

Muñoz Rivera and current dissertations

BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN



Change is a constant factor in our lives and in history. But there is a popular saying that “some things never change.” Puerto Rican history and recent events in the Popular Democratic Party bear these apparently contradictory axioms out.

With regard to our political status, historically we have had romantics in all parties, but particularly in those of the left and in those of the right and realists or pragmatists which tend to concentrate themselves in the center.

This has been so since Luis Muñoz Rivera, our principal leader at the outset of the 20th century, who was a pragmatist. During his time the principal romantics were José de Diego to the left and José Celso Barbosa to the right. De Diego, who favored independence, was a member of Muñoz Rivera’s party that achieved full autonomy for Puerto Rico under Spain, and a broader measure of autonomy than that contained in the original organic act with the United States. Barbosa favored statehood with his own party.

Luis Muñoz Marín, our principal leader at mid 20th century, was also a pragmatist. He had Gilberto Concepción de Gracia to the left in his party. Concepción went on to establish the Puerto Rican Independence Party when Muñoz Marín out of pragmatism renounced independence and came out for autonomy. To the right of Muñoz Marín were Luis Ferré and Miguel Ángel García Méndez who carried the statehood banner in a separate party.

When we look back at the sweep of Puerto Rican history over the last century it becomes clear that only the pragmatists have achieved tangible results toward greater self-government. Muñoz Rivera won a qualitative and quantitative growth in self-government through the Jones Act by which we achieved American citizenship and control of our Senate. Muñoz Marín won a quantitative growth with the Elective Governor Act and a qualitative growth with Commonwealth when Congress relinquished its internal authority over Puerto Rico and the United Nations removed us from the list of colonial territories.

The romantics have achieved nothing. Some have contributed to Puerto Rico in other ways but not toward self-government. Today’s romantics, however, derive satisfaction in pointing out the shortcomings in what the people of Puerto Rico have achieved under the pragmatists, and many look down from their lofty towers with arrogance upon those who have fought in the arena and won the battles for greater self-government.

The romantics have recently surfaced with

vengeance within the Popular Democratic Party. They are but a painful few, but they have ensconced themselves within the media through which they blast away their abstract notions of sovereignty and heap their venom upon the pragmatists. Recently, two of them—romantic, but not arrogant—have stirred public opinion and troubled the mainstream leaders and the rank and file of the Popular Democratic Party with precious platitudes about an imaginary sovereign relationship that their righteous indignation moves them to demand from the United States of America. I share their indignation as to the disrespectful treatment that Puerto Rico has suffered from the United States on the matter of status from the Ford administration to the George W. Bush administration. The jury is still out on Obama.



But their flights of fancy lead them to contemplate Puerto Rico as a sovereign nation joined by treaty to the U.S., maintaining U.S. citizenship, broadly participating in federal programs with embassies in the countries we choose, with our own tariffs but with freedom of commerce between Puerto Rico and the U.S., etc.

In order to sell this to the Puerto Rican people they blithely ignore the existing models of associated republics to the United States. These models are: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau. The U.S. can dissolve its relationship with these islands unilaterally at any time. Their inhabitants are not U.S. citizens; they only receive certain services from the U.S. such as disaster assistance and limited funds in block grants for specific periods of time. They do not participate in such programs as food stamps, WIC or Pell grants.

Given these restrictive models for islands with small populations, the Marshalls, for example have 62,000 inhabitants, it is totally unrealistic

to expect that the U.S. would negotiate a treaty of association with the Republic of Puerto Rico with not only the federal benefits that we now enjoy but also additional benefits.

On the other hand, the vast majority of the people of Puerto Rico want permanent union with the United States based on their American citizenship. They have it under Commonwealth. There is no possibility that a substantial majority of our people would vote to mandate negotiations for a relationship which is not anchored on these premises.

The proposals of the autonomist romantics are not the only ones out there in the realm of the fanciful. The same can be said, for different reasons, for the romantics on the left for independence and those on the right for statehood. The ones on the left lack local political will. The ones on the right

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— Luis Muñoz Rivera

lack political will both here and in Congress. Five score and twelve years of U.S.-Puerto Rican history bear this out.

The advancement of our political aspirations and the improvement of our relationship with the United States must tread the path of reality. History teaches us that it is a task for pragmatists, not for romantics. The successes of Muñoz Rivera and Muñoz Marín bear this out. Our current romantics would be well advised to heed Muñoz Rivera’s words: “The expansion of our autonomy must be conceived within reality and not based upon sterile romanticism.” ■

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 caribbeanbusinesspr.com. Go to [Sign in](#) link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.