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Puerto Rico: A Unique Place

From the outset, Puerto Rico has been special. Its written history begins with its role under the Spanish when it was the doorway to the Caribbean. Columbus said in 1493 that: "All of these islands are very handsome and very good earth, but this one seemed to everybody the best¹" describing Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico has always held a unique status ranging from the best island available to the Spanish to its' status today as a commonwealth of the United States. This can be seen by examining Puerto Rican history in general and then by examining specific examples.

The Spanish did learn from their mistakes governing the rest of the Americas. Puerto Rico was one of their last colonial possessions largely because they had defacto self rule. "The Spanish charter created an autonomous regime in Puerto Rico providing the Puerto Ricans with the same rights as peninsular Spaniards.²" Spain still appointed Puerto Rico's governor but his power was significantly curtailed. Puerto Rico was largely autonomous by the time of the Spanish-American war. There were no fantastic headlines or pictures about the Spanish on Puerto Rico as there were about the Spanish in Cuba. Puerto Rico was different than other Spanish colonies.

Occupation by the United States was essentially a setback for Puerto Rican autonomy. For the first two years, Puerto Rico was under strict military rule. Finally in 1900 the Foraker act was passed that ended military rule. The Foraker act was a step back

¹ Roberta Ann Johnson, *Puerto Rico: Commonwealth or Colony* (New York: Praeger Special Studies, 1980), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

from Puerto Rico's autonomy under the last years of Spanish rule. The Foraker act ended the military occupation but failed to give power to Puerto Rico; there was no US citizenship, and there were mostly appointed leaders from outside of Puerto Rico.³ Foraker was good in that it ended the military occupation, but it failed to do much more than that.

The passage of the Foraker Act was actually bad for Puerto Rico. The Foraker Act made the US Congress responsible for governing the island. Unfortunately the US Congress although it desired the prestige of being responsible for the island really wanted little else to do with it. The Congress created an un-funded mandate with the Foraker Act. The administration lacked any real power without the resources to actually implement change⁴. Puerto Rican became totally dependent on the whim of Congress. There were no elected representatives to argue for the rights of Puerto Ricans, and so they were largely ignored.

There was little real change until the passage of the Jones Act in 1918. The Jones Act allowed for limited self-rule. However, it was not all to the benefit of Puerto Rico. The Jones Act gave all Puerto Ricans US citizenship. This essentially quashed the independence movement. Puerto Rico before the Jones Act wanted the same route that Cuba took, independence guaranteed by the US after a brief occupation. This was not to be however. The Jones Act gave Puerto Rico control of local decision-making but still maintained appointed governors. That combined with the US citizenship of the residents of the island made the Jones Act made it of questionable value to Puerto Ricans.⁵ Puerto

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid., 15. Multiple federal agencies attempted to govern Puerto Rico, all lacking any broad mandate leading to ineffective government.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

Rico was unique; it was going to remain a part of the United States, much as its people wanted similar paths as other nations.

Munoz Rivera stated the feelings of a significant portion of Puerto Ricans in an address to Congress on 5 May 1916 he said:

On the 18th day of October, 1898, when the flag of this great republic was unfurled over the fortress of San Juan, if anyone had said to my countrymen that the United States, the land of liberty, was going to deny their right to form a government of the people, by the people, and for the people of Puerto Rico, my countrymen would have refused to believe such a prophecy, considering it sheer madness.⁶

The United States in the eyes of the Puerto Ricans was denying them their basic rights that America claimed to represent to the rest of the world. Puerto Rico was not unique in receiving contradictory treatment from the United States, but they were because they were because they were not a separate nation but rather a territory of the United States. The absence of different treatment in this case is what makes Puerto Rico unique.

The Jones Act essentially ended all prospects for Puerto Rican independence. With the idea of independence gone, the idea of commonwealth began to take hold. Commonwealth status meant simply that Puerto Rico would be autonomous but never a state. The idea of a commonwealth to Puerto Ricans represented, and still does a status more desirable than that of actual statehood. By choosing commonwealth Puerto Ricans feel as though they are still maintaining an independence of sorts. They are going against the desires of the United States, and doing for Puerto Rico instead of the United States. By embracing commonwealth the Puerto Ricans have set themselves apart, from both nearly every other location in the world, as well as US citizens in general.

⁶ Kal Wagenheim, *The Puerto Ricans* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 126.

In 1951, FOMENTO was created, and “Operation bootstrap” began. These were programs designed to bring industrialization to the island. In essence, the programs gave huge incentives to corporations to move to the island. The corporations were offered free and reduced costs buildings, tax breaks, as well as government subsidies. The result was that by 1961 new factories were opening at a rate of five per week.⁷ These programs transformed Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico became a model of industrialization.

Prior to FOMENTO and bootstrap the Puerto Rican economy was largely based on agriculture. Puerto Rican success was so great that the island became a model for other locations attempting to attract industry. Notably, Mexico and China have attempted to follow the Puerto Rican model. Attracting companies with significant discounts and only after a significant time period charging competitive rates and taxes, thereby convincing most companies of the value of staying in that location. Puerto Rico was the first to set this economic model. Puerto Ricans per capita income increased by more than 700% from 1948 to 1979.⁸ An increase of that size is a spectacular change in a society. Imagine going from sugar plantations to a petrochemically based economy in thirty years.

In 1959 Congress granted statehood to both Alaska and Hawaii. One of the main arguments against granting statehood to Puerto Rico was that it is not a part of the contiguous United States⁹. This revived the debate as to the future of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico was by this time a US protectorate, and a commonwealth. The advocates of statehood claimed that this shorted them political power, not being represented in Congress. Puerto Ricans despite what was evidence that statehood was very much a

⁷ Roberta Ann Johnson, *Puerto Rico: Commonwealth or Colony* (New York: Praeger Special Studies, 1980), 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40. I divided the per capita income in 1979 by the per capita income in 1948 and found it to be 7.13 times greater.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

possibility again chose to remain a commonwealth.¹⁰ Puerto Rico chose again even after the basis of their economy changed decided to maintain its unique status.

Analyzing Puerto Rican election returns can show a great deal. There have been three major political parties for much of Puerto Rico's history, one each representing statehood, commonwealth, and independence. In 1948 the party advocating commonwealth had 72% of the popular vote, statehood had 16.1%, and independence had 12%, this has changed significantly. In 1976, commonwealth had 45.9%, statehood had 48.2%, and independence had 5.8%.¹¹ Although no clear majority opinion is shown, it can be seen that commonwealth and statehood are roughly equal and independence is all but marginalized. As late as 1998 this is still the case. A referendum was offered and statehood was narrowly defeated. Puerto Rico has maintained a unique status from the outset of the time it became associated with the United States continuing to this day.

There are a number of theories as to why Puerto Rico has chosen its path in history. No one reason has a great deal of credibility more so than any other. They range from the political character of Puerto Ricans to the national identity of Puerto Rico, to the island's isolation.

A language barrier exists. The majority of Puerto Ricans speak Spanish and not necessarily English. Although this appears to be a minor difference a US Senator cited it in the 20th century as a reason against statehood.

The people of Puerto Rico represent a rich and old culture. We gladly welcome diversity; therefore, the characteristic culture of Puerto Rico, as such, is no barrier to statehood. However, the unity of our structure of federal states requires a common language ... The recognition and

¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹ Ibid., 49. I took the data provided, totaled all returns and divided to calculate percentages.

acceptance of English as the official language must be a previous condition for statehood.¹²

The issue of language was relevant for a significant time period, and to some degree is still relevant today.

In 1943 a prominent Puerto Rican politician Antonio Rivera stated:

I believe the subtle route ploughed in the seas of our insular politics by the annexationist idea has not been studied with sufficient historical rigor. Several well-minded fetiches, several other proudly held myths, and some sympathetically applauded vanities have made us lose sight of some important aspects of the history of this idea that has been considered as a preconceived path only by the astute imperialist.¹³

What Rivera is essentially saying is that the role Puerto Rico has chosen for itself is a combination of a number of reasons. In Rivera's opinion these are a poor excuse. He is essentially issuing a call to action to other Puerto Ricans, he is unhappy and wants change. The middle road that Puerto Rico has taken in his eyes is a very negative thing.

The path Puerto Rican has taken can also be seen as a result of there not being a consensus opinion. The lack of consensus by a majority for either statehood or commonwealth status is illustrated by the belief in the importance of each status by both sides. "The statehood movement is one of the most important phenomena in the political history of twentieth-century Puerto Rico."¹⁴ Both groups statehood, and commonwealth are passionately committed to their course of action.

Another view, simply a lack of political development is cited as a reason for the island's current status. "Recent books on Puerto Rico ... have been concerned with economic and social themes and have tended to be monographic ... little attention has

¹² Kal Wagenheim, *The Puerto Ricans* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 288.

¹³ Edgardo Melendez, *Puerto Rico's Statehood Movement* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3. Melendez is explaining the relevance of his book.

been paid to the political dimension of development.”¹⁵ Robert Anderson in this case is explaining that political development in Puerto Rico is an important issue that is often overlooked.

The status of Puerto Rico amongst other nations as well as its history, has developed an isolationist mindset. Simply put because of Puerto Rico’s history of uniqueness will lead to a future of unique status as well.

As a consequence of her colonial situation Puerto Rico is a country artificially isolated from the rest of the world. Not having been incorporated into the community of sovereign nations of the globe, Puerto Rico must always of necessity have her international relations sifted through the US State Department. ¹⁶

Denis explains that because of its’ status Puerto Rico will continue on the same path.

Other academics see Puerto Rico simply as modern day version of colonialism. “Colonialism with the consent of the governed is a painful fact of life for all politically conscious Puerto Ricans.”¹⁷ Puerto Rico is willingly accepting colonialism. Torruella is essentially stating that Puerto Rico has the choice and is choosing colony status simply because of apathy.

Hancock gives the most convincing reason for Puerto Rico’s choice:

Puerto Rico was transformed from an impoverished territory to its current status as a Commonwealth... the island [has] a quasi-autonomy which permits its own control of all civil functions, its own legislature, governor, domestic courts, tax structure. ¹⁸

The fact is simply that Puerto Rico’s status today as a commonwealth makes it part of the United States, denying the residents only representation in the federal government.

¹⁵ Robert W. Anderson, *Party Politics in Puerto Rico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 1. The author is explaining the relevance of his book citing political development as a significant issue.

¹⁶ Manuel Maldonado-Denis, *Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historic Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 1972), 251

¹⁷ Juan R Torruella, “Puerto Rico: Colonialism as Constitutional Doctrine,” in *Latinos in the United States Historical Themes and Identity* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1995), 463.

¹⁸ Ralph Hancock, *Puerto Rico A success story* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1960), 166.

Puerto Rico is unique. It has been that way since the beginning of its history. The island could have at a number of times chosen to be more like other nations and chose not to. At different times it was forced to be unique. There are a number of theories as to why Puerto Rico maintains its status that vary greatly but the unique status is not debated.