Puerto Rico Statehood: To Be or Not To Be?

In 1952 Puerto Rico entered the Promised Land as a Commonwealth of the United States with all the hopes and dreams of finally having an organized government and the opportunity to become a full-fledged state of the most powerful country on the planet; and yet, unlike Alaska and Hawaii, Puerto Rico has not completed its path to Statehood. Five decades of uncertainty as a colony of the United States under its flag were made official, but those five uncertain decades were followed by five more of legal uncertainty under a pair of flags that are supposed to represent the liberty and pursuit of happiness for all Puerto Rican citizens. How Puerto Rico has ended up in this pseudo-quagmire somewhere in between a commonwealth of the United States, full statehood, and even an independent nation in its own right is a long story with many twists and turns.

After being invaded and conquered by the American Army in 1898, which ended 400 years of Spanish rule over the island, Puerto Rico became a territory of the United States with political structures yet uncertain, and in many ways, they remain that way today.

Before 1900, Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain. Because of Puerto Rico’s political condition, and the separation from the Spanish mainland, the island became an easy target for enemies of the Spanish Crown. The United States needed Puerto Rico for military purposes, since strategically, Puerto Rico is the gateway to the Caribbean.

To end the Hispanic American War, the United States of America and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris, where the United States acquired Puerto Rico like it was a treasure chest splurged from the war. In an instant, the island shifted from being a Spanish colony to becoming an American colony.

The transition was not that hard, since residents of the island had been used to the colonial condition for 400 years already. The Governor of Puerto Rico was to be named by the President of the United States instead of the Spanish Royal Crown. The Supreme Court was established by the President also, naming the justices that were going to decide over unknown disputes based entirely on a legal system unknown to the American legal community.

Many independence movements were formed to counter the American invasion; however, they never achieved greater force than mere isolated local uprisings of people advocating their position at the top of their lungs. The Puerto Rican citizenry had become accustomed to believe that they were going to either be part of or belong to another country, without ever considering the possibility of being a sovereign nation. Logistically, the brainwashing helped those ideologically linked to the U.S. Federal Government, as it curtailed any separatist movement from within.

Puerto Rican residents were granted American Citizenship during the 1910’s by an act of Congress and approved by the U.S. Administration, although pressured by the international community that frowned upon the existence of a colony where its residents were property of a country without the full benefit of its citizenship. The nation of Puerto Rico had been a country unable to govern itself for more than 400 years, and apparently was incapable of doing so without the help, aid, and a welfare-based American economy. And if the United States were to govern the island and control it as a colony, it would have to make its citizens United States citizens as well.
Prior to becoming a United States commonwealth, Puerto Rico was an agricultural kingdom whose chief products included sugar cane, coffee, and plantain. Puerto Rico's profitable agricultural business was used to subsidize local employment and to generate an "independent" economy in the rapidly growing industrialized economy of the modern world.

It was during the post-depression decades that Puerto Ricans strived to develop their economic potential through agriculture, and were faced with the unusual dilemma of having to do business with the American currency, and depending on a fixed tariff imposed by Congress for importing and exporting their goods. Since there was no real possibility of boosting that economy by cultivating "en masse", local politicians that held high offices in the Puerto Rican government suggested that land owners should use their lands to grow and cultivate the products they desired. This decision was made without a strategic idea as to how this would improve the economic condition of either the individual, or the society as a whole. The decision to eliminate agriculture as the collective way to economically develop the wealth of the island was precisely the decision that killed the local economy in lieu of being dependent on a foreign power.

With this situation, even the most nationalistic politician knew that independence was out of the question for the Puerto Rican future. The result was the creation of the Popular Democratic Party that was founded on the ideal that both governments, the Insular (P.R.) and the Federal (U.S.A.) should provide protection and sustenance to the island’s residents. The United States Congress gave Puerto Rico the opportunity to call for a Constitutional Convention, in order to create a Magna Carta where the local government’s powers were to be presented to the United States Congress, and after their approval, to the residents of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico was unique in that it never had a completely organized government. Puerto Rico was thus, never really a country, and its residents were never citizens of any country in particular. Puerto Rico was never even a self sufficient nation, and even after it became a Commonwealth of the United States with the prospect of statehood, if the island continues down the path it’s on, it may never become self-sufficient both politically and economically and thus not eligible for full United States statehood.

The Puerto Rican government of the 1950’s officially became a commonwealth of the United States in exchange for a common currency, defense, and a type of governance similar to the one provided by the Federal Government to the American people. The Puerto Rican Government simply sold the idea that the island was keeping the majority of its rights, while the American Government was just supporting the island economically. Little did the uninformed Puerto Rican citizenry know that from the time they became a commonwealth, their way of life was to be entirely determined by the United States Congress.

The Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico followed the template of the U.S. Federal Government and every state, creating three branches of government: the Executive Branch, the Legislative Branch, and the Judicial Branch. This provided for a checks and balances system very analogous to the model from the United States. But the Constitution of Puerto Rico was only going to be a Federal Statute approved by the United States Congress, not an independent, self actuated document that was to be enforced worldwide as what Puerto Ricans thought it was: the declaration that they could govern themselves. The Popular Democratic Party of Puerto Rico sold their Constitution to the residents of Puerto Rico, who were not particularly well-educated at the time, as a bilateral agreement with the United States, not as an agreement that would make Puerto Rico subservient to the United States. Puerto Rican options were also very limited at the time as they were in a deep economic recession and needed any and all aid from the United States. So the people of Puerto Rico voted to approve their “Constitution” and the relationship with which it would bind them to the United States.

Upon Puerto Rico’s ratification of their constitution the Puerto Rican Government and the United States Government reached a deal that provided for American manufacturing industries to establish a place of business in Puerto Rico with an Income Tax exemption from both the Internal Revenue Service and the Department of the Treasury in Puerto Rico. This was intended to help diversify and expand the
struggling Puerto Rican economy and to help further growth in the American manufacturing sector. This proved to be very attractive at the time for American businesses since there was cheap labor widely available in Puerto Rico. But the egos of the Puerto Rican labor force grew, and employees not only asked for more, they demanded it.

Not surprisingly, the industries that once came to Puerto Rico to enjoy a low cost, high return in investment operation, were suddenly confronted with searching for other places in the world where their operations might be more profitable. And in the 1990’s the tax exemption that the industries once enjoyed ran its course, and it was never renewed by Congress. Mass unemployment resulted in Puerto Rico because in other parts of the world, the companies were paying less for the same work.

Politics has always been the bread and butter of the Puerto Rican. Whether favoring United States Statehood or complete Independence from the United States, every Puerto Rican has had his or her opinion in what is going on inside government on the island. There have been many theories as to the way the Puerto Ricans might decide which political status is the best for them. However the Puerto Ricans never make up their minds as to how to do it. There was the possibility of a plebiscite as to which political status best describes the intent of the citizen that would be approved by Congress as a final word of the Puerto Rican citizenry. However, the local politicians somehow found a way to present divergent stories in Congress as to the definitions that should be included on the ballot. Thus the plebiscite went nowhere.

Almost as many Puerto Ricans favor Statehood for Puerto Rico as favor remaining as a Commonwealth. Independence has always been a far third, not only because the citizens are against independence but because the leadership that represents independence has been very elitist and controversial.

There has been a shift within the proponents of the Commonwealth, dividing the establishment into two different propositions. First, to keep the status as a Commonwealth as it is today, with American citizenship and currency. The other option being a Free Associated State. This last one is the equivalent of sovereignty, with a treaty to be signed with the United States as to mutual aid both economically and politically. Even though a movement towards statehood should be thriving, there is one more hurdle for it, and that is the 50 United States themselves.

For Puerto Rico to be admitted into the Union, there must be consensus among the 50 individual states and Congress as a Federal entity. The Congressional structure would be changed with the addition of another state when two more senators and many representatives are included into the House of Representatives, leaving many states with less representation due to Puerto Rico’s high population of almost four million. Other obstacles include the official language of the island, which is Spanish, and other sources of pride for the Puerto Rico citizenry, such as currently Puerto Rico enjoys the right to send an Olympic team to the Olympic Games, and a representative to the Miss Universe Pageant. While such things sound superficial, these events hold high nationalistic value to Puerto Ricans.

However the biggest hurdle to reach Statehood is the internal political fighting that goes on in Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans are not all in accord as to which status would be the best option for them since Puerto Ricans are always content with what they have at the moment: American Citizenship. Puerto Ricans haven’t had a crisis that has forced them to face the reality of being an independent nation, or a State of the Union. In the meantime, Puerto Ricans go with the flow.

During the 2008 General Elections, President Barack Obama promised Puerto Ricans that he will make it part of his agenda to let the citizens of Puerto Rico determine the fate of their political status during his first term as President. He supports the Self Determination of the island as a natural process of the inalienable right of the human being that lives in his land. But in Puerto Rico, the citizens have no clue as to which ideology will be better for them. They don’t trust the politicians very much. Many scandals have riddled the aisles of the Legislature with corruption stemming from the misappropriation of Federal Funds. The previous Governor is being prosecuted this month for violations in Federal
Campaign Finance. And no one appears to be brave enough to take a stand and make the harsh decisions that must be made for the sake of the citizens of Puerto Rico.

Would the United States let Puerto Rico into the union is a matter to be discussed after the Puerto Ricans have decided by themselves that Statehood is the path they want. In the meantime, the status quo will still be rampant in the island of Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans will still enjoy all the benefits of being an American Citizen, without the full weight of the responsibility that states endure while being members of the union—albeit without full representation via voting representatives in both houses of Congress—and unable to ever make the decision of being free and independent of any other nation. To stand up face to face with the members of the other countries as an equal, not as property of another nation. Like it was said by the United States Supreme Court: “Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory that belongs to, but it is not part of the United States”. Whether it is fair or not, it is for historians to decide, because Puerto Ricans don’t reach a consensus easily.

-C.G. Salgado


**Despite Vote in Favor, Puerto Rico Faces a Daunting Road Toward Statehood**

By FRANCES ROBLES  JUNE 12, 2017

People attending a march in favor of Puerto Rican independence in Hato Rey, San Juan, on Sunday, the day of the referendum. Erika P. Rodriguez for The New York Times
SAN JUAN, P.R. — Puerto Rican politicians were pleading their cases to Congress on Monday, just one day after 97 percent of voters cast ballots in favor of statehood in a nonbinding referendum on the island’s future.

But just as the vote’s meaning was muddled by a historically low turnout, Puerto Ricans were delivering conflicting messages before a very skeptical Congress.

Puerto Rico’s nonvoting member of the House, Jenniffer González, is drafting a bill that will ask Congress to admit Puerto Rico as the 51st state. A hearing will be scheduled before the House Committee on Natural Resources.

“This is a historic moment for the island,” Ms. González said.

But because the turnout was so low — only 23 percent of eligible voters cast ballots — the vote, rather than being a dramatic turning point, underscored the divided political atmosphere in Puerto Rico and the long road ahead for any resolution of the island’s status. By law, the next steps toward statehood remain in Congress, where advocates for statehood face the daunting task of persuading a legislature dominated by Republicans to take on a state which would have the nation’s highest poverty and unemployment rates and an unpaid $74 billion debt.
The Republicans are also considered highly unlikely to do something that could result in five more Democrats in the House and two in the Senate.

Members of Ms. González’s governing New Progressive Party went to Washington to emphasize the large margin of victory. The people have spoken, and so statehood for Puerto Rico, they insisted, is about a decade away.

Others knocked on doors right behind them, pleading the opposite.

“There are 535 offices. We started today, and it’s going to take time,” said Juan E. Hernández Mayoral, a former senator in Puerto Rico who opposes statehood. “It’s hard work, but we have to do it.”

By noon, he had visited more than a dozen congressional offices, showing up without an appointment to tell staffers that the ballot was manipulated, the vote boycotted and the results invalid.

“Sometimes when you go to a congressional office, you’re walking in and a member of the opposition is coming out,” said Kenneth D. McClintock, a former Puerto Rico secretary of state who as a registered lobbyist spends several days a month advocating statehood. “I would have the last laugh and get to say: ‘Everything they told you was totally incorrect.’”

In a statement, Gov. Ricardo A. Rosselló said he would soon head to the capital with the plebiscite results to demand action. He rattled off states, such as Arizona and Wisconsin, whose requests for statehood were made in votes with woefully low turnouts.

“It will be up to this new generation of Puerto Ricans to demand and claim in Washington the end of the current improper colonial relationship, and begin a transition process to fully incorporate Puerto Rico as the next state of the Union,” he said.

Sunday’s plebiscite was the fifth taken since the United States acquired Puerto Rico in 1898. This time, only about 500,000 of Puerto Rico’s 2.2 million registered voters voiced their preference for statehood, independence or remaining a United States commonwealth, far fewer than in previous elections.

But the electoral process was managed by the statehood party, and many critics argued that the ballot was deliberately written to favor statehood. Opposition parties urged their members to boycott the vote.

Even the handful of Puerto Rican members of Congress had mixed opinions.

“Not even Putin gets 97 percent of the vote,” said Luis V. Gutiérrez, an Illinois Democrat. “We’re going to take that seriously?”

Representative José E. Serrano, Democrat of New York, on the other hand, called the boycott “cynical and unnecessary.”
“Now Puerto Rico needs to come before Congress to ask for a change in status,” he said in a statement. “In democracies, the will of the voters is respected, and Congress has a duty to listen and act upon these results so that Puerto Rico can be decolonized once and for all.”

Mr. McClintock said the 23 percent turnout figure was misleading because so many Puerto Ricans have moved to the mainland in recent years. Puerto Rico is losing about 90,000 people a year to states such as Florida and Texas. Many members of Congress are elected with much lower participation than that, and even President Trump got to the White House on the voice of about a quarter of the United States electorate, he said.

But records show the government purged more than half a million voters from the rolls in the months before the vote. Had the elections commission used the rolls from the November general election, the official turnout percentage would have been even lower.

The numbers matter, because it will probably take an overwhelming vote to force Congress to take the issue seriously. So both sides were breaking out calculators and past vote results to make arguments in their favor.

“It’s all spin,” José Fuentes, a statehood advocate, said by phone as he boarded a flight to Washington. “We can spin as well.”

During the presidential campaign, Mr. Trump had said the people of Puerto Rico deserved the right of self-determination. “The will of the Puerto Rican people in any status referendum should be considered as Congress follows through on any desired change in status for Puerto Rico, including statehood,” he said.

On Monday, the Trump administration was more circumspect.

“This referendum is nonbinding and only Congress can change Puerto Rico’s status,” the White House said in a statement.