

A Tale of Two Storms

U.S. Army Disaster Relief in Puerto Rico and Texas, 1899–1900

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Abstract: This article argues that the disaster relief efforts following hurricanes in Puerto Rico in 1899 and Galveston, Texas, in 1900 represent a watershed in American military history. These two cases highlight a critical juncture where the U.S. Army became the lead federal agency in imperial and domestic disaster relief and established a precedent that lasted well into the twentieth century. By declaring martial law, directly overseeing relief efforts, and plugging into existing social hierarchies, the Army and local elites completely reconstructed the political, economic, and social order of both locales. As this was a relatively new role for the Army, they relied on the local social hierarchy as a matter of expediency because of the absence of any existing doctrine to guide their disaster relief efforts. These Army relief efforts culminated in fostering two antidemocratic governments: a colonial regime in Puerto Rico and the first commission-style government in Galveston that upheld Jim Crow policies that were eventually replicated throughout the United States.

Keywords: U.S. Army, Puerto Rico, Galveston, imperialism, disaster relief, Jim Crow

On 8 August 1899, Hurricane San Ciriaco ravaged Puerto Rico, drowning nearly 3,000 people.¹ Only a few months had passed since the United States assumed control of the island in the Spanish-American

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War in 1898, and military governor U.S. Army brigadier general George W. Davis saw the storm as the perfect opportunity to demonstrate American benevolence to the people of the newly acquired territory. Davis quickly petitioned the federal government for relief supplies. However, American largesse came with strings attached. When American ships arrived with food, medical supplies, and clothing, Davis and chief surgeon Major John Van R. Hoff limited the availability of aid only to those Puerto Ricans willing to help clean up debris and bury the dead. Davis and Van Hoff put local plantation owners in charge of implementing this policy to uphold the social hierarchy. Planters then took this mandate one step further by distributing food only to workers who helped clear property and recover crops.²

Not long after, Davis appeared before the Senate Committee on the Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico in 1900, arguing that the United States needed full civic control of the governance of Puerto Rico.³ Davis based his argument on the economic and political instability he encountered on the island after the hurricane. Davis's testimony proved indispensable in the passing of the Foraker Act in 1900, which established a civil government in Puerto Rico under American rule.⁴

On 8 September 1900, exactly 13 months after Hurricane San Ciriaco struck Puerto Rico, a second great storm devastated Galveston, Texas, claiming the lives of more than 6,000 people. Led by Clara Barton, the American Red Cross (ARC) supported with a U.S. Army detachment swiftly answered Galveston's plea for relief, partnering with the city's elite to administer aid. The Central Relief Committee (CRC), which consisted of elite White Galvestonians, consolidated their power over city affairs when Brigadier General Thomas Scurry declared martial law and issued multiple statements proclaiming that any able-bodied men who did not volunteer to clean debris and bury the dead would not be fed.⁵ These proclamations were aimed at poor African Americans who made up 22 percent of Galveston's pre-storm population.

Scurry and the CRC, like Davis in Puerto Rico, treated relief as a reward for labor, not as a necessity to alleviate suffering, and yet again the military was tasked to supervise the distribution of aid. After the storm, this paternal approach persisted as the same elite businessmen who partnered with the Army and oversaw the relief efforts formed a commission-style city government to rebuild Galveston and barred African Americans from political participation. This form of government first originated in Galveston after the storm during the Progressive Era (from the 1880s to the 1920s) and then spread to 500 other cities throughout the United States.⁶ The commission ruled the city from 1901 until 1960 and continued to exclude Black Galvestonians, thereby reinforcing Jim Crow's presence.

The Argument for U.S. Military Involvement for Disaster Relief

This article argues that the cases of Puerto Rico and Galveston represent a wa-

tershed in U.S. military history, as these two cases highlight a critical juncture where the U.S. Army became the lead federal agency in imperial and domestic disaster relief for the very first time. By declaring martial law, directly overseeing relief efforts, and plugging into existing social hierarchies, the Army and local elites reconstructed the political, economic, and social order of both locales. As this was a relatively new role for the Army, they relied on the local social hierarchy as a matter of expediency because of the absence of any existing doctrine to guide their disaster relief efforts.⁷ However, this also meant that access to aid came with strings attached and that the poorest and most in need of aid were largely overlooked.

When comparing both hurricane relief efforts, two common trends appear: the distribution of aid was not equal, and conditions were attached to obtain the aid that created distinctions between the worthy and unworthy poor. These policies directly led to the exclusion of lower-class Puerto Ricans and African Americans from the political and economic rebuilding processes except for menial labor. The two overarching trends exist because the Army's presence in both Puerto Rico and Galveston fostered a top-down approach of disseminating aid. The Army relief efforts were the vital component in empowering local elites, which resulted in the promulgation of two nondemocratic forms of governance: colonial status for Puerto Rico and the commission government in Galveston, which further entrenched Jim Crow laws. This practice of the Army partnering with local elites and administering aid unequally became the standard method for American disaster relief operations beginning with these two storms and persisted into the twentieth century with occasions like the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the 1928 Caribbean hurricane.⁸

In terms of structure, to make this argument, this article examines both the U.S. Army's response to Hurricane San Ciriaco in Puerto Rico in 1899 and how disaster relief was administered in Galveston in 1900. This examination is followed by a synthesis, analyzing the two case studies to highlight how the inherent similarities represent a critical juncture for the U.S. Army in terms of managing disaster relief. By way of conclusion, the final lessons-learned section illustrates what contemporary military officers and practitioners can take away from these two historical case studies for application in future disaster contingencies.

Why Galveston and Puerto Rico Were Departures from the Norm

Prior disaster relief was handled on a case-by-case basis primarily by private charities and local governments that petitioned for federal government involvement.⁹ While the Army Corps of Engineers often aided in domestic flood relief in such instances as the 1882 Mississippi flood or the 1889 Johnstown Flood in Pennsylvania, these relief efforts were largely piecemeal, disorganized, and did not involve federal government and military cooperation.¹⁰ Therefore, the Army's role in Puerto Rico and Galveston deviated from the norm by exerting

complete control over relief operations and directly influencing local politics, economics, and social dynamics.

Scholars have discussed these two storms at length separately but failed to put them in conversation together as a way to analyze the Army's vital role in the disaster relief at the turn of the century.¹¹ By examining the primary sources with a comparative lens, this article also contends that the Army was a product of its time and influenced by wider Progressive Era reform trends such as social control of the lower classes and humanitarianism. At this time, American Progressives developed a growing obsession with professionalism and expertise that cultivated the establishment of new bureaucratic institutions, like the American Red Cross in 1900, which expanded the federal government's power.¹² The ARC had an established history of assisting in military conflicts and providing disaster aid in the 1880s. However, the Galveston storm represented the first partnership between the Army and the ARC after it became an official government institution in 1900.¹³

The fact that these two relief missions took place in the Progressive Era matters for military historians and practitioners because this was a transformative time in the history of the U.S. Army. The Army's experience with disaster relief in Puerto Rico, cooperation with the ARC in Galveston, and experimentation with colonial governance in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines prompted Secretary of War Elihu Root to realize that the Army could be used for what is now termed military operations other than war (MOOTW). This phenomenon influenced Root to also enact reforms to professionalize the U.S. military, especially the officer corps, to create a more efficient and organized force.¹⁴ These reforms expanded the Army's role beyond fighting to include disaster relief, which allowed the Army to exercise a form of soft power.¹⁵ The exertion of that power was showcased in the management of military aid in Puerto Rico and the alignment of the Army with the ARC and elites in Galveston.

The Change in Sovereignty and American Views of Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico lost any semblance of autonomy under U.S. rule but a brief examination of the change in sovereignty highlights the differences between Spanish and American regimes. With the Spanish Empire crumbling in the late 1890s, Liberal Party leader Praxedes Mateo Sagasta signed an autonomous charter for Puerto Rico on 25 November 1897.¹⁶ This charter gave Puerto Rico quasi-dominion status and representation in the Spanish *Cortes Generales* (parliament). However, autonomy lasted a mere four months before U.S. forces landed at the town of Guánica on the southern part of the island on 25 July 1898.¹⁷ General Nelson A. Miles, commander of the American forces, occupied the major ports and population centers on the island within three weeks. Many of the Spanish defenders became ill from disease and offered little resistance.¹⁸ Miles acted as the military governor of Puerto Rico until hostilities ended on

12 August and the last Spanish forces withdrew on 18 October. The Treaty of Paris was signed on 10 December 1898. Article IX left the question of Puerto Rican autonomy purposely ambiguous, stating that “the civil rights and political status of the native inhabitants of the territories hereby ceded to the United States shall be determined by the Congress.”¹⁹ The treaty classified Puerto Rico as a protectorate rather than a colony because, as historian Daniel Immerwahr argues, U.S. policy makers were reluctant to use the taboo “c” word.²⁰ This reluctance to classify Puerto Rico as a formal colony played an important role in influencing the American military and policy maker’s attitudes toward Puerto Ricans and the question of autonomy.

In May 1899, the next military governor, Brigadier General George Davis, took over and strongly opposed the prospect of autonomy before assuming the position. Davis, born in Connecticut in 1839, worked as a tutor for a White family in Savannah, Georgia, before the Civil War broke out. After the attack on Fort Sumter, he returned to Connecticut to enlist in the Union Army and participated in the South Mountain and Antietam campaigns. As a captain after the war, Davis served the U.S. Army in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Utah, and Texas fighting in the Indian Wars. Prior to the war with Spain, Davis served in Washington at the War Department, and he worked there until the United States declared war on Spain in 1898.²¹

During the war, Davis achieved the rank of brigadier general and commanded a volunteer division. In November 1898, he embarked for Cuba to serve as military governor of the Pinar del Rio Province. In May 1899, President William McKinley appointed Davis military governor of Puerto Rico for his administrative abilities.²² His time working as a tutor in Georgia before the Civil War, fighting Native Americans, and canal building in Nicaragua shaped his ideas of race and class. In his reports as military governor, he critically evaluated the race and class of the people of Puerto Rico. The idea of disenfranchising African Americans in the South after the Compromise of 1877 appealed to Davis, who thought it could be implemented in Puerto Rico. As he stated:

These citizens of the Union who are being disenfranchised are largely descendants of former slaves who were liberated ten years before the Porto Ricans [*sic*] were [Spain abolished slavery in Puerto Rico in 1873]. If the disenfranchisement of the negro illiterates of the Union can be justified, the same in Porto Rico can be defended on equally good grounds, for the educational, social, and industrial status of a large part of the native inhabitants of Porto Rico is no higher than that of the colored people.²³

Davis’s attitude applied to the entire Puerto Rican population, not just people of color. He also wrote that, “if universal manhood suffrage be given to the Porto Ricans [*sic*] bad results are almost certain to follow. The vast majority of the people are no more fit to take part in self-government than our reservation

Indians.”²⁴ Davis viewed suffrage as an element of “true manhood,” believing that Puerto Ricans were not “true” men and therefore did not deserve suffrage.²⁵ For Davis, autonomy for Puerto Rico was certainly out of the question.

Davis’s view of Puerto Rico and its people prevailed throughout the U.S. military and the federal government. President McKinley remained uncertain about the Puerto Ricans’ capability for self-government until he read a report from Henry K. Carroll, an advisor on the island in 1899, that informed his decision to withhold autonomy from Puerto Rico.²⁶ Carroll’s report echoed the aforementioned paternalistic sentiments and recommended that Puerto Rico not have autonomy, but instead establish an American-led insular government to teach Puerto Ricans how to properly govern.²⁷ Secretary of War Root also advocated for the United States to take a paternalistic role toward Puerto Rico. Carroll’s idea of paternalism combined with Root’s rhetoric, which implied that Puerto Ricans should freely submit themselves to America, helped this idea grow.²⁸ These paternalistic sentiments reflected ideals to pity the poor and those less fortunate, but still maintain a strict social hierarchy. These outlooks manifested in the relief efforts after Hurricane San Ciriaco hit the island on 8 August 1899.

San Ciriaco and the Relief Efforts

The hurricane affected Puerto Ricans of all ages on the coast and in the highlands. Luis Medina was only three years old when San Ciriaco hit southern Puerto Rico; “I remember San Ciriaco, I was living in a house similar to a ranch house. Behind the house there was a hill with a lot of trees. When the hurricane passed, I was amazed to see that the trees had been stripped by the hurricane. It had no leaves or flowers it was completely bare!”²⁹ Medina and his family did not experience the most devastating effects of this storm because they lived in Cubuy, a small town in the El Yunque rainforest on the northeast part of the island. The city of Ponce, a major population center in the south, witnessed at least 300 people swept away by the flood waters.³⁰ Altogether the storm claimed more than 3,000 lives throughout the island, devastated the lucrative coffee crop, and caused more than \$20 million worth of property damage.³¹

Despite General Davis’s racial bias toward Puerto Ricans, he knew that action needed to be taken to show the new territory, the world, and most importantly the American public how the government and the military dealt with disaster relief in its sphere of influence. The destruction of plantations and material wealth blurred the existing social hierarchy between elites and poor farmers.³² The top of this hierarchy were the elite White landowners—*peninsulares* and *criollos*—then White or mixed-race poor farmers called *jibaros*, and then to newly freed slaves.³³ However, all social classes now needed relief, and elites could no longer patronize the poor because they themselves had nothing to give. Davis, cognizant of the existing patron-client relationship, petitioned Root to create a relief committee for the island. Root created the Central Porto Rican Relief Committee (CPRRC) that consisted of New York businessmen

and situated its headquarters in New York City. The CPRRC partnered with banks and merchant associations to obtain capital and supplies to send to Davis. In his 1902 report as military governor, Davis stated that “the immensity of the work of relief made it impractical to rely on private contributions for the food needed and other supplies.”³⁴ As a result, the federal government and the Army appropriated most of the aid gathered by the CPRRC to the island. This insistence on federal aid assured Davis that ships reached Puerto Rico swiftly. In total, the CPRRC raised just more than \$81,000.³⁵

When the first ship arrived in Puerto Rico with supplies on 19 August 1899, Davis appointed chief surgeon Major Van Hoff president of the charities board. Hoff received the incoming aid and distributed it en masse to local officials who were then supposed parcel it out to the local populations. However, U.S. Army officers stationed throughout the island wrote to Van Hoff that “results were never entirely satisfactory, and the board was in constant receipt of reports of idleness in return for rations.”³⁶ This prompted Davis and Van Hoff to develop a more top-down structure for administering aid. They ordered noncommissioned officers and enlisted men to oversee the distribution and set criteria to get food, clothing, and medical supplies. These troops were also tasked with ensuring that Puerto Ricans worked to receive aid. Van Hoff gave detailed instructions to the noncommissioned officers, stating, “Food is issued to prevent starvation. It is intended for the worthy poor, and no able-bodied man shall receive any unless he gives a full day’s work in return.”³⁷ Secretary of War Root also mentioned this specific quote in his 1899 annual report to demonstrate how these strict conditions created a distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor. This top-down structure that Van Hoff, Davis, and Root mentioned in their reports was commonplace in private relief work during the Progressive Era, but this time, the federal government and the Army made the rules.³⁸ Davis and Van Hoff originally instituted the conditions in an effort to not run out of supplies, but they also planned to maintain the social hierarchy when they created the program of planter relief.

In mid-September, Davis and Van Hoff received a report from quartermaster Major Thomas Cruse. Cruse wrote, “During the month of September, I had to combat a period of petty thieving, after which I caught half a dozen natives [Puerto Ricans] and two noncommissioned officers who worked for me at the docks with stolen articles in their possession.”³⁹ Secretary Root also highlighted this disorder after the storm among Puerto Ricans and noncommissioned officers in his report, which he then used as proof to deny Puerto Rican autonomy.⁴⁰ Such behavior by Army personnel threatened to undermine the reputation of American benevolence on the island.

Thereafter, Davis and Van Hoff decided to foist part of the relief problems onto the elite Puerto Rican sugar and coffee planters to reassure them of the cordialness of U.S. occupation. These planters, whose social standing was now in question because of their destroyed crops, plead with the military government to furnish them with food and medical supplies so that they could hire

laborers to clean up their land. Van Hoff responded that “the board will furnish to proprietors whose lands have been devastated and who are in financial stress, enough food to feed a stated number of peons and their lawful families, as long as there is food at its disposal or until a new crop can be produced.”⁴¹ In exchange for their labor, the workers that the planters hired received a usufruct plot of land to till and daily food rations.⁴² Planters like Vicente Antonetto responded to Van Hoff in letters that said, “The proposed measure will be a great help to us proprietors who from lack of funds are unable to restore our farms. This will also prevent the peons who refuse labor from getting food.”⁴³ Other planters also thanked Van Hoff for quickly responding to them to maintain order and the social hierarchy.⁴⁴ Van Hoff took pride in this “partnership” of planters and peons and saw this as an opportunity to educate Puerto Ricans of the value of honest labor. This sentiment by Van Hoff echoed Progressive Era attitudes toward pitying the poorer classes while upholding the social hierarchy.

Prominent Progressive thinker Lester F. Ward stated in his 1883 tome on the study of sociology that “everything which distinguishes a savage from a civilized man can be directly or indirectly traced to the differences of education.”⁴⁵ Ward called for the “artificial civilization” of the lesser classes via a governmental system, which consisted of educating the lesser classes to make them civilized and thereby eliminating lesser classes altogether. Root used similar rhetoric when describing the mission of the U.S. military occupation and the relief efforts after the storm, stating that “Porto Ricans, as a people, have never learned the fundamental or essential lesson of obedience, and they have had no opportunity to learn. There can be no free government without educating them.”⁴⁶ This rhetoric proved eerily similar to Ward’s ideas on social welfare and education.

Davis and Van Hoff not only viewed the planter relief program as a way to reestablish the social hierarchy and instill moral guidance but also as a tool for economic recovery. The intended goal was for the planters and peons to work together to restore the land and crops. Nonetheless, the coffee planters forfeited their position on top of the social hierarchy because they lost 90 percent of their crop to the storm. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph P. Sanger noted in his report on the census of Puerto Rico in 1899 that the coffee planters struggled the most during this period of blurred class distinction because they no longer could give patronage due to the coffee crop taking up to five years to regenerate.⁴⁷ This caused the coffee planters to either wait for the crop to mature, switch to another crop, or work for another planter. As a result, coffee no longer prevailed as the bulwark of the island’s economy; sugar became king.⁴⁸

Transformation of the Puerto Rican Economy

Emblematic of how much power the military government had in Puerto Rico, Davis advocated for completely restructuring the economy to focus on sugar production instead of coffee. Prior to the U.S. invasion and Hurricane San Ciriaco, coffee cultivation dominated the agricultural sector as the island’s chief

export.⁴⁹ By 1899, coffee accounted for 54 percent of all exports. The main markets for Puerto Rican coffee were Cuba and Europe, but as Davis noted in an earlier report, those markets were practically lost because of the American occupation.⁵⁰ Puerto Rican elite Manuel Zeno-Gandía painted a vivid picture of the immense wealth coffee planters accrued during the nineteenth century in his seminal 1894 novel, *La Charca*. Throughout *La Charca*, Zeno-Gandía detailed scene after scene of wealth disparity between elite coffee planters and peasant *jibaros*. Specifically, when describing protagonist and coffee planter Juan de Salto, Zeno-Gandía wrote, “He had no patience for the stupidities of the *jibaros*. He oversaw every detail on the plantation that constituted his wealth, with pure affection of a father caressing the tiny heads of his offspring. They knew him as the benefactor who brought money and medicine.”⁵¹ This pointedly illustrates how much power and status coffee planters had before Hurricane San Ciriaco.

Army personnel witnessed firsthand the destruction San Ciriaco wrought on the Puerto Rican coffee industry in 1899 and influenced U.S. policy makers to facilitate a dramatic switch from an emphasis on coffee production to sugar production. Based on Davis’s estimation, it would take five years for the coffee crop to regenerate and he also asserted that it should be disregarded as an export of value.⁵² When Congress convened to debate the status of Puerto Rico in 1900, Davis testified that “free trade with the United States will give stimulus to agriculture, and especially sugar and tobacco; but this will not affect coffee. The general stimulus to other cultivation will perhaps have a detrimental effect upon coffee.”⁵³ His testimony amplified the remarks he made in his 1899 report on the civil affairs of Puerto Rico in which he wrote, “Puerto Rico, never was, is not, and probably never will be, independent. It is now a possession of the United States and must so continue until Congress decides otherwise.”⁵⁴ Davis’s position on Puerto Rico also found favor among an interested party back on the mainland.

During the 1880s through the 1890s, the “Robber Barons” amassed great wealth, presided over monopolies, and meddled in government affairs. The sugar industry’s giant was the American Sugar Refining Company, owned by Henry O. Havermeyer. The “Sugar Trust,” as its detractors called the company, monopolized the sugar industry in the United States and wielded immense power over foreign policy to expand the American sugar kingdom into the Caribbean.⁵⁵ The pressures from the Sugar Trust to turn Puerto Rico into a monocrop sugar-producing economy were clearly articulated in congressional testimony. At the same congressional session in which Davis testified, representatives from the Sugar Trust, including banker John D. Luce and British-born import/export merchant Charles Armstrong, gave statements. They echoed Davis’s remarks that Puerto Rico was not capable of self-governance and advocated for the United States to transition the Puerto Rican economy from coffee to sugar production.⁵⁶ In opposition to the Sugar Trust, Henry T. Oxnard, an independent sugar industrialist from California, vehemently argued against this

as it posed a threat to mainland sugar producers. Oxnard testified that “I have not the slightest doubt that the cause of Cuban War could be written in one word ‘sugar’.”⁵⁷ Despite Oxnard’s insistence against taking Puerto Rico as a colony and switching its economy, Congress sided with the Sugar Trust.

Davis’s testimony to Congress proved influential by influencing the Sugar Trust representatives and this proved the death knell for Puerto Rican sovereignty and the coffee industry, moving Puerto Rico away from autonomy and toward a monocrop economy rooted in sugar. This sequence of events led President McKinley to sign the Foraker Act on 12 April 1900, establishing a civil government in Puerto Rico controlled by the United States. In addition, a lower house of elected Puerto Ricans was established, but this body had limited power and little voice. Ultimately, the Foraker Act provided no guarantee of citizenship, statehood, or extension of constitutional protections.⁵⁸

An additional provision in the Foraker Act stated that U.S. interests could only occupy up to 500 acres of land per enterprise, and that Puerto Rico could not trade with any other country except the United States.⁵⁹ Subsequently, with a new focus on sugar, U.S. absentee corporations under the umbrella of the Sugar Trust invaded and did not adhere to the Foraker Act’s land ownership provision. The Aguirre Sugar Company in 1899, the South Porto Rico Sugar Company in 1901, and the Fajardo Sugar Company in 1905 dominated the export of Puerto Rican sugar to the United States well into the 1930s.⁶⁰ Although Puerto Rican elites owned most plantations and refineries, the U.S. sugar companies monopolized who the Puerto Rican planters could sell to. This system of sugar production stimulated the Puerto Rican economy but also served the U.S. sugar interests.

The disaster relief efforts of the U.S. Army after San Ciriaco directly led to the establishment of America’s overseas empire. Expansion into Puerto Rico during the Progressive Era informed how the Army and elite intellectuals in America thought about race, poverty, and social class. In addition, the lack of a cohesive disaster relief doctrine enabled Davis to wield enormous control by partnering with local planter elites to disseminate aid, which completely restructured the politics and economics of Puerto Rico. In the eyes of Davis, Van Hoff, Root, and those in Congress that signed the Foraker Act, Puerto Ricans needed to work to receive aid. This lesson in work ethic was meant to educate Puerto Ricans in the hope that someday they could be capable of self-government. However, as the Foraker Act makes clear, they were yet again a colonized people. At the same time, protecting the social hierarchy was of utmost importance so that chaos did not ensue, and the Sugar Trust benefited. The attitudes and policies of the Army in the wake of San Ciriaco contributed to establishing hallmarks of American disaster relief, which included unequally distributing aid, attaching strings to the aid, and excluding lower class Puerto Ricans from the political and economic recovery. An examination of Galveston, Texas, before and after the great storm of 1900 also underlines these similar themes.

Galveston Prior to the Great Storm of 1900

The Great Storm of 1900 saw the U.S. Army employ the same tactics to disaster relief as in Puerto Rico. The Army units deployed to Galveston, under command of General Scurry, declared martial law, directly oversaw aid distribution, and aligned with local elites and the American Red Cross. This empowered the White elites of Galveston to reconfigure the local government and economy to exclude African Americans. However, an analysis of the situation in Galveston during and after reconstruction *prior* to the storm reveals that, like Puerto Rico, politics were more inclusive to African Americans and poor people. The port and its commerce sustained the island city's economy.⁶¹ Cotton, the main export, shipped throughout the United States and Europe made Galveston critical to the Texas economy. Much like other southern cities in the mid-to-late 1800s, Galveston did not industrialize but continued to focus on port commerce. Galveston businessmen operating out of the port argued the lack of a fresh water supply and structural sustainability against hurricanes made industrialization untenable.⁶²

During and after the Civil War, Union troops seized the port, crippling Galveston's economy because the port was the bedrock. However, when Union soldiers left in the 1870s, the economy returned to prewar production, but the focus continued to be on the port and not industrialization. The end of Reconstruction in Galveston may have helped the economy, but the presence of thousands of newly freed people living in the city, who were looking for jobs and housing, exacerbated race relations.

Public education, instituted by the Freedmen's Bureau immediately after the war, helped African Americans in Galveston improve their financial and social situations. After Union troops vacated the city in 1870, public schooling for African Americans suffered and attempts at integration were ignored. This phenomenon dominated the Southern post-occupation experience and succeeded in disenfranchising African Americans. An 1871 article in the *Galveston Daily News* stated that "colored children are not sufficiently advanced in civilization to be the fit companions of white children. They are not as cleanly; they are not as well developed morally and intellectually."⁶³ This view of African Americans persisted in White culture throughout the South.⁶⁴

Galveston's economy in the 1890s appeared unstable because of the hyper focus on the port coupled with the fragility of the industry due to frequent inclement weather. Prior to the great storm of 1900, Galveston experienced harsh environmental conditions other than hurricanes, most notably repeated yellow fever outbreaks every decade starting in the 1830s. The 1890s were no different with a massive outbreak in 1897 that affected the entire Gulf Coast region.⁶⁵ When the outbreak occurred in 1897, the city owed \$2 million to northern investors who helped finance port improvements.⁶⁶ Crippled with serious debt and an inability to repay loans, elites lost faith in the existing local government and called for a change in leadership.

Politically, Galveston employed a typical mayor-council style government

with 12 aldermen elected by wards prior to the 1900 storm. This system fostered corruption and allowed political machines to wield power. One journalist wrote that “the city was bankrupt by a board of ward-alderman who had out-Tweeded Tweed.”⁶⁷ Prominent historian Charles A. Beard also criticized Galveston’s governmental system, commenting, “the local government was paralyzed, because the problems connected with the reparation of the ruin were too much for the old political machine which had control.”⁶⁸

Prominent businessmen promoted harbor improvements when they created the Deep Water Committee in 1882, which functioned as a Progressive Era Better Business Bureau. Throughout the 1890s, the committee lobbied to increase local government oversight to boost economic and social progress. The 15 men involved with the committee exercised significant influence because together they owned more than half of Galveston’s property.⁶⁹ Isaac H. Kempner, a young cotton merchant, and John Sealy, a director of the Galveston Wharf Company, involved themselves with the Deep Water Committee in the mid-1890s. These young men had immense power in city affairs because of their wealth and connections. Kempner became city treasurer in 1899, and while cleaning up the books he noticed the city’s massive debt.⁷⁰ He secured loans from companies in Cincinnati and New York to keep the city afloat. However, financial matters became more complex a year later, as the city and its economy were swallowed by the sea.

The Great Storm of 1900 and the Relief Efforts

When the storm hit, the U.S. Army had two regular regiments of full-time long service soldiers stationed in San Antonio as a part of the Army’s Department of Texas.⁷¹ The commander, Brigadier General Chambers McKibbin, ordered just 200 troops to accompany Clara Barton and a team of ARC workers to Galveston on 13 September, five days after the storm hit the area with the goal to ameliorate suffering.⁷² Barton vividly described the scene of the city when she first arrived in her official ARC report that stated, “a city of forty thousand people lay in splinters with the debris piled twenty feet above the surface and the crushed bodies, dead and dying, of nearly ten thousand of its citizens lay beneath.”⁷³ Dour descriptions like this prompted General McKibbin to declare martial law, hand over command of the 200 troops to the adjutant general of Texas, Brigadier General Thomas Scurry, and name him military governor of the city.⁷⁴ In an official history of the storm, Clarence N. Ousley, the editor of the *Galveston Tribune*, wrote that “the military regime was an absolute dictatorship without precedent and without restriction.”⁷⁵ Similar to General Davis in Puerto Rico, Scurry wielded immense power to act independently as military governor and decided that “the maintenance of law and order must be preserved to lead to swift restoration of industrial life in the city.”⁷⁶ Scurry used the forces at his command similarly to Davis in Puerto Rico, as they were ordered to directly supervise the distribution of aid and ensure that people worked to receive relief.⁷⁷ Additionally, because Scurry only had 200 soldiers at his command, he

determined the best way to maintain control of the city was to align with local elites to uphold the racial hierarchy in Galveston and funnel the relief efforts through those elites.

Clara Barton also mentioned in her report that a group of “the best men in the city” created a committee that partnered with the military government and the ARC to organize relief efforts.⁷⁸ This group of “best men” consisted of White elite members of the Deep Water Committee. These elites leaned on General Scurry to maintain order and control of the relief efforts so that their economic and social status remained intact. Ship broker W. A. McVitie created and chaired an extension of the Deep Water Committee deemed the Central Relief Committee (CRC), which set up relief stations in each ward of the city.⁷⁹ This ad hoc group of elites used martial law to their advantage to determine which residents received aid and what compensation they wanted in exchange for the aid. Conveniently, McVitie complained to Scurry that the CRC faced difficulty in securing enough labor to remove wreckage. After hearing this news, Scurry issued an order to impress men into work gangs.⁸⁰ Subsequently, under Scurry’s orders, McVitie sent out a notice that established requirements to obtain food, clothing, and medical supplies that stated, “any able-bodied man who will not volunteer to clear debris and dead must not be fed.”⁸¹ This statement, aimed toward the poor, insisted that aid not be looked on as a free handout but as compensation for services rendered. The editors of the *Galveston Daily News* reinforced the policy in both the 12 and 13 September issues stating, “Only the worthy shall receive recognition from the relief committee and all able-bodied men that expect to be supplied with food will have to work.”⁸² This tone rang similar to the efforts in Puerto Rico.

For the elite Whites of Galveston, their partnership with the military government enabled them to use race as the main distinction of who among the poor was considered worthy of aid. The military government in tandem with the CRC sought to keep African Americans in place on the social hierarchy by preferring some city wards over others when it came to distributing relief. The *City Times*, Galveston’s only African American newspaper, candidly spoke out against this injustice asserting that “the colored man is good enough to save the lives of the little white babes, white women, and every man. He has lost everything he had and in all of that he has not been good enough to even be represented as a committeeman.”⁸³ This statement appeared in a 29 September issue weeks after the storm passed. A 27 October issue echoed the remarks from the earlier issue when addressing the CRC, “for heaven’s sake how long are you going to wait before you set aside some of that financial aid for these poor people who have lost every piece of their household goods. I hope that you all will not overlook the fact so long that there were thousands of people who were losers and did not own a home.”⁸⁴ With Scurry’s military government in power for more than a month after the storm, African Americans still received no relief.

Relief for Black Galvestonians did come but not from the military government or the elite Whites who oversaw the CRC. Instead, Clara Barton report-

ed that she personally received a sum of \$397.05 from an African American community in Port Royal, South Carolina, who previously suffered through a terrible hurricane in 1893.⁸⁵ She wrote that “when our negro proteges of the old Port Royal hurricane heard of the disaster in Galveston, they at once gathered for aid and sent in their contributions. Of course, I would not permit one dollar of this holy gift to go to anyone but the negroes in Galveston.”⁸⁶ This act of African American solidarity moved Barton and she entrusted the funds to the superintendent of the African American schools in Galveston, John Rufus Gibson. Gibson wrote a letter to Barton three months after the Red Cross had left that included a calculation of how much relief money the African American community received. Not including the endowment from Port Royal, Black Galvestonians only garnered \$52.40.⁸⁷ This staggeringly low number confirmed the editorial exposés chronicling the injustice against African Americans in the *City Times*.

A contributing factor to this injustice stemmed directly from sensationalist reporting that claimed African Americans looted dead bodies. One gruesome story reported that an African American man was caught with cut off human fingers in his pocket that still had rings on them.⁸⁸ Another account from James Brown, an English immigrant who arrived shortly before the storm, wrote his family and stated, “About 20 men [*sic*] was shot dead for robbing dead of rings and jewelry.”⁸⁹ In addition, accounts like these were littered throughout the pages of official military reports, ARC reports, and local newspaper articles and also included tales of looting and the consequences for engaging in that type of behavior.⁹⁰ In one particular report written by the special assistant to Barton, Fannie B. Ward, she recounted that after a group of Black men were supposedly caught looting, “the band of negroes was forced at bayonet point to move the corpses so far advanced in decomposition that they were falling apart as they moved them.”⁹¹ Stories like these represented African Americans negatively and contributed to the lack of relief sent to them. These narratives also run parallel to Quartermaster Cruse’s account of thieving in Puerto Rico. While the stories of looting and thieving abound prominently in these aftermath reports, they almost always implicate the lower class and people of color. Such similarities highlight how in both cases, elites and the military in charge of distributing aid painted the less fortunate Puerto Ricans and Black Galvestonians as hostile marauders capable of committing grotesque acts of brutality. These embellishments also had economic and political effects on the African American community as well.

Based on the evidence, Scurry’s military government allowed the elites to continue excluding African Americans from relief policies immediately after the storm. The strict martial law and streamlined decision making in turn bled into politics and enabled the White elites to establish a different form of government. The elites chose a commission-style government that elected a chairman and appointed three at large members. It could be argued that this type of government structure could only have been instituted after the prolonged presence

of the Army and their control of the relief efforts through martial law. Nonetheless, this governing body presided over Galveston until 1960. During the reign of the commission, African Americans were continually disenfranchised and excluded in the planning of structural improvements. Therefore, the Army seemingly empowered these elites to act antidemocratically, which manifested in the commission government.

On 12 September 1901, real estate broker Valery Austin became the last member of the four-man commission government appointed by Texas governor Joseph D. Sayers.⁹² The other members of the commission were Judge William T. Austin, financier Isaac H. Kempner, and wholesale grocer Herman Lange. Governor Sayers appointed these first commissioners because Galveston needed a governing body quickly to restore order, but subsequent commissioners would be elected. These elite men assumed social and political control of the city. However, Progressives throughout the United States chose to ignore the antidemocratic features of the commission because, by 1917, more than 500 cities adopted this style of government.⁹³

In total, the great storm of 1900 claimed the lives of more than 6,000 people and still ranks as the deadliest hurricane in American history. For the people of Galveston, their identity became linked to the storm and served as a defining moment for the city. Citizens shared this moment and referred to events as either prior or post storm. The storm also had a profound effect on how the U.S. Army dealt with future disasters because, as previously stated, prior relief efforts were undertaken unevenly and rarely involved the federal government and the Army working together or at all. In his annual report about the Galveston relief operations, the adjutant general of the U.S. Army, Major General Henry C. Corbin, lamented the fact that a disconnect existed between the federal government and the Army when it came to appropriating aid. Corbin wrote, “the absence of any legal authority to apply the property of the United States to any purpose not specifically mentioned is the cause of much embarrassment in sudden emergencies demanding prompt action.”⁹⁴ He continued to chide this area of civil-military relations when he later proclaimed that “it is hoped that Congress will issue a legal enactment formally granting full power to the President to afford in similar cases whatever relief is absolutely necessary.”⁹⁵ These statements by Corbin suggested increasing federal power when dealing with disasters so that the executive branch could bypass Congress and unilaterally apportion aid or deploy the Army. Corbin’s ideas were not popular, and it was not until 1950 when Congress passed the Federal Disaster Relief Act of 1950, which gave the president power to declare a state of disaster and deploy the military without congressional approval.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, in the cases of Puerto Rico and Galveston, the Army developed a blueprint for disaster relief that prioritized elite Whites, excluded people of color and those of colonial status, determined who was to receive aid, created conditions for that aid, and sought to uphold the racial hierarchy at all costs. These exclusionary actions became hallmarks of American disaster relief and were continually implemented throughout the

twentieth century in such instances as the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, Hurricane San Felipe in Puerto Rico in 1928, and even as recently as during Hurricane Maria in 2017.⁹⁷

Conclusion

This comparative study of Puerto Rico and Galveston shows how the U.S. Army partnered with local elites in the absence of any guiding doctrine and used disaster relief efforts to completely transform the political, economic, and social structures at the expense of minorities and the poor. Contemporary Progressive Era reform ideas about social welfare, poverty, and race also guided these shifts. The common trends of unequal distribution of aid and conditions attached to the aid led to the delineation of worthy and unworthy poor. Army commanders Davis and Scurry declared martial law in both locations that enabled elites to oversee aid dissemination. This directly facilitated the creation of the Planter Relief Program in Puerto Rico and the Central Relief Committee in Galveston who acted similarly in their relief efforts. In Puerto Rico, the military government gave food, clothing, and medical supplies to the planters who were then supposed to pay the poor to clean their land rather than distributing aid directly to the poor. Some African American wards in Galveston received no aid for months and when they plead their case they were painted as looters who defiled the dead that perished in the storm. These actions by the Army and elites diminished Puerto Ricans' and Black Galvestonians' participation in politics and reconstruction of their communities except for manual labor. Additionally, the Army's execution of disaster relief efforts directly fostered two antidemocratic governments: a colonial regime in Puerto Rico and the first commission-style government in Galveston, which upheld Jim Crow laws and was eventually replicated throughout the United States.

Both operations entrenched the hallmarks of American disaster relief: distributing aid unequally, excluding African Americans and many Puerto Ricans from political participation, and maintaining control of social hierarchy. The implementation of these ideas in the wake of the hurricanes in Puerto Rico and Galveston guided the way those societies developed for better and for worse. These two cases set precedent for how the Army carried out future disaster relief efforts of the twentieth century.

Lessons to Learn

What can current military practitioners take away from the historical cases of disaster relief in Puerto Rico and Galveston? Given the prevalence of climate change and increasing instability in the developing world and Global South, the instances where the military becomes the primary first responder to climate-related disasters will only increase domestically and internationally. While the National Guard is the primary disaster relief response force for domestic contingencies, the active duty component has in the past, and will continue in the future, to respond to disasters abroad. Currently, U.S. military

doctrine concerning disaster relief abroad is *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, Joint Publication 3-29. The cases of Puerto Rico and Galveston showcase the vital need for cultural awareness and expertise within the military when planning or executing disaster relief operations. In both cases, the U.S. Army tapped into the existing social hierarchy defined by contemporary racial and cultural attitudes of the time. Davis had very little knowledge of Puerto Rican culture, and thus relied on local White elites to act as the gatekeepers of relief. Scurry in Texas was imbued in the local social hierarchy and again facilitated the same gatekeeping by local White elites. In both cases, the results were disaster relief predicated on maintaining a social hierarchy that ensured relief did not get where it was most needed, or was provided as part of a larger plan to ensure the maintenance of White supremacy over other races, in this case the persistence and continuance of Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans. Cultural expertise is noted in *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance* as a planning consideration, and a lack thereof is identified as an obstacle to effective civil-military coordination.⁹⁸ In Puerto Rico and Galveston, there was very little civil-military coordination; instead, U.S. Army officers simply established committees of local elites and accepted their recommendations for relief policies without much challenge or oversight, a decision that seemed simplest from their perspective, but a decision that ran contrary to the mission of providing relief to those who needed it most.

This matters because in the world today the U.S. military responds to contingencies in countries with differing attitudes and social hierarchies defined by gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. If there is a lack of cultural awareness and expertise when conducting a disaster relief operation, or if in the interests of expediency disaster relief is apportioned by enabling local elites' total control over who gets access to aid, there will be a pronounced disparity of outcomes in disaster zones where the most in need, or marginalized groups, will be left behind in the interests of maintaining the existing social status quo. Puerto Rico and Galveston serve as key examples of what can happen in this regard, and in some ways, the consequences of decisions made by Davis and Scurry are still being felt today.

Endnotes

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 4. Foraker Act, Pub. L. 56–191, 31 Stat. 77, 56th Cong. (12 April 1900).
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 17. Edward J. Berbusse, *The United States in Puerto Rico, 1898–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 56; and David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 353.
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 19. Treaty of Peace between the United States and Spain, 10 December 1898, Article IX.
 20. Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019), 7.
 21. Merrill E. Gates, *Men of Mark in America: Ideals of American Life told in Biographies of Eminent Living Americans*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Men of Mark Publishing, 1905), 277.
 22. Gates, *Men of Mark in America*, 278; and Berbusse, *The United States in Puerto Rico, 1898–1900*, 98–99.
 23. Davis, “Elections and the Franchise,” in *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 115. The formal U.S. spelling of the island at this time was “Porto Rico” and in all quotes it will be spelled this way. Outside of quotes, it will be spelled “Puerto Rico,” which became the formal spelling in 1931.
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 26. See Henry K. Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico: Its Population, Civil Government, Commerce, Industries, Productions, Roads, Tariff, and Currency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1899).
 27. Carroll, “Capacity for Self-Government,” in *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, 58.
 28. “Relief Measures Adopted,” *New York Times*, 12 August 1899, 2.
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 30. “Ponce Wrecked by Hurricane,” *New York Times*, 12 August 1899, 1.
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 32. Julian Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico During U.S. Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 145.
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35. Chairman of the Central Porto Rican Relief Committee Cornelius N. Bliss, "Report of the of the Central Porto Rican Relief Committee," in Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 456–57.
36. Davis to Van Hoff, 29 August 1899, Commanding Officer Humaco Porto Rico to Van Hoff, September 1899, and Commanding Officer Manati Porto Rico to Van Hoff, 19 September 1899, appendix L, "Report of the Board of Charities of Porto Rico," pt. 1, "Relief Work," in Davis, *Military Government in Porto Rico*, 702.
37. Maj John Van Hoff, "Instructions to Noncommissioned Officers in Charge of Subposts of the Board of Charities of Porto Rico," 20 September 1899, appendix L, "Report of the Board of Charities of Porto Rico," pt. 1, "Relief Work," in Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 703. This same phrasing was also expressed in Secretary of War Elihu Root, "Organization of the Civil Government of Porto Rico," *Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1900: Report of the Secretary of War and Miscellaneous Reports* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 37–38.
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41. Van Hoff, "Open Letter to the Planters of Porto Rico," 14 September 1899, appendix L, "Report of the Board of Charities of Porto Rico," pt. 1, "Relief Work," in Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 716.
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43. Vicente Antonetto to Van Hoff, 15 September 1899, appendix L, "Report of the Board of Charities of Porto Rico," pt. 1, "Relief Work," in Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 717.
44. Mr. Echevarria from Gurabo to Van Hoff, 9 October, Mr. Amadeo from Barros to Van Hoff, 12 October, Letter from the planters of Ciales to Van Hoff, 18 October, appendix L, "Report of the Board of Charities of Porto Rico," pt. 1, "Relief Work," in Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 723–26.
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