

Puerto Rico's Colonial Status and the U.S. Invasion

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Puerto Rico was a Colony of the Spanish Empire for more than 400 years. After the Spanish-American War of 1898 instigated by the '*Remember the Maine*' incident, the United States declared Puerto Rico, Hawaii, the Philippines and Guam as its territories. During the Spanish-American War, the invasion of Puerto Rico took place on July 25, 1898 with the United States Navy landing at Guanica led by General Nelson A. Miles. When Spain lost the war it ceded Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam to the United States under the Treaty of Paris for \$20 million dollars. Spain also relinquished its political power over Cuba. Cuba eventually gained its independence from the United States on May 20, 1902.

From 1898 to 1900, Puerto Rico was ruled by four consecutive US military dictatorships. The governors and other officials in the Puerto Rican government were all appointed by the President of the United States. The US government wanted to bring 'American Style Democracy' to Puerto Rico with military governors who were involved in massacres during the Indian wars in North America. The first US installed governor was General Nelson A. Miles who fought in the American Civil War, the American Indian wars and the Spanish-American War. An interesting note is that General Miles led the war campaign against Geronimo and the Apaches. Eventually General Miles troops negotiated with Geronimo and the Apaches to go to a Florida reservation with a promise to return to their native lands. It never happened because the US government planned to keep the Apaches in the reservations. Then the US government appointed Major General John R. Brooke followed by Major General Guy Vernon Henry, both took part in the Wounded Knee Massacre. Then Major General George Whitfield Davies, a Civil War veteran was also appointed governor. All ruled Puerto Rico as a military dictatorship.

✘ The Foraker Act of 1900 allowed Puerto Rico a limited civilian popular government that included US appointed and first civilian governor Charles Herbert Allen, an executive council with more than 11 members, the House of Representatives, a judicial system modeled after the US judicial system, a non-voting resident commissioner in congress and of course a United States District Court in Puerto Rico. The executive council, the Supreme Court, the Chief of Police were all appointed by the US government. Voting rights were limited to those who could read and write and paid taxes. The Foraker Act was a law intended for the US government to control Puerto Rico politically.

By 1917, the Jones-Shafroth Act was passed so that Puerto Ricans would become American citizens which allowed the US government to draft Puerto Ricans for World War I. The Jones Act of 1917 paved the way for what was to become the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico which was eventually signed into law through a series of amendments and previous laws including Public Law 600 another law that allowed for a democratic referendum that would allow Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution if they desired with congressional approval.

The law led Puerto Rico into “Commonwealth” status written by then resident commissioner Luis Munoz Marin himself, “The Architect of the Commonwealth.”

In an article titled “Let Puerto Rico Decide How To End Its Colony Status” by Rosalinda Dejesus quoted United States Secretary of the Interior when he said

“The bill (to permit Puerto Rico to write its own constitution) merely authorizes the people of Puerto Rico to adopt their own constitution and to organize a local government...The bill under consideration would not change Puerto Rico’s political, social, and economic relationship to the United States.”

A compelling fact by Chapman states the fact that Public Law 600 was seen as a tool to continue Puerto Rico’s colonial status by the Nationalist party. It was one of the main reasons that resulted in the uprisings throughout Puerto Rico. Various political parties in Puerto Rico had mixed reactions to Public Law 600. The Statehood party was divided and the Socialists supported Public Law 600. Commonwealth status is subject to US Federal Law. The Commonwealth status became law on the anniversary of the US invasion on July 25th, 1952. Not only Commonwealth status became law which led Puerto Rico to become more dependent on the US government, it became a permanent colony.

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