

Our moment in the sun

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Michael Janeway, former editor of the *Boston Globe* and *Atlantic Monthly* and currently professor of journalism at Columbia University, wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* last week on the Democratic primary that will be held in Puerto Rico next Sunday. He entitled the column “Puerto Rico’s Moment in the Sun.”

Janeway is currently writing a book on Rexford Tugwell, Puerto Rico’s last American governor and, through Tugwell, he has come into contact with Muñoz Marín. His research brought him to the island, and he visited me a couple of months ago. He is a good friend of Puerto Rico and his column is about more than just the Democratic primary.

His article is a precise historical account of Puerto Rico’s relationship with the U.S. over the past century and the direction in which our status is going to evolve: enhanced autonomy or statehood. Puerto Rico’s moment in the sun is the stateside media focus, which the Democratic primary will afford to project our reality, our problems and our possibilities more clearly to the people and government of the U.S.

The Obama-Clinton primary is indeed a historic opportunity for Puerto Rico. We have, of course, participated in presidential primaries in the past. But in no primary before has there been such a close gap between the candidates at the end of the primary campaign leading to the convention. This situation provokes questions in the U.S. such as: Are nonvoting citizens going to decide who the next president of the U.S. will be? Why are they nonvoting citizens? Why don’t they pay taxes? And, what is the U.S. national interest in Puerto Rico?

This is a unique opportunity to address these questions, not only for Puerto Rican leaders and the media, but also the candidates—Obama and Clinton—themselves. They must develop a policy on Puerto Rico, stemming from the reality that there is a permanent union between the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

After the Second World War, thousands of Puerto Ricans began migrating to the U.S. every year searching for better opportunities. The U.S. census today accounts for approximately eight million Puerto Ricans, four million on the island and four million on the mainland U.S.

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 at some point in their lives. As the years went by, there developed a still ongoing circular pattern of migration where thousands of Puerto Ricans leave the island for the mainland U.S. every year and thousands come back.

U.S. citizenship marks a difference between Puerto Ricans who migrate to the U.S. and immigrants from other countries. Citizenship comes to us by birth. It is not something we have to acquire. Immigrants from other countries must make a conscious decision to acquire American citizenship. The process by which it is acquired—English must be learned, former national loyalties must be renounced—leads to assimilation. Assimilation in the case of Puerto Ricans occurs by immersion in the dominant culture of the U.S. mainland. Since we can travel back and forth from the States to Puerto Rico where the dominant culture is our own, assimilation is not a given for Puerto Rican migrants. It may or may not occur.

The homeland of Puerto Ricans has come to be not only the island but also the mainland. 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 regard themselves as Puerto Ricans and others who regard themselves as Americans. Of course, all regard themselves as American citizens.

The vast majority of them—90%—envisage the future of Puerto Rico and the U.S. together. As the 20th century unfolded the expansion of our living space to include the mainland, the commercial, industrial, financial, educational and social interchanges, the rights and obligations accruing to citizens from the federal government have woven an intricate web of permanent union connecting Puerto Rico to the U.S.

Puerto Rico is not going to separate itself from the U.S. Puerto Ricans living on the island, and many of those living on the mainland, are not going to become Americans in a cultural-national sense. But they will all honor their American citizenship. A Puerto Rican policy must stem from this reality. Engaging Puerto Rico means taking joint action with Puerto Rico as to its internal development, as to the well-being of its people and as to its possibilities in the post-Castro Caribbean as Janeway suggests.

It also means providing a road map for Puerto Rico's self-determination, which really means toward enhanced autonomy or toward statehood. The initial step in this road map would be a constitutional process to elicit the will of the people of Puerto Rico as to the direction they wish to follow. Policy should follow their desire.

Policy toward enhanced autonomy will focus on the transfer of powers over economic and cultural development to the Commonwealth and devising some participatory mechanism as to the powers to be exercised by the federal government. This can be gradual and should be geared toward reducing dependency. Policy toward statehood must focus on transitional linguistic fiscal and economic issues including incorporation.

Following a road map such as this one is essential to a more perfect union, one where there will be no deficit in our democracy.