

Puerto Rico, where self-determination, statehood don't mix
By William Santiago
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Despite recent editorials in the Miami Herald, New York Post and Washington Post, the growing congressional campaign toward Puerto Rican statehood has sparked conspicuously slack debate.

Both the Herald and the New York Post echoed the endorsement for the initiative by the Washington Post, both newspapers implying statehood as the proper foregone conclusion. But none fully examined the stumbling blocks to that goal, starting with half the island's opposition to the notion, as demonstrated by a vote just four years ago.

Although sold as a "self-determinism" bill, the proposal leans heavily toward adding Puerto Rico's star to the American flag. Under the legislation, Puerto Ricans would get to choose between allowing their island to remain a commonwealth or letting it become a state or an independent republic.

But independence garners barely 5 percent at the polls. Support for commonwealth has been slipping. And, according to the bill, only a 1 percent majority for statehood on the island would commit the United States to begin the process of admitting Puerto Rico into the union - even if 49 percent of Puerto Ricans were against it.

The word *self-determination* implies overwhelming consensus that simply doesn't exist in Puerto Rico. Should statehood win an island plebiscite anytime soon, the victory will be marginal and not likely to persuade the U.S. public. Who wants to adopt a state ripe for secession?

Yet the bill proposes to kick off the process with an island referendum next year to mark the centennial of the Spanish American War - the conclusion of which saw Puerto Rico swiftly swapped from Spanish to American real estate ledgers.

Today, with colonial divestiture de rigueur the world over, the bill is being advanced under an anticolonial banner. But the United States scrutinizes the issue from a stubbornly imperial perspective. Because full independence gets scant support on the island, Americans stateside assume Puerto Ricans would love to become the 51st state if only they didn't have to pay taxes as the price. At present, under their limited U.S. citizenship, Puerto Rican residents can't vote in federal elections. In consolation, they pay no federal income tax.

But anti-statehood sentiment on the island is not founded on dread of the IRS. A distinct national identity prevails despite the moribund independence movement. Puerto Ricans regard the island as their motherland, instinctually referring to it as *nuestra patria* - our native country. And, as in Northern Ireland, Quebec and Palestine, the intensity of such nationalism is inversely proportional to the territory's size.

Declared in countless impassioned songs, on any given day, at any given hour, by independence, commonwealth and statehood supporters gathered at a bar, a concert or a street corner-or blaring from the radio - it's that reverberant nationalism, betraying a defiantly

Latin American mindset, that makes statehood such a difficult proposition. Sure, the lyrics could be shrugged off as benign romanticism. But there are no statehood songs.

Furthermore, many island statehooders support union not as a first choice but as a practical last resort. They conclude that even as an independent republic, Puerto Rico would remain a de facto U.S. colony by virtue of the superpower's dominating influence. So they resign hopes for independence and choose statehood over political impotence under commonwealth.

There are nearly 4 million Puerto Ricans on the island, and almost as many now living in the States. They travel back and forth freely, maintaining family ties. Most island residents aren't about to give up their U.S. citizenship to become a republic if it means compromising access to loved ones.

With strategic courage, Puerto Rico might successfully go it alone. But the independence party has yet to present a plausible transition plan with solid assurances for economic viability as a sovereign country. The party is so enfeebled at present, its only apparent strategy is to wait for the United States to reject Puerto Rico's bid for statehood, hoping the slap in the face will make Puerto Ricans see independence in a more positive light.

The U.S. public may very well reject a Puerto Rican state on the issue of language alone. Only 25 percent of the island population speaks English. Meanwhile, English-only sentiments in the United States have spread, particularly against the rapid rise of Spanish-speaking groups within its borders. Extending those borders to include another several million non-English speaking Latinos is likely to meet great resistance.

Language is an even more contentious issue on the island. If statehood means trading in Spanish for English, not even statehooders want any part of it. Puerto Rico's Gov. Pedro Rossello, leader of the statehood party, assures the island would maintain its Spanish integrity as a bilingual state. Yet, whatever federal language laws take effect in the future, Puerto Rico, as a state, would have to abide.

Statehood leaders on the island deny, dodge and downplay such facts. To assuage fears of sacrificing Puerto Rican culture for the sake of union, the statehood party has propagated many illusions. They include frivolous fantasies, such as the state of Puerto Rico retaining its own Olympic team and Miss Universe contestants - the island's beauty queens have won the pageant three times.

However trivial those points seem, Puerto Ricans cling to them as signposts validating their island as a separate entity, one that has not surrendered the profoundly unique character beneath such superficialities. As a matter of defending its identity, at least half the island refuses to sacrifice what little autonomy it retains.

That defensive reflex is by no means unique to small Caribbean islands. Consider that Britain's reluctance to join the European Union is based partly on its unwillingness to surrender the symbolic value of its traditional currency.

Puerto Ricans already use the American dollar, which has festered vast importation of American culture. From rock music to fast food, Puerto Rico has been undeniably hybridized in its century as a U.S. territory. Full assimilation as implied by statehood, however, is pitted

against the much more deeply entrenched Spanish legacy and Caribbean disposition that generate Puerto Rico's individuality.

That's not to say that statehood doesn't have merits. It does. Among them are political empowerment, economic development and general stability for the island. As a state, Puerto Rico would be entitled to two senators and six members of the House of Representatives. Not to mention that statehood would finally eliminate second-class citizenship and its corresponding stigma for Puerto Ricans.

More federal resources would be funneled to the state of Puerto Rico to address its many ills plaguing the island. Nearly two thirds of the population is below the federal poverty level. Unemployment figures hover at about 15 percent. The infant mortality rate is second only to that of Mississippi. Basic infrastructure for water, waste management and transportation is in dire need of overhaul. Environmental atrocities have spoiled much of the land. Education is largely a shambles. Drug-related crime yields a murder rate worse than that of New York and Washington, D.C., at their worst. And the incidence of AIDS is higher than anywhere in the United States.

So it's not a question of adopting a tropical paradise. Puerto Rico has serious problems and bringing the island up to minimal federal standards won't be cheap. Advocates argue - sans concrete figures - that federal tax revenue generated by the new state would eventually pay for the cost.

Clearly, there are formidable hurdles to Puerto Rican statehood, regardless of its merits or lack thereof. Barreling toward union in spite of those obstacles will result in a colossal exercise in futility.

Meanwhile all of the resources, money, energy and hopes squandered in support and opposition of the effort could have been used to resolve some of Puerto Rico's more tangible problems now.

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