

Post 1-18-77
Puerto Rico: 'Why Did Ford Do It?'

It is generally recognized that President Ford's New Year's Eve announced proposal to Congress to grant statehood to Puerto Rico was abrupt, ill-timed and harmful to Puerto Rico, to statehood and probably to the U.S. stance in the United Nations. Why did he do it and why at this late day?

Ron Nessen, the President's press secretary, on Jan. 6 provided a new and completely unreal explanation. After tendering an "apology" because "We didn't do a very good job of providing background," Mr. Nessen explained that the Joint Advisory Group (seven members appointed in 1973 by President Nixon, seven by Gov. Hernandez Colon) which in October 1975 recommended unanimously a revised Compact of Permanent Union, "directed that the President take one year to study that recommendation and at the end of that year (October 1976) send to Congress his recommendation on what should be done about it."

The committee never made any such recommendation either in its report or in any subsequent request. Quite the contrary. What the committee did recommend in its letter of transmittal signed by both co-chairmen, former Governor Luis Munoz Marin and former U.S. Sen. Marlow W. Cook was that:

"This proposed compact, formulated by the Puerto Rican delegation, advance(s) significantly the goals and objectives endorsed expressly by the electorate in the plebiscite of 1967 and contained in the advisory group's own charter."

And further:

"This compact as approved represents the consensus of the group. (The committee) recommends that the compact be referred to both houses by the President of the United States with his endorsement, for congressional action."

The committee expected, with good reason, expeditious presidential action and anticipated that the whole congressional process could be concluded before adjournment.

The White House had been represented at each and every committee meeting by a representative of the President, required pursuant to the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972. The presidential representative led the committee members to believe that the White House would re-

spond promptly. I, for one, as Puerto Rican resident commissioner, urged on several occasions the implementation of the committee recommendation. Finally, on Dec. 17, 1975, I found it necessary to submit the proposed compact as drafted to the House of Representatives with 35 sponsors.

It is deplorable that President Ford should be so insensitive to the value, purpose and possibilities of commonwealth status. True, it runs counter to the political orthodoxies of statehood and independence. They dominated Puerto Rican thinking until 30 years ago and seem to reflect President Ford's vision of Puerto Rico's future to this day.

For our part, after half a century of ups and downs with an ambivalent, frustrating, territorial relationship, the large majority of Puerto Ricans have concluded that so many negations of history and of self are required by either alternative that a new, creative, imaginative form, borrowing from both and yet distinct in itself, would be necessary if Puerto Rico is to survive.

Since its approval "in the nature of a compact" by Congress and the Puerto Rico electorate in 1952, and its subsequent endorsement by the U.N. General Assembly in 1953, commonwealth status has embodied Puerto Rico's vital center. It has represented autonomy and association, progress and stability, common citizenship and cultural identity: the best of two disparate worlds.

Inflation, oil prices and unemployment have affected Puerto Rico more than any place under the American flag. Yet commonwealth continues to afford the basic flexibilities necessary for recovery as well as for improvement. The pro-statehood party, which won the recent gubernatorial election, has tacitly accepted this reality; it has reaffirmed its commitment not to challenge present status during its term of office. It is against this background that President Ford chose to throw the gauntlet for statehood now.

Can the harm done be retrieved? The way to do so is to accept the realities of commonwealth and help to make it work.

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