

What Language for Puerto Rico?

Settle the issue before offering statehood

by Juan M. Garcia-Passalacqua

Is Congress, for the first time in 100 years, going to bite the bullet on the issue of Puerto Rico? The Caribbean island was obtained as war booty from Spain in the war of 1898 and has been a self-governing commonwealth associated with the United States since 1952.

The debate on the House floor the evening of May 22 gave us an inkling of what may happen: by a vote of 414 to 10, the mainstay of the Puerto Rican economy for the past 20 years was killed. The Territories and Possessions Corporate Tax Exemption Act (better known by its IRS section number, 936) was repealed, with a transition period of 10 years.

Meanwhile, a "United States-Puerto Rico Status Act" is making headway toward mark-up in the House. It was introduced on March 6 by Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), chairman of the Committee on Resources, and has been co-sponsored by 50 members of Congress, among them, House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

The act is intended as the congressional response to a plebiscite held in Puerto Rico in November 1992 in which statehood status won by a plurality, while anti-statehood forces (commonwealth and independence) got 53 percent of the vote.

The proposed act offers Puerto Ricans two roads — one toward statehood, the other toward independence — and calls for a vote on the island before the 100th year, 1998. We all should welcome this development.

Juan M. Garcia Passalacqua is a political analyst in Puerto Rico. © The Washington Post, this article is reprinted with permission from their June 7, 1996 issue.

Congress' consideration of the act does not really raise an issue for the 7 million Puerto Ricans living in both the island and the United States, but raises the crucial issue of whether the United States will define itself as a pluralistic or an ethnocentric nation with respect to one of its ethnic communities. Will Congress, in defining the road toward statehood, demand that English be the official language of Puerto Rico?

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As drafted, the Gingrich-Young bill is simply a rules bill. As such, it can go directly to the House floor only with the approval of Rules Committee Chairman Gerald B. Solomon (R-NY). However, Solomon is one of the biggest supporters of the "English Only" movement in Congress and the United States, and he is expected to demand that English be declared the required official language of the state of Puerto Rico.

In the section defining the alternative of "a path under United States sovereignty leading to statehood," the bill requires that "Puerto Rico adheres to the same language requirements as in the several states." No one has been able to define what that cryptic phrase really means.

Every member of Congress must understand that Puerto Ricans are a people, a nationality, totally distinct from Americans. Our native language is Spanish. Official figures filed in Congress during 1989-1991 hearings on the status issue prove that 83 percent of island residents do not speak or understand English. The bill in effect offers a Hispanic state.

I wholeheartedly support the approval of the United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act, but I insist with equal fervor that the language issue be made crystal clear before the bill is sent to the Senate and the president.

Historically, world powers have come to fear the "barbarians at the gates." To some Americans, the "brown hordes" of Hispanics, the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country, are as menacing as Vandals and Goths were to the Romans. Mexicans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, Cubans, Haitians and Puerto Ricans are not only at the gates, they've busted through in ever-growing numbers. The challenge for the United States —

with Puerto Rico as the case in point — is whether it will be ethno-centric and demand assimilation or whether it will respect diversity as a pluralistic nation. □

[Editor's Note: We obviously disagree with the writer that maintaining a common language is "ethnocentric," but we thought our readers would like to see our opposition's thinking on the Puerto Rico issue. The following response by Congressmen Roth and Solomon is reprinted with permission from the July 4 edition of The Washington Post.]

Equal Partnership Means Common Bonds

The role of a shared language

by Gerald Solomon and Toby Roth

If Puerto Rico chooses to become our 51st state, its language would have to be English. Over the past two centuries, we have forged a nation out of our different peoples by emphasizing our common beliefs, our common ideals and, perhaps most important, our common language. Our English language has permitted this country to live up to our national motto, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). For most of our nation's history, the English language has been the key to integrating new Americans as well as the glue that has held our people together. It is in this spirit that we have both worked diligently to preserve English's central place in our society by making it America's official language.

This issue has taken on added importance recently. Congress has begun considering legis-

lation putting in place a process for the people of Puerto Rico to vote on their political status. Puerto Ricans would decide whether to retain the commonwealth relationship that has existed for more than 40 years or to end that association and petition either for statehood or independence. This legislation, known as the U.S.- Puerto Rico Political Status Act, sets out the guidelines under which the Puerto Rican people would vote to determine their island's political future.

It is not Congress's place to favor one option over another in this process. The Puerto Rican people alone should decide the political status of their island. But Congress does have a constitutional responsibility to define clearly what each status option would entail. It is in this regard that the language issue has been raised. Juan M. Garcia-Passalacqua argues in his June 7 op-ed column that if Puerto Rico becomes a state, its language would have to be Spanish. We disagree. While it is abundantly clear that Puerto Rico's Hispanic culture, history and heritage are integral parts of what it means to be a Puerto Rican, we believe that, like the 50 states that preceded it into the Union, a state of Puerto Rico would have to be prepared to make certain accommodations to become an equal partner in the United States. One

Gerald Solomon (R-N.Y.) is chairman of the House Committee on Rules. **Toby Roth** (R-Wis.) is chairman of the Congressional English Language Task Force and sponsor of the Declaration of Official Language Act. © The Washington Post.

of these conditions would involve adopting the English language. If Puerto Rico chooses to become our 51st state, its language would have to be English.

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English would become the language of business and communications in federal courts and federal agencies. It would also become the language used by the state government and its agencies, as well as the courts and the public school system.

Promoting the use of English in the state of Puerto Rico would allow us to preserve our unity as a nation and prevent possible divisions along linguistic or cultural lines. In a world marked by a renewal of nationalism, tribalism and separatism, our country must do everything it can to promote the ties that bind us together.

While making English the language of Puerto Rico protects America's unity, it serves practical purposes as well. For the people of Puerto Rico, fluency in English is necessary for them to become full partners in American society.

Puerto Rico must be an English-speaking state to ensure that the United States' government is able to perform its duties in an equitable manner across the country. Whether one is in San Juan or San Francisco, a citizen of the United States must have access to the same resources, must be protected by the same rights and must be held to

the same level of civic responsibility.

Both of our congressional districts are close to the border the United States shares with Canada, where French-speaking Quebec has edged ever closer to separation from the commonwealth. That country's near breakup this past year over linguistic and cultural differences left us with a profound impression of the fragility of nations. Much like the United States, Canada is a young, diverse country founded on many of the same democratic principles. If a nation that is so similar to our own can come so close to unraveling, can we afford to take our own national unity for granted any longer?

This Congress has recognized the need to protect our nation from the forces that threaten, to use Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s phrase, “the dis-uniting of America.” Speaker Newt Gingrich has indicated that hearings on legislation making English the official language of the United States will be held this fall. We are confident that Congress will move swiftly to reinforce the common linguistic bond that keeps our nation of immigrants together. English soon will be our official language. □