

# The Fight Over Status: New Decision on Puerto Rico

Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

Politics is our national sport," a Puerto Rican lawyer warns, "but it sometimes gets too lively. That's why many bars post signs prohibiting discussions of politics or religion."

This sport is mirrored in another Island passion: music. In the Miami Beach-type hotels along San Juan's Condado strip, for example, a faceless continental music regales not only North American tourists but dolce vita from the present economic and social system. Behind the Folies Bergères night club acts flashes the subliminal message: Things are fine as they are.

A few miles inland, past a boulevard with high-rise, air-conditioned buildings in the commercial section of Hato Rey, past a Sears and several shopping malls, the rooftops get lower and the housing denser and a wild and exciting beat rises from a street corner opposite the headquarters of the Puerto Rican Independence Party. To the accompaniment of drums and maracas crowds of young people mill about, drinking beer and singing popular songs of their Island, laughing and stamping as the lyrics bring home the message: "Yankee go home."

Several blocks away is the palm-lined campus of the University of Puerto Rico, founded in 1903, five years after Spain ceded the Island to the United States. The columned university theatre is half empty, even though the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture is staging an evening devoted to the Island's "true" civilization. Ranging from reconstructions of Arawak Indian ceremonies to compositions of Pablo Casals, the evening program begins with a spoof on those Puerto Ricans who ape tourist tastes from the mainland. North American aristocrats, the satire suggests, would seek out a Puerto Rican *jibaro*—country peasant—rather than a Condado beach walker. Though many Puerto Ricans boast about their culture, few turn out to see its classical dimensions, even when admission is gratis.

In San Juan's middle-class suburbs, however, just before Thanksgiving and until the end of Epiphany

(Puerto Ricans celebrate both U.S. and Hispanic holidays) families and friends keep traditions alive by singing the songs of *Navidad*—Christmas. First they gather outside a home to sing "We are peasants come from the mountains." The host then opens both his door and his bar. Young and old know the words to dozens of *Navidad* songs, accompanying themselves on drums, guitars, gourds, and anything else that resonates. After an hour or two the host joins the group and they drive off to another home. These are people who live comfortably in the present system, have basically warm feelings toward the United States, but who also love their own ways and try to maintain them, including, for example, chaperoned dating for women.

Their's could be the music of independence, but these solid burghers—citizens of the United States and of Puerto Rico—are not likely to risk their material comforts in the gambles of independence. They—and we—face a dilemma: How to develop the association between the Island and United States to enhance a positive interdependence and minimize exploitation or excessive dependency by either side?

Puerto Rico is the only Latin American country never to have achieved even nominal independence and the only one to come under the direct imperial control of the United States. Critics consider it the living symbol of U.S. imperialism, while others perceive it as a model for democratic and economic development in the Third World. Though Congress made Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens on the eve of America's entry into World War I, Puerto Ricans did not have the authority to elect their own governor until 1947.

Island political debate since 1900 has centered on the issue of status— independence or statehood or association. Proponents of an intermediate solution hoped that the issue was resolved in 1952, when the U.S. Congress and a Puerto Rican referendum approved an Island constitution providing for a "Commonwealth" within the U.S. Federal system. The degree of disagreement was masked by the fact that the Spanish-language text called Puerto Rico not "Commonwealth" but *Estado*

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*Libre Asociado*—a “free associated state.” Though this ambiguity remained, 60 per cent of the voters approved the present situation again in a 1967 referendum, 39 per cent voting for statehood and only 1 per cent for independence. (Many *independentistas* boycotted the election, but over 70 per cent of the voters turned out.)

The 1967 referendum was held at a moment when the Island’s economic fortunes continued to look balmy, thanks in part to the “Operation Bootstrap” launched in the late 1940’s to stimulate Puerto Rico’s development in collaboration with North American investors and industry. Cheap labor provided only one inducement. The Puerto Rican government also subsidized training programs for workers, leased land, and even completed buildings. Washington has cooperated in tax exemptions for U.S. firms investing in Puerto Rico. Throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s industrial development boomed, raising per capita income from \$658 in 1947 to \$2,245 in 1974 (in 1974 dollars).

Since 1971, however, U.S. investment in the Island has slackened. Higher oil prices and the subsequent depression of the mainland economy have also hurt the Island. But Operation Bootstrap has always rested on a fragile footing. Unemployment was simply exported. By 1975 two million Puerto Ricans were on the mainland and three million on the Island. When the Island economy was growing most rapidly, emigration was at its peak; yet unemployment hardly declined. To make matters worse, industrial expansion was accompanied by agricultural decline, leading country people to the cities and thereby increasing unemployment.

The key factor behind the current slump in U.S. investment is that Island labor costs have climbed steadily while labor productivity has remained low by mainland standards. The availability of food stamps makes many Puerto Ricans reluctant to work at minimum federal wages, for food prices are even higher on the Island than the mainland. Investors in search of profits are therefore turning to other Caribbean islands—such as the Dominican Republic—that offer them the advantages promised by Operation Bootstrap in the 1950’s and 1960’s, though without the protection of the U.S. flag overhead.

Puerto Rico’s present political and economic status represents a twofold compromise. Politically, “Commonwealth” stands between the extreme of formal equality, symbolized by statehood, and the umbilical severance demanded by the proponents of independence. Economically the Island has “fiscal autonomy”—no Federal taxes—but it is walled in by U.S. tariffs so that it cannot protect its own infant industries or buy advantageously outside the U.S. market.

These midway solutions are coming apart at the seams, assaulted by political discontent and economic malaise. The cleavages are sharpening in 1976 as politicians both in Washington and San Juan discuss a proposal for a “Compact of Permanent Union” linking the Island with the United States. Endorsed by the governing pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party, the draft compact was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in December, 1975, by Puerto Rico’s Resident Commissioner, Jaime Benítez, with twenty-four co-

sponsors, including California Democrat Philip Burton, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Territorial and Insular Affairs.

This attempt to breathe new life into the present association is endorsed by Governor Rafael Hernandez Colón, who states it would allow Puerto Rico “more elbow room and flexibility to cope with its own very special problems.” Statehooders oppose the bill because it is “degrading,” stopping far short of statehood, while *independentistas* charge that it would submerge Puerto Rico in assimilation with the north.



The President of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, Dr. Rubén Berríos Martínez, has his own views about the “permanent compact,” but has refused to attend Washington hearings, saying he would testify only if the House Subcommittee came to Puerto Rico. The demand for Puerto Rican independence comes not only from a few bomb-throwing fanatics or the Cuban and “nonaligned” delegations at the United Nations who damn the United States no matter what. Their headline-catching acts are just the tip of an iceberg. Island voters give few votes to the Independence Party or the Socialist (pro-Cuba) Party, but the leadership of these parties and their influence on university youth and faculty is substantial. Most important, the demand for independence reflects not only a growing nationalism, but severe economic and social problems that the present system has helped spawn.

Berríos has been a Senator in the Assembly’s upper house since 1972. Tall, elegantly dressed, fair, he looks in his late thirties more like a Scandinavian businessman than a political activist. Educated in law at Yale and Oxford, Berríos has a brilliant mind and a deep compulsion to move Puerto Rico to complete self-determination.

Interviewed in his Senate office located atop a bluff overlooking the pounding Atlantic and the ancient fortress of El Morro, Berríos has declared: “The United States should get out of Puerto Rico while the getting is good.” Glancing at his assistant, the Party “Secretary for Foreign Relations,” Berríos recalled a Latin American saying: “If you hit a bully, others will too.” The message: Puerto Rico will become independent sooner or later; the sooner the better, not only for the Island, but also for the United States.

Why should the U.S. want to cut its ties with Puerto Rico? North American firms, says Berríos, are exploiting both the U.S. taxpayer and the Puerto Rican people in what amounts to a “great racket.” Because the Puerto

Rican people are poor (unemployment estimates range from 10 to 40 per cent), over 70 per cent of the population receives food stamps. This bill—almost \$600 million in 1975—is paid by American taxpayers. The profits, however, go to mainland firms that sold some \$2.6 billion in goods to Puerto Rico last year, products ranging from automobiles to food such as canned fruit and rice that could be produced locally. Not surprisingly, U.S. export interests are content with the status quo, as are those firms operating on the Island, where neither local nor Federal taxes are paid. Indeed, Berríos estimates that one-tenth of all overseas earnings reported by U.S. firms in 1974 came from Puerto Rico!

Berríos agrees that the wise investor should look elsewhere, and suggests U.S. taxpayers should refuse to subsidize the Island (and American firms there) any longer. He also recommends that the U.S. Navy reevaluate its need for Puerto Rican bases. Once Washington surrenders the Panama Canal it will no longer need a Caribbean outpost to defend Panama. The U.S. bases in Puerto Rico are superfluous in the age of the Trident submarine and the nuclear missile. The Independence Party takes heart from its 1975 success in inducing the Navy to depart from the Puerto Rican island of Culebra, which it used for target practice. Leviathan, they believe, can be moved. The Independence Party contends that only a handful of Puerto Ricans really benefit from the present association with the U.S., while the majority staggers under the burden of tastes and goods—all at high prices—manufactured abroad.

The Bootstrap operation assumed economic development based on exports. This approach, Berríos asserts, has proved bankrupt. His party suggests instead "economic development toward the inside." Their policy would rest on import substitution favoring local over foreign products (rum over whiskey, Island fruit juice over Tang), and limits on earnings exported from the Island.

The Independence Party model, says Berríos, is not Cuba's or Chile's (during or after Allende), but one geared to the unique problems of Puerto Rico. Though many economists note the inability or unwillingness of Puerto Ricans to save and invest in their own economy (a problem common to Latin countries), Berríos believes that behavior patterns can be altered through new laws and education. Though not a dogmatic socialist, he would put many industries under state ownership or control, including television, so that commercials exalting plastic life-styles could be eliminated from the popular consciousness. In their place he would introduce slogans such as those used in Mexican schools, praising honest sweat from honest labor. Special efforts would go to reviving Island agriculture, including kibbutz-type communes offering culture *cum* comradeship. Quality crafts would also be produced, both in the city and countryside.

Naive romanticism" is the way some statehooders see the plans for independence. Statehood has been endorsed by the Island's Republican Party since 1931 and by its 1968 offshoot, the New Progressives. The Republicans won the Gov-

ernorship and Lower House in 1968, only to lose both again in 1972.

What kind of Puerto Ricans support statehood? One is the Island's most distinguished defender of civil liberties, Santos Amadeo, now over seventy years old. Calling himself a "Christian atheist," Dr. Amadeo embodies the classic features of a civil libertarian. He has long defended women's rights and those of political radicals, and boasts of having persuaded Puerto Rican courts to agree on the right of counsel in criminal investigations some twenty years before this was accomplished on the mainland. Though Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917, he believes they will enjoy full equal rights only with statehood. "Now," he laments, "we are just like Indians," without real sovereignty or equality.

American policy, says Amadeo, amounts to "baby sitting imperialism." "You Americans are the worst enemies of statehood, because you think you must protect the Puerto Rican people from themselves, while you support dictatorships in Argentina and elsewhere." Support for statehood also comes from a taxi driver who wants to "protect" the Island from the politicians leading it toward socialism and/or independence. Like many Puerto Ricans, he joined the U.S. Army during the Korean War and then re-enlisted, finding in the Army a job, social acceptance, and upward mobility. (Opposed to the Vietnam war, however, he would have spent his last savings to help his son go to Canada rather than have him risk his life in a senseless expedition.)

Though most professors in the University Faculty of Social Sciences gravitate toward independence parties (the Dean, Antonio González, formed his own in 1969, the Partido Unión Puertorriqueña!), the chairman of the Political Science Department, Reece B. Bothwell, is another spokesman for statehood. The son of a mainlander who moved to the Island long ago, Bothwell stresses that statehood would generate "stability" rather than the capricious zigs and zags of commonwealth status; and a fair share for the Island in decisions affecting its fate. It would lessen the likelihood of the kind of discrimination exercised against a member of his own family in 1938, when a major bank advised that a Puerto Rican could never expect to hold a top managerial position in its San Juan branch. Many Puerto Ricans, he says, feared to push for statehood lest they be spurned by the American Congress. This anxiety was largely overcome in 1960, however, when Hawaii—also a noncontiguous territory peopled by non-Anglo-Saxons—became the fiftieth state.

The Republicans' main weakness today, Professor Bothwell says, is their lack of a strong leadership and a charismatic figure such as Luis A. Ferré, leader of the breakaway faction in 1968.

A centrist position has been backed historically by the Partido Popular Democrático and by its 1968 splinter group, the Partido del Pueblo. The Popular Democrats, led for years by Luis Muñoz Marín, have dominated Puerto Rican politics since 1938, winning every gubernatorial election from 1948 through

1972, except that of 1968, when they lost to the statehooders after a party schism.

Proponents of a "middle way" maintain that neither independence nor statehood is feasible or desirable, whether from the standpoint of the United States or Puerto Rico. Washington will not permit Puerto Rico to become fully independent any more than Moscow would allow Czechoslovakia to leave the "socialist commonwealth." The U.S. purports to have the ability, without exercising direct imperial controls, to promote democracy and economic development and has put forward Puerto Rico as a model for the Third World, just as we have backed West Berlin in Europe. Security interests are also at stake. Though naval power has declined in some ways, it still plays a vital role in world affairs, one to which Washington will respond as the Soviet Navy expands and Cuban troops fight in distant wars of national liberation.

Though unfettered self-determination appeals strongly to intellectuals, the voters of Puerto Rico have given only the scantiest support to *independentistas*. For decades the Island has relied primarily upon the U.S. for investment capital, but now it is tied by food coupons as well. If Dostoevski's Grand Inquisitor was only partially correct, Puerto Rican voters will not jeopardize their daily bread for abstract freedoms. They will also prefer familiar problems to unknown dangers.

The opposite extreme—statehood—also presents problems for the United States. Puerto Rico resembles Hawaii and Alaska in being separated from the mainland, but it differs profoundly in having a homogeneous population that speaks one language first, with English a poor second. The "melting pot" model could be extended to Hawaii and Alaska far easier than to Puerto Rico, where a Spanish-speaking Catholic heritage is still intact. Dr. Amadeo and other proponents of statehood have testified before Congress both in Spanish and English, to "demonstrate that use of two languages is compatible with statehood." But half of their remarks in the *Congressional Record* are simply lost to those Americans who do not happen to know Spanish.

If Congress has reason not to create a Spanish-speaking state, the Puerto Rican people have even more cause to protect their own heritage from the uncertain benefits of assimilation. As things stand now, those who want to operate bilingually in two camps have that option, while those who prefer to remain basically Hispanic can do so. While there might be some economic gains from statehood, these would probably be outweighed by lost benefits, such as exemptions from Federal taxes. Most of Puerto Rico's problems run deep and would hardly be eliminated by a formal change of political or economic systems.

Holiday festivals in San Juan homes feature imported foods, from potato chips and cheese dips to frozen turkey for the main course. Though the well-appointed bar includes rum and native liqueurs, most tastes run toward imported whiskeys and gin. Mixers are mostly imported Schweppes and ginger ale rather than fresh or locally canned fruit juices. Indeed, the fun-loving spirit of the average Puerto Rican, while genuine, is often buoyed by heavy concentrations of synthetic spirits. At least one-

fourth of floor space in a typical *supermercado* goes to booze, an observation paralleled by statistics showing that Puerto Ricans spend on alcohol and tobacco about one-third of what they do on food.

Most Puerto Ricans, as people worldwide, are attracted by the consumer ethic. Judging by the empty halls greeting performances of the Institute for Puerto Rican Culture and contrasting them with the ubiquitous television antennae, popular tastes favor the imported commercial rather than the ethnic heritage. Education and other programs to alter tastes and raise ecological consciousness could be initiated now, without any radical step toward independence.



**B**elieving the status quo could be improved, an Ad Hoc Committee appointed by the U.S. President and Puerto Rican Governor drew up the proposal for the "Compact of Permanent Union" now being reviewed in the U.S. House of Representatives. The draft Compact meets most major Island grievances head on and proposes commissions to study several others not yet resolved. On one issue only is the pact unyielding: U.S. laws regarding defense and national security will continue to apply, including the draft, if it were revived.

The Compact drops "Commonwealth" entirely and speaks only of the "Free Associated State of Puerto Rico [FAS]." The new Compact must be approved by Congress and ratified by another referendum in Puerto Rico. Subsequent modifications require mutual agreement of the U.S. and FAS governments; any changes affecting "fundamental relations" must be endorsed by the Puerto Rican electorate.

All powers exercised by the U.S. Government are spelled out in the Compact, reserving all other powers to the FAS. Disputes arising from the pact may be brought to U.S. or FAS courts, though the U.S. Supreme Court is the final interpreter.

Washington continues to have responsibility and authority in international relations and defense, but the FAS may participate in nonpolitical international organizations and enter economic and scientific agreements with other countries, as approved by the U.S. President and Puerto Rico's Governor.

U.S. tariffs continue to apply to Puerto Rico, but the FAS "may levy, increase, reduce or eliminate tariffs" on foreign articles provided there is "continuous coordination" between the U.S. and FAS governments. Indeed, Puerto Rico "may import materials and articles

duty free for subsequent shipment and sale to other parts of the United States" if at least 35 per cent of the value is added in the Island. Tariffs collected in Puerto Rico will go into the FAS treasury—not Washington's. As today, no Federal income taxes will be charged on income of Puerto Rican residents earned in the Island, and a common market will remain between Puerto Rico and the mainland.

While Puerto Rico now has a Resident Commissioner, able to vote only in House committees, the Compact would establish a counterpart of the Commissioner in the Senate. As today, Puerto Rico would affect Presidential elections only by its impact on Party conventions.

A major grievance now is that Federal laws apply automatically to Puerto Rico even though many are geared mainly to mainland needs. The Compact provides that Federal laws will not bind Puerto Rico unless they specifically include the FAS. Laws that do mention the Island may be protested by the Governor and will not apply if the objection is sustained by the relevant Congressional committee.

Showing how any proposal may be damned for doing too little or too much, Mayor Carlos Romero Barcelo of San Juan criticizes the Compact for freeing Puerto Rico from Federal minimum wage and environmental quality standards. These controls, the Governor's office held, are unnecessary and undesirable for Puerto Rico, reducing the incentives for foreign investment. The Mayor, who is also President of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party, charges that there "must be something terribly wrong with a political system that would oppose laws to protect workers, pay adequate wages, provide

clean air and water," while promising to be the means for halting the Island's recession and restoring its self-respect.

*Independentistas* charge that the Compact is a "desperate attempt" by Henry Kissinger to prevent the United Nations from looking into the Island's colonial relationship to the U.S. "Too little and too late" is another negative verdict on the draft compact, one made by Roberto Sánchez Viella, Governor from 1964-68, and the author of an earlier, more radical plan to improve on commonwealth status. But the Sánchez proposal would surely be turned down by the U.S. Congress, for it insists, for example, on Puerto Rico's right to decide in what wars its citizens will take part.

The present Compact, no doubt, fails to meet the demands for full independence or for complete equality with the fifty states. But if politics is the art of the possible, the draft pact provides a remarkable set of compromises between the competing goals of maximum local autonomy and the need for some centralized authority in a federal system.

The deepest problems of the Isla Verde, meanwhile, will probably persist regardless of changes in its constitutional relationship to the mainland. The *independentistas* may well be correct in believing that a kind of moral revolution is needed in the value system of the Puerto Rican people. To be meaningful, however, such changes must be self-generated and not the result of manipulation from above. The new Compact, if approved by both sides, offers the prospect of a fresh start toward evolutionary development without the dislocations of revolution.