

LESSON 2: THE PHILIPPINES CRISIS, 1899

Student Handout 5

Primary Source: U.S. soldiers' letters from the Philippines

1. Lieutenant Samuel Lyon to his wife, Oct. 9, 1899, and June 17, 1900:

“Between you and me Molly, I think we are making a big mistake in taking the Philippines. I believe it would be a mistake to annex them if they wanted, and I think the mistake becomes a national crime when we force them by superior strength in numbers, enormous financial advantages and mental supremacy to become subjects of our republic... There is no saying where the new policy of ‘expansion’ (which really means ‘conquest’) will end—what internal dissensions and what external entanglements may result. It is very well to say, as the exponents of expansion all do, that ‘it is our duty to elevate the people of the Philippines,’ etc., but a first duty of a nation is to our people.”

“I am disappointed in the United States, but it is still my country. I am sure the American people will see the right thing to do sooner or later. I only hope they see it in time.”

2. Captain Matthew Batson to his wife, April 23–May 4, 1899, pp. 47–48:

“One of the prettiest little towns we have passed through is Apolit... The 17th Infantry came into this place the other night and literally destroyed it—looted, ransacked, burned it—and we propose to civilize, Christianize these people... We come as a Christian people to relieve them from the Spanish yoke and bear ourselves like barbarians.”

3. Captain Matthew Batson to his wife, October, November, December, 1899, pp. 120–21:

“At present we are destroying this district, everything before us. I have three columns [of soldiers] out, and their course is easily traced by the smoke from burning houses. Of course, no official report will be made of everything.”

4. Letter from unidentified soldier to his parents, printed in the *Kingston* (New York) *Evening Post*, May 8, 1899:

“The town of Titatia was surrendered to us a few days ago, and two companies occupy the same. Last night one of our boys was found shot and his stomach cut open. Immediately orders were received from General Wheaton to burn the town and kill every native in sight; which was done to a finish. About 1000 men, women and children were reported killed. I am probably growing hard-hearted, for I am in my glory when I can sight my gun on some dark skin and pull the trigger.”

5. Letter from Corporal Sam Gillis to his parents, printed in *San Francisco Call*, April 15, 1899:

“We make everyone get into his house by 7 pm, and we only tell a man once. If he refuses we shoot him. We killed over 300 natives the first night. They tried to set the town on fire. If they fire a shot from a house we burn the house down and every house near it, and shoot the natives, so they are pretty quiet in town now.”

6. Letter from unidentified soldier, published in *Soldiers' Letters*:

Coloocan was supposed to contain seventeen thousand inhabitants. The Twentieth Kansas swept through it, and now Caloocan contains not one living native.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What is your reaction to these letters? Would your reaction have been different if the letters recounted Filipino torture of Americans (described on Handout 2)?
2. What effects do you think these letters had on the soldiers' families and the general public?
3. How reliable are these letters as sources of information about the Philippine War?