

(Special to the San Juan Star)

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

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Twenty years seem a long time in the life of an individual but only one chapter among many in the history of a country and people.

The decades spanning the years 1959 and 1979 --the lifetime of the San Juan Star-- have seen many changes in Puerto Rico, some more encouraging than others.

During those years Puerto Rico grew from an agricultural and economically backward community to an increasingly industrial one, with more technical and industrial knowhow but also, with the unfortunate byproducts of fast growth which are crime, drugs, consumerism and social displacement.

The nineteen sixties marked a special chapter in Puerto Rico's history, mainly unnoticed, which we are now only beginning to fully understand. Industrialization surged forward bringing new plants and much needed jobs. But the jobs created by Operation Bootstrap were not enough to even begin to solve the unemployment problem, and while more babies were born, migration began tapering off. Puerto Ricans born and raised here, with higher educational opportunities, found in the seventies fewer jobs available to them than in the forties and fifties.

The period of extraordinary growth and political stability

headed by Governor Luis Muñoz Marín in the forties, and continued in the fifties and early sixties, began to peter out. Governor Muñoz stepped down in 1964, hoping to institutionalize his peaceful revolution. For reasons that had little to do with the economy, a split caused the Popular Party to lose the 1968 elections. For the first time a proponent of statehood, Ponce industrialist and politician Luis A. Ferré, came to power. In all honesty, one must say that his tenure was not a happy one for Puerto Rico, either economically, socially or politically.

The New Progressive Party which was founded by Ferré shortly after the 1967 plebiscite, ran in 1968 (and again in 1972 and 1976) on a platform that while subscribing to statehood, promised the electorate its votes would not be used to push statehood, but rather to insure a better and more efficient government.

Space does not allow more than a brief view at the events of those twenty years but in a nutshell, it must be said that the New Progressive Party now in power has become synonymous not with good and efficient government but with a highly partisan brand of government which pushes statehood without a status mandate, and tends to allow social and economic problems to grow unchecked.

As governor, between 1973 and 1977, I tried to clean up the house economically. I was hampered in this endeavor by the most severe economic slump ever experienced since the 1929 depression. Arab oil cut into every economy in the free world. In Puerto Rico

it took some \$500 million yearly out of the island's economy, something no other small country could have survived. We did. But it cost us the 1976 elections. Intellectually, people may understand economic problems but emotionally, they vote against bad times.

The NPP came to power for the second time in the 1976 elections. We are now living the results of that electoral decision. Again bad times are upon us, not only economically, but also socially. Crime and drugs follow hard on the steps of increased unemployment. Between 60 to 75 per cent of all Puerto Rican families are living on food stamps. New factory openings have become so far and in between they immediately become front page news. Cost of living continues to rise faster than wages, creating the classical crunch for the middle income wage earner.

To continue debating whether statehood, independence or commonwealth will better serve the people's needs, without equating status to the problem solving methods of how to decrease unemployment, crime, high prices and other basic human needs, is to say the least, banal if not irrelevant. A majority of Puerto Rican voters seem to think so, if we are to believe recent polls. Crime seems to be the number one worry, followed by drugs, unemployment, cost of living, and only then, status.

For more than a year, a highly competent group of Puerto Ricans, specializing in every area of human endeavor, have helped me gather the basic information needed to (1) better understand the profound economic and social problems of our island; and (2) establish guidelines, a framework or blueprint, with which to begin searching for the answers and solutions to those problems. We have called this

blueprint for the future the New Thesis. To summarize a year's work in a few paragraphs is difficult if not totally impossible. But suffice it to say that we offer no panaceas for our island's age old problems, but rather hard facts that require work and sacrifice if they are to turn our present state of affairs into a more viable, healthy and happier society.

We cannot continue doing more of the same. We will never be a totally or even a highly industrialized island. We don't have the prime materials for it. We will not solve our population problem by another mass migration like the fifties, although it is heartening to know that our birth rate is now stabilizing. We must therefore seek new answers to our overpopulation and unemployment problems.

We must increase our local production in order to meet local needs. We cannot continue to import basic foods such as milk eggs, meat, poultry, which should and could be produced here.

We must increase Puerto Rican investment in our economy so that our galloping public debt (currently at \$6.3 billion) will not continue eating up our resources in interest payments amounting to some \$226 million yearly. If, in order to do so, the government must give added tax incentives to local capital, so be it. What should not be done is to continue increasing that external debt, thus putting an impossible load on present and future generations.

Government must dare to establish risk capital ventures where private investors dare not go. This should not be viewed as working

against private enterprise but rather pionnering new investment efforts which later, once proven feasible, could be sold safeguarding the public interest, either partially or in toto to private investors.

We must view our current public educational system more critically to produce a moral operation bootstrap, and begin to forge a new type of Puerto Rican worker and professional, more dedicated to higher productivity standards and to improving not only his personal and family lot, but also his country's economic future.

We must plan our government programs, not on a four -year, trial and error basis, but through longterm 10 to 20 year planning.

Longterm planning, innovative thinking, imaginative economic policies are needed to reorient Puerto Rico's growth. We are not doing this at the present time. We see many high rise condominiums, but how many stand empty for years? More and more graduates come pouring out of our universities, but how many end up collecting unemployment or coupons or both? Salaries are not catching up with the cost of living, and never will if consumerism continues creating debts far beyond our capacity for payment. Puerto Ricans, individually and as a people, are now indebted for the rest of their natural lives and perhaps well into the lives of their children. This cannot be overemphazsized, and must be changed.

The next decade will determine whether Puerto Rico becomes a welfare state (federal or otherwise) or whether it can again aspire to be considered a "developing" society, a cultural bridge between the Anglo-Saxon haves and the Hispanic havenots, a unique and hardworking political entity proud of its Puerto Rican identity which has its roots and heritage in our own history but is firmly placed in the world

... of it use of American methods of free enter-

prise and its wholehearted dedication to democratic principles.

Acknowledging the difficulties ahead, I am nevertheless optimistic that Puerto Rico will return shortly to the path of progress and stability which marked the forties, fifties and early sixties. We cannot imitate the past. We must learn from it. But we must also have the knowledge and courage to know exactly what kind of future we wish to create for the twenty first century.

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