

History Of Puerto Rico History Essay

The small country of Puerto Rico is an unfamiliar territory to many people. People know it as beautiful island for vacationing, but is that all it is? In this paper I would like to explore the issue of the “status question” surrounding Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico as a whole has had trouble answering whether or not they should officially become part of the United States. The question stands if Puerto Rico should become more than just a commonwealth or should it stand alone as its own country without any outside influence.

Through interviewing my grandfather to see the ways in which Puerto Rico’s status has affected his life. Why did my grandfather see better opportunities in the United States rather than in Puerto Rico? Was this a result of the change in lifestyles (farming areas became more industrialized) in Puerto Rico? What is his opinion of the status question considering family members still live there?

In researching this topic I hope to learn about the various opinions of authors who have also taken interest in this issue. I hope to learn the long term and short term effects of Puerto Rico’s present autonomous state and also learn if the United States influence is hurting or benefitting the island. Overall, I hope to put in perspective the unavoidable issue that Puerto Rico is facing with their status and to contribute information based on the readings of books and articles as well as a firsthand account from a family member’s experiences.

Puerto Rico’s official relationship with the United States started with the Spanish-American War of 1898. This war lasted ten weeks and was ended by a peace treaty between the United States and Spain. In this treaty, called the Treaty of Paris, the United States acquired Puerto Rico as well as the Philippines, Guam and Cuba. On March 2, 1917 Puerto Rico became a “free associated territory” of the United States by the Jones-Shafroth Act that was created by the United States Congress and signed by President Woodrow Wilson. Because of the Jones-Shafroth Act Puerto Ricans are born as American citizens although they are not officially part of the 50 States. This means that Puerto Rican people can travel to the United States freely without a certified visa just like if it were a regular state. This kind of relationship with the United States gave the people of Puerto Rico more opportunities to provide for their families. By becoming a United States citizen automatically at birth meant that Puerto Rican people can work in higher paying jobs found in the states. Many people migrated to the states and sent money back to their families to help support them.

In 1947 the “free associated territory” status changed in to commonwealth status. Commonwealth status was great for a country in the beginning stages of setting up a base in government and law. There was educational and economical advantages that created a source of social strength. Also, commonwealth status gave more freedoms to Puerto Rico government wise. It gave Puerto Rico a voting policy to vote for a governor as well as a vote for whether or not Puerto Rico wanted to write a constitution. Puerto Rico eventually elected a governor named Luis Muñoz Marín who created a constitution on behalf of the Puerto Rican people. On July 3, 1952 President Harry S. Truman approved the newly written constitution along with the approval of congress. Many Puerto Ricans opposed this movement because they felt that the United States should not be involved in the

affairs of Puerto Rico. Two Puerto Rican men by the name of Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo who were part of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party tried to overthrow the United States government that existed inside Puerto Rico and also tried to assassinate President Harry S. Truman but failed to do so.

Not all people of Puerto Rico opposed the United States involvement, but some did revolt because of the clash of cultures. The 32nd President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, created the "New Deal" which was a plan to make Puerto Rico more modern with new technology than agriculturally that for the most part was manually oriented. Farming technologies found in the United States were brought to Puerto Rico to increase the farming rate as well as the manufacturing rate. A Puerto Rican native by the name of Juan Pablo Montoya Sr. was put in charge to carry out the New Deal in Puerto Rico and for the most part he succeeded.

The United States controls almost every aspect of Puerto Rico. These aspects include relations with foreign countries which include trading, military services such as the air force, marines, army and navy, the US controls the agricultural system, mining and mostly everything the United States controls as a regular state. Puerto Rico is limited to what they can do on the political side; there are also a number of advantages to being part of the United States such as military protection and economic stability. Puerto Rico is split in half because of this. Although Puerto Rico is treated as a state it does not necessarily get the same rights as one of the 50 states.

Puerto Rico does not have equal representation. They cannot vote for the president and do not have a voting representative in the House of Representatives nor the United States Congress. Also Puerto Rico has no say in the area of revenues towards the 50 states. This caused an issue with some Puerto Rican people. They believed if the United States were going to treat Puerto Rico as a state with controlling the authority of most of the country they should be treated equally in the terms of representation, this where Puerto Rico commonwealth status suffers. Puerto Rico's government was controlled by the United States but Puerto Rico leaders wanted an increase in self-government.

The people of Puerto Rico are often split on whether or not Puerto Rico should become a state or not. This is a very important issue because this question has been preventing Puerto Rico to move forward to other issues. This status question almost creates a barrier between the Puerto Rican people and the United States; both sides seem confused on how to go about this issue. The government did try to solve this status issue democratically by using voting ballots but still this issue has troubled the people of Puerto Rico for a long time and this question must be answered once and for all. I believe they have been avoiding this question because the people are worried that the outcome of the answer could change their lives dramatically but I believe this is for their own good.

The Puerto Rican voters were asked to choose between five choices: statehood, independence, a continuation of Puerto Rico's current common wealth status, free association and none of the above. Surprisingly "none of the above" got the majority of the votes so nothing was done. I believe that the Puerto Rican people need to be more educated on the five choices in order for a final decision to be made. The politicians know the outcome of the choices but the people do not. I believe that the outcome of the answer could change their lives dramatically and could directly affect the direction as a country. If independence is chosen as the ultimate solution the question remains whether or not Puerto Rico could sustain themselves as an independent nation. Also if independence is picked Puerto Rico would have to start over to determine, laws, military options, economic stability, etc.

My grandfather Eligio Rivera was born on December 15, 1933 in Coamo, Puerto Rico. He left to the

United States at the age of 16 to find a good paying job. He disliked working on a family owned farm and he didn't want to do that his whole life. He decided that there was a better opportunity in the United States for work but he never forgot his family back in Puerto Rico. He visited Puerto Rico frequently and provided for his family with the money he earned in the states. I decided to interview him because he had experience with the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States since he was back and forth frequently.

The first question I asked if there was a difference when Puerto Rico's status changed to a commonwealth. He told me that he did see a difference but it took a while for changes to occur. He told me more before commonwealth status there was more of a military presence throughout the country and there were much stricter rules. He told me about the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and how they used to hold weekly riots because they disliked the United States presence but the United States would not budge. I then asked him if he thought the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party had good intentions. He told me that for the most part they were very violent people and they didn't seem to care who they hurt to get what they wanted. He told me if u disagreed with their views you were told to stay out of their way.

Another question I asked if there were any United States influences that he saw. He told me that Puerto Rico became more up to date. Then I asked him what he meant by that and he explained that the dirt roads became concrete and street signs went from written out to plastic "neat" lettering. He also said that more factories were popping up in the country and more machinery was being introduced to help jobs just as farming. Also he noticed that the hospitals were getting better in terms of medicines and in terms of the abundance of medicines that were available. I then asked a follow up question because I wanted to know if he felt that the outside influences from the United States were good or bad for the country. He said that for the most part these influences were good because it helped give more jobs to the people of Puerto Rico in a time where people had little money also medicines were becoming more affordable so the poor could now manage to pay for medication. He really believed that the United States had good intentions to create a more industrialized and economically sound Puerto Rico.

Another question I ask was why did he see a better opportunity in the United States rather than in Puerto Rico. He said that he had a couple of friends of his who went to the United States to look for better job opportunities. His friends would try to persuade him to come to the United States because they had a job lined up for him. Finally at the age of 16 he made his decision to leave Puerto Rico and go to New York City where a good paying job was waiting for him. My follow up question was if this was a result of the change in lifestyles where the farming areas in Puerto Rico became more industrialized. He told me that there were higher paying jobs in the United States because they were rebuilding their economy after the great depression. The new factory jobs and the farming jobs had very little payouts and he needed to make a tough decision. I asked him if he had any regrets leaving his family Puerto Rico and pursuing a job in the United States. He told he did not because he received a good amount of money which helped his struggling family in Puerto Rico. He told me he would have done whatever it took to make sure his family was healthy and never hungry. Eventually his brothers and sister followed my grandfather's footsteps and also came to New York to work and they made a good living and supported their family in the process.

My last question to him was; I wanted to know what is his opinion of the status question considering family members still live there. He told me that he was for statehood. He told me that Puerto Rico is already treated as a state. They follow the same laws as the United States and are controlled by them.

He told me that it was unfair that the people in Puerto Rico do not have any voting rights for presidency and representation in the government was unfair. He argued that Puerto Rican born natives are a United States citizen at birth and just because they are not part of the 50 states should not give the United States the right to say Puerto Rico cannot vote even though they follow the president. He told me that he thinks there are some drawbacks to statehood. He told me that the economy is not what it used to be and he scared that the United States debt could carry over to Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is struggling right now worse than the United States. His fear is that instead of making Puerto Rico better it will crush their economy. Another fear of his is that Puerto Rico would lose its culture. My grandfather learned Spanish before English. He fears that English will take over and the native language would be lost. He agrees that English should be taught but as a second language. He wants the Spanish language to continue to be spoken in class rooms.

Despite these fears he also agrees that a decision must be made about the status. He told me that the politicians in Puerto Rico have concentrated on this topic for too long now and they do not much give attention to on some of the more important subjects such as the countless number of job cuts that are going on right now. The unemployment rate has been skyrocketing in recent years but instead their main focus is the status of Puerto Rico.

Recently, a United States House of Representative bill was passed call the H.R. 2499.

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