

LESSON 2: THE PHILIPPINES CRISIS, 1899

Student Handout 2

OUTCOMES

President McKinley and his advisers decided to keep the Philippines. Here is a short list of the unintended consequences of that decision. Which of these consequences did you anticipate?



“Our Boys Entrenched Against the Filipinos”

1. Fighting broke out between the U.S. and the Philippines. It’s unclear which side started it, but racist views of non-whites by American soldiers and tension over occupation by American troops were two contributing factors. General E.S. Otis, the commander in charge of U.S. troops in the Philippines, publicly stated that he wanted to provoke a fight. At first, the Americans wiped out many of the Filipinos in large-scale battles. Then the Filipinos switched to guerrilla tactics. The war dragged on for three years (1899–1902) with the following results:
 - a. Guerrilla fighters frequently ambushed American troops and then hid their weapons, picked up farm tools, and pretended to be farmers. They set up booby traps (such as pits with sharpened bamboo sticks) to injure American soldiers.

- b. Guerilla fighters also tortured American prisoners. A U.S. patrol reported finding an American prisoner who had been buried alive up to his neck: "His mouth had been propped open with a stick, a trail of sugar laid to it through the forest. Millions of ants had done the rest."
- c. American troops also committed atrocities after U.S. troops were "hacked to pieces" near the town of Malabon. "We got orders to spare no one," recalled Anthony Michea, an artilleryman. "We went in and killed every native we met, men, women, and children. It was a dreadful sight." Some historians feel American atrocities were not widespread, while others feel it was very common. (See the letters from U.S. soldiers for examples.)
- d. In some areas American troops sent Filipinos to concentration camps to separate the civilians from the rebels. Outside these camps, everyone was considered an enemy. This was the very same policy Americans condemned Spanish General Weyler ("The Butcher") for in Cuba.
- e. The American commander ordered that captured guerrillas be denied prisoner-of-war status (in a parallel to today's "enemy combatants"), thus opening the door to torture. Americans often used the "water cure" to force prisoners to give information. Several U.S. soldiers would hold a man under a faucet, while another held his mouth open as water poured into the prisoner's mouth. If the Filipino prisoner didn't answer the questions, an American soldier would stomp on the prisoner's stomach, making him vomit. The procedure would then be repeated. One U.S. general argued that the Filipinos were not civilized, so Americans did not have to follow rules of civilized warfare.
- f. The American press reported these atrocities, which led to hearings in the Senate.
- g. In the Philippines, U.S. generals censored any American newspaper articles critical of U.S. strategy or actions, or that said the war would be difficult. General Otis, in particular, said that the U.S. had almost won the war at every stage in the war. Each American attack was "the last stroke of the war," and each battle was called a "complete success." He didn't want newspapers printing articles reporting that the U.S. wasn't close to victory. The American censor told reporters, "Of course, we all know that we are in a terrible mess out here, but we don't want the people to get excited about it. If you fellows will only keep quiet now we will pull through in time without any fuss at home." The censor asked for ten days. The reporters waited a month, and then signed a collective statement saying that General Otis had deliberately misrepresented the real situation in the Philippines. As a result, General Otis threatened to arrest the reporters.
- h. Significant protests against the war broke out in numerous U.S. cities. War supporters criticized the protesters for undermining American soldiers. The war divided the country.



General E.S. Otis,
American commander
in the Philippines

- i. Many American soldiers hated the war and were critical of some of their military leaders (especially General Otis). For example, newspapers published headlines such as, “No Friend for Otis Among the Volunteers” and “Soldiers Call Otis a ‘Foolish Old Woman.’ “
 - j. Some American soldiers had racist views of Filipinos, calling them “niggers” and “Injuns” (they had fought American Indians just prior to the war). In fact, at the World’s Fair in St. Louis in 1904, the Filipinos were part of a colonial exhibit called “The Philippine Reservation.”
 - k. At the height of the war, about three-fourths of the entire U.S. army, approximately 70,000 men, were in the Philippines fighting the insurgents.
 - l. The U.S. suffered losses of 4234 killed and 2818 wounded. The war cost the U.S. \$600 million (about \$30 billion in 2002 dollars). Approximately 20,000 Filipino soldiers were killed and 200,000 civilians died, mostly from starvation. U.S. troops killed more people in the Philippines in three years than the Spanish had killed in 350 years. U.S. military forces were able to defeat the rebels partly due to mistakes in strategy by rebel leaders, but primarily because of their advanced military technology (Gatling guns, artillery, and Krag rifles, for example) and better supplies.
2. When the U.S. acquired the islands, it built roads, hospitals, and bridges, and increased the country’s literacy rate from 20% to 50%, the highest rate in all of Southeast Asia. English was taught in the schools and became the dominant language (which is one reason Filipinos work in large numbers for American companies today). Many teaching techniques, however, were culturally inappropriate for the Philippines. For example: “A is for apple” (because apples are not grown on those islands); John and Mary in the snow (because there is no snow there); and patriotic lessons about George Washington. Americans also improved the Philippine court and tax systems and reduced disease in the country.
 3. In 1916 the U.S. was the first western power to grant some form of self-rule to a colony when it did so with the Philippines. The U.S. also promised independence at some point in the future (but didn’t specify when). In 1933 the U.S. promised independence in ten years. After World War II, the U.S. was the first colonial power to grant a colony independence.
 4. In the Philippines, democracy didn’t work as well as many U.S. leaders had hoped. Throughout the 20th century, rich families dominated the government, and many Filipino leaders were seen as puppets of American interests. Poor people couldn’t vote. Nevertheless, the Philippine government was one of the most democratic in Southeast Asia until the 1960s.
 5. The islands’ economy steadily increased, as it was tied to U.S. imports and exports. The Philippines was one the richest countries in Southeast Asia until the 1960s, though rich families dominated the economy while most Filipinos remained poor. The overall improvement of the Philippine economy began an American tradition of helping societies worldwide.
 6. U.S. military leaders stuck to a plan to defend the Philippines, even though they knew it would be difficult to prevent a Japanese attack. In a 1941 World War II battle, the Japanese captured the islands after five months of bitter fighting. The U.S. lost approximately 25,000 soldiers. Approximately 10,000 Americans died in

- the Bataan Death March, when the Japanese forcibly marched thousands of captured, starving soldiers to a prisoner-of-war camp about 100 miles away. Captives were denied food and water for several days. Those who fell behind were killed.
7. American consumers benefited from U.S. acquisition of the islands, since the cheap raw materials obtained in the Philippines reduced the price of many goods, which in turn reduced the cost of living. Some American businesses also benefited from increased exports to Asia.
 8. As a result of the U.S. acquisition of the Philippines, Asian countries viewed the United States as imperialistic. The author of an article in the *Japan Times* stated, “The whole world sank with despondency at the sight of Republican America behaving like a cruel, tyrannical and rapacious Empire in the Philippines and particularly to the broken-hearted people of Asia who are beginning to lose all confidence in the humanity of the white race.” Years later, communist leaders such as Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh played on Asian dislike of America.
 9. Protestant missionary work increased in the Philippines and China.
 10. In what were referred to as the “Insular Cases,” the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Constitution did not apply to the Filipinos. This ruling went counter to all national traditions and precedents, in which new territories became states with their residents holding equal rights to those living in the original states.
 11. The decision to keep the Philippines strengthened the power of the presidency compared to that of Congress, since the president had made the decision to acquire the islands and subsequently administered the new colony.
 12. In the Philippines, the U.S. confronted a dilemma that arises to this day. Should the U.S. emphasize human rights, or stability for American interests? The U.S. acquired the Philippines partly as a naval base but also to expand trade in the area. These national goals pushed the U.S. into a brutal war, one that violated the human rights of thousands of Filipinos and led the U.S. to employ the same type of concentration camps it had condemned the Spanish for using in Cuba.