

Cultural identity and status

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Cultural identity and a sense of nationhood have chartered the course of Puerto Rico's political relationship with the U.S. from the time U.S. troops disembarked in Guánica—25 July 1898—up to the present moment.

At that time, the people of Puerto Rico had a well-defined cultural identity. We spoke Spanish, observed the Catholic faith, operated under the civil law inherited from Spain, had our own customs and our particular values, a cohesive ethnic background forged on the island and a respectable production of our own music, literature and painting. At that time, the people of Puerto Rico were a nation with their own land, with a common history, who had struggled for liberty with failures and successes and had achieved an autonomous relationship with Spain that granted us more home rule than we have today. Our people had a vision of a common future.

We had a sense of a common cultural identity and nationhood as much as Cuba, which was also invaded by the U.S. in 1898. But the war with Spain was over the independence of Cuba, and the invasion could not turn into permanent occupation. There was no policy, however, as to what would be the final destiny of Puerto Rico. The ensuing century would witness the struggles for the final political destiny of the people of Puerto Rico with the Congress of the United States. This struggle has not ended.

One thing was clear to Congress from the very beginning: Puerto Rico was not destined for statehood. American nationalism and cultural identity regarded us as an alien culture. Therefore, Puerto Rico was not made into an incorporated territory. From the vantage point of U.S. nationalism and cultural identity, it would belong to but not be a part of the U.S. We were brought into colonial subjection. The troops were retired, and civil government was instituted. The American governors and the commissioners of education appointed by the president established English as the official language in our public schools, where we were also taught American history.

A policy of assimilation was followed during the first 40 years of colonial government, but Puerto Ricans did not turn into Americans, and Spanish continued to be our vernacular. Up to this date, 60% of our people do not speak English, 20% speak some English and 2% are bilingual. The sense of cultural identity of our people has a tremendous resilience.

President Taft was clear as to the distinctiveness of our nationhood. When he recommended to Congress to grant U.S. citizenship to the people of Puerto Rico, he expressly stated that this should not be viewed as destining Puerto Rico for statehood, but rather as a bond of union between the U.S. and our people upon

which should be built a political relationship such as the one which the British dominions had with the mother country during the second decade of the 20th century.

Congress finally granted citizenship to the people of Puerto Rico in 1917. The Supreme Court of the United States held that U.S. citizenship did not incorporate Puerto Rico into the U.S. That is, we were not destined for statehood. But citizenship and airplane transportation brought with them migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland. After the Second World War, thousands of Puerto Rican began migrating to the U.S. every year searching for better opportunities.

This migration was different from other waves of migration that had come from Europe to the U.S. Puerto Rican migrants intended to return to the island. Not all of them were able to do so, but many of them found their way back to the island at some point in their lives. As the years went by, there developed an ongoing circular pattern of migration where thousands leave every year and thousands come back.

The homeland of Puerto Ricans is not only the island today, but it is also the continental U.S. Cultural identity, however, is not genetically transmitted through the generations. It weakens and finally dissolves into assimilation with the dominant culture. So, in the States, there are Puerto Ricans who envisage their future as a part of the Puerto Rican nation and those who envisage their future as a part of the U.S.

When we look back at the evolution of our cultural identity during the 110 years of our relationship with the U.S., we notice our culture has been permeated by aspects of U.S. culture, but that the sense of Puerto Rican identity and sense of nationhood have grown throughout the years.

Spanish remains our vernacular, and we received the prize of the *Principe de Asturias*, the Spanish equivalent of the Nobel Prize, for the preservation of our language. Our music, particularly salsa and *reggaeton*, are world-famous. Our painting is dominated by the drama of our existence. We participate separately and apart from the U.S. in international events such as the Olympics or the World Fairs held by the Bureau of International Expositions in Paris.

The bottom line as to cultural identity and our sense of nationhood after 110 years of our relationship with the U.S. is that they have grown stronger, and the only way we can be incorporated as a state into the U.S. by the U.S. Congress is by accepting us with our cultural identity and sense of nationhood; that is, with no pretension of assimilation because that is not going to happen.

The bottom line as to U.S. nationalism and cultural identity at the end of these 110 years is that it is just as strong as it was in 1898. Neither Hispanic nor other minorities in the U.S. have changed the U.S.' cultural identity in a significant way nor have they dented the sense of "one nation under God," one nation, not two or more nations.

Therein lies the gridlock between Puerto Rican cultural identity and a sense of nationhood and U.S. cultural identity and its sense of nationhood.

One hundred ten years later, nationalism and cultural identity, the relationship of Puerto Rico and the United States, they are the fundamental elements upon which Congress and the people of Puerto Rico will determine how our relationships evolve in the 21st century.

