

The Hurricane of San Ciriaco: Disaster, Politics, and Society in Puerto Rico, 1899–1901

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THE Caribbean hurricanes have often been considered either exogenous acts of God or the uncontrollable results of nature; but hurricanes, like other natural hazards, only become disasters because of the vulnerability of specific social and economic structures and because of political decisions and a variety of human actions before and after their impact.¹ Disasters, then, are socially produced, and, like revolutions or wars, they are moments of extreme stress that can reveal the underlying structures of social and political life. A growing literature in many fields has examined the social implications of disasters, but the historiography of the Caribbean has rarely approached hurricanes in this way.²

In the history of Puerto Rico—a patriarchal society in which the hur-

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1. E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 22. See also Jon Tinker, "Are Natural Disasters Natural?" *Social Review* 78 (1985), 7–25.

2. José Carlos Millás, *Hurricanes of the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions* (Miami: Academy of the Arts and Sciences of the Americas, 1968), gives a careful listing and chronology typical of the historical literature on Caribbean hurricanes. For an example of the kind of study that can be done on the social history of a disaster, see Anthony Oliver-Smith, *The Martyred City: Death and Rebirth in the Andes* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1986), on the 1970 Peruvian earthquake. For some useful suggestions and bibliography, see John C. Burnham, "A Neglected Field: The History of Natural Disasters," *Perspectives* (The American Historical Association newsletter) 26:4 (Apr. 1988), 22–24.

ricanes traditionally bore the names not of women but of the saint (male or female) on whose day they appeared—the hurricane of San Ciriaco of 1899 holds a special place. Coming as it did soon after the U.S. invasion of the island, it seemed to add injury to the insult of occupation and military rule. This essay seeks to place this disaster within its specific social and political context, and to demonstrate both how its impact was manipulated and how it created conditions that influenced the subsequent history of the island.

A Storm of Great Magnitude

The hurricane of San Ciriaco that devastated Puerto Rico on August 8, 1899, was undoubtedly the worst natural catastrophe the island had experienced up to that time. The storm and accompanying floods caused more than three thousand deaths, or more than three times the total lives lost in all the island's previously recorded hurricanes.³ The destruction was horrendous even though the most populous city, San Juan, lay out of the storm's main track and was relatively spared.⁴ Estimates of total damage were finally placed at 20 million dollars (about 36 million pesos), but the effects were felt unequally in different sectors of the island's economy; the coffee-producing areas were particularly hard hit.⁵ Urban properties were destroyed, planters lost their crops, and the rural poor were left without

3. Luís A. Salivia, *Historia de los temporales de Puerto Rico y las Antillas (1492-1970)* (San Juan: Editorial Edil, 1972), 242-57. See also Rafael W. Ramírez de Arellano, "Los huracanes de Puerto Rico," *Boletín de la Universidad de Puerto Rico*, ser. 3:2 (Dec. 1932), 7-75. The reports show discrepancies in the numbers of deaths and damage from the hurricane. In a careful compilation based on reports submitted by municipalities to Cayetano Coll y Toste, civil secretary of the military government, 890 people were listed as killed by the hurricane itself and 1,294 by the floods. The injured were calculated at 2,764. The reports listing personal and property losses in each municipality were published in Román Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón del día de San Ciriaco* (San Juan: Heraldo Español, 1905), 30-340. Figures from the report of M. Geddings from the Negociado del Tiempo (San Juan) were 2,569 from drowning and 800 from injuries. See R. A. Van Middeldyk, *The History of Puerto Rico* (New York: D. Appleton, 1903), 297. These figures were complicated by the related deaths in subsequent months. See the report of the Surgeon General in the *Report of the Secretary of War*, 56th Congress, 2d session, 1900, v. 1, pt. 2, House document n. 4071, pp. 700-706.

4. A tropical storm that battered San Juan a month later reportedly caused more physical damage than the hurricane and rendered the harbor inoperable for a week. See Major Thomas Cruse, Quartermaster, to Major John Van Hoff, July 18, 1900, in *Report of the Military Governor of Puerto Rico*, 56th Cong., 2d. sess., H. doc. n. 4088, pp. 710-12 (cited hereafter as *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088).

5. Ivan Ray Tannehill, *The Hurricanes* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Weather Bureau; 6th ed. Princeton, 1945). The value of the coffee crop lost was estimated at seven million dollars. See Oliver Fassig, *Hurricanes of the West Indies* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Weather Bureau, 1913), 19-22, quoted in Salivia, *Historia de los temporales*, 243.

housing or food for an extended period. The municipal governments, the first line of relief, were virtually powerless to alleviate the people's misery.

San Ciriaco was typical of the great "Cape Verdian" hurricanes, sweeping across the Atlantic at the latitude of the Cape Verde Islands and entering the Caribbean east of Dominica. Sufficient weather signs and barometric readings had appeared to indicate the storm's approach, and it was August, the height of the hurricane season; but the island had not suffered a major storm since San Felipe in 1876 and was unprepared for the fury of this hurricane.⁶ Old-timers who lived through it said the former hurricanes were little more than "a pallid shadow of San Ciriaco."⁷

The storm itself was terrible. It measured about 60 miles in diameter, and its eye took about six hours to traverse the island. Wind velocities reached 85 miles per hour in many places and over 100 miles per hour (some said 140 miles per hour) in Humacao, Mayagüez, and Ponce. Just as devastating and deadly was the accompanying deluge. At Humacao, 23 inches of rain reportedly fell in 24 hours, and other localities reported similar amounts. Rivers like the Abacoa at Arecibo and the Portugués at Ponce rose rapidly to previously unknown levels, and flooding resulted in many places.⁸ This, plus the fury of the sea, which battered coastal areas, resulted in the high loss of life.⁹

In Ponce, the island's second-largest city, five hundred died, mostly by drowning. The storm began at 7 A.M. and ended about 3 P.M., but the rain continued until the following morning. Streets were flooded, the businesses along the seafront were ruined, municipal buildings were damaged, and records in some offices were lost. Telephone, telegraph, and electric services were destroyed. The day after the hurricane, Ponce and

6. Salvia, *Historia de los temporales*, 219-41, lists other hurricanes that touched the island in 1878, 1888, and five in the 1890s prior to San Ciriaco. See also Ivan Ray Tannehill, *Hurricanes* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), 141-61, which presents a discussion of memorable hurricanes.

7. Juan Perpiña y Pábernat, Dean of the Diocese of Puerto Rico, reported interviewing people in their seventies who informed him of their impressions of the storm. See his *Sobre el ciclón del glorioso San Ciriaco y compañeros mártires* (San Juan: A. Lynn e hijos de Pérez Moris, 1899). This was originally published in the *Boletín Eclesiástico* (San Juan), Aug. 31, 1899. Perpiña y Pábernat personally presented a copy of this essay to the U.S. military commander, General Davis.

8. One particular incident is colorfully reported in Cayetano Coll y Toste, "La inundación del valle de Arecibo después del ciclón de San Ciriaco, en 1899," *Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico* (San Juan, 1914-27), 10:257-62.

9. General Davis reported a "tidal wave" that accompanied the storm, but he was apparently referring to a storm surge. He emphasized that "the greatest loss of life resulted, not from the wind, but from the terrible downfall of rain that immediately followed." See *Report of Brig. Gen. Geo. W. Davis on Civil Affairs of Puerto Rico, 1899*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., 1900, H. doc. n. 3904, p. 543 (cited hereafter as *Report on Civil Affairs*, n. 3904).

its district presented a picture of “horrible desolation,” in the words of its municipal council.¹⁰ The surrounding countryside was flattened, the coffee crop lost, and many families left without food or shelter.

In the city, homeless families waited for assistance. A few wealthy citizens, such as D. Francisco Lanza and D. Pedro Cot, provided housing or distributed food, but the situation was well beyond the resources of the local government. Similar scenes could be found across the island. Brigadier General George W. Davis, the American military governor of the island, reported a particularly “appalling story of death, hunger, and suffering” at Utuado, in the mountainous interior. There, many died during the storm, and starvation faced the survivors, who, with the destruction of the local coffee estates, also lost their employment.¹¹ Later reports spoke of people dying along the roads in the coffee-producing uplands.

While Puerto Rico had suffered the blows of other large hurricanes in the nineteenth century, San Ciriaco was extraordinary, especially because it occurred immediately after the change in the island’s sovereignty. The *Boletín Mercantil de Puerto Rico*, in a special edition filled with startling photographs, summed up the effects:

The 8th of August will be a day of terrible memory for Puerto Rico. Before the island had recovered from the state of perturbation and turmoil in which the Spanish-American war left it, and when all its efforts to reconquer its previous normality and prosperity were successively and fatally failing, an extremely violent hurricane hammered the island, intensifying the measure of its pains, immersing it in the most horrendous ruin and destroying the last hope for its salvation and welfare.

There only remains of this Antillean isle, once so celebrated for its beauty and fecundity, heaps of rubble spread everywhere, which represent a history full of tears, death, and misfortune for its inhabitants.¹²

The storm was also particularly well documented because a weather bureau (*negociado del tiempo*), established in San Juan the previous October, had made careful observations during the hurricane’s passage. Also, the hurricane had moved diagonally across the whole island from southeast to northwest, coming ashore at Arroyo, between Guayama and Maunabo;

10. “. . . el cuadro de desolación es horroroso.” Ayuntamiento of Ponce to Gen. Davis, Aug. 9, 1899, Archivo Histórico de Ponce (hereafter cited as AHP), caja 143B, leg. 152, exp. 325. See also the *acuerdo* of the ayuntamiento, Aug. 12, 1899, *ibid.*

11. *Report of Major-General Commanding the Army*, 56th Cong., 1st. sess., 1900, H. doc. n. 3901 (cited hereafter as *Report of Major-General*, n. 3901).

12. *Boletín Mercantil de Puerto Rico* 61 (Sept. 1899), 1. Views of the destruction at Humacao are found in Archivo General de Puerto Rico (hereafter cited as AGPR), Colecciones particulares, Colección Roig, cajas 29, 30.

passing almost directly over Utuado; and finally leaving the island north of Aguadilla. Thus, municipalities throughout the island suffered from its effects and reported on the damage. Most important to this analysis, Puerto Rico in 1899 was under the control of a U.S. military government set in place after the occupation of the island in 1898. This government, already fully engaged in cataloguing the island's human and economic resources, was particularly anxious to take stock of the damage and to provide relief, for both humanitarian and political reasons.¹³

In the months following the disaster, however, it became clear that whatever political advantages might result from the new government's demonstration of concern and effectiveness, the social and economic divisions in society demanded a series of compromises that undercut the government's popularity. The hurricane of San Ciriaco was a disaster that exposed the fault lines of Puerto Rican society in a period of political transition.

Government Response and Local Interests

General Davis was a Roman Catholic and, although prisoner of a number of elitist prejudices, a careful administrator, sensitive to the political factions on the island.¹⁴ As reports of the damage arrived in San Juan, Davis acted quickly, asking Washington to appeal to U.S. citizens for aid.¹⁵ A Board of Charities was established in San Juan under Major John Van Hoff and staffed by U.S. military doctors and clergy. Davis ordered that similar committees, formed of three "people of respectability," be created in each town.¹⁶ He then divided the island into 12 inspection zones (later raised

13. The remarkable collection of information on the island carried out immediately after the U.S. occupation can be seen in Henry K. Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, Treasury Department doc. 2118, (Washington, D.C., 1899); War Department, *Report on the Census of Porto Rico, 1899* (Washington, D.C., 1900); Cayetano Coll y Toste, *Reseña del estado social, económico, e industrial de la isla de Puerto Rico al tomar posesión de ella los Estados Unidos* (San Juan: Imprenta de "La Correspondencia," 1899).

14. Steven P. Gannon, "The Ideology of Americanization in Puerto Rico, 1898-1909: Conquest and Disestablishment" (Ph.D. diss., New York Univ., 1979), 132, 146; Edward J. Berbusse, *The United States in Puerto Rico 1898-1900* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1966), 103-5.

15. "Hundreds Dead in Hurricane," *New York Times*, Aug. 11, 1899, 1-2.

16. "Manifiesto del Gobernador Davis a los alcaldes de la isla," Aug. 10, 1899, reprinted in Ramírez de Arellano, "Los huracanes," 60. "Hurricane Relief," in *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 210-19, details the relief measures taken and problems encountered. Major Van Hoff's wife, Lavinia, became the leader of a Woman's Relief Society in San Juan that distributed clothing in the city and throughout the island. Her role was always mentioned positively (and gallantly) by General Davis in official reports. See *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 759-61.

to 17), corresponding to the 12 existing military districts, and he required the commanding officers to take inventory of the damage and make appeals for food and other forms of relief.¹⁷ Within a week of the disaster, these reports estimated that about 250,000 people were without food or shelter. Davis also created an advisory board on insular policies, composed of nine Puerto Rican civilians, and asked it to make recommendations on hurricane relief.¹⁸

Damage estimates were essential to the relief effort. Officers across the island submitted reports to headquarters in San Juan, and district commanders took initiatives “to save life and property, to relieve distress, and to maintain order.”¹⁹ Davis issued a general order to inventory losses only a few days after the storm.²⁰ Local municipal governments were willing to cooperate; they hoped the resources of the United States would provide the capital needed for recovery.

In support of the general order, the civil secretary sent letters to the municipalities asking for an accurate listing of losses.²¹ By October and November, these reports began to arrive in San Juan. The level of care in the collection of information varied greatly. In Fajardo, 216 sworn declarations were gathered from those claiming property losses. These were then used to prepare a detailed accounting from the municipality. In other townships, such as Lares, the rounded figures submitted suggest estimates.²² A final accounting and summary of these inventories demonstrated that the more than 18-million-peso loss suffered by coffee agriculture made up over half the total property loss of \$35,889,000. Losses in minor crops (*frutos menores*) were calculated at \$4,766,000, urban property damage at \$7,346,000, and sugar properties at only \$3,245,000. Losses were greatest in Utuado, which reported over 5 million pesos in losses, or twice the amount lost in Ponce, the area next hardest hit.²³

17. *Gaceta de Puerto Rico* (San Juan), Aug. 15, 1899, in Ramírez de Arellano, “Los huracanes,” 62.

18. “Military Legislation,” in *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 45–53.

19. A typical if somewhat lengthy report is that of Major Albert L. Myer, from the Ponce district, to the Adjutant-General, Department of Puerto Rico, *Report of Major-General*, n. 3901, 343–46.

20. General Order n. 115 (Aug. 11, 1899), reprinted in Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 347–48. Similar inventories of damage were made after hurricanes during the Spanish administration of the island.

21. AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, Coamo, caja 3, exp. 51.

22. “Declaraciones,” AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, Fajardo, caja 282, vol. 1022; caja 282, vol. 499; Lares, caja 45, f. 43. For a listing of urban property damage in San Juan, see “Relación de los perjuicios,” AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, San Juan, leg. 34, exp. 30.

23. Here \$ represents pesos. A full accounting of the losses to life and property can be seen in “Estadística de los daños causados por el huracán del 8 de agosto de 1899 . . .,” in Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 30–340.

To carry out the relief program, the military government had to turn to the municipal administrations (ayuntamientos) of the island. The municipal councils had been reformed by the Spanish government in 1870 in an attempt to provide better local administration, but the U.S. occupation forces found them deficient in many ways. U.S. evaluations made after 1898, by no means free of anti-Hispanic prejudices, depicted the town councils as traditionally subservient to central government, rife with venality and incompetence, and, worst of all, virtually bankrupt.²⁴ Moreover, municipal elections were held throughout the island between July 1899 and February 1900. These elections, often accompanied by violence between the Liberal and Republican parties, complicated responses to the disaster by introducing partisan politics.²⁵

Still, the ayuntamientos provided the only existing civil structure that could be mobilized to meet the disaster. They also represented predominant local interests, and they seized the opportunity to suggest a series of measures that would benefit these.²⁶

The municipal governments, faced with a disastrous situation far beyond their means, acted quickly, although sometimes inefficiently. Despite their reputations, with a few exceptions, they did as well as they could. Needs varied across the island. In San Juan, for example, the ayuntamiento provided funds to needy individuals and hospitals and considered projects for the building of *bohíos* (shacks) for the homeless in Santurce and Puerta de Tierra.²⁷ It also worked closely with the Superior Board of Health to maintain a supply of drinking water and to avert an epidemic in the wake of the storm and flooding.²⁸

24. On the municipal reform, see María Asunción García Ochoa, *La política española en Puerto Rico durante el siglo XIX* (Río Piedras: Univ. de Puerto Rico, 1982), 499–529. See also María Barceló Miller, *Política ultramarina y gobierno municipal: Isabela, 1873–1887* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1984). The number of ayuntamientos had been increased in 1872. Their members were elected by males over age 25 who paid five pesos a year in taxes or who held a professional degree. *Report on the Census* (1899), 21–22; Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, 17–20; *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 35–39.

25. Mariano Negrón Portillo, *Las turbas republicanas, 1900–1904* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1990), 71–77.

26. Many of these goals, such as tax relief, long-term agricultural loans, and crop insurance, were mentioned by Antonio J. Amadeo in his article “El Remedio,” *La Democracia* (San Juan), Sept. 6, 1899. See also Ramírez de Arellano, “Los huracanes,” 42–44.

27. AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, San Juan, leg. 34, exps. 27–30.

28. See Superior Board of Health to Dr. M. Fernández Nater, Aug. 10, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, San Juan, leg. 34, exp. 27; W. E. Hughes to Alcalde de San Juan (Aug. 17, 1899), *ibid.* The Superior Board of Health (motto: *Salus populi, suprema lex*) was just being created when San Ciriaco reached the island. The storm was a major impulse to, and test of, its organization. See Blanca G. Silvestrini, “La política de salud pública de los Estados Unidos en Puerto Rico, 1898–1913: consecuencias en el proceso de americanización,” in *Politics, Society, and Culture in the Caribbean*, ed. Silvestrini (Río Piedras: Univ. de Puerto Rico, 1983), 67–84.

In Caguas, first reports estimated losses at one hundred thousand pesos, but that figure was soon raised to four hundred thousand pesos. The alcalde, Don Celestino Solá, reported that the winds had destroyed even the chimneys of the sugar mills and that “the hurricane has caused the ruin of Caguas, whose wealth has suffered such damage as has never been seen before.”²⁹ The ayuntamiento formed a relief committee, and, receiving food and medicine from the supplies of the occupying U.S. troops in the area, began to distribute these to the homeless. Alcalde Solá left to join his family in San Juan, and in his place Don Gervasio García, later to become the predominant political force in Caguas, was elected interim mayor. García directed the relief effort in the municipality. He recalled years later not only the property losses, but also the scenes of human suffering:

After the hurricane, it continued raining with some breeze. Everyone expected another hurricane. Because of this, men, women, and children went into the streets praying with candles lit. Seen at a distance, they seemed to be skeletons leaving the grave. This view demanded respect and it caused pain and affliction to see those poor people walking and skipping among the debris.³⁰

The financial resources of the island’s 69 municipalities had already been strained by the war and the occupation. Taxes had gone unpaid and operating budgets were unbalanced when the hurricane battered the island.

The ayuntamiento of Ponce appealed to the other municipal corporations of the island to join it in a formal request to General Davis. The proposal asked for 25 to 30 million pesos in bonds to be issued to finance rebuilding, a freeing of restrictions on trade with the United States, and a moratorium (*condonación*) on state and municipal taxes for the present year and the one preceding. This project, and a similar one put forward by the ayuntamiento of Mayagüez, won widespread and enthusiastic support from other municipalities. Lares unanimously approved it, and towns such as Moca, Las Marías, Humacao, Utuado, and Aguas Buenas all joined in support within a month.³¹

Meanwhile, the advisory board in San Juan had already begun to suggest leniency in tax collection, in response to petitions such as that of the

29. Archivo Municipal de Caguas, Libro Actas, 1899, f. 275 as cited in Oscar L. Bunker, *Historia de Caguas*, 2 vols. (Caguas: O. L. Bunker, 1981), 2:113.

30. Gervasio García, “Mi paso por la alcaldía,” ms. cited in Bunker, *Historia de Caguas*, 2:114.

31. Actas del Ayuntamiento, Sept. 4, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, Lares, caja 45; Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, letter 17.

mayor.³² By September 1, in fact, 58 petitions for tax relief from mayors, town councils, and interested citizens all over the island had been submitted to the government.³³

These petitions sought relief for municipalities, landowners, businessmen, and the poor, but they also hoped to use the situation to their advantage. Landowners, especially those with coffee estates, along with vendors of foodstuffs and fruits and other sectors, petitioned for a tax remission to be granted to everyone, not just to those who could document loss. A debate developed over the wisdom of such a broad policy and its susceptibility to abuse.

The civil secretary, Cayetano Coll y Toste, was reluctant to grant any concession.³⁴ He also opposed a call for a general remission of taxes, arguing that the damages had not been suffered by everyone and that tax remission should be decided on an individual basis.³⁵ Agricultural interests viewed his position on this issue (and on the later distribution of aid) as extremely hostile.³⁶ A satirical editorial pointed out that the day of San Cayetano was August 7 and San Ciriaco was August 8; in other words, with the civil secretary and the hurricane Puerto Rico had suffered two calamities back to back.³⁷

The advisory board, however, believed that with 60,900 properties on the island, it would simply be impossible to investigate each, and that the poor, out of ignorance or inertia, would fail to file while the wealthier owners would reap all the advantages.³⁸ This proved to be an accurate prediction. By October the ayuntamiento of Lares had received 369 petitions

32. AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, San Juan, leg. 34, exp. 28; AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, exp. 5125.

33. Advisory Board to Gen. Davis, Sept. 5, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, letter 17; Alcalde of Arroyo to Advisory Board, Aug. 18, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, caja 28, n. 5132. Arroyo asked for nine thousand pesos to cover operating expenses. See the similar petition from Guarabo, Aug. 15, 1899, *ibid.*, n. 5155.

34. He suggested that vendors of "*frutas menores*" be granted only a fiscal quarter of grace instead of remission for a fiscal year. The advisory board disagreed. See AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, letter 43. Cayetano Coll y Toste (1850–1930) was a distinguished physician, author, and politician. He served in a number of offices during the Spanish administration of the island and was selected as civil secretary to the U.S. military government after the U.S. occupation. See Adolfo de Hostos, *Diccionario histórico bibliográfico comentado de Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 1976), 275–78.

35. Advisory Board to Gen. Davis, Aug. 21, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, exp. 5125. Coll y Toste pointed out that his own properties in Arecibo had not suffered but that some of his relatives had lost thousands of pesos.

36. "Carta de un agricultor de Utuado," *El Diario de Puerto Rico* (San Juan), 1:77 (Apr. 4, 1900), 2.

37. *El Diario de Puerto Rico* 1:186 (Aug. 9, 1900), 2.

38. The reference to 60,900 properties includes urban properties. It was estimated that the island had about 25,000 farms in 1899.

for tax relief, mostly from large proprietors, even though it recognized that great and small had suffered losses proportionally. It asked for a tax remission to be extended to everyone. The advisory board was sympathetic to such appeals. It suggested local investigations and inventories of losses and argued for the total remission of taxes. Admitting that some had suffered worse than others, it urged prompt action and asserted that present concessions to agriculture would ensure future revenue.

General Davis followed that advice and incorporated it into General Order 138.³⁹ As late as 1902, over 295 million pesos was still owed to the insular government, mostly by “taxpayers whose coffee estates or other agricultural holdings had been devastated by the hurricane of August 1899.”⁴⁰ By 1902, Mayagüez was the furthest in arrears, having paid only 72 percent of its taxes because its many coffee planters were still struggling to get on their feet.⁴¹

Next to the remission of taxes, the ayuntamientos’ major goal after San Ciriaco was to secure funds to meet the immediate needs of each locality as well as loans or capital for rebuilding. This objective had existed before the hurricane, but the search for new capital now became urgent. The suspension of the mortgage law in 1899 had protected planters from foreclosures in the difficult days after the war, but it also had effectively discouraged new loans to agriculture. As the ayuntamiento of Lares put it, conditions had to be created to attract “capital from the new metropolis, which transferred to this territory will aid agriculture, industry, and commerce to enable it to rise from the prostration in which it finds itself. . . .”⁴² For the moment, Lares sought a four-thousand-peso contribution from the government to relieve the two thousand homeless families in the district, but it also hoped to secure a large loan to help meet present needs and to rebuild damaged properties.⁴³

The ayuntamientos also were interested in repairing the island’s precarious infrastructure of communication and transportation. The destruction of those networks made the delivery of relief difficult and slowed subsequent recovery. For example, the destruction of the 17-kilometer railroad between Mayagüez and Añasco was a major blow to the commerce of those towns as well as Lares, San Sebastián, and others.

39. Advisory Board to Gen. Davis, Sept. 30, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, exp. 5125. Cf. Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 353–55.

40. “Report of the Governor,” *2d Annual Report* (May 1, 1901–July 1, 1902) (Washington, D.C., 1902), 114.

41. “Report of the Treasurer,” *2d Annual Report* (1901), 112–13.

42. AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, Lares, Actas del Ayuntamiento, Aug. 12, 1899, caja 45.

43. *Ibid.* See also the sessions of Oct. 23 and Nov. 13, 1899, *ibid.*, caja 45, fols. 50, 70–72v.

All the municipalities affected called for government help in rebuilding the railroad, but because the railroad was privately owned, the government, while admitting its utility, still hesitated to act.⁴⁴ Road and bridge repair, however, became a major activity in the months following San Ciriaco and, “as honest labor,” one of the principal ways in which the military government justified its distribution of relief to the island’s indigent.

San Ciriaco and Puerto Rican Society

In the last decades of Spanish rule the vast majority of Puerto Ricans had lived a precarious existence. The expansion of both sugar and coffee growing had increased the landless population and worsened public health, as attested by rising mortality rates. Landless workers moved about the island seeking seasonal labor, migrated to the cities, or emigrated to Cuba or the Dominican Republic. Urban strikes and rural unrest resulted from the difficult economic and social situation that characterized the life of the lower classes on the island.⁴⁵ Still, the image of the rural worker, the *jibaro*, as a lazy, violent, uneducated, and taciturn mestizo was widely diffused in government circles and among the landed and commercial elite. These preexisting conditions and attitudes colored the perception of the effects of the disaster.

As the damage reports trickled into San Juan, they revealed that over two hundred thousand people were destitute or homeless, many facing starvation. Although a few of the military observers felt that the declarations of need were overstated because the islanders were accustomed to poor rations and precarious housing, most of the reports sympathetically emphasized the miserable conditions.⁴⁶ The rough mortality rate of 41 per thousand for 1899 was actually considerably higher than the average (29.7) for the preceding years of the decade, and it is clear that the months following the storm were difficult for much of the population.⁴⁷

44. AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, n. 5375. In 1901, Governor William Hunt reported that the railroad had cost six hundred thousand pesos but that the hurricane had disrupted it and that its owners claimed it no longer paid expenses. See *2d Annual Report*, 41.

45. Fernando Picó, 1898. *La guerra después de la guerra* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1987), 21–40, provides a succinct overview of conditions on the island in this period.

46. Eben Swift, division inspector of Humacao, wrote to the Charity Board on September 18, 1899, that he found reports of “want and suffering to be greatly exaggerated.” He believed that no relief should be given except to widows, children, the injured, and the elderly. “In my opinion, the whole barefoot population is indigent—that is, they are idle, shiftless, without ambition, and will not work except under the prospect of starvation. This does not mean that they ought to be fed.” *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 720.

47. This higher mortality rate was not due simply to the deaths caused by the storm itself. For the ten months following San Ciriaco, the rate was 43.2 per thousand. The highest

The precarious physical conditions left much of the rural laboring population without immediate prospects. One of the results was increased emigration. In the first annual governor's report, Charles H. Allen wrote: "These islanders are essentially a home-loving people and remarkably attached to their native land. But particularly since the hurricane of San Ciriaco some of the poorer class of laborers have found it difficult to procure the means of a livelihood."⁴⁸ The first Puerto Rican exodus of workers to Hawaii began after the hurricane.⁴⁹

Just as the nature of the island's political and economic structures determined the impact of the hurricane, the storm created a new set of circumstances that in turn influenced those structures and the actions of individuals and groups.⁵⁰ Despite the magnitude of the destruction, the destitution of almost a quarter of the island's population, and the breakdown of municipal controls in many areas, virtually no extensive looting or other civil disturbances were reported. The smoldering campaign of guerrilla attacks by "partidas sediciosas," carried out for revenge and retribution against pro-Spanish elements and certain planters since the end of the war, now came to a halt.⁵¹ In rural areas, the devastation apparently weakened the authority of existing groups and leaders. This may have been what disaster researchers call "the honeymoon period," in which the common trauma of catastrophe creates feelings of solidarity that cut

rates (57–58) were recorded in October and November 1899. This would have been after the food made available by the storm (such as bananas and other fruit knocked from the trees) had been consumed but before the relief system was functioning smoothly. General Davis, who reported these figures, believed that they reflected the "diminished food supply." See *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 219.

48. Reprinted in Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *Documentos de la migración puertorriqueña (1879–1901)* (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, 1977), 10–12.

49. *El Diario de Puerto Rico* 1:182 (Aug. 4, 1900); Carmelo Rosario Natal, *Exodo puertorriqueño (Las emigraciones al Caribe y Hawaii: 1900–1915)* (San Juan: Carmelo Rosario Natal, 1983). See also Andrés A. Ramos Mattei, "La emigración puertorriqueña hacia el Caribe: 1899–1901," *Historia y Sociedad* 3 (1990), 60–78.

50. Sociologists and disaster researchers have waged considerable debate over the long-term effects of disaster on social organization. The so-called "Prince hypothesis," that disasters stimulate rapid social change, underlies much of this dialogue. A good summary of the major positions is found in Frederick L. Bates and Walter G. Peacock, "Disasters and Social Change," in *Sociology of Disasters*, ed. Russell R. Dynes et al. (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1987), 291–330.

51. Picó, 1898, 193–96. The anti-Spanish and revenge aspects of the raids were noted by Manuel Reyes Ruiz, alcalde of Quebradillas, in his testimony before the Carroll commission, but under questioning he also mentioned actions of workers against planters. See Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, 401–2. Major Cruse, Quartermaster, reported to Major Van Hoff that there had been some petty thieving because of the "false idea which pervaded the country that the relief supplies were for the people and could be taken by whoever was able to get them." July 18, 1900, *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 709–12.

across existing political and social lines.⁵² At the same time, of course, the presence of U.S. troops, their campaign against the “bandits,” and the government’s overwhelming desire to maintain control over a newly subject population may have been more important than the psychological impact of the hurricane itself in ending the actions of the *partidas*. In effect, there was no need to call out the National Guard to maintain order—it was already there.

For the nascent Puerto Rican labor movement, which had taken its first important steps toward organization in the year preceding San Ciriaco, the storm created complications.⁵³ As relief ships began to arrive, dock workers in San Juan demanded higher wages to unload supplies, after objecting to the call for volunteers for this task. Their demand for two dollars a day rather than the customary dollar was opposed by General Davis, who called for volunteers among Puerto Rican soldiers and the youth of the city. These volunteers and the dock workers finally agreed to work for the standard wage; and when they realized that the cargo was destined for hurricane victims, many refused to accept any salary.⁵⁴

Longshoremen and other workers, however, continued to press for higher wages and to organize.⁵⁵ In Caguas, workers repairing a bridge struck for higher wages, but General Davis refused to negotiate. The officer in charge was instructed to withhold food from the workers and their families until they accepted the current wage of 50 centavos a day.⁵⁶ By contrast, strikes and labor unrest among sugar workers, which had begun in the 1890s and would result in a general strike in 1905, were absent in the period following San Ciriaco.⁵⁷

If workers and their movement hoped to benefit from the obvious need for labor to rebuild the island, the enormous number of unemployed and the migration from rural to urban areas after San Ciriaco undercut those

52. Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), 87, 111–12.

53. Gervasio L. García, “Los trabajadores también hacen historia,” in his *Historia crítica, historia sin coartadas* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1985), 67–107.

54. Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 63; G. Langhorne to Alcalde of San Juan, Aug. 21, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, San Juan, leg. 34, exp. 27. See also Igualdad Iglesias de Pagán, *El obrerismo en Puerto Rico* (Palencia de Castilla: Ediciones Juan Ponce de León, 1973), 101.

55. “Labor in Puerto Rico,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1900, p. 8. See also Gervasio L. García and Angel G. Quintero Rivera, *Desafío y solidaridad. Breve historia del movimiento obrero puertorriqueño* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1982).

56. *Ibid.*; Davis to Advisory Board, Aug. 28, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Documental Municipal, San Juan, leg. 34, exp. 27.

57. “El surgimiento de una fuerza trabajadora proletaria y el comienzo de huelgas en la industria azucarera puertorriqueña,” in Andrés A. Ramos Mattei, *La sociedad del azúcar en Puerto Rico, 1870–1910* (Río Piedras: Univ. de Puerto Rico, 1988), 115–27.

hopes.⁵⁸ Moreover, though General Davis did not immediately revoke the law of the eight-hour workday, which the previous military governor had established, he did not favor it.⁵⁹

Even efforts to buffer the storm's impact on the working class sometimes produced negative results. Troubled by a rise in bread prices in San Juan, Davis tried to force bakers to reduce the price. They did so by reducing the salaries of their workers.⁶⁰ Faced with rebuilding the island's economy, maintaining order, and coping with the disaster, General Davis hoped to preserve the existing relations of production and ensure a supply of reliable and inexpensive labor. That desire was shared by the planter class of the island.

The storm had worsened the situation of the island's laboring classes. Workers were squeezed between rising food and housing prices and old wage levels held constant by a government interested in holding down costs. The old provincial currency was depreciated by 30 percent in exchange for the dollar on August 1, 1900, a year after San Ciriaco; only then was the labor movement able to mount a major strike.⁶¹

If its effect on the labor movement was delayed, the storm had an immediate impact on class relations. The most serious demonstration of tension took place in Ponce, where damage and mortality had been extensive, especially for the poor.⁶² A large crowd of "several hundred indigent natives" gathered to denounce the alcalde, Porrata Doria, for not giving the population adequate warning or taking appropriate relief measures. A detachment of the U.S. Fifth Cavalry broke up the demonstration, but the alcalde was eventually forced to resign. Mounted patrols maintained order, and the commanding officer of the district assumed some of the authority of the municipal government, to the satisfaction of the region's

58. Iglesias de Pagán, *El obrerismo*, 82–104. The number of labor actions seems to decline sharply in 1899; only the major strike at the docks of Espigón took place in this period.

59. Davis to Assistant Secretary of War, Mar. 23, 1900, in Iglesias de Pagán, *El obrerismo*, 106–8.

60. Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 61.

61. Félix Ojeda Reyes, "Colonialismo sindical o solidaridad internacional? Las relaciones entre el movimiento obrero puertorriqueño y el norteamericano en los inicios de la federación libre (1898–1901)," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 26:1–4 (1987), 311–43. Masons, carpenters, and painters threatened a strike over wages on July 30, 1900. Strikes by trolley car workers (August 2), hacienda employees in Fajardo and railroad laborers (August 6), and cigarette factory employees (Sept. 8) all were provoked by the change in currency and their loss of real wages. See *El Diario de Puerto Rico* 1:177, 180, 192, 212.

62. Guillermo A. Baralt, *La Buena Vista, 1833–1904* (San Juan: Fideicomiso de Conservación de Puerto Rico, 1988), 108–11, provides an excellent description of the destruction in Ponce and its effects on the population. It is interesting to note that while many coffee producers in Ponce were ruined by the storm, hacienda Buena Vista suffered few immediate effects.

poor—at least in that officer’s opinion.⁶³ Social tension remained high, however. Overcharges by greedy merchants who controlled the supplies needed for rebuilding led a Ponce newspaper to warn, “the atmospheric storm may be followed by a seismic one that will bring the fortune of those who live in comfortable houses to the level of those who need zinc for [the roofs of] their huts.”⁶⁴

God and the Politics of Disaster

The occurrence of this disaster, following so closely the American occupation, was not lost on observers. In many ways, San Ciriaco was more disruptive to Puerto Rican society than was the American invasion.⁶⁵ Explanations of the event varied according to politics. The nationalist *Diario de la Marina* of Havana wrote that “Puerto Rico is refused a political organization by her new masters. She is not allowed even the autonomy that existed under the old regime. The cyclone that has devastated the island is a symbol of the just wrath of God toward the American occupation.”⁶⁶ Don Juan Perpiña y Pibernat, dean of the diocese of Puerto Rico, took a pro-Spanish position. He, too, saw this as divine intervention, but the lesson was directed toward the Puerto Ricans themselves. He wrote that anyone not blinded by atheism, materialism, and naturalism could see that the storm was God’s punishment of the island’s sins, which had become particularly offensive with the “change in nationality.” These sins included secularism and a pro-American rejection of the island’s Hispanic traditions by the “servile adulators of the Americans, ungrateful and denaturalized sons, after having received from Spain their being, language, religion, healthy customs, and the wise and full legislation of the Indies.”⁶⁷

Whoever was the object of God’s lesson, and as disastrous as San Ciriaco was to the island as a whole, the storm did not affect all classes and sectors equally.⁶⁸ A number of observers, both Puerto Rican and Ameri-

63. Major Albert L. Myer to Adjutant-General, Aug. 12, 1900 [sic], in *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 680–81. “Ponce Wrecked by Hurricane,” *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1899, pp. 1–2, and Aug. 13, 1899, p. 2, claims that the crowd numbered more than one thousand. A self-defense of the inactions of the ayuntamiento of Ponce is found in the *acuerdo* of Aug. 12, 1899, AHP, caja 143B, leg. 152, exp. 325.

64. Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 94.

65. Cf. Fernando Picó, “El impacto de la invasión americana en la zona cafetalera de Puerto Rico: el caso de Utuado,” in Silvestrini, *Politics, Society, and Culture*, 131–45; and Laird S. Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 208–9. Bergad indicates a long break in the normal functions of civil government in Lares following San Ciriaco.

66. Cited in the *New York Times*, Aug. 15, 1899, p. 4.

67. Perpiña y Pibernat, *Sobre el ciclón del glorioso San Ciriaco*, 10–13.

68. Modern disaster studies have increasingly pointed out the heavier impact and

can, noted the differential impact. Well-constructed houses in San Juan and other urban centers that did not also suffer flooding received damage but withstood the brunt of the storm. The mud and palm-thatch shacks of the rural population were simply blown to the ground; and to make matters worse, the uprooting of trees left the poor with no materials for new roofs.⁶⁹ The destruction of the bananas, plantains, potatoes, and other “minor crops” on which the rural poor depended created potential famine conditions, although the government acted quickly to provide immediate relief and to order the planting of food crops.⁷⁰

The problem was compounded by the island’s agrarian structure, which was already oriented toward export crops and livestock. Only about a quarter (five hundred thousand acres) of the island’s surface was cultivated, and of that only one hundred thousand acres produced foodstuffs. Puerto Rico was a food importer and already food-deficient. San Ciriaco intensified that situation and underlined the dangers inherent in the island’s colonial status.⁷¹ The export agrarian structure, the general poverty of the rural population, its lack of adequate housing, and a fragile infrastructure of transportation, health services, and communication turned San Ciriaco from a natural hazard into a major human disaster. For Puerto Rican patriots, it was not difficult to lay the responsibility for these underlying conditions at the feet of the old colonial power, Spain.

The social and political implications of governmental response to natural hazards had not been lost on the previous Spanish administrators of the island. The extensive damage caused by the hurricane of San Narciso of 1867 moved a number of Spanish officials to point out its negative effects on a province that had already reached “an extremely painful and insupportable situation.”⁷² Laborers deprived of subsistence might perish from

greater losses suffered by poor countries and poor people. See, e.g., Tinker, “Are Natural Disasters Natural?”; and Charles H. V. Ebert, “Consequences of Disasters for Developing Nations,” *Impact of Science on Society* (UNESCO) 32:1 (1982), 93–100.

69. *Boletín Mercantil de Puerto Rico* (San Juan), special ed., Sept. 1899, p. 2.

70. General Order 126 (Aug. 22, 1899) directed the alcaldes to order the planting of corn, potatoes, beans, and other “products of rapid harvest” (*temprana cosecha*). See Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 349.

71. *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 670–72. Governor William Hunt reported that Puerto Rico had 2,347,520 acres, of which about 20 percent was in cultivation; 51 percent in pasturage; 22 percent in towns, streams, and forests; and 7 percent in wasteland. Of the land in cultivation, 61,556 acres were in sugar cane, 122,358 in coffee, 4,222 in tobacco, 93,508 in foodstuffs, and 17,176 in fruits. See *2d Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico* (Washington, D.C., 1902), 17–18.

72. José Lianhes, “Sobre la situación de dicha isla . . .,” Nov. 8, 1867, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid (cited hereafter as AHNM), Ultramar, leg. 379, ex. 10. On the hurricane of San Narciso see Vicente Fontán y Mera, *La memorable noche de San Narciso y los temblores de tierra* (San Juan: Imprenta del Comercio, 1868); and Salivia, *Historia de los temporales*, 190–200.

hunger or be led astray by “disrupters of public order” (*trastornadores del orden público*) to violate the laws of property. For some commentators, the destruction of churches and a consequent weakening of moral restraint made the problem worse.⁷³ José Lianhes wrote from Puerto Rico in 1867 to the Board of Public Works (*Negociado de Obras Públicas*) that an extensive governmental program of rebuilding and improving roads, docks, bridges, and public services would provide work and sustenance to thousands and “demonstrate clearly to the country the interest which the government takes in it, leaving as permanent proof works that contribute to the wealth and material well-being of its inhabitants.”

The losses from the San Narciso hurricane allowed these officials to speak frankly about the shortcomings of the government. Miguel de Campos wrote that the failure to undertake works of public utility had led the majority of the population to believe in the “immorality of an administration seen as foreign and hostile” and therefore made them reluctant to pay taxes that did not seem to be applied to their needs.⁷⁴ The Spanish government’s inattention to the island’s needs in normal times was now brought into sharp focus; relief efforts were essential to the “prestige of the administration and the peaceful conservation of the established regime.”⁷⁵ By 1867, only about 3 percent of government expenditures on the island went for public works or an infrastructure that would provide a buffer against these calamities. A government that could not meet the needs of the people was a government devoid of support and vulnerable to popular resistance, especially when the social and economic fabric of society had been rent by disaster. The lesson that the observers of San Narciso had sought to convey to Madrid in 1867 was also foremost in the thinking of the U.S. government in 1899.

San Ciriaco presented to the military government both the problems of coping with an enormous and disruptive disaster and opportunities for using its response to forward a particular political program. From the outset, Davis emphasized to the local population his hope that the U.S. government would take relief measures to benefit the island’s agriculturalists and also relieve the painful situation of the poorer classes. Davis and the Charity Board did a creditable job, using War Department funds

73. See, e.g., Carlos de Rojas, “Dictámen de la Dirección de Administración local sobre ejecución de obras públicas por cuenta de empréstito,” Oct. 20, 1867, AHNM, Ultramar, leg. 379, ex. 10.

74. Miguel de Campos to Ingeniero encargado del Negociado de Obras Públicas del Ministerio de Ultramar, Apr. 10, 1868, AHNM, Ultramar, leg. 379, ex. 10. It is interesting to note that the Lares insurrection—the first stirring of Puerto Rican independence—occurred in the year following San Narciso, and to speculate on the extent to which dissatisfaction with the handling of the hurricane’s effects contributed to sentiments for independence.

75. Oct. 10, 1867, *Ibid.*

and drawing on the military supplies available on the island as well as organizing the distribution of charitable funds raised in the United States. Although there were some officers who felt that it might have been better to let this Malthusian crisis play itself out, General Davis was later able to claim that one hundred thousand people had been saved by the relief program, which eventually distributed over 32 million pounds of food to the islanders.⁷⁶

Davis' charitable sentiments were sincere. He and a number of other officials even surrendered portions of their salaries to the relief effort. But it is also clear that Davis and the U.S. government saw definite political advantages to be gained from the situation, and an opportunity to demonstrate the efficiency of that government and the apparent generosity of its people to a recently occupied and soon-to-be-acquired island.⁷⁷

Within a week after the disaster, President McKinley had approved the distribution of food from U.S. military supplies on the island to the Puerto Ricans, and he requested that Secretary of War Elihu Root make an appeal for relief to the American people. This step was taken because there was no congressional appropriation for this purpose at the time. Another appeal was then directed to the mayors of all U.S. cities with a population of over 150,000. In this message, the political goals were made clear.

Under these conditions, the President deems that an appeal should be made to the humanity of the American people. It is an appeal to their patriotism also, for the inhabitants of Puerto Rico have freely and gladly submitted themselves to the guardianship of the United States and have voluntarily surrendered the protection of Spain, to which they were formerly entitled, confidently relying upon more generous and beneficent treatment at our hands. The highest considerations of honor and good faith unite with the promptings of humanity to require from the United States a generous response to the demand of Puerto Rican distress.⁷⁸

76. A curious mixture of racist and class-based negative attitudes emerged in the comments of some of the American military and in the congressional discussions of Puerto Rico. For comparative purposes see Cathy Duke, "The Idea of Race: The Cultural Impact of American Intervention in Cuba, 1898-1912," in Silvestrini, *Politics, Society, and Culture*, 85-110.

77. Bailey W. and Justine W. Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1931), 31, is critical of Congress for appropriating only \$200,000 for relief after the hurricane, but does not mention the private contributions or the expenditure of supplies from military sources on the island. See also Gannon, "Ideology of Americanization," 148-55.

78. *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1899, pp. 1-2. On August 14, 1899, Secretary Root issued a direct appeal to U.S. governors for Puerto Rican relief. See *New York Times*, Aug. 15, 1899, p. 4.

In New York, the relief committee established by the State Merchants Association was chosen by Secretary Root to become the central collection agency for the nation. Its chairman, Governor Theodore Roosevelt, was no less aware of the political gains that generosity might produce. "I appeal to all patriotic citizens to show to the suffering people of our new possessions that the extension of our flag over their territory is to be of immediate material as well as moral benefit to them," he stated.⁷⁹ That same theme, the benefits of U.S. sovereignty, had been present since the initial moments of the occupation, when General Nelson Miles had emphasized the "advantages and blessings of enlightened civilization" that the new regime promised.⁸⁰ Similar sentiments appeared in various statements made by other officials in Washington and in the proceedings of the relief committee established under the direction of the Bureau of Insular Affairs. General Davis, Governor Roosevelt, and Secretary Root all understood the political benefits that would accrue from a demonstration of U.S. generosity and efficiency. These political goals channeled the sincere charitable response of many U.S. individuals, organizations, and firms who made contributions of food, clothing, and money into a relief effort with definite political goals.

The political program encoded in the relief effort was not the only consideration that faced the U.S. government and its representatives in Puerto Rico. They also had to contend with the island's social and economic realities. Not only did they have to win the support and good will of a large and destitute population; they also needed to resuscitate a ravaged economy and its principal participants, the planters. From the outset of the relief effort, the problem of delivery and distribution had concerned the advisory board and the district officers. At first, a plan was devised to issue identity cards to those needing aid, but irregularities in distribution and malfeasance in some ayuntamientos convinced the military government that another method of delivery was needed. That method was also influenced by the deep prejudices General Davis and other Americans held toward the laboring Puerto Ricans.

Davis and many of his subordinate officers expressed a profound distrust of the capacities of the Puerto Rican people. Basing their prejudices on negative opinions expressed by earlier visitors to the island, they believed the Puerto Rican poor to be lazy, ignorant, and uninterested in

79. "Help for Puerto Ricans," *New York Times*, Aug. 11, 1899, p. 3.

80. *Annual Reports of the War Department*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., H. doc. (Washington, D.C., 1902), 20 (order issued July 28, 1898). Miles' statement and the Puerto Ricans' response are discussed in Carmelo Rosario Natal, *Puerto Rico y la crisis de la guerra hispano-americana (1895-98)* (Hato Rey: Ramallo Brothers, 1975), 225-30.

their own welfare or political future.⁸¹ Whether they ascribed these shortcomings to Spanish misrule, Catholic obscurantism, or the defects of racial mixing, many U.S. military and private observers would have agreed with Davis' negative evaluation of the islanders: "indeed a more discouraging outlook for a people who are classed as civilized it would be difficult to conceive."⁸² Davis considered the majority of the population to be "a horde of human beings called civilized, but who are only a few steps removed from a primitive state of nature."⁸³ Not surprisingly, Major John Van Hoff, Davis' appointee as president of the Charity Board and director of the relief effort, shared these opinions. In a letter to Davis explaining the difficulties of working among "such a people," he stated:

We have accepted these people as our share of the burden that the strong must bear for the weak; we will keep them alive; we will lead them slowly, gently toward the light, and finally in half a hundred years they will catch the first glimmering ray which will show them what our standards are and what we wish theirs to be.⁸⁴

Davis and Van Hoff both believed that the free distribution of food and clothing to the indigent poor would be a kind of dole that would turn into beggars "a people whose every tendency is in that direction," and that employment for wages was therefore the best solution.⁸⁵ The motto of the Charity Board was "No one shall die of starvation, and no able-bodied man shall eat the bread of idleness."⁸⁶ This theme resonates throughout the correspondence of the Charity Board and the statements of General

81. Davis' report cited Inigo Abbad y Lasierra, *Historia geográfica, civil, y política de la isla de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico* (Madrid, 1788), and George Flinter, *An Account of the Present State of the Island of Puerto Rico* (London, 1834). Both books were considered classic descriptions of the island. See *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 87–91. The American attitudes paralleled those of earlier Spanish administrators and members of the planter class. See Teresita Martínez de Carrera, "The Attitudes of Influential Groups of Colonial Society Toward the Rural Working Population in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico, 1860–73," *Journal of Caribbean History* 12 (1979), 35–54.

82. *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 91; see also Gannon, "Ideology of Americanization," 150–56. Other examples of Davis' strongly class-biased attitudes are noted in María Dolores Luque de Sánchez, *La ocupación norteamericana y la ley Foraker* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1986), 90ff.

83. *Ibid.*, 116. Davis made this intemperate statement in relation to the idea of self-government, which he opposed.

84. Van Hoff to Davis (undated but probably late Aug. 1899), reprinted in *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 780.

85. *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 775. The opinions of Davis and Van Hoff were similar to those expressed by Spanish liberals during the creation of charity boards in the 1820s. See Teresita Martínez Vergne, "The Liberal Concept of Charity: Beneficencia Applied to Puerto Rico, 1821–1868," in *The Middle Period in Latin American History: Values and Attitudes 17th–19th Centuries*, ed. Mark D. Szuchman (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1989), 167–84.

86. *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 775.

Davis.⁸⁷ It became a fixation. The problem, however, was that, except for roadbuilding, the government could offer little work, and private capital for rebuilding or development was virtually nonexistent.

These attitudes were not held exclusively by the North Americans but shared and reinforced by the Puerto Rican planters. The planters argued that direct relief was counterproductive not only because it went to vagrants and the less needy, but because those who had enough food would no longer present themselves for work in the coffee harvest.⁸⁸ Given this deep distrust of the laboring classes, combined with the desire morally to uplift as well as “Americanize” the Puerto Ricans, it is not surprising that the military government developed a relief strategy that played into the hands of the planters and management in general.

Before ascribing the remarks of Davis, Van Hoff, and others wholly to racist or colonialist attitudes, however, it is important to recognize the way in which perceptions of class intersected with those of race and religion in determining policies of public welfare in this period. Charitable societies were distrustful and suspicious of the poor even when they perceived them to be simply good farmers who had fallen on hard times.⁸⁹ The views expressed by Davis and his subordinates about the Puerto Ricans were held in general about the “needy poor” by elites such as those who composed the New York Charity Board. The fear that the poor would become idle paupers unless properly motivated and controlled was widely held on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Planters and the Charity Board

The key to San Ciriaco’s impact on Puerto Rican society lay in the countryside, where the storm’s effects on agriculture and on the population were most direct. The coffee economy, concentrated in the west central part of the island, was already experiencing difficulties due to declining prices, loss of sales in Spain and Cuba, and competition in the world market. The

87. The thinking of Davis and Van Hoff was typical of contemporary attitudes concerning social welfare and relief for the poor in the United States. These ideas were clearly expressed by U.S. delegates to the First National Conference on Welfare and Correction of the Island of Cuba in 1902. See esp. Edward Devine, “Needy Families in Their Homes,” and Mary E. Richmond, “Some Recent Lessons in the Relief of Distress,” in *Primera Conferencia Nacional de Beneficiencia y Corrección* (Havana, 1902), 437–42, 466–72. For a general overview of this problem see Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poor House: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

88. Aráez y Ferrando, *Historia del ciclón*, 41.

89. See, for example, the way in which Minnesota farmers were discussed and treated by the wealthy after a devastating grasshopper plague, in Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984).

hurricane, arriving just before the harvest began in September, devastated the coffee estates.⁹⁰ It stripped the berries from the trees, damaged those that remained, felled coffee trees, and uprooted and destroyed the protecting shade trees.⁹¹ Coffee exports in 1899 were only 10 percent of their average in the five years before the war, and, despite hopeful signs by 1902, recovery was slow. General Davis estimated that from 1899 to 1901 the coffee economy lost 12 million dollars in revenue as a result of San Ciriaco, to say nothing of its loss in capital stock.⁹² For coffee planters the situation was bleak: no crop to export, no money for rebuilding, traditional markets upset, and slight prospects for the immediate future.⁹³

The sugar-growing districts also suffered a considerable blow from the storm, but given the nature of the crop and the structure of the industry, the effects differed. General Davis estimated that about a third of the normal crop could be harvested in 1899. Observers noted that the inundations of the cane fields had actually reinvigorated the soil. Unlike coffee, there would be no five-year wait before production could be resumed. The storm had damaged a number of sugar haciendas, which did not return to production; but these were of the older type, and their disappearance actually opened the way for the introduction of the larger, more technologically advanced central mills. With this change also came increasing U.S. investment in the sugar industry.⁹⁴ By 1900, there were

90. Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism*, 205–23. On the internal organization of the coffee economy see also Fernando Picó, *Amargo café. Los pequeños y medianos caficultores de Utuado en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1981); Carlos Buitrago Ortiz, *Haciendas cafetaleras y clases terratenientes en el Puerto Rico decimonónico* (Río Piedras: Univ. de Puerto Rico, 1982). See also Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico*, 79–135; and Baralt, *La Buena Vista*, 108–11.

91. Testimony of Gen. Davis, *Hearings before the Committee on Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico (Senate Bill 2264)*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., Senate doc. 147, n. 3851, pp. 30–32. Not all coffee estates suffered badly. Hacienda Castañer in Lares had already sold much of its crop and was affected most by the disruption of transport. See Luís Edgardo Díaz Hernández, *Castañer. Una hacienda cafetalera en Puerto Rico (1868–1930)* (Río Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1983), 101–2.

92. *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 189–91. For an example of a coffee planter's losses, see the "Relación nominal" for Hacienda Progreso in Juana Díaz submitted by the Corsican planter Domingo Olivieri y Dominici, AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, 1899, caja 28, exp. 5260.

93. General Davis believed that the only hope of recovery was the concentration of coffee properties in fewer hands, mechanization, and emigration for excess laborers. For those who remained, "life will be horrible, it is true, but such are the conditions to be expected everywhere in the tropics where the population is dense." *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 192. A somewhat more sanguine estimate of coffee's recovery is contained in *2d Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico (1902)*, 219.

94. Andrés A. Ramos Mattei, "DeFord & Co. Banqueros inversionistas en Puerto Rico" (paper presented to the Association of Caribbean Historians, Havana, 1985), points out that DeFord & Co. lost interest in acquiring coffee properties after San Ciriaco. See also Muriel McAvoy-Weissman, "Early United States Investors in Puerto Rican Sugar," in Silvestrini, *Politics, Society, and Culture*, 111–30.

22 *centrales* operating on the island. Their expansion enjoyed the support of the military governor, who saw in a mechanized sugar industry concentrated in the hands of a few large owners the only hope for Puerto Rico, despite the fact that it would mean continued "serfdom" for its workers.⁹⁵ San Ciriaco had contributed to the conditions that made sugar the new investment crop.

The military government and the Charity Board had to grasp a two-edged blade. On the one hand, the losses suffered by the coffee and sugar growers seriously weakened the island's economy and its ability to return to a state of normalcy. The pleas of the planters for tax relief, loans, and other benefits met with general support from the military government. At the same time, the major problem facing the relief effort was to supply food, clothing, and housing materials to the indigent, most of whom were rural laborers.⁹⁶

Given the generally low opinion of the rural working class and the Charity Board's own desire to ensure that no one received aid who did not work, the board first favored a system of registration in which each case would be examined and laborers would be issued a work card that would have to be signed by an employer in order to qualify for relief.⁹⁷ This was a new Yankee version of the *libreta*, the scheme of work cards designed to fix labor and to serve as a social control during the Spanish regime, from 1849 to 1873.⁹⁸ Adapted now to an extraordinary situation, it was based on the belief by both the planters and the U.S. military officials that rural workers would not labor if uncoerced and unsupervised. The original plan, including verification of need by local charity boards (in which the women's volunteer auxiliaries would play a special role), soon proved too cumbersome.

The Charity Board in San Juan, under Major Van Hoff, therefore tried a second scheme that the military government considered more in line with the economic as well as the humanitarian needs of the moment. By

95. *Report on Civil Affairs*, n. 3904, p. 514.

96. An official, if rather full, account of the Charity Board's operations and its relations with the planters, containing many representative documents, is presented in *Report on Civil Affairs*, n. 3904, pp. 749-61; and in *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 716-41.

97. The case-by-case approach based on evaluation of each recipient's need was characteristic of the "scientific philanthropy" approach that characterized welfare thought in this period. See Robert H. Bremner, *American Philanthropy*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 85-99.

98. The *libreta* system, designed to prevent indigency and vagrancy, required all males over age 16 who had to work for others to maintain a labor card and present themselves for regular employment under the threat of various penalties. See Dietz, *Economic History*, 42-49; Fernando Picó, *Libertad y servidumbre en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1979); Labor Gómez Acevedo, *Organización y reglamentación del trabajo en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1970).

mid-September 1899, the board had instituted a program of “planter relief” that placed the food in the hands of the planters and made them responsible for its distribution to the rural poor.⁹⁹

This idea had emerged almost immediately after the hurricane’s passage. Captain W. S. Schuyler, noting the extensive destruction, the planters’ need for labor, and the danger that many would not work if they were not forced to, wrote from San Germán: “Perhaps the planters are entitled to help at this time. Let them work the peons for their rations, and we will call their superintendence a fair equivalent for the work the peons do on their property.” The Charity Board was initially reluctant to place the workers at the “none too tender mercies of the employer,” but the advantages of the program were too attractive. Writing to banks such as DeFord and Company, the Banco Territorial y Agrícola, and Crédito y Ahorro Ponceño, the Charity Board tried to identify trustworthy planters, but it soon abandoned this approach in favor of open applications.

Planters were required to petition for a specific number of workers in relation to the amount of land to be worked. They had to establish need and agree to a number of requirements. These included granting an acre of land to each worker to grow his own food, supplying seed, and giving other assistance. Moreover, the planters were required to transport the food at their own expense from the supply depots and to report monthly on the number of workers employed and the amount of food distributed. The food—one pound a day per worker and each family member—was “under no conditions to be considered as wages” but as relief, and it was not to be sold for any reason. Above all, the planters had to make sure that no one received the food who did not perform an honest day’s work. The workers in turn were required to present themselves to the planters on a regular basis.

The Charity Board received applications from the planters indicating the size of the farm, the extent of the losses suffered, and the number of workers needed. These applications were to be accompanied by a supporting letter from the district inspector before approval. The Charity Board realized that abuses and violations were common, “since the Porto Rican planters are no more to be depended upon than other men” and “were too many and often too inaccessible for our men to inspect them, even if we knew their language and tricks, which we did not.”¹⁰⁰ In some districts, municipal officials facilitated the process by printing application forms. In Bayamón, the alcalde and municipal councilmen, who were members of

99. *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 716ff., includes numerous excerpts from the board’s correspondence and its own explanation of its activities.

100. *Ibid.*, 739.

the Republican party, distributed these forms to other Republicans, urging them to appeal for support.¹⁰¹ Complaints of the political use of aid were registered by members of the Federalist party against the Republicans in Mayagüez, Cabo Rojo, and Aguas Buenas. The Liberals claimed that the hurricane relief had become a political tool used to gain support for the Republican party; but as one observer put it, "the Puerto Rican people cannot be bought for rice and beans."¹⁰² Some of the worst violations were caught, and district officers sought to prevent abuses. A few district inspectors, such as those in Humacao and Manatí, were particularly exigent or unsympathetic to planter requests, but in the main, the level of support was high, and few completed applications were denied.¹⁰³

The government's policy brought obvious benefit to the planters. As Table 1 indicates, by June 30, 1900, when the planter relief program ended, almost 12,000 applications, a number equal to about one-third of the island's proprietors, had been received. These probably included many of the largest landowners, because the 380,000 acres under their cultivation was over three-quarters of the 500,000 farmed acres on the island. Many district officers reported receiving far more requests and far more workers than they could possibly serve.

District officers were unable to complete the investigation of a number of the applicants, and other petitions remained incomplete. Of completed files, the approval rate was over 85 percent in all districts, with only three exceptions: Humacao, Manatí, and Lares. More common were the many cases of approved applications that were subsequently withdrawn or unsigned by planters who were unwilling to accept the financial and bookkeeping obligations demanded, or who refused to provide land to their workers. This seems to have been a particular problem in sugar-growing areas such as Ponce and Guanica. Table 2 presents the disposition of planter requests.

The Charity Board's original estimates—that perhaps five hundred planters would apply and that the program would be needed for three months—proved wrong. The planters' relief program continued for ten

101. *Ibid.*, 730.

102. *El Diario de Puerto Rico* 1:116 (May 21, 1900); 1:121 (May 26, 1900).

103. When a request for planter support received from Barranquitas was referred to the district inspector in Aibonito, he responded: "As to the planters, there is no doubt that they need assistance, but it is hard to tell who needs rations, for they all tell the same pitiful story, and I am sorry to say that they do not hesitate to prevaricate. Now, if one is issued rations they should all receive them. This would be an immense undertaking, for I have over 30,000 people in my district. I have come to the conclusion that as long as we cannot feed them all, we had better cut the planters off and continue to issue rations as we have been doing. . . ." See "Planters Relief," *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 730.

TABLE 1: Planter Applications for Relief

District	Received	Acted upon and signed	Acres cultivated	Rations allowed per day	Not approved	No reply or references	Refused to sign or unreturned
Adjuntas	692	540	29,300	9,750	33	105	102
Aguadilla	394	127	4,604	150	12	52	59
Aibonito	449	352	14,340	6,341	18	94	83
Arecibo	1,762	1,568	64,210	20,962	187	312	386
Arroyo	194	157	3,672	1,227	2	66	70
Bayamón	1,230	1,190	25,653	13,904	40	492	210
Caguas	430	362	11,019	5,016	16	79	105
Cayey	199	151	10,428	2,110	18	31	47
Fajardo	48	30	1,745	815	1	3	9
Guanica	295	226	13,184	798	5	32	176
Humacao	160	152	4,594	274	59	45	41
Lares	639	519	24,121	8,362	100	71	154
Manatí	1,942	1,779	49,010	20,863	479	362	269
Mayagüez	1,749	1,408	56,690	20,484	160	240	434
Ponce	821	716	53,811	5,526	29	256	393
San Germán	506	390	12,557	1,451	33	198	114
San Juan	62	42	1,154	245	4	16	14
Total	11,572 ^a	9,709	380,098	118,278	1,196	2,444	2,666

^a 1,863 applications were received too late to be acted upon.

Source: *Report of the Military Governor of Puerto Rico on Civil Affairs*, 56th Congress, 2d session, House document n. 4088, p. 741.

TABLE 2: Disposition of Planter Requests

District	Percentage approved and signed	Percentage denied	Percentage refused to sign
Adjuntas	56	6	19
Aguadilla	3	9	46
Aibonito	45	5	24
Arecibo	44	12	25
Arroyo	12	1	45
Bayamón	38	3	18
Caguas	45	4	29
Cayey	36	12	31
Fajardo	57	3	3
Guanica	6	2	78
Humacao	5	39	27
Lares	37	19	30
Manatí	38	27	15
Mayagüez	41	7	31
Ponce	7	4	55
San Germán	12	8	29
San Juan	19	10	33

months, until June 1900. During that period over 32 million pounds of food were distributed to more than 117,000 people in rural areas. Major Van Hoff and the Charity Board took considerable pride in this “partnership” of peon and planter. It had allowed the board, in Van Hoff’s view, to perform a humanitarian task and at the same time had improved farms, employed laborers, and fed thousands, while teaching the Puerto Ricans, he believed, the value of honest labor. Table 3 reproduces figures submitted by the board to General Davis and included in Davis’ report to the War Department. It purports to show the extent of the planter relief program and indicates that when the program ended it was still supplying 48,000 workers.

The planter relief program was not simply the result of class prejudice and moral preaching; it had an economic rationale as well. Aside from the hurricane’s particular damage to coffee, various observers feared that agriculture was already in trouble because of its inability to compete with the lower labor costs in Brazil and Central America.¹⁰⁴ Even though the two hundred thousand islanders who depended on coffee agriculture usually subsisted in a half-starved condition, the planters considered the daily wage of 35 to 50 cents too high.

Davis and the planters feared that the distribution of free food and clothing to the workers would make them less willing to accept this wage

104. *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, pp. 190–91.

TABLE 3: Workers Supplied by the Planter Relief Program

District	Population	Indigent	Indigents supplied through planters	Deceased	At work
Adjuntas	112,508	10,000	(9,750)	(1,553)	1,500
Aguadilla	78,827	18,600	(150)	(2,501)	2,047
Aibonito	31,587	12,500	6,341	1,401	950
Arecibo	(66,005)	40,600	(20,962)	5,862	2,683
Arroyo	34,692	8,500	(781)	1,703	(1,000)
Bayamón	63,505	31,700	(13,904)	2,402	470
Caguas	(45,054)	15,800	5,016	(2,111)	1,141
Cayey	22,113	10,300	2,110	953	1,150
Fajardo	(24,952)	5,000	(815)	859	508
Guanica	—	8,000	798	2,259	2,200
Humacao	53,468	7,690	(274)	(2,488)	(3,600)
Lares	(21,173)	11,300	8,362	1,753	1,253
Manatí	69,205	43,500	20,863	2,900	11,869
Mayagüez	92,836	(27,420)	(20,484)	(4,273)	(6,163)
Ponce	(104,142)	47,400	5,526	5,635	10,125
San Germán	39,781	8,300	(1,451)	1,435	1,272
San Juan	90,931	(7,700)	(245)	1,937	747
Total	950,779	314,310	117,832	42,025	48,678

Note: Parentheses indicate incomplete data.

Source: *Report of the Military Governor of Puerto Rico on Civil Affairs*, 56th Congress, 2d session, House document n. 4088, p. 659.

or less—the wage level Davis and the planters felt was needed for Puerto Rican coffee to compete in world markets. General Davis assured the advisory board, and by extension the planters, that “the aid so generously given by the people of the United States will be applied so as not to make paupers of the peaceful and worthy inhabitants of this Island nor to disturb the industrial and commercial business of the communities.”¹⁰⁵

Although subsequent U.S. investment was concentrated in the sugar economy of the island, the planter relief program seems to have favored the coffee planters and the coffee economy. In the districts of Arecibo and Mayagüez, where coffee farms constituted over half of the land planted, the Charity Board received far more planter applications and approved over 40 percent of them, while in sugar-growing Humacao, few applications were made and only 4 percent were approved (see Table 2 and Figure 1). Elihu Root informed Davis that the Senate Committee on Puerto Rico desired that “a considerable portion of this [aid] should be applied toward the relief of distress and, if possible, securing much-needed work on coffee plantations,” and he supported the use of rations to provide

105. Davis to Advisory Board, Aug. 28, 1899, AGPR, Fondo Fortaleza, caja 28.

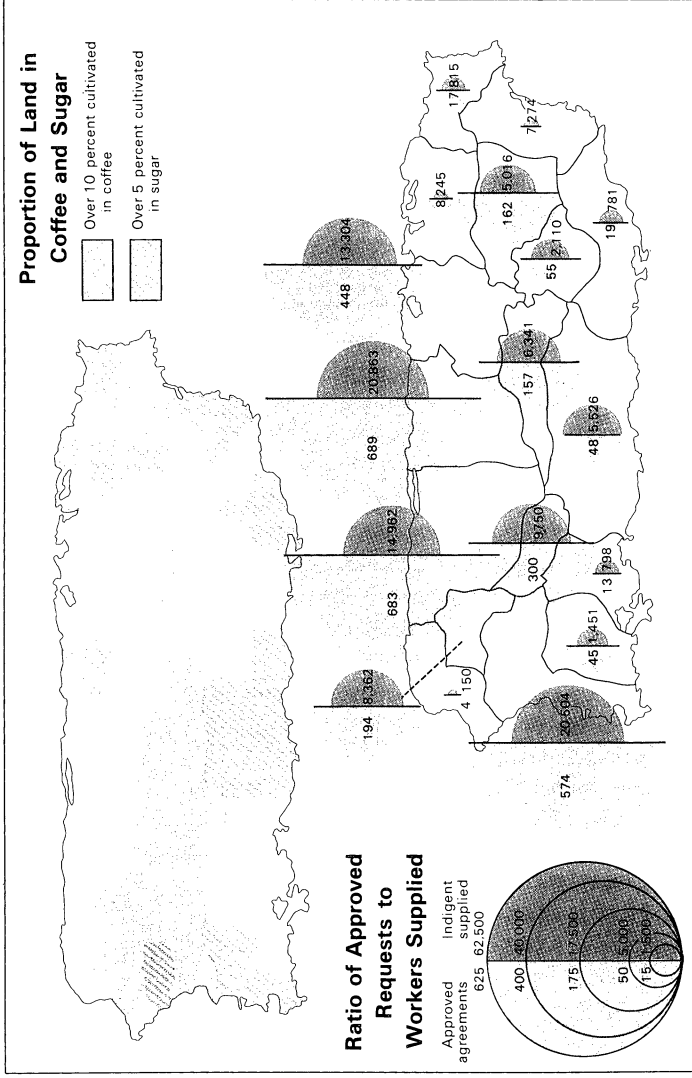


FIGURE 1: Planters' Relief Program Distributions, by Area
 Source: *Report of the Military Governor of Puerto Rico on Civil Affairs*, Annual Reports of the War Department (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1902), 56th Congress, 2d session, House document n. 2, pp. 738-41.

laborers specifically to the coffee planters.¹⁰⁶ Rural workers had few alternatives: accept the relief provided by the planters, move to the coastal cities, or emigrate.¹⁰⁷

The sugar planters suffered less and the coastal areas recovered more quickly than did the uplands, so the relief program was discontinued there after a few months. Moreover, some planters were reluctant to accept the burden of registration that the Charity Board required or to surrender lands to workers for subsistence planting, which would turn the workers into *agregados*, or attached laborers, and thereby make seasonal employment less feasible. The more important problem for the sugar zones was capital, not labor. Eben Swift, district officer at Humacao, echoed the planters' sentiments: "If some way could be devised to get American capital available for the regeneration of these sugar mills, it would do more good than a fleet of transports loaded with food."

Differing Perceptions

U.S. sentiments concerning the relief effort after San Ciriaco coincided to some extent, as we have seen, with opinions held among commercial and agricultural interests in Puerto Rico. As the policies were put into action, however, the islanders levied serious criticisms against the relief efforts and the government. In addition to the food and clothing distributed by the Army and the aid provided by private donations, Congress returned to Puerto Rico over two million dollars, representing the amount generated in taxes on Puerto Rican products entering the United States since the occupation. Most planters on the island, badly in need of capital, felt that this money should be invested directly in agriculture and not in civil building projects, as Coll y Toste suggested. After all, they argued, agricultural goods had earned the money in the first place, and investment in agriculture would provide employment to the thousands of unemployed workers. What the planters wanted was the creation of agricultural banks or municipal funds that planters could draw upon. In reality, two million dollars was hardly enough for the task. Rather than seeing the return of these funds as an act of charity by a magnanimous government, the liberal *Diario de Puerto Rico* saw it as a simple act of justice, returning what never should have been charged in the first place.¹⁰⁸

106. Root to Davis [Washington, D.C., Feb. 27, 1899 (sic)], in *Report of the Military Governor*, n. 4088, p. 727.

107. See Natal, *Exodo puertorriqueño*.

108. "Pro patria," *El Diario de Puerto Rico* 1:76 (Apr. 3, 1900). The *Diario de Puerto Rico* was founded by Luís Muñoz Rivera and was published from January 5, 1900, to Sep-

By mid-1900, perceptions of the Charity Board and its operations were increasingly negative. Eugenio Astol, writing under the pseudonym Gloucester, represented traditional planter attitudes toward the rural workers and current planter opinion of the government's policy: he argued that the island needed "something more positive and long-lasting than beans, rice, bacon, and codfish" and concluded, "What have the famous provisions accomplished? Absolutely nothing except to stimulate vagrancy, offering security to vagabonds and lowering the morality of our honored rural people."¹⁰⁹ Liberals, as noted earlier, complained that Republicans manipulated the aid; planters bemoaned the lack of capital; and critics charged that for these reasons the Charity Board was a "complete disaster."

Another kind of criticism also appeared. An independent newspaper in Mayagüez published an editorial condemning speculators who profited from the distribution of aid. The author questioned the purpose and degree of relief and criticized U.S. charity as provided through the Charity Board and the planter relief program. His criticism recognized the program's social inequities:

I do not dare to suggest that these hacendados and men with secure incomes drawn from their urban properties and invested capital leave part of these provisions on their own tables; but I will dare to swear that the work done by the workers on these haciendas is worth more, much more, than what they receive in provisions.

And if to all this we add the difficulty that confronts the laborer who, lacking work, seeks a permit to directly obtain a handful of rice and beans and a piece of codfish, we can do nothing but exclaim: "What charity, Oh, God, what charity!"¹¹⁰

The U.S. military government's response to the hurricane of San Ciriaco reflected the prejudices of its administrators and their perception of the economic needs and social realities on the island. Given that response, it is hard to accept the idea that the "colonial policy during the first years of the occupation was directed clearly to break the hegemony" of the planters, as has been argued by those who see the designs of U.S. capitalists behind the occupation.¹¹¹ In fact, it would seem quite the contrary.

tember 18, 1900, when its offices were destroyed by political opponents. See Antonio S. Pedreira, *El periodismo en Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras: Univ. de Puerto Rico, 1969).

109. *El Diario de Puerto Rico* 1:115 (May 19, 1900).

110. *La Nueva Bandeira* (Mayagüez), quoted in *El Diario de Puerto Rico* 1:112 (May 16, 1900).

111. Angel G. Quintero Rivera, *Conflictos de clase y política en Puerto Rico*, 2d ed. (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1978), 34.

San Ciriaco threw the new government and the landowners into each other's arms in unexpected ways. The military government saw the landed class as the only means to overcome the immediate crisis and to initiate eventual economic recovery. By making the planters the agents of relief distribution, however, the military government tightened the planters' control over the island's social and economic structures and over the dependent landless population. Not only metaphorically did the planters view the new government as their salvation.¹¹² The hurricane's destruction of the island's agriculture also made the planter class more dependent on the government and on foreign capital than ever before. It is true that by 1910, sugar constituted over 64 percent of the island's exports, and coffee exports had fallen from their predominance in the 1890s to only 10 percent of the total. But this shift was not a result of the Americans' intention, if the actions of the planter relief program give a fair indication.¹¹³

The hurricane of San Ciriaco presented an excellent opportunity for the United States to demonstrate its efficiency and supposed benevolence in a time of crisis. It did this within the ideological constraints of its leaders and its representatives on the island, whose opinions about class and race were often shared by the Puerto Rican upper class. The similarity of attitudes toward the working class was reinforced by the agrarian sector's need for economic help. At the same time, the hurricane placed a large number of rural laborers and the poor even further under planter control and thankful, if only momentarily, for any assistance from the new government.

Slowly, however, Puerto Ricans began to question the charitable nature of the aid and to realize the social and political program behind its organization. The final question is, from 1899 to 1901, at a crucial historical moment when the political destiny of the island was being determined, whether the material and psychological effects of San Ciriaco were so great, the destruction so widespread, and the alternatives so limited that they weakened not only the island's economy but also the resolve of those in both Washington and Puerto Rico to consider the option of independence. Certainly, the physical and economic effects of the storm figured prominently in the congressional debates on the island's status.¹¹⁴ San Ciriaco did not cause the political decision to place Puerto Rico in a dependent status, but it did create a context that made that decision easier.

112. See Ramos Mattei, "DeFord & Co., Banqueros," 25.

113. Angel G. Quintero Rivera, *Patricios y plebeyos: burgueses, hacendados, artesanos, y obreros* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1988), 103.

114. See the testimony of General Davis before the Senate Committee on Puerto Rico in *Hearings Before the Committee on Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico . . . on Senate Bill 2264*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., S. doc. 147 (Washington, D.C., 1900), 29–33, 66–67.