

POLITICS

## The Conquest of the United States and Puerto Rico

by Bill Kauffman

On the matter of statehood, Puerto Rico's outstanding novelist has written . . . actually, I have no idea what he has written, because I do not read Spanish, nor do I plan to learn. Should our flag be defaced by a 51st star for Puerto Rico—which is, admittedly, more deserving of stellification than the ersatz states, Alaska and Hawaii—most of us will be incapable of reading its writers or understanding its songs. Doesn't it seem the least bit odd that we will be unable to read the novelists and poets and polemicists of another of our *United States*? Even Mississippi's Faulkner is, theoretically, readable. (Hawaii is the exception—and the precedent—*pace* Don Ho.)

A century ago, William Graham Sumner warned us that overseas expansion carried within it the germ of destruction; that "all extension puts a new strain on the internal cohesion of the pre-existing mass, threatening a new cleavage within." The Anti-Imperialists—Brahmins and hardscrabble Populists, the James brothers and Tom Watson—fought courageously against the absorption of the rotten spoils of the Spanish-American War and lost, and the old republic was never quite the same; as one Anti-Imperialist wag had it, "Dewey took Manila with the loss of one man—and all our institutions." And so we are left to count the blessings we have derived from our colonial possessions: Pearl Harbor, once-pacific islands that target practice has bombed to rubble, and the co-ed-mauling Samoan football players of the Western Athletic Conference.

The acquisition of far-flung territories was, as Massachusetts Senator George Frisbie Hoar announced in 1899, "the

greatest question that has ever been or ever will be put to [senators] in their lives, the question, not of a year or of a Congress, but . . . the great eternity of national life." Hoar predicted that imperialism "will make of our beloved country a cheap-jack country, raking after the cart for the leavings of European tyranny." The abhorred standing army would become a permanent feature of the American polity; the expense was "sure to make our national taxgatherer the most familiar visitant to every American home."

Hoar's famous dissent was an authentic profile in courage; think of him as the reverse image of a later Republican senator, Arthur Vandenberg, who defected to internationalism in the 1940's after being compromised by beautiful British spies acting as whores. (The homonyms here serve as antonyms. What today's Republican Party needs is a few good Hoars.)

Senator Hoar had been the most conventional of Gilded Age Republicans: He was of the Hamilton-Webster school, a believer in loose construction and the Great Barbecue. "I have believed religiously, and from my soul, for half a century, in the great doctrines and principles of the Republican party," he declared in his bitterly eloquent speech of January 9, 1899. He was horrified to watch his nation stray from "the ancient path of republican liberty which the fathers trod down into this modern swamp and cesspool of imperialism." For "the most vigorous health or life may be destroyed by a single drop of poison," and he foresaw that this would be the fate of the American people under an expansionist regime. Even at this late date, when the game is over and the box scores have been printed, who but an editor of the *New Republic* can fail to be moved by the hoary Brahmin's pathetic cry: "Is there to be no place on the face of the earth hereafter where a man can stand up by virtue of his manhood and say, 'I am a man?'"

When, at mid-century, the contiguity of these United States was violated by the admission of states 49 and 50, the good fight was fought by the usual noble but doomed group of geriatric liberal muggumps, Southern Democrats, and Main Street Republicans—that is to say, Amer-

icans. North Carolina's Congressman Jones was typical of the last-named; he remarked in House debate in 1953,

If Hawaii is admitted, the next step will be Alaska [*vice versa*, as the case turned out to be], and after these will come Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam, Wake Island, and on down the line. Where is the line to be drawn? Where shall we stop? Shall we spread the American States over two or three continents? Have we learned nothing from the lessons of the old Roman Empire?

If Alaska and Hawaii were admitted, said Senator John Stennis (D-MS), "Puerto Rico will have her day or should have her day in court." That day has come.

Statehood for Puerto Rico, like its acquisition 100 years ago, is largely a Republican project borne of the same ghastly mixture of expansionism and Great White Father benevolence. The opposition, we are told, consists of a few grizzled graybeard Spaniards, some wild-eyed Puerto Rican communists preparing to toast statehood with Molotov cocktails (but Janet Reno will take care of them), and stateside racists who will admit, after a beer or two, that their real fear is putting "four million spics on welfare."

This is a serviceable lie that has crowded out the truth: that Puerto Rican *independentistas* are patriots, and that Americans who wish to grant the island her long-overdue freedom are acting in the best interests of *both* countries. "Independence," says Senator Ruben Berrios Martinez, long-time leader of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, "would end Puerto Rico's lifeless imitation of the colonizer, typical of colonies." The Uncle Tomases of statehood offer Disney and food stamps; the poets and patriots of the independence movement dream of the cultural flourishing of their enchanted isle. The dream has lasted decades.

The classic exposition of the debilitating effects of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico was provided by the brilliant young patriot and aristocratic *bon vivant* Luis Munoz Marin in the pages of the *American Mercury* in 1929. Inflammatory, mordant, spiked with enough punches at

the Elks and Odd Fellows and Rotary to suggest that either Marin flavored his rum with Mencken or the Sage of Baltimore was an overactive editor, “The Sad Case of Porto Rico” explains that “The American flag found Porto Rico penniless and content. It now flies over a prosperous factory worked by slaves who have lost their land and may soon lose their guitars and their songs.”

Republican trade policies transformed an island of small landholdings and independent coffee growers into a virtual sugarcane forest. Coffee, the crop of human-scale farmers, was not protected by the U.S.-imposed tariff, sugar was, and so, as Senator Martinez has written, an *economy of*

small and medium-sized farms producing primarily for local consumption . . . became under the stimulus of U.S. tariff laws a large sugar plantation dominated by absentee landlords in the United States and tilled by a pauperized peasantry.

Munoz Marin, in his 1929 essay, achieves the kind of savagery that is only possible when the writer is witnessing the murder of something he loves. He deplores the Protestant do-goodism that is assaulting the island, though “I doubt that such implied notions as Christ’s disapproval of cigarettes gets much serious attention from the local young men.” He views the depressing effect of the up-lifters, as

charity becomes slightly organized, evangelical preachers thunder in the villages . . . three or four prominent citizens become Protestants and are considered funny, women are beginning to be feared as the rolling-pin follows the flag, virginity still abounds and often attains to old age, but is perceptibly on the wane.

To which Puerto Rican collaborators rejoined: GDP is rising! Exports are swelling! Disposable income is . . . being disposed of!

But something far greater than mere millions of dollars was at stake. To Munoz Marin, “saving a culture, even an inferior one, from becoming the monkey of another, even a superior one, is a good in itself.” At all costs a Puerto-American hybrid must be avoided; yet he

feared,

Perhaps we are destined to be neither Porto Ricans nor Americans, but merely puppets of a mongrel state of mind, susceptible to American thinking and proud of Latin thought, subservient to American living and worshipful of the ancestral way of life. Perhaps we are to discuss Cervantes and eat pork and beans. . . . Perhaps we are going to a singularly fantastic and painless hell in our own sweet way. Perhaps all this is nothing but a foretaste of Pan-Americanism.

Munoz Marin was to fall in with a bad crowd—FDR, Rexford Guy Tugwell—and find, to the disgust of his erstwhile compatriots, that Scratch rewards his administrators handsomely. He would become the island’s first elected governor and the chief architect of the peculiar commonwealth status it achieved in 1952.

As Munoz Marin delivered his people into the gilded cage of New Deal colonialism, leadership of the *independentistas* was assumed by the fiery Pedro Albizu Campos, whose uncompromising Nationalist Party took up the gun and created the official pretext for a half-century of vengeful and brutal repression of independence activities.

Albizu Campos believed in *La Raza* and the Catholic Church; his movement opposed canned goods, U.S.-sponsored birth control programs, and any hint of collaboration with the colonial power. Nationalists despised the New Deal and refused to accept government employment. Albizu Campos called young Puerto Ricans who disdained independence “sissies.” Modern Latin American historians of the left are not quite comfortable with Campos and the Nationalists. Yes, they battled the colossus across the sea, but they also were “particularly concerned with the idea of promoting the Puerto Rican bourgeoisie and turning workers into small landholders.” Most were devout Catholics.

The Nationalists marched, fought, illegally flew the Puerto Rican flag, and used such proscribed terms as “*nacion*” and “*patria*.” As Senator Martinez writes, from the 1930’s through the 1950’s “*independentistas* were arrested and imprisoned for almost any reason, including reciting patriotic poetry, making speeches, and unfurling the Puerto

Rican flag.” Pedro Albizu Campos was to spend most of these years in prison for inciting violence; he stubbornly refused to beg for a pardon or renounce revolution.

World War II and its Cold War aftermath turned Puerto Rico into an alleged strategic asset; the Roosevelt-Truman administrations lavished federal monies on the island while jailing and silencing patriots. Commonwealth—a travesty of self-government, plausible only to those who believe that junior-high-school student councils actually run the schools—was hatched. Jose A. Cabranes, a high-ranking official in Munoz Marin’s Popular Democratic Party, called commonwealth

an authentic expression of the post-war American liberal worldview: a poor and racially mixed Third World community undergoing modernization as a result of the inventive application of American capital and American liberal ideology.

Munoz Marin was cursed by despairing Nationalists for forsaking independence in favor of commonwealth. Hot heads and homicides among them responded with mad assassination attempts against President Truman, Munoz Marin, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives. And that was all she wrote: The resultant crackdown, on both the gun-toting Nationalists and the nonviolent middle-class Puerto Rican Independence Party, destroyed political manifestations of Puerto Rican patriotism for a generation or more.

If ever one needs evidence of the devitalizing, emasculatory effects of colonialism, look no further than the paltry vote totals tallied by today’s *independentistas*. In 1952, barely one-eighth of Puerto Rican voters supported pro-statehood parties, while almost one-fifth favored the independence-minded parties. Today, almost half support statehood, and barely five percent cast their votes for a free Puerto Rico.

Writing in the *Nation*, Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo asserts that “the abundance of consumer goods that has resulted from the U.S. presence has limited the appeal of the *independentistas*.” The Puerto Rican Independence Party is asking people bred in political serfdom to choose liberty and dignity over a welfare check and a Madonna CD. It may be a

lot to ask.

As during the Cold War, U.S. policymakers assure us that *independentistas* are “left of red,” in Eric Burdon’s felicitous phrase. While it shouldn’t much interest Americans what kind of economic system other peoples may choose, the messy fact is that statehood is advertised by its proponents as a pass on the gravy train, a free tray at the welfare-state buffet, while independence leader Senator Martinez is given to such commie observations as “the founding fathers did not intend statehood as a ticket for a poor nation to a cornucopia of federal welfare benefits” and “the basic economic problem of Puerto Rico is . . . dependence on U.S. subsidies.”

Statehood advocates—the “good Puerto Ricans,” in the view of the Democrat-Republican Party—base their case almost solely on welfarist grounds; it is the *independentistas* who reject the statehood utopia of one big happy welfare-fattened bilingual Puerto Rican state. While the Republican National Hispanic Assembly gushes that statehood would turn welfare into a “right rather than charity,” the “leftist” Stevens-Arroyo argues that “the statehood myth carries the seduction of dependency. Like a hospital patient on a life-support system, Puerto Rico’s economy has become dependent on subsidies.”

*Independentistas* assert that cultural regeneration must precede economic prosperity. This is why the typical university-bound activist who uses words like “transgressive” is unsympathetic to Martinez’s *Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño* (PIP); the party tends to “attribute many social ills to the excessive dependency on government handouts.” Party leaders also believe that independence will allow Puerto Ricans “to regain their dignity and pride” and instill “a new work ethic.”

An indigenous creation, the PIP is not easily translated into terms intelligible to Richard Gephardt and Trent Lott. It has attacked government waste and politicians who travel abroad and called for an emphasis on “manly sports.” Historian Raymond Carr, in a study for the Twentieth Century Fund, noted that, to the PIP, “a national theater is . . . as important as a national economy.” Television is loathed for its “violence, cultural assimilation, individualism and the excess of consumerism.”

The PIP is also absolutist—extremist!—when it comes to Puerto Rico

maintaining her language. The island’s English-speaking masters have discouraged the use of Spanish off and on over the last hundred years, and Puerto Rico is unlikely to achieve statehood without some requirement, however ineffectual, that her people learn a Spanglish *patois*. (More than 60 percent now speak no English at all.)

Well-meaning nativists play into the hands of the Cold War liberals (who, a decade after the Soviet Union’s collapse, still define American politics) by wielding such sticks of petty tyranny as “English only” dictates. Statehooders who press bilingualism on Puerto Rico seek to remove her heart and accept the corpse into our union. (Imperialists care about “the cage, not the birds,” according to Albizu Campos.)

*Independentistas* are right: Puerto Ricans who advocate statehood are not merely misguided; like the Americans who sat on metric-conversion boards or worked for the CIA, they are collaborators in the destruction of their nation. They gutlessly eschew the seemingly unobjectionable phrase “Puerto Rican people” and instead describe themselves as “U.S. citizens resident in Puerto Rico.” What self-respecting American wants to share citizenship with bloodless people who deny the primacy of their homeland? Someone like Senator Martinez is easier to understand, with his pronouncement that

Puerto Rico’s heart is not American. It is Puerto Rican. The national sentiment of Puerto Ricans is entirely devoted to our patria, as we call our homeland in Spanish. We are Puerto Ricans in the same way that Mexicans are Mexicans and Japanese are Japanese. For us, “we the people” means we Puerto Ricans.

So where do we go from here? Shall Puerto Rico join Hawaii and Alaska? (Fittingly, Alaska Congressman Don Young is the leading statehood advocate in the House, as one bastard state helps beget another.) Guam, with its active commonwealth movement and murmurings of statehood, will be next.

“There seems to be a feeling in the United States against permitting others to be responsible for their own welfare,” wrote Munoz Marin 70 years ago. That feeling seldom extends beyond Wall Street and the District of Columbia—do

any of *your* neighbors give a damn about Puerto Rico one way or the other?—but it has earned us the hatred of people against whom Main Street Americans harbor no ill will.

That statehood talk is in the air suggests just how thoroughly Puerto Rico has been routed. The loss of one’s culture, the pretty poison of statehood, is “insidious,” wrote Munoz Marin.

It works while you sleep. It changes the expression of your eyes, the form of your paunch, the tone of your voice, your hopes of Heaven, what your neighbors and your women expect of you—all without giving you a chance to fight back, without even presenting to you the dilemma of fighting back or not.

Puerto Rico, he predicted, “will never be incorporated into the Union as a State save through the operation of cultural forces: that is, not unless, and until, our manner of life and thought has been respectably Americanized” (or until Americans have been disrespectfully Puerto Ricanized). A fantastic and painless hell, Munoz Marin called it, with a grinning newt standing at the gate. The price of admission is the loss of Puerto Rico’s soul. What kind of monster regards this as a bargain?

Under Puerto Rican statehood, the Democrats will keep Maria’s welfare checks coming, and the Republicans will force her children to speak English and scorn their mother’s tongue, as well as the mother tongue. Maria’s great-grandchildren may become fanatical nationalists, but by then it will be too late. They’ll need Berlitz tapes and Sony recorders to relearn the language.

Young Munoz Marin wanted “Porto Rico to be Porto Rico, not a lame replica of Ohio or Arizona.” It is more likely, given the official celebration of all things non-American, that Ohio will become a lame replica of Puerto Rico, as the children of Akron and Ponce snooze through the same federally approved history texts and watch the same Fox nighttime soaps and learn everything about Rosie O’Donnell and nothing about Sherwood Anderson or Pedro Albizu Campos.

The United States of America, the 48 contiguous states on the North American continent, cannot absorb Puerto Rico (or Hawaii or Alaska, for that matter) with-

out dishonoring our ancestors and adulterating the cultures of both countries. It is time—it is way past time—for patriots who love our country and who understand that home is not elastic to take their stand on the American soil of the Old 48.

*Vivan los independentistas!* For Puerto Rico's sake, yes—but for ours, too.

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## Live Right, Think Left

by George Watson

“Anglo-Saxon hypocrisy” is a famous phrase, and in January 1996, Harriet Harman, Labour spokesman for health in the British House of Commons, became an object of scorn on both sides of the House by sending her 11-year-old son to a school outside the public sector, chosen by entrance examination. She was later, after 1997, a minister in the Blair government.

She was only following her leader, it must be said. In fact it *was* said, repeatedly. Prime Minister Tony Blair sends his son to another such school, hardly less selective, and both events caused public outrage, since Labour is against selection. Left-wing hypocrisy is suddenly a fashionable topic again.

To live right and think left has its advantages, after all—you get the material benefits of the one with the moral satisfactions of the other—and it has been about for much of the century. In fact, most languages have witty descriptions for it, all coined before the war. The English speak of “champagne socialists,” the French have *gauche de luxe* and the Germans *Salonbolshewiker*. So the hunt for hypocrisy is an old one, and there are those who are happy to be back at the game. The prime minister of the day, John Major, took all his chances at parliamentary question-time. “I’m just being tough on hypocrisy and tough on the causes of hypocrisy,” he told Tony Blair blandly in 1996, to Conservative cheers and jeers, echoing a phrase the Labour leader had once thought he had made his own. Meanwhile, after a stormy

meeting with her own party, Ms. Harman, who is married to a prominent union official, kept her job—just. But with a year to go before a general election, the matter was not soon forgiven or forgotten.

There are several explanations to be offered for her behavior that are more or less convincing. There are also her own explanations, which are not. She was only, she told an interviewer, making a choice that thousands of parents have to make for their children; but Labour is publicly committed to abolishing the right of parents to choose. The present school system in Britain, she claims, which is divided between public and private, is not of Labour’s making; but in fact it is, since it derives from the Butler Education Act of 1944, which Labour (in coalition) supported. In any case, there is nothing unsocialist about selection. It was practiced widely in Eastern Europe in the days of the Soviet Empire, and it was endorsed by Labour down to the 1960’s. Communism, in its day, had nothing to do with equality, and the privileges of its ruling class were notorious.

There are contradictions when a dedicated egalitarian seeks to abolish educational selection, in Britain or elsewhere. To start at the top: If Eton College and other fee-paying schools were abolished, education would probably become even more unequal, since Britain enjoys freedom of movement with its neighbors as a member of the European Union. If fee-paying were abolished, the rich could still send their children abroad to private schools that would probably cost even more, since they would involve travel costs as well as boarding and expert teaching. So a universal public sector at home might well prove not less elitist but more. As for the middle tier, or grammar schools, if you abolish them and let Eton survive, as Labour has long been pledged to do, you destroy the ladder by which the poor have traditionally climbed into the professional classes—in which case, in a competitive world, Etonians would enjoy even better chances of promotion than now. These are arguments that Labour leaders would prefer not to hear, and they hope no one will have the wit or audacity to utter them. They are likely, in that hope, to be disappointed.

The world is plainly right to be tough on hypocrisy and its causes, whether left or right. And it will be, in an age where the media are merciless to those in office and no less merciless to those who seek

it. Power can expect no pity. But I suspect there is another issue here, and one that is so far unheard. I mean the case of the justified sinner—one who believes, and honestly believes, that he has fulfilled his moral duty to God, or to some abstraction like social justice, when he has declared his allegiance. It is enough, he thinks, to speak up. A declaration of virtue can then be used to justify a life of sin. But my term is borrowed from a novel now seldom read, though it deserves to be, and I should explain.

*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is a horror story by a Scottish poet named James Hogg. It appeared anonymously in 1824, and it tells the grim tale of Robert Wringhim, who is legally the son of a land-owning laird but has been strictly and piously brought up by a Calvinist minister who is probably his real father. From boyhood on, Wringhim justified a life of deceit and violent crime by a certainty that he is one of the elect of God. His sins are divinely justified, and he cannot be damned. “Hath He not made one vessel to honor and another to dishonor, as in the case with myself and thee?” Wringhim tells a wretched servant who has convicted him of lying. That is only a beginning. Wringhim grows up to kill his elder brother, and when his father dies of a broken heart, he inherits the estate and continues his profitable career of murder.

The fable, in a melodramatic way, is apposite to our times, and there may even be those who find Hogg’s book too close for comfort. Wringhim was son and heir to a laird, for one thing, and it is notable that parties claiming a socialist tradition are seldom led by the low-bred. Tony Blair, who went to a private school and then to Oxford, is today the most socially superior leader of any British political party. Conservatives, by contrast, gave up electing gentlemen to lead them as long ago as 1965, when Edward Heath replaced Sir Alec Douglas-Home; and John Major, who was brought up in rented rooms in south London and went to no university, has the humblest social origins of any British prime minister since the war. Harriet Harman, true to form, is the daughter of an eminent physician, was privately educated, and is a niece to the Countess of Longford. It may seem entirely natural for such people to give their own children a privileged education. That is all they know. It may even have seemed natural to them