

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 a colonial power.

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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. News-papers 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 nation-hood 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 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

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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.