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Treaty to End the "One Hundred Years" War

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As I was imagining what I will be doing in the next century (I’ll be thirty years of age in the year 2000), I thought of how I would deal with the problems humanity continues to have such as pollution, crime and poverty. At the same time I thought of my own career goals and how I would use my ambition someday to become a university professor. But I was distressed by the fact that this year is the one-hundredth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico and the 18th year of imprisonment for 15 Puerto Rican political prisoners and prisoners of war.

How could I as a Puerto Rican, born and raised in the United States, imagine an exciting future with hopeful prospects—knowing that my culture and my ancestral country have been stuck in a state of war for over a century with no sign of ending before the next century and new millennium?

The one-hundredth year of this war forces me, as well as many other Puerto Ricans and North Americans to reexamine this history. This history filled with dates that hauntingly remind us of history’s cruel and ruthless presence in the core of our daily lives, as other Americans focus on presidential scandals or the economy. War is the ever present task of the 15 Puerto Rican political prisoners, prisoners of war and their families. A war which began one hundred years ago.

December 10 marked the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Paris of 1898, which was supposed to
settle the terms of the war between Spain and the United States. However, the Spanish-American War or “Splendid Little War” as some have referred to it, was actually many wars: The Spanish-American War, the Cuban-American War, The Filipino-American War and the Puerto Rican-American War. So why was the Treaty of Paris only signed by two countries at war (Spain and the United States) when in fact, four were at war?

From a Puerto Rican historical perspective, it is easy to see how Puerto Rico—along with Cuba, the Philippines, and Guam—was left out of the peace process. Puerto Rico had received its autonomy from Spain in a treaty called the Charter of Autonomy (1897). According to this treaty, Puerto Rico was a commonwealth under the Spanish crown, with an elected Insular Parliament capable of making its own trade laws. But the most important aspect of that charter was that Spain could not force any law upon Puerto Rico without the approval of its elected government. However, Article 2 of the Treaty of Paris dismisses this Charter of Autonomy, “Provides for the cession of Puerto Rico.” Did Spain forget the charter of autonomy made with Puerto Rico a year before? Or was Spain forced to break her own laws and give up Puerto Rico to a more powerful United States full of imperial ambition?

The Puerto Rican-American war actually began on May 12, 1897, when a U.S. naval armada lead by Admiral Sampson, bombarded the capital of San Juan, but was repelled by the fortified city’s defenders. A few months later, President McKinley sent General Nelson A. Miles (the jailer of the Apache Indian leader—Geronimo and the man responsible for the Massacre of Wounded Knee), to lead an invasion force of 16,000 troops through the southern port of Guanica. There, the invading troops were greeted by the guns of Águila Blanca (or White Eagle) and his regiment of Puerto Rican defenders.

On the other hand, the Marines encountered little resistance from “La Mano Negra” or Black Hand, a secret society which had a grip on the machete of conspiracy against the Spanish; they were later to turn their terror against the new invaders and their collaborators. La Mano Negra and many other groups upheld the idea of defending the Republic of Puerto Rico since 1869. That year on September 26, a rebellion erupted in the town of Lares, where the Puerto Rican flag was first waved and Francisco Ramírez Medina (president of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Puerto Rico), and Lola Rodríguez de Tío declared independence. The new Puerto Rican Republic continued to fight for legitimacy in the last half of the nineteenth century. El Grito de Yauco on March 24, 1897, was a premature yet memorable armed attempt by the islanders to achieve recognition from Spain as an independent nation. Finally, in 1897, Spain exhausted by war in Cuba and the Philippines, recognized Puerto Rico and conceded the full right of commonwealth with her own parliament. Yet this was not enough for those who wanted the Republic to be the sole legitimate force on the island. As a result, the continuing relationship with the Spanish empire created a state of war and emboldened those Puerto Ricans of the Republic to join another front.

From exile in New York, the Cuban Revolutionary Party prepared to launch a new war for independence against Spain in 1895. In that war over 2,000 Puerto Rican soldiers fought, and some even played commanding roles, such as, the heralded Puerto Rican, Major General Juan Ruiz Rivera. The goal of the CRP was to free Cuba and then Puerto Rico. On August 13, 1898, in the town of Ciales (PR), an armed uprising known as “El Grito de Ciales,” exploded to reaffirm Puerto Rico’s independence as the establishment of a republic. Yet U.S. history books claim that the war ended on October 18, when the American flag was hoisted over San Juan, and with the signing of the Treaty of Paris on December 10, the book was closed on this war. But if a treaty of peace was not with the Puerto Rican people, then the current relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States continues to be that which antecedent the Treaty of Paris—that relationship being a state of war. This is one of the cornerstones in the posture of the Puerto Rican political prisoners and prisoners of war. In regards to this position, Elizam Escobar, one of the POWs, wrote that the situation of Puerto Rico could not be judged by the state of that war.
but by the state of war that continues unabated to this day. Obviously, a state of war is an unacceptable condition for any human being to live under, so I propose a solution: a new treaty to end this century-old war. This new treaty would do what any treaty is supposed to do—end hostilities and resume normal relations between two equal nations at peace. But before this new treaty can be attained, a process already established by International Law must be used to prepare for this exciting end to war. This process includes the release of all political prisoners and prisoners of war; the demilitarization of the occupied country (Puerto Rico); the establishment of a temporary government under a neutral body (i.e., the United Nations); an election which would include all nationals at home or abroad (meaning that the 2.9 million Puerto Ricans living in the United States would vote); finally, a period of time for Puerto Ricans to discuss and debate in a free manner without the threat of the U.S. machines of war. After all these conditions have been achieved, Puerto Ricans would be able to vote on a referendum with the following options: independence, some type of association/commonwealth or incorporation (statehood).

American historians will praise the signing of the Treaty of Paris as the end of the "Splendid Little War," and the beginning of the United States' rise as a world power. Yet their refusal to acknowledge the crime of empire is equally matched by the Puerto Rican peoples refusal to be erased from history. And it is that history (spanning thousands of years) that will allow future Puerto Ricans to enjoy peace as human beings. I would, as I'm sure anyone else would, prefer to have a peaceful future without war. But first, I must insist on a treaty to end the One Hundred Years War!

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