

The Independence of Puerto Rico: Its History and Future

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Spanish acronym)

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<sup>1</sup>Translators note: "North American" is colloquially utilized in Puerto Rico and the rest of Latin America to refer to the U.S.A. specifically.

<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: The official Spanish name for the commonwealth status imposed since 1952 is "*Estado Libre Asociado*", literally meaning "Freely Associated State".

# The Independence of Puerto Rico: It's History and Future

by Fernando Martín García<sup>3</sup>

*"The colonial history of Puerto Rico has been a prolonged and vain attempt to avoid the inevitable, its Independence". – Rubén Berríos Martínez*

## Introduction

THE CENTURY-OLD FIGHT for the independence of Puerto Rico and for the defense and development of Puerto Rican nationality constitutes one of the most tenacious and collectively courageous processes in the history of Latin America.

The will of the Puerto Rican nation for self-governance and to affirm its unquestionable Latin American cultural personality has had an infinity of manifestations throughout time, product of the diverse forms that have taken the dominance of the incumbent empire of the time, first being Spain and now the United States of America. However, no manifestation of this will has been more persistent nor more transcendental than the constant demands of the Puerto Rican independentists for an end to our colonial condition and to give way for a regime of complete sovereignty.

The fight for freedom and independence has been – particularly during the occupation by the United States of America that started in the Cuban-Hispanic War of 1898 – the highest and most complete expression of this unbreakable calling for national affirmation.

In order to accurately appraise this liberatory saga, and in order to understand why it has still not achieved its culmination, it is necessary to keep in mind the enormous adversities with which the Puerto Rican nation has had to confront, and the grotesquely disproportionate forces

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that have always existed between the fight for decolonization and freedom and the interests that have promoted and sustained colonialism in Puerto Rico.

The correct evaluation of these determining factors of Puerto Rican history will permit us comprehend why Puerto Rico is today the last colony of importance that remains in the world. Likewise, we will be able to identify the new and unprecedented circumstances of the current historical period that will finally make way for our national independence and our complete spiritual, political, and economic integration to the great Latin American homeland that has recently been rediscovering its own continental identity.

### **Bolívar's Unfinished Agenda**

AFTER THE EMANCIPATORY STRUGGLES that at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century defeated the Spanish Empire in Central and South America and Mexico, Spain clung like never before to its remaining colonies in Cuba and Puerto Rico, whose geographic isolation with respect to the continent and its immense concentration of military power had impeded that the liberatory movements reached them successfully, even considering the fact that 180 years ago Simón Bolívar the Liberator included in his original agenda for the Anfictionic Congress of Panama in 1826 the proposal for an expeditionary force to liberate Puerto Rico. The continued presence of Spain in both Antilles was considered thus a national imperative of that empire.

The growing economic importance of Cuba, and the ties that the sugar industry had with the most influential figures of the Spanish political elite, generated a hardening of the repressive, anti-independence policies that predominated the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including even the fleeting lapses of liberal reform that sputtered in the peninsula. Although because of her lesser amount of population and economic development Puerto Rico was not the primary target of that policy, the obsession that Spain had with the absolute control of Cuba painstakingly manifested itself in Puerto Rico.

The massive influx of immigrants and capital, not only from the peninsula but also from the fleeing Spanish and monarchist creoles that fled the wars of independence in the continent, decisively contributed into strengthening the colonial regimes in both Antilles and into creating even more difficult conditions for the development of pro-independence thought.

Nevertheless, nothing could stop the inevitable: the gradual, but progressive formation – both in Cuba and Puerto Rico – of a proper national conscience on the basis of the multiple geographic, ethnic, social, and economic factors that made Puerto Rico, not Spain, the mother country.

The political manifestation of this new national conscience that was sharpened throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the growing inconformity of Puerto Ricans with the Spanish colonial regime. This inconformity was itself expressed in the demands for varying degrees of self-governance that spanned everything from timid administrative reform to radical and intransigent independence.

The existence of this last sector was left dramatized in a town in the mountains of Puerto Rico when on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September of 1868 the “*Grito de Lares*” was produced. There, it was proclaimed with equal heroism and tragedy the fleeting Republic of Puerto Rico barely a few days before the “*Grito de Yara*”, an event that led to the Ten Years’ War in Cuba, the first war of independence in that country. The patriotic feat in Lares, led from exile by the Father of the Puerto Rican Motherland, *don* Ramón Emeterio Betances, was the womb and crucible of Puerto Rican nationhood and established the basis for its future social and economic revindications.

If there is anything that exemplifies the very different circumstances that unfolded in a rich and developed Cuba and a poor and isolated Puerto Rico of the times was that the fire for freedom could not be squashed in Cuba, while in Puerto Rico her revolutionaries indeed were, the revolutionary movement was disarticulated and demobilized by a fierce and encompassing repression.

Faced with such realities, the independence movement was left hobbled and disorganized throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The political activity for change was reduced, at least in the public sphere, to a reformist program that the insular autonomic government supported that aspired for equal rights with Spaniards from the peninsula, and the full participation of Puerto Ricans in the Spanish courts. This, however, did not impede pro-independence Puerto Ricans of such stature like *don* Ramón Emeterio Betances and *don* Eugenio María de Hostos would continue from exile conspiring and fighting, not only for the independence of Puerto Rico, but also for the independence of Cuba. They proclaimed and promoted to all and sundry the necessity to forge a Confederation of the Antilles, idea that was after picked up by the apostle

José Martí in the fight to unify our Caribbean peoples in the necessity of confronting the project of the United States of America of converting the Caribbean into its lake.

Since then, Puerto Rican independentism has always been defined by anti-imperialism and solidarity with the peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America facing the policies and hegemonic pretenses of the United States in our America.

### **The North American Occupation**

THE INVASION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA to Puerto Rico in July of 1898 was militarily unnecessary. The Cuban-Hispanic war had already been won by then by the great Northern Colossus although formal rendition had yet to be produced by Spain. The decision to invade, thusly, was the product of a political decision already taken that, once the conflict had been concluded, the United States of America would maintain Puerto Rico as an indefinite colonial possession.

The geopolitical and strategic exigencies of the moment, particularly the necessity to secure the control the access to the Caribbean Sea – the entrance to the Panama Canal whose construction was imminent – sealed the fate of Puerto Rico. The victors of the War demanded and obtained Puerto Rico as war plunder from Spain in the negotiations of the Treaty of Paris of 1898. It goes without saying that no Puerto Rican was ever consulted or participated in the negotiations in any way, shape, or form, neither in the Spanish nor the United States' side. Said treaty established that the political condition and the civil rights of Puerto Ricans were to be decided by the Congress of the United States of America.

Just like under Spain, the privileged geographic location of Puerto Rico destined her to be a military bastion, this time for the young emerging power of the United States. Franklin Roosevelt, later president of that republic, called it the "Gibraltar of the Caribbean", invoking the traditional Spanish characterization of Puerto Rico as the "Keys to the Indies".

The occupation of the territory by United States' troops and the period of military governorship that lasted from 1898 to 1900 found a country completely worn out from the Spanish colonial regime that, even considering the granting of an Autonomic Charter in 1897, it

had only done so in a desperate attempt to calm down the fight for freedom that was being done in Cuba and to avoid it ever reaching Puerto Rico. The absence of good faith or genuine purpose of amendment by Spain was painfully obvious to all.

The general population, and its political class, saw with good eyes the end of the Spanish regime. It also valued positively the prospects of good relationships with the United States of America that would permit the development of industry and agriculture – principally the sugar industry – once permitted unrestricted access to the market of the United States that had for the last 20 years become the main commercial partner of Puerto Rico.<sup>4</sup>

### **The new colonial regime**

IN A COUNTRY WHERE not only the independentists, but also the most timid of reformers had been systematically persecuted and repressed by the authorities, and where the most prominent syndicalist organizer was inside a dungeon just as the United States troops disembarked on the shores of Puerto Rico, there also existed the generalized hope that the United States would respect the will of Puerto Ricans with respect on its political future, and would finally put an end, in a reasonable timeframe, to any colonial tutelage.

Some, in the excitement of the moment, were dazzled by the democratic and progressive reputation of the United States, and, without seeing any threat to the integrity of their cultural identity, sympathized with the idea that Puerto Rico would be incorporated as another state in the North American Union. Many of these individuals still cultivated the myth that the United States, with a constitutional order that would guarantee a great deal of administrative and political autonomy to its member states, was a “republic of republics” in which Puerto Rico could realize its autonomic aspirations and juridical equality that Spain had always refused her. In this line of thought, the Puerto Ricans that espoused such ideals would find great common ground with a very similar and strong current of Cuban independentist thought of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that

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<sup>4</sup> The collapse of the sugar industry in Puerto Rico in the years prior the war was due mainly by the decision of the United States to raise import costs on Antillean-produced sugar as reprisal by the protectionist taxes raised by Spain with respect to the imports brought in from the USA.

thought that freedom from Spain would be the first logical step to a political annexation with the United States of America.

Others in Puerto Rico saw the exit of Spain as a possibility for independence with a privileged system of customs for the exports of the country in order to avoid the economic isolation that would follow the political decoupling of Puerto Rico from Spain. The complementarity between the economic potential of Puerto Rico and the economy of the United States was evident, like it was in the case of Cuba. For the independentists, to exploit favorably such complementary economic conditions was not in any way or form contradictory with political sovereignty.

Others, resigned before this new development and burdened by expansionism of the United States of America, were not willing to force a solution. They preferred to favor an autonomous civil government that would immediately substitute the military government, and in which the full recognition of responsibility to Puerto Ricans over their internal government would be recognized during a transnational period until the circumstances would mature, and the Puerto Rican people could decide their final destiny.

Very similar processes, notwithstanding the distance, the epoch, or the participants, had been given in the fights for independence in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the majority of the Spanish colonies in America. The Latin American emancipatory movements after the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, oscillated between those that postulated the annexation of her American territories as provinces of the Spanish Crown to those that fought for independence from Spain.

However, those optimistic expectations of all sectors of the Puerto Rican political sphere after the North American invasion were rapidly dashed before the political realities of their new owners.

The first organic law passed by the Congress of the United States of America that organized a civil government in Puerto Rico – called the Foraker Law of 1900, established three fundamental principles: Firstly, it established that Puerto Rico is a possession of the United States, although it would not form part of said nation, and that the Congress had complete faculties to legislate over any issue concerning Puerto Rico. Secondly, that the government of the



island would be led by a governor appointed by the president of the United States of America (this imposition would be extended to the magistrates of the Insular Supreme Tribunal and other key members of the cabinet of the executive) and it also stated that its legislative organ would be composed by a bicameral system composed by a lower chamber composed of popularly elected delegates and a higher chamber hand picked by the governor. This completely neutered any law that did not received the consent of the Washington-appointed governor. The third principle that was ordained in the Organic Law established that after a brief transitional period, commerce would be free of customs duties between the United States and Puerto Rico. Additionally, it was determined that the government of Puerto Rico would be defrayed by income raised by the Insular Government.<sup>5</sup>

Although the possibility of the extension of United States citizenship to Puerto Ricans was debated, this proposal did not find support in a North American Congress that did not feel constitutionally forced to do so due to the fact that Puerto Rico was not to be incorporated into the Union like the previously acquired territory of Hawaii that was annexed in 1898. As such, Puerto Rico would remain mere possession of the United States of America, subject to the plenary power of its Congress.

The frustration and disenchantment of Puerto Ricans over the unequivocally colonial character of the Foraker Law of 1900, and under the evidently negative character of the United States over any the possibility of creating any process whatsoever that would conduce toward decolonization, ended up generating a consensus in favor of independence within the Union Party of Puerto Rico. Said party had rapidly transformed into being a majority-independentist party since the start of the new century, from an organization that accepted both annexation, independence and autonomy as satisfactory conclusions to the political status of the archipelago. In the election of 1914, the Union Party addressed the voters with an uncompromising position that espoused the freedom and independence of Puerto Rico as the only and final aspiration of the country and crushed its opposition. Its most brilliant leader, José de Diego, who presided the chamber of popular vote , not only was a fervent independentist, but also another who openly

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<sup>5</sup> The forced inclusion of Puerto Rico into the excise and customs system of the United States of America, alongside the introduction of the American dollar (after imposing a confiscatory rate of exchange on the current Spanish tender that was already in circulation), created the condition for a relationship based on economic vassalage and dependency that has lasted till the present.

espoused the idea of an Antillean Federation which contemplated the future political union between Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, thus combining the movement for freedom with the political thought of the founding fathers of Puerto Rico and Cuba, Betances and Martí.

### **Imposition of the citizenship of the United States of America**

THE REACTION OF THE UNITED STATES to this clearly majoritarian consolidation of Puerto Rican public opinion in favor of independence did not wait. In the Congress of the United States, the discussion over a new organic law that would expand, although in marginal fashion, the participation of Puerto Ricans in the government of the island, by converting the high chamber into one that would also be of popular election but maintaining intact the powers of the government appointed by the President and the plenary powers of the United States Congress was had begun.

The most significant thing of the Jones Law of 1917 was that – ignoring the will of the elected Chamber of Delegates of Puerto Rico controlled by the independentist wing of the Union Party – said law would impose on Puerto Ricans the citizenship of the United States of America while at the same time maintaining that said extension of citizenry did not eliminate the condition of territorial possession subject to the plenary power of Congress. With its approval by the Jones Law Congress of 1917, Puerto Rico remained the same colony as before, and still subjected to the absolute powers of Congress of the United States of America. A Congress in which, of course, Puerto Ricans had no participation.<sup>6</sup>

The imposition of United States citizenship on Puerto Ricans constituted irrefutable proof that the will of the United States with respect to Puerto Rico in that moment was to establish a colonial regime in perpetuity. With this citizenship, Congress pretended to create an unbreakable link with Puerto Rico, while at the same time that it took this action, not incorporating Puerto Rico into the Union of the United States of America. This, in no uncertain terms, established that

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast with the way Congress treated Puerto Rico, in that same year of 1917, it also adopted the new Organic Law for the Philippines. In the case of this other possession, far from extending citizenship, the Congress of the United States of America expressed its intention of conceding its eventual independence after a preparatory period that would last several decades.

the possible annexation of Puerto Rico as a state of the Union – something that historically always was preceded by territorial incorporation – was discarded<sup>7</sup>

The transcendental political decision by the United States of America, embedded in the Jones Law of 1917 and the imposition of citizenship that pretended to legally bar the way for independence without opening the way for annexation, permanently sentenced Puerto Rico as a colony of the Union. This was the result of the same policies stimulated by the First World War that led the United States to practice interventionism in the Caribbean region in unprecedented form given the threat that this very conflict could lead to France and Germany to find new military enclaves in the Caribbean. During these years the United States of America invaded and occupied Haiti (1916) and the Dominican Republic (1917), intervened in Cuba (1917) like it had done in Nicaragua (1912) and it acquired by right of purchase the Danish Virgin Islands (1916). The idea to create an independent Puerto Rico under these circumstances resulted inconceivable in a strategically vital area, even surpassing the cost of invading, and occupying entirely free countries in the area. Said foreign policy initiated by the United States since the 19<sup>th</sup> century would convert the history of Central America and the Caribbean into variations of the theme of independence, of which Puerto Rico is its extreme case.

While the United States of America, through the Jones Law of 1917, reaffirmed its colonial political project in Puerto Rico, its strategy was complemented by the condition of extreme poverty and dependence it had created in the island. The principal effect of this free commerce regime in Puerto Rico created at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been the monopolization of the most fertile lands in Puerto Rico by the great sugar trusts of the United States. These monopolies converted Puerto Rico in a giant plantation whose sole proprietor was absentee capital from which the insular economy depended on, and had only managed to survive,

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<sup>7</sup> In 1922, the Supreme Court of the United States of America confirmed, in a historic vote by voice of President Judge Howard Taft (also ex-President of the United States of America and ex-governor of the Philippines), the condition of Puerto Rico as mere possession of the United States. This continues to be to this day the definitive constitutional interpretation on the subject. Taft ruled that the incorporation of Puerto Rico into the Union, as part of the tradition of incorporating territories as states after the granting of citizenship, was not applicable to a territory populated by peoples of different languages and cultures.

due to its high costs of production, by virtue of protected markets that provided preferential prices that was only possible at that time by the colonial relationship.<sup>8</sup>

This crushing and stifling economic reality, and the permanent threat that with independence Puerto Rico would lose its preferred status as sugar exporter into the United States (bringing total collapse to the economy of the island), isolated the Puerto Rican independentists – stricken by de Diego’s just after the implementation of the Jones Law of 1917 – and led many Puerto Ricans to a fatalistic colonial resignation. Many believed that in Puerto Rico, freedom and survival were incompatible.

### **Albizu Campos and the awakening of national consciousness**

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<sup>8</sup> To have a clear idea by which the high degree of economic dependence on absentee sugar monopolies that Puerto Rico was stricken by, during the 1920’s, with less than 10 percent of territorial area of Cuba (the sugar monocrop economy of excellence), Puerto Rico outproduced the sister Antilles by a factor of 25 percent.