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## Walter Rogers Reports

# Puerto Rico Is Unique As Political Subdivision Of U.S.

Legislation is currently pending in the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, on which I serve in the House, which would considerably alter the status of part of America. I speak of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, about which the history, political evolution and status are hazy to many people. The Committee has recently conducted a survey of the historical, economic and political affairs of Puerto Rico and is currently holding hearings in an effort to determine proper legislative moves in many areas concerning our Caribbean possession.

Naturally, the entire subject could not be covered in the brief span of this newsletter, but it occurred to me you might be interested in some of the facts current which are pertinent.

When Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1493, the Spanish anticipated great mineral wealth — hence, the name Porto

Rico, or rich port. For the next 400 years Porto Rico was, in varied status, a Spanish possession. The island was occupied by U.S. troops during the Spanish American War and was ceded to the U.S. as a result of the Treaty of Paris of April 11, 1899, which designated Congress as having the responsibility for determining the civil rights and political status of its inhabitants. Thus began a period of 61 years, still continuing, in which the Puerto Rican people have gradually evolved from military occupation toward complete local self government, and from an exclusively agricultural economy to a rapidly diversified industrial and commercial system.

The Foraker Act passed by the Congress in 1900 ended the military occupation but did not grant citizenship to the people of Puerto Rico. It provided for a form of civil government with most of the legislative, judicial and executive

offices to be appointed by the President. It was recognized even at that time that the island's status was unique in the American political system. Historically and constitutionally the U.S. has always provided for the greatest degree of self determination in government. This has been achieved by the of Puerto Rico as well as the right granting of statehood, territorial status, or outright independence as was the case of the Philippine Islands.

The Jones Act of 1917 granted collective citizenship to the people to elect certain of their own governing officials, but retained strong veto power with the President and the Congress. Many benefits were extended to the people of Puerto Rico during the next 30 years including those of the Smith-Hughes Act, the creation of the Puerto Rican Reconstruction Administration and the right to elect their own governor. In 1950, Congress passed legislation which would allow the people of Puerto Rico to draw up their own constitution, but did not abdicate Congressional responsibility for the island. Under the terms of Public Law 600 "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", only two stipulations were included with respect to the content of that constitution.

The bill required "that the constitution shall provide a republican form of government and shall include a bill of rights." It provided for a Puerto Rican referendum on the acceptance or rejection of Public Law 600, which referendum supported it overwhelmingly. The constitution was subsequently adopted by the people of Puerto Rico and ratified by the Congress and the new government thus constituted was referred to as a Commonwealth in English while in Spanish it became Estado Libre Asociado, or Free Associated State.

Thus, a political subdivision of the U.S. exists which is unlike any other part of America. This booming, burgeoning Caribbean isle enjoys a great degree of self government, although it bears the title Commonwealth rather than state or territory. Many questions have been raised as to the position of the island as regards the authority of Congress. Several factions in Puerto Rico seek a change in status, and bills have been introduced in the 86th Congress which would (1) provide for extensive amendments to the "compact" between the people of Puerto Rico and the U.S., (2) grant outright independence to Puerto Rico or (3) grant statehood to the island. I have heard many of these proposals discussed. From the expressions of the Puerto Rican people which have come to me, it would appear the majority of them are conscious of their democratic growth and development in their present status, and I foresee no immediate change.

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