

HOW THE NEW YORK EVENING POST COMMENTED ON THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

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A Newspaper of Reason

With regard to the story of the Spanish-American War, we are very familiar with the influences of yellow journalism, especially by some newspapers like the *Journal* and the *World*. However, we have always neglected a few papers such as the New York *Evening Post*, *Journal of Commerce* and the Boston *Transcript*, who refused to join the atrocity hunting and supported President McKinley in his efforts to avoid intervention.

In this report the writer would like to look over some selected editorials of the New York *Evening Post*, and to find out how it commented on the unnecessary war. Of course, it is difficult to make a complete and empirical analytical study due to the blurred microfilms and the limited time and space, but I believe the main points drawn from a number of editorials, still can give us a complete view of the *Evening Post's* stand.

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As we know, the *Evening Post* under its outstanding editor, Edwin L. Godkin, had opposed jingoism. In 1883, Godkin wrote admirably and appealed to the reason of his readers rather than to their emotions. "My notion is that the *Evening Post* ought to make a specialty of being the paper to which sober-minded people would look at crises of this kind instead of hollering and belling and shouting platitudes"1

Anti-Jingoism

First of all, after the Cuban revolution was launched on Feb. 24, 1895, most editors of New York papers seemed unable to determine the seriousness of the movement. The *Evening Post* believed from the start that the revolution was serious. In its editorial (Feb. 26, 1895), it said "that Spain is seriously troubled over Cuban affairs may be safely inferred from her pursuing at the same moment the policy of concession and the policy of repression."

Of course, Spain had a hard fight on her hands at that time. While most American newspapers denounced Spanish rule in Cuba and sympathized with the Cuban cause, Godkin was primarily concerned over a jingoistic American imperialist response which would undoubtedly include American intervention in the struggle. He regarded the rebellion as

1 Ogden, Rollo, *Life and Letters of E.L. Godkin*, (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1907), Vol. 2, p. 127.

a Spanish problem in which the U.S. had little interest and no right to interfere. The editorial of March 30, 1895 said: "It would be much more in keeping with the infantile years of the King if he had sent a small company of soldiers, and these not very heavily armed, to put an end to this Cuban rebellion instead of entering on a course of intimidation."

As a matter of fact, some Americans at this stage advocated not only intervention, but also ultimate annexation. The *Evening Post* was, of course, even more hostile to the idea. Godkin opposed Cuban annexation on the principle that the annexation of all lands inhabited by alien peoples was undesirable. On March 26, 1895, his editorial said: "Does not Mr. Proctor (a U.S. senator and annexationist) know that intense Americans never ask how we are to govern distant lands and mongrel races after we get them If the Cubans are undesirable, what are the Hawaiians, what are the Samoans, what are the other nondescript islanders that Lodge (U.S. senator) says we must annex?" He continued sarcastically: "Does not Mr. Proctor know what the instantaneous effect of American institutions upon alien peoples is certain to be? Can he not see them becoming at first contact with our politics, industrious and sober students of the Constitution, enemies of corruption, good Republicans?"

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A Nugget to the News-hungry Press

On March 8, 1895, the Spanish gunboat *Conde de Venadito* fired on the U.S. merchant ship *Allianca*. This event proved a nugget to the news-hungry press. Some papers wrote their headlines "Our Flag Fired On" or "The American Flag Has Been Insulted".² But the *Evening Post* failed to join in the outcry against Spain. The editorial of March 19, 1895 said that "we should treat it as a private gentleman would a private insult—not do anything until the committing party acknowledged it as intentional."

The *Evening Post's* editorial also challenged some New York papers saying: "a look askance at the flag cuts them like a knife, a gun pointed our way makes their hearts quiver and their eyes fill with burning tears, and a shot, an actual shot, constitutes a deadly insult which cannot be wiped out, except in double-lettered editorials and a sale of at least eleven extra copies." (Mar. 14, 1895) And "the advocacy of war by a newspaper ought to operate as legal notice that the editor-in-chief is willing to serve on shipboard in some capacity Nothing is more shocking than the preparation of the public mind for hostilities by persons who do not propose to fight themselves, but do expect to make money out of the spectacle of other men's deaths and destruction." (Mar. 15, 1895)

² Wisan, Joseph E., *The Cuban Crises As Reflected in the New York Press* (N.Y.: Columbia Univ., 1934), p. 71.

On the Other Side-Cuba & Spain

Anyhow, most papers approved the method of warfare adopted by the insurgents, but the *Evening Post* called attention to the other side of the picture. According to Senator Hale's statement that greater atrocities were committed by the rebels than by the Spanish forces, the *Evening Post* pointed out on March 10, 1896: "This fact has been leaking out for some time, the answer of the jingo politicians and newspapers is that this mode of warfare is excusable in those who are struggling for 'liberty' but not for their oppressors --- an answer which does not go far to help families whose fields have been devastated, their houses and sugar mills burned, and themselves, if not slaughtered, turned into the highway to perish."

Additionally, the *Evening Post* also tried to understand the Spanish problem, so it tried to interpret editorially on May 18, 1896, the reasons Spain could not grant home rule to Cuba or renounce the trouble-making island outright. It said, "we suppose no party or form of government in Spain could do that and live. The sentiment of national dignity and honor seems now to attach itself chiefly to the retention of Cuba. Spain may be impoverished, but she will maintain her lofty tone to the end." And Godkin attacked the narrow mercantilistic policy of Spain, claiming that "The commercial policy of the eighteenth century dominates Spain in her relations to her colonies and to other countries as thoroughly as it did in 1750."

During the final week of 1897, publication of the full text of Spain's grant of autonomy precipitated a flood of journalistic criticism of her intentions. Even Godkin attacked the limited grant, "even if put forward in perfect good faith and operated with the best intentions, would prove only a mockery and a source of fresh disaster to the Cubans." (Dec. 23, 1897)

"De Lome Letter" and The "Maine Incident"

When the debate had arisen among press, congress, and politicians, Godkin proclaimed President Cleveland's stand a triumph over jingoism. (Dec. 4, 1895)

He also thought that a recognition of belligerency between the Spanish Government and Cuban Revolutionary Forces would be disadvantageous to the U.S. (Feb. 29, 1896)

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The conservative journal was hopeful that new President McKinley's policy would not differ materially from that of the old one. Yet Godkin was deeply worried about this matter: "It is certain that he (McKinley) will do everything in his power to restrain the wrath of the Republican Jingo, but can he do it? A party that has been for four years raging like a lion for a foreign war may not find it so easy to reform and lead the sweet, submissive life of a lamb, even in the green pastures of power and patronage." (Jan. 16, 1897)

When the famous "De Lome Letter" was published, the *Evening Post* was much more sympathetic, but agreed that he (De Lome) must go. It said "an experienced diplomat, who had maintained himself in a position of extreme difficulty with great resource and skill; a Minister, moreover, who had prided himself almost arrogantly on his 'correctness', and had scarcely concealed his scorn of the rough-and-ready diplomacy of Americans, he is brought low in one day by a letter thief. The chances were a million to one that this particular letter would never see the light; but it was De Lome's bad luck to have the one chance go against him" (Feb. 10, 1898)

The President's order on the so-called "friendly naval visits at Cuban ports" evidently became the cause of the *Maine* Incident. *The Evening Post* disliked the President's act and attributed it to a desire to placate the more aggressive elements of his party. It said, "what this step amounts to is a willingness to disregard Spanish sensibilities and risk the effect on American inflammabilities. What has moved the President to take this step? There is much guessing, but the strong probability is that he was told that he had to do something to appease the Republicans in Congress" (Jan. 25, 1898)

The Challenge to Yellow Journalism

While most papers encouraged more hostilities to Spain, Godkin warned on March 2, 1896 "All these doings are

wicked and they point to a reign of militarism the end of which no man can foresee. They will give rise to a new demand for forts, battleships, big guns, war materials and all things that go to make a hell upon earth."

Early in 1897, Godkin considered again that the sensational papers were the source of greatest danger. Especially harmful were exaggerated reports concerning the mistreatment of Americans in Cuba. He said, "A lying and reckless press is responsible for a good part of the humiliating scene in the Senate." (Feb. 26, 1897)

And then, the *Evening Post* lamented that "nobody appears to know how much discount should be made for the sensational tendencies of those newspapers to which the public is indebted for most of its information." (Aug. 26, 1897)

After destruction of the *Maine* on Feb. 15, 1898, the *Evening Post* devoted as much editorial space to denouncing the war hawks as to the *Maine* itself. Especially to the yellow journalists, Godkin said: "A thousand different explanations have been offered by editors and reporters who were not there, and a thousand different pictorial illustrations of the scene have been given by persons who did not see it." (Feb. 18, 1898)

Furthermore, on the next day, Godkin directly attacked the *Journal* and the *World*. He said, "nothing so disgraceful as the behavior of two of these newspapers this week

has been known in the history of American journalism. Gross misrepresentation of the facts, deliberate invention of tales calculated to excite the public, and wanton recklessness in the construction of headlines which even outdid these inventions, have combined to make the issues of the most widely circulated newspapers firebrands [scattered broadcast throughout the country It is a crying shame that men should work such mischief simply in order to sell more papers." (Feb. 19, 1898)

The Unnecessary War Is Inevitable

Emery wrote in his book,³ "other newspapers carried extensive quotations from Senator Proctor's speech or printed the text in full, Godkin instead sought to minimize the impact of the speech by argument in his editorial column". And he was merely stimulated to a renewed attack upon intervention and unnecessary war. (Mar. 18, 1898) He attacked Congress on April 6, 1898 that it had become "almost a mob"; that it seemed "to have gone crazy for the first time in its existence at such a critical juncture as the present." The House offered a solution on April 13, 1898 directing the President to intervene to the end of the war in Cuba, most N. Y. newspapers, of course, were very happy. The *Evening Post* alone condemned the "hasty and ill-advised action." (Apr. 13, 1898)

³ Emery, Edwin, *The Press and America*, (N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 433.

Consequently, on April 16, 1898, the Senate embodied in its resolutions a clause recognizing the *Republic of Cuba*. The *Evening Post* on its editorial of the same day continued its opposition to the war. The voice is "the feeling grows stronger day by day that we are drifting into a war with Spain - - - a war which is altogether unnecessary, which might be avoided honorably and, which will not be justified by history where we should find deliberation we see rashness; where we should find the greatest aversion to war and the strongest determination to pursue peaceful measures to the furthest possible limits, we see denounced all peace advocates and the champions of war winning over even those who should be our reliance in moments of passion It is a melancholy situation to observe; it will be a melancholy chapter in American history."

Actually, the war was inevitable after McKinley signed the Congressional resolution regarding hostility to Spain on April 20, 1898. The *Evening Post*, critical to the last, could only hope that the nation would win the war as honorably and quickly as possible. "We have done everything in our power to prevent this lamentable result Now that war seems inevitable, every interest of the nation and the world demands that the shortest possible job should be made of it."

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An Interesting 'IF'

As Mott said in his book, "the 'ifs' of history are

usually more amusing than profitable, but there seems to be great probability in the frequently reiterated statement that if Hearst had not challenged Pulitzer to a circulation contest at the time of the Cuban insurrection, there would have been no Spanish-American War.”⁴ Yet I should say, no matter what kind of circulation competition existed at that time, if most newspapers did their job as the *Evening Post* had, the war would not have come about. This is an interesting ‘if’, but I think that historians have tested the hypothesis and found it to be true.

⁴ Mott, Frank L, *American Journalism*, (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1962), p.527.