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American Journalists in the Great War

Chris Dubbs

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AMERICAN JOURNALISTS IN THE GREAT WAR

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American Journalists in the Great War

*Rewriting the Rules of
Reporting*

CHRIS DUBBS

University of Nebraska Press
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Finally, I must salute the men and women who inspired me to write this book—the American journalists who covered the Great War. They lived a great adventure and shared it with the rest of us. This book is dedicated to their memory.

AMERICAN JOURNALISTS IN THE GREAT WAR

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Introduction

In 1904, when American war correspondent Stanley Washburn traveled with the Japanese army, a telegraph wire extended from a mud hut at army headquarters, across hundreds of miles of barren Manchurian plain, and over the Korean mountains to Fusan, where it connected by cable to Nagasaki and from there to the outside world. It was through that link that Washburn's editor at the *Chicago Daily News* could reach him with the news that the Russo-Japanese War had ended. Washburn knew it before the Japanese army. The next morning he pounded out a story on what the army thought about peace and cabled it off. It ran in the *Daily News* that afternoon. Before Washburn could catch his breath, revolution stirred in Russia, and he was off to his next assignment.

Stanley Washburn was what was known in the trade as a “cable man.” The job owed its existence to the vast network of telegraph lines and undersea cables that crisscrossed the world as the twentieth century began. The first transpacific cable had just been completed in 1903. Washburn chased down wars and political upheaval in any dark corner of the globe, tethered himself to a telegraph line, and filled it with stories that would interest newspaper readers in the American Midwest. His job was to inform readers about the war—even wars in which America did not participate—but also to maintain their interest. A good war sold newspapers. A good reporter found a hundred ways to squeeze the juice out of a conflict. When public interest in one conflict waned, Washburn's editor sent him to the next. Fortunately for American newspapers, the world never lacked for conflicts or adventurous individuals wanting to report on them.

If a war seemed substantial enough, an editor sent in another breed of war correspondent: the “feature man.” These were the literary artists who had established their fame by writing novels, short stories, and plays. Beginning in the 1890s, writers such as Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Richard Harding Davis popularized a brand of war reporting that used fiction techniques and often placed them at the center of a war adventure. These men could make war entertaining and mold public opinion. Whereas cable men worked anonymously, the names of feature men ran beneath banner headlines and graced the covers of magazines.

The two decades that straddled the start of the twentieth century provided both types of war reporter with ample opportunity to practice their craft in multinational wars, civil wars, revolutions, colonial disputes, and Latin American incursions. So in August 1914, when the world found itself suddenly embroiled in the largest war in history, America enjoyed a surplus of veteran war correspondents. They hurried across the Atlantic confident that they would cover this new conflict in the same way they had covered so many others. They would attach themselves to one army or another and cable home captivating accounts of battles. They would write stirring stories of their own war-zone adventures. However, as it turned out, little about this new war was like any other. Its scale, brutality, duration, novelty, censorship, and social impact challenged news organizations to keep the public informed. It was the largest story any publication had ever covered.

The very long four years of the Great War brought one complete evolutionary cycle of war reporting. At the start journalists were totally banned from the war zone. Those few who ventured in were arrested, accused of spying, and sometimes threatened with execution. By the end of the war, every nation had learned to appreciate the power of publicity and understood that news, just like any other resource of war, had to be managed.

No group of journalists participated more fully in this evolution—indeed, helped to shape it—than those from the United States. Being from the largest neutral country gave them the advantage of being able to operate from both sides of the battle line. Amer-

ican publications, unlike their heavily censored counterparts in the warring nations, could provide fuller and more accurate war coverage. Once printed in American newspapers, those same articles were often then republished in the Allied press, giving their readers a level of candor unavailable from their own correspondents. When the United States joined the fight in the spring of 1917, American reporters took on a new role. They chronicled the transformation of raw American troops into effective soldiers and followed them into battle.

Throughout the war, American readers were better informed about the conflict than those in any other country. All reporters struggled against severe censorships, but the variety and depth of American reporting, from the battle lines and behind the scenes, by cable men and feature men (and women), helped to define for readers the exact nature of this modern, industrial war, its toll on individuals and nations, and its implications for the future.

American Journalists in the Great War examines the unique role played by these trailblazing reporters in World War I. It follows the evolution of news reporting during the war: the variety of writers, the types of stories, struggles against censorship, battlefield experiences, hair-raising adventures, the reporters' moments of fame or infamy, and the landmark eyewitness stories that helped to define how we view the Great War today.

CHAPTER ONE

Prelude to Armageddon

I have been under fire without fighting; known the comradeship of arms without bearing arms, and the hardships and the humors of the march with only an observer's incentive.

—War correspondent FREDERICK PALMER, *The Last Shot*, 1914

In early 1914 when anyone spoke of “the war,” it referred to the conflict in Mexico, otherwise known as the Tampico Affair. In the midst of Mexico's civil war, a dizzying series of alleged atrocities and insults against U.S. citizens and U.S. pride prompted the United States to mass an army on its southern border and sail a fleet into the port of Veracruz. The moves set off alarm bells among that distinct brotherhood of journalists who specialized in war, who knew war more intimately than most of the soldiers and generals they wrote about: the war correspondents.

The major city newspapers and large-circulation magazines rushed their veteran war reporters to Veracruz, men who had covered the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Insurrection, the Russo-Japanese War, the Boer War, assorted Balkan wars, and dozens of other conflicts over the past few decades. The United States had never been so well supplied with experienced war correspondents. *Collier's Weekly* hired novelist Jack London and photographer Jimmy Hare. Reporter-illustrator John McCutcheon went down for the *Chicago Tribune*, Robert Dunn for the *New York Evening Post*, Frederick Palmer for *Everybody's Magazine*, and Chicago reporter Medill McCormick for the *Times* of London.

The legendary war reporter Richard Harding Davis sailed from Galveston with the commander of U.S. forces, General Freder-

ick Funston. Davis became the first correspondent to be officially credentialed by the army for this campaign. The fifty-year-old Davis had been enticed into covering yet another war by a lucrative joint offer from the *New York Tribune* and the Wheeler Syndicate, guaranteeing that his unique brand of war reporting would reach a large audience.

Davis expected his stay to be brief. Mexico's presidential pretender Victoriano Huerta could barely hold off his revolutionary rivals, let alone withstand the United States Army. Funston would likely battle his way the 250 miles to Mexico City, making light work of the Mexican army, while Davis kept the telegraph cable hot with rousing, eyewitness reports. Other correspondents might record the "morbid realism" of war, but Davis's colorful prose focused on that brand of human drama that only war provided and on his own, often perilous, involvement in the fighting. Readers loved it.

General Funston had his own ideas about how any fighting would be covered by the press. He wanted to avoid the scandalous free-for-all that had occurred during the Spanish-American War, when reporters of every description swarmed over Cuba like maddened tourists pursuing adventure and souvenir experiences. They had operated virtually without censorship, and their newspapers exaggerated and sensationalized events. Despite the vows of secrecy to which correspondents swore, the invasion of Cuba was about "as well advertised as the arrival of a circus in town."

Things would be different in Mexico. The number of reporters would be limited and their role strictly defined. Only the press associations and a few dozen newspapers and magazines could send reporters, and for each they must post a substantial bond to cover their expenses and ensure their good behavior. Reporters could not just wander off on their own in search of a story. Instead, they would be given official accreditation, which would allow them to travel with the army, enjoying most of the privileges of officers or neutral military attachés. Their dispatches would have to pass the scrutiny of a military censor.

While he awaited the fighting, Davis took up residence at the fin-

est hotel in town. Each evening, precisely at six, he donned his dinner jacket and dined on the hotel's open-air arcade, where he could observe the pageantry of the town plaza. Over the past twenty-five years, Davis had worked his way up from a beat reporter to a national celebrity, gaining fame as a journalist, fiction writer, and dramatist. At times in his illustrious career his reportage appeared in a major magazine, simultaneous with one of his novels being a bestseller and several of his plays running on Broadway. Middle age may have rounded his dashing good looks, but he still cut the figure of a gentleman, instantly recognizable to all who saw him.

In Veracruz Davis regularly hosted dinners for General Funston and his staff, along with select correspondents. The correspondents enjoyed a relaxed camaraderie with the officers, many of whom they knew from previous conflicts. Their dinner conversation might range over fighting in the Philippines or the United States' interventions in Panama, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, or Honduras. Veracruz's other senior war correspondent, Frederick Palmer, fit well into those dinners. Hardly any world conflict in the past two decades had escaped the attention of either or both Davis and Palmer. They could regale the guests with tales of wars in Europe, Africa, or Asia. Although the two men shared so many experiences, in the summer of 1914 they stood as curious bookends on their profession.

At the age of forty-one, Frederick Palmer's reportorial résumé already included coverage of the Greco-Turkish War, the Philippine-American War, the Boxer Rebellion, the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Balkan War of 1912. He missed the Spanish-American War while in the frozen north covering the Klondike gold rush. Over half a million readers followed his articles on war and adventure in *Everybody's Magazine*.

At that very moment, bookstore shelves held Palmer's just-released novel *The Last Shot*, about a modern European war of unparalleled scale. In Palmer's scenario two European nations put an astounding eight million men on the battlefield. With the deadliest cannons and rifles, supported by fleets of dirigibles and airplanes, they fight a nightmarishly modern, industrial, scientific war.

Their leaders are not generals in the traditional sense but rather professors of mathematics, able to compute the best formulas for death and destruction. There is no pageantry or noble cause in Palmer's fictional war. No heroes, no right or wrong. Just slaughter. The end comes when individual soldiers, reduced to dumb, obedient cogs in a modern war machine, regain their individuality and brush away "outworn militaristic traditions and make war forever impossible." For now it was seen as speculative fiction, in the vein of H. G. Wells. Within a few months it would be hailed as an extraordinarily prophetic piece of writing.

Although only nine years Palmer's senior, Richard Harding Davis had one foot more firmly rooted in the nineteenth century. His writing tapped into a mix of youthful idealism, noble causes, polished manners, and American exceptionalism that defined the Progressive Era. Davis had covered the same wars as Palmer but cemented his war correspondent reputation during the Spanish-American War, in the heyday of "yellow journalism," when newspapers sensationalized news—and sometimes *invented* news—to build circulation. Sent to Cuba two years before the United States went to war with Spain, Davis wrote dramatic stories of Spain's brutal treatment of Cubans rebelling against Spanish rule. The bodies of fallen rebels had been mutilated, he reported. To prevent the civilian population from aiding the rebels, Spain set up internment camps, where thousands of women and children died of disease and starvation. The concept of journalistic objectivity had not yet taken firm root in the profession, allowing Davis to make such observations as, "The cannibal, who has been supposed hitherto to be the lowest grade of man, is really of a higher caste than these Spanish murderers." Davis bluntly called for U.S. intervention.

Good and evil, right and wrong, heroes and villains existed in Davis's wars. When the United States eventually declared war on Spain, Davis lionized American fighters, in particular Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders. Sitting around the campfire, Davis could chat with these warriors about books, opera, travel, and plays. In battle he could attest to their grit and bravery. These

men were not mindless cogs in a military machine but rather perfect role models for the modern American gentleman forced into war to preserve the values of civilization. His reporting made a hero out of Roosevelt and smoothed his path to the presidency.

Only months before Davis arrived in Veracruz, America's fledgling movie industry produced one of its first-ever feature-length films based on Davis's novel *Soldiers of Fortune*. The plot involved an American engineer caught in a Latin American revolution who leads a ragtag group of fighters against the uprising. As advisor on the movie set in Cuba, Davis coached the actors on how an American hero dressed and behaved when suppressing a native revolt. The story was a paean to past wars rather than a vision of the future.

Soldiers and correspondents alike paid a curious deference to the mythical Richard Harding Davis—but they didn't know quite what to make of him. The best known and highest paid war correspondent, a cultural icon, and a caricature of manliness, Davis crafted war reporting that could be melodramatic, naive, jingoistic, or brilliantly evocative. Regardless, it ran in countless newspapers and the best magazines. On the movie set in Cuba, Davis joked that with one machine gun and two thousand soldier-actors borrowed from the movie, he could clean up the whole mess in Mexico. Correspondent Robert Dunn described Davis in Veracruz dressed like a cavalry colonel in khaki, with military-style campaign ribbons on his chest.

To the great disappointment of the waiting journalists, the United States chose not to invade Mexico but to submit the dispute to mediation by Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Although the correspondents in Veracruz protested to editors that nothing was happening and they should come home, editors held out. The United States would not park an army on the border and thirty-five warships in the harbor unless it intended to do some fighting.

To satisfy editorial offices impatient for war news, correspondents wrote behind-the-scenes stories about the American crack-down on bullfights and brothels, the battle against city garbage

and flies, the armament of U.S. battleships, and the first hydroplanes deployed by the navy. Reporters cruised on a destroyer, went on scouting missions with the cavalry, visited marines on sentry duty, and flew in the hydroplanes for a breathtaking view of the ships in the fleet. When Davis went aloft and flew inland, Mexican troops fired on his plane. Coming under fire from the enemy while soaring in the novel contraption of a seaplane made for a great story.

The Wheeler Syndicate made arrangements for Davis to interview the dictator Huerta in Mexico City. It would be a difficult, possibly dangerous, assignment that violated military restrictions on journalists. But if he brought it off, it would be the biggest scoop of that quiet summer. Along with Frederick Palmer and Medill McCormick, Davis set off by train on the unauthorized excursion.

At their first stop, the trio was promptly arrested and marched through a village by four barefoot boys armed with rifles and bayonets—an ignominious predicament for the seasoned war reporters. A local official deemed Palmer's U.S. passport insufficient for him to continue and sent him to walk back to Veracruz through the desert. Davis and McCormick, who had taken the precaution of acquiring letters from the Brazilian and British ambassadors in Mexico City, were allowed to continue. However, when they arrived in Mexico City, they were immediately rearrested and put on a train back to Veracruz. The hoped-for interview with Huerta never happened, but the adventure itself, the mere pursuit of news against obstacles and hardships—the more the better—always provided sufficient fodder for a colorful story.

Near the end of June, Davis finally despaired of seeing any fighting and sailed for home, just days before the correspondents read in the El Paso newspaper about the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Subsequent reports of building tension in that region failed to rouse much interest from the reporters. That fractious corner of Europe—the Balkan “powder keg”—had become a journalistic cliché. Scarcely a year turned on the calendar without a minor Balkan war erupting.

Even though European powers built armies and competed in

the development of warships and weaponry, peace had reigned on the continent for the past forty years. A system of national alliances helped to maintain a “balance of power” that kept each country and each headstrong monarch in check. In idle moments correspondents might speculate about a cataclysm unleashed in Europe, but none believed it would happen. It was simply too horrendously unthinkable. Even Frederick Palmer, whose novel *The Last Shot* actually foretold just such a scenario, thought “all the repeated talk about its possibilities had only the conjectural interest of a collision between two planets.”

The correspondents were more likely to be interested in an article about Mexico’s civil war that had just appeared in the large-circulation *Metropolitan Magazine*, written by a young upstart journalist named John Reed. The previous year Reed had ingratiated himself to one of Mexico’s revolutionary leaders, Francisco “Pancho” Villa, a move that landed him in the thick of battles and allowed him to share life with Villa’s fighters. His vivid accounts that began appearing in the *New York World* in February read more like fiction than the typical war report. “When Mr. Reed describes a battle, the reader sniffs powder,” one commentator noted. Not content to merely summarize military events, Reed painted impressionistic word pictures of the people, the land, and the undercurrent of revolutionary violence in the country.

With Villa’s army, Reed worked unfettered by military minders and stifling censorship. It was something more akin to the war correspondents of yesteryear who ranged freely over a war zone on horseback, immersed in the action, and cabling home exclusive stories. Reed had read Davis’s swashbuckling accounts of the Spanish-American War, and now people compared their styles. “Reed has done for Mexico what Richard Harding Davis and Stephen Crane did for the Spanish-American War,” one reviewer noted about Reed’s book *Insurgent Mexico*. However, Reed’s accounts tapped a deeper social and political vein that had never attracted Davis’s attention. Readers met Mexican characters and came to understand their motivations and aspirations. In short Reed had

taken ownership of the Mexico story. He was now back in New York, famous and feted as an expert on the conflict.

The bored correspondents languishing in Veracruz got the message. As the summer progressed, they turned their attention away from the idle U.S. Army and onto the country's bloody revolution. Reporters could avoid all entanglements with the U.S. military simply by entering Mexico via Texas. Frederick Palmer and John McCutcheon ventured into Mexico's northern provinces where competing revolutionary leaders seemed poised to attack each other or launch their own march on Mexico City.

Out from under the control of the military, Palmer gained a deep appreciation for the beleaguered Mexicans and a better understanding of the Mexican situation. He realized that the United States' rationale for intervention was merely a smokescreen for commercial interests and military glory. "All foreigners are in Mexico for money," he wrote, "and in the oil-fields the strife for control of oil-leases is more intense than that of other great enterprises in Mexico." It was a war story that Richard Harding Davis would never have written.

But at the tail end of America's "dud war" and Mexico's protracted revolution, a major conflict erupted in Europe. At the end of July urgent telegrams flew from editorial offices to the correspondents in Veracruz and the villages in northern Mexico—*Forget Mexico . . . War imminent in Europe . . . Hurry there*. Dozens of America's best war correspondents boarded trains and hurried home, eager to take on a war with greater potential for good stories. Mexico had served them as one final rehearsal for the Great War, but it in no way prepared them for what lay in store.