

# NO SOMOS ÚNICOS:

## The Status Issue from Manila to San Juan

Déborah Berman Santana

(note: This is a revised and updated version of the article "No somos únicos: the status question from Manila to San Juan." Special Issue: 1898-1998, Part 2. *CENTRO XXI*:1, Fall 1999. Used here by permission.)

### Introduction

The year, 1998, marked the centennial of the United States as a global power, highlighted by seizing territories in the Pacific and Caribbean. During the past century, three became independent, one became a U.S. state, but most have been maintained as possessions -- which is Washington's euphemism for a colony. Now it's well known that in the so-called Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, political status is the most troubling issue, and even today it seems far from resolution. But the island is not alone, as we approach the new millennium.

The United States also took other war prizes in 1898. While Cuba was granted conditional independence, the Philippines was ruled by colonial governors until 1946. Guam struggles over its status and land rights. During 1898 Hawaii was forcibly annexed by Washington; yet statehood has not ended the struggle for self-determination by the Hawaiian people. Most of the former Trust Territories of Micronesia have recently entered into so-called "free association" with the United States. And the "status" issue is a top concern in both the US Virgin Islands and American Samoa. As a scholar and a Puerto Rican, I believe that all of these stories hold some important lessons for Puerto Rico.

Not all observers would agree. In fact, most have argued that the United States never intended to hold territories not destined for statehood, and thus lacks a coherent policy toward its overseas territories. But I challenge that view. I argue that nineteenth century "Manifest Destiny" and "Indian" policies helped lead to U.S. occupation of overseas territories. I have found clear patterns in territorial relations over time, motivated by Washington's strategic, economic, and political interests, and shaped by racist and colonialist assumptions -- in particular, by persistent denigration of the cultures, abilities and aspirations of the native populations. I also consider these "political status struggles" in terms of self-determination under international law. Finally, understanding that there are key points of consensus among Puerto Ricans, I consider the possibilities for successful resolution of the status issue.



### Manifest Destiny and Indians

Let's begin by looking at what I call the Jeffersonian contradiction: two general principles of U.S. domestic and foreign policy put forth by Thomas Jefferson at the beginning of the independent United States of America. The first was the right of all peoples to self-determination, which justified forming the United States, and inspired similar efforts throughout the world. The second principle was the right of the United States to pursue its interests, even if it interfered with the rights of other peoples to self-determination; this was justified by a belief in the natural superiority of white Anglo-Saxons and the so-called "Manifest Destiny" of the U.S. to expand its political, economic, and cultural borders. Throughout the nineteenth century, various U.S. leaders advocated annexing parts or all of the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America, which in fact did happen (nearly half of Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.) Then, as laid out by Alfred Thayer Mahan, the most important key to global power was expanding the U.S. Navy and acquiring territories in both the Caribbean (to dominate Latin America and the future Panama Canal) and the Pacific (the gateway to Asia).

We should also review the evolution of the concepts of territory and sovereignty in the United States. Early on the distinction was made between the occupation of lands recognized as already belonging to others, from that of "terra nullius": no man's land, empty territory available for occupation, at least empty in the sense that no sovereign government recognized by the U.S. had claimed and occupied it. At first Washington did deal with the indigenous peoples of North America as sovereign nation-states. But whenever a dispute over land arose between US citizens and so-called Indians, the government intervened on the side of its citizens. It did so partly because the practice of Indians to hold their lands as common property instead of private property encouraged the idea that the lands were not owned -- but also because the Indians were not white. However, by the 1830's the earlier treatment of Indians as sovereign nations was replaced by referring to them as "domestic dependent nations," which has continued to this day -- along with various attempts at tribal termination and forced assimilation, to resolve the problem of having former nations claiming lands that were becoming part of the United States.

During the 1830's five major eastern tribes agreed to give up their ancestral homes in exchange for

permanent Indian territory (today's Oklahoma). When the U.S. resumed its westward expansion after the Civil War, the people of Indian territory petitioned Congress to join the federal union as a state -- a state which would preserve their unique cultural features and identity. The petition was rejected by Congress, precisely because of the cultural differences which would be preserved by state law, such as property rights, language, education, commerce, and civil laws. Congress thought it would be unfair to other states, and would discriminate against white US citizens who might want to move there. Not until whites became the majority population in Oklahoma territory was it admitted as a state in 1907. In fact, we consistently find this precondition for statehood: white Anglo majority, white Anglo rule, for example, in the territories captured from Mexico that became the US Southwest. In order to effect the "cure" of statehood, the prescription called for "Americanization," which specifically included the "disappearing" of "non-assimilable" peoples and cultures by depriving them of their resources, first in North America, and later in the island territories. Only in Hawaii was there not a white majority at statehood -- and this caused congressional resistance to statehood for over half a century --, but native Hawaiians were definitely a minority by then, and economic and political (not to mention military) control were firmly in white hands.

There is a general order for progression of status in US territories. First, they are militarily occupied and governed, then civilian rule is established, first directly from Washington and then local. Unorganized territories become organized with passage of an Organic Act which defines them. The next step is a Federal Relations Act, which confers U.S. citizenship on native inhabitants by an act of Congress. But some questions arose with the conquest of the island territories. Washington did not want to concede an absolute right to eventual statehood, nor did it want to commit itself to irrevokable U.S. citizenship, nor to all protections guaranteed to U.S. citizens. In fact, as in Oklahoma and the former Mexican lands, non-whites were never automatically considered entitled to the benefits of full U.S. citizenship. So in partial answer to these questions, not all territories have passed through all of these steps. Washington justified the conquest and permanent rule over the island territories without promising eventual citizenship and statehood, by citing the example of the "domestic dependent nations" already under its rule, namely, the Indians.

We should now review the experiences of specific territories within five existing alternatives of political status: independence, free association, commonwealth, territory, and statehood. Each story offers interesting comparisons and important lessons for Puerto Rico.



**Independence**

The Philippines declared independence from Spain on June 12, 1898. The islands had been coveted for their closeness to Asia, many strategic harbors, and rich natural resources. Almost the first act of the U.S. in the Spanish American War was to attack Manila. Then, at the Treaty of Paris in December 1898, Spain agreed to sell the Philippines, along with Guam and Puerto Rico, to the US. The Filipinos then fought the US for the next 12 years. Washington maintained control by carrying out a "scorched earth" military campaign resulting in the deaths of at least half a million Filipinos.

It should be noted that, while there was some ambivalence toward granting Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship (they finally did in 1917) Congress was adamantly opposed to doing the same for Filipinos, who were commonly referred to as "niggers", "injuns" and "gooks" by the U.S. military. In 1901 Congress passed the Sedition Law, which allowed for long prison terms, even the death sentence, for Filipinos who advocated independence; the law set a precedent for the extremely long sentences imposed on our Puerto Rican political prisoners. As in Puerto Rico, North American teachers and missionaries were sent to "civilize" the Filipinos, by teaching them English and U.S. history, and by trying to convert them to Protestant Christianity. But anti-colonial resistance continued, and in 1916 Congress agreed to grant independence "when conditions are appropriate."

In 1935 the the Philippines became a "Commonwealth" (the first among U.S. territories). This status was to last for 10 years, and would then transition to independence. Filipinos then gained formal independence on July 4, 1946, under the following strategic, economic, and political conditions:

- 1) US military bases would stay indefinitely, and the lands on which they were located would be leased under favorable terms
- 2) US economic domination (along with their elite local allies) would continue unchanged
- 3) political parties considered too leftist or nationalist were made illegal

So the Phillipines received a type of dependent independence that in many ways continued its status as a US colony. Interestingly, in 1962 the Philippines changed its independence day from July 4 to June 12, the day they had declared independence from Spain, so that officially those fifty years of US colonial rule is not even recognized.

But US support for the Marcos dictatorship disenchanted even many elites, and when he was overthrown a new constitution was drafted in 1987 that banned nuclear weapons on Filipino soil. U.S. policy is never to confirm or deny the existence of nuclear weapons on its bases or ships, and so Washington actively pressured the new government to rescind that provision. But the U.S. government underestimated Filipino resolve on the nuclear issue, and overestimated the local perception of the value of having U.S. bases. In fact, U.S. insensitivity during negotiations united antinuclear, nationalist, and leftist sentiments, so that in 1991 the Philippine senate voted to immediately close all U.S. bases. While the bases were closed in 1992, they left an enormous toxic waste cleanup job behind. Recently Washington has successfully pressured the Filipino government to sign a bill that would open all ports to U.S. ships as needed, regardless of what they might have on board, and granting immunity from prosecution to US military forces whenever they visit ports. Although citizen activism against renewed U.S. military presence is strong, promises of U.S. economic and military aid – particularly in view of an ongoing civil war in several provinces – have convinced the Philippines government to allow the U.S. military back in. At no time has Washington – or its elite local allies – demonstrated any concern for the long-term interests of the Filipino people, a pattern repeated in the other islands.

### **Free Association**

Micronesia comprises several island groups and thousands of islands between the Phillipines and Hawaii. Today the U.S. territories of Micronesia are divided into four recently created political entities: first, the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, which includes the island of Saipan, recently been charged with serious human rights violations of immigrant workers making U.S. label clothing. (Guam is geographically and culturally part of the Marianas, but was occupied by the U.S. in 1898, and is an unincorporated U.S. territory.) The second grouping is the U.S. Free Associated Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI); the third

is the U.S. Free Associated Federated States of Micronesia (FSM); and the fourth entity is the US Free Associated Republic of Palau (ROP). (Ironically, the official names for these new republics originally included the title "free associated state" -- which is the English translation of "estado libre asociado," Puerto Rico's current status.) Except for Guam, Micronesia came under U.S. rule as United Nations Trust territories after World War II, after having been occupied by Japan. As U.N. trust territories they were all supposed to have become independent fairly quickly. Yet because of their strategic and economic value, the U.S. only entered into status negotiations in the late 60's, after consistent pressure from the Micronesians, the UN and several Asian/Pacific states. Washington created a "Congress of Micronesia" modelled on Congress, and subject to Federal vetoes, and directed this colonial body to form a Political Status Commission with whom to negotiate.

During the twenty-five years-long process of status negotiations the United States kept trying to divide the Micronesians, making separate deals and playing up differences among them. Increased federal funding for political, social, and economic development was designed to bring about a status outcome that would keep the territory (quote) "within the U.S. political framework." At first, Washington would not even consider independence -- offering instead a choice between the commonwealth status of Puerto Rico or a territory like the Virgin Islands -- but bowed to Micronesian and international pressure to offer independence and free association as options, as long as the U.S. retained the right of "strategic denial" of third party states to Micronesia. Basically, Washington did not want to make deals where they might lose their bases, control over use of the islands or the surrounding ocean, or preferences in any future economic or political arrangements, regardless of whether the territories eventually became independent. Self determination -- whether cultural, political, or economic -- for the Micronesian people was at no time considered important. The U.S. did succeed in concluding a separate deal with the Northern Marianas, after a hurried (and tightly controlled) local "plebiscite" in 1975 approving Commonwealth status. However, the deal gave the Northern Marianas special native land ownership rights, so that they feel they have a better deal than does Puerto Rico.

Frustrated with the long process and the stalling by the U.S. negotiators (who would often agree to Micronesian demands, then back out when Congress disapproved), the rest of the Micronesian territories finally signed Compacts of Free Association: RMI and FSM became free associated republics in 1986 and were admitted to the U.N. in 1991, while Palau had to wait until 1994. These Compacts are to last for fifteen years. Not surprisingly, each side differs in their interpretation of the agreements: for example, the U.S. insists that the compacts will be automatically renewed, but RMI says that both sides must first agree, and that it wants extra payment for continued military use of the Kwajalein Missile Testing Site. All three "associated republics" receive block grants averaging between \$3 - 5,000 per resident per year. They also receive federal transfer payments, student federal aid, and other investment incentives which are nearly identical to those received by Puerto Rico and other territories. Strategic elements of the Compacts give the U.S. military option rights in perpetuity, and deny Micronesia the right to unilaterally cancel the agreements. Residents are U.S. nationals and may freely come to the U.S., but are not U.S. citizens. In the FSM the primary income today is those compact payments, and opinion is divided as to final status; similar to Puerto Rico, sectors most dependent upon U.S. aid favor a status change to commonwealth or statehood, while those fighting land use and anti-military struggles want total independence. In sum, Micronesia receives the world's highest per capita rate of U.S. aid, and economic development over the past thirty years is almost entirely a byproduct of the expansion of U.S. subsidies. Washington appears to have succeeded -- at least in the short term -- in holding on to these territories through increasing economic dependence.

The Republic's of Palau's constitution included banning nuclear weapons. Washington opposed such a provision and instructed Palau's government to hold plebiscites to eliminate it from the constitution. Because the constitution requires a 2/3 majority vote to amend it, Palau ended up holding six plebiscites during the 1980's because it couldn't get that 2/3 vote. This issue is what delayed the Compact of Free Association for Palau. The government of Palau actually threatened to withhold transfer payments and cut public jobs in order to get a favorable vote on the nuclear issue, and finally get the Compact; this experience of economic and political pressure and repeated so-called "plebiscites" should be familiar to Puerto Ricans. In addition, several murders and suspicious suicides of anti-nuclear and pro-independence leaders traumatized the population and helped gain approval for the Compact. Today Palauans believe that "free association" allows them to opt for complete independence within fifty years; in fact, their government refers to Palau as independent already. However, under the Compact Washington has the right to intervene politically, economically, and militarily whenever its interests are threatened. This provision is identical to the Platt

economically, and militarily whenever its interests are threatened. This provision is identical to the Tilt Amendment, which the U.S. required for Cuban independence in 1902, and promoted a colonial arrangement in all but name.



### **Commonwealth and Other Territories: Northern Marianas, Guam, American Samoa**

Residents of the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNM) are U.S. citizens, just as in Puerto Rico. However, in part because local law restricts long-term land ownership and use to natives of the Northern Marianas – among other provisions, including customs and immigration control, for which Puerto Rico lobbied unsuccessfully for years – some consider CNM's commonwealth deal to be less colonial than that of Puerto Rico. The U.S. minimum wage does not fully apply, which has encouraged the practice of shipping in foreigners to work under near-slavery conditions in Saipan's garment industry. Not surprisingly, sentiment favoring closer U.S. ties runs high on Saipan. By contrast, residents of the island of Tinian opposed a U.S. takeover of land for a military base, and have supported independence. As in all island territories, throughout the Northern Marianas there is an ongoing effort for more clarity in relations with Washington.

Special permission from the U.S. Navy was required to visit Guam until the 1950's; at that time Congress approved an Organic Act and placed the organized, unincorporated U.S. Territory of Guam under jurisdiction of the Office of Territorial Affairs of the Department of the Interior. Like Puerto Rico, Guam has a voice but no vote in Congress, its own elected governor, similar federal programs, transfer payments, and tax status, and its residents are U.S. citizens. Native Chamorros (Chamorus) make up 47% of the population, while the majority are from the Philippines, the continental United States, and other Pacific Islands. Since 1989 the government of Guam has been struggling to get Congress to consider Commonwealth status. The governor of Guam has reminded Congress of Guam's strategic and economic importance as "America in Asia," but has also insisted on two important points to any status change: first, future status may not be altered without mutual consent; and second, Chamorro people have the right to self-determination; not surprisingly, Congress has shown little interest in a status change for Guam.

Land rights are a particularly troublesome issue in Guam. Guam comprises 212 square miles. Three U.S. military bases hold 44,000 acres of land, or one third of Guam's total territory, but only uses 6,000 of those acres. Chamorro activists are asking for return of unused lands, but have been told by the U.S. military that they must pay \$281,000 per acre. The island's only lake is located within those lands, and toxic waste generated by the military has contaminated Guam's fresh water supply. While the U.S. government is currently considering setting aside 32,000 acres of its unused military lands as a wildlife refuge, the proposal is opposed by Chamorro activists, who claim that Washington values plants and animals more than it does the indigenous people. In addition, regardless of status preference many Guamanians want control over immigration, tax, and trade policy, none of which Puerto Rico currently enjoys.

The Samoan Archipelago is part of Polynesia, which stretches from its northern outpost, Hawai'i, southeast to Easter Island (Rapanui), and southwest to New Zealand (Aotearoa). By the late nineteenth century Spain, Great Britain, Germany, and the United States all struggled for control; Samoa tried to remain independent and neutral but suffered from factionalism among its chiefs, each side supported by colonial powers. Not long after the Spanish American War the islands were partitioned, with Germany getting Western Samoa and the U.S. (supported by Britain) taking the eastern islands. American Samoa was directly ruled by the U.S. Navy until 1951, when it was placed under the Department of the Interior. Today American Samoa is an "unorganized, unincorporated US territory," which lacks an Organic Act. Since 1967 residents have elected their own governor, but their annual budget must be approved by the U.S. House of Representatives. Similar to Puerto Rico, they elect a nonvoting representative to Congress, and partake in transfer payments, tax incentives, and federal programs. The federal minimum wage does not apply in American Samoa, and while residents are U.S. nationals and may move freely to the United States they are not U.S. citizens. American Samoa is campaigning to keep 936 even when it is discontinued for Puerto Rico, in order to keep the tuna canneries open; interestingly, many of the workers are from independent Western Samoa. As in all other U.S. territories, status clarification and local control are critical issues.

### **Statehood**

Hawai'i was first visited by Europeans late in the eighteenth century, and was coveted for its resources and strategic location. Throughout the nineteenth century the Kingdom of Hawai'i was internationally recognized as an independent state, including by Washington. In 1826 armed US gunboats forced the King to assume debts incurred by lesser chiefs; at that time Washington also secured docking rights for its Navy, assured the right of U.S. citizens in Hawai'i to sue, and received "most favored nation" trading status. A steady stream of U.S. missionaries, teachers and businessmen began to flow to Hawaii. Through the growing power of U.S. business (especially export agriculture), the ever-present threat of military invasion, and the weakening of Hawaiians through disease, forced acculturation, and loss of access to traditional lands, Hawai'i became an embattled nation, recognized as independent but under increasing influence from Washington.

In 1893 U.S. residents of Hawai'i, backed by US Marines, overthrew the Hawaiian queen and declared a Republic of Hawai'i. This government was not recognized anywhere in the world. Even President Grover Cleveland agreed that the coup was illegal but he did not withdraw the troops, who were assisting the rebels in suppressing dissent. The rebel government almost immediately seized more than two million acres of land held in trust by the queen for the people, and then petitioned to be annexed by the United States. Since Hawaii was independent a treaty had to be ratified by the U.S. Senate, and a vote fell short of the necessary two-thirds majority. Then on August 12, 1898, at the close of the Spanish-American War, a simple majority resolution was passed in Congress making Hawai'i a U.S. territory, in violation not only of international law but also of the laws of the United States, and over the objections of thousands of native Hawaiians who had sent petitions against annexation to Congress. Annexation opened the floodgates of immigrant workers to work in the sugar and pineapple plantations. They replaced native Hawaiians, whose numbers had declined from one million at the time of first European contact, to some 40,000 by 1893.

The U.S. federal government took over the former "royal lands," building up its military infrastructure on around 500,000 acres – for example, on Oahu, home to 80% of the population, the military still controls 25% of the land. Washington also assigned 1.8 million acres to be held by the territory (today the state) government of Hawai'i as (quote) "solely for the benefit of the inhabitants of the Hawaiian islands." But Hawaiian natives have not gained access to most of that land. In 1921 200,000 acres were earmarked for

homesteaders with 50% or more Hawaiian ancestry; however, 60% of the lands went to non-natives, while natives received mostly marginal lands without adequate water. Today Washington claims that it cannot remedy the situation because that would show a "racial preference" towards Hawaiian natives, in violation of U.S. law; they also resist attempts by natives to gain the right to sue the government for breaches of the land trust. Hawaiians living on such lands without official title are frequently evicted and jailed as squatters. Laws enacted since the U.S. takeover have promoted the increase in Hawai'i's non-native population, and have enabled corporate interests to dominate the economy, so that today Hawaiian natives comprise 20% of the population; they have less access to resources than any other group, and comprise more than three-quarters of the prison population.

In 1959 residents of Hawai'i – including thousands of military personnel – voted on a simple question: Shall Hawai'i petition to become a state of the United States, or shall it remain a U.S. territory? The majority of voters voted for statehood, although areas with high percentages of native Hawaiians rejected statehood. This vote was submitted to the United Nations as evidence that Hawai'i had exercised its right to self-determination, and Hawai'i was taken off the list of non-self-governing territories. Yet the past thirty years have seen increased activism among Hawaiian natives and their supporters. Hawaiian language and culture is increasingly being taught, and dozens of different organizations advocating Hawaiian sovereignty are currently active. In 1993 big demonstrations condemning the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii prompted an official apology from President Clinton for the illegal act which the U.S. perpetrated against a friendly independent country. Seventeen independent Pacific Island States now officially support returning Hawaii to the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories. Meanwhile, Hawaiian sovereignty activists continue their work. As one activist says about statehood, "We were the last ones in, and we hope to be the first ones out." While sovereignty supporters face perhaps the steepest challenge among island territories, the struggle is clearly far from over.

### **Patterns**

Even a brief review such as presented here reveals some patterns in U.S. policies toward its island territories. While on occasion the United States has resorted to heavy handed domination and frankly genocidal policies, over the years Washington has demonstrated a preference for a type of "low intensity hegemony," enacted wherever possible by local elites. This type of rule typically intertwines the strategic, the economic and the political. U.S. strategic interests are of primary importance in securing unlimited rights to all of the Pacific and Caribbean territories – which is the main reason behind the U.S. Navy's insistence on retaining Vieques, as well as other contested bases. Policies encourage economic dependence of the territories upon the United States so as to weaken island support for independence, while at the same time they consistently enable U.S. capital to flow with ease to the territories, and through them to neighboring regions – and, of course, eases the flow of wealth in the opposite direction. Political status allows just enough self-government to keep the locals relatively quiet, and to mute international criticism. Washington counts on divisions among local factions to prevent more unified demands for real self determination. Relations with the island territories have always demonstrated insensitivity to local cultural concerns and active resistance to any proposals that might decrease economic or political dependence on the United States. Only under sustained, unified pressure by territorial representatives and especially public activism, along with overt international calls for justice, has Washington ever agreed to any terms favoring more self-government, such as opening negotiations with Micronesia and closing bases in the Philippines. Only continued and increased pressure holds any hope for expanding and making permanent such limited gains.

### **International law**

It is also important to examine the concept of "self-determination" under international law. Briefly, the UN General Assembly's Resolution 1541, passed in 1960, defined three ways that a non-self-governing territory can be said to have reached a measure of self-government:?

- 1) independence
- 2) free association with an independent state -- with evidence of freely chosen, uncoerced status, the right to unilaterally terminate or change the agreement in the future, and the right to freely determine its own constitution

3) integration with the independent state -- which requires complete equality between the people of the territory and of the independent state, also evidence of freely chosen and uncoerced status.

It can be argued that the new Micronesian free associated republics do not meet the first or second criteria, because they don't have the right to unilaterally terminate or change their agreement; in addition, Palau was clearly coerced into changing its constitution. American Samoa, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico presently fail to meet any of the above criteria. Presumably, as a state Puerto Rico would meet criterion number three, if it freely chose that option - I would argue that Hawaii did not do so.

### **Puerto Rico Consensus Points**

Finally, even though Puerto Ricans appear deeply divided on the status issue, I believe that there are a number of key points where most do agree. These include:

**1) Identity:** Puerto Ricans overwhelmingly see themselves as a distinct nation. Even the pro-statehood party has always been careful to portray U.S. statehood as safeguarding Puerto Rican nationhood, the primacy of Spanish, even its own Olympic team. Any status hoping to gain overwhelming support from Puerto Ricans must safeguard Puerto Rican identity.

**2) U.S. citizens' rights:** Puerto Ricans - who are all born with U.S. citizenship regardless of birthplace - overwhelmingly reject any formulation of status that would abrogate the rights to which they are entitled as U.S. citizens, paid for with blood and taxes. Any formulation for independence or free association would have to insist that Puerto Ricans have the right to retain U.S. citizenship for life -- and supporters should be prepared to take the issue to the Supreme Court and international fora if necessary. This really shouldn't pose a problem, because U.S. citizens currently enjoy dual citizenship with many countries. In particular, independence supporters should ask themselves why citizens of an independent Republic of Puerto Rico should not enjoy the same treatment.

**3) Security:** Regardless of status preference, Puerto Ricans are concerned with longterm economic sustainability. It should be made clear that none of the status options of themselves guarantee this, and that Puerto Rico faces equal dangers as a poor dependent state, commonwealth, or independent country. Status activists need to become informed about the economic, cultural environmental, and political dangers posed by the "Bootstrap mentality", which continues to waste precious natural and human resources on attracting outside capital to Puerto Rico, instead of supporting and developing local business and economic activity. Statehood supporters, for example, should note that dismantling local economic activity and encouraging dependence do not make Puerto Rico particularly attractive as the fifty-first state.

### **Conclusions**

In closing let me emphasize that Puerto Ricans need to consider each status option honestly, not as we might like them to be, in light of United States policy on the continent and in all of its island territories. History and everyday U.S. reality teach us that statehood is not a good way to safeguard a separate national identity. Experience tells us that the status options of territory, commonwealth, and free association are considered temporary and do not satisfy many island residents, especially as time goes on. Moreover, any status that can not be changed by that territory in the future may still be considered colonial by international law.

Independence supporters need to consider carefully how to deal with U.S. citizens' rights, how the transition to independence may be equitably accomplished, and how "dependent" independence can be avoided; unless these issues are satisfactorily addressed, it is unlikely that independence will ever gain enough popular support on the island. Independence will need to be protracted, not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end. Such an end could be described as increasing the capacity of Puerto Rico - the land and its people - to realize the full potential of each individual and the whole community to meet material needs, and to grow intellectually and spiritually. In the long term, a satisfactory resolution of the political status issue - one which could gain the strongest popular support - should help enable increasingly shared responsibility for maintaining the biological and social bases of life; it should also contribute toward the goal of maintaining life (sustainability) on the island, in the region and in the world as a whole. Independence supporters need to start envisioning,

fleshing out, and explaining to the public what Puerto Rico could be like after independence, given global realities and trends as we begin this new millennium. For example, an independent Republic of Puerto Rico might eventually form a cornerstone of some type of regional federation. In other words, independence should be seen as just a beginning, in an increasingly interconnected world where peoples and states freely associate with other peoples and states in a partnership of equals – but never again as colonial appendages..

"No somos únicos, y no estamos solos" – we are not unique, and we are not alone. As a puertorriqueña, I believe that by taking lessons from history, learning from the experiences of sister territories, and honestly considering popular opinion and global trends, we may begin to resolve our most agonizing dilemma – the political status issue – and then move on.

*The author is an Assistant Professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at Mills College in Oakland, California.*

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