



The Collection of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.

El Pan Nuestro (Our Bread), by Ramón Frade (1875–1954). The painting depicts a jíbaro, the farmer of Puerto Rico's mountainous interior.

Puerto Rico

When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Finley Peter Dunne's comic Mr. Hennessey urged prompt acquisition of Cuba and Puerto Rico. "An' yet," replied his friend Mr. Dooley, "'tis not more than two months ago since ye learned whether they were islands or canned goods." Today, the Commonwealth's 3.3 million Spanish-speaking inhabitants are U.S. citizens who do not vote in U.S. elections or pay federal taxes. Operation Bootstrap—the promising drive for economic growth launched in the 1950s—stalled during the '70s. Unemployment now hovers around 20 percent; only massive subsidies from Washington prevented serious economic hardship. Inevitably, such disappointments have helped to rekindle debate over the island's future. Here, political scientist Jorge Heine looks at the island's history and current politics; economist Jaime Santiago examines the Commonwealth's economy; and filmmaker Pedro Rivera sketches a portrait of a Puerto Rican migrant family in Hoboken, New Jersey



A PEOPLE APART

by Jorge Heine

"Puerto Ricans," wrote the island's governor, E. Montgomery Reily, to President Warren G. Harding in 1922, "as all continentals say, are 'children' and change their attitudes almost daily." Not all American officials have been as patronizing as Reily, but his remark reflects a certain condescension or ignorance that persists to this day in Washington and elsewhere on the U.S. mainland.

An odd relationship has existed between the United States and Puerto Rico ever since American troops occupied the island in 1898. Despite eight decades of U.S. rule, Puerto Ricans re-

main a Latin American, Catholic, and Spanish-speaking people; their culture is distinctive and remarkably resilient. The island embodies all of the characteristics of a "nation." But, as U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans are viewed on the mainland as merely another minority (and a relatively small one at that) within the vast American melting pot.

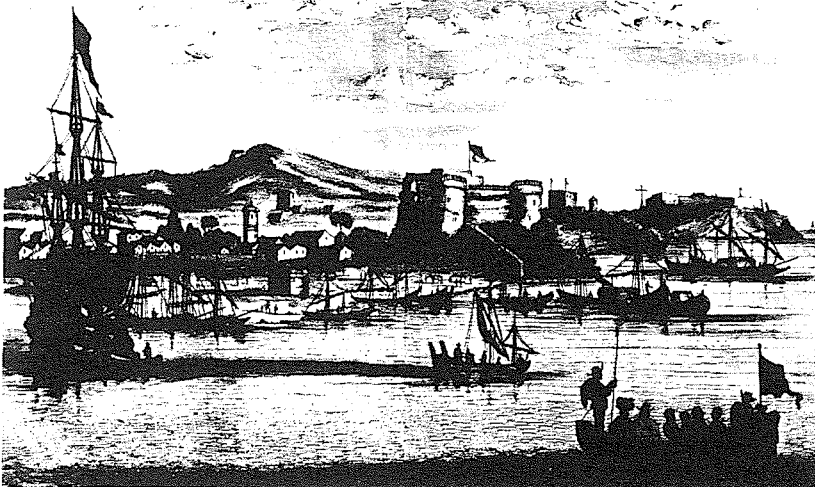
As befits an island torn between two identities, even the scenery seems to take sides. It is only a short walk from the beauty of the cobblestoned *Calle Cristo* in Old San Juan to the *Condado* beachfront with its gleaming hotels and Miami Beach atmosphere. As elsewhere in Latin America, the average man's quest for a "modern" life has created urban squalor in San Juan; yet the unspoiled lushness of the interior is only a few miles away. The most striking contrast in Puerto Rico is between its potential and its reality. Endowed with a balmy climate and fertile soil, Puerto Rico has had a history not of riches or even self-sufficiency but of destitution. In 1765, the Spanish royal envoy, Alejandro O'Reilly, described the Puerto Rican people as "the poorest in America." Even today, after 82 years under the U.S. flag, Puerto Rico's 3.3 million people have a per capita income of only \$2,681, considerably below that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the Union.

Boriquén

Puerto Rico's recorded history goes back nearly 500 years. In late 1493, during his second voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus dropped anchor off the green, mountain-ribbed island. He did not tarry. Traveling with Columbus was Juan Ponce de León, a young Spanish officer, who was struck by the island's beauty. He returned in 1508 to establish a settlement at San Juan Bay, and to fraternize with the gentle native Taíno Indians (who called the island *Boriquén*, whence the present-day national anthem, *La Borinqueña*).

With its formidable Morro Castle and La Fortaleza (now the governor's mansion), San Juan soon became a key outpost. But Mexico and Peru, not little Puerto Rico (the island is only 100 miles long and 35 miles wide), were the sources of Spain's over-

Jorge Heine, 31, is assistant professor of political science at Inter-American University of Puerto Rico, San Germán. He holds a law degree from the University of Chile (1972) and a B.Phil. from York University, England (1974), and is a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University. He is currently organizing a conference on U.S.-Puerto Rican relations to be held at the Wilson Center and at Yale University this spring.



San Juan Harbor, 1671.

By Peter Schenk, London, 1671.

seas wealth; Madrid regarded San Juan simply as a strategic garrison on the gold and silver routes from the New World.

A sense of "nationhood" emerged among Puerto Ricans only in the 19th century. Economics provided the impetus. The island's agriculture, once based on small, independent farmers who lived off their own produce, had slowly evolved into an enterprise based on cash crops (coffee, sugar, tobacco) grown for export on large estates, or *haciendas*. The new *hacendados*, who made up only about 2 percent of the population, soon found themselves at odds with the entrenched Spanish elite—the military, the bureaucrats, the bishops, the San Juan merchants. Eyeing the nearby U.S. market, they chafed under official policies that prohibited trade outside the Spanish Empire. Increasingly they demanded *autonomía*.

There was a short-lived insurrection in 1868 (the *Grito de Lares*), whose leaders proclaimed a Republic of Puerto Rico; later, a few Puerto Rican exiles in New York worked hand-in-hand with Cuban patriots to throw off the Spanish yoke. But for the most part, the *hacendados* preferred political reform to popular revolt. In 1870, they founded the Liberal Reformist Party to oppose the Conservatives, who represented the Spanish loyalists. Led by such men as Luis Muñoz Rivera and José C. Barbosa, the Liberals finally extracted substantial concessions from Madrid—notably, internal autonomy and the right to ne-

gotiate trade agreements with foreign countries. Spain's concessions were embodied in the *Carta Autonómica* of 1897.

Four months later, after the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor, the United States declared war on Spain, sending expeditions to seize the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Secretary of State John Hay called it "a splendid little war"; it was soon over. Puerto Rico was quickly occupied by U.S. troops in the summer of 1898 and formally ceded to Washington by year's end. So much for the *Carta Autonómica*.

In early 1900, with passage of the Foraker Act, Congress granted civilian rule, of sorts, to Puerto Rico. Washington would appoint the American governor and his 11-member advisory council, and a nonvoting Puerto Rican Resident Commissioner would sit in Congress. A 35-member parliament could be elected by the Puerto Ricans, but Congress, the President, or the governor could veto its actions. The island, with its Spanish-



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"Here, sonny, put on these duds" was the caption for this 1898 American cartoon hailing the annexation of Puerto Rico by the United States.

speaking population of almost 1 million, was now almost as much a colony as, say, French Indochina or Dutch Surinam.

Why did the United States annex Puerto Rico?

There is no simple answer. Obviously, long before the war with Spain, some U.S. officials had seen the Caribbean as a potential *mare nostrum*. Wrote Secretary of State James G. Blaine in 1891: "There are three places of sufficient value to be taken: one is Hawaii and the others are Puerto Rico and Cuba." Aside from its potential usefulness as a coaling station for the U.S. fleet in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico was coveted by some American businessmen. Only later would "defense of the Panama Canal" (completed in 1914) be cited as a factor.

The effect of the American occupation on the average Puerto Rican's life was meager. Public health improved, to be sure, and the benefits of primary education (in English) slowly spread throughout the island. But the mass of Puerto Ricans were poor peasants when the Americans arrived, and they stayed poor for another half century. Like the British in Nigeria, Washington had but two hopes for Puerto Rico: tranquility and profits.

The island economy underwent a fundamental change under U.S. rule. Heavy property taxes and sharp credit restrictions bankrupted many *hacendados*, who sold off their estates to American-owned sugar companies like the Central Aguirre Association. The long-term effects of this basic shift were profound. It meant, first, that Puerto Rico's agriculture, once diversified and based on coffee, sugar, tobacco, and numerous subsistence crops, now became a "monoculture" ruled by King Sugar. (Sugar production grew from less than 100,000 tons in 1900 to 1.3 million tons in the peak year of 1952.) Second, it set the pattern for Puerto Rico's economic development throughout the 20th century: development based on external control of all major economic activities.

Amid the Cacophony

Local politics was lively but ineffectual. Statehooders, *autonomistas*, and *independentistas* jockeyed for power—power that meant nothing in Washington. The Americans' most formidable foe in the years before World War II was Pedro Albizu Campos, leader of the pro-independence Nationalist Party (founded in 1922). Dark-skinned, with high cheekbones and wavy hair, Albizu Campos captivated rallies throughout the 1920s and early '30s with his hypnotic, steely voice. His speaking style, rich in similes ("The homeland has to be loved like a woman, both physically and spiritually"), cut through the

cacophony of island politics.

Yet, Albizu Campos was unable to link his abstract ideas of independence and "Puerto Ricanness" to a pragmatic social program that workers and peasants could understand; his party suffered disappointments at the polls. After an outbreak of violence in 1936 sparked by official repression and the excesses of his own followers, Albizu Campos landed in federal prison, where he spent most of the rest of his life.

Luis Muñoz Marín tried a different approach. The son of Luis Muñoz Rivera, he had spent much of his early life in the literary salons of New York and Washington. Returning to Puerto Rico in 1931, he became editor of *La Democracia*, the Liberal Party newspaper, and quickly emerged as a leader of the party's progressive, *independentista* wing.

The Commonwealth Is Born

Disillusioned with the feasibility of independence after Senator Millard Tydings (D.-Md.) in 1936 sponsored legislation designed to make Puerto Rico pay dearly for its freedom, Muñoz Marín broke away from the Liberals.* He founded his own party, the Popular Democratic Party, whose members were known as the *Populares*. Muñoz Marín put the status question on the back burner and instead traveled throughout the island preaching a gospel every *jibaro*, or peasant, could understand: breakup of the sugar *centrales*, a minimum wage, Spanish-language schools, unemployment benefits. He became a crucial link between the Puerto Rican masses and the political leadership. In 1940, Muñoz Marín's *Populares* took control of the legislature. For the next three decades, the party dominated island politics.

Working closely with Governor Rexford G. Tugwell, a Roosevelt appointee, Muñoz Marín whittled away at sugar company holdings, enacted a minimum wage, and carried out a land reform. He engineered the appointment of a Puerto Rican as governor in 1946 and was himself elected governor in 1948. Four years later, taking advantage of the anticolonial fervor sweeping the fledgling United Nations (and U.S. embarrassment over Puerto Rico's colonial status), he midwived into being the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the *Estado Libre Asociado*, after the plan was approved by Puerto Ricans in a 1951 plebiscite by a margin of 387,000 to 119,000.

Briefly, the idea of the Commonwealth was to leave "inter-

*Disturbed by the mounting toll of political violence on the island, Tydings had angrily called for Puerto Rican independence within four years, with tariffs rising 25 percent annually. The bill never got out of committee.



*Pedro Albizu Campos
(1891–1965),
Harvard-educated lawyer
and fiery independentista.
"Independence is not a
matter to be negotiated,"
he proclaimed, "and if it
is, it will be with bullets."*

By José Alicea. Reprinted by permission.

nal" affairs in the hands of San Juan, and external affairs in the hands of Washington. In practice, of course, the distinction has not always been clear-cut. From the FBI to the IRS, from HEW to the NLRB, almost all federal agencies, commissions, and departments do business in Puerto Rico. While Puerto Ricans pay no federal income tax and have complete autonomy in budgetary and fiscal matters, Congress has never acknowledged that it has anything less than absolute power over Puerto Rico.

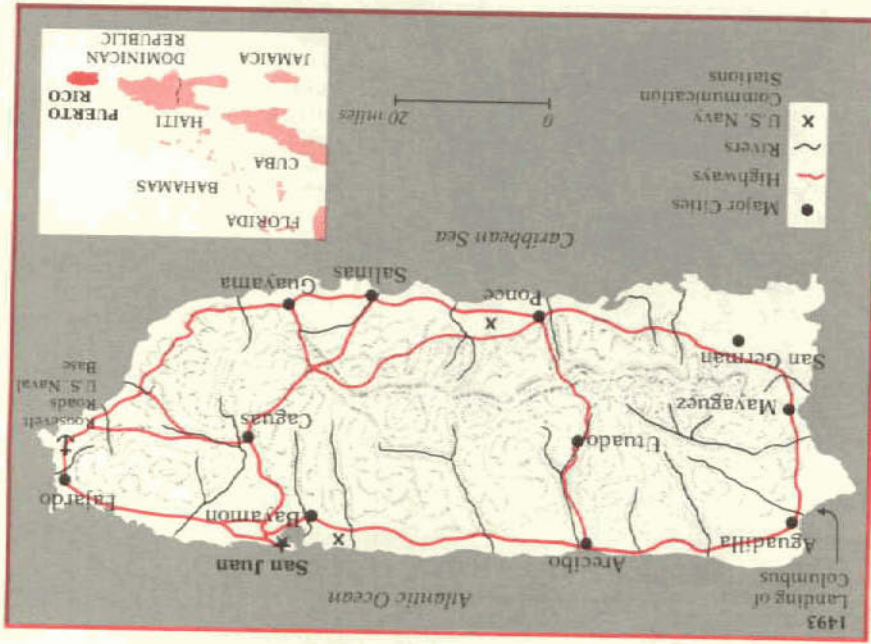
Nevertheless, Commonwealth status gave Puerto Ricans more self-government than they had had since the short-lived *Carta Autonómica* of 1897. Moreover, fiscal autonomy meant that Muñoz Marín could use the island's tax advantages to turn the island into an "investment paradise"—which is exactly what he did under Operation Bootstrap.

Hundreds of American companies began building plants on the island. As capital poured in, the Gross Domestic Product soared, tripling between 1950 and 1970. Per capita income became the highest in Latin America. A university system sprouted (1978 enrollment: 123,000). In 1976, there were 812,000 registered automobiles on the island, one for every four Puerto Ricans. A growing middle class began to enjoy what it saw as the "good life," meaning credit-buying and consumerism,

Within a generation, Operation Bootstrap transformed Puerto Rico from a poor agricultural island to a booming industrial park. Inevitably, as industrialization accelerated and cities grew, Muñoz Marín's rural-based *Populares* found themselves challenged by the "new" Puerto Rican they had helped to create. Urban workers and the middle class found the *Populares'* symbols (a *pava*, or peasant's straw hat) and slogans ("Bread, Land, and Liberty") increasingly irrelevant. The beneficiaries of the island's transformation have been the "statehooders," led by the New Progressive Party (NPN) and drawing support from the poor and unemployed as well as some of the island's richest men, such as industrialist Luis A. Ferré, who was elected to a four-year term as governor in 1968. Another NPN candidate, Carlos Romero Barceló, was elected governor in 1976 with 48.3 percent of the vote.

The statehood movement seems incongruous. Puerto Ricans are acutely aware of the differences that divide island and mainland: different languages, cultures, histories. Puerto Ricans have an unquestioned sense of *insularismo*, of being a community "apart." There is no question that most Puerto Ricans value U.S. American-style.

Puerto Rico (area: 3,435 sq. miles) is roughly the size of Connecticut.



PUERTO RICO

citizenship and appreciate the benefits of "free association" over the past three decades. Yet, they do not feel "American" in the same way a Californian or New Yorker does. It is impossible for a *continental* (the official euphemism for Americans) or *gringo* (the more common expression) to win election to any public office in Puerto Rico.

Why have so many Puerto Ricans voted for the NPN, the statehood party?

Given the 30-year dominance of the *Populares*, a vote for statehood often represented a protest vote—"get the rascals out." Moreover, during the 1970s, the enormous increase in federal funds going to the island has heightened a sense of dependence on Washington. Statehood provides the best guarantee that those unemployment checks and Food Stamps will keep on coming. Finally, the influential 50,000-strong emigré Cuban community in Puerto Rico, made up mostly of professionals and businessmen, has consistently supported the NPN and thereby augmented the statehood vote.

The Great Debate

Whatever the cause, the steady swelling of pro-statehood sentiment over the last decade has revived the status debate; it will dominate the island's elections this November.

The *Populares*, now led by former governor Rafael Hernández Colón, still defend the Commonwealth formula. For better or worse, they contend, Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory and suffered the indignities of colonialism—but now reaps the benefits of unrestricted access to the American market and of federal relief programs estimated at more than \$3 billion in 1979. The Commonwealth arrangement is flexible. Puerto Ricans elect their own governor and legislature; they are exempt from federal taxes. As a small, overpopulated island with few natural resources, Puerto Rico simply cannot afford independence; statehood would destroy the island's fiscal autonomy, undermine its traditions and heritage, and subject it to the whirlwind of national politics.* Hernández Colón concedes that the *present* Commonwealth formula is threadbare. He has proposed a "new thesis" calling for Washington to transfer sweeping powers to San Juan. Commonwealth in some restructured form, say the

* Presidential primaries were held in Puerto Rico this year for the first time. The candidates brushed up on their Spanish and made no embarrassing errors. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the island's governor from 1929 to 1932, was not so lucky. It is said that while addressing a large crowd in Maricao, a small town in western Puerto Rico, he concluded with a ringing "*Somos todos Maricones!*" (literally, "We are all homosexuals"). Residents of Maricao are actually called *Maricaños*.

THE UNITED NATIONS SPEAKS

Four times during the last decade, the United Nations has held hearings on Puerto Rico's political status. According to the UN Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (also known as the Decolonization Committee), Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States, a dark island of "persecutions, harassment, and repressive measures."

The UN Charter requires nations that administer territories lacking a "full measure of self-government" to submit annual reports on their economic, social, and educational conditions. In 1947, the U.S. government agreed to report on Puerto Rico as a "non-self-governing territory"—a colony, in other words. But in 1952, Puerto Ricans voted overwhelmingly to adopt Commonwealth status; in 1953, the UN agreed that reports on Puerto Rico were no longer warranted.

At the urging of Castro's Cuba, however, the Decolonization Committee took up the question of Puerto Rico in 1972. In 1973, it declared the island a colony. There the matter rested until 1978, when, for the first time, spokesmen for all four major Puerto Rican parties told the committee of their dissatisfactions. Among the 40 witnesses who flew from San Juan to New York was Governor Carlos Romero Barceló, a proponent of statehood, who lamented "the undeniably ambiguous nature" of Puerto Rico's political status.

The 1978 hearings lasted three weeks. Last year, the Decolonization Committee's discussion of Puerto Rico ended after three days. The result: a joint Cuban-Iraqi resolution citing "the inalienable right of the people of Puerto Rico to self-determination." It passed by a vote of 11 to 0, with 12 abstentions. The line-up was predictable,

Populares, provides the best of both worlds: all the benefits of U.S. citizenship, none of the costs.

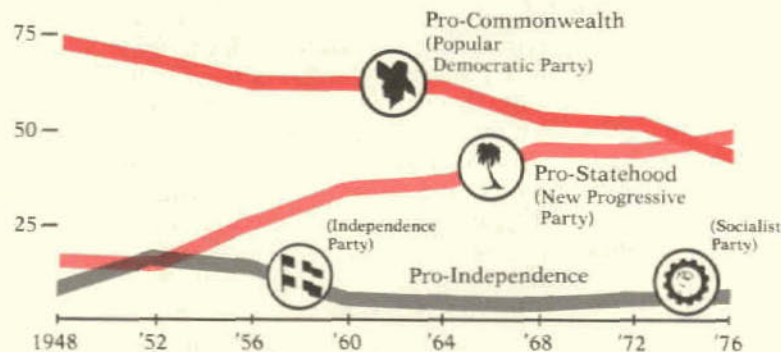
But statehooders argue that half a loaf is no loaf at all. Commonwealth status is a legal hybrid; no clause in the U.S. Constitution justifies it, even implicitly. Under Commonwealth, Puerto Ricans are second-class citizens, unable to vote in presidential elections or to send a voting delegation to Congress. (Puerto Rico, if admitted to the Union, would have two Senators and a minimum of seven Representatives, a larger delegation than 25 of the 50 states.) With statehood, Puerto Rico would qualify for vastly more federal funds—an extra \$800 million annually, proponents say. And its Washington representatives could make sure the island's share grew and grew.

The *independentistas* (led by Rubén Berríos Martínez of the

with pro-Soviet countries like Afghanistan, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria supporting the resolution and Australia, Chile, India, Indonesia, Sweden, and Yugoslavia refusing to go along.

Meanwhile, Puerto Ricans have had ample opportunity to express their own preferences, which are changing (see the chart below). One note: Observers across the political spectrum suspect that independence per se has more support among the islanders than do the minority *independentista* parties.

PERCENT OF POPULAR VOTE



Source: Health Care Financing Administration.

Puerto Rican Independence Party and Juan Mari Brás of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party) hold that, despite 80 years of legal tinkering, Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. colony has never changed substantially. Imperialist exploitation has always motivated U.S. interest in the island. American corporations first monopolized the sugar industry, then monopolized the island's manufacturing, turning Puerto Rico into "Profit Island, U.S.A.," as one government brochure put it. In terms of national defense, Puerto Rico has become a giant aircraft carrier in the Caribbean. Roosevelt Roads is one of the largest (37,000 acres) naval installations in the world, and the U.S. Navy uses the offshore island of Vieques for target practice. Puerto Ricans have served in four American wars; 1 out of 42 U.S. casualties in Korea was Puerto Rican.

More to the point, the *independentistas* claim, federal jurisdiction over everything that matters on the island, from immigration to shipping, has made a mockery of "autonomy." The main beneficiaries of the "common market" with the United States, they add, are not the Puerto Rican people but the American companies that flood the island with expensive consumer goods. (Puerto Rico is America's fifth largest export market.) The *independentistas* acknowledge that the transition to independence would be difficult but, given appropriate financial arrangements with the United States, a new emphasis on agriculture, and much hard work, it could be done. In any event, they believe, real economic and social development will not occur in the context of association with the United States.

The most likely scenario at this point is that the current, pro-statehood governor, Carlos Romero Barceló, will be re-elected in November by a small margin and that he will then call for a plebiscite on the status question in 1981. Given the long-term electoral trends, it is quite possible that the statehood option, for the first time in Puerto Rican history, will receive a small majority of the vote (55 percent, say). It would then be up to the U.S. Congress to decide whether Puerto Rico should become the 51st state.

Who Will Choose?

President Carter has pledged to "respect the wishes of the people of Puerto Rico and [their] right to self-determination." So has the U.S. Senate in a unanimous 1979 resolution. Yet Puerto Rico's future status is not a burning issue in Congress, and most Congressmen would probably be content to leave things as they are.

Does 55 percent of the electorate have the right to impose on the other 45 percent something as definitive and permanent as full incorporation into another nation? The question is especially relevant given the intensity of feelings regarding the status question. There is a strong undercurrent of violence in Puerto Rican politics. It emerged with particular force in the 1930s and early '50s and is on the rise once again. Overt and covert harassment of the *independentistas* by state and federal police is one of the givens of Puerto Rican politics. (A federal grand jury is currently investigating the 1978 shooting deaths of two independence proponents by Puerto Rican government undercover agents.) Right-wing Cuban emigré terrorists operate in San Juan. The *independentistas* themselves have a long tradition of violence that spilled onto the mainland with their at-

tempted assassination of President Harry S Truman in 1950 and their 1954 shooting spree in the U.S. House of Representatives. Last December, two American sailors were killed when a nationalist group attacked a U.S. Navy bus. If statehood comes to the island, Puerto Rico could well become another Northern Ireland.

That aside, statehood would only exacerbate the deep structural imbalances in the Puerto Rican economy that led voters to endorse statehood in the first place. By removing the incentives for external investment (tax exemptions would disappear under statehood) as well as the impediments to stepped-up welfare payments from Washington, statehood, in my view, would merely accelerate the "ghettoization" of the island. The ultimate irony is that the ostensibly anti-American *independentistas* want Puerto Ricans to face the future with the old Puritan values of self-reliance and hard work; the pro-American statehooders advocate all-out welfarism, a notion decidedly at odds with mainland sentiment these days.

If the statehood issue comes before Congress in the '80s, American legislators may seek guidance in the words of philosopher Johann Herder: "Whom nature separated by language, customs, and character, let no man artificially join together by chemistry."