

**Bonnie M. Miller.** *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of the Spanish-American War of 1898.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. xv + 324 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-924-9; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-905-8.

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## Cultural Manifestations of the Spanish-American War by America's Media Makers

On February 15, 1898, the USS *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor. Ordered to Cuba by President William McKinley to protect American interests and citizens in the face of growing social unrest between Spanish colonizers and Cuban nationalists, the deaths of 226 American sailors aboard the *Maine* galvanized popular American opinion regarding the military involvement of U.S. armed forces to expel the Spanish from its colonial possessions in the Western Hemisphere. Traditional accounts regarding U.S. participation in the Spanish-American War place historical agency at the doorsteps of journalists with sensationalist or “yellow” press leanings, such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Bonnie M. Miller (assistant professor of American studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston), however, challenges the established “yellow” press paradigm by arguing that neither Hearst nor Pulitzer, or the activities of other sensationalist journalists of the era, had the power to force President McKinley into war in 1898. The manifestation of the media’s power, however, influenced American public opinion during the late nineteenth century through its visual depictions of race, gender, and national identity ideals for a fledgling mass market of cultural consumers within the United States hungry for direction concerning America’s global presence.

Miller does, however, frame much of her analysis on “media makers” of the era, including editors, cartoonists, advertisers, playwrights, and others. Although there is discussion of the activities of Hearst and Pulitzer,

Miller is careful to include a wide array of newspapers and periodicals aside from the *New York Journal* and *New York World*. Some readers of this monograph might be surprised to learn that “many newspapers repeatedly primed readers to be wary of yellow press accounts” when forming opinions of national and global events (p. 11). Throughout her work, Miller repeatedly returns to a central tenet of her project: the influence of the white media on the construction of popular American opinion regarding intervention in Cuba and the consequences of imperialism for the United States and other parts of the world between 1898 and 1899.

*From Liberation to Conquest* approaches the events leading up to the Spanish-American War and its aftermath chronologically. The first two chapters examine the build-up to this conflict. Miller stresses that the “Cuba Libre” (Free Cuba) sentiment was abundant in American political and popular culture, which created a national environment that castigated Spanish treatment of Cuba under the guise of an emerging American moral righteousness. Miller asserts that Americans were exposed to a “much broader cultural framework” regarding the *Maine* explosion and, therefore, were not solely influenced by the depictions found in sensationalist newspapers (p. 56). Chapters 3, 4, and 5 cover the events of the Spanish-American War. Miller emphasizes the commercialization of war, the triumphalist imagery of the American media in portraying decisive military engagements, the emerging national unification paradigm for

the United States regarding the “healing of wounds” in the postbellum era between the North and South, and the gradual decline of the media’s depictions of war as heroic and manly. Collectively, these three chapters provide a cogent overview of the war years and the evolution of American thought processes regarding war and imperialism. The final two chapters discuss the postwar situation regarding the acquisition of overseas territories, the national debate concerning American colonial possessions, tensions (both domestic and international) arising from the Filipino insurrection, and the commercialization of leisure and mass entertainment in the wake of the Philippine-American War. Miller includes in chapter 6 an elaborate analysis of race through American political cartoons in prominent newspapers as well as the perceived “Americanization” of “savage” peoples abroad, especially in the Philippines. Of interest to some readers, chapter 7 incorporates the often overlooked 1899 Greater American Exposition and its influence, both culturally and politically, on the mindset of Americans regarding the display of Hawaiians, Cubans, and Filipinos as imperial bounty.

Miller’s book finds common cause with David Brody’s *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism and Imperialism in the Philippines* (2010) because both texts examine the role and influence of American mass media on ideas associated with American imperialism, especially in the wake of the Spanish-American War. In addition, both authors rely heavily on visual imagery in order to situate readers within the cultural milieu of the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Where these scholars differ, however, concerns their placement of emphasis; Brody’s work, for the most part, geographically concentrates on the Philippines as an American possession and incorporates a myriad of visual mediums to dissect American empire while Miller’s focus, primarily, is on the influence of America’s white media makers and the consequences these individuals had on creating a cultural environment within the

United States that ebbed and flowed when it came to the issue of empire.

There are numerous strengths to *From Liberation to Conquest*. Miller expertly orients her readers by providing an overview, both culturally and historiographically, of this era. The inclusion of over eighty images, primarily newspaper cartoons and photographs, assists in demonstrating Miller’s overall assertions that America’s media makers helped to manufacture popular consent for imperial activities of the nation in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Spanish- American War. A useful appendix lists Miller’s newspaper and periodical sources as well as their daily circulation numbers, stance on the war, political party affiliation, and imperial-colonial alignment. Finally, Miller’s notes, many with extended discussion and analysis, provide readers with a scholarly gateway for further exploration of the topic examined.

Miller writes that she centers her attention primarily “on media that white Americans produced for broad consumption” (p. 3). Although she elaborates on the reason for doing so in an extended note and cites an article she wrote for the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* in 2000 that explored the Spanish press and its treatment of the Spanish-American War, some readers might be disappointed that she did not do more to incorporate non-white perspectives of important events evaluated in this text. Others may take issue that this monograph has no bibliography or official concluding chapter but rather a chapter that uses three postwar moments as a means of wrap-up. Aside from these minor grievances, *From Liberation to Conquest* offers readers a new take on the role of American media makers during the late nineteenth century and their agency regarding the construction of American cultural norms. Miller’s prose is fluid and without repetition. History faculty teaching upper-division undergraduate courses or graduate reading seminars on American foreign relations, culture, or imperialism will find this tome useful.

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