

Muñoz Rivera and Karl Rove

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We celebrate this week the birthday of Luis Muñoz Rivera, Puerto Rico's most eminent statesman of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Muñoz Rivera obtained the Autonomic Charter from Spain in 1897, which provided a wide measure of self-government for Puerto Rico. Under U.S. rule, he fought against the Foraker Act, the first organic act for the government of Puerto Rico passed by Congress. The Foraker Act, approved in 1900, profoundly disappointed Puerto Ricans because it represented a marked retrocession in self-government.

At the end of the 19th century, the United States was the most progressive country in the world. The freedoms enshrined in the U. S. Constitution were broadly admired. Upon landing in Ponce July 27, 1898, Gen. Miles, the commander of the invading forces, proclaimed to our people that the purpose of the invasion was to bring the liberties of American institutions to Puerto Rico. Hope sprung throughout the island and the invading forces were joyously received by the majority of the population. These hopes were shattered when the Foraker Act was enacted depriving us even of the rights of self-government, which we had under the Spanish Crown.

Muñoz Rivera organized a party called Union de Puerto Rico, which encompassed Puerto Ricans of all political persuasions. The party was swept into power and he was elected resident commissioner, a post he held until his death in 1916. At that time, he had negotiated the Jones Act in Congress, which gave us a wider measure of self-government and granted us American citizenship.

Muñoz's untimely death shocked Puerto Rico and his funeral was something similar to that of Lincoln who died in Washington, D.C. and was transported to be buried in Illinois. Muñoz died in San Juan and his funeral traveled several days from San Juan to Caguas, on to Cayey, Aibonito, Coamo, Ponce and then on to Barranquitas where he was buried.

After his burial, it became customary for his followers to travel on his birthday—July 17—to his burial place in Barranquitas to leave flowers and make memorial speeches. His son, Luis Muñoz Marín, traveled to Barranquitas many times and two of the most important speeches of his life were made on these occasions.

Reflecting on all the speeches I have heard at Muñoz Rivera's tomb in Barranquitas, there are some words of his that are frequently quoted there and which I find of particular importance to us today: "*La fuerza está en el país*"—"power lies in our country"—said Muñoz reflecting upon the power that was necessary to bring about the required changes from Madrid or Washington. This maxim has tremendous importance

for all of us who would like to see Puerto Rico respected and our aspirations heeded by Washington. It came to my mind when I read a column by Juan Manuel García Passalacqua last week in a Spanish daily.

In this column, García Passalacqua attributes a certain expression about Puerto Rico to Karl Rove, Bush's principal political strategist. When Rove was asked by an important official of the Bush administration what the U.S. was going to do with Puerto Rico, García Passalacqua says Rove answered: "Let them rot."

I, of course, have no means with which to corroborate the anecdote offered to us by García Passalacqua. But it rings true to me because it is the conclusion that a political strategist or adviser such as Rove would reach through dealing with the warring factions that converge upon the powers that be in Washington trying to pull them over and enlist them to their cause.

When a political strategist such as Rove focuses on Puerto Rico, he will have a partisan political interest in his mind and also a national interest. The U.S. no longer has a national interest in the island in the nature of a military strategic interest. Such was the case during the past century but, today, the national interest lies in the well-being of the 4 million American citizens who inhabit the island.

"What are we going to do with them?" is the question García Passalacqua says was asked of Rove. To answer it, the Republican, partisan political interest could have determined the answer. Rove could have thought of the advantages that bringing Puerto Rico in as a state could have for the Republican Party. But these may be affected by the backlash that the admission of a Spanish-speaking nation / state would have from Bush's immigration policies. Yet, from a long-term point of view, the U.S. will become more Latinized and a Republican state in Puerto Rico could be an important foothold from which to garner the Hispanic vote in other areas.

All these considerations would go through the mind of a presidential political strategist and they could well bring him to the conclusion that the policy best suited for the well-being of the 4 million American citizens in Puerto Rico would be to structure a path toward statehood.

But then Rove would have to consider that statehood does not command a majority of the votes in Puerto Rico. That the dominant plurality in the island favors Commonwealth and that there is a small but vocal independence sector. That these two sectors together constitute a majority that opposes statehood and that in the history of the U.S. Congress has only admitted as states territories that favored statehood either by consensus or by overwhelming majorities on the order of 90%. This is not in the cards for Puerto Rico, either now nor in Rove's lifetime.

Yet, Puerto Ricans are American citizens and, according to American Constitutional Law, we cannot be deprived of our citizenship even by the Congress of the United States. So, the answer from this hypothetical Republican political adviser to the question of what the U.S. is going to do with Puerto Rico would be "Let them rot." I would venture to guess that a Democratic presidential adviser would probably

come to the same conclusion, or would possibly come up with some well-meaning but ill-advised social programs to better our situation.

Reflecting on all of this as we again celebrate Luis Muñoz Rivera's birthday, we should do well to remember his maxim "*La fuerza está en el país*"—power lies in our country—and his achievements for Puerto Rico through the politics of unity. A house divided against itself can not stand. The politics that can bring Puerto Rico into its own, vis-à-vis Washington or vis-à-vis our internal problems, are the politics of outreach, dialogue and compromise among ourselves, civil society and our political parties. As long as our political parties insist on pursuing their political ideals by going it alone, we will be divided and condemned to the sad state we have been cast into by Rove.

