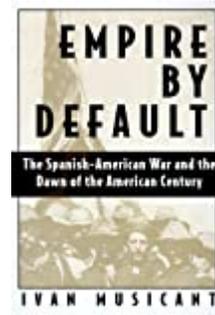


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ivan Musicant. *Empire By Default: The Spanish-American War and the Dawn of the American Century.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. ix + 740 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-3500-1.



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Published on H-SHGAPE (June, 1998)

Remaking but not Revising the Spanish American War

Remakes are a hallowed tradition in Hollywood. From *Brewster's Millions* to *An Affair to Remember* to this summer's faltering blockbuster *Godzilla*, filmmakers regularly revisit tried and true plots and characters in search of box-office dollars. A different custom exists among historians. Reexamining previous subjects and rethinking historical issues from a fresh perspective represents the way in which the discipline moves forward. The assumption is, however, that the historian will use new sources, bring new information, and develop new insights to justify the time and effort spent on a familiar topic. Ivan Musicant's study of the war with Spain in 1898 seems more of a marketing campaign in the Hollywood vein than a fresh look at the conflict that made the United States a world power. An historian of American naval history, Musicant offers no statement of his purpose in writing the book, nor does he consider explicitly where his work fits in the evolving historiography of the war. Instead, he sets out on a lengthy treatment of the diplomatic, political, and especially military aspects of the war. The result is a kind of historical remake which mixes equal parts of Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit* (1933), Ernest May, *Imperial Democracy* (1961),

and David F. Trask, *The War With Spain in 1898* (1981).

What is absent is any sense that Musicant has delved into the primary sources on the American side of the war. He dismisses the value of the William McKinley Papers at the Library of Congress (p. 97), though there is no evidence that Musicant consulted the microfilm edition which has been available for thirty-five years. He certainly did not examine the George B. Cortelyou Papers which contain several significant boxes of documents on the conduct of the war. The Cortelyou Papers have yet to be incorporated into any general account of the fighting of the war. Nor did Musicant look at the papers of William R. Day, John Hay, Russell Alger, John Bassett Moore, and he made no attempt to examine the records of such key congressional leaders as Henry Cabot Lodge, John Coit Spooner, and William Boyd Allison. A resident of Minneapolis, Musicant did not deem it necessary to peruse the papers of Senator Cushman K. Davis at the Minnesota Historical Society, even though the collection has some fascinating letters from the spring of 1898 as war loomed. It says something about the current state of American publishing that major houses are

willing to publish works of history that use no primary sources whatever.

The treatment of the late nineteenth century political context in which the war came is also innocent of recent scholarship. Musicant writes from the perspective of Allan Nevins and others about the 1890s, and familiar clichés about the Republicans and Democrats in this period once again pop up. Musicant knows little of the “new political history” and its practitioners, and his interpretation of the public life of the 1890s is out-of-date and stale.

In his view of the war, Musicant makes a few oblique comments about “revisionist historians” (p. 590), though it is not clear to whom he is referring. He does sometimes seem to adopt the market-seeking interpretation associated with William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber, but he does not share their respect for William McKinley as a chief executive and policymaker. Musicant also rejects the view that the United States had legitimate reasons for wanting the Spanish to settle the Cuban revolt promptly or relinquish the island altogether. He does not cite anywhere the important work of John Offner in *An Unwanted War* (1992) about the diplomatic interaction between Spain and the United States in 1897-1898.

Musicant’s view of McKinley is essentially that of Ernest May four decades ago, as May himself notes in his review of Musicant in the *Times Literary Supplement*, May 22, 1998, p. 27. Musicant is right that McKinley “remains one of the most enigmatic men to occupy the presidency” (p. 97), but for this book the president is the familiar stereotype as the puppet of Mark Hanna, the irrefutable national leader in 1898, and the pliant instrument of popular hysteria. Yet by the end of the book McKinley becomes “the floor manager for the treaty” of Paris (p. 655), and Musicant notes that “the White House, not Congress, emerged from the war as a fount of decision and action in foreign affairs” (p. 655). Since presumably the White House as a building did not govern the United States between 1897 and 1901, Musicant must be saying that McKinley had become a strong president as a result of the war. There’s a theme that one could write a book about!

In reading the book, there is a sense in places that the reader is returning to familiar sources and old historical friends. Echoes of Margaret Leech, H. Wayne Morgan, Ernest May, and other scholars on this period resound through Musicant’s text. In fact, in places it seems as though one is reading May, Leech and Morgan. Consider

the following examples of that experience. Here is Ernest May on Spain:

An old Castilian proverb has it that God granted Spain warm skies, good grapes, and beautiful women. When entreated also to provide good government, He refused, that if Spain had that too, it would be heaven on earth (*Imperial Democracy*, p. 94).

And then Musicant on the same theme:

There is a Castilian proverb that God granted Spain warm skies, good grapes, and beautiful women. When asked to provide good government, God refused, saying that if Spain had that too, it would be heaven on earth (*Empire by Default*, p. 38).

And May on William McKinley:

...William McKinley, one of the most enigmatic figures ever to occupy the White House. A man’s character usually emerges for the historian out of private letters. McKinley wrote none. The hundred-odd volumes of his personal papers in the Library of Congress have practically nothing in his own hand (*Imperial Democracy*, p. 112).

Musicant on McKinley:

William McKinley remains one of the most enigmatic men to occupy the presidency. He left no trove of personal correspondence as a window to his soul, and the hundred volumes of personal papers in the Library of Congress contain almost nothing in his own hand.

Margaret Leech’s biography *In the Days of McKinley* (1959) also resounds throughout Musicant’s text. Here she is on the disillusion with Secretary of War Russell Alger among McKinley’s men in 1898:

Cortelyou was irritated by Alger’s habit of going downstairs, after every conference with McKinley, to give out his own version to the press. At the beginning of August, the news reports of the Seneca and the Concho had incensed the President...The President had Alger on the carpet for two days, and asked him and (Henry C.) Corbin “many searching questions” about the steamship contracts and Shafter’s arrangements (Leech, p. 292).

Here is Musicant’s prose about this episode:

George Cortelyou, the president’s secretary, was always intensely annoyed at Russell Alger’s habit of heading down to the White House lobby after a conference with the chief executive to give his own view of events

to reporters. At the beginning of August, when the appalling conditions in the first transports from Santiago had made the news and greatly angered the president, McKinley, quite out of character, had chewed Alger out for two days, pointedly asking the secretary detailed questions about the ship contracts and Shafter's arrangements for the return of troops from the front (p. 631).

For another example of this sense of returning to previous writing, look at Leech on the War Department preparing the troops:

The War Department was doomed to egregious blunders, and its shortcomings were magnified by the speedup of the military program; but neither defective organization nor unexpected requirements could account for the failure to prepare for the volunteers in the home camps (p. 216).

And Musicant on the same issue:

The War Department was doomed to glaring blunders, and these were magnified by the speedup in the mustering of the volunteers. But neither the defective organization of the department nor the unexpected requirements for feeding and outfitting the masses can account for the failure to prepare the volunteers with the most basic outfits in their home camps (p. 250).

H. Wayne Morgan also provided Musicant with much inspiration. Here's how Morgan dealt with the response of the McKinley administration to the de Lome letter in February 1898 in *William McKinley and His America* (1963), p. 358:

On February 14, Woodford called again at the ministry and said frankly that unless an official apology were forthcoming he would resign for he could not remain accredited to a government that slandered his chief.

And Musicant's version:

On Monday, the fourteenth, Woodford called again at the foreign ministry to inform Gullon that unless an apology was forthcoming, he had no choice but to resign and return to the United States for he could not remain accredited to a government that tolerated slander against the president.

Finally, from my own work on the war with Spain in *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley* (1982), p. 48 about McKinley's April 11, 1898 message to Congress:

After quoting from Presidents Grant and Cleveland on the Cuban question and from his own annual message

in 1897, McKinley asserted: "In the name of humanity, in the name of civilization, in behalf of endangered American interest which give us the right and the duty to speak and act, the war in Cuba must stop." That sentence produced a wave of applause in the House chamber.

And Musicant on the message:

Quoting from Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, and his own 1897 annual message, McKinley asserted that "in the name of humanity, and in the name of civilization, in behalf of endangered American interests which give us the right and the duty to speak and to act, the war in Cuba must stop." A standing wave of applause swept through the House chamber (p. 184).

In these and other instances, Musicant provides the reader with the page in his sources from which the information (and often the language) is taken. But it would be an astute and well-informed reader of Musicant's book who would recognize that the prose is often no more than a close paraphrase of what the author cited had written ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. In the opinion of this reviewer, Musicant's performance comes very close to the line of scholarly impropriety and his text represents an inappropriate use of the work of other historians.

This book does not seem to have been written so much as assembled out of the efforts and research of those authors who have preceded Musicant. The creativity, extensive digging in primary sources, and fresh analysis were the product of the labors of distinguished writers such as May, Morgan, Leech, and numerous others who supplied the elements for Musicant's amalgam of previous writings regarding the war. Like the Oscar-winning composer whose acceptance speech included thanks to Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart, Musicant should have been more candid about his reliance on the ideas and research of his scholarly predecessors. But then screen credit has always been a chancy thing among Hollywood studios.

This is a big book about a "splendid little war." It will not affect historical interpretations about the Spanish-American War because it stands apart from the mainstream of analysis. Like *Godzilla*, it is big, overdone, and empty. With luck, it will fade from the scene as fast as its cinematic counterpart seems to be doing.

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Citation: Lewis L. Gould. Review of Musicant, Ivan, *Empire By Default: The Spanish-American War and the Dawn of the American Century*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

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