
From Liberation to Conquest adds to recent scholarship on visual and popular culture aspects of U.S. imperialism around 1898. In contrast to accounts framed around particular cultural producers and forms of cultural production, it starts with familiar narratives pertaining to the U.S. interventions of 1898 and uses visual and cultural analysis to enrich and, in some cases, shift our understandings of these events. Although the ground it covers is well trodden—involving U.S. depictions of suffering Cubans, brutal Spanish villains, manly U.S. saviors, and ostensibly childlike and otherwise racialized islanders, to name a few topics—it provides a number of new insights.

Bonnie Miller goes beyond earlier discussions of the passive Cuban woman by considering depictions of Cuban women's purposeful manipulation of their sexuality for political ends. In contrast to scholarship emphasizing the celebration of U.S. military masculinity during the Cuban campaign, she situates such celebratory accounts in the context of U.S. military negligence, which contributed to a typhoid epidemic among the ranks. Miller finds that well before the Philippine campaign led to concerns about degeneracy among U.S. forces, critical reports highlighting the frailty, sickness, and incapacity of U.S. servicemen replaced images of suffering Cuban civilians. In her commendably nuanced reading of military manhood, Miller also reminds us that the U.S. public did not always treat servicemen as heroes—in one parade, onlookers pelted marching soldiers with food, perhaps due to the imperial turn that the war had taken.

Miller is concerned not only with the contents of press coverage, but also with the production and cultural afterlives of that coverage. She thoughtfully assesses the ways that publishers molded news stories to fit familiar and popular narrative conventions. She investigates how the press made some battles—especially the battles of Manila Bay, Santiago Bay, and San Juan Hill—into signal events and some servicemen, such as Richmond P. Hobson, into military celebrities. Going beyond a mere cataloguing of the different racial stereotypes applied to the nation's new subjects, she carefully tracks how racialized depictions of Filipinos changed over time (though with little attention to the positive appraisals mustered on occasion by anticolonialists). She contrasts coverage of the war in Cuba with
that in the Philippines, finding that only in the latter conflict did images of
dead bodies figure prominently.

As part of her emphasis on cultural production, Miller provides some
coverage of who did the reporting, which of their stories found audiences
(the ones on U.S. military successes more often than the ones on U.S. mili-
tary shortcomings), and how censorship and communications technology
affected news transmission. She looks at a variety of means of communicat-
ing ideas about Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines, including plays, world’s
fairs, Wild West shows, battle reenactments, parades, cinema, celebrations,
photography, souvenirs, and advertisements. Miller finds that “the celebra-
tion of U.S. militarism in visual and popular media was so widespread that
escaping its influence was nearly impossible” (p. 118).

So what were the political ramifications of all this coverage and cul-
tural engagement? Miller rejects the lingering thesis that the yellow press
whipped up sufficient frenzy to lead the nation into war. It had limited cir-
culation—at most 3 percent of the nation’s population—and a reputation
for excess and misrepresentation. The president, she points out, looked
elsewhere for news. So what about the larger media environment that the
book attempts to characterize through a sampling of forty-three newspa-
pers and periodicals? Miller seems loathe to grant them too much influence
either, lest that undermine President McKinley’s accountability. By setting
up the issue as a matter of either presidential or press responsibility, Miller
misses opportunities to more fully situate McKinley (and the congressmen
vested with war-making power) in their larger cultural context.

By skirting the relations between policymakers and popular culture,
Miller leaves her readers with a fuzzy sense of causality. From Liberation
to Conquest is sometimes better at explaining how war became a spectacle
than what the implications of being a spectacle were. Miller seems torn
between arguing that representations of war were too inconsistent and
multivalent to have specific political consequences and that the spectacu-
lar production of war advanced U.S. imperialism.

Although her close readings are very good, her finding that the drama,
heroism, and action that characterized depictions of events in Cuba did not
figure so largely in accounts of the Philippine-American War calls for fur-
ther explanation. If sensationalizing the Cuban crisis proved a moneymaker
for the press, why not for the Philippines too? This question is all the more
pressing due to Miller’s concluding claim that the cultural productions
of the period “functioned to secure the foothold of image, spectacle, and drama in American media” (p. 259).

Wide though the scope of this research is, especially in visual materials (many of which appear in the book), it is worth noting that From Liberation to Conquest focuses on publications aimed at native-born white Americans. It pays little attention to Cuban, Hawaiian, and Philippine self-representation efforts.

All things considered, however, this is a lively work of cultural analysis, well-suited to classroom use (despite the absence of a bibliography). It is of likely interest not only to those who would understand U.S. imperialism around 1898 but also to anyone who has ever wondered how media-made spectacles came to attract more attention than the on-the-ground complexities behind them.

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