "Destruction of the War Ship *Maine* was the Work of an Enemy." The headlines continued, "Assistant Secretary Roosevelt Convinced the Explosion of the War Ship Was Not an Accident." Another article also on the front page headlined that "Naval Officers Unanimous That the Ship Was Destroyed on Purpose," followed by:

NAVAL OFFICERS THINK THE *MAINE* WAS DESTROYED BY A SPANISH MINE. George Eugene Bryson, the *Journal's* special correspondent at Havana, cables that it is the secret opinion of many Spaniards in the Cuban capital, that the *Maine* was destroyed and 258 men killed by means of marine mine or fixed torpeda [*sic*]. This is the opinion of several American naval authorities. The Spaniards, it is believed, arranged to have the *Maine* anchored over one of the harbor mines.

... The *Journal* offers a reward of \$50,000 for exclusive evidence that will convict the person, persons or government criminally responsible for the [destruction] of the American battleship and the death of ... its crew.

The suspicion that the *Maine* was deliberately blown up grows stronger every hour. Not a single fact to the contrary has been produced.⁵

Newspapers sent hundreds of reporters, artists and photographers to Cuba to recount Spanish atrocities. The correspondents, including such notables as author Stephen Crane and artist Frederick Remington, found little to report on when they arrived. "There is no war," Remington wrote to his boss. "Request to be recalled." Remington's boss, William Randolph Hearst, sent

a cable in reply, "Please remain. You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war." Hearst was true to his word. For weeks after the *Maine* disaster, the *Journal* devoted more than eight pages a day to the story. Not to be outdone, other papers followed Hearst's lead. Hundreds of editorials demanded that the *Maine* and U.S. honour be avenged. Many people in the U.S. agreed. Soon a rallying cry could be heard everywhere — in the papers, on the streets and in the halls of Congress, "Remember the *Maine*! To hell with Spain."^{6, 7}

"Remember the *Maine*" has its origins in "Remember the Alamo" of 1836. Alamo was the Texas garrison composed of 188 men at San Antonio that was crushed by Mexican troops in conflict with U.S. expansion. "The Texas settlers, rallying ... with the cry, 'Remember the Alamo,' defeated the Mexican president. They then set up Texas as an independent government."⁸ "Remember the Alamo" was thus used as the pretext and "helped shape American public opinion" to encourage the people of Texas to support the war against Mexico in 1836 as part of further U.S. annexation.⁹

The U.S. president contributed to the pretext of the USS *Maine*, when, only a month after the explosion and before any serious investigation could have taken place, he issued a message in which he said,

For some time prior to the visit of the *Maine* to Havana Harbor our consular representatives pointed out the advantages to flow from the visit of national ships to the Cuban waters, in accustoming the people to the presence of our flag as the symbol of goodwill and of our ship in the fulfillment of the mission of protection to American interests, even though no immediate need therefore might exist... The ship was destroyed by the explosion of a submarine mine, which caused the partial explosion of two or more of her forward magazines.¹⁰

The role of the U.S. media in initiating this war is of utmost historical importance for Cuba, and for the world, as its first imperialist war. It requires serious reflection on the role of the press. In the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, it is written, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press."¹¹ From this one example of the USS *Maine*, it cannot be denied that the media serve specific interests. The U.S. tradition of fabricating a pretext to go to war and the significant contribution of

the media in this has developed over decades. In fact, *casus belli*, or “an event or action that justifies or allegedly justifies a war or conflict,”¹² is very much part of U.S. foreign policy, irrespective of the political party in power. The main point to underline here from the USS *Maine* incident is that freedom of the press (like democracy itself), irrespective of the system, is not neutral.

¹ Pérez, Louis A., Jr. 1995. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. NY: Oxford University Press, p. 165–67.

² Latin American Studies. n.d. “Spain’s Reconcentrado Policy in Cuba 1896–1897 (The Cuban Holocaust).” At <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/reconcentrado.htm>>.

³ Thomas, Evan. 2008. “A ‘Splendid’ War’s Shameful Side.” Daily Beast (March 24). At <<http://www.newsweek.com/2008/03/24/a-splendid-war-s-shameful-side.print.html>>.

⁴ McCallum, Jack. 2006. *Leonard Wood: Rough Rider, Surgeon, Architect of American Imperialism*. NY and London: New York University Press, p. 56.

⁵ *New York Journal*. 1898. “Destruction of the War Ship *Maine* Was the Work of an Enemy.” (February 17), 5:572.

⁶ Richman, Michael. 1998. “A ‘Splendid Little War’ Built America’s Empire.” Washington Post. (April 8). At <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/1898/WP-9-11-1998.htm>>.

⁷ Small Planet Communications. n.d. “Remember the *Maine*.” At <<http://www.smplanet.com/imperialism/remember.html>>.

⁸ Foster, William Z. 1951. *Foster, Outline of the Political History of the Americas*. NY: International Press, p. 208.

⁹ Hall, Michael R. 2009. “Remember the Alamo.” In Spencer C. Tucker (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Spanish American Wars*, Vol. I. ABC-Clio. Santa Barbara: University of California, p. 541.

¹⁰ Government Printing Office, Document No. 207. 1898. “Message from the President of the United States. Transmitting the report of the naval court of inquiry upon the destruction of the United States Battle Ship *Maine* in Havana Harbor, February 15, 1898, together with the testimony taken before the court. March 28, 1898. Read, referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations, and ordered to be printed.” Washington.

¹¹ Cullop, Floyd G. 1984. *The Constitution of the United States: An Introduction*. NY: Mentor, p. 113.

¹² Merriam-Webster. n.d. At <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/casus%20belli>>.