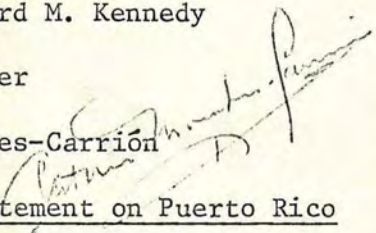


February 5, 1980

To: Senator Edward M. Kennedy
Through: Mark Schneider
From: Arturo Morales-Garrion 
Subject: Briefing Statement on Puerto Rico

Historical Background

One basic fact to remember about Puerto Rico is that it is the second oldest Spanish settlement in the New World. Colonization started in 1508; the Hispanic roots, therefore, are very deep. Ethnically, Puerto Rico became a true melting pot. To the original Hispanic-Indian mixture, there was added the African element, although slaves were not as numerous as in Haiti, Cuba or Jamaica. In the XIX Century, French, Irish, Italians and Corsicans were added to the population, while Royalists came from Venezuela fleeing the armies of Simón Bolívar.

These foreign elements helped Puerto Rico develop as a plantation economy, gradually superseding the island's strategic role as a key imperial outpost. Sugar found a ready market in the United States, while coffee went to Europe. Slavery, abolished in 1873, gave way to a peonage system, especially accentuated after great U.S. corporate investments in the sugar industry after 1898. From 1900 to the Depression, sugar was queen in Puerto Rico. Huge profits went to the corporations, while the bulk of the cane workers barely made a living. Puerto Rico became a "stricken land," in Tugwell's phrase.

Emergence of P.R. Political Parties

Politically, three trends emerged in the XIX Century: 1) conservatism, firmly committed to Spanish bureaucratic and military preponderance; 2) autonomism, heavily influenced by Canada's evolution to dominion status; and 3) separatism, favoring, at the end of the century, a free federation of the Spanish West Indies. Annexation

to the U.S. began to gain ground before 1898. By 1897, autonomismo was triumphant as Spain granted a liberal charter which was very short lived as a result of U.S. takeover of the island.

The United States took Puerto Rico to strengthen American naval preponderance in the Caribbean. The strategic diagram was clear; the economic opportunities were evident. Not so, however, the political status. Puerto Rico's one million people were too foreign to be incorporated as a territory. The island was ruled as a colony under the Foraker Act (1900), but it was called "a possession." P.R. --so said the Supreme Court-- "belongs to but is not a part of the United States." This led to sharp disenchantment among Puerto Ricans. Liberal Democrats in Congress assailed the Foraker Act, which had failed to provide for even U.S. citizenship. U.S. political "muddling through" accounted for a cleavage in P.R. opinion. The autonomists fought for "home rule," and later for an "associated free state"; the annexationists favored statehood, and the most disenchanting opted for independence. The status question is not just a Puerto Rican creation. It is very much related to American ambivalence from 1898 to 1948, a half century of colonial rule from Washington.

The Coming of Commonwealth

Basic political changes took place under Democratic administrations. The Wilson era extended U.S. citizenship and an elective Senate in 1917, under the Jones Act. The Truman era was receptive to the drive towards full self-government in association with the United States, led by Luis Muñoz Marín. Muñoz founded in 1940 the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), committed to social justice and effective political freedom. With practically no economic support, he captured the peasants' imagination

and barely defeated a ruling coalition of Republicans and Socialists (these last were really a labor party, with no radical orientation). With Washington support, Muñoz tackled both the economic and political stagnation, and was able in 1952 to proclaim the Commonwealth constitution and become the first elected Governor. From 1952 to 1964, he presided over a dramatic economic and social transformation which led JFK to call Puerto Rico in 1958, "a showcase of political and economic democracy."

The Current Struggle

Muñoz' ideal was to strengthen Commonwealth as a unique, permanent status, in association with the United States to assure P.R. growth. A 1967 plebiscite upheld this view, but Congress and the Republican Presidents failed to support it. The island Republicans led a drive for statehood and began challenging the PPD's hold when Muñoz retired. Their party, now called New Progressive, barely won the governorship in 1968 as a result of a PPD split, but lost it to Rafael Hernández-Colón and a revitalized PPD in 1972. In spite of great dedication, Hernández Colón could not overcome in 1976 the sharp backlash of the economic recession and the Republican hostility to his Administration evidenced by their strong support to the NPP leaders, Luis A. Ferré and Carlos Romero-Barceló. Romero won by a narrow margin, vowing that status was not an issue. But once in power, he started a heavy-handed campaign for statehood, while his old aide, Franklin Delano López, became Carter's man in Puerto Rico. A shrewd opportunist, Romero has managed to control, up to now, P.R. representation in both major parties. López, however, clashed with Romero over federal patronage, but failed to get White House backing. Carter was ready to exchange Romero's support for López' official decapitation, thus sacrificing old loyalties.

The Danger Ahead

Romero is leading Puerto Rico to a dangerous confrontation which may turn P.R. into a Caribbean Northern Ireland. The separatists, never an electoral force, are, however, strong and articulate enemies of statehood. No other area applying for statehood has ever had such a resolute and devoted minority opposing statehood by peaceful or violent means. They could coexist with Commonwealth; they will not coexist with statehood. A chain of violence has already started between the PNP and the separatists, which may escalate if Romero has his way. The destruction of the PPD and the Commonwealth relationship --Romero's avowed objective-- would effectively eliminate the democratic vital center in Puerto Rico.

As at the beginning of the century and again in 1917 and 1948-1952, Puerto Rican liberal democratic opinion has turned to American liberalism as its natural ally. The Kennedy candidacy, in this sense, is very symbolic of an old, tacit alliance, vis-a-vis the gravity of the Puerto Rican and U.S. situations.

