

War Correspondence

Among the dispatches of James Creelman, a prominent correspondent during the Spanish-American War, is his account of the Battle of El Caney. Creelman describes the strangeness he feels merely recording the action of the battle, prompting him to suggest to a general that he himself should lead a bayonet charge up a hill. "This was hardly the business of a correspondent," he admits, but the general grants him the opportunity. "Who will judge a man in such a moment?" Creelman writes. "Who can analyze his motives? Can he do it himself, with his heart leaping wildly and his imagination on fire? There was the Spanish flag, a glorious prize for my newspaper."

The rush is successful. Creelman finds the Spanish flag lying on the ground, picks it up, and waves it, taunting Spanish troops dug in at another position. He draws fire; a bullet rips into him. He's placed with other wounded soldiers, the captured flag covering his body. He lapses in and out of consciousness. Delirious, he hears "Copy! Copy! An hour to spare before the paper goes to press!" He opens his eyes.

"I saw Mr. Hearst, the proprietor of the *New York Journal*, a straw hat with a bright ribbon on his head, a revolver at his belt, and a pencil and note-book in his hand," Creelman writes. "The man who had provoked the war had come to see the result with his own eyes and, finding one of his correspondents prostrate, was doing the work himself."

"I'm sorry you're hurt, but wasn't it a splendid fight?" Hearst asks Creelman. "We must beat every paper in the world."

In general, the newspaper coverage of the ousting of Spain from Cuba in 1897-1898 established the power of the press to manipulate the news and, with reporters at hand to aggrandize newly commissioned officers, to create instant American heroes. Creelman's and other correspondents' ambivalence toward the carnage they witnessed was overwhelmed by excitement at being in the thick of things. Holding those feelings together was a sense of righteousness about Cuba's freedom and moral



Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and Richard Harding Davis

indignation toward the Spaniards, who were routinely depicted as barbarous jackals.

The hero of another correspondent's dispatches was only a slightly more likely figure than Creelman's Hearst. Richard Harding Davis wrote about a stout politician nearing 40 who had been commissioned a colonel among a group of volunteer cowboys and a few Eastern swells. Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first public figures to truly understand the power of newspapermen who were manipulating the news. A few years earlier, when he was police commissioner of New York City, Roosevelt had invited the young Davis to accompany him as he made midnight rounds to check on his patrolmen.

In Cuba, Davis described Roosevelt as a decisive leader who, "mounted high on horseback, and charging the rifle-pits at a gallop and quite alone, made you feel

that you would like to cheer." And, when writing about Roosevelt, that's precisely what the correspondent did.

Davis was the preeminent reporter of the day, a dashing idol of the emerging middle class whom Hearst once paid \$500 just to cover a Yale-Princeton football game. The year before the war broke out, Hearst hired Davis and artist Frederic Remington to report on the budding Cuban rebel movement. Bad weather, however, stranded them in lethargic Key West for weeks. In letters to his mother and father, Davis describes his growing frustration with a tedious routine of eating, reading, smoking cigars, placating Remington, and having his boots shined.

An anecdote from one of his letters sums up the ram-bunctious attitude of the new breed of reporters born a century ago. "I have two boys to black [my boots] at the same time every morning and pay the one who does his the better of the two," Davis writes. "It generally ends in a fight so that affords diversion." ■



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