

Activity from [Contemporary History](#) and [Foreign Policy](#)
Activity

Discussion Activity: Annexing the Philippines

Learning Objectives

Students will analyze primary source documents to evaluate historical perspectives surrounding the U.S. annexation of the Philippines at the end of the 19th century. Use the [Primary Sources From the Overseas Expansion Debate](#) Learning Journey to facilitate the discussion activity below.

Length

1-2 class periods

Instructional Plan

In the late nineteenth century, Chautauqua assemblies brought lectures, debates, and performances to communities across the United States. What began as a summer retreat to train Sunday school teachers in western New York grew into a national movement for adult education, with assemblies emerging across the country. These gatherings were spaces where Americans of various backgrounds encountered new ideas and debated the pressing questions of the era. In that spirit, set up a Chautauqua assembly in class to discuss American overseas expansion. Students will be assigned a role. Then, they will learn about the era by exploring a collection of readings. Finally, they will have a discussion about the issue in character.

Part 1: Overview and Assign Roles

Guiding Questions:

- What factors led the United States to annex the Philippines in 1898?
- What were the human, material, and moral costs of possessing an overseas empire?

Have students read the overview, which will outline the historical context shaping Americans' feelings towards annexation of the Philippines.

Assign students their roles. In the event there are more students than roles, more than one student can play the same role. They should still participate individually, they'll just share the same assigned perspective (e.g., there could be two veterans or three pastors).

Roles:

Veteran of the Spanish-American War

Filipino student studying in the United States

Protestant pastor from a rural town in Mississippi

High school teacher with a university degree
Suffragette and labor organizer working in the textile industry
Hawaii-based sugar exporter
First-generation Irish dockworker
Share-cropper from a southern state

Consider adding unique details to each role, or ask your students to write a short profile to give their role additional background. For example:

Evelyn Hanes is a labor organizer in Chicago. Born to a poor, working-class family, Evelyn worked in textile factories from a young age. Along with the other women at the factories, she worked in unsafe conditions and received meager wages. Over the years, she began to advocate for the factory workers' rights, and eventually became a full-time labor organizer for the Women's Trade Union League. Evelyn only received an elementary school education, but has developed reading and writing skills over time.

Part 2: Primary Source Gallery Walk

Put students into groups. Spread the documents around the room and assign each group to one or more documents. Students should read the document together and answer the following questions:

- Who is the author of the document? What do we know about them?
- When and where was the document produced?
- What insight does this document give about the discussion questions?
- What insight does this document give about my assigned role?
- What questions does this document raise that you'd like answered?

Once students have examined their primary sources, have groups briefly share out one or two key insights from their documents. This ensures all students have exposure to all sources, not just the ones their group analyzed.

Part 3: The Chautauqua Discussion

For homework, have students write a short position paper in the voice of their assigned role, reflecting their character's perspective. They should write persuasively, using evidence and reasoning, as if writing an opinion piece for a newspaper.

Have students make placards that indicate their role. At the start of the discussion, ask them to briefly introduce themselves in their role to set the scene. (Optionally, students could bring props.)

Conduct the Chautauqua discussion in class. Introduce the exercise with a brief scene-setter:

On a cool afternoon in 1899, you attend a lecture at your regional Chautauqua Assembly concerning the situation in the Philippines. The Treaty of Paris—which would result in the United States annexing the Philippines—was recently signed by President McKinley, but Congress is currently debating whether to ratify it. Like in Congress, not everyone in your group agrees on how the United States should proceed. Each of you has your own opinions, shaped by your own experiences and interests. Join the discussion and share what you make of the debate around the United States annexing the Philippines.

Once students are ready to begin discussion, consider the following questions:

- Is maintaining U.S. control over the Philippines in the United States' best interests? Why or why not?
- Is maintaining U.S. control over the Philippines in Filipinos' best interests? Why or why not?
- Does U.S. control over the Philippines go against the United States' founding ideals? Is it ever possible for the United States to control overseas territories while remaining true to its founding ideals?

Whenever necessary, push students to provide evidence and reasoning for their comments.

Consider recording the class or using a transcription app to help with giving feedback and assessment.

Leave time at the end of the discussion for a debrief in which students can step outside their roles and reflect on what they learned. Optionally, consider also assigning students a short reflection paper in their own voice.

Consider the following questions:

- In the discussion, what seemed to be the most important points of agreement and disagreement?
- What made this a controversial issue? In other words, why did people disagree about it?
- How do you think the United States should have acted after the Spanish-American War?