

Puerto Rico and Statehood

By Ronald Reagan

When I formally announced my intention to seek the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, my televised speech to the nation included a commitment to not only support statehood for Puerto Rico if the people of the island Commonwealth desired statehood. It also included a commitment that, as President, I would initiate statehood legislation, which really means that I would take the lead in persuading the people of Puerto Rico — the mainland United States — all American citizens — that statehood would be good for all of us

A number of people, including close friends, wondered about my remarks. Not that they opposed the statehood idea. They just thought that it seemed odd that I would put such an emphasis on an issue that strikes them as routine, when U.S. foreign policy positions everywhere seem to be collapsing. But then I remind my friends that in 1976, when many U.S. foreign policy positions were collapsing, I was putting great emphasis on the Panama Canal.

By this observation I mean to suggest that we cannot expect our foreign policies to be enjoying prestige around the world — attracting support instead of collapsing — when we are having serious problems with our closest neighbors. The American people lost the debate over the Canal when, despite their opposition to the treaties, President Carter pushed them through. We were going to win the applause of the Third World, remember?

Now it is no longer our neighbors who are being pulled away from us in the world-wide tug of war. Now — at least in this hemisphere — the pivot of the struggle is among our fellow citizens in the Puerto Rico Commonwealth.

“Yankee Imperialism”

Fidel Castro hardly lets a speech go by without denouncing “Yankee imperialism” in Puerto Rico and calling for its total independence from the United States. The idea is not confined to blustering speeches at Havana’s Third World conferences or in the United Nations. Early in December, it came out of the point of a gun. A few miles from San Juan, two Navy employees were assassinated by the Soviet-made machine guns of terrorists who represent the tiny independence movement on Puerto Rico.

While the world watches the Iranian drama unfold, comrades of Cuba and its allies have now established a beachhead of violence on American shores.

Our keen “peacefully coexisting” competitor, the Soviet Union, is not unaware of the importance of Puerto Rico in the great global contest of ideas. As a “Commonwealth” Puerto Rico is now neither a state nor independent, and thereby has an historically unnatural status. There is this raw nerve to rub, and our Marxist-Leninist competitors rub it. They’ve long thought of the island economics of the Caribbean as easy marks. I do not suggest that the Kremlin strategists expect to snap Puerto Rico into the Communist orbit any time soon, only that they find it convenient to use its unnatural status, creating tensions around the idea of American “colonialism.” “Yankee Imperialism.” We can’t

merely defend ourselves against this attack. We must ourselves attack, not with terror, but with statehood.

It is not only that the fact of Puerto Rican statehood would deny Mr. Castro a raw nerve. But, in cementing itself to us as the 51st state, with unbreakable bonds, Puerto Rico would represent a positive bridgehead into the Caribbean, Latin America and the developing world.

The geopolitical concept of Puerto Rico’s exposed position on the front lines of geopolitics isn’t new on my account, by any means. It is at the heart of the old Republican Statehood Party on the island, now the New Progressive Party. It is understood by Gov. Carlos Romero Barcelo and San Juan Mayor Herman Padilla, the two young, dynamic advocates of statehood. I know it is profoundly understood by Luis Ferre, the 77-year-old President of the Senate, who was

If we cannot design a model for a political economy that is sufficiently attractive, if we can't win over our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico, how can our model succeed as an instrument of foreign policy anywhere in the world?

governor of Puerto Rico when I was governor of California. To these men, statehood is an historical imperative.

It is as simple as this: If we in the United States cannot design a model for a political economy that is sufficiently attractive, if we can’t win over our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico to the nuptials that statehood involves, how can our model succeed as an instrument of foreign policy anywhere in the world? And, if we can succeed in discovering what it is that drags on the statehood idea, what it is that fosters a volatile independent movement that can harbor assassins, perhaps we can shed light on the failures of American foreign policy around the world this past quarter century.

How do we begin to understand Iran, and what has gone wrong in the Middle East, if we cannot fathom Puerto Rico — what it is that repels it as it is drawn to us?

The one thing I can say for sure, because it is a part of human nature, is that you cannot arrange a marriage unless both spouses believe the union will be greater than the sum of its parts. Because of this, I don’t believe statehood will be achieved until a great majority of Puerto Ricans — not just a simple majority — feel the pull of statehood with passion.

Some Puerto Rican leaders here argue that the people of Puerto Rico must sacrifice in order to enjoy statehood, especially by means of greater tax burdens. Yet Puerto Ricans already face

higher tax rates and they have shed a disproportionate share of blood, relative to mainland citizens, in our wars. Thus, an American President will have to work with Governor Romero to integrate the two separate fiscal systems in a way that increases opportunity for the average island citizen, and thereby makes statehood an attractive proposition rather than an increased burden. Governor Romero has already been moving in this direction, systematically lowering tax rates in preparation for merger.

In the 1980s, the American President must understand that for U.S. foreign policy to succeed it must be magnetic, as opposed to expansive. This means we must once again make economic policy an essential ingredient of foreign policy. This is behind my idea of Statehood for Puerto Rico.

Foreign Policy Failures

At the heart of our foreign policy failures of the last 25 years, I believe, has been the attempt to export “economic expansion” through dollars, rather than ideas. While the rest of the world waited for us to assist in the development along the lines of our own “land of opportunity,” we responded with ideas that were never part of our own development: high tax rates, plenty of public debt, devalued currencies and less rather than more democracy in the guidance of state-capitalist systems.

Looking back on it, it should be no wonder that GI Joe was turned into the Ugly American.

And now, in our backyard, the Cubans are handing out AK-47 rifles even as they advertise their system — all over the region — as the path of progress. And we sit on our thumbs. The “Cuban Model” has been a disaster. Cuba is incapable of providing its people with the essentials of life. It is totally dependent on the U.S.S.R. which, in turn, depends on us for its food. Yet, with noisy propaganda and active support of violent revolution borne of economic failures, the Soviet-Cuban offensive in Latin America continues to slice off one piece of salami at a time.

An American counteroffensive must rely on the greatest weapon we have: the hope of a better life, achieved by adopting America’s recipe for prosperity. It must advertise the proven secrets of economic growth, upward mobility for the poor, and, ultimately, political stability — even as we return to this recipe ourselves: reasonable tax rates, modest regulation, balanced budgets and stable currency

Instead of letting our competitors pick the battleground of violent revolution, we should pick a peaceful battleground of competition between economic systems. Instead of reacting with force to revolutionary situations, we should preempt those situations with a positive foreign policy. We can build from a bridgehead in Puerto Rico. To show the world that the American idea can work in Puerto Rico is to show that our idea can work everywhere.

Mr. Reagan is a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination.