

The Year 1898 in Puerto Rico

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In the early morning hours of July 25, 1898, United States Navy and Army troops, the latter commanded by General Nelson A. Miles, disembarked in Guánica, on the south coast of Puerto Rico. The *Gloucester* bombarded the town and thirty seamen that disembarked from a launch, took down the Spanish flag from the flag post at the Customs House and replaced it with the American flag. The resistance, which consisted of a few volunteers who exchanged fire with the seamen, was quickly neutralized, and with the help of military engineers, they erected “a barbed wire fence at the end of Guánica’s only street.” After that initial skirmish, the nearly 3,500 soldiers that comprised the advance forces of Miles’ command landed and initiated the “Puerto Rico Campaign.”

This, however, was not the first incident of the Spanish American War in Puerto Rico. A few months earlier, on May 12, in the early hours of dawn and without advance notice, the American Navy squadron commanded by Admiral William T. Sampson had bombarded the City of San Juan. The bombing lasted around three hours and produced some casualties among the civilian population and the military garrison, as well as damages to several buildings.

These two incidents, one naval and the other terrestrial, constitute elements of the war that, to this day, remain in the collective memory of Puerto Ricans. Today, at the mark of more than a centennial, Puerto Ricans observe the historic events of 1898 in a variety of ways. This variety is nothing other than a reflection of the interpretations that are currently given to those historic events. The bombing of San Juan was remembered with a nocturnal silent march through the old city’s streets.

Calendar year 1898, of which the most complete and accurate account is

Crónica de la Guerra Hispanoamericana en Puerto Rico, by Captain of Artillery Angel Rivero, who was one of the participants of the year 1898 in Puerto Rico.

Remembrance of the events that marked those moments is evoked in the daily contemporary press through the publication of a column in *El Nuevo Día* entitled “Hoy en 1898,” by journalist Carlos Uriarte, based on news gathered from the newspapers of the time, especially *Gaceta de Puerto Rico*, *El Boletín Mercantil*, *La Correspondencia*, *El Liberal*, and others. In addition, longer articles that narrate significant moments of the war in Puerto Rico, as well as in Cuba and the Philippines, appear occasionally. In this manner, the press contributes to the observance of those events.

Calendar year 1898 has also left its mark on our literature. In the second decade of the present century, Ramón Juliá Marín published two novels, *Tierra Adentro* (1911) and *La Gleba* (1912), in which he analyzes the impact on Puerto Rican peasants of the “change of sovereignty.” Forty-six years elapse before the appearance of the novel by Luis Hernández Aquino, *La muerte anduvo por el Guasio*, a work that evokes 1898 “in an atmosphere of struggle between the guerillas loyal to Spain and the rebel guerrillas, loyal to the ideals of Betances.” These publications were followed by two others, to wit: in 1980, José Luis González published *La llegada*, a “fictional” chronicle that deals with “the historic event” “that has conditioned our life as a people throughout an entire century.” However, there is no doubt that *Seva*, by Luis López Nieves, subtitled *Historia de la primera invasión norteamericana de la isla de Puerto Rico ocurrida en mayo de 1998* was the work that caused the most sensation when it appeared in 1984. Many considered it to be history rather than fiction, which demonstrates that the events of 1898 were still very much alive in the collective memory.

Puerto Rican society came of age during those final years of the century. In Puerto Rico, a culture evidencing locally-born Puerto Rican and Caribbean

characteristics developed, despite its Hispanic roots. That is the full-grown product of cultural and ethnic crossbreeding that defines us. It also was the time in which the locally-born elite saw its political expectations fulfilled with the establishment of the Autonomic Government, by virtue of the decrees of November 25, 1897, promulgated by the Queen Regent María Cristina, by request of the Spanish Prime Minister, Práxedes Mateo Sagasta. In a twenty-fifth hour effort by Spain to stop what was obviously unavoidable, the United States' intervention in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Puerto Ricans, who unlike the Cubans had taken the route of reformism, saw in the Autonomic Charter the realization of their economic-administrative autonomy ideal. The Autonomic Cabinet, headed by Luis Muñoz Rivera, was constituted on February 11, 1898. The island was living the ephemeral “autonomy rehearsal” days. Then the American invasion stopped that process, and later, General Guy V. Henry, as Military Governor, decreed the dissolution of the cabinet and the autonomic government for being incompatible with the new order of things. However, the ideal of autonomy did not die with the disappearance of the autonomic government. When the first civil government was established under the Foraker Act in 1900, many Puerto Ricans considered that, compared to the Autonomic Charter, it was deficient and miserable. Many became disillusioned, and the Charter turned into the paradigm of those who defended autonomy. Years later, juridical-type approaches were to be made regarding the nullity of the Treaty of Paris, based on the exclusion of Puerto Ricans, who had enjoyed an autonomic system, from the peace negotiations. In the middle of the present century, the autonomist ideal returned with renewed vigor and took shape with the establishment of the Commonwealth. This political formula, which was created to a large extent by Luis Muñoz Marín, established in the Constitution of the Commonwealth and approved in 1952, grants Puerto Ricans a broad spectrum of

internal powers and establishes a sort of republican government, with the three traditional powers, Executive, Legislative and Judicial, elected by the direct vote of the Puerto Ricans.

At more than a century after 1898, autonomy, separation and association, the same three that grappled for the favor of Puerto Ricans in the 19th Century, although in different historic contexts, are the three status formulas that the people of Puerto Rico have to choose from concerning their relationship with the United States.

Significant changes within the sphere of religion came along in 1898. With the change of sovereignty from Spanish to American, the Catholic Church ceased to have the preeminence and quasi-exclusiveness derived from its position as the religion of the state. The opportunity for the incursion of other Christian religions into the island appeared under the administration of the United States' Constitutional principle of separation of church and state. Missionaries from the United States began their proselytizing efforts. Today, Christian churches in Puerto Rico have already celebrated their centennial and the fact that they became an important element in contemporary Puerto Rican life. Precisely this religious and sociological phenomenon has been the object of several important recent studies. Samuel Silva Gotay's *Protestantismo y política en Puerto Rico 1898-1930* (1997) and Nélica Agosto Cintrón's *Religión y cambio social en Puerto Rico (1898-1940)* (1996) are worth mentioning.

Little over three decades after the change of sovereignty, a generation emerged, a product of the Americanization policies that began with the dawning of American government, designated as the "the 30s generation," which would reaffirm the Hispanic roots of Puerto Rican culture. Personalities such as Antonio S. Pedreira and Tomás Blanco in historic interpretative essays, and Enrique Laguerre with his novel *La llamarada*, extolled the Hispanic elements that define

us and make us part of the groups of Latin-American peoples that are linked by a common language and history. There was a reevaluation of our Hispanic legacy, highlighting the positive value of the relationship with Spain, minimizing the mistakes. As a consequence of the Civil War that was raging in Spain, the presence of Spaniards in Puerto Rico was enriched with the arrival of significant personalities of Spanish thought and intellectuality. The University of Puerto Rico, specifically during the years of the chancellorship of Jaime Benítez, opened its doors to this significant immigration that would later make a positive impact on Puerto Rican life during last century's 40s and 50s.

More than a century after those events, three controversial matters have seized attention, one of which has been the object of public discussions. Those matters are the decision to invade Puerto Rico, the change of landing point and the problem of the speedy collapse of the resistance once the island was invaded by the Americans. In the first case, the controversy has been centered around whether the Americans decided to invade the island in response to the activities of the leaders of the Puerto Rico section of the Cuban Revolutionary Party in New York, or whether the invasion was due to the Americans' expansionist interests.

I think that the decision was based on the convenience of acquiring a potentially valuable territory. Due to its geographical position in the eastern Caribbean, and controlling one of the most important entry and exit routes from the Atlantic to the Caribbean, the island was an ideal base to project the United States' power, in both the Caribbean and the South Atlantic. I do not believe that Roberto H. Todd's thesis that the negotiations that he and Julio J. Henna carried out were what brought Puerto Rico to the attention of the McKinley administration can be upheld. We must not lose sight of the fact that there were geopolitical considerations dictating the convenience of making such a decision. In his work on the Spanish American War, Albert A. Nofi states that the German Joint Chiefs of

Staff had included the island in their contingency plans for a possible war against the United States. I recall that, in 1917, the United States purchased the Virgin Islands, a possession of the Danish Crown, precisely to avoid the possibility of their acquisition by the German Empire.

The point selected for initial landing in the original Puerto Rico Campaign plans was Cape San Juan, located in the northeastern end of the island, next to Fajardo. After having left Guantánamo to head toward Puerto Rico on July 21, Miles decided to change the landing point and opted for sailing toward Port Guánica in the south coast, a few miles west of Ponce, the most important city of Puerto Rico. He discussed the decision with Captain Francis J. Higginson, the Commander of the naval support force, whom he finally convinced. Miles adduced several reasons to justify his decision. First, all the cables concerning the landing harbor had been sent via foreign telegraph lines, which led him to suppose that the Spanish authorities on the island were aware of the landing point. (In his memoirs, Miles stated that he was later informed that the Spanish military forces had been strengthening the area of the projected landing point.) Poet Carl Sandburg, a 6th Illinois Infantry Regiment private, recalled having read details of the plan in the newspapers, including the landing in Cape San Juan. Second, the harbor at Guánica was a deep, sheltered bay, and had excellent facilities, while Fajardo Port was an open inlet without adequate port facilities. Capt. Whitney, who accompanied Miles as part of his Joint Chiefs of Staff, had reconnoitered and sounded Guánica bay during his espionage mission to the island. A third element that influenced Miles' decision was that the landing point, and the southeast area of the island in general, was the most disaffected from Spain because it had been the one to suffer the most from the consequences of the “comportes” [punishments] of 1887. However, without a doubt, the fundamental reason was the element of surprise, which would favor the invaders and would allow them to establish a beachhead from which to

march overland toward Ponce later. Although Trask describes Miles as erratic, in my opinion, the decision to alter the landing point was an excellent strategic move, because in addition to the aforementioned, it allowed the 6th Massachusetts and the 6th Illinois Regiments to receive their baptism of fire under the most favorable conditions possible. Miles chose what Liddle Hart called “the indirect approach,” thus achieving important victories at a minimal cost.

Finally, how can the swift collapse of the Spanish forces in the island after the invasion be explained? According to our judgment, the volunteers were badly trained and unreliable fighters. The situation was very different from that of more than a century before, when the Disciplined Militia, consisting of locally-born Puerto Ricans, had performed well against the English troops, commanded by General Ralph Abercromby, when they made a third and final attempt to take San Juan in 1797. Throughout our history, the native-born had defended the sovereignty of Spain in Puerto Rico successfully from its European enemies on numerous occasions. However, after the Grito de Lares of 1868, Captain General José Laureano Sanz started to dismantle the locally-born Puerto Rican militia, substituting it with the Civil Guard, an essentially a law enforcement corps, and the Institute of Volunteer Corps units, that consisted mostly of native Iberians. Thus, the Puerto Ricans’ ability to contribute toward the effective defense of the island was destroyed. That was the fundamental reason for the collapse of the Spanish military forces in the island. The war had to be fought with the forces at hand, with no possibility of receiving support. After the hostilities began, the only reinforcements to arrive at the island were 27 officers and 715 troops, along with two sections of Mountain Artillery that arrived on April 15, with only 160 rounds, which were barely enough munitions for a few hours of combat.

The historic year 1898 is certainly very rich in terms of its productivity. After the 1870s, but especially in the years closer to the centennial, Puerto Rican

histography delved into the events of 1898 driven to reexamine the facts and interpret them according to what happened as their consequence.

Several studies have stated that far from being a date of separation, although there was one regarding the political relationship between the island and the Spanish metropolis, 1898 shows elements of continuity. The processes that characterize the first years of Puerto Rico's history in the past century have their roots in the years after Spain's presence on the island. Contemporary histography has made a remarkable effort to reexamine and review the historic documents to find clues that explain the Puerto Rico of today. The production is abundant and full, and integrates into history elements that had been left out and forgotten until the present. Those "without history" are coming to the fore as collective protagonists in Puerto Rican life.

The year 1898 has been approached from the perspective of the now more than centennial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Efforts have been made to measure the results of that relationship objectively. We Puerto Ricans are divided as to whether this secular relationship is good, since the yet unresolved matter of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States underlies the problem. Nothing better illustrates what has been mentioned previously than the activities that marked the centennial of the American invasion of Puerto Rico. Guánica was the scene of two of them. The first one, that of the groups that promote Puerto Rico's independence and condemn the invasion. The second, that of those who seek permanent union with the United States through statehood, who extolled common citizenship and the progress that ensued thereafter. The third activity took place within the historic setting of Castillo de San Felipe del Morro, in which those who supported the Commonwealth as a permanent solution to the relationship with the United States did so extolling the Constitution adopted in 1952 and highlighting the values of that formula, which

allows for keeping the elements of Puerto Rican culture under a permanent association with the United States.

Without a doubt, 1898 was a key date in the history of Puerto Rico. It marked the end of the Spanish Empire in America and the coming apart of a little over four times centennial relationship between the island and Spain. From then onwards, the destinies of Puerto Rico and the United States were linked. So far, the nature of said relationship has not yet been definitely resolved. That is the circumstance that makes the year 1898 in Puerto Rico a contemporary event.

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