

The press and US militarism -- a lesson from history

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In light of yesterday's bombing attacks on the Sudan and Afghanistan, an examination is in order of the role of the US news media, which, as if on cue, prepared public opinion in advance for the raids.

Within hours of the bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and other prominent voices in the American news media began calling for military retaliation.

Before any serious investigation had even begun editorials appeared in major newspapers suggesting the Clinton administration consider taking action against a number of Middle Eastern countries. Potential targets included traditional bogeymen such as Iran, Iraq and Libya. Some added Syria and Islamic fundamentalist groups based in Egypt, Afghanistan and Yemen for good measure.

The blood lust of the press was predictable and follows a well trodden path. In the history of United States, incidents such as the embassy bombings have been used time and again as the pretext for military aggression to achieve one or another aim of the ruling class. More often than not such events turn out to have either been willfully provoked or fabricated out of whole cloth. This latest incident is not the first time the American news media has functioned as little more than an arm of US military policy.

In this regard it is well worth considering an extremely relevant historical precedent. 1998 marks one-hundred years since the explosion aboard the Battleship Maine in Havana harbor that triggered the Spanish-American War.

The role of the American press, in particular William Randolph Hearst's *New York Herald*, in inciting pro-war hysteria is well known. Through one-sided and sensational reporting the newspaper barons provided a popular gloss to a fight for colonial plunder, the seizure of Cuba, the Philippines and other territories from the Spaniards.

Little new has been added in the last century to the methods employed by the big business press. If anything the news media is even cruder today in its appeals to chauvinism, its distortion of fact and its resort to outright lies.

The Spanish-American War was a watershed event. It was the first eruption of militarism on the part of the United States, which until that time had rested content with consolidating its internal position, and marked the emergence of America as a world power.

When the Battleship Maine arrived in Havana, Cuba on January 25 1898, ostensibly as a gesture of goodwill, relations between Spain and the United States were already under severe strain.

With the closing of the American frontier, capital looked for new areas of investment. Arriving late on the scene as a world power the US could only acquire new territory at the expense of the older,

established European states.

Cuba, only 90 miles from the Florida coast, had long been coveted by the Americans. Attempts by US mercenaries to foment rebellion against the Spanish dated back to before the civil war. The Southern plantation owners financed several such expeditions with the hopes of expanding their slave empire.

In the years after the civil war the possession of Cuba came to be seen as strategically desirable. As plans went forward for the construction of a canal across Central America, control of Cuba came to be seen as even more necessary.

Likewise the growing importance of trade with Asia raised the necessity for the United States to establish a base in the western Pacific. Control of the Philippines would put the Americans in a position to stake their claim the rich markets of China and southeast Asia.

US lust for Cuba was hardly a secret. A few years before the Maine's visit to Cuba Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts had declared, 'England has studded the Atlantic seaboard with strong places which are a standing menace to our Atlantic seaboard. We should have among those islands at least one strong naval station, and when the Nicaragua canal is built the island of Cuba...will become to us a necessity.'

Another Senator, Shelby M. Cullom, was even more blunt in expressing the imperialist ambitions of the American big business. He said, 'It is time someone woke up and realized the necessity of annexing some property. We want all this northern hemisphere.'

Spain, weakened by internal decay and the loss of most of her American colonies was hardly in a position to fight the United States. The only problem that remained for big business was how to convince a public still imbued with the ideals of the American Revolution and the civil war against slavery that the forcible annexation of Spanish colonies squared with democratic principles.

The fortuitous outbreak of popular rebellions in Cuba and Philippines against Spanish rule provided the Americans with a plausible justification for military intervention. William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer and other publishers gave great play to the uprising in Cuba in order to foment hostility toward Spain. The successes of the insurrectionists and alleged atrocities on the part of the Spaniards were exaggerated out of all proportion in order to build sympathy for US military intervention.

In one incident Hearst sent the noted artist Frederic Remington to Cuba to provide sketches for American newspaper readers of the revolution. When the disillusioned Remington wired Hearst 'Everything quiet. No trouble here. There will be no war. I wish to return.' Hearst shot back the notorious reply, 'Please remain. You

furnish the pictures and I will furnish the war.'

By 1897 large sections of big business were clamoring for war. In October 1897 Theodore Roosevelt, at that time Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the administration of President William McKinley, sent a wire to American Admiral George Dewey in the far east advising him to prepare for an attack on the Spanish fleet in the Philippines pending developments in Cuba.

On the pretext of protecting American citizens, in fact there was no such threat, the President ordered the Battleship Maine to Key West, Florida, where it could sail to Cuba at a moments notice. When a group of conservative Spaniards attacked a Havana newspaper office on January 12 McKinley provocatively sent the Maine to Havana.

The Spanish, bending over backwards to avert war, accepted US explanations that the visit of the powerful warship was a 'courtesy call.' The ship's officers were treated with all due respect.

Then, on February 15, just as the Maine prepared to leave Havana, a huge explosion tore apart the ship. Two officers and 266 enlisted men out of the 354-man crew died. The Spanish helped rescue the survivors and expressed shock at the tragedy.

To this day no one knows for sure what caused the explosion. The Spanish certainly had no motive for provoking a war given the huge military and industrial preponderance of the United States.

Without one shred of evidence the American press assumed the Spanish were to blame. When Hearst heard the news of the explosion he declared, 'This means war.' The *New York Journal* carried a headline reading, 'The War Ship Maine Was Split In Two By An Enemy's Secret Infernal Machine.' The front page carried a drawing of the ship riding atop mines and showed wires leading to a Spanish fort guarding the harbor.

A commission hastily assembled by the United States concluded that a mine had indeed destroyed the ship. The assumption, though not explicitly stated, was that the Spanish were responsible.

The slogan 'Remember the Maine' became the battle cry of US militarists. The United States issued a series of ultimatums, demanding that Spain virtually cede sovereignty over Cuba. Despite the fact that Spain capitulated to most American demands, McKinley asked for and received authorization for the use of military force from Congress. On April 23 Congress adopted a resolution declaring that a state of war existed with Spain.

Within months the Spanish were defeated. The United States obtained virtually all of Spain's remaining colonies, including Cuba and the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico. The United States next turned its military against its supposed allies, the Philippine insurrectionists. After crushing the Philippine revolutionary movement the United States established a brutal colonial administration to rival the Spaniards.

What did happen aboard the Maine? The facts all but rule out an attack by the Spanish. Not only did the Spanish have no motive, but circumstantial evidence makes it highly unlikely that an external device such as a mine or a torpedo destroyed the ship.

An independent report conducted by the Spanish made the following significant points.

1. A mine would almost certainly have had to have been detonated by electricity since the Maine was stationary and did not run into an explosive device. However, no wires were found.
2. No column of water was seen, though one would have been likely if a mine had exploded.
3. There were no dead fish in the harbor, even though that would be expected if an external explosion had occurred.

Further the Maine entered Havana with virtually no advance notice, making it unlikely that anyone could have planted a mine in the ship's berth.

If the explosion was not caused by a mine then it must have been triggered by something inside the ship. One hypothesis raised by the navy but soon discarded in light of the war hysteria was that a fire in a coal bunker detonated a reserve magazine. Many in the navy had questioned the wisdom of placing ammunition right next to the coal, given the significant danger of accidental fire.

In 1976 US Admiral Hyman Rickover published a report asserting that a fire in the coal bunker most likely had caused the explosion on the Maine. In preparing his study he enlisted two navy experts on ship design.

However there is another possibility that deserves consideration. Was the explosion on the Maine a deliberate provocation by US militarists or their agents to foment war with Spain?

If accidental, the blast was extremely fortuitous for the United States. Without an overt act on the part of Spain the McKinley administration would have been hard pressed to justify military action.

The British historian Hugh Thomas in his history of Cuba published in 1971 cites William Astor Chanler, a member of the US House of Representatives, who had connections to Roosevelt, as a suspect in the bombing of the Maine. Chanler along with his brothers were involved in smuggling arms to the Cuba insurrectionists. He reportedly claimed responsibility for the explosion on the Maine in a conversation with the US ambassador William C. Bullitt in the early 1930's. Chanler died shortly afterwards in Paris.

In considering their response to the recent tragic bombings in Africa workers should keep this historical precedent in mind. Workers should be conscious that the American news media works with its own agenda, set down by the business interests that control it, which is as often as not at odds with the truth.

If not directly or indirectly responsible itself for the Africa tragedy, the US ruling elite, as today's events demonstrate, is more than prepared to manipulate the incident for its own reactionary political and military purposes.

See Also:

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