

Juan Agosto Alicea



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

Juan Agosto Alicea should be ranked among our best public servants, along with the likes of Ramón García Santiago, Rafael Picó or Guillermo Irizarry.

I first met Agosto Alicea when I was president of the Senate. He was then the head of Peat, Marwick and

Mitchell in Puerto Rico. He came into public service with my second gubernatorial administration as secretary of the Treasury, where he undertook deep internal reforms. He also upgraded the accounting system of the central government, took on our first major income tax reform since the 1950s, presided over the board of the Government Development Bank (GDB), responded successfully to the environmental challenges facing the Puerto Rico Aqueduct & Sewer Authority (Prasa) as president of its board, and set up Banco de Desarrollo to finance the ventures of small businesses and start-ups.

After that, Agosto Alicea went on to serve under Héctor Luis Acevedo in the San Juan municipal government and returned to central government with Gov. Sila Calderón to preside first over the GDB and later over Prasa, facing, successfully in both positions, major challenges of a financial and administrative order.

Throughout his career as a public servant, Agosto Alicea has been a man of integrity, broad vision and courage—the type of public servant who comes in to make a difference and has made a difference in all the positions in which he has served.

Agosto Alicea has just published a book titled “Crisis: On the Verge of Bankruptcy,” wherein he details his experiences in public service and, with the rigor befitting his background as a certified public accountant and the vantage point of his governmental experience, exposes the critical financial condition in which our central government finds itself, and offers suggestions for addressing the crisis.

One of the experiences he recounts in the book relates to the inaugural speech I gave for my third term as governor on Jan. 2, 1989. Having served throughout my second term, Agosto Alicea weighed his options as we were going into the third. He would have preferred going back to private practice, but would have stayed on if we focused during this term on restructuring government to make it more agile and efficient. He had talked to me about this before the speech, and I agreed to move forward in that direction. However, he was shocked when

in the speech I announced that I would pursue the resolution of our status problem. Apparently he thought these two things couldn’t be pursued at the same time.

This is how he puts it: “*Para sorpresa de todos los que estábamos en la tarima durante la juramentación, el Gobernador anunció desde allí su plan para un plebiscito sobre el status político de la Isla, a celebrarse durante el cuatrienio que apenas comenzaba. Hasta aquí llegó la transformación, pensé yo. Los rostros de Miguel Hernández Agosto, Rony Jarabo y Jaime Fuster (Comisionado Residente) destilaban asombro. Aparentemente, todos estaban tan ajenos al contenido del discurso como yo. En ese momento sentí la urgencia de renunciar inmediatamente a mi puesto.*”

This isn’t the first time I have heard people were surprised when I made the announcement that we would pursue the resolution of the status matter during my third term. Their surprise has always surprised me, and more so coming from people such as those mentioned by Agosto Alicea in his book and by Agosto Alicea himself.

Why am I surprised? Because they should have been expecting me to say exactly what I said, since this was our commitment according to the program we had presented to the people of Puerto Rico in the campaign leading to my election in 1988.

As a matter of fact, the part of the program that dealt with status was the same part I had read in the widely remembered debate with Baltasar Corrada del Río at the end of the campaign. Apparently what people tend to remember about this part of the program is Corrada del Río losing his cool over my showing up unexpectedly at the debate, rather than the status content of the debate.

Well, in its section on the status question, “Programa de Gobierno 1989-1992 Vamos por Buen Camino,” reads: “*Iniciado el cuatrienio le plantearemos al país el desarrollo del ELA a un máximo de autonomía compatible con la unión permanente con los Estados Unidos desarrollo que se someterá a una consulta electoral. Para determinar la forma en que habrá de cumplirse este mandato iniciaremos inmediatamente después de las elecciones un proceso de diálogo con el gobierno de los Estados Unidos y con los líderes que en Puerto Rico representan otras fórmulas de status sobre la manera de hacerle la consulta a nuestro pueblo.*”

In my inaugural speech I stated: “*Anuncio que nos proponemos plantear al país, el desarrollo del Estado Libre Asociado al máximo de gobierno propio compatible con la unión permanente de Puerto Rico con los Estados Unidos. En consecuencia, iniciaremos en breve*

conversaciones con el gobierno de Estados Unidos y con los líderes que en Puerto Rico representan otras fórmulas de status, sobre la manera de plantear la consulta a nuestro pueblo, de modo que las tres fórmulas de status político tengan igual oportunidad de ser sometidos en la consulta para que nuestro pueblo escoja libremente entre ellas.”

So it amazes me when people say they were surprised by my announcement to pursue the status solution in my inaugural speech for that third term.

Because our efforts didn’t succeed in solving the status issue, Agosto Alicea feels our time was wasted. I disagree. The efforts of a people to deal with the issue of their political status are cumulative in history. The initiatives of previous generations yield important lessons for future generations that are invaluable if the objective pursued is to be finally realized. But these lessons must be learned; if not, instead of going forward, we reach a stalemate or we go backward.

The initiatives we took during my third term moved the status issue in Congress further than had any other initiatives since the commonwealth was established in 1952. The House passed our bill unanimously, and the Senate took up its own bill, which was defeated in committee because the members were unwilling to approve a plebiscite that included statehood in the ballot. This is the only time since 1952 that a status bill has reached markup in the Senate, albeit the bill was defeated.

The principal lessons to be learned were: (1) If we want Congress to act seriously upon a status bill, we must go forward together—as we did in 1989-91; and (2) Congress won’t commit previously to admitting Puerto Rico as a state.

These lessons haven’t been learned by the New Progressive Party leadership, and that is why we have reached a stalemate in our quest to solve this problem. Nevertheless, they have led people in the Popular Democratic Party, such as Agosto Alicea and myself, to the conclusion that plebiscites aren’t the means for solving the problem, but rather that a continuing body such as the Constitutional Convention would be more effective in engaging Congress and achieving a solution. ■

Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-76 and 1985-92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-67) and Senate president (1969-72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusiness.pr. Go to [Sign in](#) link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.