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The Maine, the Media, and the American Mind: Exploring the Outbreak of the Spanish American War

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In the days following the disaster of February 15, a nation cried out “Remember the *Maine*” and vowed to avenge the tragedy in Havana Harbor against whomever carried it out. This is the narrative surrounding the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine* told throughout the United States today. Modern historiography about the Spanish-American War depicts a vulnerable American public and government falling victim to the sensationalist influence of the media. While this perception of the American public in 1898 is rooted in some truth, it does not tell the full story. The study of newspaper sources both before and after the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana Harbor shows a misrepresentation of the American public by modern scholars. They describe a fervently pro-war population but do not acknowledge the large conservative population in America who remained less outspoken, more rational, and less reactive to the sinking of the *Maine*. Because it oversimplifies the impact of the explosion of the *Maine* and the impact of media on American society, modern historiography ultimately fails to encapsulate the public perception of the Spanish-American war.

A few sources sum up the current field of literature regarding the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Hyman Rickover’s book *How the Battleship Maine Was Destroyed* takes a unique point of view in the historiography of the *Maine* through its explanation of the sociopolitical inner-workings before the war’s outbreak. One of the *Maine*’s biggest impacts on society and government in America was the long, elaborate investigation into the events that transpired that day. Experts agree that the sinking was caused by an explosion from either the inside or outside of the hull, but conflicting testimonies and evidence could not produce a definitive answer. While the investigation trudged along for weeks, “McKinley had an impatient Congress to contend with,” a Congress pushing for a quick and timely decision, but ready and willing to move forward with military action. Sensationalist journalists already began speculating about the potential findings of the investigation, drawing conclusions about the inevitability of

war and telling stories of “how the ‘perfidious’ Spanish had destroyed the *Maine*.”¹

The war and the sinking of the *Maine*, however, trace their roots back to the 1840’s, a time during which British abolitionists saw Cuba as a hub for slave trade and activity, and desired to extend their antislavery influence on the island. The H.M.S. *Romney*, a British vessel set on freeing slaves and curtailing the slave trade through Havana harbor, moored itself in the harbor from 1837-1845. In “The *Maine*, the *Romney*, and the Threads of Conspiracy in Cuba,” Paul Ryer goes into depth about ‘the Year of the Lash’, a year which saw whippings, banishments, executions, and imprisonments of thousands of slaves accused of conspiring against the Spanish government in a slave uprising. Many Spanish officials believed a small group of British government officials to be the ring leaders of a conspiracy centered around agitating Spanish colonial order, all as part of England’s movement for emancipation of Cuban slaves.²

The literature or historiography on this conspiracy, called ‘*La Escalera*,’ is sparse, despite the conspiracy’s fifty years of profound influence in Cuba on race relations, struggles to end slavery, and a struggle for independence.³ The *Romney*, for instance, in addition to being a safe haven for slaves, acted as a symbol of British influence over the anti-slavery movement on the island, and was therefore viewed by Spanish loyalists as a threat to Spanish sovereignty on the island, even up to the birth of the Cuban rebellion in 1895.

While Americans see the *Maine* as an isolated event of the Spanish American War, they miss out on the deep historical context with regard to international diplomacy that took root in Havana Harbor during the previous fifty years. These diplomatic actions produced skepticism among Spanish loyalists in Cuba

¹ Hyman Rickover, *How the Battleship Maine was Destroyed* (Washington, D.C.: Naval History and Heritage Command, 1976), 61-62.

² Paul Ryer, “The *Maine*, the *Romney* and the Threads of Conspiracy in Cuba,” *International Journal of Cuban Studies* 7, no. 2 (2015), 200-211.

³ Ryer. “The *Maine*, the *Romney* and the Threads of Conspiracy in Cuba,” 204.

towards international powers encroaching on their colonial territory. The *Maine*'s trip to Havana Harbor, whether it posed an actual military threat or not, presented a perceived threat to Spanish sovereignty. Because of the United States' potential interests in encouraging the Cuban independence movement, this, to the Spanish, was the history of *Romney* repeating itself.

The historical context of the *Maine*'s sinking, therefore, affected the public reaction to the sinking of the *Maine* in 1898. To the American public, the sinking was an affront to American sovereignty and is believed, according to Rickover, to have produced a wide ripple of patriotism, fervent calls to war, and disdain towards Spain from the American public and government. Ryer explains that it does not matter what factually happened to the ship, because the myths and stories that arose from its sinking were more important in the larger historical context than the facts. The fact that the ship sank at all is what mattered to the Americans, who believed it was perpetrated by the Spanish.

Many Cubans, however, held a different view of both the *Maine* and its explosion. They did not see the explosion as an attack on American sovereignty, but conversely saw the presence of the *Maine* in Havana harbor as an attack on Spanish sovereignty because of their memories of the *Romney* and British intervention in the Cuban slave trade. Many of them, according to Ryer, "believed that the *Maine* was deliberately blown up in Havana's harbor by the Yankees themselves as a pretext for intervention." This conspiracy sounds fabricated and baseless to Americans but is objectively similar to the conspiracies created by Americans about the explosion at the time.⁴ Thus, the historiography of the nineteenth century Cuban independence movement played a significant role in the public's reaction to the *Maine*'s explosion and their perception of the war. Without any historical perspective, Americans failed to see the implications of the *Maine*'s approach into Havana Harbor.

⁴ Ryer, 206.



Figure 1, “Holding the Watch on Him” (March 21, 1898), Source: Charles Bartholomew, *Cartoons of the Spanish-American War* (Minneapolis: Journal Printing Company, 1899), 35.

Nonetheless, the *Maine* certainly provided a potential pretense for American intervention in Cuba. In fact, one political cartoon represents McKinley’s predicament, as described by Rickover, particularly well. Figure 1 depicts the president with a loaded gun, symbolizing his immediate ability to engage in war with Spain, while Uncle Sam “holds the watch” on him, as though provoking him. According to Rickover, as the investigation pushed on and results became more and more contentious, President McKinley could not wait for the completed inquiry before taking steps in preparation for war. Government leaders believed that the navy’s job would be easier if he declared war and set manpower and equipment in place before the Spanish would be able to get gunboats across the Atlantic and fortify Havana Harbor. The complexity of the investigation forced the navy and the American media’s hands in expeditiously preparing for war in Cuba.

Rickover also speaks in depth about the state of Congress and other bureaucratic and naval organizations at the time of the Cuba Libre movement. While Cuba withstood revolts in the past,

American businesses had made increasingly “sizable investments on the island, particularly in sugar” by the time the 1895 rebellion broke out, and the American economy would be threatened just enough by this new rebellion to present a conflict of interest. Furthermore, Rickover speaks about the “new spirit” of romanticism and nostalgia that swept American society at the end of the nineteenth century. It prevailed primarily among the military class who fought in the Civil War, but also with young Americans seeking glory and a sense of masculine identity. New naval developments like Alfred Thayer Mahan’s new writings on sea power, which produced a profound sense of confidence in the newly mighty American navy and its leaders, gave Americans an excitement towards war and a desire for dominance overseas.⁵

The establishment of the Naval War College in 1884 also created a class of senior naval officers with years of experience in wargaming and strategy, often with case studies like Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. This new officer class saw that “the proximity of Cuba gave the United States a great advantage” and believed that “the Americans should welcome an engagement, but not go out of their way to seek one.” Rickover’s book argues that the American government, public, and military leaders held a pre-existing openness to war and in many ways sought an event, like the *Maine*, to launch the United States into a conflict.

Bonnie Miller, in the book *From Liberation to Conquest*, takes a different perspective on the reasons for a call to war in America. She joins an extensive existing field of literature that attributes the outbreak of the Spanish-American War to American media and yellow-journalism, as opposed to Rickover’s description of bureaucracy and government pressure as the war’s primary catalyst. Miller focuses her study of the war on the “sensory and psychological enticements of patriotic media surrounding US actions.”⁶ This book outlines the literary and visual mechanics

⁵ Rickover, *How the Battleship Maine was Destroyed*, 7-8.

⁶ Bonnie M. Miller, *From Liberation to Conquest* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 1.

used by journalists early in the war, and how they created the narrative of an unjust oppression of Cubans.

Imagery, for instance, played a large role in the effectiveness of American media. Devices like the feminization of the Cuba Libre movement depicted the Cuban rebels as damsels in distress waiting for the strong American military, a manly figure, to save the day. According to Miller and the many sensationalist political cartoons of the era, the feminized Cuban “victim” is portrayed as an Anglo-woman, with the Spanish portrayed as a “butcher”.⁷ Depictions of Uncle Sam in American media also appealed to patriots and created a sense of American unity. To Miller, the importance of such devices came from their ability to increase American enlistment numbers and to shift public opinion in favor of going to war.



Figure 2: Only a Question of Time (April 8. 1898), Source: Charles Bartholomew, *Cartoons of the Spanish-American War* (Minneapolis: Journal Printing Company, 1899), 40.

Miller’s book argues that the American call to war in Cuba was driven primarily by a sensationalist movement among journalists. She portrays media in the United States as a

⁷ Miller, *From Liberation to Conquest*, 38.

competition which could often be taken out of hand by newspapers and a deep analysis of political cartoons of the pre-war years supports her claims. Figures 2 and 3, in particular, sternly advocate for war despite their lack of basis or reasoning for going to war. Figure 2 displays a hawkish sense of excitement for war with its illustration of Uncle Sam's cocked fist, the removal of his jacket, and a sinister-looking Spaniard standing over the wreckage of the *Maine*. This cartoon operates on multiple assumptions. Firstly, the United States is eager for and fully prepared to go to war and secondly, the only thing holding the country back is a direct order from the commander-in-chief. The cartoon is an effective propaganda source because it paints all of these assumptions as truths for the American public.

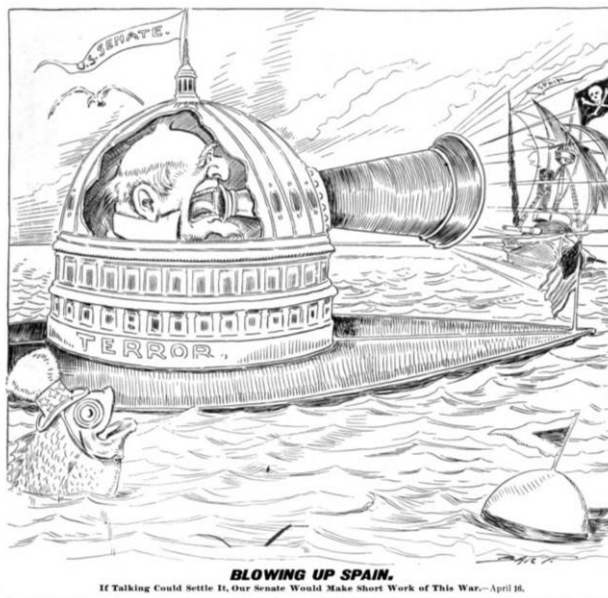


Figure 3, "Blowing up Spain" (April 16, 1898), Source: Charles Bartholomew, *Cartoons of the Spanish-American War* (Minneapolis: Journal Printing Company, 1899), 47.

Figure 3 takes a similar stance towards the war, insinuating that the only thing holding the United States back is a gridlocked and lazy Congress without enough nerve to use military force against the Spanish. The tagline reads “If talking could settle it, our Senate would make short work of this war,” implying that Americans were frustrated by the lack of military action taken against the Spanish. However, one prominent writer who emerged during this time and became a household name with yellow journalism is Joseph Pulitzer. According to Pulitzer’s biography, the very nature of yellow journalism and these sensationalist pieces of literature is to make money, not to reflect the views of the American people.⁸ While the American public was certainly influenced by the media, and still is today, Miller’s argument in *From Liberation to Conquest* is weakened by the fact that pro-war imagery and sensationalism writing from men like Joseph Pulitzer provide no evidence that the American public also believed these sentiments.

George Juergens, the author of Pulitzer’s biography, outlines the reasons for Pulitzer’s rise to fame and the reasons his name is still associated with yellow journalism. After all, Pulitzer, Hearst, and other household names were not the first of their kind to employ sensationalism in their reporting. Juergens argues that they simply did so at the perfect time for this kind of writing to catch the eye of the public on a wide scale. “Men who purchased their papers each morning at a station newsstand were more likely than subscribers to be influenced by a front page either startling, or shocking, or bright.”⁹ With a growing urban population and an intriguing, yet still mysterious, backdrop of the *Maine*, Cuba Libre, and conflict with the Spanish, Pulitzer and other writers jumped at the opportunity to compete for daily media dominance through bold, but still baseless, political rhetoric in favor of war.

These media tactics were effective, but do not tell the full story. When it comes to the idea of ‘jingoism’, or extreme

⁸ George Juergens, *Joseph Pulitzer and the New York World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 48.

⁹ Juergens, 48.

patriotism in the media, Juergens provides an explanation to why the media seemed so overwhelmingly in favor of war when this was not necessarily the case in all of America. Pulitzer, while described as “scholarly and judicious”, could also “not afford the luxury of contradicting his audience.” In the United States, there were two sides to the war debate, but the path of ‘jingoism’ provided less resistance to journalists like Pulitzer and Hearst, giving them an avenue to argue in favor of war and retribution for the sinking of the Maine.¹⁰

With the idea of vulnerability of the American public in mind, Kristin Hoganson writes *Fighting for American Manhood*. This book takes an opposing view to Miller’s argument that the media was responsible for the call to war after the sinking of the *Maine*. Hoganson instead argues that the shift away from American neutrality and towards a more aggressive foreign policy was not driven by journalism, but by the American post-Civil-war male identity.¹¹ The Civil War and the tales of its heroics created a romanticized view of American manhood. Men saw war as a rite of passage for their generation and ignored the destructive loss of life and unity that war brings.

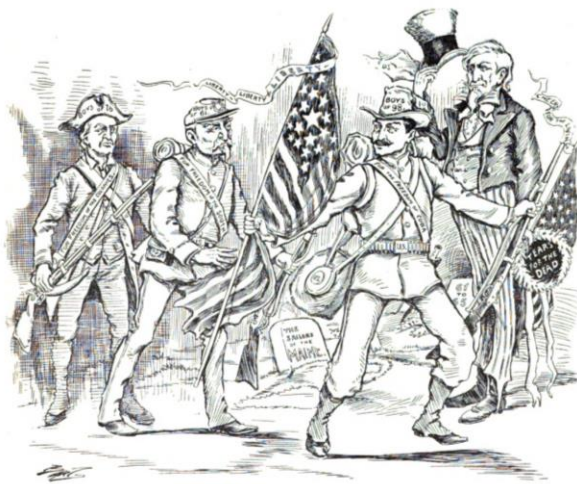
A shift in the industrial revolution towards a more white-collar workforce also changed the idea of how Americans viewed the new generation of men. A male population lacking any experience at war combined with decreased demand for manual labor and an increase in white collar jobs, American society struggled with its masculine identity and sought out a chivalric pursuit outside of America’s borders to revive this lost identity. Americans sought to “forge a new generation of martial heroes.”¹² According to Hoganson, public support for the war was more so a

¹⁰ Juergens, *Joseph Pulitzer and the New York World*, 212.

¹¹ ‘Post Civil War Male Identity’ refers to American men’s views of war as a central rite of passage into manhood and a prime opportunity to display their bravery and chivalry. Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 202.

¹² Hoganson, 202.

product of romanticized memories of the Civil War and a fractured masculine identity than a product of media influence.



THE BOYS OF '76 AND '61 PASS ON "OLD GLORY" TO THE BOYS OF '98.
May 30.

Figure 4, “The Boys of ‘76 and ‘61 Pass on “Old Glory” to the Boys of ‘98” (May 30, 1898), Source: Charles Bartholomew, *Cartoons of the Spanish-American War* (Minneapolis: Journal Printing Company, 1899), 79.

To be sure, Hoganson does acknowledge American media as one of the mechanisms perpetuating this masculine crisis. Much like the imagery Miller describes in *From Liberation to Conquest*, journalists depicted Cuba as a damsel in distress through their illustrations of the Cubans as Anglo-women and Americans as a strong warrior. This imagery capitalized on the “chivalric standards” that men sought to revive, as they saw the war in Cuba as a perfect opportunity for gallantry and for the Spanish to be held accountable for their lack of honor. In fact, Figure 4 accurately depicts this same idea and its prevalence throughout American history. In the cartoon, men who are labeled as “the boys of ‘76” and “the boys of ‘61”, named after the fighters of the American

Revolution and Civil War, pass along an American flag to the “boys of ‘98.” This cartoon not only provides evidence for Hoganson’s argument, but also identifies the idea that these “chivalric standards” are not new to American men. However, even with the influence of media on the American public, Hoganson still believes that America’s struggling masculine identity was the main factor that pushed the United States to war.

One glaring weakness of Spanish-American War historiography, especially when it comes to the study of pre-war American society, is exploration of the anti-war argument. Piero Gleijeses, in his article “1898: The Opposition to the Spanish-American War”, provides a sense of what currently exists about anti-war sentiments within both the media and the American public. A few Chicago newspapers give their perspective on the matter. The *Chicago Chronicle* argues that although the American public operates under the perception that the Spanish forces are weak and undisciplined, the same thing was said about the South during the American Civil War. Others argue that the war, from a utilitarian perspective, is not worth the money and manpower.¹³

While sensationalist journalists depicted a supportive attitude towards the war across America, Gleijeses describes anti-war papers as “less sanguine.” He explains that they “had little confidence in the rebels” and believed the rebels “‘avoid all encounters’ with Spanish troops, and ‘confine their operations to the paralysis of all agricultural industry and the dynamiting of trains.’”¹⁴ Gleijeses brings an important idea to mind: not everyone in the nation believed that war with Spain in Cuba would be over quickly or without a significant toll on human life. In fact, many major news sources advocated against the war, warning that while an invasion of Cuba seems one-sided, the reality of the situation would naturally be met with more resistance than expected. Anti-war sources at the time brought up points of friction like the rough

¹³ Piero Gleijeses, “1898: The Opposition to the Spanish-American War,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35, no. 4 (2003) 695, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable>

¹⁴ Gleijeses, “1898: The Opposition to the Spanish-American War,” 695.

terrain, inexperience of American troops, and even yellow fever in order to diffuse the claims that this war would be quick and one-sided.

The American news media at the time, however, suggests that one event in particular inspired a wave of changing and polarizing opinions. The outbreak of the Spanish-American War sees a distinct pivot point with the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana Harbor and the examination of primary sources like newspapers, correspondence, and cartoons both before and after the event suggest that a very dramatic shift occurred that day.

One example of this shift is a pair of articles published by the *Baltimore Sun* on different dates. The first, published on January 17, 1898, a month prior to the tragedy in Havana Harbor, is entitled “The Cuban Situation” and describes a peaceful situation in Cuba while the North Atlantic squadron departs towards “southern drill grounds” for routine operations. This article provides a uniquely pacifist approach to the Cuban independence movement compared to other media sources, but there are still a few conditional statements. For example, intervention is not justified in Cuba “until it has been proved that Spain is unable to restore peace or to conquer her rebellious subjects” and that Consul-General Lee has been given “broad discretion” to send a warship to Havana in the event that a situation may “justify defensive action.”¹⁵ According to this article, the *Baltimore Sun* is not concerned with the war in Cuba, but still gives criteria for which war would be acceptable.

The second article was published on February 28, 1898, two weeks after the tragic sinking of the *Maine* in Havana Harbor. This article takes on a vastly different tone. “War of Heinous Kind” emphasizes the severity of war against Spain and acknowledges the massive loss of life that it would bring. “War is hell,” proclaims Baltimore Rev. J. Woods Elliot, “But there is war of the most heinous kind, wherein 85,000 people are dying by the

¹⁵ “The Cuban Situation,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 17, 1898, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpbaltimoresun>

slow torture of starvation, rapine and murder, and we, as a nation, calmly stand by and pray that our people will not get excited.”¹⁶ To be sure, the article does not explicitly advocate for war, but it does provide a very thin line over which the United States is willing to cross at a moment’s notice. The sinking of the *Maine*, while it did not necessarily transform the *Baltimore Sun* into an advocate for war or change its initial pretenses for which it believed war would be justified, evidently shifted its tone to hostile and defensive. Although the *Baltimore Sun* is an anti-war newspaper, it was still subject to the shock in American society propagated by the *Maine*’s sinking.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* is also a good example of this pivot. An article entitled “Our Country at the Mercy of a Foreign Foe” in January of 1898 outlines a conservative approach to America’s foreign policy, especially when it comes to naval operations. The article speaks about ‘if’ rather than ‘when’ the United States would go to war against Spain and assumed that up-and-coming naval superpowers like Germany and Japan were anti-American and would jump at the opportunity to use the Cuban conflict as a pretext for encroaching on American territory. All in all, the article takes a pessimistic and unpatriotic approach to US foreign involvement. It also suggests a lack of confidence of the American public in its military strength.¹⁷

For evidence on this stance, the *Chicago Tribune* cites the relative size and armament of the United States Navy against the aforementioned powers. The US is criticized for having a fleet that is not only small in numbers but also lacking the size and firepower necessary to be a threat outside its own waters. While the United States excels in coastal defense by employing small torpedo boats and cruisers, it lacks a major battleship class that can rival most of the world’s other naval superpowers.

¹⁶ “War of Heinous Kind,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 28, 1898, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpbaltimoresun>

¹⁷ “Our Country at the Mercy of a Foreign Foe,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 2, 1898, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune>

Another significant shift brought by the *Maine*'s sinking on February 15, 1898 is the polarization of American media. The media experienced a particularly strong shift in its rhetoric from January into February of that year. One article, written less than two weeks after the *Maine*'s sinking, is entitled "If War Should Come" and once again paints the Cuban conflict as a purely naval one. It suggests that only two military actions are necessary in defeating Spain in the war against the Cuban rebels. A blockade of Spanish ships, with their troops and provisions unable to pass through to the island, would paralyze the Spanish ground forces and render them ineffective on land. For this approach, the author takes a surprisingly optimistic stance in favor of the navy's ability to fare against the Spanish navy. The article also cites past battles by Cuban rebels, saying that even without proper weapons, they are able to hold their own against the Spaniards:

"If without such munitions and with the immense risk and difficulties they incur in securing scanty supplies from the feeble filibustering expeditions [the Cuban rebels] not only hold their own against Spain but actually imprison the Spaniards in their forts and cities. It is obvious that possessing war appliances... they will exterminate all the Spanish columns daring to leave their fortified places."¹⁸

This author believes that the only other missing piece in a war with Spain would be the armament of the Cuban rebels.

Religious Americans across the nation also became bolder and more patriotic after the sinking of the *Maine*. Reverend R. A. White cites sermons from four Chicago ministers in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*: W. E. Danforth, P. S. Henson, J. H. Boyd, and J. Q. A. Henry. Each of these men ultimately took a stance towards peace and the protection of human lives in the Cuban independence movement, both of which were consistent with traditional Christian beliefs. All four men, however, also speak about fervent patriotism as a way to achieve that peace and to

¹⁸ "If War Should Come," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 26, 1898, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune>

mourn the losses of American lives. Rev. J. H. Boyd, for instance, says that “there are many of us who feel that the loss of that splendid ship and of those brave sailors was the price America and Americans have been called upon to pay for the procrastinating policy of those at the head of our nation, who have failed to deal honestly and courageously on behalf of an oppressed people.”¹⁹ Even within American religious circles, there were men and women who viewed the sinking of the *Maine* as a non-negotiable and irrefutable call to war. While still not all Americans advocated strongly towards war, a strong majority became more passionate towards the subject, less indifferent towards the war, and more patriotic, as evidenced by both the statements of these ministers and the sentiments of the *Chicago Tribune* after the *Maine*’s sinking. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, this event had a polarizing effect on the pre-existing beliefs of American society, forcing Americans to abandon their skepticisms and indulge their patriotism.

The *Washington Post* presents a different twist to this argument about the polarization of American media after the *Maine*’s sinking. The *Post* is best characterized at the turn of the century as a conservative newspaper which focuses its articles on events and speeches, while generally avoiding editorials altogether. “As the Matter Stands in Cuba,” an article written on January 15, 1898, makes no reference to war as a possible option in Cuba, stating that Spanish outbreaks in Cuba “are directed against autonomy and not against either Spain or the United States.”²⁰ The *Washington Post* takes a strictly neutral stance towards the Cuban conflict.

The *Washington Post* in the weeks following the sinking of the *Maine*, however, takes one of the most fervent anti-war stances out of any news source examined, being very skeptical about the true cause of the tragedy and refusing to make any definitive

¹⁹ “Man and the Nation,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 21, 1898, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune>

²⁰ “As the Matter Stands in Cuba,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 1898, accessed November 16, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpwashingtonpost>

claims. In this way, the sinking of the *Maine* actually had a very minimal effect on the *Washington Post*'s coverage of the war.

“Spirit of American Press,” a *Washington Post* article from February 25, not only criticizes sensationalist, or ‘jingoist’, newspapers in America for their quick rush to judgment about the explosion in Havana harbor, but it also claims that these kinds of newspapers fail to truly represent the sentiments of the American public. The subtitle reads “Representative Newspapers Deprecate Jingoism and Urge the Public to be Calm,” insinuating that the only truly “representative” newspapers at the time were ones like the *Baltimore Sun*, *Richmond Times*, and *Boston Herald*, who urged the public to patiently await results of the *Maine* investigation and remain impartial in the meantime. These sources also share certain similarities when it comes to their conservatism.

Firstly, they all advocate for the public to reserve judgment and threats until the investigation is complete. Many conservative papers accuse the ‘yellow’ journalists of spreading fake stories about the events which took place on February 15. Called a “war scare” by the *New York Tribune* and the product of “cranks, fanatics, agitators, and alarmists” by the *Kansas City Journal*, the insinuation by sensationalist media that the sinking of the *Maine* is essentially a call to war is seen as ludicrous to conservative media.²¹ One claim by the *Indianapolis News* effectively sums up their criticism and attempts to diffuse the sensational arguments floating around: “Belligerent feelings evoked by the loss of the *Maine* have almost disappointed. Freak politicians like Senator Mason are still breathing forth threatenings and slaughter. Freak newspapers still pretend to be excited... A few newspapers have been doing their best to create a demand for war. They have set about this task by lying on a large scale.”²² This *Washington Post* article is so intriguing because it challenges the popular historiographical norm that the *Maine* disaster is the turning point in the public perception of the war by praising the patience and

²¹ “Spirit of American Press.” *The Washington Post*, February 25, 1898, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpwashingtonpost>

²² “Spirit of American Press.”

rationality of the American people in the wake of the sinking of the Maine. It depicts a society in which the sensationalist media represents a minority of the population but a strong majority of the public voice.

Furthermore, most sources also evoke a doubt as to whether or not war will come at all as a result of this catastrophic event. Sources like the *New York Tribune* describe war as ill-advised, arguing that the US Navy is not prepared to fight a far superior Spanish Navy and that the war would be a “wild and desperate scramble to do in a day what should have been done years ago.”²³ These sources represent a major conflict with modern historiography that suggests that the Spanish-American war is a product of overwhelming public support, sensationalist media, and romanticism of the Civil War. The newspapers of the time, however, suggest that the US government held far less support from the public than anticipated, and this illusion was nothing more than an attempt by yellow journalists to make more money.

The confusion between media sensationalism and the illusion of public support calls to mind a popular anecdote cited throughout American history. The credibility of the anecdote is heavily debated but produces the same effect either way. When the journalist William Randolph Hearst employed Frederic Remington, a famous painter and sculptor known for his scenes of the American West, to send sketches of the 1896 rebellion in Cuba back to him, Remington reported back that everything was quiet, saying “There will be no war. I wish to return.” Hearst is claimed to have replied “Please remain. You furnish the pictures, and I’ll furnish the war.”²⁴ This famous sentence exists today as a catch-all phrase to illustrate the many shortcomings of the media by claiming that much of their purpose is to sell stories, not to sell the truth. True or not, this quote lays a groundwork for plenty of media skepticism in the Spanish-American war. It also supports the claim

²³ “Spirit of American Press.”

²⁴ Joseph W. Campbell, *Getting it Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010), 9.

that the narrative of widespread public support for the Spanish-American War that Miller, Hoganson, and Rickover describe is simply an illusion. Journalists like Pulitzer and Hearst, seeking money through their sensationalist rhetoric, were the creators of this illusion of public support.

To examine this bias, John Maxwell Hamilton, Renita Coleman, Bettye Grable, and Jaci Cole conducted a quantitative study on the prevalence of certain topics of the Cuban conflict in the American media in “An Enabling Environment.” They also investigate the extent to which conservative, ‘yellow’, and mixed news sources are either pro-Spain or pro-Cuba. This spectrum from ‘yellow’ to ‘non yellow’ with mixed news sources in between, qualitatively defines how sensationalist a newspaper source was, with ‘yellow’ being the highest on the scale. The study examines 789 randomly selected articles from 10 different news sources, determining which biases are prevalent throughout different types of newspapers.

The study proves its hypothesis that every type of newspaper presented stories sympathetic to Cuba and against Spain, that these newspapers were all biased towards Cuba and against Spain, and that each of the newspapers gave significant coverage to Cuba.²⁵ Most surprisingly, as evidenced in Table 1, conservative newspapers ran more than double the number of stories about the war in Cuba as the yellow sources, and roughly 50 percent more than mixed sources. From those stories, however, yellow sources produced 23.8 percent more stories in support of Cuba and produced nearly the same number of stories in support of Spain. While yellow sources produced a lesser quantity of stories, they proved to be much more densely opinionated when it came to furnishing support for or against the war.

²⁵ John Maxwell Hamilton, Renita Coleman, Bettye Grable, Jaci Cole, “An Enabling Environment,” *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006), 86.

Table 1: Percentage of Stories with Statements Reflecting Specific Frames

Frame	All Types (%)	Conservative (%)	Yellow (%)	Mixed (%)
Spanish Internal Politics	44.0	42.4	38.9	50.0
US Politics & Diplomacy	30.7	32.5	25.2	30.4
Cuban Independence	19.4	17.3	27.7	18.7
Spanish Conflict	14.8	13.6	16.0	16.5
Cuban Internal Politics	13.0	10.1	8.5	21.2
Cuban Conflict	11.8	8.3	19.1	14.3
Spanish Humanitarian Abuses	11.8	3.7	38.2	12.1
International Politics	6.1	2.3	21.4	0.5
US Economic Interests	2.8	2.5	3.1	3.1
Cuban Humanitarian Abuses	0.5	0.2	0.8	0.9
Spanish Independence	0.3	0.5	0	0

Source: John Maxwell Hamilton, Renita Coleman, Bettye Grable, and Jaci Cole, "An Enabling Environment" in *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 78–93, Table 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700500450368>.

Table 2: Frequencies and Average per day of Stories About Cuba, Percentages of Pro-Cuba Valence and Pro-Spain Valence Stories

Newspaper	Total No. of Stories	Average no. of Stories Per Day	Pro-Cuba (%)	Pro-Spain (%)
Conservative			14.7	6.0
Washington Post	112	8.0		
Los Angeles Times	131	9.4		
Seattle Post-Intelligencer	102	8.6		
New York Times	89	6.4		
Mixed			26.8	5.0
Atlanta Constitution	88	6.2		
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	48	3.5		
Chicago Tribune	88	6.3		
Yellow			38.5	6.2
Denver Post	47	3.4		
New York World	21	1.5		
New York Journal	63	4.5		

Source: John Maxwell Hamilton, Renita Coleman, Bettye Grable, and Jaci Cole, “An Enabling Environment” in *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 78–93, Table 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700500450368>.

While Table 2 answers the extent to which each of these sources may be biased or opinionated, Table 1 represents the specific topics each news source chose to speak more about than others. This table emphasizes two major points of focus in all of America’s newspapers: Spanish internal politics and US politics and diplomacy. Conservative, yellow, and mixed newspapers all focus on these two political mechanisms fairly equally. The yellow

newspapers, however, speak about the issues of Spanish humanitarian abuses, international politics, and Cuban military conflict more than twice as frequently as any other newspapers. This means that yellow journalists are more concerned with outlining the positives of Cuban rebellion, while exposing the negatives of Spanish sovereignty in Cuba. Yellow sources are bound to be more pro-war because of their stronger support for Cuba and disdain for Spanish rule than any conservative news sources.

All in all, American historiography and the current field of literature describes a vulnerable American public and government falling victim to the sensationalist influence of the media. Authors like Bonnie Miller describe a creative class of journalists who fabricate a narrative of Spanish aggression through their use of imagery like the evil Spaniard, the Cuban damsel in distress, or Uncle Sam's loaded rifle and ticking clock for war.

Hyman Rickover also tells a story about a class of senior military leaders and government officials with significant personal interests and eagerness in going to war against Spain. The American economy and the future of its young navy saw an opportunity for growth and expansion and gave many Americans a strong desire to push for Cuban independence and dominate the Spanish military. With opportunity, however, also came vulnerability. Rickover and Hoganson both describe an American public with such a romanticized view towards war and need for a collective masculine identity, both of which are the products of the Civil War, that war seemed new and exciting.

Thus, current literature on the Spanish-American War provides proof that the *Maine*'s sinking, romanticism of the Civil War, a struggling masculine identity, and sensationalist media in 1898 played a role in increasing public support for the war. After all, the breaking of more than a hundred years of American neutrality required not only the support of government and senior military leaders, but also the public and the media, as these are the mechanisms which ultimately influence politics in America.

Spanish-American War era newspapers, however, do not fully support this historiographical narrative. For instance, the *Washington Post* criticizes sensationalist, or ‘jingoist’, newspapers in America for their quick rush to judgment about the explosion in Havana harbor. It claimed that these newspapers fail to truly represent the sentiments of the American public. Dozens of mainstream newspapers around the country advocated against intervention, while remaining calm about the catastrophe until the investigation was completed. They suggested the presence of a less well-known, conservative population in America who remained less outspoken, more rational, and less reactive to the sinking of the *Maine* than their ‘jingoist’ counterparts.

To be sure, sources like the *Chicago Tribune* and *Baltimore Sun* do see a considerable shift in their tone after the tragedy in Havana Harbor. Media sources like these were emboldened by the Maine’s unifying, ‘rally ‘round the flag’ effect. The one thing that both modern historiography and newspapers at the time agree on is that the sinking of the *Maine* changed the way many Americans thought about the war. The *Maine*, however, did not turn Americans from anti-war into pro-war overnight, but made their pre-existing opinions more bold. Neutral sources like the *Washington Post* would become even more neutral and push away from war, while yellow sources like the *New York Journal* would become even more pro-war.

Furthermore, the study in “An Enabling Environment” by Hamilton emphasizes that it is important to not only acknowledge “what” each newspaper is saying, but also “how” they are making these points. For example, while conservative newspapers produced more articles per week, sensationalist newspapers tended to be considerably more densely opinionated with words and phrases in support of Cuba and against Spain.

The current historiography of the Spanish-American War favors the narrative of a gullible American public and government exploited by the sensationalist influence of the media. While this perception of the American public in 1898 is rooted in some truth, it does not tell the full story. The study of newspaper sources both

before and after the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana Harbor shows a misrepresentation of the American public by modern scholars. They describe a 'jingoist,' pro-war population but do not account for the large conservative population of Americans who were less outspoken and reactive to the sinking of the *Maine*. Modern historiography therefore fails to encapsulate the broader public perception of the Spanish-American war through its oversimplification of the impact of the *Maine*'s explosion in Havana Harbor.