Serie 2

PUERTO RICO: SELF DETERMINATION IN PRACTICE

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Ladies and gentlemen: *

I should like to express my deep appreciation to the Latin American Institute of the University of Texas for affording me an opportunity to come back to a land very close to my heart. I cherish the memory of my student days here when the University authorities had just laid the first stone of the Library tower which has now become a symbol of Texas watchfulness and alertness in the field of higher education. I gratefully remember my seminars and classes with Charles Wilson Hackett, one of the founders of the Institute. It was through him that I learned of the history of Texas and the Spanish Southwest, that I delved into the drama of Mexico's political development and gained a basic understanding of the need for serious study and hard thinking in the area of inter-American Relations. Many and great were Dr. Hackett's contributions in this field. But to us, his students, he was particularly unexcelled in the eagerness and human warmth of his teaching, in the sense of comradeship he developed in the classroom and in the humorous, tolerant and wise vein of his thinking as he unfolded the complexities of New World history.

In coming to Texas and the Southwest, I feel a profound affinity with the people here which goes beyond the fact that, as a Puerto Rican, I share with you the bonds of a common citizenship. It is an

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affinity which stems out of a rich and mellowed historical heritage. You have here, as we have in Puerto Rico, a land that has been visited by many cultures and races, a crossroads of civilization. You also have a sense of vitality and progressiveness and a desire to conquer new human frontiers which are also typical of the collective drive which animates the people of Puerto Rico. And may I add that you have a pride in your historical achievements, in the peculiarities of your folkways and regional traditions, a love of your flag and of your Texan local institutions, which greatly resemble the cultural self-expression of the people of Puerto Rico.

It is, therefore, fitting that as a former Texan resident, I should tell you something today of the culture and aspirations of the newest partner of the American Union: the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico belongs historically and culturally to the West Indian area—an area crisscrossed by many racial strains. In the early stages of Spanish colonization, the island of Saint John the Baptist —now Puerto Rico—was a busy center of experimentation in the great effort to transplant European civilization to the New World. It served as a stepping stone to the exploration of the mainland and later provided the first shield of defense when the bold intruders from France, England and Holland moved into the Spanish Main.

Our city of San Juan was surrounded by walls and fortresses in order to repel all aggressors. Strategic consideration dominated Spanish thinking with regard to Puerto Rico. The island was to be a mailed fist embodying Spanish determination to preserve its great and extended American empire.

Outside the city walls the rural folks were forgotten. Their small communities began to mushroom along the coastline as the settlers traded with

smugglers to obtain the barest necessities of life. I have found documents concerning the early relations of these rustic colonists with famous American characters like the fabulous pirate William Kidd.

In the eighteenth century, the human frontier moved into the rugged interior of the island. A new Puerto Rico was already in the making outside the city walls—a Puerto Rico which was never a rich sugar colony worked by great masses of slaves to the advantage of a handful of aristocratic planters. We evolved rather as a poor country where the white and the negro and the mulatto had to work together in the field and share basic human experiences in order to make a living. Slavery was never among us a flourishing institution. Our social development was slower than in the neighboring islands or on the mainland and yet more organic, less plagued by tensions and misunderstandings.

Our nineteenth century saw the emergence of our regional consciousness, of our town life with its provincial manners, of our first literary and cultural efforts. The seeds of liberalism were cast in our soil. But we did not embark upon the adventuresome experiment of total separation from Spain and of political anarchy and *caudillismo* as did the other Hispanic countries of the New World. Ever since the beginnings of our native search for political self-determination, we professed less adherence to the abstract tenets of a revolutionary ideology and more concern with regard to practical economic and political formulas that could assist the growth of our society and economy.

There is a noticeable trend in Puerto Rican political history towards the basic ideals of federative association. In Haiti, nationhood was understood to mean the breaking of all bonds, politically and racially, with the French people. In Cuba, nationhood meant at the end of the century a mortal struggle

with Spain with the emphasis on total separation. But to us, in Puerto Rico, the achievement of self-expression was mainly sought within a system of self government, of autonomy, which was finally embodied in a charter given by the Mother Country shortly before the Spanish American war broke out. Even our greatest political thinker of the last century, Eugenio María de Hostos, who labored for the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico, was never attracted to the idea of total national sovereignty as the highest solution, but thought that an Antillean federation sponsored by the United States was the most adequate *desideratum* for the islands.

I have dwelt upon the historical background of Puerto Rico because there are many important features of modern Puerto Rican life that can only be properly explained if looked at from a broad time perspective.

We have inherited a long history that has greatly influenced our collective behaviour, our language and our institutions. By historical definition, we are a Latin-American people of the West Indian islands. We are the product of one of the great crossroads of America. Our folk wisdom is rooted in this experience of life in a frontier region where the surge of animosities has always been tempered by the all too human impulse towards communication and friendship.

History also brought us in direct contact with the United States. We have been a part of the American political system since 1898. But more than that: we have faced the need of readjusting our institutions and our way of life to the dynamic impact of American culture. There is, indeed, no greater experiment in Puerto Rican history than the experiment of the last fifty years.

As in all processes of transculturation, of frontier give and take, there were moments of frustration and misunderstanding. But the basic impulse of American fairplay and the plastic, flexible nature of our society have overcome most shortcomings and led us into a partnership which I strongly feel, not only holds great promise to the people of Puerto Rico, but is already contributing, in a most positive way, to the cause of inter-American understanding.

This partnership is directly concerned with a dramatic surge forward that has taken place in Puerto Rico, based on two fundamental democratic principles: the principle of government by consent and the principle of self-determination. Both of these principles are now formally proclaimed and acknowledged in our relations with the United States and especially in our Commonwealth Constitution. But they have been guiding our historical development ever since 1940. They formed, indeed, the hard core of our political life even before they found their expression in constitutional theory.

We are a poor country, beset by many harassing problems. Our natural resources are very limited. We lack oil and coal and iron. And yet we have an astounding population density of 668 persons per square mile. But the Puerto Rican people resolved in 1940 that their Legislature, which was popularly elected, should lead the way in meeting head-on the challenging and distressing reality of overpopulation and underproduction, of inadequate distribution of wealth and substandards of living. They made the firm decision to do away with whatever vestiges of colonialism there may have been in their economic and political relations with the United States. And above all, they insisted that their elected representatives should embark upon a policy of self-help and self-reliance, free of nationalistic overtones, prudent and patient, and yet, at the same time, inflexible in

its aim of overcoming poverty and achieving political and economic freedom.

It is to the high credit of the United States that it understood, respected and assisted this expression of our collective will. Thus, a partnership was created that has gone beyond the issue of personalities and political parties, and is now rooted in a deep understanding of common purposes and a sharing of common democratic values.

In the background of that partnership, there lies, also, a change in the climate of opinion in Washington concerning the island. From 1940 to 1946, local efforts to improve public services and facilities, to promote economic development through the creation of new industries and manufacturing opportunities, to foster increased agricultural productivity and to achieve distributive justice, as well as efficient administration, were gradually understood and appreciated in the White House and the Congress and encouraged in Puerto Rico under the administration of the last United States-born Governors of the island. In both parties friends began to appear. There was a growing awareness in many places that something new was developing in Puerto Rico, that the island was quite alive and not dormant and passive.

After the Second World War was over, things really began to happen. In 1946, the President of the United States appointed Jesús Piñero, who had been elected by the people of Puerto Rico as their Resident Commissioner in Washington to the post of Governor. In so doing, the President respected the principle of government by consent which had not yet found full expression in our political status. A further step was taken when in 1947 the Jones Act, our Organic Law, was amended to permit the election of the Governor and liberalize the Executive

branch by making all members of the Cabinet appointees of the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Senate of Puerto Rico.

Already we had achieved, in fact, a truly responsible government. When in 1948, Luis Muñoz Marín was elected as the first native Governor of Puerto Rico in the island's long history, the full energies of the people, unhindered and untrammeled, were put to the task of rebuilding the economy according to a program locally conceived and administered and effectively responsive to popular aspirations. The Governor—a master in graphic language in both English and Spanish—called this effort "Operation Bootstrap" to provide our continental friends with a true image of the dramatic struggle of our people in casting away the shackles of a worn-out tradition of economic passivity and political unfulfillment. And to our rural folks, who have grown in fortitude and austerity in the hilly regions of Puerto Rico, he gave a slogan: *¡Jalda Arriba!*—Uphill!, Uphill! —as a cry of hope and effort.

Jalda Arriba or Operation Bootstrap has meant to our people the ~~doubling~~ of the income per capita over the past ~~twelve~~ years in real terms of purchasing power. It has increased agricultural production from $70 million dollars in 1940 to ~~$144~~ million dollars in ~~1952.~~ It has meant the establishment of over ~~225~~ new factories since the end of the war with an investment of ~~$65~~ million dollars in the over-all industrialization effort of which the government contributed not more than ~~$20~~ millions as an incentive to the program. It has meant the increase in life expectancy from 46 in 1940 to ~~61~~ years in ~~1952.~~ It has practically eliminated malaria and dramatically reduced the tuberculosis rate, two of the most harassing diseases in the history of Puerto Rico.

Jalda arriba has also meant the opening of new educational facilities to our younger generation: more schools, more vocational training, more scholarships than ever before. A little over 300,000 children attended our school system in 1940. Today we have over 525,000. The program has carried electricity to remote villages and *barrios* and it has provided nearly 8,000 new housing units in healthy and favorable surroundings to move the people away from the slum areas.

In 1950, it was high time to express in legal and constitutional terms the real facts of political and economic life in Puerto Rico. The dynamic stream of events led us, then, to Washington. The people of Puerto Rico through its government requested from the Congress the right to establish their own constitutional government on the basis of a compact with the Federal government.

On July 3, 1950, Public Law 600 was approved. In its first article, the law stated: "That, fully recognizing the principle of consent, this Act is now adopted in the nature of a compact so that the people of Puerto Rico may organize a government pursuant to a constitution of their own adoption."

There were two basis features in the new congressional legislation. The part of the former Organic Act which referred to the *modus operandi* of the federal government in Puerto Rico and the relationships between the government and people of Puerto Rico and the United States continued upon approval of the Puerto Rican voters and according to the principle of compact, as a Statute of Puerto Rican Federal Relations. Puerto Ricans retained their American citizenship, free trade was assured with the mainland, as well as exemption from payment of US internal revenues, the refund of internal revenues to the Insular Treasury when paid on Puerto Rican products brought to the Continent, the

refund of custom dues collected in Puerto Rico on foreign imports, the position of the Resident Commissioner in Congress, the Federal District Court in Puerto Rico and other provisions defining the role of federal jurisdiction in the island, similar to the States.

The novel aspect of the legislation dealt with the mechanics through which the compact was to be implemented by Puerto Rico and the United States. Public Law 600—it should be stressed—was no ordinary law of Congress. The act could only take effect if approved by the people of Puerto Rico in an island-wide referendum. Upon approval of the Act, by a majority of the voters participating in such referendum, Public Law 600 provided that the Legislature of Puerto Rico was authorized to call a constitutional convention to draft a constitution. The said constitution—according to the law—had to provide a republican form of government and include a bill of rights.

A period of intense political and constitutional activity in Puerto Rico was ushered in by the approval of Law 600. There was first the referendum on June 4, 1951, in which 65 per cent of the 777,675 qualified voters of Puerto Rico participated and 76.5% of those voting approved the act. On August 27 of the same year ninety-two delegates were elected to the constitutional convention representing three of the four parties of the island. Only the Independentists—a small minority—abstained.

The convention met in September, 1951, and concluded its painstaking work in February 1952. An official English and an official Spanish version of the constitution were adopted and wide publicity was given to the document throughout the island. On March 3, 1952, nearly 375,000 voters accepted the Constitution with only 83,000 rejections. The President transmitted the document to the Congress

of the United States which ratified it promptly. On July 25, exactly fifty-four years after American troops had landed in the island, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico was proclaimed in an impressive ceremony attended by distinguished guests from most countries of the Americas.

Thus, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico was born on July 25, 1952, as a new manner in the experiment of political association in response to a long historical urge for self-determination in Puerto Rico and in keeping with the wisdom and democratic idealism of American constitutional theories and practices.

The principle of compact, deeply rooted in the historical origins of American democracy, is now the cornerstone of our association with the United States. It is a dynamic principle which may call for further developments as this new partnership unfolds its rich potentialities, both in its mutual relationships and in its contacts with the rest of the world.

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is therefore a unique experiment in American constitutional development. Puerto Rico is not a state of the Union like Texas or Florida nor is it an independent republic. It is a new kind of state bound to the United States by the provisions of Law 600 freely approved by our people, under the principle of compact. It is an experiment in voluntary association on the basis of mutual trust and understanding.

This new pattern of relationships provides a novel outlet to the old territory-state dichotomy that characterized the evolution of the Union throughout the nineteenth Century. We think of it as a dynamic framework, best suited to our present conditions but capable of positive growth. It is highly sensitive to the purposive elan in our collective life. It preserves

our cultural characteristics, our urge for self-development and self-expression, and at the same time it strengthens the bonds of affection that link us to our fellow-citizens of the mainland.

The preamble of our constitution reads as follows: "We, the people of Puerto Rico, in order to organize politically on a fully democratic basis, to promote the general welfare, and to secure for ourselves and our posterity the complete enjoyment of human rights, placing our trust in Almighty God, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Commonwealth which, in the exercise of our natural rights, we now create within our union with the United States of America."

These words have deep meanings for us. They are symbolic of the assertion of freedom in a small corner of our tortured world. And they speak of the quality of greatness of America.

The birth of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is, above all, a significant event in the field of inter-American relations. Puerto Rico stands as a vivid and tangible example of the possibilities of inter-American friendship and understanding. Our political association with the United States is, of course, a product of the peculiar nature of our social and economic evolution. It is a formula best fitted to our special conditions and not neccessarily applicable to any other area.

But the spirit of comradeship and amity which now characterizes the relationships of the people of Puerto Rico with the American people is of great import to our neighbors south of the Río Grande. In Puerto Rico we have applied American ideas and methods to strengthen our democratic processes and to wage an implacable fight against hunger, disease, poverty and ignorance. Whether it is in the field of public health or housing or rural electrification or

in the more delicate sphere of education and human relationships we have accepted and adapted American concepts, wherever and whenever we found them compatible with our cultural values, our way of life and our basic needs.

In so doing, we have enriched our heritage and opened new vistas of social progress and economic and political stability. In spite of our limitations, we are already a useful laboratory in the great trend of our age concerning the transition of underdeveloped areas of low standards of living into thriving communities, free of economic colonialism and political frustration.

The Department of State in Washington awarded Puerto Rico the distinction of becoming a training center for students under the Technical Cooperation Program for underdeveloped countries. Ever since 1950, a joint project has been undertaken by the United States and the Government of Puerto Rico which has brought to the island ~~nearly 450~~ over 2,000 trainees and ~~183~~ visitors from ~~65~~ 85 different countries. A good many of them came from Latin America, but the program has also included visitors from such faraway places as Burma, the Gold Coast, Formosa, Pakistan, Iraq and the Union of South Africa among others.

Our visitors from Latin America and other continents are witnessing the new determination with which Puerto Rico is attempting to cope with its difficult problems. They are seeing democracy at work in a society neither highly industrialized nor endowed with abundant resources.

The Commonwealth Government feels that this program ought to be extended and intensified. We are planning to encourage the visit to the island of many of the leaders of thought and opinion in the other American countries. We want Puerto Rico to be a real meeting place of men of good will where

in an atmosphere of work and peaceful effort the basic problems of this Hemisphere relating to intercultural relations, economic improvement and mutual assistance can be explored with profit and faith.

We have struck a well in the island, richer perhaps than the fabulous oil deposits of this gifted state of Texas. It is the well of renewed hope in man. And we want to share this wealth with whoever comes our way from the broad horizons of the free world. This is, perhaps, our greatest contribution to the partnership we have established of our own free will with the American Union.