

“Self-determination and independence are not synonymous”

# Puerto Rico: On Letting the People Decide

George McDougall

Every so often some “scholarly commentator” suggests that the United States should admit it made a mistake when it acted unilaterally to annex Puerto Rico in 1898. To remedy the damage, such writers argue, the United States should now take the initiative in preparing Puerto Rico to become an independent nation. To help atone for his eighty years of “colonial” intervention they would have Uncle Sam be both sympathetic and generous in helping the new republic get started: Plenty of transitional assistance would be provided, and there would be “continuing warm friendship” after the final break. Once Puerto Rico is turned loose, it is explained, its people would at least be “free,” the U.S. would have extricated itself honorably from an expensive international embarrassment, and we could all live happily ever after.

Although this may strike the casual observer as an appealing scenario, closer inspection reveals it to be nothing less than a veiled attempt to assert that two wrongs make a right. What these proponents of forced independence are actually advocating is nothing less than *reverse imperialism*. For all their rhetoric about self-determination and liberation, such proposals no more take into account the aspirations of the Puerto Rican people than did the U.S. conquest of Puerto Rico in the first place. And, like it or not, the eight intervening decades simply cannot be swept under some convenient historical carpet.

Puerto Ricans have embraced American democracy with a passion; in contrast to the recent steady decline to 53 per cent in presidential elections on the United States mainland, voter turnouts on the island invariably exceed 80 per cent—despite the fact that Puerto Ricans are excluded from voting for president and have no voting representation in the U.S. House and Senate. Over the past forty years the Puerto Ricans’ commitment to a private enterprise economy has helped the island raise

its standard of living from disease-ridden and poverty stricken (Puerto Rico was once on a par with Haiti) to a level that today surpasses that of any other locale south of the Rio Grande. Thousands of Puerto Ricans have died fighting for the United States in World Wars I and II, Korea, and Vietnam (contributing in the process four posthumous Medal of Honor winners and a half-dozen generals and admirals).

Given these facts, I fear an element of unconscious prejudice may be influencing the thinking of those mainlanders who favor unilateral U.S. withdrawal from Puerto Rico. Confronted with the spectacular progress Puerto Ricans have achieved since becoming American citizens, intellectually honest observers really ought to pause long enough to ask themselves the following questions: If most Puerto Ricans had blue eyes and spoke English as a first language, would we still view them as a burden? Or would we be applauding their achievements as our up-and-coming Caribbean cousins?

But let’s assume for the moment that only the best of intentions are involved when people recommend “cordial disengagement” as an alternative to the perpetuation of Puerto Rico’s existing “kept-client” relationship as a “commonwealth” of the United States. I have no quarrel with “cordial disengagement”—*in principle*. But surely no analysis of Puerto Rico’s political status can be deemed valid unless it takes fully into account the will of the more than three million human beings who are Puerto Rico’s population. After all, we should not callously disregard the inalienable right of all peoples to self-determination. Interestingly, when the will of the Puerto Rican people *is* taken into account, it immediately becomes apparent that “self-determination” and “independence” are by no means synonymous.

To illustrate this point, suppose the people of Puerto Rico decide they are tired of being, as at present, “half-free” (free of federal income taxes, for example, but lacking the right to vote for the president who can send them to war, or for the Congress that passes laws

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GEORGE MCDUGALL, a communication aide to Carlos Romero-Barceló, governor of Puerto Rico, is decried as “the highest ranking ethnic mainlander in the Puerto Rican government.”

governing many aspects of their lives). Suppose the Puerto Rican people decide they want to exercise the same rights and to assume the same responsibilities as their fellow American citizens in the fifty states. Suppose self-determination for Puerto Rico should happen to take the form of a petition to Congress for admission to the Union as the fifty-first state of the USA.

Some facts are relevant to the above supposition. Since the so-called "commonwealth" status was adopted in 1952 the percentage of Puerto Rican voters supporting local political parties that advocate U.S. statehood for the island has risen from 12.9 per cent to 48.3 per cent. During the same period, support for proindependence parties has declined from 19 per cent to less than 7 per cent. In the most recent election (November, 1976) the people of Puerto Rico chose a governor who favors statehood, a legislative majority that favors statehood, and seventy-eight mayors of cities and towns, a majority of whom favor statehood. In light of all this, the proposition that the United States should now set out to prepare Puerto Rico for independence can hardly be viewed charitably. Such an action would not only *not* be self-determination, it would be outright *expulsion*—an act at once unprecedented and grotesquely immoral.

Ought we to discard communities of United States citizens whenever we conclude that they are too poor or not culturally "American" enough (whatever that means!) to suit the rest of us? If Uncle Sam could dump Puerto Rico, could he not also dump Guam, American Samoa, Micronesia, the Virgin Islands, Midway, or the Northern Marianas? Of course he could.

But, it might be objected, many of *those* places are of critical strategic value. No doubt. But so was (and indeed perhaps still is) Puerto Rico. And if that doesn't stop Uncle Sam from dumping it when it has outlived its usefulness, then who will be next? The result would be anxiety throughout our hundreds of other tropical island possessions and protectorates. Such anxiety could spawn independence movements. Or it could invite overtures from world powers not friendly to the United States. It would destabilize presently tranquil relationships, and further erode America's already severely weakened position in the Pacific. But no less profound would be the impact on our allies. If the United States could evict a community of its own citizens, where would that leave friendly foreigners? If a community of American citizens can "outlive its usefulness," what chance would a foreign ally have?

Retreat from Southeast Asia. Reticence in Africa. Reverse imperialism in the Caribbean. Who would continue to trust the United States? Who would continue to feel secure in an alliance with the United States?

Then there is another consideration. Two million Puerto Ricans already live on the U.S. mainland. As

natural-born American citizens, they have just as much right to move there as does a Texan to move to Ohio. If the expellers had their way—if the island of Puerto Rico were to be "set free"—might not another two million Puerto Ricans decide to join their friends and relatives on the mainland?

This is not a remote possibility. Although the 3,400 square miles of real estate that constitute the island of Puerto Rico could indeed be jettisoned by a simple Act of Congress, the 3.3 million people who *live* in Puerto Rico could not, even then, be stripped of their American citizenship without due process of law in each and every case. And it is highly doubtful that any such case would stand up in court. The likely result of Puerto Rico's expulsion (or even its imminent prospect), therefore, would be a mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the fifty states.

"Get Puerto Rico out of the nation's hair," cry the expulsionists.

"Set Puerto Rico free," chant the ideologues of the far left.

Yet ironically their mechanism for achieving their common goal could easily *double* the number of Puerto Ricans residing in the continental United States. In other words, even the most hardened cynics—those who might at first glance find attractive a thinly disguised "final solution to the Puerto Rican problem"—would probably find themselves inheriting the whirlwind.

Fortunately few Americans are so insensitive, antidemocratic, and, yes, in some cases racist as the misguided "friends" of Puerto Rican independence. President Gerald Ford advocated making Puerto Rico the fifty-first state. President Jimmy Carter just this past July issued a formal proclamation in which he pledged his unequivocal support for any alternative political status the Puerto Rican people may request by majority vote—specifically including both statehood and independence.

For two centuries the United States has struggled to come to terms with the needs and aspirations of its less fortunate citizens. Yesterday it was the Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, and others. Today, among others, it is the blacks and the Hispanics. The pilgrimage toward true equality of opportunity in the United States has been invariably painful and slow. But the nation has always emerged stronger and richer for the effort. To abandon now this most worthy of American ideals would both endanger our security and further erode our integrity. Puerto Rico's political destiny must be determined freely and without constraints by the people of Puerto Rico. Let the rest of the nation await their decision with patience and ratify it with brotherhood.