

Hearst's report on the Sinking of the Maine

"Shameful Treachery": Hearst's *Journal* Blames Spain

On February 15, 1898, an explosion ripped through the American battleship *Maine*, sinking the ship and killing 260 sailors. Americans responded with outrage, assuming that Spain, which controlled Cuba as a colony, had sunk the ship. Two months later, the slogan "Remember the *Maine*" carried the U.S. into war with Spain. In the midst of the hysteria, few Americans paid much attention to the report issued two weeks before the U.S. entry into the war by a Court of Inquiry appointed by President McKinley. The report stated that the committee could not definitively assign blame to Spain for the sinking of the *Maine*. Many historians have focused on the role of the "yellow press" (sensationalist newspapers so named because they waged cutthroat circulation battles over comic strips like the popular "Yellow Kid") in stirring up sentiment that propelled the U.S. into its first imperialist war. This editorial in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, from February 17, 1898, pointedly blamed Spain for the sinking of the *Maine*, providing an example of how the "yellow press" covered the incident.

SPAIN'S VICTORY OF PEACE

To five hundred thousand Cubans starved or otherwise murdered have been added an American battleship and three hundred American sailors lost as the direct result of the dilatory policy of our government toward Spain. If we had stopped the war in Cuba when duty and policy alike urged us to do the *Maine* would have been afloat today, and three hundred homes, now desolate, would have been unscathed.

It was an accident, they say. Perhaps it was, but accident or not, it would never have happened if there had been peace in Cuba, as there would have been if we had done our duty. And it was an accident of a remarkably convenient kind for Spain. Two days ago we had five battleships in the Atlantic. Today we have four. A few more such accidents will leave us at the mercy of a Spanish fleet.

Two years ago our naval superiority over Spain was overwhelming. Two successive administrations have waited patiently for Spain to overcome that disadvantage by buying and building ships enough to bring her navy up to an equality with ours. That process proving too slow, it is now being hastened by the accidental destruction of the American fleet. At this rate it ought not to take long for Spain's naval strength to surpass our own.

As to the immediate cause of the disaster that has bereaved so many American households and robbed the American navy of one of the most valued elements of its fighting strength, we heed

Captain Sigsbee's appeal to sound judgment. The Government has set an investigation on foot, and the *Journal* has independently undertaken another. Between them the truth will soon be known. If it be found that the Spanish authorities have fought about this calamity, so profitable to themselves, no power from the White House to Wall Street will be able to restrain the American people from exacting a terrible retribution. And Spain's innocence must be clearly proven. All the circumstances of the case fix the burden of proof upon her. The *Maine* was lying in one of her harbors, under the guns of her fortresses, with the warships at hand. The removal of the *Maine* meant a tremendous reduction in the odds against her in the event of the conflict that all Spanish Havana desired. The chances against such a removal by accident were millions to one, and yet the removal occurred. In such circumstances polite expressions of regret count for nothing. The investigations must clearly disclose Spain's innocence or her guilt will be assumed.

But while we must wait for definite evidence before formally charging Spain with the shameful treachery, which all the world is ready to suspect her, we need wait for nothing before instituting such a change of policy it will relieve us of the fear of future troubles. The anarchy in Cuba, which for three years has reached the sympathies of all Americans but the dehumanized stock-jobbers of Wall-Street, has become an intolerable evil to American interests. It has destroyed three hundred seamen. We have endured it long enough. Whether a Spanish torpedo sank the *Maine* or not, peace must be restored in Cuba at once. We cannot have peace without fighting for it, let us fight and have it over with. It is not likely that the entire Spanish navy would be able to do us as much harm in open battle as we suffered in Havana Harbor in one second for a state of things that was neither peace or war.

The investigation into the injuries if the *Maine* may take a week, but the independence of Cuba can be recognized today. The Spanish Government can receive today such a notice as freed Mexico when it was addressed to Louis Napoleon. The *Vesuvius* can be recalled today from her odious work of doing police service for Spain against the Cuban patriots and sent to join the defenders of America. The American fleet can move on Havana today and plant the flag of the Cuban Republic on Morro and Cabana. It is still strong enough for that in the absence of further "accidents." And if we take such action as that, it is extremely unlikely that any other accident will happen.

Source: New York *Journal*, 17 February 1898.