

JAMES R. BROCKMAN

Puerto Rico's Future

For the first time, residents of Puerto Rico have participated in U.S. Presidential politics through the primary elections held there. On February 17, 210,000 voters elected 14 delegates to the Republican convention, and on March 16, some 800,000 elected 41 delegates to the Democratic convention. For Puerto Rico, if not for the candidates themselves, the fact of the elections was probably more significant than the outcome. In the Democratic primary, some 80 percent of the electorate voted (including many or most who had voted in the Republican primary), and thereby displayed their apparent desire to participate in mainland politics.

For Gov. Carlos Romero Barceló, the primaries were an important move in his maneuvers to make Puerto Rico the 51st state. Having had a taste of voting for President, Puerto Ricans must now watch the November election go by without being able to vote. Governor Romero will then urge them to vote for statehood in a referendum that he plans to hold next year. Statehood advocates are predicting a vote of 60 percent for statehood. They seem likely to get at least a majority.

That would be a disappointment for the Popular Democratic Party, which advocates association with the United States, and for the Independence Party and others, who want an independent Puerto Rico. It would not mean the end of their hopes, however, nor the fulfillment of the hopes of statehood advocates.

Statehood must be conferred by Congress, and Congress might not be willing to do it. As a state, Puerto Rico would have about seven representatives in the House, and other states could possibly lose the same number. No congressman would like to vote his state fewer seats and perhaps vote himself out of office.

Some will surely object, also, that Puerto Rico is a land of a different language and culture. When Congress admitted Oklahoma, Arizona and New Mexico, it required them to use English in legislatures and public schools. Congress might feel the same about Puerto Rico—and Governor Romero has said such conditions would be unacceptable to him. Besides, if a sizable minority, such as 40 percent, votes against statehood, it would seem that too large a proportion of Puerto Ricans reject integration into the United States with the consequent diminishment and eventual loss of their own culture and language. Some Puerto Ricans obviously feel very intensely their difference and are willing to fight to maintain it. The terrorist groups that have attacked U.S. soldiers and killed U.S. sailors in Puerto Rico and set off bombs there and here may be small in numbers, but many in the U.S. Congress may prefer not to take them on as a permanent adversary. Who, after all, needs an I.R.A. or a P.L.O.?

Another difficulty may concern money. Puerto Rico is exempt at present from most Federal taxes, including the income tax. Puerto Rico residents pay about the same taxes as mainlanders, but to the Puerto Rican Government. Even so, Puerto Rico has a public debt of \$22 billion, a sign of its continuing economic problems. The Federal Government would probably have to assume Puerto Rico's debt, as it did Hawaii's in 1898, and also give it financial help, as it helped Alaska with cash and 103 million acres of public lands. Puerto Rico as a state would probably not cost the Federal treasury much more than it does now, but some Congress members might object to admitting a state that would be a financial burden for the foreseeable future.

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In the past, Congress has often been slow to grant statehood, even when residents of a territory clearly wanted it. Alaskans voted for statehood in 1946 and Congress approved it only in 1958. A General Accounting Office study notes that Congress has been reluctant to admit states with cultures different from the rest, like Utah, New Mexico and Hawaii.

Statehood, moreover, would not necessarily mean the end of agitation for independence or autonomy. The Basques have been part of a united Spain for centuries, Ireland was once part of the United Kingdom and one could go on and on with examples of peoples that resisted absorption into another nation. Some Puerto Ricans would undoubtedly continue to resist assimilation.

Governor Romero has said that if Puerto Ricans ask for statehood and Congress refuses, he will work for independence. He may mean what he says. No doubt others would react to a rejection by Congress in the same way. Some independence advocates are counting on it and predicting a great upsurge of independence sentiment when the statehood movement stumbles.

Congress has a precedent in granting independence: the Philippines. Like Puerto Rico, the Philippines were taken from Spain by conquest in 1898. Unlike Puerto Rico, the Philippines declared their independence, with Admiral Dewey's encouragement, after the battle of Manila Bay in 1898, drew up a constitution and inaugurated a president. Both Spain and the United States ignored this action, however, and the islands remained under U.S. government until the Japanese occupation of 1941. Congress had finally granted independence in 1934, however, with a 10-year transition period, so that the Philippines became officially independent in 1944 and really so in 1946. Filipinos celebrate their Independence Day, however, on June 12, the anniversary of the 1898 declaration.

Although independence sentiment has not been so widespread in Puerto Rico as in the Philippines, it is just as passionate and just as old. The Latin American independence movement arrived in Puerto Rico with an uprising in 1868 that Spain quickly quelled. Independence sentiment among many Puerto Ricans continued, however, under both Spain and the United States. A small uprising occurred against U.S. rule in 1950, but most independence advocates have abstained from

ence. In recent years, they have shown less political strength, but many observers think that independence sentiment sleeps in the heart of most Puerto Ricans, waiting to be awakened by a change in political conditions or the kiss of a charismatic leader. So far, the Prince Charming has not appeared, but he just might be Carlos Romero Barceló if the Governor finds his statehood dream frustrated and decides to become the first president of the republic of Puerto Rico.

That is to move far ahead into the realm of speculation, however. If Puerto Ricans choose statehood and Congress refuses, the immediate result for Puerto Rico will be to continue as it is. The "Commonwealth," a system of limited self-government, was devised in 1952 to appease anti-colonial forces in the United Nations. In recent years all political groups in Puerto Rico have rejected its present form, including its founders, the Popular Democratic Party, which calls for greater autonomy within the present structure. For the United States, the present arrangement is an embarrassment, since Puerto Rican leaders of all persuasions do not hesitate

to call it colonialism. This is because it is Congress and Federal law that govern Puerto Rico, even though Congress has conceded limited local rule. Such critics of the present system as the Puerto Rican Bar Association and the American Friends Service Committee want Congress to renounce its power over Puerto Rico and let Puerto Ricans choose their own future. That, Congress is unlikely to do, even though U.S. politicians profess adherence to Puerto Rican self-determination.

"The problem of Puerto Rico is colonialism," wrote José A. Cabranes in Foreign Policy (Winter 1978-79), "and decolonization stands at the front and center of the island's politics and its relations with the United States, now and for the foreseeable future." Mr. Cabranes was special counsel to the Governor of Puerto Rico and administrator of the commonwealth's Washington office under the Popular Democratic government. Since writing the above, he has become a Federal judge. Even the ardently pro-American Governor Romero Barceló admits that the U.S.-Puerto Rican relationship contains "vestiges of colonialism," and

some of his fellow party members use even stronger words.

Governor Romero sees statehood as the best way out of colonialism's vestiges, but he faces a hurdle of his own before he can even have his statehood referendum—he must be reelected next November. He is a popular figure, but he was unable to deliver the big win that he wanted in the primary for his candidate, President Carter. Former Gov. Rafael Hernández Colón of the Popular Democratic Party backed Senator Edward M. Kennedy. Many Puerto Ricans viewed the primary as a warmup between the Governor and the former Governor, who will face off in November for the governorship, rather than a Carter-Kennedy popularity poll, as mainlanders saw it. If Mr. Hernández Colón should unseat Mr. Romero in November, there will be no statehood referendum next year. The Popular Democratic Governor would continue to seek greater autonomy under the commonwealth structure, and Puerto Rico's future would be as uncertain as before.

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