

Smothering a Country: Puerto Rico and the Nationalist Party

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The people of Puerto Rico have never had the chance to fully self-govern. Although the relationship between Puerto Rico and the US has changed over the 120+ years since the Spanish crown ruled, one thing has remained consistent: the US has never let its territory free from its domain. Although the island is considered to be a commonwealth, the mainland government recognizes that Puerto Rico is still ruled like an unincorporated territory (1). Puerto Ricans still cannot vote in presidential elections, negotiate trade deals, or maintain their citizenship. And there are scant options for the people. Puerto Ricans virtually no longer have the option to fight for freedom from the US. The persecution of the Nationalist movement by the US and the Governor's office in the twentieth century has led to the independence movement in Puerto Rico becoming irrelevant, resulting in most of the island voting for statehood.

Although the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico was founded in 1922, the real first impact made by the group came at the hands of an agricultural strike, inspiring acts of violence committed by the authorities. In January 1934, workers at the United Porto Rico Sugar Company revolted and went on strike for better pay. Pedro Albizu Campos, the president of the Nationalist Party, spoke to the striking workers, and then represented them in court, eventually leading to the workers doubling their wages (2). The response by the government, however, was ferocious. "The FBI initiated round-the-clock surveillance of the Nationalist leadership. An additional 115 Insular Police were armed with carbines, submachine guns, and grenades (3). Police killed four Nationalists in Río Piedras and executed two others in front of the San Juan Police Headquarters (4). The FBI and the Insular police were already motivated to target the Nationalists, and the deadliest day in this struggle was still to take place.

On March 21, 1937, the Nationalists gained permits to hold a parade in the mid-sized city of Ponce. The procession marched up until the corner of Calles Marina and Aurora. They had gathered to commemorate the end of slavery on the island in 1873 and to protest the imprisonment of Pedro Albizu Campos (3). When they got to that corner, the mayor and the captain of the Insular police stepped up to them and announced that the parade license had been revoked. The governor at the time, Blanton Winship, a US-appointed former military, had revoked the license and told the police chief to vastly increase the presence in Ponce. The paraders found that around two hundred police officers had surrounded them, submachine guns drawn (4). After a short argument, the first shot rang out. By the end of the chaos, nineteen people lay dead. A majority of them had been shot in the back (5), and two Insular officers had been killed in the crossfire. After the fact, the chief of police staged a photo in an effort to convince the public that the police were simply returning fire (6). Families of those slain were forced to give affidavits contradicting what actually happened, and no one other than the Governor was removed from office (two years after the fact). All of this shows just how much the mainland government wanted the Nationalists silenced. But this was a two-pronged attack.

The mainland press skewed their reporting of the massacre to serve the cause of discrediting the Nationalists. Take the staged photos from Colonel Orbeta for example. The photo was depicted in many Puerto Rican newspapers, even appearing on the front page of *El Mundo*. However, every paper reported these photos as staged. “In the pages of *El Mundo*, a doctor from a local hospital, José A. Gándara, testified that many of the wounded he’d seen had been shot in the back (4).” *Florete* magazine ran a political cartoon of the event with the caption: “Now we can say that they fired at us from the rooftops (7).” In the US, however, the most powerful publications recycled the government’s whitewashed version of events. The *New York*

Times wrote that 68 Nationalists were arrested in a “Nationalist riot (8).” Fourteen NYT articles in 1937 were run that described the events, and eleven of them described the massacre as a “riot (4).” The *Washington Post*, in one article, described it as a “lamentable affair (9).” The clear difference in coverage of the Ponce Massacre shows just how different the intentions were between the local and mainland peoples.

After the release of Campos from his first prison term, the US-influenced Puerto Rican government worked even harder to neuter the Nationalist’s reach and message. Campos was released in 1947: the Gag Law was signed by the US-appointed governor Jesús T. Piñero in June of 1948. The law basically made being a Nationalist illegal. It “made it a felony to own or display a Puerto Rican flag (even in one’s home); to speak in favor of Puerto Rican independence; to print, publish, sell, or exhibit any material that might undermine the insular government; and to organize any society, group, or assembly of people with a similar intent (4).” Thousands were arrested, and fines of up to ten thousand dollars, (equivalent to \$113,000 in 2021) were handed out. For example, a poet and Nationalist supporter named Francisco Matos Paoli was imprisoned for ten years, simply for writing four Nationalist speeches and owning a Puerto Rican flag (10). The law was repealed in 1957, giving life to the theory that the law was explicitly written to obstruct the Nationalists from gaining any traction. This was a targeted action by the government to take out the Nationalists, and the answers to this action were fierce.

The culmination of this conflict exploded in the uprisings of 1950, where the extent to which the US put down the Nationalists reached its highest point. Both the passage of the Gag Law and the proposed new commonwealth was extremely unpopular with the Nationalists. The Gag Law was passed on June 10, 1948; Campos gave a speech to thousands of Nationalist supporters on June 21, 1948. Supporters were gathered all around him, just in case the authorities

tried to arrest him (10). In this speech, he expressed how the Law violated the First Amendment and the need for real action. In secret, Campos planned an armed revolution to bring attention to the Puerto Ricans' plight. Gaining the attention of the international community was to become a common theme at the end of the Nationalist movement, as Campos and others believed that bodies like the United Nations would be partial to their struggle (4). The revolution was originally planned to take place in 1952, when the new status was to become a reality. However, news of Campos's imminent imprisonment arose in 1950, and so the revolution was moved up. On October 30, Nationalist revolts in Ponce, Arecibo, Naranjito, Mayagüez, Utuado, San Juan, and Juyaya occurred (11). They were all put down in different ways. In San Juan, Nationalists drove to the Governor's mansion and attempted to assassinate Luis Muñoz Marín. They were killed immediately. In Utuado, where all militants were to regroup, 70% of the town was bombed by the Puerto Rican National Guard. The same happened in Juyaya, with both bombs and machine guns used to ruin the town (4). After these events, Campos and other Nationalist leaders were arrested with lengthy prison times. Two days later, two Nationalist members, Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo, attempted to take Harry Truman's life at Blair House. Torresola was killed, and Collazo was sentenced to death (4). This conflict absolutely crippled the Nationalist cause, and just about all momentum was taken away from them.

After the Nationalist uprisings and the attempted assassinations, the independence movement had lost all steam. The people had been effectively scared off from the option. In 1945, some 57 percent of Puerto Rico's elected representatives supported independence publicly (4). After the events in 1950, including the arrest of Albizu Campos, the Nationalist party had essentially been decapitated. They had lost their leader and a good amount of members from the uprisings, and the failed assassinations had scared people from the cause (11). The effects of this

would soon show themselves in the ballot box. In 1967, a referendum was held on the status of Puerto Rico. In 1967, only 0.6% of people voted for statehood, and 60% of people voted for a commonwealth status (12). Over those seventeen years, the threat of retaliation turned people completely away from the option. Over the years, independence would stay at that low level of support. In 2012, 5.6% of people voted for independence (12). Although there are small pockets of independence support, the events of the twentieth century have essentially murdered the Nationalist cause.

With the option of independence gone, the Puerto Rican people turned to a new option: statehood. With the current status that Puerto Rico is under, it is extremely easier for American corporations to exploit the island for cheap labor, set up monopolies, use it as a tax haven, or all of those at once (11). As a result, the people have been suffering. In April of 2022, power outages occurred across the entire island when a fire took out an electrical plant, leaving people without food or access to the outside world. The plant is owned by LUMA, a subsidiary of a Canadian company, that has run the Puerto Rican power grid since June of 2021 (13). With no way of advocating complete freedom from these conditions, the majority of Puerto Ricans have turned towards statehood as a way to gain safer, more stable resources. In 1967, the support for statehood stood at 39%. Over time, as the island became more entrenched in the culture of privatization, the support for statehood grew. In 1998, 46.5% of Puerto Ricans voted for it, and in 2012, 61.1% did. However, this increase is not completely due to the virtues of statehood. In the 1998 referendum, 50.3% voted for “None of the Above (12).” The people were still partial to a better status than either option. However, with independence removed from the conversation, their hand had been forced by the actions of the US.

The US, to this day, has sought out Nationalists and their families. In 2005, the FBI raided Filiberto Ojeda Rios' house, killing him in the process. Approximately 104 rounds were fired at Ojeda, and after he was finally hit, the FBI agents didn't allow any medical attention to be administered to him for 18 hours (14). The report would later state that "We (the Inspector General's office) found that the senior FBI officials who ordered the delayed entry believed that the concerns about agent safety outweighed Ojeda's need for medical attention (14)." Ojeda was an important part of the independence movement post-Jayuya. In 1967, he founded and was the head of the Armed Revolutionary Independence Movement. He had a big role in organizing and had already been living in hiding for 15 years (15). There was a cry throughout the entire island, with even the pro-commonwealth Governor of the time, Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, searing the FBI and vowing to complete his own investigation on the matter. However, not much changed. As observed earlier, support for independence only rose 2.95 percent between 1998 and 2012 (12).

The government, both that of the mainland and the Governor, persecuted the Nationalist movement enough that Puerto Ricans lost the option of independence, and turned to statehood as a way to improve their conditions. However, this is most likely a dead end. Becoming the 51st state will require federal action, with the act being passed by both houses and signed by the president. No recent president has made a push for statehood, and each of the two major political parties platforms either doesn't mention statehood or has made no effort to advance legislation pertaining to it (16)(17). The chance that independence had to be a popular option in the determination of Puerto Rico's future was taken away by the actions of the US government, the FBI, and the Insular government in the twentieth century.

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- (2) Villanueva, Victor. "Colonial Memory and the Crime of Rhetoric: Pedro Albizu Campos." *College English* 71, no. 6 (2009): 630–38.
- (3) Federico Ribes Tovar, *Albizu Campos: Puerto Rican Revolutionary* (New York: Plus Ultra Publishers, 1971)
- (4) Nelson A Denis, *War against All Puerto Ricans : Revolution and Terror in America's Colony* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016).
- (5) Carlos Torres Morales, *The Ponce Massacre Begins*, April 2, 1937, *War against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony*, April 2, 1937.
- (6) Ángel Lebrón Robles, *Police Chief Orbeta Searches for Nationalist Snipers*, March 21, 1937, Print, *War against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony*, March 21, 1937.
- (7) Caricature by Manuel de Catalán; magazine, March 27, 1937, published in *Florete*
- (8) "7 Die in Puerto Rico Riot, 50 Injured as Police Fire on Fighting Nationalists," *New York Times* , March 22, 1937, 1, 11.
- (9) J. M. Clark, "What Destiny?," *Washington Post*, November 3, 1937, 9.
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- (14) Office of the Inspector General. "OIG Special Report - a Review of the September 2005 Shooting Incident Involving the FBI and Filiberto Ojeda Rios." [oig.justice.gov](https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/archive/special/s0608/index.htm), August 2006. <https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/archive/special/s0608/index.htm>.
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- (16) Democratic Party, "2020 Democratic Party Platform" (2020), <https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/party-platform/>.
- (17) Republican Party, "Republican Platform 2016" (2016), <https://prod-cdn-static.gop.com/static/home/data/platform.pdf>.

