



The NiLP Report

on Latino Politics & Policy

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NiLP Commentary

The Puerto Rican Debt Crisis Twilight Zone

By Angelo Falcón (November 27, 2015)

The debt crisis in Puerto Rico has politically activated the Puerto Rican diaspora in a way many have not seen in some time. Just regarding forums and panels on the subject largely featuring Nelson Denis and his *The War Against All Puerto Ricans* book, the discussion of things Puerto Rican has never been so robust. The issue of Puerto Rico's political status and role of colonialism, the economic opportunism of Wall Street, the significance of international law and related issues have been interpreted, constructed and deconstructed, proposed and debated, chewed and gargled. Along the way, we have been introduced to such concepts as the U.S. bankruptcy laws, the maritime aspects of the Jones Act of 1920, something called "haircuts" and all sorts other technical financial and legal terms like "odious debt" and processes usually outside of the day to day reality of most Puerto Ricans (actually, of most people, period).



The uniqueness of Puerto Rico's political status in relation to the United States has made grasping clear solutions difficult, the way that I simply can never master a Rubik's Cube. I like to explain this relationship by liking it to being in a political Twilight Zone, "There is," Rod

Sterling used to point out before every episode, "a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears, and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call . . . The Twilight Zone." This, if anything, is the best definition of Puerto Rican politics I can think of.

Wednesday, December 2nd is the next big social media mobilization of the Puerto Rican diaspora billed as a Day of Action for Puerto Rico to be held in Washington, DC. This will be what is usually referred to as a "lobby day" to influence Congress to pass legislation to help Puerto Rico address its serious debt crisis. It is focused on promoting three things:

- The granting Puerto Rico bankruptcy & debt restructuring protection
- The elimination Medicaid inequities and preserve health care access in Puerto Rico
- The uplifting og Puerto Rican families by extending the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC)

This effort is being coordinated by the Hispanic Federation with the leadership of such figures as Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez (D-NY) and former 1199 labor leader Dennis Rivera. While largely based in the Puerto Rican community, it has also attracted the active support of the broader Latino community through the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda and the National Council of La Raza.

Then on Thursday, December 3rd, there is the demonstration in Wall Street by another group, the A Call to Action on Puerto Rico, who describe themselves as "a collective of groups and individuals of the Puerto Rican diaspora seeking solutions to the crisis in Puerto Rico from an anti-colonial perspective." They argue that it is time to say "no" to colonialism and "yes" to independence for Puerto Rico as the only way out of the fiscal, political and social crisis that destroys their nation. Their focus is on saying "no" to:

- Odious debt and criminal attacks of the vulture funds and the Wall Street wolves;
- The Federal Fiscal Board and to surrendering our future to big interests; and
- To the dismantling and privatization of the public school system, the layoffs of teachers and other essential works and services.

But before all this, on Sunday, November 29th, the ProLibertad Freedom Campaign is mobilizing for a national call-in day to flood the White House with phone calls demanding the release of Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar Lopez Rivera. As professor Johanna Fernandez explains, "At a moment when Puerto Rico faces the greatest economic crisis of its history and US corporations, and financial institutions continue to extract billions of dollars in yearly profits from the island, the right to self-determination of the Puerto Rican people is a self-evident truth. The road to Puerto Rican freedom begins with bringing Oscar Lopez Home. Make your phone call for Oscar on Sunday, November 29th!"

In the midst of all of this activity, what is not clear is what role the "Unidos Por Puerto Rico" national convening of hundreds of activists and leaders in Orlando, Florida on October 13-14, 2015 to develop a National Puerto Rican Agenda has played in all of this. Led by José Lopez of Chicago's Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the Boricua Human Rights Network, the one outcome of this gathering was a plan to develop an organization of stateside Puerto Rican elected officials to influence the 2016 Presidential elections. But it appears that nothing concrete has been released so far on the progress being made with this project.

Conducting surveys of stateside Puerto Rican activists since 1979, individually and through the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy and the National Institute for Latino Policy, I found a significant change in the political leadership of the diaspora over time towards the political status of Puerto Rico. Where during most of this period, the largest group (about 40 percent) supported the independence of Puerto Rico, a poll we conducted this year found a more divided leadership on this question. This is no doubt the reflection of a dramatically changed migration pattern, where the enormous growth of the Puerto Rican population in Florida and the American South from the Island has introduced greater support for statehood, along with the Commonwealth status appearing to be losing support. Unfortunately, we have to rely on surveys of Puerto Rican activists to interpret these trends because of the absence of reliable opinion surveys of the whole stateside Puerto Rican population. What is clear, however, is that stateside Puerto Rican politics on the status question has become more polarized than ever.

This polarization seems to be playing itself out this coming week as we go from a national call-in to President Obama to free a Puerto Rican political prisoner, to supporting Congressional reforms to more or less restore Puerto Rico's economic status quo, to a Wall Street demonstration to end colonialism and Wall Street exploitation of Puerto Rico.

Does this all amount to a comprehensive approach to the issues facing Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans today, or actions that are contradictory and will ultimately cancel each other out? Is this, as Nelson Denis put it, a war against all Puerto Ricans, or is it more accurately a war against all of ourselves? Well, let's at least see what this Friday looks like before jumping to any conclusions upon entering this area I call . . . the Puerto Rican Twilight Zone!

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