Lessons of the Spanish-American War, the first US "humanitarian" intervention

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For weeks American high tech weaponry has been devastating Yugoslavia. Electrical plants, water treatment facilities, oil refineries, bridges, factories--the entire infrastructure needed to sustain modern life--are being reduced to rubble. Countless civilians have been killed due to "collateral" damage.

This one-sided slaughter, we are told, is all being carried out in the name of the purest "humanitarian" ideals. US President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany and others assure the public that NATO is acting from the unselfish desire to help the beleaguered Kosovar Albanians. The US and European media numbs the public with pictures of harried refugees and tales of alleged Serbian atrocities.

In attempting to build support for the war the US government and its partners count on a lack of a historical perspective on the part of the public. A basic knowledge of history is vital if one is to untangle fact and fiction in the welter of one-sided and deliberately misleading reports coming out of Washington.

Undoubtedly real and serious atrocities have been carried out by the Serbian forces, just as all sides, including the Kosovo Liberation Army, have targeted civilian populations in the terrible ethnic-based conflict that has engulfed the region since the break-up of Yugoslavia. The United States and the Western European powers bear a large share of the responsibility for setting in motion the tragic chain of events in the region. However, while hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslim, Croat, Albanian and Serb workers have died in the fighting, the Western powers have profited. Bosnia is now a virtual protectorate of the West, and the US and NATO stand ready to occupy mineral-rich Kosovo.

In promoting their "humanitarian" war against Yugoslavia, the big business politicians and their allies in the media and academia simply parrot the empty claims made time and again to justify imperialist aggression. It is ironic that the latest outburst of militarism by the United States comes on the 100th anniversary of her emergence as a colonial power, with the annexation of the Philippines in February 1899, following the Spanish-American War.

The Spanish-American War of 1898 was presented at the time as the most altruistic and moral of wars, an intervention waged on behalf of the people of Cuba to liberate the island from colonial oppression. The demand for war, it was claimed, emanated from the people, who pushed a reluctant President McKinley into dispatching troops to Cuba and the Philippines.

It soon became evident, however, that the US intended to take advantage of Spain's troubles in order to acquire a colonial empire for itself. The real face of American altruism was exposed by the bloody war it waged against the Philippine people. US "philanthropy" toward the Filipinos inspired that great believer in the equality of peoples, Rudyard Kipling, who penned his infamous poem *The White Man's Burden* in honor of the Philippine annexation.

One of the most notorious promoters of war hysteria against Spain was publisher William Randolph Hearst. Reviewing the role of the media in building public support for the war against Yugoslavia one wonders if the *New York Times* and CNN have not called up Hearst's ghost. Certainly the term "yellow press," coined to describe the manipulative and sensationalist style of Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, could apply to most of today's media.

As one biographer of Hearst noted ironically about his paper's coverage of the Cuban conflict, "The majority of the public found it more exciting to read about the murder of Cuban babies and the rape of Cuban women by the Spaniards than to read conscientious accounts of complicated political problems and injustices on both sides. The hero/villain concept of the war was simple, easy to grasp and satisfying." [1]

Take this piece from the Hearst press describing the leader of the Spanish forces in Cuba: "Weyler the brute, the devastator of haciendas, the destroyer of families, and outrager of women... Pitiless, cold, an exterminator of men... There is nothing to prevent his carnal, animal brain from running riot with itself in inventing tortures and infamies of bloody debauchery." [2]

The attempt by the yellow press to demonize Spain recalls the media campaign against Serbia, where wild and baseless rumors are routinely presented as fact. For example: "Under the heading 'FEEDING PRISONERS TO THE SHARKS' the *Journal* told how the Spaniards drowned their prisoners at night. The *Journal* constantly denounced the Spaniards for attacking hospitals, outraging women, poisoning wells, imprisoning nuns, and 'roasting twenty-five Catholic priests alive.'" [3]

The allegation of atrocities against women was a staple of the yellow press. As US historian David Traxel wrote in his recent book *1898: The Birth of the American Century*, "The themes of this touching up, and often making up, took various forms, but stories about women provided opportunities for particularly moving copy, because of the great value placed on the civilizing role of feminine virtue in the United States. There were reports of innocent female victims: 'WEYLER THROWS NUNS INTO PRISON. BUTCHER WAGES BRUTAL WARFARE ON HELPLESS WOMEN,' was one *Journal* headline." [4]

The yellow press took a direct hand in stoking up conflict, as when Hearst organized a jail break to free a women prisoner being held by Spanish authorities in Cuba. Later the *Journal* published a letter purloined from a Spanish diplomat containing critical remarks about President William McKinley. "THE WORST INSULT TO THE UNITED STATES IN HISTORY," wrote the *Journal* just one week before the mysterious explosion that destroyed the US battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor.

Under conditions of a determined effort by the United States government to provoke war, no concessions by the Spanish would suffice to avert a conflict. Without any evidence and against common sense the yellow press declared that Spain had given orders to destroy the *Maine*.

The war fever of the yellow press was echoed in Congress "where jingoistic feelings gathered volume as the fighting (in Cuba) continued. Especially among western Democrats and Populists, war hawks

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abounded." [5]

The church picked up the cry to "free" Cuba. "The Reverend Washington Gladden, one of the founders of the Social Gospel movement, was sure that it was a selfless desire to help humanity that was behind the excitement. 'To break in pieces the oppressor, to lift from a whole population the heavy hand of the spoiler, to lead in light and liberty, peace and plenty--is there any better work than this for the great nations of the earth?' The United States would fight 'not for territory or empire or national honor, but for the redress of wrongs not our own, for the establishment of peace and justice in the earth. Perhaps this experience may awaken in us that enthusiasm of humanity by which life is purified. In saving others we may save ourselves.'" [6]

President McKinley brushed aside all concessions and apologies offered by Spain, including an immediate halt to military operations against Cuban rebels and reparations for the *Maine*, and issued a non-negotiable ultimatum. The US declared war and began military operations.

This "humanitarian" intervention entailed few risks to the United States. As the Spanish well knew, they did not have the resources to fight the Americans. The small and antiquated Spanish navy was decimated at the battles of Santiago and Manila with the loss of only one American life. An American expeditionary force landed on Cuba and Puerto Rico, forcing the capitulation of the isolated Spanish garrisons. In the Philippines the Americans secured the surrender of the Spanish with virtually no losses, due largely to the sacrifices of the Philippine insurgent movement led by Emilio Aguinaldo, whom the US had returned to the Philippines from exile.

Many in the United States who had been taken in by the talk of freeing Spain's colonial subjects were genuinely shocked when American forces, far from disbanding after the victory, stayed on to occupy the "liberated" territories. Puerto Rico and Guam were annexed outright by the United States. "Independent" Hawaii and "unoccupied" Wake Island were also taken to provide additional bases for the fleet. As for Cuba, the Americans converted the island into little more than a protectorate by forcing the insurgents to recognize the unlimited right of the United States forces to intervene in the name of preserving "order." For decades the Cuban people enjoyed their freedom under the heel of a series of US-backed puppet rulers.

The fate of the Cubans was mild compared to the treatment meted out to Aguinaldo's forces. Workers who believe the claims by the US and Western European governments that they are deeply concerned over the plight of the Kosovars should ponder the experience of the Filipino "allies" of the United States.

The annexation of the Philippines evoked strong protests in the United States and led to the formation of Anti-Imperialist Leagues in many cities. Among those opposing American policy was Mark Twain, who, in his famous essay *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*, said US treatment of the Filipinos "debauched America's honor and blackened her face before the world." [7]

The seizure of the Philippines, while not talked about openly in the period leading up to war with Spain, had long been sought by American business interests. Plans had been laid years in advance to move on the Philippines in the event of war. In the wake of the *Maine* explosion Theodore Roosevelt, at that time US Under Secretary of the Navy, ordered the American Far East squadron to prepare for offensive action in the Philippines in the event of hostilities.

At the beginning of 1898 American businessmen founded a committee on American Interests in China. It sought to get the McKinley administration to promote economic expansion in China and protect American business in the region, then under sharp pressure from British, German and Japanese imperialism. A base in the Far East was widely seen as necessary to secure American access to the vast Chinese market.

In a submission to Congress in June 1898 Secretary of State William Day declared, "The fact has become more and more apparent that the output of the United States manufacturers...has reached the point of large excess above the demands of home consumption...the United States has important interests at stake in the partition of commercial facilities in regions which are likely to offer developing markets for its goods. Nowhere is this consideration of more interest than in its relation to the Chinese Empire."

As one historian wrote "In all parts of the United States people saw the connection between the Philippines and the potential market. In the west the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce petitioned the president to keep the islands, 'with a view to strengthening our trade relations with the Orient.'"[8]

With annexation in mind the United States refused to allow Filipino insurgents to enter Manila and would not recognize the newly founded Philippine Republic. After a skirmish between US troops and Filipino soldiers the United States initiated war against its supposed comrades. The American campaign was marked by brutality on a wide scale. In its campaign to pacify the Philippines the US forces resorted to the same methods employed against Native Americans.

When the Filipinos, defeated in conventional warfare by the superior arms of the Americans, turned to guerrilla tactics, US commanders countered by launching a war against the Filipino people as a whole.

Wounded Filipino soldiers were bayoneted rather than taken prisoner. Whole villages were wiped out with US soldiers killing every man, women and child.

The Americans "developed a 'water torture,' that made even the Spanish cringe. If a captured Filipino refused to divulge military information, four or five gallons of water were forced down his throat until his body became an 'object frightful to contemplate.' Then the water was forced out by kneeling on his stomach. The treatment was repeated until the prisoner talked or died... Thus did the Americans civilize their 'little brown brothers.'" [9]

The struggle dragged on for years. More than 4,000 American soldiers died, 10 times the number killed in the war against Spain. Filipino casualties are unknown, but probably were in the hundreds of thousands, including those killed by starvation and disease.

After formal independence in 1946 the Philippines served as a major base for US imperialism in the Far East, most notably in the war in Vietnam. The Philippine people suffered under the yoke of a series of dictators backed by their "benefactors" in Washington. To this day the Philippines bears the mark of US colonial oppression, economic under-development, widespread poverty and social inequality.

This is the legacy of US "humanitarian" intervention. From the Philippines to Somalia it has been time and again exposed as an attempt to dress in "democratic" trappings the most undemocratic of policies--the subjugation of militarily weak and economically backward countries for the sake of US geopolitical and commercial interests.

The task of ending the oppression of the Balkan people can only be carried out through the efforts of the working people of the region themselves. This requires the construction of an independent political party of the working class, uniting workers of all backgrounds in a common struggle against the ethno-nationalist leaders and Western imperialism. To aid in this task workers in the United States must oppose the bombing of Yugoslavia and fight for the withdrawal of all US and NATO troops from the region.

Notes:

1. *Citizen Hearst*, W.W. Swanberg, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961 p117
2. Quoted from the *Journal*, Feb. 23, 1896
3. Swanberg, p110
4. *1898: The Birth of the American Century*, David Traxel, Alfred A. Knopf, 1998 p 83
5. *The Transformation of American Foreign Relations*, 1865-1900.

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Charles S. Campbell. Harper & Row 1976
6. Traxel, p. 114
7. *From: Mark Twains Weapons of Satire: Anti-imperialist Writings on the Philippine American War*, Jim Zwick, ed., Syracuse Univ. Press 1992
8. Campbell, p. 285
9. *The Wars of America*, Robert Leckie, Harper & Row 1981, p. 570

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