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A Delayed Revenge: “Yellow Journalism” and the Long Quest for Cuba, 1851–1898

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Abstract

Historians have long been intrigued by the role that the press played in McKinley’s decision to intervene in Cuba in 1898. Most, however, have focused their attention on the decade of the 1890s, ignoring the long history of interventionism aimed at Cuba. This essay uses the story of William L. Crittenden to explore the many instances where interventionists tried (and failed) to drum up support for Cuban intervention. Crittenden was executed by the Spanish in 1851 after a failed filibuster raid. Over the next four decades, interventionists wrote newspaper accounts, held boisterous public meetings, penned poems, and published novels that demanded revenge upon Spain. Yet Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Ulysses Grant, and Grover Cleveland did not choose to intervene. By focusing on nearly five decades as opposed to a single year, this essay calls into question the idea that the press reflected public opinion and challenges the larger assertion that the “Yellow Press” propelled the United States into a war with Spain. Whether they shouted “Remember the Maine,” “Remember the Virginius,” or “Remember Crittenden,” writers, editors, poets, and journalists simply did not have the power to control public opinion and certainly did not prove to be successful at manipulating presidents to intervene.

Keywords: yellow journalism; Spain; Cuba; intervention; William L. Crittenden

On April 25, 1898, the *Evening Bulletin* of Maysville, Kentucky, discussed the preparations that were underway for an invasion of Cuba. That very day, Congress had empowered President William McKinley to call upon the various states to raise volunteer regiments. Within Kentucky, Governor William O’Connell Bradley quickly worked to create a regiment of volunteers. The article in the *Evening Bulletin*, however, did not focus upon the causes of the war, nor did it mention the blowing up of the *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana, which had occurred in February. Instead, this writer noted that David R. Murray, a resident of Cloverport, Kentucky, had been “commissioned to raise a regiment of volunteers.” The next paragraph focused on Murray’s half-brother, William L. Crittenden, who had been executed in Cuba in 1851. The writer for the *Evening Bulletin* concluded the article with the observation: “the battle cry of Murray’s regiment will be ‘Remember Crittenden.’”¹

In 1898, editors talked familiarly of William L. Crittenden, a man who had died nearly fifty years before. Yet no scholarly biography exists of Crittenden and historians have relegated him to the status of a footnote.² This oversight is somewhat glaring, given that Crittenden's name appeared in newspapers, poems, songs, dime novels, and numerous political speeches. Up until the conclusion of the 1890s, newspapers and politicians discussed Crittenden's ill-fated expedition and retold the dramatic story of his execution in Cuba. This essay recaptures Crittenden's story, exploring the reasons why his name evoked such strong emotions during the nineteenth century and why it was quickly forgotten thereafter.

More than a mere biography, however, this essay focuses on the historical memory of William L. Crittenden, paying particular attention to how interventionists manipulated it after his execution. In 1851, interventionists loudly clamored for revenge against Spain, held public rallies, and called President Millard Fillmore a murderer. Yet he refused to act. A few years later, interventionists pressured the inexperienced Franklin Pierce to launch an invasion of Cuba. Instead, Pierce condemned filibustering. In 1873, interventionists issued a similar call, asking Ulysses Grant to intervene. He refused. Over twenty years later, jingoes printed stories of Spanish "atrocities" and challenged Grover Cleveland to intervene. He did not. While the circumstances were different in each decade, and while President William McKinley did eventually break with his predecessors, the recurring deployment of the Crittenden legend illuminates the difficulties that interventionists had when they attempted to manipulate public opinion and shape foreign policy.³ For nearly fifty years, they used a wide range of mediums, including newspapers, public speeches, and novels, to whip up support for intervention, with little success. In 1898, therefore, there was very little in the cries for intervention that was particularly new. "Remember the Maine" was merely an updated version of the classic cry of "Remember Crittenden."⁴

Crittenden and the Antebellum Cry for Intervention, 1848–1861

Expansionists had coveted Cuba since the early nineteenth century, but it was only after the U.S.-Mexican War had concluded in 1848 that they formulated plans to take the island. In 1849, a small expedition prepared to launch an invasion of Cuba, the first of what would become four filibuster expeditions between 1849 to 1851.⁵ The only two expeditions to make it to Cuba were led by Narciso López, a Spanish soldier who had served Spain loyally for decades before becoming wrapped up in the movement to free Cuba. Historians have debated whether or not López desired to annex Cuba to the United States, but whatever his ultimate ambitions, López primarily recruited Americans. In 1850, López raised a force of slightly over six hundred men to invade Cuba.⁶ This expedition landed in Cárdenas, Cuba, in the summer of 1850, but when no local help appeared, López and his men fled back to the United States.

Refusing to abandon his project, López began plotting another invasion. In 1851, he departed with slightly under five hundred men, having picked up a rumor that there was an uprising in Cuba. López set sail with a force he cobbled together in New Orleans, which included William Logan Crittenden, a veteran of the U.S.-Mexican War and nephew of John J. Crittenden, the attorney general of the United States.⁷ For reasons that remain unclear, Crittenden decided to join López's expedition. This proved to be a poor choice as the filibusters arrived in Cuba only to realize that there was no revolution. López and Crittenden were later captured and executed.⁸

Up until his execution, William L. Crittenden had led a relatively obscure life. He had graduated last in his class at West Point in 1845, served in the U.S.-Mexican War, and worked in the customs house in New Orleans. But his death catapulted him to fame. Crittenden was executed on August 16. In less than a week, the *Daily Crescent* of New Orleans discussed the manner of his death. "When the moment of execution came," the paper reported, "many, Colonel Crittenden, and Capt. Victor Kerr among them, refused to kneel with their backs to the executioners." The paper then added the line that would make Crittenden famous: "No," said the chivalrous Crittenden, "An American kneels only to his God, and always faces his enemy." At that point, the men "were shot down, and their brains were knocked out by clubbed muskets."⁹

Some papers did not merely report the news of Crittenden's death, but they used it as a justification for a full-scale invasion of Cuba. The *Daily Crescent*, to cite the most famous example, wrote: "In the eyes of outraged humanity, now, the war against the Spanish authorities of Cuba is a crusade, and sanctified by the sacredness of retribution for the butchered dead." It then observed: "let Spain look to it; the avengers will shortly be upon Cuban soil, and a fearful penalty will be exacted for the horrors and outrages of the sixteenth August."¹⁰ The *New York Herald* splashed the Cuba news on its front page, including one headline that read: "The Frightful Execution of Fifty Americans in Havana—Horrible Scenes—Insult to the American Flag."¹¹ In that same issue, it argued that the execution of Crittenden and his men had helped engender "a feeling against the government of Cuba, which nothing but sanguinary revenge will appease."¹² A paper in Mississippi called it a "cold-blooded massacre of the fifty-one young men" and argued that "thousands will flock to the standard of Cuba, and raise their good right arms to wipe off the last vestige of Spanish tyranny at our very doors."¹³

Others derived an entirely different meaning from the events that transpired in Cuba. As most newspapers gathered the details and figured out what happened, the *National Intelligencer*, a prominent Whig organ located in Washington, D.C., began to report a different narrative. On September 1, 1851, the paper ran a letter that had been written by one of the filibusters, before he was executed. This letter discussed how disastrous the campaign had been and how the filibusters had no chance of success. After reprinting the letter in its entirety, the *Intelligencer* commented "two other letters have been shown us, but without the liberty to publish in full. Both complain of having been deceived in the expectation of Creole assistance on landing, and one speaks of being deserted by Gen. Lopez, and speaks with harshness of his abandonment of them." Instead of sympathizing with López's invasion, the *Intelligencer* began to paint a different picture. Here was not the story of young men gallantly dying on behalf of freedom; here was the story of young men who were deceived into fighting for a hopeless cause.¹⁴

As the days passed, papers such as the *National Intelligencer* began to build their case.¹⁵ They were aided by the appearance of a letter written by Crittenden. In his letter, Crittenden explained the circumstances that led to his capture. "We had retired from the field," he wrote, "and were going to sea, and were overtaken by the Spanish steamer Habanero, and captured." Like the others who had written, Crittenden portrayed a bleak and hopeless situation in which he was not "furnished with a single musket cartridge." Crittenden also did not hesitate to assign blame for the failure of the expedition. "We saw that we had been deceived grossly," he noted, "and were making for the United States when taken." Crittenden had been promised that a full-scale revolution was underway, but nothing of the sort had been the case. Nonetheless, he remained determined to die in a worthy manner. "I will die like a man," Crittenden wrote, "My heart has not failed me yet;

nor do I believe it will.”¹⁶ Crittenden’s letter helped solidify the Whig argument that the filibusters were to be more pitied than praised.¹⁷

Yet the appearance of Crittenden’s letter did little to dampen the enthusiasm of interventionists for retribution. As soon as news of Crittenden’s execution reached Kentucky, the *Louisville Courier* ran articles with inflammatory headlines such as “Outrages to the Dead Bodies of the Massacred Fifty.”¹⁸ Even after Crittenden’s letter had been published, the paper demanded retribution for the “gallant, true-hearted Crittenden and his compatriots” whom the Spaniards had “murdered like dogs.”¹⁹ The following month, citizens in San Francisco gathered at a meeting in favor of Cuban independence. The men passed several resolutions, including one that read, in part, “we have learned with the deepest sorrow and indignation, of the barbarous *murder* of the gallant Col. Wm. S. Crittenden and his gallant compatriots.”²⁰ Under any circumstances it would be regarded as a *cold blooded murder!* After the resolutions were agreed upon, a speaker harangued the crowd, proclaiming: “The blood of Americans has been shed on the soil of Cuba, and shall the blood of the gallant Crittenden sink into the soil unavenged?”²¹

The cries for immediate revenge did not seem to influence Fillmore.²² In April 1851, shortly before the expedition, Fillmore issued a proclamation against filibustering. In December, when demands for retribution reached a fevered pitch in the press and in indignation meetings across the country, Fillmore discussed Cuban affairs in his annual message. Fillmore concluded that “thoughtless young men have been induced by false and fraudulent representation to violate the law of their country through rash and unfounded expectations of assisting to accomplish political revolutions in other states.” Like most Whigs, he lamented that these young men had been deceived into fighting, but argued that Spain had the legal right to respond to an invasion.²³

Fillmore’s response triggered Democratic attacks. As 1852 was an election year, many Democrats began to argue that a new president was needed to implement a stronger foreign policy.²⁴ In June 1852, Jefferson Davis delivered a speech in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where he railed against Fillmore, calling him the “tail of a ticket” whose proclamation led to Crittenden’s murder.²⁵ “While the dying words of Crittenden yet rung in the American ear,” Davis intoned, “and the heart turned sickening away from the mutilated remains of his liberty-loving followers ... even then we were called upon to witness a further manifestation of the truckling spirit of the administration, in a complimentary salute to the Spanish flag at New Orleans.” A month later, Stephen Douglas of Illinois delivered a nearly identical message, arguing that it simply did not matter if the filibusters were participating in an illegal invasion. “But they were butchered without a chance of law,” Douglas fulminated, “murdered in cold blood. ... The blood of our countrymen cried from the ground, and there was no ear for the cry at Washington ... we put our forehead in the dust before offended royalty, and the flag of stars was trailed in the dust before the banner of Castile.”²⁶ Democrats believed that only the election of Pierce could lead to the avenging of Crittenden.²⁷

Pierce’s triumph over Winfield Scott in 1852 led to increased optimism from expansionists, who believed that he would quickly act to secure Cuba.²⁸ Once in power, however, Pierce refused to use Crittenden’s death as an excuse for invading Cuba.²⁹ Although Democrats had blasted Fillmore, and the Whig Party, for allowing the flag to be dragged “in the dust before the banner of Castile,” Pierce did not demand that Spain apologize for the executions.³⁰ Not surprisingly, then, aggressive expansionists began to apply pressure on Pierce.³¹ In 1854, Edward J. Handiboe released *Will Crittenden, Or the Lone Star of Cuba*.³² Hardly a subtle work, Handiboe made it clear in his opening poem what his purpose was: “Of such a heart do we make the hero of our humble story;—one

name do we take from the record of the mighty Past—CRITTENDEN!”³³ After opening with the name of his hero in capitalized letters, Handiboe called for vengeance against Spain for killing the hero of his fictional story. Writing in the florid style of the mid-nineteenth century, Handiboe requested sanguinary vengeance. “And may he who pens these pages live to behold,” Handiboe stated, directly addressing his readers, “a signal vengeance wreaked upon the assassins of that noble patriot! Spaniards! Myrmidons of despotism—treacherous slaves! Lo, verily I say unto ye, the hour approacheth when the innocent blood which saturated with damning stains the soil of the loveliest of islands, shall be amply, fearfully avenged. Tremble!”³⁴

To help make his argument, Handiboe created an entire story around a fictional version of Crittenden. In this story, Crittenden was a dashing young hero of the U.S.-Mexican War, who met Inez de Zamora in the midst of his campaign. Crittenden competed for her affections and ended up stealing her away from her betrothed, a man named General de Bustillos.³⁵ It is later revealed that De Bustillos was born in Spain and was a well-known physician, before he seduced a married woman and fled to Cuba.³⁶ Crittenden, in contrast, is depicted as a heroic youth, who realizes that he will likely give his life on behalf of Cuban freedom. Before he departs, he tells Inez, “But even should it be otherwise—should I perish on the field of battle . . . I shall fall as a soldier should fall, in the sacred cause of Liberty!—with my face to the foe, and the requiem of Despotism on my lips.”³⁷ Upon being taken by the Spanish, Crittenden is allowed to deliver a lengthy address. “Here, standing upon the threshold of the grave,” Crittenden declaims, “the gift of prophecy hangs upon my lips, and the future of nations is revealed to my mental gaze: and in the delightful prospect I behold thy destiny, dear Cuba.”³⁸ Crittenden prophesies that Cuba will soon be liberated. After his speech, Crittenden is executed, but only after he delivers his most famous line: “an American kneels only to his God, and always faces his enemy.”³⁹

Yet Pierce remained unmoved by calls to revenge Crittenden’s death.⁴⁰ And so over the following year, interventionists continued to apply pressure on the president. In 1855, Lucy Holcombe published *The Free Flag of Cuba; Or, The Martyrdom of Lopez: A Tale of the Liberating Expedition of 1851*.⁴¹ Holcombe’s novel was remarkably similar to Handiboe’s, with the slight difference that she focused her attention on Narciso López instead of Crittenden. As did Handiboe, Holcombe made it explicitly clear that she expected the United States to avenge the death of the filibusters.⁴² The *Democratic Review* joined in the call for revenge against Spain. In June 1855, the magazine published a “Song: Philanthropic and Piratical” that began “We’ve borne too long the idiot wrong of Cuba’s tyrant masters/And tamely ta’en from shattered Spain dishonors and disasters.” The poem went on to demand that the United States immediately take action against Spain. The second stanza ran: “They slew our brave who went to save the land they rob and plunder/Around the Moro’s grim façade the soul of Lopez wanders/And Crittenden, a glorious shade! beside him walks and ponders/O God of Peace! that such as these, like dogs should be garrotted.” Although the poem was shorter than Handiboe and Holcombe’s novels, the message remained the same: the souls of López and Crittenden were crying out for revenge.⁴³

In spite of the cries of the expansionist press, Democratic presidents refused to intervene. Both Pierce and Buchanan did hope to purchase Cuba, but neither came close to pulling off the feat.⁴⁴ Internal discord within the United States, especially after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, led to an increasing unwillingness among Northerners to countenance the acquisition of a slave state.⁴⁵ Many Southerners had made it clear that they desired to acquire the island to strengthen the institution of slavery,

and so Republicans increasingly portrayed the attempt to acquire Cuba as evidence of the Slave Power's grasp on the nation.⁴⁶ Over the course of the 1850s, then, interventionists were unable to use Crittenden's death to stir up an aggressive approach to Cuba. Once Democrats held power, they behaved similarly to Fillmore, a man they had denounced in no uncertain terms.⁴⁷

Crittenden, the *Virginus*, and the Renewed Call for Cuba, 1865–1875

The outbreak of the Civil War silenced debates over the wisdom of annexing Cuba, but only for a time. In 1873, Isaac H. Sturgeon, a Kentuckian who resided in St. Louis, penned a letter to the *Missouri Tribune*. In this letter, Sturgeon asked his fellow Democrats why they had abandoned the issue of annexation. He boasted that the Democratic Party had been responsible for “the acquisition of Florida and Louisiana, Texas, Alaska and other territory.” Sturgeon believed the Democratic Party needed to reclaim territorial expansion as a partisan measure. The reason that Sturgeon gave for annexing Cuba, however, harkened back to a previous decade. Sturgeon recounted how “a number of my young Kentucky friends embarked on a vessel,” believing that Cuba was in the midst of a revolution. He then explained how Crittenden had been captured and executed.⁴⁸ As had interventionists in the past, Sturgeon believed that Crittenden's death justified American intervention. Months later, Sturgeon penned a second letter to a Missouri newspaper that repeated most of his arguments, bemoaning the fact the “the murder of these sons of the United States remains unavenged.”⁴⁹

By the end of 1873, Crittenden's name would again appear frequently in U.S. newspapers, but it had little to do with Sturgeon's letter writing campaign. In 1868, Cuban insurgents had kicked off a revolution that would later be known as the Ten Years' War. Many Americans who had expressed interest in Cuba demanded that President Grant recognize the insurgents.⁵⁰ Grant chartered a conservative course and refused to intervene.⁵¹ Then, in October 1873, an American steamer named the *Virginus* was taken by Spain off the coast of Cuba. Joseph Fry, a former commodore in the Confederate Navy, and his crew were captured. There was no doubt that the *Virginus* had been attempting to aid the insurgents. Fry and over fifty of his men were executed by the Spanish government.⁵²

As had occurred in 1851, newspapers across the United States turned Cuba into frontpage news. The *New York Herald* again ran headlines focusing on the Cuban tragedy, such as “Forty-Nine Persons Shot to Death” and “Bloody Scenes at Santiago de Cuba.”⁵³ The *Memphis Daily Appeal* printed bolded headlines such as “The Whole Country Excited and Indignant Over the Spanish Slaughter of Men in Cuba” and “In the Interest of Civilization and Humanity, the United States Government Must Intervene.”⁵⁴ The *Courier-Journal* discussed the news on its frontpage underneath the bolded words “The Spanish Butchers.”⁵⁵ Papers frequently described the events as a “butchery” and breathlessly reported on the possibility that the United States would soon intervene in Cuba to avenge the deaths of Fry and the crew of the *Virginus*.⁵⁶

The execution of Fry, however, did not erase the earlier memory of Crittenden. If anything, Fry's death led to a renewed interest in Crittenden's expedition. The *New York Times* noted the similarity between the two expeditions, observing that “the indignation now felt over the executions in Cuba, was fully as great in 1851, when the news of the execution of the prisoners of the Lopez Bahia-Honda expedition was sent from New Orleans to all parts of the country.”⁵⁷ The *New York Times* then recounted the history of

the expedition, focusing special attention on Crittenden's bravery and his refusal to kneel. A correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun* wrote something similar. After briefly discussing the history of the *Virginius* affair, the author segued into a history of "the Crittenden Massacre."⁵⁸ Fry's death thus led to a renewed interest in Crittenden's expedition, which had faded from popular memory.⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, interventionists sought to strategically deploy Crittenden's story. Instead of using Crittenden alone as a justification for intervention, as they had in 1851, interventionists argued that repeated Spanish atrocities demanded revenge.⁶⁰ "Men remember," a Virginia paper observed, "not the *Virginius* alone, but a long series of murder, stretching back to the times of Crittenden, outrages that form in unbroken sequence the public history of Spain in Havana."⁶¹ Interventionists merged Crittenden's execution with the men of the *Virginius* to tell a longer tale of Spanish aggression and barbarity. This combining of stories led to a similar call for revenge. "The blood of Crittenden and his chivalrous band of patriots," one paper proclaimed, "the blood of Charles Speakman and Albert Wyeth, as well as the blood of the 111 captured on the *Virginius* and cruelly murdered at Santiago de Cuba, cries aloud for redress!"⁶² Newspapers that had placed Cuba in their headlines for days soon demanded action.⁶³

Not everyone became swept up in war fever. One American penned an open letter to a paper in Nashville and scoffed at the "slang and gas about ... Cuba." "The truth is," the author opined, "the *Virginius* had no business to use our flag, or that of any other nation, to cover her illegal trade."⁶⁴ As Whigs had suggested two decades before, the author advised that Americans "stay at home and look after your own liberties." Other papers provided similar advice, suggesting that there was no legitimate reason for the United States to involve itself in a conflict with Spain over Cuba. "These newspapers—and there are many of them," one paper complained, "... which are engaged in an endeavor to cultivate a war spirit, are false to the country and the people."⁶⁵ An orator in Georgia drew a similar conclusion, pointing out that Crittenden had been a filibuster, and that the men onboard the *Virginius* had been engaged in illegal activity that warranted the death penalty.⁶⁶ For those opposed to intervention, the men aboard the *Virginius* were decidedly in the wrong, just as Crittenden had been two decades before.

President Grant agreed with the opponents of intervention. As they had during the presidencies of Fillmore and Pierce, interventionists organized rallies, ran editorials, denounced "Spanish butchery," and demanded that the United States seek revenge. "The brutality of the Spanish officials on the Island of Cuba," one paper explained in a lead editorial, "has stirred the American heart from the Kennebec to the Gulf and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The cry of 'War against the Spanish Butchers,' is heard throughout the length and breadth of our land."⁶⁷ Whether or not he heard those cries, Grant refused to change his foreign policy. Throughout his two terms in office, Grant focused a great deal of attention on acquiring the Dominican Republic and seemed uninterested in using an international incident to provoke a war with Spain.⁶⁸ Over time, the cry of "Remember the *Virginius*" slowly faded from popular memory.

Crittenden and the Quest for a Free Cuba, 1895–1898

The calls to "liberate" Cuba and "revenge" Crittenden would come back with a vengeance, however, in the 1890s, as Cuba became a subject of national conversation. In February 1895, what would become known as the Cuban War of Independence began when a series of insurrections broke out across Cuba.⁶⁹ Not coincidentally, newspapers suddenly dug

up the story of William L. Crittenden. A writer for the *Washington Post* retold the entire story of the López expedition, using it as an illustration of Spain's tyrannical hold on the island.⁷⁰ An article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* highlighted the many revolutions that had transpired in Cuba in the nineteenth century, including López's filibuster invasion.⁷¹ The *New Orleans Picayune*, which had advocated for filibustering in the 1850s, recalled the role that New Orleans had played in previous filibuster expeditions. "Old citizens ... never can forget that the two Cuban revolutionary expeditions which were commanded by General Don Narciso Lopez ... were organized chiefly in this city," the paper boasted, "and that it was from this port that they sailed on their ill-starred ventures."⁷² Papers suddenly found themselves intrigued by the story of William L. Crittenden.

Interventionists did not merely retell Crittenden's story to entertain audiences. Instead, they tried to stir up sympathy in the United States for intervention. Edward Wright Brady published a lengthy story of the Crittenden expedition in the *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, calling it the first attempt "to free Cuba from the baneful dominion of the Spaniard."⁷³ The *Boston Globe* interviewed T.C. Frye, a man who claimed to have been serving as a civil engineer in Cuba at the time of López's invasion. Frye recounted in vivid detail the executions of Crittenden and López. The article concluded with Frye's observation that Cuban "independence" and "annexation to the United States is ... no more chimerical than the acquisition of Texas."⁷⁴ Others were even more direct and called for an immediate invasion. One writer for the *Atlanta Constitution* declared that "the fate of the Colonel Crittenden here alluded to should never be forgotten, but, on the contrary, its memory should ever prove an incentive for Americans to wipe out the last vestige of Spanish rule upon this continent."⁷⁵ With a war ongoing in Cuba, many Americans felt that the time was propitious to avenge the death of Crittenden.⁷⁶

As had occurred in 1873, interventionists relied upon the Crittenden narrative to prove that Spain was unfit to govern Cuba. Articles emphasizing "Spanish Butcheries" retold in grisly detail the deaths of Crittenden and Frye.⁷⁷ The *New York Sun* traced the history of "Spanish Atrocities," beginning with Santa Anna, moving to the story of Crittenden, and concluding with the *Virginus*.⁷⁸ The expansionist *Sun* sought to use this "catalogue of atrocities" to show that Spaniards had a track record of brutality. Violent "butchers" such as Valeriano Weyler were merely carrying on the legacy of those who had executed Crittenden.⁷⁹ The United States needed to intervene to prevent the Spaniard from carrying out further atrocities.

Yet the version of William L. Crittenden that appeared in the press in 1895 and 1896 was somewhat different. In 1851, the *Daily Crescent* of New Orleans had reported that Crittenden's last words were "an American kneels only to his God, and always faces his enemy."⁸⁰ Up until the 1890s, that is typically how the story was retold. Nonetheless, when the Crittenden story reappeared in the 1890s, the words had changed. For instance, in 1896 a Kentucky paper briefly rehashed the story of Crittenden and noted that he said "a Kentuckian never turns his back on a foe and kneels only to his God."⁸¹ The *Breckenridge News* repeated that rendition, writing that he "uttered the immortal sentence 'Kentuckians never turn their backs to an enemy and kneel only to their God.'"⁸² After 1895, most papers, inside and outside of Kentucky, remembered that Crittenden had said "Kentuckian" and not "American."

Some Kentuckians used Crittenden's name to demand revenge against Spain.⁸³ Isaac Sturgeon suddenly reemerged in the press, recycling most of the arguments that he had deployed two decades before.⁸⁴ The most prominent newspaper in Kentucky, the *Courier-Journal*, pushed hard for American intervention.⁸⁵ Article after article made it appear that Spanish soldiers in Cuba spent their time murdering citizens, assaulting women, and

committing random acts of violence.⁸⁶ “The despotic and corrupt methods of Spain’s administration have made Cuba a source of irritation to this country for a century,” one writer concluded.⁸⁷ Based on this reporting, the *Courier-Journal* suggested that the United States recognize Cuba.⁸⁸ In 1897, the newspaper also reprinted two speeches by Isaac Sturgeon. In one of these speeches, Sturgeon told a crowd of Cuban sympathizers in St. Louis that he wished “this Government could let out to my native State, Kentucky, the contract to wipe from the face of the earth Spanish rule in Cuba, and it would be done in double-quick time.”⁸⁹ Papers such as the *Courier-Journal* believed that intervention was necessary, long before the explosion that occurred on the *Maine*.⁹⁰

The pleas to intervene in Cuban affairs did nothing to persuade Grover Cleveland. Like many of his predecessors, Cleveland occupied the White House at a time when an increasingly bellicose portion of the press angled for intervention. Not uncommon was the Pennsylvania paper that declared “there is hope for Cuba” on its front page, under the bolded headline: “For the Freedom of Cuba: There is Yet Hope for the Island of Discontent. The United States May Act.”⁹¹ As the war in Cuba intensified, the press increasingly questioned whether Cleveland would finally intervene.⁹² Yet Cleveland largely ignored the demands for vengeance, the calls for intervention, and the argument that the United States had to protect its economic interests in the region.⁹³ Cleveland stepped away from office in 1896, having avoided a conflict with Spain.

War with Spain and the Unravelling of the Crittenden Legend, 1898–1915

William McKinley’s decision to intervene in 1898 and ask Congress for a declaration of war was therefore a decided break with the past, a policy decision that five presidents had opted not to choose.⁹⁴ Certainly, the explosion of the *U.S.S. Maine* on February 15, 1898, which led to the deaths of over 250 men, unleashed a fresh call for intervention, but these demands were quite similar to those that had appeared in the past. Indeed, many papers explicitly linked “Remember the *Maine*” with the earlier cries of “Remember the *Virginian*” and “Remember Crittenden.” For example, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* argued that the *Maine* was “not an isolated incident” and that it was the “culmination of a long series of irritating and tragic events.”⁹⁵ It then retold the story of Crittenden’s execution and the *Virginian* affair. Another paper observed that the “south will not forget the butcheries of gallant Crittenden and his band by the Spaniards, nor the slaughter of Captain Fry, who had bled for the lost cause, and his crew of the *Virginian*.”⁹⁶ The stories of Crittenden and Fry were used to prove that the rule of the Spanish in Cuba “from its very inception up to and including the present time, is synonymous with horrible crime, and, like the Inquisition, is imbued with blood, moistened with tears and surcharged with groans and shrieks of anguish.”⁹⁷

Interventionists proved remarkably adept at linking together Crittenden, the *Virginian*, and the *Maine*. For instance, Richard B. Scandrett, a prominent lawyer in Pittsburgh, addressed a Pennsylvania meeting that had gathered to raise funds for a monument. The monument was in honor of Friend W. Jenkins, a young Pennsylvanian who had been killed in the explosion. In his speech, Scandrett compared Jenkins “with Lopez, Crittenden, and Captain Frye, all of whom were assassinated ... by Spanish treachery.”⁹⁸ Not only did Scandrett compare Jenkins to Crittenden, but he demanded revenge for all of them. Scandrett promised that “the United States was preparing to avenge, not only the death of Jenkins and his mates, but the butchery of Captain Frye and the long, bloody list of other murders that stain the pages of Spanish history.” Revenge could wait no longer.

Those in Kentucky who favored intervention presented a similar argument. A month after the *Maine* exploded, the *Courier-Journal* ran an article on Crittenden that alleged he “had fought a brief and ineffectual war for the independence of Cuba forty-seven years ago.”⁹⁹ The explosion of the *Maine* hardly erased the earlier history of the Crittenden expedition. If anything, the *Courier-Journal* simply reworked the narrative, telling its readers that the explosion was merely one in a long line of Spanish atrocities. “From the martyrdom of Crittenden, and his fifty Kentuckians, to the annihilation of the battleship in the harbor of Havana,” the paper proclaimed, “the history of Cuba has been an endless chain of incalculable brutality ... Spanish rule in the Western Hemisphere has been marked by a calculating rapacity and an unsparing ferocity.”¹⁰⁰

Poets even worked similar themes into their poetry. In April 1898, James Jeffrey Roche published “The Sailor Ghosts” in a New York magazine called the *Criterion*.¹⁰¹ This poem introduces three ghosts, each of whom explains why he is walking in the “Port of Peace.”¹⁰² The first ghost relates that he had sailed with Crittenden, the second explains that he was on the *Virginius*, and the third notes he had been on the *Maine*. All three men were “ghosts” because of Spanish treachery. The point of the poem is that the United States is unlikely to avenge the *Maine*, as it had never bothered to seek retaliation for previous crimes. At the conclusion of the poem, the third ghost predicts: “They will pay out fathoms of empty talk/And fathoms of foolish lies/And they’ll prate of fight till it heaves in sight/And then they’ll—apologize.”¹⁰³ Roche’s poem aptly captures how interventionists tied together Crittenden, the *Virginius*, and the *Maine* to demand a war.¹⁰⁴

Not surprisingly, once the war began, interventionists used Crittenden’s name to drum up support for the war effort. Within Kentucky, Governor Bradley commissioned David R. Murray to form a regiment of volunteers.¹⁰⁵ Although his last name was different, Murray was the half-brother of Crittenden.¹⁰⁶ In July 1898, a paper in Lexington interviewed Murray, who openly spoke of his desire to revenge his brother. “If I could be the first of the conquering army to enter Havana,” Murray was quoted as saying, “I would feel that Will Crittenden’s death had at last been avenged.” Murray went on to explain how his mother was impacted by the news of his brother’s death and how his brother’s body had “been mutilated.” “Yes,” Murray told the reporter, “I would like to be the first to enter Havana, but not for the plaudits and praise of the country, but for the sake of my dead brother.”¹⁰⁷ For Murray, in particular, the conflict with Spain had little to do with the blowing up of the *Maine*.

Others backed Murray in his revenge quest.¹⁰⁸ One paper noted that Kentuckians were “anxious to spill Spanish blood in revenge” for Crittenden, whom the paper called “the flower of the commonwealth’s manhood.”¹⁰⁹ Shortly after the United States declared war, a Kentucky paper reported Murray’s regiment would use “Remember Crittenden” as its “battle cry.” “This inspiring slogan,” the paper reported, “has caused hundreds of patriotic Kentuckians to respond to his call and he has received a perfect avalanche of telegrams and letters from men in all parts of the state who offer to enlist under him.”¹¹⁰ The *Courier-Journal* attempted to drive up support by reprinting several letters from Isaac H. Sturgeon.¹¹¹ In July 1898, one former resident of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, delivered a pro-war address, where he proclaimed that “if the people of one State should hate Spain and the Spanish more than the people of another it is the Kentuckians.”¹¹² He then recounted Crittenden’s story.

During the war, outsiders seemed bemused that Kentuckians were so heavily invested in Cuba. Papers in places as far away as Massachusetts reprinted Crittenden’s story.¹¹³ The Philadelphia *Times* ran an entire article on David R. Murray, explaining how he was

out to revenge his brother's death.¹¹⁴ Perhaps the most prominent feature story was one that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in June of 1898. John Fox Jr. wrote about the volunteers from Kentucky, whom he described as tall and willing to fight. Near the conclusion of his article, however, Fox turned his attention to the story of Crittenden, whom he depicted as "that gallant Crittenden who, with 150 other Kentuckians, went to Cuba in 1851 to fight the fight we are fighting to-day." Seeing parallels between the two conflicts, Fox believed that "these volunteers know this story, and when they get to Cuba they will have something more than the *Maine* to remember. They will remember Crittenden."¹¹⁵

Even after the conflict with Spain had ended, Crittenden's story lingered in the popular imagination.¹¹⁶ Henry Watterson, for example, the long-time editor of the *Courier-Journal*, delivered a rousing speech in 1906 in which he discussed the rich history of his state. As he spoke, Watterson rattled off the names of famous men associated with Kentucky, including Daniel Boone, Henry Clay, Jefferson Davis, and Abraham Lincoln.¹¹⁷ "Kentucky struck the earliest blow for freedom," Watterson asserted, "furnished the first martyrs to liberty, in Cuba." He then observed: "It was a Crittenden, smiling before a file of Spanish musketry, refusing to be blindfolded or to bend the knee, for the fatal volley, who uttered the key-note of his race 'a Kentuckian always faces his enemy and kneels only to his God.'" In Watterson's mind, Crittenden was worthy to be discussed in the same breath as Clay, Lincoln, and Boone. In the pantheon of legendary Kentuckians, the name of Crittenden deserved to be remembered.

Watterson was not the only individual who tried to preserve Crittenden's legacy. In 1905, Anderson Chenault Quisenberry, an early historian of Kentucky and member of the Filson Club, began compiling information on López's invasion for a historical novel.¹¹⁸ Quisenberry intended to call his novel *The Strong in Heart*, but he eventually published his findings as *Lopez's Expedition to Cuba, 1850 and 1851*.¹¹⁹ Although designed as an accurate historical account, Quisenberry portrayed Crittenden and his men as heroic freedom-fighters who went to Cuba to battle the forces of Spanish tyranny.¹²⁰ As had novelists of the 1850s, Quisenberry turned Crittenden into the paragon of chivalry, describing him as "twenty-eight years old, tall, handsome, talented, a born hero, a born soldier, and brave beyond compare."¹²¹ In many regards, Quisenberry's account mirrored pro- filibuster propaganda produced in the 1850s. In his climatic scene, Quisenberry has "one of the rabble" pull Crittenden's beard: "The gallant Kentuckian, with the utmost coolness, spit in the coward's face. He refused to kneel or to be blindfolded; saying in a clear, ringing voice: 'A Kentuckian kneels to none except his God, and always dies facing his enemy!'"¹²² By writing this account, Quisenberry hoped to preserve the legacy of Crittenden for the next generation.

Such was not to be, however.¹²³ In 1915, historian Robert Granville Caldwell published the first scholarly account of López's expedition, effectively shattering the myth that Crittenden was a "martyr" to Cuban liberty. Caldwell downplayed Crittenden's importance to the expedition and called into question Crittenden's last words, noting "other accounts say nothing about this dramatic incident which is in all probability a New Orleans embellishment."¹²⁴ Caldwell's scholarly volume set the tone for ensuing scholarship, which tended to focus on Narciso López. Even in Kentucky, few remembered William L. Crittenden. In 1916, a reader in Louisville sent a letter to the *Courier-Journal* asking if the paper could explain the history of a poem entitled "A Kentuckian kneels to None but God."¹²⁵ The *Courier-Journal* included both the poem and a short account of what Crittenden had done. Two decades before, Crittenden's name had peppered the pages of the *Courier-Journal* as it demanded revenge against Spain. By 1916, that same paper had to explain how Crittenden had died.

Historians, however, have done a disservice to Crittenden by largely ignoring him. Whether or not he said his famous last line, his story is significant for two reasons. In the first place, the continual use of Crittenden's name demonstrates the linkages between the 1850s and the 1890s. Historians often begin the story of "U.S. empire" in the 1890s, ignoring the long, and fraught, history of U.S.-expansion aimed toward Cuba, which spanned the century. While interventionists used the *Maine* as a justification for war with Spain, they often tied it into older tropes that predated the explosion. Certainly, practitioners of "Yellow Journalism" developed new techniques in the late 1890s, ranging from the selective use of correspondents to the deployment of images and cartoons. But most of the written text remained the same. Newspapers in the 1850s and 1870s also blazoned headlines calling for revenge against Spain, breathlessly reported on Spanish atrocities, included letters from correspondents who provided insider information, and portrayed the American public as anxious for a fight.¹²⁶ Isaac Sturgeon, to cite the most obvious example, delivered nearly identical speeches and published similar letters in 1851, 1854, 1873, 1895, and 1898. In each of these years, interventionists like Sturgeon denounced Spanish brutality, demanded revenge, and blasted presidential inaction.

Perhaps more importantly, then, Crittenden's story illustrates the limited power of the press over foreign policy in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Far too often, the United States' declaration of war against Spain in 1898 appears inevitable, a moment in time when a jingoistic press, intense public pressure, and an unexplained explosion pushed a hesitant president to embrace war. By focusing on years other than 1898, however, it becomes clear that previous presidents faced similar situations. Pierce also had a bellicose wing of his own party that desired Cuba and a hostile press, led by the *New York Herald*, that increasingly portrayed him as weak. Grant dealt with the Ten Years' War, a hostile Democratic Party, and the *Virginius* affair. If one thing remained constant from the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, it was a segment of the press that opted to use a variety of incidents—from Crittenden to the *Maine*—to demand presidential action on Cuba. While studying 1898 can lead to numerous insights, attention should also be paid to years when America's foreign policymakers opted not to intervene. By focusing more on 1851 and 1873, and the long arc of U.S. empire, it will be easier to separate out the reasons why McKinley opted to break from his predecessors and make the far from inevitable decision to go to war with Spain.

Notes

1 "Remember Crittenden": New Battle Cry for a New Kentucky Regiment of Volunteers," *Evening Bulletin* (Maysville, KY), Apr. 25, 1898.

2 Crittenden is typically discussed in a cursory manner in studies of filibustering. See Charles H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 75, 80–82; 88–89; Tom Chaffin, *Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U.S. War Against Cuba* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 214–15; Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 32–33; 186; Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 187–89; 219–20.

3 For historians who have seen the press as a factor in the United States' decision to declare war, see Marcus M. Wilkerson, *Public Opinion and the Spanish-American War: A Study in War Propaganda* (1932; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 132; Joseph E. Wisan, *The Cuban Crisis as Reflected in the New York Press* (1934; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1977), 400; 455; Gerald F. Linderman, *The Mirror of War: American Society and the Spanish-American War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974),

166–70: David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 30–31; Paul T. McCartney, *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 88–92.

4 For historians who have downplayed the press as a cause of war, see Louis A. Pérez Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); W. Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 97–123; Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 151–53.

5 Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 25–26; Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1848–1855* (1948; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 99–100. Antonio Rafael de la Cova, “The Taylor Administration Versus Mississippi Sovereignty: The Round Island Expedition of 1849,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 62 (Winter 2000): 296–97. It should be noted that only two of these expeditions made it to Cuba.

6 Antonio Rafael de la Cova, “The Kentucky Regiment that Invaded Cuba in 1850,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 105 (Autumn 2007): 571.

7 For the Crittenden family, see Albert D. Kirwin, *John J. Crittenden: The Struggle for the Union* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1962); and Damon R. Eubank, *In the Shadow of the Patriarch: The John J. Crittenden Family in War & Peace* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009).

8 Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 87–88; Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 214–16.

9 “The Havana Massacre,” *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans, LA), Aug. 22, 1851.

10 “The Havana Massacre,” *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans, LA), Aug. 22, 1851.

11 “The Frightful Execution of Fifty Americans in Havana—Horrible Scenes—Insult to the American Flag—Firing into the Steamer Falcon,” *New York Herald*, Aug. 22, 1851.

12 “Slightly Important from Cuba—Disastrous Result of the Lopez Expedition,” *New York Herald*, Aug. 22, 1851.

13 “The News from Cuba,” *Mississippian* (Jackson, MS), Aug. 20, 1851.

14 See “From the New Orleans Picayune of August 23,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 1, 1851; “Further Particulars,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 1, 1851.

15 The *National Intelligencer* reprinted excerpts from ten different papers to show that many newspapers condemned the raid. See *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 9, 1851.

16 “Letter from Colonel Crittenden,” *North American and United States Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Sept. 12, 1851.

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19 “The End May Not be Yet,” *Louisville Courier*, Sept. 15, 1851; “William S. Crittenden,” *Louisville Courier*, Sept. 8, 1851; “From a Kentuckian Who Started for Cuba,” *Louisville Courier*, Sept. 16, 1851; Kentuckian in New Orleans, “Correspondence of the Courier,” *Louisville Courier*, Sept. 24, 1851; “An Anecdote of Col. Crittenden,” *Charleston Courier*, reprinted in *Louisville Courier*, Sept. 20, 1851; “The Purchase of Cuba,” *Louisville Courier*, Sept. 30, 1851; “The Interference of France and England,” *Louisville Courier*, Oct. 4, 1851; “Cuba and the Administration,” *Louisville Courier*, Oct. 14, 1851; “British Interference on Account of Cuba,” *Louisville Courier*, Oct. 24, 1851.

20 Crittenden’s name appeared in the press with various initials for his middle name.

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22 “Correspondence of the Ohio Statesman,” *Daily Ohio Statesman* (Columbus, OH), Oct. 8, 1851; “Narciso Lopez and His Companions,” *United States Magazine, and Democratic Review* 29 (Oct. 1851): 301.

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- 25 “Speech of Col. Jefferson Davis, At Jackson, June 9, 1852,” *Weekly Mississippian* (Jackson, MS), Jun. 18, 1852.
- 26 “Speech of Senator Douglas,” *Union* (Washington, D.C.), Jul. 18, 1852.
- 27 “Mass Meeting in Tammany Hall: Immense Gathering of the Democracy,” *New York Herald*, Oct. 23, 1852. For the Whig response, see “Issues Before the People—No. IV. Flibustierism,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 9, 1852.
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- 31 “The Black Warrior,” *Mississippi Free Trader* (Natchez, MS), Mar. 25, 1854.
- 32 Edward J. Handiboe, *Will Crittenden, Or the Lone Star of Cuba* (Cincinnati: U.P. James, 1854). No date is given in the original publication, but papers began to advertise the novel in Mar. of 1854. See “Harper’s Magazine for March,” *South Carolinian* (Columbia, SC), Mar. 20, 1854.
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- 34 Handiboe, *Will Crittenden*, 7–8.
- 35 Handiboe, *Will Crittenden*, 13.
- 36 Handiboe, *Will Crittenden*, 41–55.
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- 38 Handiboe, *Will Crittenden*, 103.
- 39 Handiboe, *Will Crittenden*, 104.
- 40 In 1854, Pierce put forth two proclamations against filibustering. See James D. Richardson, comp., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1907*, vol. 5 (New York, Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1908), 271; 272.
- 41 H.M. Hardimann, *The Free Flag of Cuba; Or, The Martyrdom of Lopez: A Tale of the Liberating Expedition of 1851* (New York: DeWitt & Davenport, 1855).
- 42 Hardimann, *The Free Flag of Cuba*, v.
- 43 “Song: Philanthropic and Piratical,” *United States Review* (Jun. 1855): 459. For other calls to avenge Crittenden, see “Cuba, Progress, and Manifest Destiny,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 17, 1853; “The New Captain General,” *Comet* (Baton Rouge, LA), Sept. 24, 1854.
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- 51 Charles W. Calhoun, *The Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 161–85.
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- 53 “CUBA,” *New York Herald*, Nov. 13, 1873.
- 54 “CUBA,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Nov. 13, 1873.

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