

Copyright 2002 The Washington Post

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

The Washington Post

August 24, 2002 Saturday

Final Edition

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. A21

LENGTH: 390 words

HEADLINE: Warmongering Mythology

BODY:

In his Aug. 18 [2002] op-ed column, "Kidnapped by the Times," Charles Krauthammer invoked one of American journalism's most dubious anecdotes—the purported vow of William Randolph Hearst to "furnish the war" against Spain over Cuba.

Hearst's vow, supposedly contained in instructions cabled to the artist Frederic Remington in Cuba in 1897, almost certainly is apocryphal.

Reasons for doubting it are many and go beyond Hearst's denial, made in 1906 and repeated in the autobiography of one of his sons. They go beyond the fact that the purported cables never have surfaced.

Those reasons include: Hearst sent Remington to Cuba to draw sketches of the rebellion against Spanish rule. The Cuban insurrection began in 1895 and forced Spain to send 200,000 soldiers to the island. It simply would have made no sense for Hearst to vow to "furnish the war" when war was the reason he sent Remington to Cuba.

It is improbable that Hearst's purported instructions would have cleared Spanish censors in Havana. So strict were the censors that dispatches by American correspondents often were smuggled by passenger steamer to Florida and transmitted from there.

The original source of the anecdote, James Creelman, wasn't in Cuba at the time Hearst supposedly sent the "furnish the war" message. Creelman was in Europe, and as such could have learned about the supposed vow only secondhand.

Creelman, moreover, misrepresented the terms of Remington's assignment to Cuba. Creelman, who described the anecdote in a book published in 1901, wrote that Remington had been "instructed to remain in Cuba until the war began." In truth, Remington had agreed to go to Cuba for one month.

So why does all this still matter?

It is inherently important to correct journalism's historical record, a record not immune to myth and distortion. Debunking the anecdote also serves as a cautionary reminder about stories that sound too good to be true, or too good to be checked out.

It also matters because the anecdote suggests a power the press does not possess -- the power to propel the country to war. Often and erroneously, the Spanish-American War of 1898 has been termed "Mr. Hearst's War." And the 101-year-old anecdote about Hearst's vowing "to furnish the war" has long served as Exhibit A for that badly mistaken yet undying belief.

W. Joseph Campbell