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# **Puerto Rico Does Not Want To Be a State**

By

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**Governor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico**

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# Puerto Rico Does Not Want to Be

Despite the examples of Alaska and Hawaii, says Governor Muñoz Marín, its present Commonwealth status best suits both the island and the U. S.

By **LUIS MUNOZ MARIN**

**P**UERTO RICO, now a vigorous self-governing Commonwealth within the American political system, would be smothered if some of its misguided Stateside well-wishers, like Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico and Representative Victor Anfuso of New York, had their way. They have introduced or proposed to introduce bills for Puerto Rican statehood. The bills have no chance of approval in Congress, and only minority support in Puerto Rico.

Recently, in the lobby of a Washington hotel, an old friend greeted me, "Well, Governor, pretty soon we should be seeing you up on the 'Hill' as a Senator from the fifty-first state." He meant it as a high compliment to Puerto Rico, and I was touched by both his warmth and enthusiasm. In the wake of Alaskan and Hawaiian statehood, a similar status for Puerto Rico seemed logical, simple and desirable to him. He melted into the milling crowd of the lobby before I had an opportunity to outline to him the great complexities of Puerto Rico's circumstances, which make statehood neither logical nor desirable for Puerto Rico or the United States.

When I say that it is far better for Puerto Rico to remain a Commonwealth, it is with no insensitivity to the high honor which statehood implies. Nor is it because we seek independence—we definitely do not. Nor does it mean we are content to be less than a federated state—because, definitely, we are not less, but only different. Nor is it because we do not wish to share in the common expenses of the Federal Union, of which we are a part in a new way—since Puerto Rico is now proposing a formula by which it would begin to pay into the Federal Treasury as its economic growth allows it to do so.

**P**UERTO RICO's history has been far different from that of Alaska and Hawaii, and the understandable tendency to speculate on possible statehood for Puerto Rico after the rapid accession of Alaska and Hawaii can lead men of goodwill far astray. Puerto Rico was a populous island with a long history and a well-defined culture when it first came into the American orbit in 1898 following the Spanish-American War. Alaska and Hawaii, on the other hand, were sparsely settled and ripe for colonizing from the mainland.

Alaska and Hawaii became incorporated territories, clearly destined for

cultural integration and eventual statehood. Puerto Rico's special circumstances were early recognized when it became the first unincorporated territory, which implied that it would not be slated for statehood. At the same time it would have been obviously contrary to the American spirit that Puerto Rico should remain a colony forever.

Economic factors were very different, too. Both Alaska and Hawaii have been for many years notably wealthier than Puerto Rico is even now after fourteen years of rapid economic progress since the end of World War II. The net annual average income of Hawaii, and probably of Alaska, is more than \$1,800, very little below the 1957 national average of \$2,027. Puerto Rico's per capita income of \$470 is still less than half of that of the lowest income state of the Union, Mississippi. Puerto Rico has little land in relation to population, no fuels, no significant mineral resources. That is why we have called the program by which we progress "Operation Bootstrap."

**T**HESE economic and cultural factors have since 1898, made Puerto Rico's political evolution unique, and clearly different from that of Alaska and Hawaii. Indeed, as late as 1940, many sober, informed men in the United States considered Puerto Rico's economic and political problems "insoluble," and were resigned to Puerto Rico's being a dependent poorhouse on a kind of permanent dole from the Federal Treasury, a place where poverty and hopelessness would constantly churn up social and political instability.

It took a double-barreled attack on these problems in Puerto Rico itself to lead to the relative prosperity of today, and to the visible social and political health and vigor of the island. First came the attack on poverty, temporarily foreclosing political debate. Only when "Operation Bootstrap" was well under way did Puerto Rico address itself to finding a political status which answered the needs of its special relationship with the United States and its own economic and cultural circumstances.

To those who forget that peoples are the creators of political formulas and not their slaves, Puerto Rico seemed to have no way to turn. Continued existence as a territory or colony was impossible. The corrosive effects of colonialism, even a benevolent colonialism, could no longer be accepted, especially in the

post-war period. Neither dignity, nor the swift course of history, nor common sense, nor the American tradition, would permit the continuation of such a system in the American context.

**I**N contemplation of the inevitable end of colonialism, a sterile debate had raged for many years in the island between adherents of independence and those of statehood. The great majority of Puerto Ricans rejected independence on two counts: Puerto Rico's economy was by then so integrated with that of the United States that separation would have meant economic suicide and, equally important, Puerto Ricans had developed a deep and genuine attachment for their fellow United States citizens and for United States political institutions.

The great majority also rejected the possibility of statehood as totally unrealistic. Economically, statehood then would have meant another form of ruin for Puerto Rico—and still would, as we shall see in a moment.

**T**HE circumstances called for the same kind of political pioneering which created the original thirteen states themselves—a new projection which would be in the spirit of the twentieth century, taking due recognition of the mutual interests of both the United States and Puerto Rico. The concept of a self-governing Commonwealth had been foreseen as long ago as 1912 by Henry L. Stimson, then Secretary of War under President Taft. With far-sighted statesmanship Stimson observed that he saw no inconsistency between United States citizenship for Puerto Ricans and the ideal that Puerto Rico should have, when ready for it, completely autonomous local government within the American system.

This is essentially what happened when Puerto Rico became a Commonwealth in 1952. The official Spanish translation is *Estado Libre Asociado*—Associated Free State: Puerto Rico, in the generic sense of the term, is a new kind of state. Puerto Ricans are United States citizens, sharing with their fellow

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LUIS MUÑOZ MARÍN became the first elected Governor of Puerto Rico in 1948. He was re-elected Governor in 1952 after the territory had been designated a Commonwealth.

citizens in the continental United States a common defense, a common foreign policy, a common market, a common currency and the operation of practically all Federal laws. Puerto Ricans differ from other Americans in that they do not vote in national elections, have no voting representation in Congress, and have, on the other hand, autonomy in directing their local affairs, including the collecting and spending of their own taxes.

Nearly seven years after its hopeful inception, how is the Commonwealth doing? It is doing remarkably well, I am happy to report. "Operation Bootstrap" has raised the per capita income from \$121 in 1940 to today's \$470. Living standards have virtually doubled in fifteen years, perhaps the most rapid economic advance in any underdeveloped region in the world.

Certainly development has been dramatic enough to attract high officials, technicians and students from all over the world to study our methods. Nearly 9,000 visitors from 107 different countries—from Nepal to Saudi Arabia, from Morocco to Bolivia—have studied how we have raised life expectancy from 46 years in 1940 to 68 years today, how we are rapidly winning the fight against illiteracy and how a whole people can be raised, in a few years, from despair and deepest poverty to relative prosperity and dynamic purposefulness.

The creation of the Commonwealth had political as well as economic lessons for the world. It was a notable achievement, in the post-war era, to end a colonial relationship in such a constructive, fruitful manner, devoid of the bitterness and violence which characterized the end of colonialism in many parts of Asia, the Near East and Africa. Puerto Rico clearly gave the lie to the persons (Communists and others) who are always ready to raise the cry of "imperialism" against the United States. It was patently impossible to square "imperial exploitation" with a people who are self-governing, who sent 40,000 of their sons into the armed forces during the Korean conflict (90 per cent of them volunteers) and who are so effectively dramatizing the quality of United States democracy to thousands of earnest observers from all over the world.

**T**HE dignity of self-government has not only engendered an explosion of energy in economic affairs in Puerto Rico

but has seen a lively ferment in cultural realms as well. No one who has visited Puerto Rico recently can be immune to the feeling that "things are happening." The Casals Festival, lively drama, ballet, opera and symphony orchestra seasons are all part of the energized local scene. Puerto Rican painting and writing are in obvious renaissance. A people with new pride and new confidence and new creativity are clearly on the march.

In the light of this progress, it may seem strange that the sterile debate regarding possible statehood at any time in the foreseeable future should have been revived in Puerto Rico. Certainly persons who make any serious study of Puerto Rico's economics are aware that statehood, at this time, or for many generations to come, would mean a fatal crash for the island. It would be like a fully loaded airplane about to be airborne having half its motors suddenly stopped.

Federal taxes would about double the already high tax load that the Commonwealth must impose upon itself in order to keep its public works and public services in line with its rapid economic development. Federated statehood would mean either breaking the back of the taxpayer and thus making further economic development impossible or cutting the public services so drastically that their decay would constitute a bottleneck for private enterprise and economic development.

**T**HERE has been nothing automatic about Puerto Rico's progress to date. Only hard, uphill work has brought it about. And while this progress has been notable enough to attract interest in many countries, our living standards, as I have indicated, are still far below those of the mainland United States.

The Federal Government has long been cognizant of the different economic situations of Puerto Rico and the harsh handicaps imposed by a population concentration of 658 persons per square mile in a mountainous island with virtually no resources. Never, since Puerto Rico was first associated with the United States, has the Federal Government applied Federal taxes here. This was to give the island a chance of economic development as well as to honor the principle of "no taxation without representation." Without this to compensate for the other disadvantages I have mentioned, Puerto Rico would still be in deepest poverty.

Most Federal grants-in-aid apply in Puerto Rico. These grants, like those allowed to the States, are apportioned on the theory that they will benefit the United States as a whole. Matching funds for building certain roads and for hospital construction are cases in point.

The United States tariff is collected in Puerto Rico on foreign imports—which, by the way, are few, since most of our trade is with the United States—but the receipts go into the Commonwealth

treasury after the cost of collection is deducted. In this way American manufacturers are protected from foreign competition while the Puerto Rican treasury is benefited. This is important because Puerto Rico is one of the world's greatest per-capita consumers of United States products, spending \$700 million a year on them. The Federal excise tax on Puerto Rican rum, while it serves to protect American distillers, also reverts to the Commonwealth.

On the other hand, our association with the United States imposes some penalties on the Puerto Rican economy, for which our treasury is not compensated. Under the Sugar Act of 1946, for example, Puerto Rico loses considerable potential income by being denied the right to refine more than 11 per cent of its own sugar production. In addition, shipping rates between Puerto Rico and United States ports are artificially high because they are governed by the coastwise shipping laws confining cargoes to American vessels. While these laws have the legitimate objective of subsidizing United States shipping for defense purposes, in practice they place a heavy share of this defense load on Puerto Rican consumers.

**F**ROM the United States point of view, the accession of a state unable to pay Federal taxes except at the cost of economic ruin is obviously inconceivable. Puerto Rico, which as a Commonwealth is a showcase of American democracy before the world, would, as a federated state, become exactly the opposite: an economy in shambles, having to be kept alive by a W.P.A. type of charity, with a people far more hopeless than during the worst of the great depression.

Nor has the United States the desire or interest to force the cultural assimilation of Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico. Indeed, the fact that Puerto Ricans are probably the most bilingual people in the hemisphere, with deep understanding of and ties to both their fellow United States citizens and their Latin neighbors, has made Puerto Rico a valuable meeting place for people and ideas at a time when Latin America is in a state of far-reaching flux. Its unique position has been an undoubted asset for the United States in sensing changing currents in Latin America, and in translating its hemisphere policy into action.

**B**UT even now, however limited our means, Puerto Rico wants to make it clear that it intends to begin contributing to the Federal treasury as its economic circumstances permit. There is now a bill before Congress whose purpose is to define the permanent association of Puerto Rico with the United States. One principle is clearly established: that Puerto Rico wishes, of its own accord and within its abilities, to

help shoulder the Federal burden by contributing money to the Federal Government and by performing some functions in Puerto Rico now underwritten by U.S. taxpayers.

Puerto Rico is not looking for a "free ride." On the contrary, it is just as anxious to carry its share of the financial load as its sons were to risk their lives in Europe and Korea—as a matter of pride and dignity, as our contribution to the whole.

When the strident chorus of nationalism begins to fade in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa, some ingenious formula may permit the rational regrouping of new and old sovereign units on a sounder economic basis, just as the

United States and Puerto Rico found a workable formula. The world has become too small, too complex, too interdependent to permit indefinite political fragmentation at the price of widespread poverty. Where blind insistence on rigid, nineteenth-century-style sovereignty exists in defiance of economic logic, new forms of federalism are called for. Puerto Ricans are proud that they are contributing to the American political system a new form of federalism.

**I**N dedicating the Puerto Rico Supreme Court Building, Chief Justice Earl Warren expressed this in words that remind

us of the creative political genius of the United States:

"In the sense that our American system is not static, in the sense that it is not an end but the means to an end—in the sense that it is an organism intended to grow and expand to meet varying conditions and times in a large country—in the sense that every governmental effort of ours is an experiment—so the new institutions of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico represent an experiment—the newest experiment and perhaps the most notable of American governmental experiments in our lifetimes."

A new way of abolishing colonialism has been born.