

# **OBSERVATIONS ON PUERTO RICO: AN AMERICAN PROFESSOR'S VISIT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Topics covered in this paper include: a brief history of Puerto Rico's relationship with the US, Puerto Rico's main political parties and their positions, arguments for and against statehood, independence, and the status quo (commonwealth), impact of cultural issues, the Puerto Rican Paradox, the "Cookie Theory," US position on statehood, Puerto Rican employment issues, Caribbean trade initiatives, local Puerto Rican entrepreneurial efforts, and knowledge transfer issues of an American teaching in Puerto Rico.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF PUERTO RICO'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE US**

This section is excerpted and quoted directly from Mark Kurlansky's *A Continent of Islands: Searching for the Caribbean Destiny*, Perseus Publishing, 1992, unless otherwise noted, and reflects Kurlansky's views [4]. Many other resources are available that capture Puerto Rico's historical development with the US. A brief background is essential in order to understand Puerto Rico's current relationship with the United States and, therefore, Puerto Rico's future challenges.

Historically, the US had little interest in the Caribbean or Puerto Rico, but in 1812 the British allied with Spain against Napoleon and were able to use Cuba to attack the US. From then on, the US was obsessed with keeping Europe out of the Caribbean and with controlling Cuba. Four US presidents offered to buy Cuba from Spain. The histories of Cuba and Puerto Rico have been tied and the expression that Cuba and Puerto Rico "are two wings of the same bird" is sometimes heard, but they were never equal wings [4]. Cuba was the center of Spain's Caribbean and the one Spain did not want to lose but the one the US wanted. Puerto Rico was a minor colony dependent on Mexico to pay its annual duty to the Spanish crown.

The 1868 uprisings by Cuban and Puerto Rican leaders for independence took place mostly in Cuba, but Cuba promised when they won, they would help Puerto Rico. In 1898, the US intervened, one-tenth of the Cuban population had already died, and it was the Americans, not the Cubans, who took the fight to Puerto Rico. When the Americans got to Puerto Rico, there was little resistance, and Cuba and Puerto Rico fell to the US in 1898. US military governments were established on both islands in 1898, but by 1902 the US had turned over power to a Cuban civilian government. In 1900, Puerto Rico was established as a virtual US Colony, with no citizenship. The Americans who called themselves liberators had actually developed a system of government for Puerto Rico that granted less autonomy than the island had achieved under Spain. Puerto Ricans have for the most part tried for the entire 20th century to get back the level of independence they had enjoyed briefly under the Spanish, although others argue that Spanish rule in Puerto Rico was "strict and autocratic, and Puerto Rican natives were treated as inferior in every way" [11]. In 1900, a Puerto Rican politician told US Congress, "We are Mr. Nobody from nowhere." By 1917, the Puerto Ricans had still been citizens of nowhere with no passports to even travel. The Jones Act granted Puerto Ricans US citizenship, just in

time to be "cannon fodder" as some Puerto Ricans believe, among some other strategic considerations. There remains controversy regarding these issues. At the time, the only Puerto Rican voice, the House of Delegates, opposed citizenship. This is also when the US bought 3 other islands for military purposes [4].

Puerto Rico languished in impoverished neglect. As a result, political activity heightened. The moderate pro-independence Liberal Party became the strongest party in PR in the 1930's obtaining 46 percent of the vote in 1936. At the same time period, armed resistance to US rule came from the Nationalist Party led by Harvard graduate Pedro Albizu Campos. Statehooders tried to ask for changes in the colonial relationship, but were greeted with a cold shoulder by Congress. A group of "independentistas" led by Luis Munoz Marin (for which San Juan's airport is named) formed the Popular Democratic Party and began winning elections and demanding independence. But Munoz Marin was a New Deal Puerto Rican with close ties to Roosevelt. Just as Roosevelt's New Deal destroyed the American left by co-opting the issue of poverty, so Munoz Marin destroyed the Puerto Rican independence movements due to his idea of deferring independence and bringing American money to the impoverished island from the US, "until" the island could develop gradually and evolve into a prosperous independent state [4]. To date, the island remains a commonwealth.

In 1950, Puerto Rico officially became a "commonwealth," and keeping with the ambiguity of relationship "commonwealth" has no direct translation to Spanish. The Puerto Ricans called it "Estado Libre Asociado," meaning Free Associated State. The Puerto Ricans could elect their own legislature and every 4 years a governor. They were governed under US law with notable exceptions, absence of federal taxes, lower minimum wage, etc. They became eligible for US social programs. The idea was Puerto Rico needed jobs, US industry needed cheap labor, not to mention the US military bases established in Puerto Rico. By the 1980's most Puerto Ricans had reached a consensus that the arrangement, as it stood, was not working as well as intended. Victoria Munoz Mendoza, daughter of Munoz Marin stated that while industrialization might have been a good idea, it was ahead of its time and was implemented poorly. It was a mistake to ignore family businesses, agriculture, small scale tourism, projects that could have been managed with local investment. Puerto Rico relied too much on big capital projects. Puerto Rico planted cement instead of trees, cultivated sugar cane instead of fruit, Puerto Rico should have offered more in tourism other than the big luxury resorts and casinos [4, p. 258].

The environmental costs of industrialization are arguments used by both statehooders and independentistas to argue against the commonwealth. The commonwealth they both argue forces Puerto Rico to relate to the US from a position of weakness. "Again and again one comes back to the main, degrading fact of colonial society; it never required efficiency, it never required quality, and these things, because unrequired, became undesirable" [6, p. 248]. Arguments for statehood, independence, or status quo are covered further in subsequent portions of this paper.

Early in any discussion in Puerto Rico on the state of the environment, the spread of AIDS, drugs, a growing crime problem, restaurants, beaches, -- someone will always point out the "root of the problem is our political status" [4, p. 265]. Everyone can agree on that one.

## **PUERTO RICO TODAY**

### **Main Political Parties and their Positions**

New Progressive Party, *Partido Nuevo Progresista, PNP*, Pro-statehood  
Popular Democratic Party, *Partido Popular Democratico, PPD*, Pro-commonwealth  
Puerto Rican Independence Party, *Partido Independentista, PIP*, Pro-independence

The PPD and PNP have exchanged the Governor's seat since 1948, but the PIP is reported by some to have had an impact on the elections in that the small group of PIP voters could have made a difference as to which of the other two major parties won some of the close elections. This is analogous to the arguments made in the US that the independent voters have affected the results of some Republican versus Democratic outcomes. There is currently some debate about the most recent governor election in Puerto Rico with the losing party contending the votes were not accurate. The current governor, Anibal Acevedo Vila, won by a slim .18% margin. Acevedo Vila represents the Pro-commonwealth party. The House of Representatives and the Senate are dominated by the New Progressive Party (Pro-statehood, 49 seats), followed respectively by Pro-commonwealth (27 seats) and Pro-independence (2 seats) [1] [2].

The elections were the second closest in Puerto Rican history and resulted in a full recount of the election. As a by product of the recount, controversy divided public opinion on the victory which continues to date. The losing candidate for Governor continues to hold rallies throughout Puerto Rico contending the election was stolen from him. *San Juan Star* columnist, A. W. Maldonado points out there is an "uncanny similarity between Mexico and Puerto Rico" following close elections [9, p. 59].

### **Arguments for Statehood, Commonwealth, and Independence**

*Main Arguments for Statehood:* Puerto Rico would get the right to elect members of Congress and vote for the President, Puerto Rico would receive taxes from their citizens to build infrastructure which is very much needed, Puerto Rico would have an open market to trade with all nations that are in alliance with the US, Puerto Rico would enjoy the benefits of America's high per capita income and low unemployment rates, Puerto Rico would have the opportunity to improve its economic situation.

*Main Arguments against Statehood:* Cost of living would rise even further with federal taxes, social structure of Puerto Rico would be affected negatively, statehood would threaten sovereign rights and international presence and image, English would become the official language, Puerto Rico's sense of national identity would be undermined.

*Main Arguments for Commonwealth:* Best of both worlds' arguments--US military protection, including contribution of soldiers to US armed forces, and US benefits as US citizens without having to pay taxes, the status quo has worked for 50 years and many believe is a role model for Caribbean economic development, Puerto Rico has been able to maintain its identity and still be US citizens, Puerto Rico's political stability has been maintained, avoiding the problems of some other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

*Main Arguments against Commonwealth:* The economy in Puerto Rico is in serious trouble and Puerto Rico does not have any tools to deal with it, many Puerto Ricans want their own identity, many Puerto Ricans believe American corporations are benefiting at the expense of Puerto Ricans, Puerto Rico is deprived of political rights because Congress makes the decisions affecting Puerto Rico without Puerto Rican participation.

*Main Arguments for Independence:* Puerto Rico will be able to enter into trade agreements with other free nations as it so chooses, many other Caribbean islands have been independent for years and are doing well, independence would foster more entrepreneurship in Puerto Rico, resulting in better self sufficiency, the US could reduce financial aid to Puerto Rico given other US international challenges occurring at this time, Puerto Rico's national identity would be preserved.

*Main Arguments against Independence:* Some feel Puerto Rico is not ready for self government, fear of loss of US federal aid, fear of potential political instability, some feel Puerto Rico may lose the benefits of US laws.

## **Cultural Issues**

Many cultural issues also affect the arguments regarding Puerto Rico's political status. Some of these include: Transient Puerto Rican population, moving back and forth between Puerto Rico and the US, language, bi-lingual educational issues, cultural or national identity.

## **US Position on Statehood**

A leading Puerto Rican political analyst, Juan M. Garcia Passalacqua, following a meeting with Condoleezza Rice and Ted Sorenson, stated: "I [Garcia Passalacqua] had broached the subject of the future of Puerto Rico and I was told, 'Understand that the national interest of the United States has moved from the Caribbean Sea to the Caspian Sea, there is oil there. There is none in Puerto Rico.' " Garcia Passalacqua concludes, "[Puerto Rico] is no longer useful as a military base. We have no oil in our land. Half our people live there [the US], half our people live here [PR]. Why? WWI gave us American citizenship, WWII gave us commonwealth status, WWIII may give us freedom. Its effect" [10, p. 16].

Aside from the issues of political status *in* Puerto Rico, remains the question of whether the US would actually grant statehood to Puerto Rico if the Puerto Ricans voted for that option. This in itself becomes the topic of debate.

The *National Review*, for example, has gone so far as to state that the US should prepare Puerto Rico for eventual independence. The central argument has been made against statehood that the acceptance of Puerto Rico as a state could create another Quebec scenario – a distinct region in which culture and language might result in perpetual political instability and secessionist sentiment [3]. Kuhner [3] does not accept this argument and further states that a more appropriate analogy would be Hawaii, which prior to statehood possessed its own language, religion, and culture and has preserved those following overwhelming support for statehood.

There has at least been mention that if Puerto Rico became independent, it could be subject to takeover by other countries based on the notion of little domestic military might [5]. This argument, however, can be questioned since no takeovers have occurred in the other countries of the Caribbean during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Other arguments that have been made are that statehood for Puerto Rico could be an advantage for the US Latino vote, typically Democratic. Republicans have been accused of wanting Puerto Rico to remain in the status quo due to economic benefits for US businesses.

“Since 2000, very influential Republican paid lobbyists have been representing the agenda of the Commonwealth advocates that for six years have worked to convince leaders in Congress and the administration that it would be politically unwise for the federal officials to take the lead on a permanent political status for Puerto Rico” [8]. Similarly, the *Puerto Rico Herald* stated that “It is not in the interest of Puerto Rican politicians to bring about a change in political status. The minute that such a change would occur, each would be ‘out of business’. As long as Puerto Ricans are in an indefinite state, they [politicians] can use the status card to promise anything and deliver nothing” [8]. The same article states that an enhanced Commonwealth, one in which more powers would be granted to Puerto Rico by the US under the current Commonwealth system, is nothing more than a “pipe dream” [8].

### **Puerto Rican Employment and Economic Issues**

One in three salaried employees works for the government. The Commonwealth government is organized into 130 government agencies. Florida, with a 75% larger population gets its public sector work done in 14 government departments. The ratio of Puerto Rican public employees to the overall island population is greater than any state of the Union. Economists agree that Puerto Rico is in the midst of a “fiscal crisis” caused in large part by an excessively large and inordinately inefficient public sector. Puerto Rico has 1 public employee for every 13 residents. Connecticut, roughly the size of Puerto Rico, has 1 public employee for every 58 residents. Only Hawaii and Alaska come close to Puerto Rico’s ratio, with Hawaii at 1 to 21 and Alaska at 1 to 26 [7]. To make matters worse, the cost of living in Puerto Rico is very high, both in San Juan and in the more remote parts of the island. Housing is expensive and many Puerto Ricans drive a nicer car than the house they own—if they even own a house. Very small apartments sell for high prices and are “sold out” before they are built. Nearly everything is imported and sells at a price higher than in the States. The utility infrastructure is antiquated, thus high rates are charged for services that are often “out.”

### **The Puerto Rican Paradox: The Best of Both Worlds, or 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Citizenship?**

Puerto Ricans have US passports, but cannot vote. Puerto Ricans receive federal aid, but do not pay federal taxes. Puerto Ricans are liable for US military draft. One third to one half of Puerto Ricans live in the US and routinely move back and forth between the US and Puerto Rico.

### **Cookie Theory**

Puerto Ricans live a schizophrenic existence. They are at once citizens of a wealthy, powerful, western nation, but they are also tropical Third World people. The double life is the result of an economic and cultural struggle to function in the island system and most straddle the line. As previously mentioned, 1 in 3 salaried employees in Puerto Rico are government employees. The great obstacle to independence, as all Caribbean independence leaders recognize, is that “the people have gotten hooked on the cookies, they have been made dependent” [4, p. 265].

### **Caribbean Trade Initiatives**

There have been efforts in the Caribbean to unite independent countries in some form of trade relations that would foster economic stability and promote trade, for example CARICOM, Association of Caribbean States, and partnerships that the US and European Union have with Caribbean countries.

## **Local Puerto Rican Entrepreneurial Efforts**

Additionally, Puerto Ricans are realizing opportunities of entrepreneurial efforts. University of Puerto Rico—Mayaguez Campus business professor, Jose M. Romaguera, has published *Chispa Empresarial*, a book for students to encourage them to become entrepreneurs.

## **Teaching in Puerto Rico**

As a visiting professor to Puerto Rico, I believe there are some challenges of instructing Puerto Rican students using American-authored textbooks. For example, in teaching Human Resource Management, the text often refers to the labor shortage in the US. The average unemployment rate in the US at this time is about 5% with over 15 states having unemployment rates under 4%. The unemployment rate in Puerto Rico remains at 12% – 14%, which does not take into account the significant number of civil servants who are underemployed, working in menial jobs funded by US aid.

Progressive forms of organizational structure, such as virtual organizations, lean manufacturing, flextime, and so on, are inconsistent with the current state of Puerto Rican organizations and its economic situation. Students report high levels of interest in these topics, but say they do not think they will work in Puerto Rico where more centralized, often unionized, bureaucratic forms of organizations prevail and unemployment rates are high. Furthermore, Puerto Rico is losing manufacturing jobs at a rapid pace to countries with lower labor costs, such as Mexico, and losing tourist business to less expensive destinations, such as Dominican Republic.

Education is highly respected in Puerto Rico and the attitude of the students is much more positive toward learning than the author has experienced teaching in the States. Every student was grateful for the opportunity to take a class from an American professor and additionally for the opportunity to practice English.

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## **REFERENCES**

Available on request from the author.