

PUERTO RICO, THE UNITED STATES,
AND THE 1993 REFERENDUM ON
POLITICAL STATUS

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PUERTO RICO: PROCESO PLEBISCITARIO, 1989–1991 / POLITICAL STATUS REFERENDUM, 1989–1991. 3 volumes. (Washington, D.C.: Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, 1992. Pp. 599, 466, 570. \$60.00 set, cloth.)

THE UNITED STATES AND PUERTO RICO: DECOLONIZATION OPTIONS AND PROSPECTS. By Roland I. Perusse. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987. Pp. 175. \$40.00 cloth, \$19.75 paper.)

THE UNITED STATES AND PUERTO RICO: THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY. By Roland I. Perusse. (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 1990. Pp. 181. \$10.50 paper.)

COLONIAL DILEMMA: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY PUERTO RICO. Edited by Edgardo and Edwin Meléndez. (Boston, Mass.: South End, 1993. Pp. 255. \$40.00 cloth, \$16.00 paper.)

MODERN CARIBBEAN POLITICS. Edited by Anthony Payne and Paul Sutton. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Pp. 332. \$50.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

PUERTO RICO: CINCO SIGLOS DE HISTORIA. By Francisco A. Scarano. (Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia: McGraw-Hill, 1993. Pp. 868. \$45.00 cloth.)

1898: LA GUERRA DESPUES DE LA GUERRA. By Fernando Picó. (Rio Piedras, P.R.: Huracán, 1987. Pp. 215. \$11.95 paper.)

In a plebiscite conducted in Puerto Rico on 14 November 1993, the island's 1.7 million voters were asked to decide whether they wished to retain the status of Estado Libre Asociado or Commonwealth, whether they preferred that Puerto Rico become the fifty-first U.S. state, or whether they wished to become citizens of a free and sovereign nation. The option of retaining the Estado Libre Asociado received the most votes by a narrow margin.¹ Leaders of the statehood forces, however, inter-

1. A total of 823,258 voters (48.4 percent) favored the Estado Libre Asociado, while 785,859 (46.2 percent) favored statehood, and 75,253 (4.4 percent) favored independence.

preted the close vote as a mandate to keep promoting the movement toward statehood, while independence supporters continued to insist that Puerto Rico has the right to complete freedom and sovereignty.

Casual observers of this entire process could claim that not much has changed since a similar exercise was held in 1967.² More perceptive students may reach a different conclusion. First of all, the plebiscite brought Puerto Rico into the news. This time around, the U.S. public showed mild interest in the problems of its forgotten cousin. The once-dormant issue of Puerto Rico's legal status actually became part of a discussion that included issues like welfare, deficits, immigration, culture, and even foreign policy.

Second, Puerto Ricans at home and abroad realized that the status question is far from settled. Meanwhile, U.S. citizens on the mainland recognized that the issue is a complicated one and that no easy solutions lie ahead. Should Puerto Ricans be satisfied with this outcome? Is Puerto Rico's dilemma over its status now better understood? Was this flurry of attention enough to clear the air and shelve the matter for another twenty-five years?

The island's recently acquired newsworthiness brought out one central truth: in this age of lobbying, spin doctors, and opinion makers, little media time is devoted to in-depth analysis of the facts. The aim of the media is evidently not to educate but to cajole and influence.

Puerto Rico's colonial predicament comprises far more than the three ill-defined political alternatives offered to voters and discussed on national television. Other factors include the psychological and cultural burdens of five hundred years of colonial rule, the spiritual ordeal of defining what Puerto Ricans should be, and the scars of economic dependency. These and other consequences of the status dilemma have been poorly analyzed in a political climate driven by one-liners and clever sound bites.

This review essay will examine seven works that deal seriously with Puerto Rico's dilemma over status. These books present the historical background and contemporary perspectives that foster a more judicious and better informed look at Puerto Rico's national question. A three-volume set of plebiscite-related documents published by the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration allows the opportunity to examine the inherent legislative mechanisms and political tactics. The scholarly monographs of historians Francisco Scarano and Fernando Picó also provide background information for those willing to go beyond headlines and political pundits. Two works by Roland Perusse focus on the dy-

2. A plebiscite was held in Puerto Rico on 23 July 1967 in which Puerto Ricans were asked to choose among commonwealth, statehood, and independence. In that referendum, the *Estado Libre Asociado* or Commonwealth captured 60.5 percent of the vote.

namics of the U.S.–Puerto Rico relationship and explain why Washington’s “hands-off policy” has failed. Of the two collections under review, that edited by Edgardo and Edwin Meléndez demonstrates how the present political arrangement imbues Puerto Rican society with a sense of economic inertia and political impotence. Finally, Anthony Payne’s edited volume contains a study of Puerto Rican foreign policy that contradicts the island’s usual image as a reluctant partner in Washington’s Caribbean policy.

President George Bush’s unequivocal public support for Puerto Rican statehood was a remarkable development in recent U.S. history. Not since the Puerto Rican Statehood Act of 1977 had official action for a change in Puerto Rico’s status originated in the Oval Office.³ As expected, Bush’s stance galvanized public opinion and set the stage for a political confrontation. The next thirty months witnessed unprecedented levels of legislative activity. In Washington, the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives introduced bills to authorize a referendum to allow U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico to vote on the country’s political future. In San Juan, traditional party alliances once again blew the bugles calling the faithful to do political battle.

To provide a frame of reference for this complex and politically charged legislative agenda, the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration compiled *Puerto Rico: Proceso Plebiscitario, 1989–1991 / Political Status Referendum, 1989–1991*. This comprehensive and hefty reference set offers students of the plebiscite the opportunity to review and compare copies of the official documents connected with the referendum. These documents also allow scholars to sort through countless letters, reports, and studies without having to search archival holdings or private collections.

Documentation provided in this set includes: official correspondence between key U.S. legislators, information requests by the U.S. Congress to support agencies such as the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and the Congressional Research Service (CRS), studies conducted by private groups at the behest of Puerto Rico’s political parties, and studies conducted by the General Accounting Office (GAO). Each volume includes a chronology of key events and a listing of significant dates. Conspicuously absent from this massive work, however, are the transcripts of the public hearings held by the Senate and House committees involved.

The strength of *Puerto Rico: Proceso Plebiscitario, 1989–1991* is its lack of extraneous interpretation. No attempt was made to analyze the referendum process, while references to outside events were purposely ig-

3. The Puerto Rican Statehood Act was introduced by former President Gerald Ford in 1977. The bill states “That this is the sense of the Congress of the United States that the appropriate status for the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is statehood and that the people of Puerto Rico should be able to achieve this status under the Constitution of the United States if they should so desire. . . .”

nored. As the volume's bilingual introduction explains, "the work of interpreting the significance and importance of each document is left to historians, lawyers, other students of the subject, and in general, any person interested in the future of Puerto Rico" (p. xii). Those interested in Puerto Rico's future and its current colonial dilemma will indeed benefit most from having such a wide array of key documents assembled in one essential reference tool.

Beneath the political debris of the plebiscite in November 1993 lay a key set of statistics: during the past twenty-five years, electoral support for statehood has grown from 38.9 percent to 42.6 percent, while support for the *Estado Libre Asociado* has dropped from 60.5 percent to 48.4 percent. Those favoring independence increased modestly from less than 1 percent to 4.4 percent.⁴ What do these figures mean? Statehood, although defeated in the recent plebiscite, remains an attractive political alternative, and pro-statehood sentiments continue to mount. The other evident trend is growing disillusionment with the *Estado Libre Asociado*.

In recent years, various scholarly monographs have focused on the history and development of the movement for Puerto Rican statehood.⁵ These works have centered on the movement's local dynamics and internal political machinery. Few works, however, have dealt with Puerto Rico's quest for permanent union or the political minuet danced by Washington and San Juan. Fewer still have proposed a decolonizing option—at least until the publication of Roland Perusse's *The United States and Puerto Rico: Decolonization Options and Prospects*.

In this work, Perusse presents a balanced view of Puerto Rico's efforts to find a way out of the colonial morass. Prefaced by former President Gerald Ford, the volume consists of brief position papers written by key local politicians representing all political stances. Thus the collection profiles Puerto Rico's major political players and delineates the vast array of opinions on the question of status. The volume ends with Perusse's own prescription for decolonization.

His second book, *The United States and Puerto Rico: The Struggle for Equality*, includes a collection of presidential proclamations, legislative acts, committee reports, and congressional and United Nations resolutions on Puerto Rico. Readers of this volume can browse through "The Proclamation of General Nelson Miles" (1898),⁶ the Treaty of Paris

4. See the London publication, Kessing's *Contemporary Archives* 16 (1967–1968):22, 239; and "Choosing Status Quo: Puerto Rico Avoids Radical Change but Now May Be Ignored by Congress," *The New York Times*, 16 Nov. 1993, sec. A, p. 24.

5. See Edgardo Meléndez, *Puerto Rico's Statehood Movement* (New York: Greenwood, 1988).

6. Three days after landing on Puerto Rican soil, General Nelson Miles proclaimed the purpose of the invasion: "This is not a war of devastation, but one to give to all within the control of its military and naval forces the advantages and blessings of enlightened civilization."

(1898),⁷ the Foraker Act (1900),⁸ the Jones Act (1917),⁹ Public Law 600 (1950),¹⁰ the United Nations' General Assembly's Resolution 1514 (1960),¹¹ President Ford's statehood bill (1977),¹² President Reagan's statement on Puerto Rico (1982),¹³ and many other key documents in Puerto Rico's political and legislative development.

Both of Perusse's studies attempt to illustrate the vicious cycle of relations between Puerto Rico and the United States. For years, Washington's pledge of "respect for self-determination" and its policy of "let them decide and we'll respond" (p. 143) have led both countries nowhere. These two monographs portray painstakingly the long winding road littered with empty slogans and vague resolutions. Perusse courageously offers an alternative, commenting incisively that "The United States and Puerto Rico have been cohabitating for nearly a century. Now is the time to get married or to separate" (p. 153).

The effect of the colonial dilemma that Perusse cogently describes is the main issue explored by Edwin and Edgardo Meléndez in their compilation of scholarly essays, *Colonial Dilemma: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Puerto Rico*. This collection of previously published pieces goes further than any other work in dealing with the issue of status. It is not an attempt to recycle arguments from the past or to revisit well-documented highlights from the Puerto Rican experience. Instead, *Colonial Dilemma* offers a diverse collection of forward-looking essays centering on the many issues related to Puerto Rico's status. Among the unique pieces of this unresolved political puzzle under discussion are political status, military installations, citizenship, women in the labor force, feminism, squatters, labor unions, educational reform, Puerto Ricans in the United States, and the struggle for independence.

The value of *Colonial Dilemma* resides in its timeliness and broad scope. Its timeliness is bound to benefit students of the Puerto Rican experience seeking more contemporary material, while the work's ample scope will satisfy students of emerging disciplines like feminism and women's studies as well as researchers searching for alternative approaches to traditional fields like education and the economy. Another plus is the volume's well-thought-out topical arrangement. Readers can

7. The Treaty of Paris brought the Spanish-American War to a close and sealed Puerto Rico's fate. In accordance with the treaty, Puerto Rico came under U.S. sovereignty after four centuries of Spanish rule.

8. The Foraker Act established a civilian government in Puerto Rico.

9. The Jones Act granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans.

10. Public Law 600 allowed Puerto Rico to form its own government under its own constitution.

11. This UN resolution demanded "immediate steps" to abolish colonial relations. Under this resolution, any associated state must be free to sever its ties with other countries.

12. On his last day in office, President Ford introduced the Puerto Rican Statehood Act of 1977.

13. In 1982 President Reagan reaffirmed U.S. policy regarding Puerto Rico.

quickly scan the five main topics (politics and the status debate, the Puerto Rican economy, emerging social movements, the view from the United States, and looking toward the future) and choose among the fifteen carefully written essays. Although most contributors frame their remarks in the appropriate historical context, *Colonial Dilemma* is certainly not for beginning students of Puerto Rican affairs. Some background is needed in order to grapple successfully with some of the concepts presented throughout the book.

Two essays in this collection merit special mention. Angelo Falcón's "A Divided Nation: The Puerto Rican Diaspora in the United States and the Proposed Referendum" and Humberto García Muñiz's "U.S. Military Installations in Puerto Rico: Controlling the Caribbean" serve a dual purpose. First, both essays define the deep and complex relationship that exists between the United States and Puerto Rico. Falcón focuses on the demographic reality that Puerto Rico has exported 40 percent of its population to the mainland, while García Muñiz explores a relationship based on the metropolis's power to unilaterally enact and impose legislation on an often unwilling recipient. Second and perhaps more important, both works attempt to discredit Washington's long-standing position that Puerto Rico's future is a domestic issue and that no international body can claim jurisdiction over the case.

In the twelfth essay, Falcón takes a close look at the proposed 1993 referendum to decide Puerto Rico's future and the heated debate that participation by mainland Puerto Ricans caused in the island and the continental United States. He details the results of a recent survey conducted on this issue by the Puerto Rican Policy Institute. Falcón argues convincingly that most Puerto Ricans living on the mainland want to have a say about the island's political future. Yet amidst this seemingly domestic debate, larger issues of foreign policy remain unresolved. What are the proper roles of international law and international organizations in resolving the Puerto Rican dilemma? Who would control the foreign policy of an independent Puerto Rico? In a new world order where nation states are being replaced by ethnic tribes, will Puerto Ricans be viewed as an ethnic minority or as part of a divided nation? These questions remain to be addressed, along with issues like citizenship, official language, migration, and immigration.

García Muñiz's informative essay documents the history, the uses, and the future of U.S. military bases in Puerto Rico. He discusses the key role played by these bases in the formulation and execution of U.S. foreign policy. García Muñiz traces the increasing militarization of Puerto Rico since the 1950s and pinpoints the dual role of these bases as launching pads for U.S. invasions of the Dominican Republic (1965) and Grenada (1983) and a more sinister role in the local political arena. He closes reflecting on the presence of nuclear weapons on Puerto Rican soil, the

increased militarization of Puerto Rican society, and U.S. plans to maintain control of the bases.

The role of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean and its new visibility in the region is one of many topics explored by editors Anthony Payne and Paul Sutton in *Modern Caribbean Politics*. Dedicated to the late Caribbeanist Gordon Lewis, the collection consists of twelve essays covering all major territories and topics. Readers will find specialists in Caribbean studies writing about subjects ranging from electoral politics in Jamaica, militarization in Suriname, and the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti to race and politics in Trinidad and Guyana. Of interest to students of Puerto Rico is the contribution of two perennial observers of the Puerto Rican scene, Jorge Heine and Juan Manuel García Passalacqua. Their essay, "Political Economy and Foreign Policy in Puerto Rico," examines the island's newly developed ties with its Caribbean neighbors, traces the evolution of Puerto Rico's foreign relations between 1948 and 1989, and offers a fresh reading of Puerto Rico's foreign policy.

Heine and Passalacqua analyze Puerto Rico's past diplomatic efforts and compare them with Washington's Caribbean policy. What they find is not surprising. After sifting carefully through forty years of U.S.-Caribbean and Puerto Rico-Caribbean relations (from the onset of the cold war to the Panama invasion), the authors conclude that "Puerto Rico is not so much a tool of U.S. policy as a user of U.S. policy to obtain its own ends" (p. 210). To put the matter another way, Puerto Rico pursues a foreign policy with twin objectives: to advance its own interests and to complement Washington's military, economic, and strategic interests.

Colonial Dilemma and *Modern Caribbean Politics* reveal the complexities of the issue of Puerto Rico's status. They also reflect the wide range of approaches currently being used to investigate the dynamics of U.S.-Puerto Rico relations. But perhaps more important, these two works provide a scholarly view of many significant issues that until now have remained poorly analyzed or ignored.

Puerto Rico: cinco siglos de historia and *1898: la guerra después de la guerra* are good background sources for those seeking a more thorough understanding of Puerto Rico's historical development. *Puerto Rico: cinco siglos de historia* is an ambitious attempt to organize a one-volume synthesis of Puerto Rican history. The result is a comprehensive, well-written, and insightful look at five centuries of Puerto Rican history. Francisco Scarano, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin and author of a seminal work on sugar and slavery in Puerto Rico, has successfully pulled together an extraordinary amount of useful information and brought unmatched vitality to the subject.¹⁴

14. See Francisco A. Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico: The Plantation Economy of Ponce, 1800-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

The book's format makes it an ideal textbook. Each of the twenty-five chapters is followed by "preguntas y temas de discusión," notes, and a list of recommended readings. The work is richly illustrated, well-indexed, and includes a massive bibliography. The only thing missing is a good English translation.

One value of *Puerto Rico: cinco siglos de historia* is its broad array of topics, including information on literature, painting, urbanization, education, industrialization, geography, and weather and climate. The book also includes an entire chapter on the African experience and its contribution to Puerto Rican life and culture. Scarano presents an insightful analysis of the last thirty years (1963–1993) in which he details the stagnancy of Puerto Rican society and its economic decay.

During the 1950s, Puerto Rico was ravaged by political violence. For many, political violence in Puerto Rico began and ended with Pedro Albizu Campos and his Nationalist Party.¹⁵ Presenting evidence to the contrary is the goal of Fernando Picó's *1898: la guerra después de la guerra*. In this work, Picó has reconstructed a little-known event in Puerto Rican history. The phrase "the war after the war" refers to the episodes of semi-organized rural violence that plagued Puerto Rico's coffee plantations in the months immediately following the U.S. invasion in 1898. According to Picó, these "*partidas sediciosas*" (seditious posses) represented "the most vigorous manifestation of popular feeling as a reaction to the Spanish-American War in Puerto Rico" (p. 201).

Hired hands and laborers made up these *partidas*. Their aims were neither to resist the invasion nor to lobby the newly installed American government for concessions. Rather, the *partidas* were motivated by hatred of the old economic and social order and a deeply rooted desire to "*ajustar cuentas*" (settle accounts). Their targets were the most blatant symbols of the old regime: foremen and warehouses, property owners and shopkeepers, "*tiendas de raya*" and "*compontes*."¹⁶ *La guerra después de la guerra* is historical inquiry at its best. Picó, a Jesuit and a history professor at the University of Puerto Rico, has put together a concise and readable account of the *partidas*. After reconstructing their historical context, he chronicles specific episodes and analyzes their significance. Picó's work offers irrefutable evidence of a burgeoning class struggle and shatters the myth of Puerto Rican docility.

15. See Marisa Rosado, *Las llamas de la aurora: acercamiento a una biografía de Albizu Campos* (San Juan, P.R.: Corripio, 1992); and Ivonne Acosta, *La mordaza: Puerto Rico, 1948–1957* (Rio Piedras, P.R.: Edil, 1987).

16. The so-called *tiendas de raya* (line stores) were the company stores where laborers could buy food and supplies. Strapped by their meager salaries, workers constantly had to borrow against future earnings and found themselves trapped in a cycle of debt. In 1887 Governor Romualdo Palacios, fearing the political machinations of some pro-autonomy groups, ordered a series of preventive measures. These "*compontes*" included massive arrests, torture sessions, and executions.

The seven books reviewed here offer some indication of where current research on U.S.–Puerto Rican relations should go. Previous studies have focused mainly on the San Juan–Washington axis and were utterly consumed with island-based analysis usually centered around powerful local bureaucrats. The new scholarship is inclusive rather than exclusive, taking as its point of departure the undeniable reality that creating a new political paradigm will not happen in isolation. The new scholarship claims that emerging social, economic, and political movements in San Juan and Washington, the Caribbean, and the United Nations and among Puerto Rican communities in the United States will all serve as catalysts in creating the new political order. Thus scholarly studies on Puerto Rico are finally shifting away from the tacit acceptance of Puerto Rico’s historical insularity.