

Puerto Rican Nationalist Prisoners

Symbols of Courage - Victims of Repression

Today, five Puerto Ricans have been in U.S. prisons for over 20 years—longer than any other political prisoners in this country. Their sentences condemn them to remaining terms of thirty to fifty years. And although they are not the best known political prisoners (at least to the people of the United States), their fates are extremely important, as their own pasts and futures are irrevocably linked with the past and future of the island and people of Puerto Rico.

The specific events surrounding the arrests and convictions of Lolita Lebron, Oscar Collazo, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irvin Flores and Andres Figueroa Cordero took place between October 1950 and March 1954. To understand these events, and to understand the history of the Puerto Rican struggle for national liberation, it is necessary to understand their context.

That context is colonialism, vicious and ever-present, constantly changing its form but never its content . . . and the struggle against colonialism, heroic, determined, often overcome but never destroyed.

1898 When the island of Puerto Rico passed from Spanish to United States hands, its people had a considerable history of patriotism and a national desire for independence. Thirty years before, a group of patriots had fought a heroic struggle against Spanish rule in the town of Lares. The day of that confrontation, September 23, still remains a national holiday.

The U.S. takeover, legally expressed in the Treaty of Paris, completely ignored a treaty, signed in 1897, which gave Puerto Rico the right to decide its own destiny. This "illegal" trade, enforced by the landing of the United States navy on Puerto Rico's shores, was to have great significance.

It was to intervene in the development of a nation on the verge of becoming independent, and absorb it totally into the economy of the United States. In practical terms, this meant:

1). The total absorption and destruction of the sugar crop, the island's main economic concentration. By 1930, U.S. business owned the whole production area. The possibility of Puerto Rico developing an ownership class was thereby destroyed, and the U.S. controls directly 85% of the Puerto Rican economy today.

2). The complete U.S. control over all political and social functions on the island. At first, Puerto Rico was governed by American military officials, then by American government officials and, today, although there is a commonwealth government, 85 per cent of the basic governing areas are still under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Congress. These include transportation, immigration, trade, citizenship, juridical appeals, military use of the island territory, all communications, and the list goes on. Puerto Rico's government governs almost nothing.

3). The attempted absorption of Puerto Rican national culture and spirit. Sometimes crude, as in 1913 when colonial authorities attempted to change the native language to English—a task soon abandoned. Sometimes more subtle, as with the current conversion of the island's metropolitan centers into crass centers of tourism.

In spite of the tremendous attack which the Treaty symbolized and the invasion concretized, resistance was heard.

1928 In 1928, the Nationalist Party elected as its president a brilliant young lawyer, Pedro Albizu Campos. In the course of his 40-odd years of active political life this man was to fashion much

of the nationalist philosophy and revolutionary practice. He was to be the first independence leader of the century to truly inject the concept of anti-imperialist struggle, the concept of revolution, into the belief in independence.

1936 The Nationalist Party called for a complete boycott of all colonial elections, since those elected had to promise to uphold and defend the United States rule over Puerto Rico and had to operate within the narrow framework established by the U.S. Congress.

Following up the boycott call, Albizu Campos called for a constituent assembly of all Puerto Ricans, regardless of political affinity, to draft a constitution for a free Puerto Rico and seek mutually beneficial trade relationships with other countries. Puerto Rico was at that time, as it still is, limited to trading solely with the U.S. The concept had astounding success: there was almost unanimous agreement among all the major parties, including pro-statehood groups. All over the island, massive popular demonstrations were held against the economic strangulation of Puerto Rico. This was too much for the authorities and Albizu Campos was arrested for inciting rebellion; he was tried, convicted and exiled to the United States to serve a term of ten years in jail.

1937 The conflict escalated even further when on March 21, 1937, the anniversary of abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico in 1873, the Nationalist Party called for a massive demonstration in Ponce to protest Albizu Campos' incarceration.

It was to begin with a march to the Cathedral to pray for the freedom of Puerto Rico and the release of her political prisoners. As the procession began it was machine-gunned by police handpicked from all over Puerto Rico. Nineteen persons were killed and more than 200 wounded. Later, the American Civil Liberties Union was to prove, by photograph, that the fire was unprovoked and uncontested. The few police who died were killed by cross fire. Today, the incident is known as the Ponce Massacre.

1940 Despite Albizu Campos' absence, the independence movement continued forward, holding Congresses in 1943, 44, 45, which culminated in 1946 formation of the Puerto Rican independence Party—the PIP—which is still today the largest electoral independence party.

1947 When Albizu Campos returned in late 1947 he found, maturing, the fruit of the seeds he had planted. He honed the Nationalist Party apparatus and set about reorganizing its various functions for imminent action.

1948 The time was so ripe that when the Rector of the University refused to permit Albizu Campos to address a group of students, the reaction was fulminating; the whole student body went out on strike and the protest spread across the island.

1950 The rising resistance of the population to the occupying regime again brought a reaction from the United States government, this time in the form of Congressional Law 600,

which permitted Puerto Ricans to draft a constitution governing certain areas which did not affect United States military and economic control over Puerto Rico.

Puerto Ricans were allowed to express acceptance or rejection of this new Congressional formulation, but not to express a preference for any other form of government. A minority of Puerto Ricans participated in this "plebiscite"; the majority boycotting it. However, since a majority of those voting favored accepting U.S. Congressional Law 600, the U.S. government declared that the results were an indication of the will of the Puerto Rican people and their rejection of "independence" as a viable solution.

At the same time, the plan was coordinated with the subsidization of U.S. business to establish tax-free industry in Puerto Rico, paying one-third the wages they would have to pay in this country. The government which Law 600 established would serve as coordinator and administrator for this industrialization scheme.

1950 As the federal government began its maneuvers for this plebiscite, it saw that Albizu Campos was the primary obstacle to the success of its plans. Tension between Nationalists and police grew, but the Nationalist Party, well aware of its extreme military disadvantage, hoped to avoid an armed confrontation if it could do so honorably. However, it seriously prepared for such an armed confrontation in the event that they would be forced into it.

In late April of 1950, Secretary of War Louis Johnson paid a visit to his generals in Puerto Rico. Through Nationalist intelligence, Albizu Campos learned that Johnson had instructed his generals to tell Governor Luis Muñoz Marín to jail or kill all Nationalist leaders.

On October 30, the jailing started when four Nationalists were arrested in the small town of Pañuelas. Fighting soon erupted, spreading to all the island's major cities. For five days, tanks and planes, bombs and machine guns strafed the island seeking out the insurrectionists. Thousands of Puerto Ricans were arrested, thousands were confined to house arrest, hundreds massacred, and those few Nationalists who did survive were sentenced to outrageously long prison terms.

The war lasted six days. During the course of those days, an event took place on the mainland. Among those dedicated Nationalists who had earlier emigrated to New York were two young men, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola. They had previously agreed that if any crisis should develop affecting the movement in their country they would meet and decide what they could do about it. When they heard of the repression of the October 30 rising, they met, and bought two one-way tickets to Washington. Torresola was an expert in handguns, Collazo had never handled a weapon in his life, but in their hotel room that night, Torresola taught Collazo all he could about loading, handling, and firing. The next morning they went to Blair House, where President Truman was living, and tried to shoot their way up the stairs. It didn't take long; Torresola shot a guard who fell but rose again after Torresola had passed; before dying, the guard shot Torresola in the back and killed him. Collazo's gun jammed after he had fired just a few shots; he was on his way up the stairs when another guard shot him in the chest. He fell, was seized, and carried off to the hospital. President Truman was still upstairs on the second floor.

By November 4, the fighting was over. In its aftermath, the surviving Nationalists on the island were sentenced to prison terms such as 200 and 400 years each. Here in the U.S., Collazo was sentenced to death in the electric chair, but later President Truman commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. As in Lares, the 1950 uprising did manage to take over the city of Jayuya and proclaim the Republic. Jayuya fell after four days, but it was an expression of a far wider support and more universal Nationalism among the Puerto Rican population.

1952 With Nationalists and Nationalist sympathizers in prison, the machinery for the establishment of the Commonwealth, or Free Associated State functioned smoothly. The plebiscite was held in the spring of 1951; the Constitution was drafted, approved and went into effect on July 25, 1952.

This Free Associated State was a hoax; it was born as a palliative and with no alternative choices, was ratified by an electoral minority of a people occupied by the armed forces of the country which proposed it. It is neither free, nor a state, and the form of its association is colonialism. It is indeed a super-agency for the management of U.S. economic interests in Puerto Rico.

1953 The United States had succeeded in persuading the United Nations to declare Puerto Rico "self-governing" on the basis of the "Commonwealth" formulation. Plans were to seek the same kind of declaration when the Organization of American States convened in Caracas on March 1, 1954. Those who determined to prevent this were a small group of dedicated Nationalists in New York. Under the leadership of Lolita Lebron, they decided that they must call international attention to the Puerto Rican predicament. What place was more fitting than the institution in which these plans of oppression were drafted?

1 March 1954 Lolita Lebron, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irvin Flores and Andres Figueroa Cordero set out for Washington, fully aware of the dangers inherent in their plan. They entered the gallery of the House of Representatives and began to shoot, crying "Viva Puerto Rico Libre!" They offered almost no resistance when they were immediately apprehended. The three Nationalist men were condemned to 75 years in prison each, and the leader, Lolita Lebron, to 50 years.

In the intervening years, these people have been subjected to particular harassment, transferred frequently from one penal institution to another, kept in solitary confinement for months and years on end. Figueroa Cordero suffers from cancer and Lebron is seriously ill; neither of them is given proper medical treatment. Yet these four revolutionaries maintain an exemplary stance for which they will not be moved. They have been offered parole but refused it because of the restrictions it would impose upon their political activities. Their statements, their endurance, their unswerving dedication have been nothing less than heroic.

December 1972 Last year, just before his successor took office, the ex-governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Ferré, issued a proclamation freeing from the Puerto Rican jails the remaining prisoners from the 1950 uprising. These were four men whose sentences had amounted to something like a total of 950 years, and from the moment of their release they hurled themselves directly back into the independence struggle, addressing huge crowds and issuing statements reaffirming the same positions they had outspokenly held during those 22 years in jail. "Armed struggle," said Jose Antonio Cruz Colón in an interview the week after he came out of prison, "is a legitimate form of struggle. We must use any means at our disposal, as long as it is effective."

August 1972 His contention echoed a recent decision on the part of the United Nations Committee on Decolonization which declared, a year ago last August, that the recourse to force and violence on the part of national liberation armies in colonial situations is a legitimate reaction of self-defense. In spite of heavy pressure from the U.S. to brand all such acts and gestures as "terrorism", the rest of the world can plainly see that there are many situations where the balance of power permits no other possible form of appeal.

It is in this light that we must see the actions of the Nationalists who took part in the 1950 uprising, in the Blair House incident, and in the 1954 events in the House of Representatives. To the Puerto Rican independence movement, each of these patriotic prisoners is a banner flying undauntedly in prison.