

Defining the future

BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN



Once again, we are embroiled in the status issue. The President's Task Force Report hasn't been acted upon. Sen. García Padilla's bill to implement it hasn't been given consideration by the New Progressive Party (NPP) majority in the Senate. The NPP directorate

determined a two-step process, which ran afoul of the timeframe set by the report. A "Dialogue Committee" composed of representatives of our three political parties was convened by the governor. The committee didn't arrive at a consensus.

President Barack Obama is scheduled to visit Puerto Rico next week. He promised a fair process for self-determination. The Popular Democratic Party (PDP) waived aside programmatic positions to move forward the process proposed by the Task Force. The NPP stepped aside from that process, pushing the statehood-commonwealth confrontation to 2013. The White House task force expected us to make a decision by this summer.

Furthermore, the NPP is intent on having a process wherein they define Commonwealth with no dignity, as a U.S. colony under the plenary power of Congress, and an improved Commonwealth as an associated republic, Micronesian style. They are intent on having a plebiscite contrary to the true nature of Commonwealth and its potential improvements; a plebiscite they are certain to win. It is evident they will buck the president and submit the people of Puerto Rico to a pro-

position. They hold positions in the Legislature and have access to the media. They are again running for elective office. They would have the PDP abandon its position of permanent union with the U.S.—PDP Reps. Carmen Yulín Cruz and Charlie Hernández. They are but a few, but they speak loudly and the NPP capitalizes their assertions by attributing them to the party as such.

The most studied and complete proposition on the part of these legislators comes from Sen. Antonio "Tony" Fas Alzamora. It is an extensive document titled the "Pact of Association Between the Governments of the Free Associated State of Puerto Rico & of the United States of America." This is the sort of proposal that stokes the flames of demagoguery on the part of the NPP. It proposes an associated republic Micronesian style, with U.S. citizenship to be established through the treaty power granted to the U.S. president. Most federal powers devolve

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to the free associated state, and federal funds and transfer payments are allotted in block grants directed to areas such as education, health, infrastructure, etc. for a renewable period of 28 years. Such a proposal is contrary to PDP ideology and stands no chance with voters.

However, this is the stuff that NPP campaigns thrive on. When they don't have this sort of ammunition, they invent it. Evidence: the 1988 election when the PDP had permanent union, front and center, in its platform and the NPP nonetheless developed a highly emotional media campaign lowering the U.S. flag in Puerto Rico, which plummeted my lead in the polls. I would have lost that election had I not debated

my opponent on this issue and established in the debate the falsehood of the NPP ads. In spite of these experiences, some PDP members still dabble in propositions that depart from the will

of the vast majority of the members of the party, who stand for permanent union with the U.S.

The PDP has made clear it won't stand for any proposition in the plebiscite that departs from permanent union from the U.S.; neither will it stand for a proposition disparaging commonwealth as colonial or territorial. These are inflammatory political adjectives intended to drive the votes away from Commonwealth. They belong to the campaign discourse, where they can be refuted, but not on a ballot where voters would have to accept them as defining the type of relationship he or she wants with the U.S.

Reaching an agreement on the definition of status by all participants in a plebiscite is an improbable proposition because each party seeks to enhance its own definition and undermine the others.' It is better to simply state on the ballot the status alternatives by their names: commonwealth, statehood or independence. Let the campaign debate fill in the contents; once an alternative is selected by a majority, flesh it out with Congress and then bring it back to the voters with concrete—not hypothetical—conditions for acceptance or rejection.

If there is an irresistible impulse to define the alternatives at the outset of the process, then I would go to juridical, not political, definitions. In that case, one could borrow a definition from the U.S. Supreme Court, which has defined Commonwealth as "an autonomous political entity sovereign over matters not ruled by the [U.S.] Constitution."

Given the standoff that prevails between commonwealth and statehood supporters, and the intention of the NPP of going forward with the plebiscite under its own terms and conditions, I wonder if the White House has done its homework concerning the president's trip to Puerto Rico? Normally, one would expect, under such conditions before the president's trip, a high-ranking figure would be dispatched to Puerto Rico to meet with the parties to try to work out an agreement between them so the plebiscite could go forward and the president could honor his word for a just and fair process to determine Puerto Rico's political future this term.

That hasn't been done, and that sort of conciliatory effort isn't the thing presidents do in a short visit. These matters have to be worked out before the president arrives. If not, they tend to undermine the success of the presidential visit. ■

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foundly unfair exercise in authoritarian "self-determination."

Unfortunately, individual members of the PDP have given the NPP ammunition to defend its