

Puerto Rico Libre — And Good Riddance

Independence is best for both P.R. and the U.S.

by George Szamuely

President Clinton was right to offer the 16 imprisoned members of the FALN clemency. In fact, he should have gone further. He should have announced his intention of granting independence to Puerto Rico as soon as possible. The continued possession of Puerto Rico is a throwback to a colonial era that should have been abandoned long ago. Puerto Rico's bizarre "commonwealth" status is one that robs Puerto Ricans of their dignity and Americans of their dollars. Moreover, the acquisition of Puerto Rico followed one of the most shameful acts of American history — one that has particular significance today. In 1898 the United States picked a fight with Spain for no reason whatsoever. As a result of that war Spain lost its few remaining imperial possessions and with it its sense of national honor. And America abandoned its proud anti-colonial tradition and became

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a colonial power.

In 1895 Cuba mounted one of its periodic rebellions against Spanish rule. As the Spanish sought to restore order Americans got caught up in self-righteous frenzy. President William McKinley understandably had little enthusiasm for going to war with Spain. Spain posed no threat to the United States. It ran its empire pretty well. And if it were to be dispossessed of its colonies what was to be done with them? No American seriously believed that Cubans could govern themselves. But the shrieking Bill Kristols and David Rieffs of that time did not trouble themselves with such details. Day after day they would proclaim that American intervention was essential to prevent a great humanitarian calamity. Newspapers were filled with lurid tales of unimaginable horrors that the Spanish were perpetrating. "Massacre," "Slaughter of Innocent Noncombatants Continues in Cuba," "Bodies Thrown into Trenches and Left Unburied" were a few of the contemporary headlines. William Randolph Hearst's gutter journalism was almost as bad as Rupert Murdoch's.

To intervene was a

"humanitarian" imperative. One senator declared: "We intervene not for conquest, nor for aggrandizement ... we intervene for humanity's sake ... to aid a people who have suffered every form of tyranny and who have made a desperate struggle to be free." Sound familiar? Here is what Henry Cabot Lodge had to say about Spain: it was "three hundred years behind all the rest of the world ... What seems to us brutal treachery seems to them all right." "I would like to see Spain ... swept from the face of the earth," said suffragist leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Stacy Sullivan of her day. Hating the Spanish was even more fun than hating the Serbs. Catholic and obviously in decline, they were ideal material on which Americans could etch their lurid fantasies.

Though Americans fought poorly, they were fortunate that the Spanish performed even worse. The war was to have devastating consequences. Spain went from revolution to dictatorship to civil war. The Franco era brought a measure of stability but it also cut Spain off from the rest of Europe. Today the Spanish are once more in a downward spiral. For its part,

America acquired colonies that it had no idea what to do with. Neither statehood nor independence was thinkable to the U.S. So it came up with a compromise solution: these territories would be reduced to dependencies of one sort or another of the United States.

Such a solution was to have wretched consequences for everyone else. Cuba, for instance, never really recovered from being cut off from Spain. Ask any Cuban today and he will tell you that the Spanish era was Cuba's most glorious time. Cut off from Spain and Spanish culture, Cuba never managed to develop any stable self-government. The United States arrogated to itself the right to intervene in Cuba any time it felt that American interests were endangered. It was a right that the United States was to exercise with some frequency in coming years. The story of the Philippines is just as dismal. Fighting broke out immediately between U.S. forces on the island and Filipino rebels. Soon Americans were committing the very atrocities for which they had so self-righteously denounced the Spanish. By 1901, 200,000 Filipino civilians had been killed in the fighting. Having won this war, the United States proceeded relentlessly with the Americanization of the Filipinos. The result was a disaster. Unlike other places in Asia, no sense of nationhood ever developed in the Philippines.

The United States acquired Puerto Rico without ever really intending to. Puerto Rico, impoverished and wretched, became an American possession as compensation for expenses that the U. S. incurred fighting its war with Spain. A ferocious campaign

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of Americanization pretty much destroyed a 400-year-old Spanish culture, but did not succeed in turning Puerto Ricans into English-speakers. The United States then decided that Puerto Rico would be denied statehood, independence or even any representation in the federal government. As part of an oppressive Spanish Empire, Puerto Rico had voting representation in both chambers of parliament in Madrid, whereas it was never to have any representation under U.S. democracy. U.S. federal laws apply to Puerto Rico and they are enforced by federal agencies. Yet Puerto Ricans have no say in the making of these laws.

Not surprisingly, Puerto Rico has become a parasite. Exempt

from federal taxes, it lives off federal handouts. It survives by being able to export its population to the mainland. Puerto Rico has an unemployment rate of 13 percent (three times that on the mainland); 20 percent of its workforce is employed by the government; 30 percent of its economy derives from federal transfers. When the food stamp program was introduced in the 1960s, something like 75 percent of the island's population was eligible for food stamps. Puerto Rico received no less than 10 percent of all federal food stamp payments. The program brought billions to Puerto Rico. It fueled corruption, crime, drugs, gang warfare, as well as a culture of dependency. Puerto Ricans found that living on welfare was quite lucrative. No one felt much like working after that. Boasting poverty and hardship became a means of squeezing more money out of the U.S. Treasury.

Sadly, Puerto Ricans have become quite satisfied with their current absurd “commonwealth” status. As a U.S. state, they would no longer be exempt from federal taxes. As an independent country, they would no longer be eligible for federal handouts. This is why the time has come to do to the Puerto Ricans what grown-ups are eventually forced to do to their idle offspring: kick them out of the house. If it makes him feel any better, let Clinton apologize for a hundred years of colonialism while he is doing it. **TRC**

On Teachable Moments

An illuminating exchange about immigration numbers and population growth

by **Tim Aaronson**

[“ProjectUSA” tries to inform the public about the need for immigration reform by setting up billboards alongside congested highways with the message that uncontrolled immigration is affecting the quality of life in our country by contributing to rapid population growth with its attendant pressures on infrastructure and resources. The following exchange was prompted by a note from a teacher in Brooklyn, New York, upon seeing, along with her students, a Project USA billboard.]

Dear ProjectUSA:

We all enjoy freedom of speech in this country, but how do you explain the message presented in your billboards to a group of children whose parents or themselves are immigrants?

I am a schoolteacher who recently went out on a trip in a school bus through Brooklyn. One of my fourth graders asked me what the billboard about immigration was trying to say. As I tried to explain it to her it dawned on me that she herself, her parents, and grandparents are immigrants. I became very embarrassed and asked other students to help me explain what the billboard was saying. My students began a discussion based on the message in the billboard.

They all decided that the billboard is not helping our society. The message is creating conflict among the children of different backgrounds and hatred against a group of people. These fourth

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graders stated that people who see the billboard will think that immigrants are bad people and will act violently against them.

In school I asked some of my colleagues their opinion about the billboards and your web site. We would like to know what do you mean by “American people?”

According to you, who is a true “American Person?” Is it Native Americans, People from North and South America or United States citizens who entered the U.S. before 1970?

When you say that Americans have their own culture, can you describe and explain that culture? Isn't everything in this country adopted from foreign countries?

I'd like to end here and ask you to think and research why the number of immigrants is increasing so dramatically. Why does every working class person in every other country in the world dream of coming to this one for a better life? What has happened to the world that no one is happy at home? Who is truly to blame for their unhappiness?

Zulma Hernandez, 4th grade teacher.

Tim Aaronson responds:

As one who has spent his career in education, I recognize good teaching technique — in this case your seizing the “teachable moment” and discussing immigration with your students. I would also like to thank you for the tone of your inquiry. It is in stark contrast to the many who are unable to distinguish concern from hatred. I hope I succeed in convincing you that it is the former and not the latter that motivates ProjectUSA to put up billboards.

First, let me try to explain the concerns many of us have. The U.S. is growing at a staggering rate. Americans are the greatest consumers of world resources so it is particularly important that we act