Independentistas and advocates of statehood play one another’s game. November is a month of decision

Puerto Rico Going Three Ways at Once

Ursula von Eckardt

Today, July 25, 1972, is Constitution Day. It is the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or, more accurately, of “The Free Associated State” that links a speck in the Caribbean, 110 by 35 miles of subtropical hills and beaches, to the United States of America. It is also the seventy-fourth anniversary of the day when American troops landed in Guánica, Puerto Rico—just about where Columbus landed on his second voyage in 1493—to take possession of the former Spanish colony, ceded at the Treaty of Paris, America’s victory prize in the Spanish-American War.

There is a parade in downtown San Juan. High-stepping baton twirlers vie for attention with the candidates in the “Miss Universe” contest.* Governor Luis A. Ferré, cement manufacturer and member of one of the oligarchy’s leading families, is making the official speech, a pitch for the reelection of his own New Progressive Party, organized first in 1967 to campaign for federated statehood in that year’s plebiscite when the Statehood Republican Party refused to participate. On his march to the speaker’s platform the Governor is flanked by a U.S. military policeman and the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Roger C. B. Morton, Nixon’s official representative. The reviewing stands are half empty. As the speeches are about to begin, Rafael Hernandez Colon, President of the Senate and leader of the opposition Popular Democratic Party, arrives to shake hands all around. The spectators on the street, New Progressives waving their party’s flag—a royal blue palm tree on a white ground, used as the symbol for statehood in the plebiscite—his and boo and shout insults at the young opposition leader. Don Fernando Chardon, master of ceremonies and Secretary of State, gentleman and retired soldier, intervenes, harshly criticizing the bad manners of the crowd. At Chardon’s request, the officials lead a standing ovation to Hernandez Colon. It is not enthusiastic.

To the uninitiated the scene looks dismal. The leader of the political party responsible for the creation of the constitution and the federal relations of “Free Association” is booed and insulted. The governor’s speech is a lukewarm appraisal of the status which he supports only as an instrument toward “permanent union” with the United States. The National Guard and military units from the various U.S. bases on the island, as well as the imported beauties

* The “Miss Universe” and preliminary “Miss U.S.A.” beauty contests were brought to Puerto Rico a year ago by the Chief of the Economic Development Agency, at an annual cost to the taxpayers of $200,000, in high hopes of propping up the sagging tourism industry by making San Juan “the beauty capital of the world.” Some bombs exploded at the Cerromar Hotel, site of the contest, last May during the “Miss U.S.A.” contest, causing several millions in damage to the new hotel but injuring no one and not perceived by the millions of satellite TV-watchers. Again, the leader of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, a left-wing pro-Independence movement, announced that his followers would picket the contest, described as “an insult to women” and “a rape of Puerto Rican culture” in its slick, characterless commercialism. Newspapers were full of renewed fear of violence, and tight security measures turned the hotel into a police compound. Georgina Rizk, reigning “Miss Universe” and representative of Lebanon, was forbidden by her government to travel to Puerto Rico to crown her successor; it was feared she might be attacked in revenge for the killing of sixteen Puerto Ricans among the civilians massacred some weeks earlier by three Japanese terrorists associated with Arab liberation fronts. This year’s “Miss Japan” was under heavy guard. While the Puerto Rican public—hysterical with joy two years ago when a local girl won the crown in Miami—disputes the merits of the overblown public relations stunt, the threat and fear of violence received worldwide attention.

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of "Miss Universe, Inc.," are very much in evidence. The Puerto Rican public, however, is not there. Perhaps this is but another instance of the "eloquent political apathy" observers attribute to Puerto Ricans.

I am at home, watching the proceedings on the government-owned and managed TV station. The noise from the highway drowns out the broadcast; there is a motorcade, interspersed with crowds on foot, in trucks, and on buses, surging by in waves. They started at eight that morning, on their way to Hiram Bithorn Stadium, where the real Constitution Day celebration is going on: the nominating convention of the Popular Democratic Party. This is the party of Luis Muñoz Marín, the founder of modern Puerto Rico, who created Free Association—a politico-economic arrangement that permitted a malaria-swamp of poverty and colonial exploitation to become, in the well-financed and brilliantly managed "Operation Bootstrap," a revolution sans blood and terror, the "showcase of democracy" and the wirtschaftswunder of the Western Hemisphere.

Now, it seems, a second "Operation Bootstrap" is going on, an effort of the PDP to rejuvenate itself and to re-form the tired old machine it had become, old and tired enough after two decades of uninterrupted political power to lose the elections of 1968.

The 22,000 capacity stadium can hold only a fraction of the steaming, sweaty, noisy crowd of—how many?—sixty, seventy, maybe a hundred thousand. Everywhere the PDP colors, red and white. The Party flag waves on every vehicle: the white field of peace with the red profile of the jibaro, the Puerto Rican peasant, wearing the distinctive paca, Puerto Rican straw hat. Around this profile runs the slogan of Muñoz's peaceful revolution: Pan, Tierra, y Libertad (Bread, Earth, and Liberty).

Hernandez Colon, minus the tie and jacket worn at the official parade, is swept forward toward the speaker's platform. He is nominated for the governorship by acclamation. Party delegates vote for nominees to the Senate and the House of Representatives,* and for the nominee of Resident Commissioner in Washington. This Resident Commissioner represents Puerto Rico as a nonvoting member of the House of Representatives, but with voice and vote on crucial congressional committees. Legislator, ambassador and second most powerful figure in the island's government, the Resident Commissioner must defend Puerto Rico's case before the Insular Affairs Committee and all other bodies, legislative and executive, in Washington, which can all too easily make or break Puerto Rico by special grants, favors, rules or legislation. Jaime Benitez, for three decades chancellor, then president, of the University of Puerto Rico—fired last October by the government-controlled Council on Higher Education for his refusal to abrogate his right to make university appointments—wins nomination with a three-to-one margin over his only opponent, a history professor.

Perhaps the Popular Democratic Party can regain La Fortaleza, the fortress of former colonial rulers that is the Governor's Mansion, on November 7, and once more direct, as it did between 1940 and 1968, the destiny of three million people. Perhaps Puerto Rico can demonstrate again that social revolutions and economic development can be fought for and (almost!) won with persistent patience, shrewd realism and a political arrangement that makes it possible to have one's cake and eat it too. (The island's treasury is supplied with most of the federal grants for which U.S. states, cities and regions are eligible, although the island is exempt from federal income and excise taxes, enjoying almost complete fiscal autonomy. Taxes on Puerto Rican goods, mostly rum, collected on the mainland are returned to the local treasury. As American citizens, Puerto Ricans can and do migrate to any corner of the United States, establish residence, vote. Mainland industrial developers are encouraged to settle on the island, where tax exemptions and lower wages prevail.)

Can the PDP win again? Can Free Association survive? Is the small experiment in freedom a success?

Until today political prophets doubted it. They foresaw a close race with a photo finish placing Ferré once more in "the fortress," while a divided legislature agonizes over growing unemployment, growing drug abuse and alcoholism, growing "crime in the streets," growing traffic jams, growing pollution, growing flood damage resulting from the leveling of watersheds for ticky-tack suburban housing and superhighways, growing strikes and labor unrest and skyrocketing inflation. With Ferré's second, pro-Statehood, conservative Republican victory, his opponents predict the economic experiment will terminate itself abruptly as Yankee industrialists pack

* This in itself was a major reform. Up through the last election in 1968 candidates of all major parties tended to be elected "by finger." The PDP was then still dominated by the towering figure of Luis Muñoz Marin himself. Although Muñoz had voluntarily withdrawn after four terms as Governor, in 1964, fearful of his own benevolent despotism, he had pointed the finger at Robert Sanchez Villega, thirty years his chief dispatcher and disciple. Sanchez was indeed elected in 1964, but during the next four years he quarreled with the PDP high command. A private scandal, leading to his divorce and remarriage and alienation from PDP conservatives, who thought he pushed the party too far to the left and to "perfumed independence" or autonomy with only nominal federal union, led to his failure to be renominated in 1968. Sanchez then broke with the PDP and formed his own "People's Party," which now advocates a hybrid of independence and commonwealth that is unlikely to receive more than a handful of votes in November. In 1968, however, Sanchez's party pulled enough votes away from the PDP—10 per cent—to secure Ferré's NPP election.
theirs and move to Costa Rica for lower wages or more tax exemption, or to West Virginia for higher productivity and cheaper transportation. More luxury hotels, bank-rupted by union featherbedding at high minimum wages, may also close their overpriced doors. Right and Left extremist "liberators" may bomb each other to ruins. But—and this makes the election of 1972 crucial—with a Ferré victory Puerto Rico will move a giant step closer to independence.

What four hundred years of colonialism did not achieve, a well-meaning, ardent pro-American, MIT-educated governor can easily achieve in eight years by pushing statehood. The pro-Independence party is counting on it, and confidently plans for victory in 1976.

This may seem strange to most Americans, who know Puerto Rico only as the home of more than a million migrants to the mainland's urban ghettos—Spanish-speaking, brown-skinned "foreigners" on welfare and heroin; or as the sunny paradise of turquoise-watered beaches, green velvet vegetation, and palm trees and rum. What Puerto Rico really is depends on whom you ask. Those most eager to answer the question and best organized to do so, particularly in Latin America, behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains, in the "Puerto Rican studies" departments of mainland universities and in "intellectual" congregations, are the partisans of Puerto Rican independence. They will tell you that Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States. For four and a half centuries only storms and foreigners made island history. During its four hundred years as a Spanish possession Puerto Ricans rose up in arms only once, in 1868. Like the hurricanes that periodically wiped out the feudal coffee plantations, breaking the power of the Creole aristocracy and thereby whatever power it might have wrested from the Spanish military overlords, the uprising lasted less than a day. Unlike hurricanes, it was without damage and without effect. It is called the Grito de Lares, a small shriek of outrage in a small mountain town. Every year, on September 23, the shriek is ambivalently commemorated. The day is not an official holiday—score one for the "establishment"; school children and university students get the day off—score one for the "revolutionaries." Independence supporters take buses to Lares to shake fists at the air and to orate against oppression. Statehooders take buses to Lares to declare that Spain was the colonial villain and the USA is the "land of the free." Everybody else stays away and prays there will be no violence.

Except for the abortive grito, Puerto Rico was the most faithful "daughter" of the Spanish Empire. Unrest in Hispanic America, periodic since 1810, knit the island more closely to the metropolis, since Puerto Rico was the headquarters of antirevolutionary Spanish forces. Successive groups of immigrants arrived, often Spanish loyalists who had been driven out by successful anticolonial coups. These resisted Puerto Rican revolution and often even purely social reforms. With their relative wealth and high education giving them instant power, the upper-class refugees kept the island conservative and loyalist.

This phenomenon continues still. The tens of thousands of Castro-refugees from Cuba, passionately pro-American and ardently capitalistic, fear Independence. They call Independence-supporters "Communists." They say so in newspaper ads encouraging Communist-hunting in the schools and universities; they say so with campaign contributions to pro-Statehood groups, particularly the more fanatical right-wing defenders of "the military-industrial complex," the draft, the ROTC, the American Legion, Civil Defense and stars-and-stripes waving civic clubs; they say so with radio and television programs on stations they control through money and know-how; and they allegedly say so, at least some fanatics among them, through anti-Communist "liberation" groups that bomb the establishments, shops and offices of well-known Independence-leaders. Many refer to the hard-working, ambitious and business-minded Cubans as, in ill-disguised transfer-rom of anti-Semitic feeling, "the Jews of the Caribbean." The autonomist faction of the Popular Democratic Party would like federal consent to control immigration locally in order to prevent, or at least retard, what some have called "the Cubanization" of Puerto Rico.

Other factors, in addition to loyalist-minded conservative immigrants, have kept Puerto Rico from becoming independent. Since 1810 Puerto Rican spokesmen traveled to the Spanish peninsula to advocate and win, by political strategies without revolution, island home rule. Although liberal and repressive measures by the metropolis se-curred vast fortunes of Spain's own politically divided factions, Puerto Rico did achieve a "Charter of Autonomy" in 1897, including rights of internal self-administration, a voice in the shaping of economic and mercantile dispositions and something its advocates borrowed from British dominion status—a system of territorial and economic protectionism within the empire. Everybody won: autonomists got home rule and assimilationists achieved unity under one flag with their Spanish brothers. Freedom, however, was short-lived; basic economic and administrative reforms never went into effect, and four months later Puerto Rico became a war prize when the U.S. Marines landed on the shores of the new U.S. colony.

The anticolonialist struggle had to begin all over again, Sisyphus-like, from the very bottom. Puerto Rico fell victim to the American split-personality. On the one hand, Americans proclaimed that all men were created equal and that God and nature ordained
the consent of the governed. On the other, they decided that all populations of “inferior” ethnic, religious and cultural identity had to be protected from themselves for their own good, at least until they proved, by speaking English and displaying Protestant middle-class virtues, “their willingness to sacrifice prejudice at the shrine of liberty,” as the Louisiana “Frenchies” did when they were still somewhat suspiciously granted statehood forty years after the Purchase.

American military governments did their best to sacrifice Puerto Rican prejudices. They built schools and taught English. Puerto Ricans learned—as they still do in New York but no longer on the island (although the school system is still somewhat culturally distorted)—that it is better to be called John than Juan, better to be light-skinned than dark, and that, since the angels speak English in heaven, one should be grateful to be shown the path to salvation.

Nevertheless, Puerto Rican leaders continued peaceful but determined efforts to gain what they wanted: respect, equality, home rule, particularly in economic and social matters, and international protection under the American flag. Step by step—pulled upward by liberal Democratic administrations in Washington, pushed downhill by Republican ones—Puerto Rico struggled up the political mountain.

In 1917 American citizenship was conferred on all Puerto Ricans in a massive political baptism that now made them, even if only by adoption, a part of the community, if not yet of the Saints, at least of the Elect, or visibly blessed elsewhere in the world. Only a small group of Puerto Ricans, organized in 1912 as the “Partida de la Independencia de Puerto Rico,” refused citizenship as a step toward assimilation. For all others the visible grace symbolized by an American passport that could command respect in banana republics (since no one dared push around even a dark-skinned, Spanish-speaking Catholic Yankee) was too enticing to refuse. The 228 persons who rejected citizenship, however, were right, for the citizenship is now the largest single judicial stumbling block to independence. By Supreme Court dictum American citizenship can never be withdrawn once it is granted, and it is doubtful that many would willingly give up the little green booklet of mystical Elevation. And what would become of an independent republic in which the majority of inhabitants claimed citizenship in another country?

American citizenship, however, solved no basic problems. Inept presidents, such as Harding, sent inept governors. The worst of these, E. Montgomery Biley, redoubled Americanization programs in the schools, obstructed all local reforms as “socialistic” and generally provoked nationalist and anti-American sentiment. The Puerto Rican fallout from the mainland depression of the thirties did nothing to help matters. Something new appeared on the Puerto Rican scene: Nationalist violence.

Pedro Albizu Campos—brilliant, flamboyant, emotionally enflamed by the knowledge of revolutionary turmoil elsewhere in the world and by the knowledge of American racial and cultural discrimination on the mainland—took over the leadership of the hitherto tame Nationalist Party in 1930. With heroic gestures and romantic oratory he organized an army of black-shirted militants ready to rid the island of its northern usurpers. Efforts to gain local political support, however, failed; its only time at the polls, in 1932, Albizu’s party received only 5,257 out of 383,372 votes. The disillusionment of this defeat, a sure sign that elections themselves were only a colonialist trick (still a popular Independentista claim), turned the Nationalists toward terrorism.

On February 23, 1936, two Nationalist youths assassinated the chief of police, Colonel E. Francis Riggs. They were arrested and shot by police while “trying to escape.” In revenge, Senator Millard Tydings, Chairman of the Insular Affairs Committee in Washington, started a project to grant independence to Puerto Rico. This deliberate play to slam shut the doors of heaven, to push the Elect once more into a rapacious international world without economic support or political protection, to orphan what Taft had called “the favorite but ungrateful” daughter, was bitterly resented in Puerto Rico.

Since then the threat of independence has been brandished repeatedly by Washington, always as a punitive measure when Puerto Rico demanded too much. No one really wants independence in Puerto Rico; even Independentistas become a little vague about it. They want “freedom,” “equality” and an “end to colonialism,” but only, please, in a kula-chromed world of universal peace and brotherhood. Independence is the pot of spiritual gold at the end of the rainbow; it is the Christian, socialist and/or truly democratic paradise.

The Tydings bills were vehemently resented and fought by Puerto Rican political leaders. Now began a powerful local resistance to independence as well as to suicidal Nationalist terrorist methods. In 1936 anti-Independentist backlash won the elections in Puerto Rico for a pro-assimilationist Republican coalition party. Some months later, on April 23, 1937, Albizu Campos’s “Cadets of the Republic” wanted to march through the southern city of Ponce. The police first granted, then rescinded a permit. The Nationalists decided to march anyway, nervous police opened fire and twenty-one persons were killed, eighty wounded.

Impartial observers blamed the police and a panic, repressive local government. But federal courts judged differently. They sentenced Albizu Campos to a federal penitentiary for inciting subversion and revolt. Thanks to this total insensitivity, the Independentistas found an enduring hero and martyr in
Pedro Albizu Campos, the only really local hero in the revolutionary pantheon of Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, et al.

A few times more Nationalist terrorism erupted, largely in desperation at electoral defeat or at successful efforts to obtain greater home rule and economic help within federal relations. Thus, in 1950, when a status referendum was planned and the Nationalist call to abstain went unheeded by the electorate, black shirts tried to shoot their way into the Governor's Mansion and to start uprisings in various towns. This ended with twenty-seven dead, ninety wounded and most leaders in jail. Two days later, on November 1, 1950, two Nationalists living in New York tried to assassinate President Truman. Albizu was again found implicated.

Meanwhile, Muñoz Marín had been busy working for "Bread, Earth and Liberty." Status, Muñoz argued, was not the issue; poverty was. He obtained Bread, Earth and Liberty with overwhelming popular support. Luck was also on his side. Roosevelt was in the White House, and a University of Chicago economics professor was on the loose. Together, Governor Rexford Guy Tugwell—imaginative, liberal and influential New Dealer—and Luis Muñoz Marín, the elected legislative leader, built the "showcase of democracy and development" in the Caribbean.

In 1952 Muñoz Marín obtained the new constitution with "Free Association" guaranteed "in the nature of a compact." The Golden Age began. Puerto Rico got on with the giant task of economic construction, administrative democratization and social and cultural growth. The school system switched to Spanish as the language of instruction, university and cultural activities flourished, surplus proletariat migrated to the mainland, where someone else paid their upkeep, and industries came and settled.

The question of status was resolved, over, settled. Or so everyone thought. Everyone was wrong. The debate continued and continued to continue even when it was again "resolved" in a series of negotiations with Congress, with Kennedy and Johnson, through extensive joint Status Commission hearings and by a plebiscite in 1967. In 1967, 60.41 per cent of the electorate opted for Free Association, deciding that a series of joint ad hoc committees could take the bugs out of shipping laws, minimum wages, rules governing grants-in-aid, military service laws, and so forth. Some argued that the bugs were built in by a notorious provision of the Federal Relations Act, which states that all federal statutes not "locally inapplicable" have "the same effect and validity in Puerto Rico as in the United States." This provision still creates confusion and maximum feasible misunderstanding.

But a year after the plebiscite Ferré and his pro-
Statehooders, who received only 38.98 per cent in the plebisce, won the election with more than 47 per cent of the vote. Ferré pushed for strengthening all ties to the mainland so as to obtain eventual statehood. The harder he pushed, the stronger the Independence groups and parties became. In the plebiscite they received 0.6 per cent of the vote. In 1971 more than 5 per cent of those polled considered themselves Independentistas. In November their percentage is likely to be higher still.

Fortunately for everybody else, there are several Independence movements and parties. The biggest and strongest is the PIP, the Puerto Rican Independence Party proper. It was born when Muñoz "betrayed" independence by rejecting political status as an issue in the forties. At first the PIP was pro- or at least not anti-American, democratic, in all social policies conservative, but ready to fight rhetorically for "liberty or death." When its original leader, Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, died, a power struggle ensued within the party and it split. Its smaller faction has become the PUP (Puerto Rican Union Party), spayed and housebroken, still ready to fight for liberty, brotherhood, justice, equality, and so forth, but not at all ready to die. Everyone listens respectfully to, and then ignores, its leader, Professor Antonio González—Boy Scout Independentista. The larger faction is still the PIP, led by Ruben Berrios. He has managed to organize the "New Left" and countercultural young into a powerful romantic movement. The same issues which move these groups on the mainland pervade pro-Independence ideology and activity. The PIP practices militant but "nonviolent" civil disobedience and rose-colored Newspeak. Its university-professor- and student-dominated membership wants "socialism and democracy" but "neither the socialism of the Soviet Union nor the democracy of the United States." Inspiration comes from Chile and Cuba and from radicals on the mainland. Opposition to the Vietnam war is transformed into opposition to service in a "colonial" army. At the University of Puerto Rico this has become the standard battle to oust the ROTC, fought by PIP-youth with hunger strikes and generally ignored, self-inflicted martyrdom. It also takes the form of opposing the U.S. Navy's use of a tiny offshore island, Culebra, for target practice. The military exercises disturb the fish on which seven hundred Culebrans depend for their livelihood and keep the beaches from recreational and tourist development, plus lending a military-occupation smell to things. For a decade every Puerto Rican governor has tried to get the Navy to go away and play somewhere else, and the Navy, together with various congressmen, has tried clumsy ways of making friends and influencing people. PIP exploited the issue brilliantly. Berrios, helped by some gullible pacifists from the mainland, squatted on the island, built a small ecumenical chapel on the beach that was being shelled, forced the Navy both to rip down the chapel and to obtain a court order under which he was arrested. Sentenced to three months in prison, Berrios wrote letters to the New York Times and posed for inspirational posters, WASPish features smiling, arm extended in clenched fist salute through prison bars.

PIP supporters also "help the humble" by illegally inciting squatters to build shacks on privately owned and government land so that the police can be photographed tearing them down. They sometimes manage to get themselves arrested pasting posters on public buildings. During last year's Southern Governors' Conference in San Juan, they staged a large, quiet and orderly protest march. The PIP nominating convention a few weeks ago collected a respectable crowd of about 30,000. The PIP hopes to win an at-large Senate seat for Berrios so that he and another Independentista running for the House can control what they hope will be a delicate balance of power between the PDP and the NPP.

To the left of Berrios and the PIP is the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, or PSP, formerly the Pro-Independence Movement. The PSP has good connections, both in New York and internationally, with Marxist and neo-Marxist groups. The old Mission Vito Marcantonio, old-style Communist-front group in the thirties and forties, is the PSP New York office now. Juan Mari Brás, its Secretary General, is the leader of the revolutionary establishment. In 1942 he led the first major University of Puerto Rico riot and was expelled by Chancellor Benítez, the very same Benítez whose dismissal from university leadership in 1971 was justified by pro-Statehood politicians on the grounds that Benítez "protected radicals." Since 1942 Mari Brás has inspired the FUPI (Federation of University Students Pro-Independence) in SDS-style demonstrations of "student power." When some misunderstood freedom-loving, bomb-tossing kid is indicted, Mari Brás defends him in court. Mari Brás and his followers are widely traveled behind the Iron Curtain and in the Third World, able to persuade just about every enemy of the United States that "Yanqui imperialism" imposes such tyranny that armed revolution is the only answer. On the island itself Mari Brás's group is regarded as a more or less dangerous nuisance: the bomb-tossers, by and large, confine themselves still to empty "colonial establishments" at three in the morning when no one is likely to get hurt; their rhetoric calls upon Independentistas to die for freedom rather than to kill for it. When real blood is actually spilled, as at the University of Puerto Rico riot in March, 1971, when an ROTC cadet and two riot squad policemen were killed and more than seventy persons were wounded and, more recently, when sixteen Puerto Rican religious pilgrims were senselessly gunned down in the name of "armed liberation" in Tel Aviv by those who were presumably ideological brothers, PSP preachers
of violence go into rhetorical shock. Like the ideal of independence itself, violence does not really appeal to Puerto Ricans.

In addition to the PSP there are two tiny terrorist groups, the Movement of Armed Revolution and the Armed Commandos for Liberation. They rarely surface except to claim propaganda credit for this or that bit of trouble. The Socialist League, offspring of Albizu Campos’s Nationalist Party, is run by a poet. The Authentic Sovereignty Party is on the ballot rather than the bullet side of Independentism and has a few hundred, vaguely Laborite, members.

Neither Gonzalez nor Berrios nor Mari Bras nor all the blood-and-thunder, liberty-or-death advocates put together—and certainly not while they cut each other asunder—are likely to persuade the people of Puerto Rico that they would enjoy more freedom or happiness or prosperity as an independent republic. But others can force historical developments so as to give more hope to the Independentistas and encourage them toward more divisive and destructive tactics. Thus, for example, the PIP and the PSP are trying to have Puerto Rico placed once more on the list of non-self-governing (colonial) territories in the United Nations (Puerto Rico was removed from the list in 1953). Cuba represents the Puerto Rican Independentistas’ case before a committee composed largely of Third World and Communist countries. Any defense of Puerto Rico’s present status by the Ferré government is likely to be tepid, thus aiding the Independence cause. The Puerto Rican police is less than impartial in dealing with political violence. Right-wing extremists and terrorists are subtly encouraged by an official attitude that always finds them less culpable than the Left. The indiscriminate manner in which moderate liberals and opponents of Statehood or, simply, of the party in power, are lumped together with the leftists of all varieties creates polarization and, by seeking to abolish the middle, gives strength to the Left. Conservative government policies or sheer ineptitude in dealing with social and economic problems, from drug abuse to unemployment and inflation, can radicalize greater numbers on the left. Misunderstanding in Washington serves the same purpose.

No one knows whether “the small experiment in freedom” will meet with success. We may be witnessing its rapid decline and end. After November 8 we will know better. If the pro-Statehood conservatives win, and if there is a corresponding Republican sweep on the mainland, Puerto Rico will be closer to Independence than before.