

“I’ll Furnish the War”

The Making of a Media Myth

You furnish the pictures, and I’ll furnish the war.

Attributed to William Randolph Hearst in
James Creelman, *On the Great Highway:
The Wanderings and Adventures of a Special
Correspondent* (Boston: Lothrop, 1901), 178

As America prepared for war with Iraq in the early years of the twenty-first century, commentators at opposite ends of the political spectrum turned to what may be the most famous anecdote in American journalism to describe how poorly U.S. media were reporting the run-up to the conflict. The anecdote is more than one hundred years old and tells of the purported exchange of telegrams between William Randolph Hearst, the activist young publisher of the *New York Journal*, and Frederic Remington, the famous painter and sculptor of scenes of the American West. Hearst engaged Remington’s services for a month in December 1896 and sent him to Cuba to draw sketches of the rebellion then raging against Spain’s colonial rule. The Cuban rebellion gave rise in 1898 to the Spanish-American War, in which the United States wrested control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

After only a few days in Cuba in January 1897, Remington purportedly sent a cable to Hearst in New York, stating: “Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war. I wish to return.” In reply, Hearst supposedly told the artist, “Please remain. You furnish the pictures, and I’ll furnish the war.”¹

Hearst’s famous vow to “furnish the war” has achieved unique status as an adaptable, hardy, all-purpose anecdote, useful in illustrating any number of media sins and shortcomings. It has been invoked to illustrate the media’s willingness to compromise impartiality, promote political agendas,

and indulge in sensationalism. It has been used, more broadly, to suggest the media’s capacity to inject malign influence into international affairs.

As debate intensified in the United States in 2002 about the prospect of war in Iraq, the conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer invoked Hearst’s “furnish the war” vow to condemn Iraq-related coverage in the *New York Times*. The unbroken flow of antiwar reporting and editorializing in the *Times*, Krauthammer claimed, was so extreme and egregious as to invite comparison to Hearst’s agitation for war with Spain in the late 1890s.² A few months later, the editors of the liberal magazine *American Prospect* also turned to “I’ll furnish the war” and claimed that Hearst “was a pacifist compared with the editors of the *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page, who are not only fomenting a war with Iraq but also helping to orchestrate it.”³

Although its appeal is timeless and its versatility impressive, the anecdote about Hearst’s vow and his exchange with Remington is a media-driven myth. It is perhaps the hardest myth in American journalism, having lived on despite concerted attempts to discredit and dismantle it.⁴ The Remington-Hearst anecdote is often cited and widely believed. In most retellings, Hearst is said to have made good on his promise,⁵ and war with Spain “was duly provided.”⁶ As such, the Spanish-American War has been termed “Mr. Hearst’s War.”⁷ But the factors explaining why the United States went to war with Spain in 1898 are far more profound and complex than the supposed manipulative powers of Hearst and his newspapers.⁸

Like many media-driven myths, it is succinct, savory, and easily remembered. It is almost too good *not* to be true. Not surprisingly, Hearst’s vow to “furnish the war” has made its way into countless textbooks of journalism.⁹ It has figured in innumerable discussions about Hearst and about the news media and war.¹⁰ It has been repeated over the years by no small number of journalists, scholars,¹¹ and critics of the news media such as Ben Bagdikian, Helen Thomas, Nicholas Lemann, and the late David Halberstam.¹²

Interestingly, the anecdote lives on despite a nearly complete absence of supporting documentation. It lives on even though telegrams supposedly exchanged by Remington and Hearst have never turned up. It lives on even though Hearst denied ever sending such a message. It lives on despite an irreconcilable internal inconsistency: it would have been absurd for Hearst to vow to “furnish the war” because war—specifically, the Cuban rebellion against Spain’s colonial rule—was the very reason Hearst sent Remington to Cuba in the first place. Anyone reading U.S. newspapers in early 1897 would have been well aware that Cuba was a theater of a nasty

war. By then, the Cuban rebellion had reached islandwide proportions and not a single province had been pacified by Spain's armed forces.¹³

The origins of the "furnish the war" anecdote are modest and more than a little murky. The story first appeared as a brief passage in *On the Great Highway: The Wanderings and Adventures of a Special Correspondent*, a slim memoir by James Creelman, a portly, bearded, cigar-chomping, Canadian-born journalist prone to pomposity and exaggeration. Creelman relished making himself the hero of his own reporting, a preference that quickly becomes clear in *On the Great Highway*. In the book's preface, Creelman said he sought to illuminate "the part which the press is rapidly assuming in human affairs, not only as historian and commentator but as a direct and active agent." Figuring prominently in *On the Great Highway* are accounts of Creelman's meetings and interviews with Leo Tolstoy, Sitting Bull, and Pope Leo XIII. "The frequent introduction of the author's personality," Creelman wrote, "is a necessary means of reminding the reader that he is receiving the testimony of an eyewitness."¹⁴

On the Great Highway was favorably received by critics when it appeared in the autumn of 1901.¹⁵ Few reviewers, however, noted or commented on the passage reporting the supposed Remington-Hearst exchange. Hearst's *Journal* in November 1901 devoted two pages to lengthy excerpts from *On the Great Highway*.¹⁶ But the passage about Hearst's vowing to "furnish the war" was not included in the *Journal's* selection. It also is noteworthy that Creelman invoked the Remington-Hearst exchange not as a rebuke but as a compliment, to commend Hearst and the activist, anticipatory "yellow journalism" that he had pioneered in New York City. Creelman wrote:

Some time before the destruction of the battleship *Maine* in the harbor of Havana, the *New York Journal* sent Frederic Remington, the distinguished artist, to Cuba. He was instructed to remain there until the war began; for "yellow journalism" was alert and had an eye for the future.

Presently Mr. Remington sent this telegram from Havana: "W. R. HEARST, *New York Journal*, N.Y.: Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war. I wish to return. REMINGTON."

This was the reply: "REMINGTON, HAVANA: Please remain. You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war. W. R. HEARST."

And Hearst was as good as his word, Creelman declared.¹⁷

If such an exchange had taken place, it would have been in January 1897, the only time Remington was in Cuba before the *Maine's* destruction in February 1898. Remington had been hired by Hearst for a month and not, as Creelman wrote, for an indefinite period "until the war

began."¹⁸ Moreover, Creelman had no firsthand knowledge about the purported Remington-Hearst exchange. Creelman in early 1897 was neither in Cuba nor in New York. He was in Europe, as the *Journal's* "special commissioner" on the Continent. Which means someone had to have told him about the exchange, or else he invented the anecdote from whole cloth. In any case, Creelman never explained how he learned about the anecdote.

Although Remington apparently never spoke publicly about the purported exchange with Hearst, the artist's conduct, correspondence, and recollections of the assignment to Cuba all belie Creelman's account. According to Creelman, Hearst instructed Remington to "please remain" in Cuba. But Remington did nothing of the sort. After just six days in Cuba, on January 16, 1897, the artist left Havana aboard the *Seneca*, a New York-bound steamer that carried six other passengers.¹⁹ The *Seneca* reached New York four days later, and soon afterward Remington's sketches began appearing in Hearst's *Journal*. The work was given prominent display. The *Journal's* headlines hailed Remington as a "gifted artist"²⁰—hardly an accolade that Hearst would have extended to someone in his employ who had brazenly disregarded instructions to remain on the scene. Far from being irritated and displeased with Remington, Hearst was delighted with his work. He recalled years later that Remington and Richard Harding Davis, the celebrated writer who traveled to Cuba with the artist, "did their work admirably and aroused much indignation among Americans" about Spanish rule of the island.²¹

For his part, Remington chafed about how poorly his sketches were reproduced in the *Journal*.²² Although they hardly were his best work, the sketches serve to impugn Creelman's account that Remington had found "everything . . . quiet" in Cuba. The sketches depict unmistakable (if unremarkable) scenes of a rebellion—a scouting party of Spanish cavalry with rifles at the ready; a cluster of Cuban noncombatants trussed and bound and being herded into Spanish lines; a scruffy Cuban rebel kneeling to fire at a small Spanish fort; a knot of Spanish soldiers dressing a comrade's leg wound. The sketches appeared beneath headlines such as "Cuban War Sketches Gathered in the Field by Frederic Remington" and "Frederic Remington Sketches a Familiar Incident of the Cuban War."²³ Accompanying the sketch of the captive noncombatants was a caption in which Remington said the treatment of Cuban women by irregulars allied with the Spanish was nothing short of "unspeakable." And "as for the men captured by them alive," Remington's caption said, "the blood curdles

in my veins as I think of the atrocity, the cruelty, practiced on these helpless victims."²⁴

Following his return to New York, Remington wrote a letter to the *Journal's* keenest rival, the *New York World*, in which he disparaged the Spanish regime as a "woman-killing outfit down there in Cuba."²⁵ In 1899, Remington recalled the assignment to Cuba in a short magazine article that further challenges Creelman's account that the artist had found "everything . . . quiet" there. Instead, Remington wrote: "I saw ill-clad, ill-fed Spanish soldiers bring their dead and wounded into" Havana, "dragging slowly along in ragged columns. I saw scarred Cubans with their arms bound stiffly behind them being marched to the Cabanas," a grim fortress overlooking the Havana harbor. The countryside, Remington wrote, "was a pall of smoke" from homes of Cubans that had been set afire.²⁶

Remington's sketches and correspondence thus leave no doubt that he had seen a good deal of war-related disruption in Cuba. The island during his brief visit was anything but "quiet." Still, it remains something of a mystery why Remington never publicly addressed Creelman's anecdote, an unflattering anecdote that certainly cast the artist as timid, ineffective, and feckless. And Remington presumably had opportunities to confront Creelman. He lived until the day after Christmas in 1909, eight years after publication of *On the Great Highway*. Perhaps Remington kept his silence because the anecdote in the first years of the twentieth century had not yet become widely known or infamous. As we've noted, Creelman intended the anecdote as a compliment—a tribute to Hearst and his aggressive style of yellow journalism.

Although Creelman again recounted the Remington-Hearst exchange in 1906 in a magazine profile of Hearst,²⁷ the anecdote stirred little public controversy until 1907, when a correspondent for the *Times* of London mentioned it in a dispatch from New York. The correspondent wrote: "Is the Press of the United States going insane? . . . A letter from William Randolph Hearst is in existence and was printed in a magazine not long ago. It was to an artist he had sent to Cuba, and who reported no likelihood of war. 'You provide the pictures,' he wrote, 'I'll provide the war.'"²⁸

The *Times's* article was the first to give the Remington-Hearst anecdote an unflattering interpretation. It was an interpretation that stirred Hearst to anger. In a letter to the *Times*, he dismissed as "frankly false" and "ingeniously idiotic" the claim that "there was a letter in existence from Mr. W. R. Hearst in which Mr. Hearst said to a correspondent in Cuba: 'You provide the pictures and I will provide the war,' and the

DAVIS AND REMINGTON TELL OF SPANISH CRUELTY.

The Pen of the Gifted
Writer and the Pencil
of the Brilliant Art-
ist Describe How
a Brave Cuban
Met Death.



BY RICHARD HARDING DAVIS.
TRINIDAD, Cuba, Jan. 25. For Key West, Fla. 1—Abdolo Rod-
riguez was the only son of a Cuban farmer, who lives nine miles
outside of Santa Clara, beyond the hills that surround the city
to the north. When the revolution broke out young Rodriguez joined
the insurgents, leaving father, mother and two sisters at the farm. He
was taken two months ago by a force of the Guardia Civil, the arm
of the Spanish army, and detained himself when they tried to
execute him, wounding three of them with his machine. He was tried
by a military court for bearing arms against the Government, and sen-
tenced to execution by a firing squad the next morning before sunrise.
 Previous to execution he was confined in the military prison at
Santa Clara with thirty other insurgents, all of whom were sentenced
to be shot one after the other on mornings following the execution of
Rodriguez. His execution took place the morning of the 20th at a
place half a mile distant from the city, on the great plain that stretches
from the forts out to the hills over beyond which Rodriguez had fled for
nearly two years. At the time of his death he was twenty years old.

How He Met Death.
 A witness of his execution, and what follows is an account of the way

he went to death. I hope it is not impertinent for the writer to introduce
himself, so far as to say that he did not go to see this man die through
any idle or morbid curiosity. The young man's friends could not be
present. It was impossible for them to show themselves in that crowd
and that place with violence on without detection, and I like to think that
although Rodriguez could not know it, there was one person present
whom he did not feel hostile to, and who was a sympathetic
though unwilling onlooker. There had been a full moon the night pre-
ceding the execution, and when the squad of soldiers marched out from
town it was still raining by fits, through the mist, although after 11
o'clock. It is a plain two miles in extent, broken by ridges and valleys
and covered with thick, high grass and with bunches of cactus and pal-
metto.

In the hollow of the ridge the mist by the broad lanes of water,
and on one side of the plain stood the walls of the old town. On the
other two hills, covered with royal palms that showed white in the moon-
light like hundreds of marble columns. A line of tiny campfires the en-
tire had built during the night stretched between the forts at regular in-
tervals and burned brightly. But as the light grew brighter and the
moonlight faded these were stamped out, and when the soldiers came in

Moonlight Execution of Young Rodriguez.

Figure 1. Remington's sketches for the *New York Journal* made clear that he had seen a good deal of war-related upheaval during his brief stay in Cuba. Among other drawings, he illustrated Richard Harding Davis's report about the firing-squad execution of a twenty-year-old Cuban insurgent, published February 2, 1897. [Library of Congress]

intimation that Mr. Hearst was chiefly responsible for the Spanish war. This kind of clotted nonsense,” Hearst declared, “could only be generally circulated and generally believed in England, where newspapers claiming to be conservative and reliable are the most utterly untrustworthy of any on earth. In apology for these newspapers it may be said that their untrustworthiness is not always due to intention but more frequently to ignorance and prejudice.”²⁹

The controversy soon sputtered out, and the unflattering interpretation of Creelman’s anecdote was largely forgotten for years until it was resuscitated in the 1930s. At that time, public opinion was running strongly against Hearst and his newspapers. The media baron turned seventy in 1933 and seemed more roundly disliked and distrusted than ever. His anticommunist advocacy had become strident and harsh. His newspapers solicited essays from the likes of Hitler and Mussolini³⁰ while campaigning viciously against Franklin D. Roosevelt, likening the president to a communist dupe. In the 1936 election campaign, Hearst’s newspapers characterized Roosevelt as Moscow’s candidate for president.³¹

Americans then were deserting the Hearst newspapers. Given a choice between the publisher and the president, readers exiled Hearst newspapers from their homes, David Nasaw, Hearst’s leading biographer, has written. By the late summer of 1936, unflattering characterizations of Hearst were etched so deeply in the nation’s psyche, Nasaw wrote, “that Roosevelt and his advisers recognized that the worst thing that could be said of [the Republican presidential candidate] Alfred Landon was that he was supported by Hearst.”³²

Against this backdrop, the Remington-Hearst anecdote reemerged and took on a permanently sinister cast. Notably, the anecdote appeared in several works in the 1930s that identified the press as an active agent in bringing about the Spanish-American War. Among these works was Joseph E. Wisan’s *The Cuban Crisis as Reflected in the New York Press (1895–1898)*, which influenced a generation of scholarship on the press and the Spanish-American War. Wisan argued that the “principal cause of our war with Spain was the public demand for it, a demand too powerful for effective resistance by the business and financial leaders of the nation or by President McKinley. For the creation of the public state of mind, the press was largely responsible.”³³

Wisan argued that the “most widely circulated of the newspapers,” such as Hearst’s *Journal*, “were the least honestly objective in the reporting of news and in the presentation of editorial opinion. . . . Hearst’s famous reply to the artist Remington’s complaint that there was no war in

Cuba—“You furnish the pictures; I’ll furnish the war,”—well illustrates the degree of objectivity that prevailed.”³⁴

Other works of the time helped revive the anecdote. A year before Wisan’s book appeared, Willis J. Abbot, a former editor at Hearst’s *Journal*, brought out *Watching the World Go By*, a memoir that invoked the supposed Remington-Hearst exchange.³⁵ John Dos Passos cited it in his 1936 novel, *The Big Money*.³⁶ Ferdinand Lundberg, the most unforgiving of Hearst’s several biographers, cited Creelman’s account of “furnish the war” in *Imperial Hearst*, a slim and truculent polemic that appeared in 1936. Lundberg erroneously suggested that Creelman had accompanied Remington to Florida.³⁷

What firmly and finally pressed Hearst’s purported vow to “furnish the war” into the public’s consciousness was *Citizen Kane*, the 1941 motion picture that was based loosely on Hearst’s life and times. *Kane* was not a commercial success, in part because of Hearst’s attempts to block its release,³⁸ but the film is consistently ranked by critics among the finest ever made.³⁹ A scene early in the film shows Charles Foster Kane, the reckless newspaper tycoon who invites comparisons to Hearst, at his desk, quarreling with his former guardian. They are interrupted by Kane’s business manager, Mr. Bernstein, who reports that a cable has just arrived from a correspondent in Cuba. Bernstein reads the contents and Kane, superbly played by Orson Welles, dictates a reply that paraphrases Hearst’s purported vow. “You provide the prose poems,” Kane says, “and I’ll provide the war.” Bernstein congratulates Kane on a splendid and witty reply. Saying he rather likes it himself, Kane tells Bernstein to send it off immediately.

The Remington-Hearst anecdote thus became something far removed from the compliment Creelman intended in *On the Great Highway*. It had taken on an unflattering and threatening tone. Hearst’s toxic personality made the malevolent interpretation seem plausible. The cinematic treatment of *Citizen Kane* made it vivid and enduring.

REMINGTON WAS ASKED TO LEAVE

As we have seen, Remington’s contemporaneous writings impugn Creelman’s anecdote. So, too, does the correspondence of Richard Harding Davis, the dashing if self-absorbed author and playwright whom Remington accompanied on the assignment to Cuba. In early 1897 Davis was burnishing his credentials as a war correspondent. And he commanded top dollar: Hearst paid him \$3,000 for a month-long assignment in Cuba.⁴⁰

The plans mapped with Hearst’s editors were to take Davis and Remington to Cuba surreptitiously, aboard the *Vamoose*, a high-speed steam yacht that Hearst had chartered. The *Vamoose* was to deposit Davis, Remington, and a couple of Cuban guides in Santa Clara Province. From there, they would travel to the camp of the Cuban rebel leader, Máximo Gómez.⁴¹ But the trip almost did not take place.

Davis and Remington met the *Vamoose* at Key West, as planned, in late December 1896. At first, the weather was too unfavorable to hazard a crossing of the Straits of Florida to Cuba. Then the captain balked at making the run over Christmas. Finally, when all seemed ready, the *Vamoose* proved unseaworthy. Twenty miles out of Key West, the crew refused to go on. The *Vamoose* turned back and Davis stretched out on the deck and cried.⁴² Exasperated by the bungled plans, Davis declared, “I am done with [J]ournal forever.”⁴³

In all, Davis and Remington spent three weeks in Key West, awaiting passage to Cuba. Davis fumed about the time wasted and insisted on a thousand-dollar advance payment from the *Journal* “because of the delay over the *Vamoose*.”⁴⁴ “Wait,” he seethed, “is all we do and that is my life at Key West. I get up and half dress and take a plunge in the bay and then dress fully and have a greasy breakfast and then light a huge Key West cigar price three cents and sit on the hotel porch with my feet on a rail. Nothing happens after that except getting one’s boots polished.”⁴⁵ Remington, whom Davis called “a large blundering bear,”⁴⁶ was frustrated, too, and thought about aborting the assignment to return to New York. But Remington “gave up on the idea . . . as soon as he found I would not do so,” Davis wrote.⁴⁷

Fed up with waiting for Hearst to send a vessel more seaworthy than the *Vamoose*, Davis and Remington abandoned plans to enter Cuba by stealth and booked passage on a scheduled passenger steamer to Havana. They arrived January 9, 1897. Davis wrote to his mother that it was a great relief to reach Cuba, “after the annoyances and disappointments of those days at Key West. I cannot tell you what we will do but we are both anxious to pull a sort of success out of a failure, if we can. . . . Had we not wanted to go [to Cuba] so much neither of us would have put up with the way we have been treated” by Hearst and the *Journal*.⁴⁸

If Hearst had vowed to “furnish the war” in an exchange of cables with Remington, it would have occurred while Davis was in Cuba. Had Davis known about it, there is little reason to believe he would have kept quiet. His loathing for Hearst would have inspired Davis to direct wide attention to the “furnish the war” telegram, had it been sent. But in his extensive

A Thrilling Tale of Real Life
THE JOURNAL

1847 Ferry Pass, That Sporting Page, That News Revealer, That Mystery Journal
THE JOURNAL

NEW YORK JOURNAL

NO. 5,176. NEW YORK, SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 1897.—52 PAGES. PRICE FIVE CENTS.

Tips on Sporting Matters
THE JOURNAL

FUN FOR ALL
THE JOURNAL

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS AND FREDERIC REMINGTON IN CUBA FOR THE JOURNAL.

FREDERIC REMINGTON, the artist and Richard Harding Davis, author and newspaper writer, have reached the insurgent army in the island of Cuba, where they go to represent the Journal. Mr. Remington is making sketches of the life and activity of the patriot army. He and Mr. Davis, acting as war correspondents, will have been field of effort for his remarkable and brilliant pen.

Together they will present the situation in the war-stricken island in more graphic and vivid style than has yet been returned to the American public.

Fredrick Remington is beyond doubt the best known illustrator of military life in America. Although a young man, Mr. Remington has won recognition rapidly by combining an early accumulated fund of experience and a love for the unadorned phases of the life, the natural gift as an artist and energy that secure distinction.

His education's various phases of education was begun in the Yale School of the Fine Arts and carried on at the Art Students' League of New York—structures

the American school which has turned out so many clever and original artists. About six years ago he went out among the corn-boys of the West and found a wealth of material to work upon. The rough side of life on the plains appealed to him strongly, and he traveled through Wyoming, Idaho, Utah and Indian Territory, securing material in several Indian camps. All of his future compositions were devoted to sketching. It was during this service that he gained such an intimate knowledge of the dress, appearance and habits of Indian, Spanish soldiers, cowboys, Indians, miners and frontier characters in general.

After going through an Indian war in Arizona he came East, but was soon sent back to join General Miles with a commission from Harper & Brothers. Since then he has been kept constantly busy drawing for the Harper, the King and some other magazines.

The truth and vigor of his illustrations bring the reader of the picture into his picture. He has done more with the work of composition than let one say that he was confined on his terms when he

sketches. "This man knows the horse." He has been justly called the personal historian of the great West. He has covered every phase of that section's life from the North-South feud to the Yampai River, in Mexico, and has a rich fund of "news" from these picturesque channels of experience. He and Mr. Davis have worked together before, and each in a valuable subject and inspiration to the other.

On the Cuban battle field Mr. Remington will find a new background for his vivid sketches, work and the readers of the Journal are to have the benefit of his brilliant observations. He will give to every one who understands the life and trends of originality that will make them more real to the American people than anything in the shape of illustration that has been depicted since the beginning of the century.

Richard Harding Davis, the Journal's war correspondent with one human nature. The sketching we will know to the benefit of his well-patterned, remarkable, and public both as an author and as a newspaper man, to remain. Not only in the Journal last year in describing his own appreciation, but all of his work, the excitement attending the his development of his work.

Figure 2. Remington and Richard Harding Davis traveled to Cuba in early 1897 on assignment for Hearst's *New York Journal*. The trip gave rise to the myth about Hearst's vow to "furnish the war" with Spain. [Library of Congress]

correspondence from Cuba, Davis did not mention an exchange between Remington and Hearst. None of Davis’s letters from Cuba suggest that the artist wanted to return to the United States on the pretext that “everything is quiet.” Instead, Davis offered three related reasons for Remington’s departure. In a letter that Remington carried with him to mail in the United States (a letter he may have read en route), Davis said: “Remington has all the material he needs for sketches and for illustrating my stories so he is going home. I will go on further as I have not yet seen much that is interesting or new.” Davis added that *he* had asked Remington to leave, “as it left me freer.”⁴⁹

In another letter, written the same day and mailed from Cuba—a letter that Remington probably did not see—Davis rejoiced at the artist’s departure. “I am as relieved at getting old Remington to go as though I had won \$5000,” Davis wrote. “He was a splendid fellow but a perfect kid and had to be humored and petted all the time.” Davis confided that he “was very glad” that Remington had left, “for he kept me back all the time and I can do twice as much in half the time. He always wanted to talk it over and that had to be done in the nearest or the most distant cafe, and it always took him fifteen minutes before he got his cocktails to suit him. He always did as I wanted [in] the end but I am not used to giving reasons or traveling in pairs.”⁵⁰ Davis gave a related explanation for Remington’s departure in another letter written in January 1897. In it, he said Remington left because he was too frightened to try to cross Spanish lines and attempt to meet up with the rebels under Gómez. “Remington got scared and backed out much to my relief and I went on and tried to cross the lines,” but without success, Davis wrote.⁵¹

Moreover, Davis’s correspondence and his dispatches to the *Journal* described considerable upheaval in Cuba. “There is war here and no mistake,” Davis wrote the day Remington left to return to the United States, “and all the people in the field have been ordered in to the fortified towns where they are starving and dying of disease.”⁵² His correspondence contained graphic descriptions of what he called the grim process “of extermination and ruin” in Cuba. “The insurgents began first by destroying the sugar mills some of which were worth millions of dollars in machinery, and now the Spaniards are burning the houses of the people and hoarding them in around the towns to starve out the insurgents and to leave them without shelter or places for food or to hide the wounded,” Davis wrote. “So all day long, wherever you look you see great heavy columns of smoke rising into the beautiful sky above the magnificent palms.”⁵³

Davis's correspondence thus represents a powerful and contemporaneous challenge to Creelman's anecdote. There is a small chance, however, that Davis was unaware of the purported exchange of telegrams between Remington and Hearst. Had it occurred, the exchange would have taken place late on January 15, 1897, after Remington had left Davis in Matanzas to return to Havana, or in the morning or early afternoon of January 16, 1897, before Remington left Havana for New York aboard the *Seneca*. In such a scenario, Davis may have been unaware of an exchange between Remington and Hearst.

But such a scenario does not explain how Hearst's arrogant vow would have cleared the rigid censorship that Spanish authorities had imposed on international cable traffic from Havana.⁵⁴ The U.S. consul-general in Cuba, Fitzhugh Lee, reported in February 1897 that the "Spanish censor permits nothing to go out except formally [official traffic] to Spain & whenever you see a dispatch in newspapers dated Habana it is shaped to pass the censor."⁵⁵ The restrictions were so imposing that the trade journal *Fourth Estate* declared in mid-February 1897, "The power of the press has been paralyzed by the Spanish censorship."⁵⁶ The *New York Tribune* reported in mid-January 1897 that inside Cuba, "censorship is more rigorous than ever. The publication of news on the burning of cane-fields, farms, estates, etc., known to be occurring daily in the western provinces, especially Havana and Matanzas, is prohibited."⁵⁷

So there was no chance that telegrams such as those Creelman described would have flowed freely between Remington in Havana and Hearst in New York. Spanish control of the cable traffic in Havana was too vigilant and severe to have allowed such an exchange to have gone unnoticed and unremarked upon. A vow such as Hearst's to "furnish the war" surely would have been intercepted and publicized by Spanish authorities as a clear-cut example of Yankee meddling in Cuba.

A TASTE FOR HYPERBOLE

Creelman's fondness for overstatement and hyperbole stands as further reason to doubt that Hearst ever vowed "to furnish the war." Creelman's record of exaggeration offers compelling reason to challenge the anecdote's authenticity. It is indeed ironic that what may be American journalism's best-known anecdote owes its existence to the undocumented ruminations of an absentee and notoriously unreliable journalist whom contemporaries derided for his pomposity and extreme self-regard.



Figure 3. James Creelman was a widely traveled, cigar-chomping correspondent who had a keen taste for hyperbole and a fondness for overstatement. He often took a starring role in his own dispatches. [Fourth Estate/*Newseum*]

Creelman had a far-flung foreign and domestic career in journalism, writing for James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, and Hearst's *Journal*. Among Creelman's specialties was interviewing prominent figures of the day. Invariably, these interviews seemed more about Creelman than about his subject. An editor at Hearst's *Journal* recalled that Creelman would "put so much of himself into an interview or story that the real subject of the article was utterly obscured."⁵⁸ After the *Journal* published Creelman's interview with the union leader Eugene V. Debs in 1897, a columnist for the *Journalist* trade publication observed that "Creelman talks a hundred fifty words to ten from Debs. What an ass that Creelman is, and I have often wondered whether Hearst supposes that anybody is fooled by his platitudinous nonsense."⁵⁹

Creelman was something of an anomaly in American journalism of the late nineteenth century. He was more a polemicist than a reporter. He routinely called attention to himself at a time when nearly all American journalists labored obscurely, rarely even receiving a byline to recognize their work. Few ever became prominent. The ethos of fin de siècle American journalism was that a reporter had to "sink his personality out of sight and merge his very identity in that of his paper. . . . Every newspaper has a policy, determined by the editor-in-chief, and it is the reporter's duty to hew the line that has been stretched for him. Nobody cares what his private opinions may be upon matters political or things critical."⁶⁰ But there was to be none of that for Creelman. Hearst and, to a lesser extent, Pulitzer indulged Creelman's self-importance⁶¹—and usually looked the other way when he traded in hyperbole.

A notable example came in 1894, when Creelman filed reports to the *World* describing how Japanese soldiers had massacred and mutilated Chinese civilians while overrunning Port Arthur, a city now known as Lüshun, at the tip of Liaodong Peninsula. So complete was the slaughter, wrote Creelman, that the only Chinese left alive were those who formed burial parties.⁶² Creelman's atrocity report was dismissed by the *New York Tribune* as "reckless sensationalism." The *Tribune* declared that the details Creelman related were "so untrue that to call them wild exaggerations would be gross flattery."⁶³ Nonetheless, Creelman's report stirred something of an uproar in the United States⁶⁴ and the U.S. minister to Japan, Edwin Dun, was ordered to investigate. Dun interviewed Creelman as well as American, French, and Japanese military officials and, in a report to the U.S. State Department, concluded that "the account sent to 'The World' by Mr. Creelman is sensational in the extreme and a gross exaggeration of what occurred."⁶⁵

The rebuke dogged Creelman for years. “Port Arthur Creelman” became a sneering epithet, one favored by the gossip columnist for the *Journalist*, who relished poking at Creelman’s outsized ego.⁶⁶ Creelman, though, was hardly chastened. In *On the Great Highway*, he resurrected his account of atrocities at Port Arthur, writing that “the Japanese killed everything they saw. Unarmed men, kneeling in the streets and begging for life, were shot, bayoneted, or beheaded. The town was sacked from end to end, and the inhabitants were butchered in their own houses.”⁶⁷

Creelman described similarly gory scenes in dispatches to the *World* from Cuba in 1896. Spanish atrocities, he claimed, were commonplace. “The horrors of a barbarous struggle for the extermination of the native population are witnessed in all parts of the country,” Creelman wrote. “Blood on the roadsides, blood in the field, blood on the doorsteps: blood, blood, blood! The old, the young, the weak, the crippled—all are butchered without mercy. There is scarcely a hamlet that has not witnessed the dreadful work.”⁶⁸ Given the predominantly hit-and-run guerrilla nature of the Cuban rebellion, extensive bloodshed of the kind Creelman described was rare.⁶⁹ In any event, his exaggerated reports about conditions in Cuba prompted Spanish authorities to order him expelled.⁷⁰

Cuba was the theater of another of Creelman’s self-starring exploits in July 1898, during the Spanish-American War. This time, Creelman claimed to have single-handedly captured a Spanish blockhouse, or stone fort, near the end of a vicious, day-long battle at El Caney, a town on the San Juan heights above Santiago de Cuba. The blockhouse was protected on three sides by a deep trench from which Spanish defenders laid down withering fire, holding off successive assaults by American troops and thwarting their plans to advance on Santiago, Cuba’s second-largest city.

In a first-person account published a few months after the battle at El Caney, Creelman wrote that the Spanish troops offered no resistance as he walked up the hill late in the afternoon. He entered their battered fortress and demanded their surrender: “I went up to the officer [in command], and looking him straight in the eye, said in French: ‘You are my prisoner.’ He threw up his hands and said, ‘Do with me as you please.’ Do you know at that moment I got a sneaking idea into my head that a soldier’s work was about the easiest thing I had ever struck; but I found out my mistake later,”⁷¹ when a bullet fired from a Spanish rifle tore into his left shoulder.

Creelman’s account of forcing the surrender of the Spanish troops at the blockhouse seems highly improbable. An editorial writer for the *Washington Post* mocked Creelman’s unlikely tale, writing: “When he really gets

his blood up, what he wants to do is to surround and capture armies, to fly into the imminent deadly breach, to beat back regiments with his single sword, and to scale the dizzy heights in quest of glory. . . . But not everyone could have charged up the hill . . . intimidated the Spaniards crouching there, and then modestly transferred the glory and the booty to the trembling forces of the United States. That’s what Creelman did, however; he tells us so himself.”⁷²

There is little evidence the blockhouse at El Caney was captured as Creelman described. Official U.S. Army reports about the fighting there make no mention of Creelman’s presence or his purported heroics. They say instead that the fortress was taken in a charge led by Captain Harry L. Haskell of the Twelfth Infantry Regiment. By the time of Haskell’s assault, U.S. artillery had greatly reduced Spanish resistance inside the blockhouse.⁷³

A far more plausible version of Creelman’s actions at El Caney was offered by David Nasaw in *The Chief*, an admirably even-handed biography of Hearst published in 2000. Of the battle at El Caney, Nasaw said that Creelman, in the company of Hearst and his small party, mistakenly wandered onto the battlefield as the final American assault on the blockhouse was about to unfold. “Not fully understanding the lay of the land—and the position of the Spanish troops—Hearst’s entourage, on arriving at El Caney, strolled up the hill toward the Spanish fort,” Nasaw wrote. “Only when the American soldiers, lying prone on the ground to escape Spanish gunfire, shouted at the civilians to make themselves scarce, did those in the Hearst party realize that they were walking toward the Spanish fortifications. James Creelman drew fire from the Spanish soldiers and was wounded.”⁷⁴

Creelman, who recovered from his shoulder wound and filled another self-starring role in covering the Philippine insurrection in 1899, was an adherent of the “journalism of action,” a model or paradigm that Hearst developed in the late nineteenth century. The “journalism of action” anticipated that newspapers would go beyond editorializing about social ills and corruption, and inject themselves, conspicuously, as active agents in righting the wrongs of public life. Newspapers would actively fill the void of government inaction and incompetence and render any public service they could.⁷⁵ For a time at the end of the nineteenth century, Hearst’s vision of activist journalism attracted a fair amount of interest. No one embraced the “journalism of action” with more fervor than James Creelman.

He exulted in “the journalism of action,” which critics disparaged as “yellow journalism.” Creelman wrote in *On the Great Highway*: “How

little they know of ‘yellow journalism’ who denounce it! How swift they are to condemn its shrieking headlines, its exaggerated pictures, its coarse buffoonery, its intrusions upon private life, and its occasional inaccuracies! But how slow they are to see the steadfast guardianship of public interests which it maintains! How blind to its unfearing warfare against rascality, its detection and prosecution of crime, its costly searchings for knowledge throughout the earth, its exposures of humbug, its endless funds for the quick relief of distress!”⁷⁶

In offering the Remington-Hearst anecdote, which we now know is surely counterfeit, Creelman sought to illustrate the power and potential of the “journalism of action.” He succeeded instead in constructing a media myth of remarkable tenacity. It lives on as Creelman’s singular contribution to American journalism, an anecdote of timeless appeal that feeds popular mistrust of the news media and promotes the improbable notion the media are powerful and dangerous forces, so powerful they can even bring on a war.