

The Memory of a Victory: The Spanish-American War through Cocktail Names, “War Drinks” and the Art of Mixing

Ilaria Berti

Pablo de Olavide University, Seville

Keywords

US power; Spanish empire; mixed drinks; community building; conflict

Extended Abstract

To what extent can the name of a cocktail be an object of study for historical analysis? How could a simple name like a very common alcoholic cocktail like the Cuba Libre be used as a source for the history of the United States Empire and for the construction and invention of its memory? Did the small decorations that were added to the glasses of mixed drinks have a specific meaning in order to promote the growing power of the empire and to build a memory around it?

This paper examines the construction of the memory around the Spanish-American War of 1898. This was a short-lived conflict in which the United States gained Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and the island of Cuba, the subject of this paper. Through this war, the United States became the main actor of the twentieth century, the so-called American century. Not only the war was an armed conflict with casualties and death but also a struggle between two ways of perceiving the same United States and its policies. On the one hand, the United States had been born with anti-imperialism ideals since its struggle for independence against the British Empire.¹ on the other hand, it proclaimed the non-acceptance of foreign

¹ See Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963); Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Susan Gillman, “The New, Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?” *American Literary History*, 17, no. 1 (2005): 196–214; Kristen L. Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Alessandra Lorini, *L’impero della libertà e l’isola strategica. Gli Stati Uniti e Cuba tra Otto e Novecento* (Napoli: Liguori, 2008).

interferences throughout the Americas through a series of widely known policies that had been in place since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.

In a context of independent nation-states in North, Central and South America, the strategic island of Cuba was one of the very few exceptions, a colony of the Spanish empire being in an area that the United States perceived and defined as part of its backyard. Therefore, after becoming the leading regional economic power in the Americas, the United States continued to pursue and assert its authority in what was believed to be part of the American Lake. The island of Cuba, a source of wealth for its agricultural production, among whom sugar played a significant part, and a key geopolitical location, was one of its targets. The US expanded its economic dominance on the island by acquiring plantations, setting up companies and forward agencies, granting loans and contributing to the development of a modern technological, communications and transport system; Cuba and its economy became increasingly dependent on the United States and less tied to the Spanish empire. These policies would have shaped all future plans and strategies of the United States in the Caribbean context.

Although the US was reluctant to define itself as an empire, it acted as one. As Jurgen Osterhammer has reminded us, the United States practiced “imperialism without a major colonial empire”² presenting itself as a benevolent power that wanted to bring civilization to the old Spanish colonies,³ not only through its pervasive economic power, but also through “banal” everyday actions, conversations, objects, beliefs, and thoughts, too.⁴ In fact, in addition to its physical and commercial influence, the US also used metaphors, images, symbols, representations and the “fictive world” to establish its rule over Cuba. According to my hypothesis, among other trivialities, food, drinks, the discourse around them, and the practices of consumption associated with them were used to glorify US dominion at the expense of Spanish power. In this scheme, Cuba was perceived and used as a laboratory for the development of the United States strategies to become a global empire.⁵

² Osterhammel, Jurgen, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Markus Wiener and Ian Randle Publishers, 1997), 22.

³ Meg Wesling, *Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), 9.

⁴ Osterhammel, Jurgen, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Markus Wiener and Ian Randle Publishers, 1997), 22; Meg Wesling, *Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), 9; Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1995). Barbara Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2006), 122 defines this attitude as “mechanisms of cultural imperialism” that acted by trying to refuse, incorporate and modify local cultures.

⁵ Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuban in the American Imagination. Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1.

Within this context and through the analysis of newspaper articles, images published in satirical magazines, recipe books for mixed drinks and other sources, this paper hypothesizes that also alcoholic beverages and mixed drinks were used to assert the power of the United States in Cuba. According to my interpretation, the memory of the 1898 War was also built around mixed drinks: from the names given to new cocktails, to the patriotic colors of their decorations, to their intoxicating effects whose descriptions recalled various battles fought in Cuba, and to the same bartenders' tools and performances in preparing them. Probably, apart from the Cuba Libre, none of us has ever heard of mixed drinks such as "Schley punch, Dewey cocktail/Dewey pousse [*sic*] café, Sampson ricky [*sic*], Oregon julep, Blanco peg, Hobson cannon ball/the Hobson kiss, the Roosevelt punch, and Matanzas mule." However, all of these different alcoholic beverages - probably none or only a few of which are still available today - have a name associated with the Spanish-American War. Among them Winfield Scott Schley (1839-1911) was a commodore, while William T. Sampson (1840-1902) and George Dewey (1837-1917) were admirals in the conflict and considered heroes; the Oregon was a US battleship commanded by the aforementioned Sampson and Schley that fought in the blockade and Battle of Santiago de Cuba in 1898; Ramón Blanco y Erenas (1833-1906) was the Captain General of Cuba; Richmond P. Hobson (1870-1937) was a veteran of the war and described by the United States press as a war hero; the future US President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) fought with the Rough Riders, a regiment in Cuba during the conflict; and Matanzas Mule is a story that was told during one of its battles. This is just one example of the so-called "war drinks" described in *Wheeling Sunday Register*, one of the newspaper articles examined in this paper.⁶ In addition to newspaper articles, this paper also examines satirical images, political cartoons and caricatures published in the humorous weekly magazine *Puck* (1876-1918).

It will be relevant to compare the time in which the war was fought and the immediate, almost live, appearance of the news about mixed drinks with new patriotic US and Cuban colors. In fact, although the war only lasted only a few months, from April to December 1898, newspapers promptly wrote articles describing new alcoholic mixed drinks whose names recalled events or war heroes associated with the war, as well as the spread of new drinking habits and new styles of consumption. Within this hypothesis and through the sources, my aim is to examine the extent to which the printed press contributed to associating drinks with a key global event of the dawn of the twentieth century, such as the Spanish-American War, in order to reinforce an "imagined community"⁷ built around the entry into the war, its victory and its memory, too.

⁶ Anonymous, "The Genius of the Bar. Art in Compounding Cool Drinks in Summer-Time," *Wheeling Sunday Register*, August 14, 1898, p. 15.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Editions, 1983).

References

- Anonymous. "The Genius of the Bar. Art in Compounding Cool Drinks in Summer-Time." *Wheeling Sunday Register* August 14, 1898.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86092523/1898-08-14/ed-1/seq-15/>
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso Editions, 1983.
- Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE, 1995.
- Bush, Barbara. *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Gillman, Susan. "The New, Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?" *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 196–214 <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.13053>.
- Hoganson, Kristen L. *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- LaFeber, Walter. *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963.
- Lorini, Alessandra. *L'impero della libertà e l'isola strategica. Gli Stati Uniti e Cuba tra Otto e Novecento*. Napoli: Liguori, 2008.
- Nugent, Walter. *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
- Osterhammel, Jürgen. *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. Princeton: Markus Wiener and Ian Randle Publishers, 1997.
- Pérez Jr., Louis A. *Cuban in the American Imagination. Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Streeby, Shelley. *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Wesling, Meg. *Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2011.