

***A TALE OF DARKEST
MASSACRE
SLASHES JAPAN'S SHINING ARMOR***
James Creelman at

Port Arthur

By Frederic A. Moritz



***Looking ahead to World War II's "War Without Mercy;"
A Yellow Journalist's "Watchdog" Duty Helps Bring an
"Open Door" for American Expansion:
Will the "Bad Asian" Please Stand Up?***



A view of the harbor and town at Lushun, formerly Port Arthur, in 2005 from an old Japanese fortification. Check history of [Lushun](#), a cradle of great power rivalry since 1894 massacre of Chinese by Japanese



"Port Arthur" today showing Chinese naval vessels at harbor



Lushun, formerly Port Arthur, where James Creelman reported Japanese massacres in December 1894, is in the area marked Dalan.



"THE MASSACRE AT PORT ARTHUR

**"At Least Two Thousand Helpless People
Butchered by Japanese Soldiers**

"THE TOWN SACKED FROM END TO END

**"Streets Cloaked with Mutilated Bodies
of Men, Women and Children While
the Soldiers Laughed**

"STOREKEEPERS SHOT AND SABERED

"Complete Details of the Startling Story Originally Cabled to The World by Its War Correspondent with the Japanese Army - Several Europeans and Americans Were Present and Some Were in Danger."



WWII: "War Without Mercy"

[DOWNLOAD THIS ESSAY IN .PDF FOR ACROBAT READER](#)
[DOWNLOAD ACROBAT READER](#)
[CREELMAN: "FATHER" OF HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING](#)
[CREELMAN IN CUBA: CENTURY OF GUERRILLA WAR](#)
[STIR THE POT; OR CALM THE TEMPER?](#)
[CREELMAN'S MEMOIRS: "ON THE GREAT HIGHWAY"](#)
[PORT ARTHUR IN CREELMAN'S MEMOIRS](#)
[JAPANESE STUDENT DENOUNCES CREELMAN, NEW YORK TIMES](#)
[A RELATIVE'S PORTRAIT](#)
[A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME](#)
[A SLASH QUICKLY FORGOTTEN](#)
[WAR WITHOUT MERCY](#)
[CREELMAN'S BARBARISM IMAGE REVIVED](#)
[TARNISHING THE "GOLDEN AGE"](#)
[CREELMAN'S DETAILED COVERAGE](#)
[CREELMAN: NO PRETENSE TOWARD BALANCE](#)
[THE IMPACT](#)
[CREELMAN KEEPS HIS HEAD: ON DUTY](#)
[BOOKS ON SINO-JAPANESE WARS: AMAZON.COM](#)
[BOOKS ON SPANISH AMERICAN WAR: AMAZON.COM](#)
[BOOKS ON AMERICAN IMPERIALISM](#)
[HOME](#)

"My dear James, please inform us at once whether or no you have really been beheaded by the Chinese. We have been very anxious about you until now we get telegram from The World saying that the war correspondent who was beheaded was a Jap....Poor Jap. I'm sorry for him but devilish glad it was him and not you....

-D.H. Buell, James Creelman's brother-in-law in Letter to Creelman, November 29, 1894.

"I am now the general target for abuse in Japan simply because I have told the truth about Port Arthur. I knew in advance that to lay the naked facts before the public would mean the instant activity of the vast enginery of

abuse maintained by the Japanese government and so I considered my duty call. I could not as a reputable journalist nor as an American attempt to conceal any fact of the great crime. It was too monstrous, too cold, too long continued.....When a clear question of duty presents itself to me, dear, you know how I am likely to decide. I can now come back to you and to my baby with the consciousness that I have not stained your name. This whole empire rings with the salvos of my work, and I am proud of it."

-James Creelman in a letter to his wife Alice from Yokohama, Japan, dated December 21, 1894.

In 1894 it appeared to many in the West, including The World's war correspondent James Creelman, that Japan had booked passage on a ship of civilized nations.

It was a time when Japan's willingness to learn from Europe and the United States had generated admiration among Western travelers, journalists, and diplomats. The island nation famous for its samurai swords and colorful wood block prints and opened to the West by America's Admiral Perry just 40 years earlier seemed a fertile field for the plantings of Western civilization.

Japan's army had modernized -- and took pride in standing equal to the standards of weaponry and behavior proclaimed by countries such as England and Germany. By contrast, the Chinese empire often seemed decadent, cruel, corrupt.

Then came an historic test of Japan's mastery of modern military technology and Victorian standards of humane combat. War with the Chinese empire would measure just how far Japan had come.

Something went terribly wrong.

On December 17, 1894, four decades before Japanese troops

massacred at least 100,000 Chinese civilians in the December 1937 "Rape of Nanking," a headline appearing on page one of a half million copies of Joseph Pulitzer's The World spotlighted an embarrassing wart on Japan's image as a civilized outpost in backward Asia:

**JAPAN CONFESSES:
Her Government Makes an Official Statement to The World**

VOICES NATIONAL REMORSE

**Confirms Creelman Account of Butchery at Port Arthur
WASHINGTON ASTONISHED AT THE NEWS**

Joseph Pulitzer's New York City flagship had scored a direct torpedo hit. Yellow journalism - or what might be called an early form of human rights reporting - had undermined Japan's claim to have joined the family of civilized nations.

In a cable to The World, as run in that paper December 17, Japan's Foreign Minister Mutsu was forced to concede that Japan's soldiers "transported with rage at the mutilation of their comrades by the enemy broke through all restraints...to inflict vengeance without discrimination."

The apology - and pledge of further investigation - gave further visibility to James Creelman's December 12 four paragraph page one report in The World that Japanese soldiers had entered the Manchurian city of Port Arthur on November 21 and "massacred practically the entire population in cold blood." For The World it was an unprecedented coup to have the Japanese minister cable a confirmation and apology for events covered by the newspaper - even if Mutsu protested "against exaggerations calculated to present the affair in a distorted and misleading aspect" and added "there was absolutely no intention to harm or molest non-combatants."

Creelman's December 12 dispatch had reported:

"The defenseless and unarmed inhabitants were butchered in their houses and their bodies unspeakably mutilated. There was an unrestrained reign of murder which continued for three days. The whole town was plundered with appalling atrocities. It was the first stain upon Japanese civilization. The Japanese in this instance relapsed into barbarism. All pretenses that

circumstances justified the atrocities are false. The civilized world will be horrified by the details."

(For Creelman's account of the massacre in his memoirs see [On the Great Highway](#), Lothrop Publishing Company, Boston, 1901, [Chapter 5](#).)

A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME

The World's scoop from Port Arthur was a sign of things to come. An American war correspondent playing international "watchdog" on pony back some 10,000 miles from home had witnessed Japanese excesses. They were to resume on a far more massive scale during World War II when Japanese forces massacred or otherwise abused both conquered Asian nationals and Western prisoners of war. (See activist/author Iris Chang's [version](#)).

Only ten years later Japan's military chose Port Arthur as a place to pioneer the tactic of "[surprise attack](#)," the backbone of Japan's bombing strike on [Pearl Harbor](#) on December 7, 1941. The [Russo-Japanese](#) War of 1904-5 began on Feb. 8, 1904, when the main Japanese fleet launched a surprise attack and siege on the Russian naval squadron at the harbor of Port Arthur.

Creelman's reporting from Port Arthur reflected America's post Civil War expansion. American journalists joined increasingly outwardly looking businessmen, missionaries, and military strategists to build greater United States influence overseas.

Indeed Creelman's later reporting for The World on Spanish atrocities in Cuba helped crystallize the nationalistic sentiment which led to victorious war with Spain in 1898 and indirectly to the take over of Madrid's colonial empire in Cuba and the Philippines. The U.S. annexed Hawaii in 1898, after landing marines there in 1893.

This wave of expansion into areas also coveted by Japanese expansionists made the U.S. a Pacific power. American newspaper scrutiny of Japanese operations in Manchuria foreshadowed the emergence of the United States as China's 1930's protector against Japan.

Aggressive American journalism of 1894 thus foreshadowed the American-Japanese confrontation which brought Japan's effort to remove American influence in Asia by a surprise attack on the American fleet in Pearl Harbor.

The World's coverage embarrassed the Japanese government and

provoked a rash of popular nationalistic resentment against the Western press - especially after Japanese officials were reported to have accused Creelman and other Western reporters of supplying allegations of atrocities to Japan's opposition newspapers, particularly the English language Yokohama Journal.

A SLASH QUICKLY FORGOTTEN

Creelman's exclusive, as essentially confirmed by Thomas Cowan of the London Times, as well as other journalists, and diplomats on the scene, slashed a hole in Japan's hard won image as a modernizing civilized nation.

It was a slash quickly forgotten. Admirers of Japan later concluded Port Arthur was a temporary aberration. Creelman himself reverted to his positive view of Japanese progress toward civilization in his 1901 memoirs, On The Great Highway. In retrospect, he wrote, Japanese conduct elsewhere in that war and in its 1900 military intervention with Western allies against the barbarism of China's Boxer rebellion had set a tone of moderation.

Indeed historians have noted that to avoid again alienating Western public opinion, Japan's leaders insured firm discipline in their armies fighting the Boxers and largely prevented their soldiers from indulging in the excesses of looting practiced by many European soldiers. Unlike its Western allies, Tokyo quickly withdrew its troops after foreigners trapped in Peking were rescued.

Still Creelman's coverage at Port Arthur demonstrated the critical part journalists can play in the battle over stereotypes. The Creelman scoop briefly demolished the "good Asian" stereotype Japan had won in the course of its modernization.

A sensational journalism scoop briefly fueled the "cruel, bad, yellow Asian stereotype" later revived by Japan's invasion of China and "sneak" attack on Pearl Harbor.

After World War II Japan was able quickly regain its "good Asian" image with the democratization and economic "miracle" following American occupation. In 1950 Chinese Communists quickly earned the "bad Asian" image as American comic books portrayed hordes of ant like yellow men in barbaric human wave attacks on American G.I.'s in Korea.

WAR WITHOUT MERCY

A cycle of World War II atrocities by both Japan and the United

States revived the fearsome , cruel, barbaric Japanese image momentarily portrayed by Creelman.

American writers, soldiers, filmmakers, and cartoonists portrayed "Japs" as subhuman animals, inscrutable hordes of unthinking, devious rats, apes, and vermin to be mercilessly annihilated.

As both sides committed "unspeakable" atrocities, American war propaganda took on both officially and unofficially a virulent racist color. Americans tended to see the massive brutality of Japan's conquering armies, the sword and bayonet executions of civilians and prisoners of war as evidence of racial inferiority. All across Asia Japan seemed to repeat the atrocities documented by James Creelman at Port Arthur in 1894.

Japanese images of Allied opponents as merciless, vicious, racial inferiors dedicated to repression of Asians were likewise fueled, as American forces executed Japanese prisoners, cut off ears, extracted gold teeth, and enthusiastically bombed Japan's civilian population. The frequent American practice of shooting or knifing those who surrendered encouraged the Japanese insistence on "fighting to the death."

John W. Dower's [War Without Mercy](#) provides an exhaustive account of how World War II in the Pacific degenerated into a race fueled battle to the death, with "no quarter" expected nor given.

Germans, argues Dower, were portrayed as "Nazis," so that the possibility of a "Good German" remained alive. By contrast, Japanese were virulently labeled in all inclusive racial/ethnic terms as "Japs" or "Nips" with the often clearly stated implication that "the only good Jap is a dead Jap."

It is important to remember there was more than a racial divide. Japanese atrocities in China were widely and vividly publicized BEFORE Pearl Harbor. The visually compelling footage of Nazi concentration camps, for the most part, did not come out until the END of World War II when Allied armies liberated the extermination camps.

CREELMAN'S BARBARISM IMAGE REVIVED

American newspaper and newsreel coverage of Japanese conquests in China in the 1930's brought back to life the image of wholesale cruelty portrayed by Creelman's 1894 coverage at Port Arthur.

A decade of war in China, beginning with the [Manchurian Incident](#) of 1931 and Japan's [attack on Shanghai](#) in 1932, made it

easier for the American public to see Japan as the stereotypical "bad Asian" --as opposed to the "good Asian" stereotype held earlier by those who emphasized Japan's modernization, arts, philosophy, and "civilized" ways.

In this period Japn's ultra-nationalistic military gradually took control, partly by assassinating civilian leaders, such as prime minister Japanese prime minister Inukai Tsuyohi in 1932. This killing by a group of right-wing naval officers symbolized the end of pre-World War II Japanese democracy and the triumph of militarism and fascism.

American propaganda, both official and unofficial fanned a clearly racist anti-Japanese desire for revenge after the American humiliation at Pearl Harbor and Japanese atrocities on American prisoners of war.

Nazi anti-Semitism toward a distant seeming ethnic religious group often disliked in America produced nothing of the incendiary lust for revenge created by "Jap" attacks on "Americans" themselves.

Dower summarizes Japanese actions in China in this way:

"The Chinese people were the first victims of Japanese massacres. Eradication of Chinese "bandits" -- the Japanese euphemism for patriotic resistance groups who opposed them --occurred on various occasions in the early 1930's, but it was in 1937, with the Rape of Nanking, that the killing of noncombatants escalated to a massive scale. Nanking fell on December 12 after heavy shelling and bombing, and for the next six weeks Japanese troops engaged in widespread execution, rape, and random murder of Chinese men and women both in the captured city and outlying communities. The total number of Chinese killed is controversial, but a middle-range estimate puts the combined deaths from both the shelling and subsequent atrocities at two hundred thousand. Much smaller killings occurred in other Chinese cities that fell into Japanese hands, including Hankow and Canton. In attempting to consolidate their control over northern China, the Japanese subsequently turned to "rural pacification" campaigns that amounted to indiscriminate terror against the peasantry. And by 1941--42, this fundamentally anti-Communist "pacification" campaign had evolved into the devastating "three-all" policy ("kill all, burn all, destroy all"), during which it is estimated that the population dominated by the Chinese Communists was reduced, through flight and

death, from 44 million to 25 million persons." (page 43).

As American journalists sympathetic to China publicized this fighting, the Japanese achievements which so impressed Creelman and others of his generation faded into memory.

Dower summarized the prophetic, progressive aspects of the military Imperial Precepts in this way:

"Since the 1880's, the Japanese military had been enjoined to exemplify true valor and avoid reprehensible behavior against the enemy. The important Imperial Precepts to Soldiers and Sailors, issued by the emperor in 1882 and memorized by servicemen in World War Two, stated in the third of its five articles that military men should behave in such a way as to earn the esteem of the enemy.

"'If you affect valor and act with violence,' the precepts stated prophetically, 'the world will in the end detest you and look upon you as wild beasts. Of this you should take heed.'" (page 61)

TARNISHING THE "GOLDEN AGE"

The year 1894 sat squarely in what Phillip Knightley has called a "Golden Age" of war correspondents. The period between the American Civil War and the First World War saw the "rise of the popular press, the increasing use of the telegraph, and the tardy introduction of organized censorship."

A steady procession of wars, beginning with the Franco-Prussian of 1870 and including colonial conflicts in Africa, Asia, and the Balkans, provided a seemingly unending series of battles to electrify newspaper readers and boost circulations in Europe and America.

James Creelman joined Japan's army in Manchuria to witness a colonial war of a new kind. No longer was it Britain, or France, or Russia doing battle to acquire empire over some "backward" people. For the first time two Asian powers - each with pretensions of learning from the West - did battle to acquire a third Asian country as dominion.

The winner might prove it had the technology and will to take on an Asian version of the "White Man's Burden" - to play the

dominating colonial master in backward Korea. (For a photo of Creelman and a brief biography by a distant cousin, John E. Creelman, click [here](#).)

It was a time of faith in the triumph of modern civilization and science over the darkness of medievalism. It was a time when European nations took pride in the civilized ideal of humane warfare in which prisoners would be kept alive and well treated, civilians unmolested, and first aid provided for the wounded of both sides. Adherence to these practices was often seen as a mark of civilization.

As Creelman rode with Japanese armies advancing toward Port Arthur, his dispatches could help Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper boost its two penny sales with colorful accounts of distant battles. Newspaper readers of Victorian days relished the excitement of even a "civilized" war - not to mention tales of massacres on Christian minorities in the Balkans, the Mideast, or China. Newspapers such as The World boastfully promoted themselves on the ability of their correspondents to cable back an exclusive so fresh that even the State Department or the White House got its first inkling of foreign upheaval from the press - rather than from its own diplomats.

On December 13, 1894, one day after Creelman's first published account of the taking of Port Arthur, The World could proudly report in a page one headline, "America Is Aghast: The World's News of a Massacre at Port Arthur Astounds Washington."

CREELMAN'S DETAILED COVERAGE

Even as Japan's foreign minister Mutsu cabled The World to put his own defensive spin on Creelman's first reports from Port Arthur, the correspondent's most damaging account of mass executions by bullet and sword was making its way to publication.

On December 20 The World published its correspondent's full account of alleged massacre, dispatched from Japan where Creelman had gone to file his dispatches free of military censors. The first person account stretched across the entire first and second pages. Although the headline occupied only one column, the descending subheads introduced the full graphic detail to Creelman's sketchier early accounts:

THE MASSACRE AT PORT ARTHUR

**At Least Two Thousand Helpless People
Butchered by Japanese Soldiers**

THE TOWN SACKED FROM END TO END

**Streets Cloaked with Mutilated Bodies
of Men, Women and Children While
the Soldiers Laughed**

STOREKEEPERS SHOT AND SABERED

Complete Details of the Startling Story Originally Cabled to The World by Its War Correspondent with the Japanese Army - Several Europeans and Americans Were Present and Some Were in Danger."

The headlines were mild compared to what followed:

"When the Japanese troops poured into Port Arthur they saw the heads of their slain comrades hanging by cords, with the noses and ears gone...A great slaughter followed. The infuriated soldiers killed everyone they saw.

"I can say as an eyewitness that the wretched people of Port Arthur made no attempt to resist the invaders. The Japanese now claim that shots were fired from the windows and doorways, but the statements are utterly false.

"No attempt to take prisoners was made.

"I saw a man who was kneeling to the troops and begging for mercy pinned to the ground with a bayonet while his head was hacked off with a sword...An old man on his knees in the street was cut almost in two...

"All day the troops kept dragging frightened men out of their houses and shooting them or cutting them to pieces...All through the the second day the reign of

murder continued. Hundreds and hundreds were killed. Out on one road alone there were 227 corpses...

"Next day I went...to see a court-yard filled with mutilated corpses. As we entered we surprised two soldiers bending over one of the bodies. One had a knife in his hand. They had ripped open the corpse and were cutting the heart out. When they saw us they cowered and tried to hide their faces.

"I am satisfied that not more than one hundred Chinamen were killed in fair battle at Port Arthur, and that a least 2000 unarmed men were put to death. It may be called the natural result of the fury of troops who have seen the mutilated bodies of their comrades, or it may be called retaliation, but no civilized nation could be capable of the atrocities I witnessed at Port Arthur."

THE IMPACT

Creelman's reporting from Port Arthur brought international recognition for The World as echoes reverberated in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. An American journalist appeared to have "scooped" his more established European competition.

At first there was skepticism, as many papers in the United States and Europe relied on less damaging accounts put out by the Japanese government or cabled second hand from Western correspondents in China. As one dispatch datelined Shanghai noted, "Most of the correspondents declare that the excesses were excusable by parallel cases which have occurred in the best European armies. Indeed The New York Times published a [letter](#) on March 20, 1895 from a Japanese student roundly denouncing Creelman's reporting.

JAPAN ASKS ONLY JUSTICE

**One of her Citizens Tells the Truth
About Port Arthur**

SOME DISTORTED NEWSPAPER STORIES

**Straining After Sensationalism Which
Reflected Unjustly on a
Civilized Nation**

MR CREELMAN'S DISPATCHES UNRELIABLE

**Evidence to Prove that Both He and
Mr. Villiers Misrepresented Facts
to Secure Sensational Effects**

Yet Joseph Pulitzer could take pleasure from headlines such as this
in The World on January 8, 1895:

LONDON JOURNALS FOLLOW *THE WORLD*

**At Last They Print
Details of Port Ar-
thur's Massacre**

CREELMAN'S DESCRIPTION LAUDED

On January 9 the London Times printed a lengthy account from its
correspondent, Thomas Cowan, who had also been present at Port
Arthur.14) Back in New York, The World could scarcely conceal
its glee as it ran this story on January 10:

**BEATEN BY *THE WORLD*
London Journals Admit Being
Three Weeks Late with
Port Arthur News.**

COULDN'T BELIEVE IT AT FIRST

***Westminster Gazette* Joins in the
Chorus of Praise of Creelman's
Account of the Massacre.**

CREELMAN: NO PRETENSE TOWARD BALANCE

Creelman made no pretense toward objective, balanced reporting,
to avoid becoming "part of the story." The language was often
emotional, containing what today would be called "editorializing."
which included his own thoughts, emotions, or even actions. Willis
Abbott, once a journalist for Hearst and in the 1920's editor of The

Christian Science Monitor maintained that Creelman's egotism "often impelled that very enterprising writer to put so much of himself into an interview or a story that the real subject of the article was utterly obscured. (Willis Abbott, Watching The World Go By, p. 208).

A good example of Creelman's editorializing, emotion stirring style is this passage from his first brief dispatch in The World reporting the Port Arthur massacre:

"The defenseless and unarmed inhabitants were butchered in their houses and their bodies unspeakably mutilated. There was an unrestrained reign of murder which continued for three days. The whole town was plundered with appalling atrocities. It was the first stain upon Japanese civilization. The Japanese in this instance relapsed into barbarism." (December 12, 1894, The World, p.1)

On several occasions Creelman abandoned the notion of the journalist as observer to become an active part of the story. When covering Cuba some three years after Port Arthur, he personally appealed to the Spanish commander Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau to investigate after filing a dispatch to The World concluding Spanish troops were executing non-combatants without trial . He personally helped lead an American charge against Spanish forces at El Caney when he returned to Cuba to cover the Spanish-American war in 1898.



The Assault on El Caney

CREELMAN KEEPS HIS HEAD: ON DUTY

A rumor that he had been beheaded by the Chinese as a spy caused jitters at The World until a November 1894 cable from the paper's Tokyo correspondent confirmed his safety. Creelman's brother in law D.H. Buell was able to write him November 29 semi-humorously:

"Please inform us at once whether you have really been beheaded by the Chinese. We have been very anxious about you until we got telegram from World saying that the correspondent who was beheaded was a Jap."

Attesting to the rigors of the mission Creelman later wrote his wife Alice on December 8, 1894 from Yokohama, Japan, "I am in perfect health but thin. I have lost about thirty pounds."

Creelman gave his personal interpretation of his reporting from Manchuria to his wife Alice in a December 21, 1894 letter from Yokohama, Japan:

"I am now the general target for abuse in Japan simply because I have told the truth about Port Arthur. I knew in advance that to lay the naked facts before the public would mean the instant activity of the vast enginery of abuse maintained by the Japanese government and so I considered my duty call. I could not as a reputable journalist nor as an American attempt to conceal any fact of the great crime. It was too monstrous, too cold, too long continued.....When a clear question of duty presents itself to me, dear, you know how I am likely to decide. I can now come back to you and to my baby with the consciousness that I have not stained your name. This whole empire rings with the salvos of my work, and I am proud of it."

[Email](#)



Copyright ©1997 Frederic A. Moritz

All Rights Reserved
Updated 2009
Citation Permitted Only With Credit

[TOP](#) | [HOME](#)