



Puerto Rico and the Spanish-American War: Student Packet



U.S. Navy ships bombard San Juan, Puerto Rico, on May 12, 1898 (Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-8328)

Essential Question

- ✿ Why did the U.S. Navy bombard San Juan, Puerto Rico, on May 12, 1898?

Student Packet:

Puerto Rico and the Spanish-American War

Context

The Spanish-American War

The Spanish-American War broke out in the spring of 1898 when the United States intervened in conflicts between Spain and Cuba, then a part of the Spanish Empire. The Cubans, like others throughout the Spanish Empire, were fighting for independence.

By 1898, the war for Cuban independence was causing great suffering among the people of Cuba, whose economy and everyday lives were disrupted by the arrival of 100,000 Spanish troops and the violence they unleashed.

A short distance north, many Americans were calling for intervention to stop the suffering in Cuba. Others saw great opportunity in a Cuba free from Spanish control—a Cuba that might be a market for U.S. goods and a source for commodities like sugar and coffee. Ultimately, and for a number of reasons, American politicians and policymakers decided to intervene in the conflict.

Upon Spain's defeat, only a few months after the U.S. intervention, many people formerly under Spanish rule—Filipinos, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans, especially—now expected the United States, itself a former European colony, to grant them independence. Instead, the United States took over Puerto Rico and the Philippines and turned Cuba into a U.S. “protectorate,” where Americans were free to conduct military operations as well as interfere with Cuba's elections and government. To many people in the Caribbean and the Philippines, the postwar settlement amounted to a bitter disappointment.

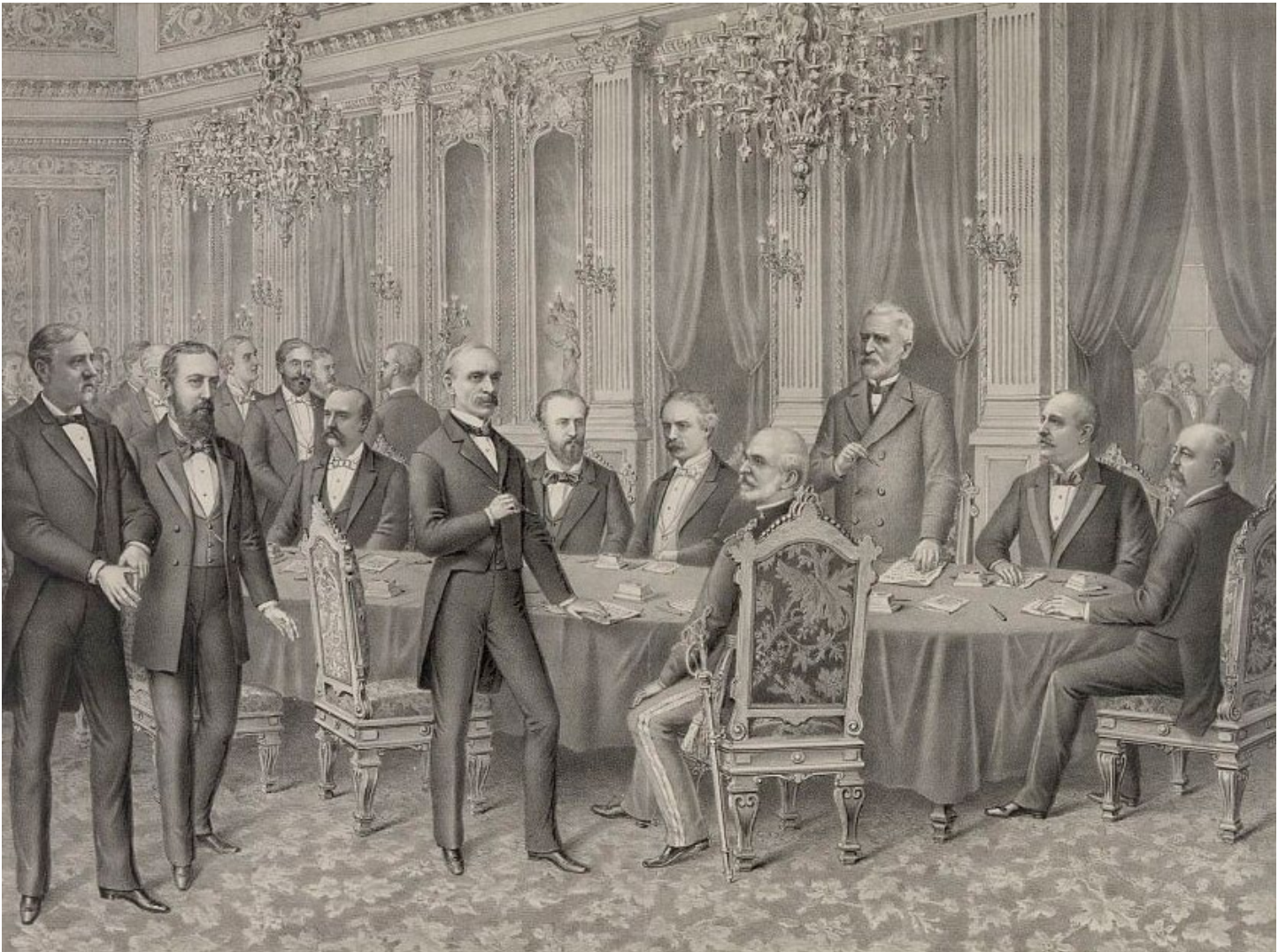
Puerto Rico in 1898

Puerto Rico had been a Spanish colony since 1493, when Christopher Columbus claimed it on his second voyage to the Americas. He and his successors soon established a system of plantation slavery there, which persisted well into the 19th century. Through the centuries, Puerto Rico supported a diverse and highly stratified population of Spaniards, people of Spanish descent, people of African descent, people of Native American descent, and people of mixed descent. As in the United States, an individual's opportunities were determined first and foremost by their race, their class, and their gender.

In the late 19th century, many Puerto Ricans for a variety of reasons wished for independence from Spain: Certain wealthy agriculturalists hoped for better access to lucrative markets in the United States, while less wealthy Puerto Ricans hoped for greater freedom and social mobility. None if these things would be possible, they believed, without independence from Spain.

When an anti-Spanish revolt broke out in Cuba and appeared to be succeeding, even in spite of Spain's war against the independence movement, the anti-Spanish elements in Puerto Rican society took notice. A debate developed over whether it might be better in the future to try for lasting independence for Puerto Rico or to request annexation to the United States, which might lead to an even richer future. In the midst of this debate, and in the context of the U.S. war against Spain, the U.S. military invaded Puerto Rico.

Puerto Ricans experienced the U.S. invasion as two events: the bombardment of San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital, on May 12, 1898, and the land invasion of the island five weeks later, on July 25. In December of that year, representatives from the United States and Spain met in Paris, where they agreed to let the United States keep Puerto Rico as an imperial possession.



The Treaty of Paris being signed by U.S and Spanish representatives on December 10, 1898 (Library of Congress LC-DIG-pga-01948)

Relevant Dates

Puerto Rico and the Spanish-American War

February–May 1895	The Cuban independence movement begins its war of independence against Spain.
December 7, 1896	President Grover Cleveland, heretofore in favor of neutrality, announces that the United States may take action in Cuba if the war there continues.
March 4, 1897	President William McKinley is inaugurated.
November 25, 1897	Spain offers Puerto Rico greater (though limited) political autonomy and representation under the Spanish crown. Puerto Ricans accept the offer.
January 1, 1898	Spain offers Cuba greater (though limited) political autonomy and representation under the Spanish crown. The Cuban revolutionaries refuse the offer, preferring independence.
February 15, 1898	USS <i>Maine</i> , a Navy warship, explodes in Havana Harbor, killing 266 Sailors. The U.S. government blames Spain but offers no conclusive evidence.
March 29, 1898	The United States issues an ultimatum to Spain, stating that if Spain did not leave Cuba, claimed for Spain by Columbus in 1492, then the United States would seize Cuba by force—i.e., declare war on Spain.
April 1, 1898	Spain replies to the U.S. ultimatum of March 29 in the negative: The ultimatum is not accepted.
April 11, 1898	President McKinley requests congressional authorization for military intervention in Cuba.
April 13, 1898	Congress agrees to President McKinley’s request of April 11.
April 25, 1898	War is formally declared between the United States and Spain.
May 1, 1898	The U.S. Navy defeats the Spanish fleet at Manila, in the Philippines.
May 12, 1898	The U.S. Navy bombards San Juan, Puerto Rico.
May 27, 1898	The U.S. Navy blockades the port of Santiago, Cuba.
June 10, 1898	U.S. Marines land at Guantánamo, Cuba.
July 17, 1898	The Spanish forces at Santiago, Cuba, surrender to U.S. forces.
July 18–25, 1898	The Spanish government works through French diplomats to ask the Americans for a cessation of hostilities.
July 25, 1898	U.S. forces invade Puerto Rico.
August 2, 1898	Spain accepts the U.S. terms for a cessation of hostilities and agrees to draft the legal document that will end hostilities.
12 August 1898	Hostilities between the United States and Spain are officially suspended.
10 December 1898	Representatives of the United States and Spain meet in Paris to sign a peace treaty. Spain loses Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

Source 1. Excerpt from “Strategy Upon a War with Spain” (1894)

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Lieutenant Commander Charles J. Train, U.S. Navy, with the assistance of two other Navy officers and under the direction of a Navy captain
<i>What is it?</i>	a proposed plan for how the U.S. Navy might deal with a war against Spain
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Naval War College, Newport, RI
<i>When was it written?</i>	1894
<i>Why was it written?</i>	to begin to prepare the Navy for the possibility of war against Spain over Cuba and Puerto Rico

The only point where the interests of Spain and those of the United States could possibly clash, with the result of bringing on a war, would undoubtedly be Cuba. Geographically and commercially, Cuba belongs to the United States. Nor is it possible that a political union can long be delayed. But such a union cannot come peaceably, more by reason of the fierce patriotism of the Spanish race, than from the material benefits Spain derives from its possession. A declaration of war by either nation against the other, would be immediately followed by preparations for the defense of the island by Spain and for its capture by the United States. Spain is not a maritime nation nor an offensive one in a military sense. That she would undertake an offensive campaign against any of our ports, is most improbable. It would require all the power she could possibly ex[ert] to preserve Cuba, and she would have nothing left for other things. That Spain could prevent the capture of the island by the United States is hardly to be expected provided the latter puts forth all her power. . . .

In anticipation of a declaration of war the U.S. would organize her naval force. . . . Spain would mobilize her fleet, put as many troops as she could transport, on board vessels and attempt to land them on the coast of Cuba. Since Cuba is entirely dependent on the outside world for her food supplies, for her coal, and maritime supplies of every sort, it is plain that a strict and rigorous blockade would end in the speedy reduction of the island and that the Spanish fleet would have to bring its own supplies with it. . . .

Should the enemy propose to proceed to Havana [from Spain] at once, . . . his plan may be to touch at San Juan de Porto Rico [sic], and refit and recoal there [before proceeding onward to Cuba].¹

1. Source: Charles J. Train, “Strategy Upon a War with Spain,” also titled, “Plan of Operations Against Spain Prepared by Lieutenant Commander Charles J. Train,” 1894, available at https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/pre-war-planning/plan-of-operations-a-5/_jcr_content.html.

Glossary

political union

in this case, the annexation of Cuba by the United States

blockade

a system of using ships of war to stop by force all shipping to and from enemy ports

recoal

refuel

Source 2. Excerpt from “Plan of Operations Against Spain” (1896)

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	U.S. naval officers
<i>What is it?</i>	a plan for how the U.S. Navy might deal with a war against Spain
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Washington, DC
<i>When was it written?</i>	1896
<i>Why was it written?</i>	to help the Secretary of the Navy prepare the Navy for the possibility of war against Spain over Cuba and Puerto Rico

The Statesman’s Yearbook of 1896 gives ten percent of Cuba’s area as cultivated and states that its annual imports . . . are chiefly food: rice, jerked beef, and flour. The present war has continued since February, 1895. Upwards of 100,000 additional [Spanish] troops have been landed and half of that number of men of the resident population have been in arms. To these add all non-producers, the inhabitants of cities, and consider the destruction of crops by both parties with loss of production from the war, and the conclusion is inevitable that an imported food supply is absolutely essential to the continued maintenance of the war, or indeed the occupation of the island by Spain. Food stopped, the garrisons of all fortified seaports and cities must capitulate. . . .

The strangulation process outlined can be quickened in its operation greatly by the bombardment of San Juan, Porto Rico [sic], and Habana [sic], which are the civil, commercial, military and naval capitals on the islands of Spain [near] our coasts To meet the contingency of the Spanish Army holding out after the control of the coast of Cuba has been obtained by the navy, our army should be prepared for immediate military occupation of that island.²

2. Source: F. M. Ramsay, Francis M. Bunce, W. T. Sampson, and Richard Wainwright, “Plan of Operations Against Spain,” December 17, 1896, available online at <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhrc/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/pre-war-planning/plan-of-operations-a-3.html>.

Glossary

Statesman’s Yearbook

a one-volume reference work published annually, with information about the contemporary world

jerked beef

strips of sun-dried beef

Source 3. The U.S. Consul's Recommendation for Puerto Rico

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Philip C. Hanna, the U.S. consul (representative) at San Juan, Puerto Rico
<i>What is it?</i>	a letter to his superior, Assistant Secretary of State William R. Day
<i>Where was it written?</i>	St. Thomas, the Caribbean island then in Danish possession
<i>When was it written?</i>	May 9, 1898
<i>Why was it written?</i>	to inform and advise the U.S. government in Washington, DC

Sir:

Concerning the Spanish Army in the Island of Puerto Rico, I have the honor to report that from the best information obtainable there are about 2,000 regular soldiers at San Juan, 1,000 at Ponce and 1,000 at Mayaguez and about 600 divided among the other cities of the Island, making about 4,000 regulars in the whole island. Then they claim 7,000 colonial troops who are comprised of young men of the island. Besides they have of late distributed several thousand guns among the natives of the Island. I am still of the opinion that Puerto Rico should be taken and held as a coaling station, thus supplying our Navy and cutting off Spain. In order to accomplish this we should land in Puerto Rico not less than 10,000 men. Let them land at Ponce or Fajardo, or some other port and march through the Island to meet the American fleet at San Juan. Let the fleet knock down the fortifications there, which are the only ones in the Island, and our land forces of 10,000 can hold the Island forever. Then the fleet can go on its way sinking Spanish warships and the like and return to San Juan for coal and supplies, just as the Spanish fleet now expect to. From Ponce to San Juan there is the finest road in the whole West Indies, and an army could march across to San Juan with no bad roads to interfere.

I wish to be instructed to return to San Juan with the first troops or first warships.

I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

Philip C. Hanna ³

3. Source: Letter from Philip C. Hanna to William R. Day, May 9, 1898, available at https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/bombardment-of-san-j/united-states-consul/_jcr_content.html#.

Glossary

I have the honor

a standard phrase in letters between government officials of this and earlier periods

West Indies

the Caribbean islands

obedient servant

a standard phrase in letters from government officials to their superiors in this period

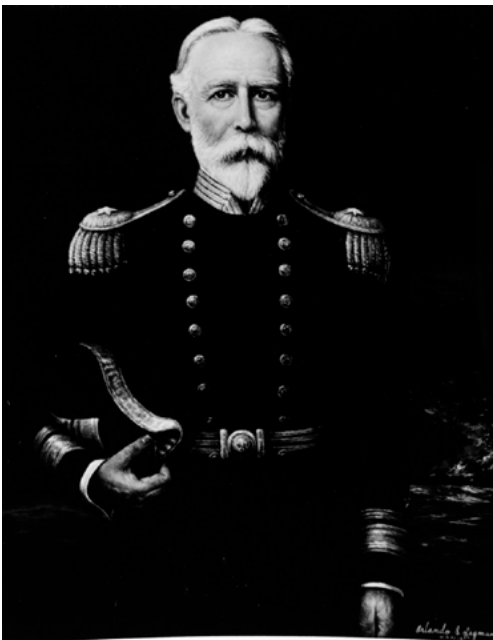
Source 4. The Bombardment of San Juan

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Rear Admiral William T. Sampson, Commander, North Atlantic Fleet
<i>What is it?</i>	a telegram to the Secretary of the Navy John D. Long
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Caribbean waters
<i>When was it written?</i>	May 12, 1898
<i>Why was it written?</i>	to inform the Secretary of the Navy and the government in Washington, DC, that Sampson's ships had bombarded San Juan, Puerto Rico

A portion of the Squadron under my command reached San Juan this morning at daybreak. No armed vessels were found in the port. As soon as it was sufficiently light I commenced an attack upon the batteries defending the City. This attack lasted about three hours, and resulted in much damage to the batteries and incidentally to portions of the city adjacent to the batteries. The batteries replied to our fire but without material effect. One man was killed on board the New York and four slightly wounded in the Squadron. No serious damage to any ship resulted.⁴

4. Source: Telegram from William T. Sampson to John D. Long, May 12, 1898, available at https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/bombardment-of-san-j/rear-admiral-william/_jcr_content.html#.



Rear Admiral William T. Sampson
(NH 64577-KN)

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Squadron

a group of warships

batteries

groupings of artillery
(heavy guns, cannon)

replied to our fire

shot back

without material effect

causing no
physical damage

New York

a U.S. Navy warship

Source 5. Excerpt from a Firsthand Account of the Bombardment of San Juan

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Commander Hermann Jacobsen of the Imperial German Navy
<i>What is it?</i>	a firsthand account of events during the bombardment of San Juan
<i>Where was it written?</i>	unknown
<i>When was it written?</i>	1898 or 1899
<i>Why was it written?</i>	for publication in Germany, later obtained and translated by U.S. naval personnel

In the evening the whole population [of San Juan] would usually repair to the plaza; several times during the week there was music there. The theater also remained open and enjoyed pretty good audiences. . . .

This peaceful situation was suddenly changed when, on May 12, 1898, a part of the fleet commanded by Admiral Sampson appeared at 5 o'clock in the morning in front of San Juan, and without any further notification opened bombardment. The Spanish complained bitterly of this surprise, which did not give them a chance to remove the sick and the women and children to places of safety, and did not give foreign representatives and warships time to leave the city or the harbor. "There are no international agreements, it is true, as to previous notice of a bombardment," says the Puerto Rico Gazette, "but in practice the custom prevails among all civilized nations to give notice of the bombardment of a city or fortification. For no Christian soldier, no civilized nation, will want to take the terrible responsibility of butchering defenseless women and children. The soldier fights against those who carry weapons, but not against the weak and the sick." The Spanish are not entirely wrong in this. A real surprise could have been of advantage to Admiral Sampson only in the case it had reconnaissance, he might have granted a delay of two or three hours without in any manner prejudicing the result of the bombardment.⁵ As it was, the inhabitants were rudely awakened from their sleep. The troops and volunteers at once hurried to their posts; but old men, women, and children sought their safety in the fields and roads outside of the city. A veritable emigration of fleeing people was moving along the road to Cangrejos, but all were quiet and orderly. Meanwhile the American projectiles were steadily falling upon the city and its vicinity; some passed over the city and fell into the bay.⁶

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repair

to go somewhere, to gather in a place, to return to a place

projectiles

bombs

5. Jacobsen means that the Americans gained nothing by the element of surprise in this case, and had the Americans done any reconnaissance (scouting of the area beforehand), they would have seen that the Spanish soldiers were never far from their positions in the batteries and thus always ready to defend San Juan from American bombardment. Therefore, Jacobsen reasons, the Americans had no military justification for not warning the people of San Juan that they were about to be bombed.

6. Source: Hermann Jacobsen, *Sketches from the Spanish-American War*, translated by the Office of Naval Intelligence (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1899), 13, available at https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/bombardment-of-san-j/sketches-from-the-sp/_jcr_content.html.

Source 6. The U.S. Consul's Response to the Bombardment of San Juan

About This Source

Who wrote this?	Philip C. Hanna, the U.S. consul (representative) at San Juan, Puerto Rico
What is it?	a letter to his superior, Assistant Secretary of State William R. Day
Where was it written?	St. Thomas, the Caribbean island then in Danish possession
When was it written?	May 13, 1898
Why was it written?	to inform and advise the U.S. government in Washington, DC, and to elaborate on an earlier communication

Sir:

On the evening of May 12, I had the honor to send you the following cablegram:

Bombardment San Juan today. I consider such movements unwise until troops are ready to land to hold the Island.

I wish to say this was in no way intended to criticize the Navy for the bombardment, as I have full faith in their judgment. I simply spoke in the telegram my opinion from my knowledge of the situation in the Island, and I think the Navy will agree with me that Puerto Rico should not be touched again until a body of troops can be landed to co-operate with them, which troops can hold the Island after the fortifications are destroyed. Simply to bombard San Juan and then go away will leave a bad state of affairs in the Island and every American still there would be killed, all American property destroyed. All Cubans in Puerto Rico would suffer like fate and our friends who number thousands throughout the Island might lose faith in our ability to take Puerto Rico if we bombard and then leave them to the Spanish still. There are thousands of the best men in the Island today who want our Government to take the Island, and I firmly believe they will assist us if we go about it in a way that will cause Puerto Ricans to feel that we mean business and will not turn them over to the wrath of Spain after the Island has been taken.

I understand that the Governor General has published all through the Island already that "the Pig Yankees" have tried their best to take the Capital and were badly defeated, and that we lost several ships. But the friends of the United States in the Island are accustomed to such reports and will make sport of it. They have faith in us and long to be included among America's States.

I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

Philip C. Hanna⁷

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friends

Hanna is likely referring to the Puerto Ricans who believed that annexation to the United States would be a good idea

Yankees

in this case, slang for Americans

Capital

San Juan

make sport of

mock, discredit

7. Source: Letter from Philip C. Hanna to William R. Day, May 13, 1898, available at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/united-states-navy-s/bombardment-of-san-j/united-states-consul-o.html>

Name _____ Date _____

Worksheet (Formative Assessment)

4. How did Admiral Sampson's attack (**Source 4**) on San Juan differ from recent plans for Puerto Rico (**Sources 2 and 3**)?

5. According to **Source 5**, why were the Americans wrong to bombard San Juan in the way that they did?

6. According to **Source 6**, how might the bombardment of San Juan be a bad thing for the U.S. war effort?

Homework (Summative Assessment)

Why did the U.S. Navy bombard San Juan, Puerto Rico, on May 12, 1898?

Directions:

Newspapers were the principal way that people in the United States received news of the war as it unfolded, and journalists played a major role in the formation of public opinion about events before, during, and after the conflict.

You are a reporter trying to make sense of what happened on May 12 in San Juan, and the sources available to you are the sources in this packet. Write a news story that tells Americans what happened and why. Use all six sources in your article. Limit your response to two pages, 1-inch margins, double-spaced, Times New Roman font, size 12. Be sure to give your article a title (headline).

Extension Exercise

Why did the U.S. Navy bombard San Juan, Puerto Rico, on May 12, 1898?

Write a five-paragraph essay answering the question above. You may repeat points you made in the summative exercise, but you may want to change the tone, since a historical essay is different from a newspaper article of 1898.

Be sure to support your argument by using examples from at least four of the sources above, as well as examples from your textbook and/or other assigned readings that touch on U.S. politics, economy, society, and culture in the 1890s.

Limit your response to three pages, 1-inch margins, double-spaced, Times New Roman font, size 12.