

PUERTO RICO
The Flame of
Resistance

PUERTO RICO The Flame of Resistance

Written by the
Peoples Press Puerto Rico Project:

Lincoln Bergman, Gail Dolgin,
Robert Gabriner, Maisie McAdoo,
Jonah Raskin

Designed by Jane Norling

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We hope this book will prove to be a useful tool, an educational contribution towards building support for Puerto Rican independence and self determination, and in helping to reach a clearer understanding of U.S. imperialism.

We would like to hear your criticisms, suggestions, and comments. Please write to us: Peoples Press Puerto Rico Project, P.O. Box 40130, San Francisco, California 94110.

The Authors

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE
PEOPLE OF PUERTO RICO WHO EMBODY
THE HEROIC FREEDOM SPIRIT OF
BETANCES, LOLA RODRIGUEZ DE TIO,
ALBIZU CAMPOS AND LOLITA LEBRON.
IT IS OFFERED AS A CONTRIBUTION
TO THE GROWING FRIENDSHIP
AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN
THE PEOPLE OF PUERTO RICO AND
THE PEOPLES OF NORTH AMERICA.

CONTENTS

Prologue	El Grito de Puerto Rico	1
1	Borinquen: Land of Courage	5
	2 Birth at Lares	13
3	Under the Folds of the American Flag	25
4	The War between U.S. Capital and Puerto Rican Labor	39
5	"To Take Our Country They Will Have to Take Our Lives"	51
	6 Colonial Master Plan	61
7	Prisoners in a Battle of Liberation	73
	8 Profit Island, U.S.A.	89
9	The People are the Target	105
	10 Jíbaro Sí Yankee No	123
	11 We Will Attain Victory	139
12	Against the Common Enemy	153





Prologue

EL GRITO DE PUERTO RICO

There is an old Latin American legend about a foreign tyrant who tried to bury the truth. This tyrant used arms to conquer another nation. He enslaved the people and forced them to work for his benefit. This tyrant had a ceaseless drive for more wealth and more power. He was cruel and selfish, but he was not yet all-powerful because the truth stood in his way. The truth followed him everywhere and revealed his cruelty and selfishness. So the tyrant decided that it was absolutely necessary to bury the truth once and for all. Then he would seize all the wealth and power.

The tyrant ordered the people to give up the truth. He sent his soldiers into the land to gather the truth. Some citizens refused to surrender what was rightfully theirs and they were shot or jailed. When the soldiers returned the tyrant stored the truth in his brain, it made him dizzy. Late one night he crept into the jungle. When he was far away from the castle he dug a deep hole in the ground. It was hard labor because he had never worked before.

Then the tyrant cupped his hands around his mouth, and as loud as he could shouted the truth to the bottom of the dark hole. The tyrant could hear the truth rumbling at the very bottom of the hole. But before the truth could escape the tyrant threw earth into the hole as fast as he could. He packed the earth down and stamped on it with his boots.

"Now at last the truth is buried forever," he said, brushing the soil from his robes. He was very pleased with himself; on the journey back to the castle he planned new wars of conquest.

The foreign tyrant didn't know it, but two peasants watched him dig the hole and bury the truth. When the tyrant left the jungle they emerged from hiding. These two peasants got their shovels and began to work. The peasants had always worked hard, so they were soon at the bottom of the dark pit. However, all that remained of the truth was a small seed. Gently the peasants lifted the seed of truth and planted it as they would plant a corn seed. Then they went home to sleep.

That night the foreign tyrant didn't sleep well. At midnight he woke suddenly with a fear that the truth had emerged from the dark hole and that it was alive in the land. The first thing the next morning he walked into the jungle. From a distance he could see that on the exact spot where he had buried the truth there was a strong and beautiful tree. Moreover, there was a crowd of peasants with machetes, shovels and hoes. The tyrant's heart pounded against his chest. He was afraid. Even as he walked toward the tree it grew taller and taller. The peasants raised their tools and let out a cry. The tyrant could see that the roots of the tree went deep into the rich earth. The trunk of the tree was too wide to put his arms around, and its branches were long and powerful.

It was spring. There were millions of budding branches. Each one distinct and yet they were one and the same. The buds unfurled; they became bright green leaves. Suddenly the wind blew through the tree and together all the leaves sang an anthem to the truth. The people cheered. With the truth echoing across the jungle, they raised their shovels, machetes and hoes and drove the foreign tyrant from their native land.



This old Latin American legend has meaning for the island nation of Puerto Rico today. For hundreds of years foreign tyrants have dominated Puerto Rico. They have used every means possible to try to bury the truth about Puerto Rico. They have tried to bury the truth that Puerto Rico was and still is today an oppressed nation, a colony, a land imprisoned by foreign tyrants.

✱ From the late 15th to the late 19th century Puerto Rico was a colony of the Spanish Empire. The land, labor, and resources were controlled by Spain. Since 1898 Puerto Rico has been a direct colony of the U.S. U.S. corporations have exploited the wealth of the island and the labor of the Puerto Rican people.

Both the Spanish and the U.S. Empires tried to bury the truth about Puerto Rico. But the people of Puerto Rico resisted. They have never allowed the imperial powers to bury their island, their history, their culture, their land or their lives. They have fought to preserve the truth. The Puerto Rican people have denounced colonial control; they have shouted their national identity and proclaimed their independence. "El Grito de Puerto Rico," "The Cry of Puerto Rico," is heard around the world.

✱ *Puerto Rico, Puerto Pobre*—rich port, poor port, port of wealth and poverty, opulence and oppression, destruction and resistance, conquest and rebellion. The story of Puerto Rico is a story of struggle, change, and upheaval. It is a story of an unbroken drive for freedom.

The Puerto Rican people have resisted foreign domination from the 15th century until today. The tree of the Puerto Rican nation, the tree of life and liberty, the tree of liberation proclaims the truth: the people have been enslaved. The people will be free.



1

BORINQUEN LAND OF COURAGE

The Taino Indians

* The Taino Indians, the native people, called the island *Borinquen*, "Land of Courage." They were the first to be conquered and they were the first to rebel. The Taino Indians—they numbered 50,000 when the Spanish arrived—lived in tribes along the sea and along the rivers. The European invaders called them "savages," but for several thousand years they had a developed civilization and a culture.

The Tainos were mainly a farming people. They grew corn, yuca, and tobacco; they domesticated animals and hunted small game; they wove cotton fabrics and used the fibers of the rubber tree. Taino doctors used herbs and roots to cure illness and disease; their musicians played flutes and drums and their poets preserved their history in legend and song.

The Tainos were also a fishing people and their technology—hooks, nets, traps and boats—was highly developed. Land was communally owned and cooperatively worked. There were rich deposits of gold in the mountains, and though the Indians mined it in small quantities, they did not buy it, sell it, or use it in commerce or trade. The village *cacique* or chief wore a gold medallion to symbolize spiritual and political power, but the medallions were never used in payment for goods or labor. The Taino people fished and farmed, not to sell their crops and their catch, but for use in their daily lives.

In the social life of the Taino, political and religious organization was one and inseparable; democratic councils governed the tribes. The *caciques*—both men and women—were warriors and healers responsible for the physical and spiritual well-being of the people. They guided the rituals connected with birth and death, conducted meetings, led their people into battle and took council with all the island chiefs.

In Taino culture women were equal to men; they hunted, fished, farmed. They were doctors, generals, *caciques*. The story of Loiza, one woman *cacique*, has been passed down to us through legend. Loiza ruled the fertile lands at the mouth of what is now called the *Rio Grande de Loiza*, the largest river on the island.

In Taino legend the creator of the island and the source of all life was a woman, the Mother Goddess, the Goddess of Fertility. An evil male god *Juracan* (the root of the English word hurricane) lived in the sea and brought death and destruction; a good male god named Yuki-yuku lived in the mountains and guarded the gold.

The Spanish Empire

In the middle of the 15th century a Taino *cemi* or priest prophesied disaster; in the quest for Yuki-yuku's gold the Taino people would be exterminated. The priest warned:

A CLOTHED RACE WILL COME
A CLOTHED RACE WILL COME TO RULE BORINQUEN
THEY WILL ENSLAVE AND MURDER OUR PEOPLE
THEY WILL STARVE AND TORMENT THEM TO DEATH.

★ On November 19, 1493 Christopher Columbus and his crew landed on *Borinquen*. They brought the gun and the sword, the Christian cross and the Bible to the island. Columbus claimed the land for Queen Isabella of Spain. Soon Spanish *conquistadores* landed on *Borinquen*; they brought with them brutality and avarice, *machismo*, smallpox and syphilis. Across the Caribbean, Latin America and what is now California, Arizona, and New Mexico, Spanish *conquistadores* burned, tortured, crucified and destroyed in their search for gold. One Mexican Indian described the Spanish quest as follows:

"They lifted up the gold as if they were monkeys with expressions of joy . . . As if it were something for which they yearn with a great thirst . . . Their bodies fatten on it and they hunger violently for it . . . They killed so many Indians that it made a river of blood, and the day became red because of all the blood."

The cross and the Bible notwithstanding, gold alone was sacred to the Spanish conquerors.

★ On the island of *Borinquen* two cultures, two civilizations met in bloody conflict. Spain was an Empire, an economic and political system based on conquest, exploitation, and theft. The Taino were a farming people; they had weapons and they defended their land but they did not conquer other nations. The Taino walked, the Spanish rode horseback; the Taino sailed in small canoes, the Spanish sailed in ships of war. One respected life, the other craved gold.

Gold is the most precious of all commodities;
gold constitutes treasure, and he who
possesses it has all he needs in this world,
has also the means of rescuing souls from
purgatory and restoring them to the
enjoyment of paradise.
-Christopher Columbus

★ The gods and the goddesses of the native people were banished and Jesus Christ, St. Paul and St. Augustine rose over the island to bless the conquest. The commercially valueless medallions of the Taino chiefs were stolen, and in the hands of the Spanish became valuable commodities that were bought and sold on the market. When no more gold could be taken from the *caciques* the Taino people were enslaved and forced to work 14 to 16 hours a day in the gold mines. Yuki-yuku's treasures were defiled; *Borinquen* became a Spanish colony. By royal decree the land and the Indians were "given" to Spanish colonists. The Indians worked the mines as slaves. This was called the *encomienda* system.

The King of Spain appointed Ponce de Leon, a leading conquistador, as head of San Juan, the major port on the island. Under Ponce de Leon's direction, a gold smelter was built in the early 16th century; by 1510 the first smelting yielded 100,000 pesos of gold. A year later, in 1511, gold fever ran so high that the Spanish settlement on the island of *Borinquen* was named Puerto Rico, or rich port.



Cowards do not fall as this people fell

*The Indians who worked the mines were given just enough food to allow them to live and labor another day. Thousands died in the dark gold mines under the Spanish overseer's lash. The Taino "savages" were given "souls" by Christian missionaries and brought into the fold of the Catholic Church. Bishops and priests, with few exceptions, used their religion as a weapon against the native peoples. The Bible was used to justify brutality; the conquistadors claimed that they were bringing sub-human creatures into the realm of humanity, and if the whip was necessary, so be it. The missionaries taught the Tainos that Christians had eternal life, that therefore it was futile to rebel against the Spaniards or try to kill them.

At first the Indians believed that the Spaniards were immortal. But Urayoan, a wise old Taino warrior, suspected that this notion was false. He devised a plan to disprove the Catholic priests and conquistadores and only waited for the proper moment to test it. One afternoon Diego Salcedo, a Spanish conquistador, entered Urayoan's village and ordered the Indians to carry him across the deep river. Urayoan took council and decided to put his plan into operation. Salcedo mounted the backs of the Indian porters and urged them forward. When they reached the middle of the river the Tainos dumped Salcedo and held his head under water for several

hours. When at last they dragged his body ashore, the first conquistador was dead on Puerto Rican soil. Resistance to the Spanish Empire had begun.

Urayoan passed the news to Agueybana, the leading Taino chief, and together the tribes declared war on the Spaniards. The Indian warriors ambushed the soldiers, burned their forts, destroyed the hated mines, attacked Spanish homes, stampeded their horses and threw their guns into the sea. Initially the cocky Spaniards were taken by surprise and suffered defeats, but Ponce de Leon, the Spanish governor, rallied his forces and launched a reign of terror against the Indians.

* The Taino were hunted like wild animals; they were captured and massacred. Cannon balls were fired at random into the jungle, fields were burned and villages were destroyed.

* Hundreds of Indians fled from Puerto Rico in small boats and settled on other islands in the Caribbean; others retreated into the mountains of the interior, but Ponce de Leon and his army pursued them mercilessly through the dense jungle and from one island to the next. By 1514 only 3,000 Indians were still alive; in 20 years the Spanish exterminated over 45,000 people or 95% of the population. Seven years later only 600 Taino Indians were alive. Some managed to escape capture and survived in the mountains, but many were rounded up and held captive in villages. They were prisoners on their own island.

In 1521 Ponce de Leon arrived in Florida in search of more gold. There his crimes caught up with him. The Indians had their revenge. A Seminole warrior shot and killed Ponce de Leon with a bow and arrow. New conquistadors arrived to take his place. The Spaniards were the victors; but *Borinquén*, the island of the Tainos, lived in legend and song. As one Puerto Rican historian noted:

The Indians, defeated in combat, won the right to historical immortality; cowards do not fall as this people fell.

Black slaves and white sugar

Most of the Indians were exterminated, the gold mines drained of their wealth. But the Spaniards did not abandon Puerto Rico, their rich port. *El Morro*, an immense stone fortress and prison, was built at the entrance to San Juan Bay; Puerto Rico became a strategic outpost of the Spanish Empire. It was an important military base, and also a vital trading center. The Dutch and the English — under Sir Francis Drake — attacked the island and tried to conquer it but the Spanish drove them into the sea.

* In the middle of the 17th century the economy of Puerto Rico shifted from mining to agriculture. Coffee, tobacco, ginger and sugar cane were almost as profitable as the gold mines had been. As the economy changed so did the class structure. The conquistadors, adventurers and miners moved on and were replaced by landowners, farmers, shopkeepers and artisans.

* The island was ruled by a colonial administration responsible to the Spanish crown, and by the wealthiest plantation owners and merchants. Most of these merchants, landowners, and administrators were born in Spain and returned to Spain wealthy men. Below them on the social ladder were the *hacendados*, the owners of large plantations and estates. They defined themselves as Puerto Ricans rather than Spaniards; they were on the island to stay. Their descendants became the island's doctors, lawyers, and government bureaucrats.

* Since 99% of the Indians had been exterminated a new, cheap supply of labor was necessary. The new laborers were Black slaves. Puerto Rico was locked into a world-wide commercial network that was called the "Triangle Trade." The three points of the Triangle Trade were New England, Africa and the Caribbean Islands.

Slave traders kidnapped millions of Blacks from the West Coast of Africa and brought them to the New World in chains. Hundreds of thousands of Black people died on the hellish Atlantic crossing, the "Middle Passage," and were tossed into the sea like so much spoiled cargo.

* In Puerto Rico and the West Indies, the New England ships exchanged their human cargoes for sugar. The same ships carried the raw sugar to New England where it was made into rum — "demon rum." On the last leg of the journey the ships carried the rum to Africa. One keg of rum bought dozens of Black bodies.

Slave labor was the foundation of the extremely profitable triangle trade. Spanish colonists in San Juan, British colonists in Boston, European bankers and traders in London, Paris, Amsterdam and Madrid made their fortunes on the misery and the suffering of the Black slaves who labored on the sugar plantations. Thousands of Africans died in the New World; they were buried in the rich dark soil beneath the fields of cane they worked from dawn to dusk.

* In 1553 there were 1500 Black slaves in Puerto Rico; by 1830 there were 30,000 Black slaves. In Puerto Rico, as elsewhere, the Spanish suppressed African culture. Slaves were forbidden to use their own names or speak their African languages; it was a crime to teach a slave to read and write. On breeding farms Black women brought the next generation of laborers into slavery. Black women were raped and beaten by their white masters; the children of these sexual assaults were raised as slaves.

* Black slaves were branded with the *carimbo*, the same tool that was used to brand cattle with a rancher's mark of ownership. It was not until 1784, eight years after the start of the revolution by the 13 North American colonies, that this barbaric practice was abolished in Puerto Rico, and then only because slaves rebelled and forced their masters to end it.



The first revolt of Black slaves was in 1527, one hundred and seven years before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. Though slaves were executed, tortured, and lashed if they were caught conspiring rebellion, they continued to rebel throughout the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Black slaves escaped to the mountains and lived with the surviving Taino Indians as free men and free women. These fugitives from Spanish tyranny were a threat to the plantation system; they were a beacon of liberation and they inspired other slaves to resist, rebel, and escape to freedom.

The work force in colonial Puerto Rico was also composed of *jornaleros* or day laborers. *Jornaleros* were Blacks or people of mixed race who were free in name but in fact were not far removed from chattel slavery. The Spanish authorities required that *jornaleros* carry a *libretta* or notebook on their person at all times. The *libretta* was a record of work, expenses, moral conduct, and was used to control the movement and the activities of the *jornaleros*. This system was also used in the southern states after the U.S. Civil War, and today is a cornerstone of the apartheid regime in South Africa. In 17th-century San Juan and Ponce, day laborers were arrested, fined, and assigned jobs if they could not show their *libretta* on demand to police authorities and judges.



* For four centuries the Spanish colonialists controlled Puerto Rico. They grew rich and powerful from the labor of Black slaves and day laborers, but they also brought into existence new social forces that eventually dislodged them. A new racial and social group — the Puerto Rican — was created on the island.

* In the countryside the surviving Taino Indians, the fugitive Black slaves, and poor farmers from Spain, mingled, married, mixed. The *jíbaro* was born. (In the Indian language *jíbaro* means "one who escapes to be free.") The *jíbaro* roots went back to Africa, back to the Taino tribes, and back to the villages of Spain, but the *jíbaro* — the poor country folk or peasants — were distinctly Puerto Rican. Puerto Rico was their land, their home, their nation. Out of oppression and exploitation, the colonized peoples developed a consciousness of themselves, their class, their language, and their cultural identity.



2

**BIRTH
AT LARES**

Cracks in the Empire

Signs of decline and fall cast a shadow across the worldwide Spanish Empire even as it appeared most confident and secure. The fall of Spain did not occur in a day, a month, or even a year, but step by step the imperial system cracked and decayed; Spain lost its colonies, its wealth and power.

At home the royal court was devoured by decadence and corruption; the crimes committed in the conquest of the colonies poisoned political and moral life at the center of the Empire. Internationally, rival nations challenged, then eclipsed Spanish power. As the Spanish Empire collapsed, the British Empire grew more powerful. In the 17th and the 18th centuries English pirates and buccaneers, often working as unofficial agents of the crown, attacked Spanish ships, hijacked their cargoes, and sunk them to the bottom of the Caribbean Sea.

* In the early 19th century, rebellious Puerto Rican pirates preyed upon the San Juan-Madrid trade. Roberto Cofresi, a Robin Hood of the seas, plundered Spanish ships and shared his booty with the poor of Puerto Rico. But the Spanish monopoly on Puerto Rico was broken, not by maverick pirates, but by wealthy U.S. merchants backed by the U.S. Navy. Increasingly throughout the 19th century, U.S. merchants came to dominate trade with the island.

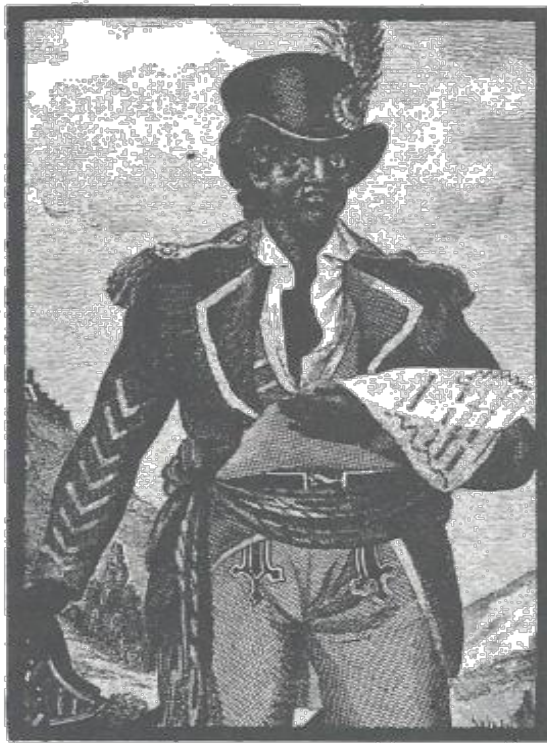
Revolution on Three Continents

Feudal Spain was economically backward, socially archaic. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Madrid, Cadiz, and Barcelona were left behind and London, Manchester, and Liverpool became the manufacturing and trading centers of the world.

It was an age of economic, political and social revolution. Feudalism was buried, capitalism emerged triumphant and the European ruling class expanded its interests around the globe. In 1776 the 13 North American colonies declared their independence from England, and after an eight-year anti-colonial war became a separate nation — a nation that in turn would become an Empire. In 1789 the French Revolution shook the foundations of Europe. In Paris angry crowds demolished the Bastille, the prison fortress that symbolized the oppression of the feudal regime. The cry "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!" rang through the cobblestone streets; the French King and Queen fled and the power of the aristocracy was broken.

Reverberations were felt in Puerto Rico, in Venezuela, and in Haiti. In Haiti, Toussaint L'Ouverture, an escaped Black slave, led an army of slaves against their French masters. The Haitians were successful; they won their independence, and their freedom and abolished slavery.

The French Revolution led to war in Europe, and Spain was forced to fight on two fronts — at home and in the colonies. In 1808 Napoleon invaded Spain and deposed King Ferdinand VIII. For six years French troops camped on Spanish soil. With the imperial center weakened and Spanish forces overextended, revolution broke out in the New World. In Mexico, Miguel Hidalgo, a radical priest, summoned his people to fight for freedom. In 1810 he led 80,000 Indians armed with machetes, rocks, bows



Toussaint L'Ouverture



Simon Bolívar

and arrows against a Spanish regime that had robbed and butchered since Cortez defeated the Aztecs in the early 16th century. Miguel Hidalgo divided up feudal estates, distributed land to the peasants, and decreed freedom for all slaves.

In South America, Simon Bolívar — the "Great Liberator" — rallied an army of ex-slaves, agricultural workers and patriots to drive the Spanish from the continent.

Simon Bolívar was born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1783 to a wealthy landowning family. At 16 he sailed for Spain; the new ideas about human rights, democracy, and the abolition of slavery captured his imagination. In his twenties he declared himself a revolutionary and vowed:

On my life and honor, I shall not rest until I have liberated America from its tyrants.

In the Liberation War against Spain, Bolívar's army fought hundreds of battles, many of them in the sky-high, snow-capped Andes mountains. The Spanish retreated, then at last surrendered. In 1826, at the age of 43, Bolívar was the president of five liberated Latin American nations — Venezuela, Columbia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, and the newly-created state of Bolívar.

Bolívar wanted to lead an expeditionary force to free Cuba and Puerto Rico from the yoke of Spanish tyranny, but the U.S. rattled its sabre and threatened war. Lacking support Bolívar was forced to back down. "The United States seems destined to plague America with misery in the name of liberty," he observed.

* Spain sought desperately to isolate Puerto Rico from the Latin American, Mexican, and Haitian revolutions. Wealthy planters who were driven from South

America by Bolivar's liberating armies resettled in Puerto Rico and exerted a conservative influence on the island's social and political life. News of Bolivar's military victories was censored, his writings burned.

But the winds of revolution also blew across Puerto Rico. Bolivar's victories in Latin America inspired day laborers, Black slaves, planters, merchants, doctors and lawyers. Spanish authorities tried to recruit Puerto Ricans to fight against Bolivar but no one would sign up. "These people have suffered enough in tolerating their natural authorities," wrote one angry Puerto Rican patriot. "We will not tolerate being taken to fight against our brothers and sisters in Venezuela."

All across Puerto Rico — in cities, villages and countryside — there were popular insurrections and military rebellions, throughout the 1820s, then again in 1835, 1838, and 1867. In 1821 Puerto Ricans formed an organization called Los Rayos y Soles de Bolivar, the Rays and Suns of Bolivar. In 1822 Pedro Duboy, a mulatto, organized an uprising of Blacks, both free and slave. Two years later, Maria Mercedes Barbudo, a woman revolutionary, launched — with help from the Venezuelans — an insurrection against the Spanish authorities on Puerto Rico. She was captured, jailed in *El Morro*, and then deported to Cuba.

A campaign of ruthless terror was directed against the Puerto Rican independence movement. For four decades the island was ruled by a series of military dictators or "little Ceasars," as they were called, who outdid one another in acts of savagery.

Miguel de la Torre, the first of the dictators, was defeated by Bolivar in Venezuela in 1821. Transferred to Puerto Rico, he went on a rampage against revolutionaries, patriots, and liberals. Civil rights were abolished, travel severely restricted, curfews imposed. De la Torre and his successors intensified exploitation and the oppression of workers. The *Bando Negro* (1848) tied Blacks, both free and slave, to the plantations and imposed severe punishments; a Black who merely "insulted" a White overseer was automatically sentenced to five years in prison.

Rebels were arrested and executed on the spot — or if "lucky," like Maria Mercedes Barbudo, they were exiled to Cuba. One separatist leader was strangled to death in *El Morro*, the Spanish stone fortress; others were routinely executed by firing squads. The power of *El Morro* extended beyond its stone walls; tyranny was felt by workers on the docks, peasants on the coffee farms, and teachers in the classroom. All of Puerto Rico became a prison fortress.

Independence activities were outlawed and the movement was forced to meet secretly. Guerrilla activity rose. In the late 1830's in retaliation for the murders of political prisoners in *El Morro*, the Puerto Rican liberation forces tried and executed eight army officers.

Puerto Rican society was polarized; political lines were tightly drawn and antagonisms exploded in the open. The wealthiest plantation owners, merchants and government bureaucrats formed the *Incondicionales*, the party unconditionally in favor of the King and the Spanish Empire. The *Incondicionales* had direct ties with the Crown and received the best contracts and trading agreements; naturally they wanted no social change.

The *hacendados* (the smaller farmers), some merchants, lawyers and doctors belonged to the *Autonomista* movement. Economically and politically this group was caught between the San Juan commercial interests and the feudal landowners. The *Autonomists* wanted autonomy — more self-government, freer trade, the growth of the local economy — within the Spanish Empire. Though far from revolutionary, they listened sympathetically to more radical demands for liberty and equality.

"We agree
that the time
has come to
take up arms
to sanctify
the cause
of our rights,
and we
declare our
resolve to
die before
continuing
under
Spanish
domination."

~ Ramon
Emeterio
Betances



Ramon Betances

The third force on the island was the separatist or *independentista* movement. Drawing upon all sectors of Puerto Rican society, except the highest, and inspired by Bolivar, Hidalgo and L'Ouverture, the *independentistas* wanted independence, the end of Spanish colonialism, the abolition of slavery, and the destruction of the *libretta* system — the system of passes. Only then could business and trade, based on free wage labor, develop. With independence, markets would grow and trade with other countries would expand.

The separatist movement reached across the Caribbean and joined hands in solidarity with revolutionaries in Cuba. And in 1865 Puerto Ricans and Cubans in New York formed the *Sociedad Republicana de Cuba y Puerto Rico*, the Republican Society of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Ruis Belvis, a lawyer, and Ramon Betances, a doctor — both members of the *Sociedad Republicana* — planned a military expedition and a mass uprising that would liberate Cuba and Puerto Rico from the Spanish Crown and establish a Federation of Caribbean Nations.

Betances, known as "the Father of his Country," was born to a land owning family in the town of Cabo Rojo. In 1827 he went to France to study; like Bolivar before him he was inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution.

Betances returned to Puerto Rico a doctor, and in 1855 battled a cholera epidemic that ravaged the land and took the lives of 30,000 people. At first hand he saw the wretched poverty, the ignorance, the hunger, and the sickness of his people. Like Che Guevara, the Argentinian doctor who joined the Cuban Revolution, Betances came to understand that the health and the well-being of the Puerto Rican people demanded a revolution, a fundamental change of social conditions.

For his role in combatting the epidemic of 1855 Betances won the respect and the admiration of the people. The Puerto Rican laborers and peasants called him the "father of the poor." But the San Juan government called him a traitor. Because of his *independentista* and anti-slavery activities Betances was sent into exile in 1856. For the next twelve years he was a wanted man with a price on his head, hunted and harassed, an outlaw and a fugitive in his native land.

Under these adverse conditions Betances' political understanding deepened. He fused the *hacendado* demand for independence with the Black demand for the abolition of slavery. Thus, Betances created a political alliance between the small planters and merchants, who were excluded from the most lucrative Crown contracts, and the most exploited workers — the Black slaves and *jornaleros*.

Betances also recognized the necessity to take up arms against Spain. Spanish power had to be confronted with Puerto Rican power; Spain would never surrender its rich port, Puerto Rico, without a fight. Betances and Ruis Belvis organized revolutionary committees across the island that were prepared to distribute arms and lead the masses in a popular rebellion.

In July 1867 Betances and Belvis arrived in Santo Domingo to gather arms for the rebellion. They organized a Revolutionary Committee and established a command post for the uprising. Belvis went to Chile to collect money and weapons. Alone in his

hotel room he died "mysteriously," perhaps at the hands of Spanish agents who had been on his trail.

Betances was deeply shaken by this news, but he and the Revolutionary Committees on the island proceeded with their plans for revolution and the creation of a Caribbean Community of Nations. From exile on St. Thomas, Betances issued "The Ten Commandments of Liberty," the first Puerto Rican *independentista* manifesto. Echoing the demands of Bolivar and L'Ouverture, Betances called for

- Abolition of slavery
- Right to reject taxes
- Freedom of Religion
- Freedom of Speech
- Freedom of the Press
- Freedom of Commerce
- Right to Assemble
- Right to bear arms
- Right to elect own Representatives
- Protection of citizens from search and seizure

In December 1867 Betances called upon the people of Puerto Rico to put "an end to Spanish domination;" on January 2, 1868 — still in exile — he wrote a "Provisional Constitution of the Puerto Rican Revolution."

El Grito de Lares

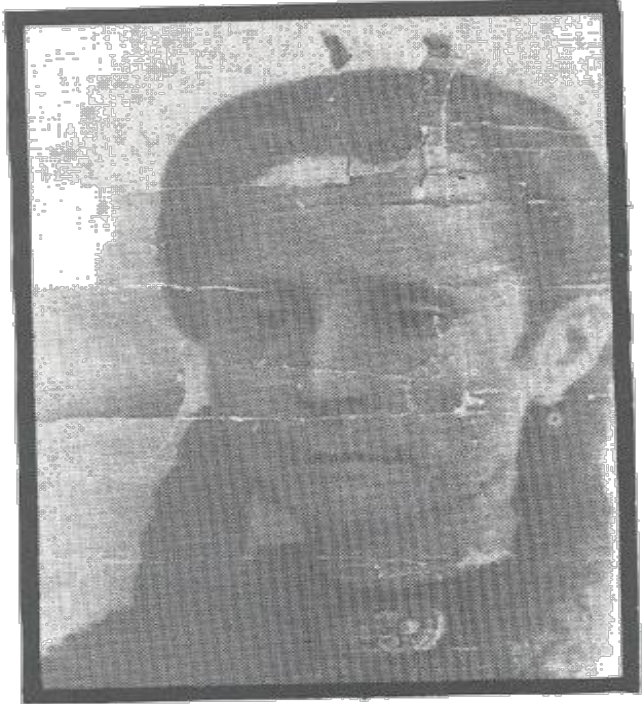
The exiled Betances and the Revolutionary Committees on the island fixed September 29, 1868, the Feast Day of Saint Michael, for the start of the insurrection. Slaves would have the day off and laborers would be celebrating. The rebels agreed that the best place to launch their attack was the mountain town of Lares. In Lares they would hold a tactical advantage over the Spanish authorities. San Juan was far away; the roads were in poor condition and would slow the arrival of government troops. In Lares too the rebels could count on support from the people, especially from the *jibaros* who worked on the surrounding coffee plantations. In the mountains, fugitives from slavery were ready to take up arms. Finally, Lares was selected because the town judge and the commanding officers of the militia *belonged* to the Revolutionary Committee.

Revolutionaries from both North and South America joined with Puerto Ricans at Lares. Mathias Bruckman was from the U.S.A. Manuel Rojas was born in Venezuela where his father, a Puerto Rican doctor, fought side by side with Bolivar. Mariana Bracetti, known as the woman with the "Golden Arm," because of her bravery and her dedication to independence, was a leader of the Lares Revolutionary Council.

* Lola Rodriguez de Tío, known as "the daughter of the Islands," was a poet who used her pen in the cause of Puerto Rican independence. In the late 1860s she wrote the words to *La Borinqueña*, Puerto Rico's revolutionary national anthem. "I wanted the words to make people leave their homes and take up arms," she said. The song reflects her belief that freedom would be won through armed struggle, and that women would make important contributions to the independence movement:



Lola Rodríguez de Tío



Mariana Bracetti

Awake, Borinqueños, the signal has
 been given,
 Awake from your sleep, it is the hour of
 struggle.
 The Drum of war announces by its beat
 That the thicket is the place,
 The place to meet.
 We want no more despots,
 Let the tyrant fall,
 Women, rising up angry
 Know how to fight.
 We want freedom, our machete will
 gain it;
 Let's go Borinqueños, let's go now,
 Freedom anxiously awaits us
 Freedom, freedom!
 Freedom, freedom!

Week after week the *Independentistas* attended fiestas, mingled with the crowds and spread the word that the uprising was scheduled for Lares the 29th of September. Thousands of workers on the plantations were ready to strike. In Santo Domingo Betances purchases 500 rifles, six cannon and *El Telégrafo*, a small ship. He and his crew were prepared to sail for Puerto Rico and join the rebels in the mountains.

But on September 22nd, a week before the rebellion was scheduled to begin, Manuel Gonzales, a member of the Revolutionary Committee at Arecibo, was arrested on a tip supplied by a paid police informer. A search of Gonzalez's house yielded a list with names of rebels and plans for the revolt. Immediately the Spanish officials sent a message to St. Thomas, *El Telégrafo* was trapped in the harbor and Betances was held prisoner.

These setbacks reached the Revolutionary Committee at Lares; Mariana Bracetti, Mathias Bruckman, and Manuel Rojas took council and decided to attack at once. On September 23, 1868, six days ahead of schedule, 400 Puerto Ricans armed with knives, machetes and a few guns surrounded Lares and, after a short battle, marched triumphantly into the main square. The mayor and a few supporters of the Spanish Crown were arrested. Workers built fires and burned their *librettas*; prisoners were freed from the jail. Black slaves smashed their chains and rejoiced at their new freedom. Above the plaza two flags were raised — one made by Mariana Bracetti, the other a white streamer with the words

Muerte o Libertad, Viva Puerto Rico Libre.
(Liberty or Death, Long Live a Free Puerto Rico!)

The patriots at Lares declared the "Republic of Puerto Rico." The Provisional Government issued four decrees:

1. All Puerto Ricans are duty-bound to fight for the revolution.
2. Every foreigner who voluntarily takes up arms on the side of the Republic will be considered a patriot.
3. Every slave who joins the Republic is free.
4. The *libretta* system is abolished.

The manifesto of the Lares Government declared:

We agree that the time has come to take up arms to sanctify the cause of our rights, and we declare our resolve to die before continuing under Spanish domination. And so that this will not be known as a riot or a mutiny of an evil kind, but will be considered as a patriotic movement leading to the overthrow of a heavy yoke and the creation of a free country, we declare this to the entire world.

Lares was a victory and a turning point in Puerto Rican history. The Puerto Rican nation was born. But the Republic at Lares was short-lived. Spanish troops armed with cannon overwhelmed the rebels and captured the town. Guerrilla battles were fought in the mountains and the insurgents were hunted down.

Mariana Bracetti was imprisoned in Arecibo prison where her new-born son died. Manuel Rojas and Mathias Bruckman were executed, hundreds of men and women were arrested and the cells of *El Morro* were packed with *independentistas*.

A few weeks after the Lares revolt, the Cuban people also rose against the Spanish. *El Grito de Yara*, the rebellion that began at Yara, lasted ten years. In the 1890s another rebellion erupted. It was led by Jose Martí, a Latin American patriot as extraordinary as Bolivar or Toussaint L'Ouverture. Martí founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party; throughout his life he fought for the freedom of the Caribbean and all Latin America. Martí also supported workers in the U.S. who were demanding an eight hour day. Martí was a poet, playwright, journalist and revolutionary internationalist. He noted:

The spirit of Lares and Yara are one, in the future, as they have been in the past. Cubans and Puerto Ricans are one in preparation today, as they were yesterday in prison and exile, and they must be one in action to hasten their common liberty through a double effort.

"When Cuba becomes independent, I will ask for permission to fight for the freedom of Puerto Rico."

~ Antonio Maceo



Betances was deeply saddened by the military defeat at Lares, but he, Lola Rodríguez de Tío, and other Puerto Rican patriots rallied to support their Cuban comrades. Lola Rodríguez de Tío worked with José Martí to plan the Cuban war of independence. In her most famous poem she wrote:

Cuba and Puerto Rico are two wings of the same bird.
They receive bullets and flowers in one heart.

The Cuban revolutionaries did not forget their sisters and brothers on Puerto Rico. Antonio Maceo, the Black general and leader in the Cuban war for liberation, promised:

When Cuba becomes independent I will ask for permission to struggle for the freedom of Puerto Rico because I should hate to put down my sword while that part of America remains in slavery.

In 1873, five years after the rebellion at Lares, chattel slavery on the island was abolished. But even this victory was bitter. The freed Puerto Rican slaves were required by law to work for their masters for three more years.

In 1874 the government created the Civil Guard, a special police unit empowered to attack independence forces. A repetition of Lares was the last thing that Spain and San Juan wanted. For 15 years wave after wave of repression struck the people; public meetings were outlawed, the press was censored, the right to assemble was abolished. 1887 came to be known as "The Year of the Terror." The Civil Guard arrested hundreds of people, tortured and bludgeoned them to death. But Lares was not buried. Betances' "Ten Commandments of Liberty" were a hope for the future, and the words to "La Borinqueña:"

Let's go, Borinqueños, let's go now
Freedom anxiously awaits us
Freedom, freedom!

continued to inspire the Puerto Rican people.

*"The spirit of Lares
and Yara are one,
in the future,
as they have been
one in the past.
Cubans and
Puerto Ricans are
one in preparation
today, as they
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in prison and
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action, to hasten
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liberty through
a double effort."*

~Jose Martí





3

**UNDER
THE FOLDS OF
THE AMERICAN
FLAG**

The Only Prime Minister

In 1897, 29 years after the Lares rebellion, Puerto Rico was granted autonomy within the Spanish Empire. Though the 1868 rebellion was crushed, and though there was intense repression through the 1870s and the 1880s, the revolutionary movement for independence was not defeated. From 1868 to 1890 there was an unbroken record of armed struggle (most of it carried out by underground groups) against Spanish power. Betances, and the Revolutionary Committees, continued to work for independence. Thus, the Puerto Rican independence movement forced Spain to pull back.

The crisis of its Empire forced Spain to grant Puerto Rico "autonomy." Spain was being defeated by liberation movements in Cuban and the Philippines. The Spanish army and navy were over-extended and it was increasingly difficult to protect and police the remaining colonial possessions. The military crisis was compounded by a deepening economic crisis in Spain. To prevent total collapse, the Spanish Parliament loosened the strings that bound Puerto Rico to Madrid.

In February 1898 the cabinet of the new autonomous Puerto Rican government was appointed; in March general elections for legislators were held. Muñoz Rivera, the first and the only Prime Minister of the government, was a liberal politician and journalist who wanted autonomy and limited reform; he was strongly opposed to revolution and to independence. In 1897 he informed the Spanish authorities about plans for a rebellion.

Muñoz Rivera's government offered very little to the Puerto Rican people, but some modest changes were made to suit the commercial interests. The banks, the customs, and the post office were no longer controlled from Madrid but from San Juan. Puerto Rico sent 16 representatives to the Spanish Parliament; no laws or treaties affecting Puerto Rico could be enacted without the consent of the Puerto Rican Parliament. Spain was still responsible for the military defense of the island, but Puerto Ricans had their own citizenship and were not obligated to serve in the Spanish army.

Conquest

Hardly was the new state in existence than it was toppled. In July 1898 U.S. troops invaded and conquered the island.

The military invasion and conquest of Puerto Rico was the culmination of 100 years of U.S. expansion. From 1790, when George Washington became the first U.S. President, to 1890 when the frontier was officially closed, the U.S. conquered and bought 2,300,000 square miles of land. What began as a nation of 13 states on the eastern seaboard of the North American continent, was, by 1890, an immense Empire that extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

The U.S. government disguised this naked aggression and brutal conquest as "Manifest Destiny." Presidents, politicians, preachers and poets too claimed that it was the god-given *destiny* of the white people of the U.S. to expand their economic and political system to the "savages of the wild west."



INDIAN TERRITORIES BEFORE THE EUROPEAN CONQUEST



BEGINNINGS OF THE U.S. EMPIRE

Throughout the 19th century — the century of North American conquest — the U.S. government and U.S. business interests had their eyes on Puerto Rico. As early as 1820 President James Monroe announced that "Cuba and Puerto Rico are natural appendages of the U.S." Three years later the Monroe Doctrine staked out Latin America as U.S. territory. England and Spain were told in no uncertain terms:

PRIVATE PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES!
KEEP OUT!

Intervention by European powers in Latin America, President Monroe declared, would be read as a hostile act against the U.S. itself.

After the Civil War and the defeat of the Confederacy, triumphant Northern industrialists and financiers talked about annexing Puerto Rico. It was felt that direct *political control would make business even more profitable*. "The United States has constantly cherished the belief that someday she can acquire the island by just and legal means," Secretary of State William H. Seward noted in 1867. It was Seward's aim to construct "such empire as the world has never before seen." Ten years later Secretary of State James G. Blaine bluntly stated:

I believe that there are three non-continental places of enough value to be taken by the United States. One is Hawaii, the others are Cuba and Puerto Rico.

In 1898 Hawaii was annexed. Major U.S. sugar companies had invested heavily in Hawaiian sugar and they wanted direct political and military control over their plantations. The same sugar interests urged the U.S. government to invade Puerto Rico.

Imperialism

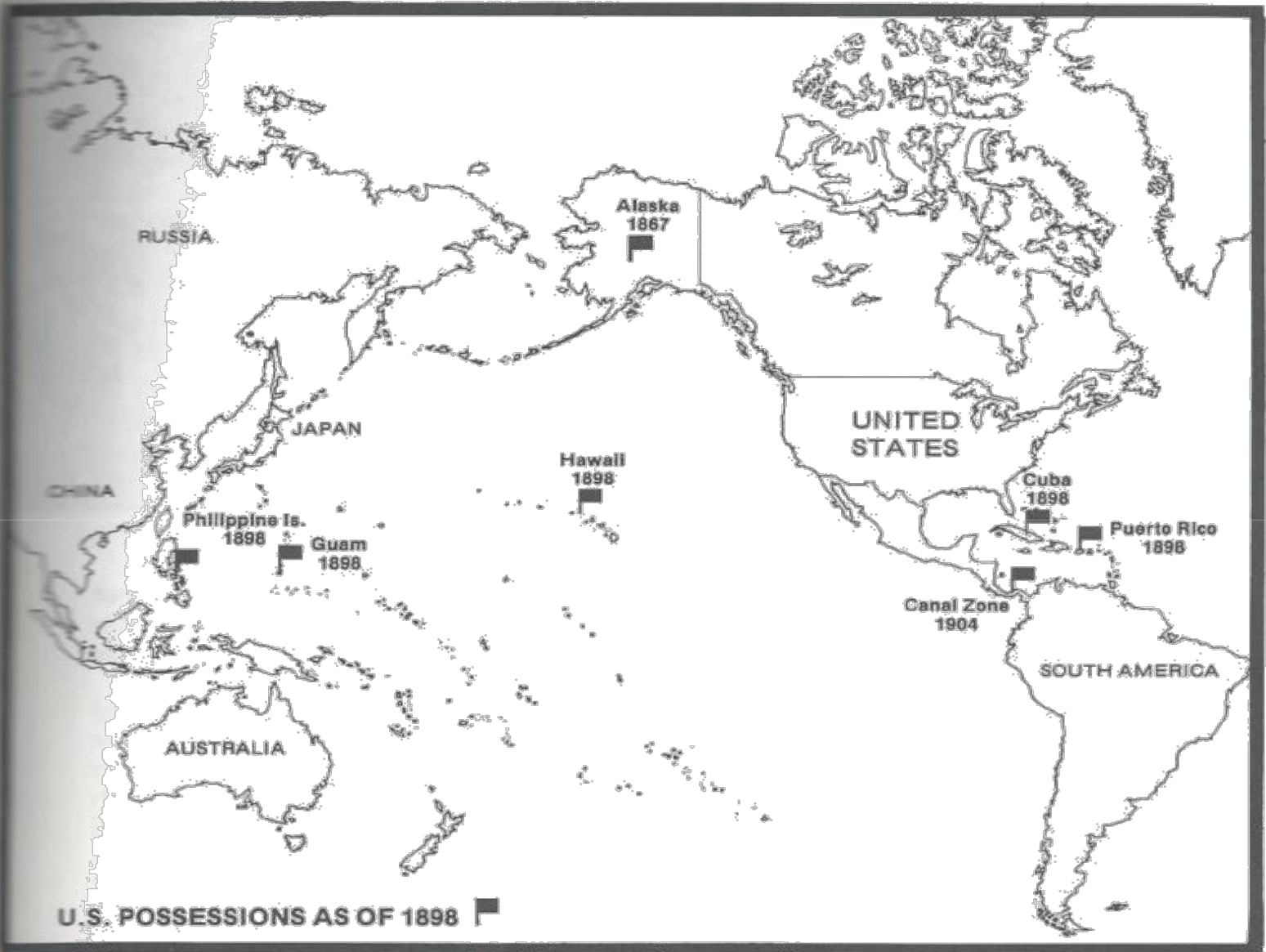
The 1890s were a crucial decade in U.S. history. In the 1890s the U.S. became an imperialist power. In 1898, on the eve of the Spanish-American War, the U.S. was a highly developed financial and industrial nation. The banks were concentrated in a few hands, and the super rich — the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and Morgans — seized control over the nation. Big capitalists devoured little capitalists and the monopolies grew larger and larger.

But the development of the monopolies also brought economic crisis. The Great Depression of 1893, the worst in U.S. history until the Depression of the 1930s, plunged the nation into a severe slump. Factories closed down, millions of workers were unemployed, manufactured goods could not be sold, and agricultural products rotted because people didn't have the money to buy them. The capitalist system ground to a halt.

In the cities people rioted and demanded food. In rural areas poor Black and White farmers joined the Populist Party and demanded that the government take over the monopolies and run them for the benefit of the people. The power of the working class movement grew stronger. Radicals advocated socialism in North America.

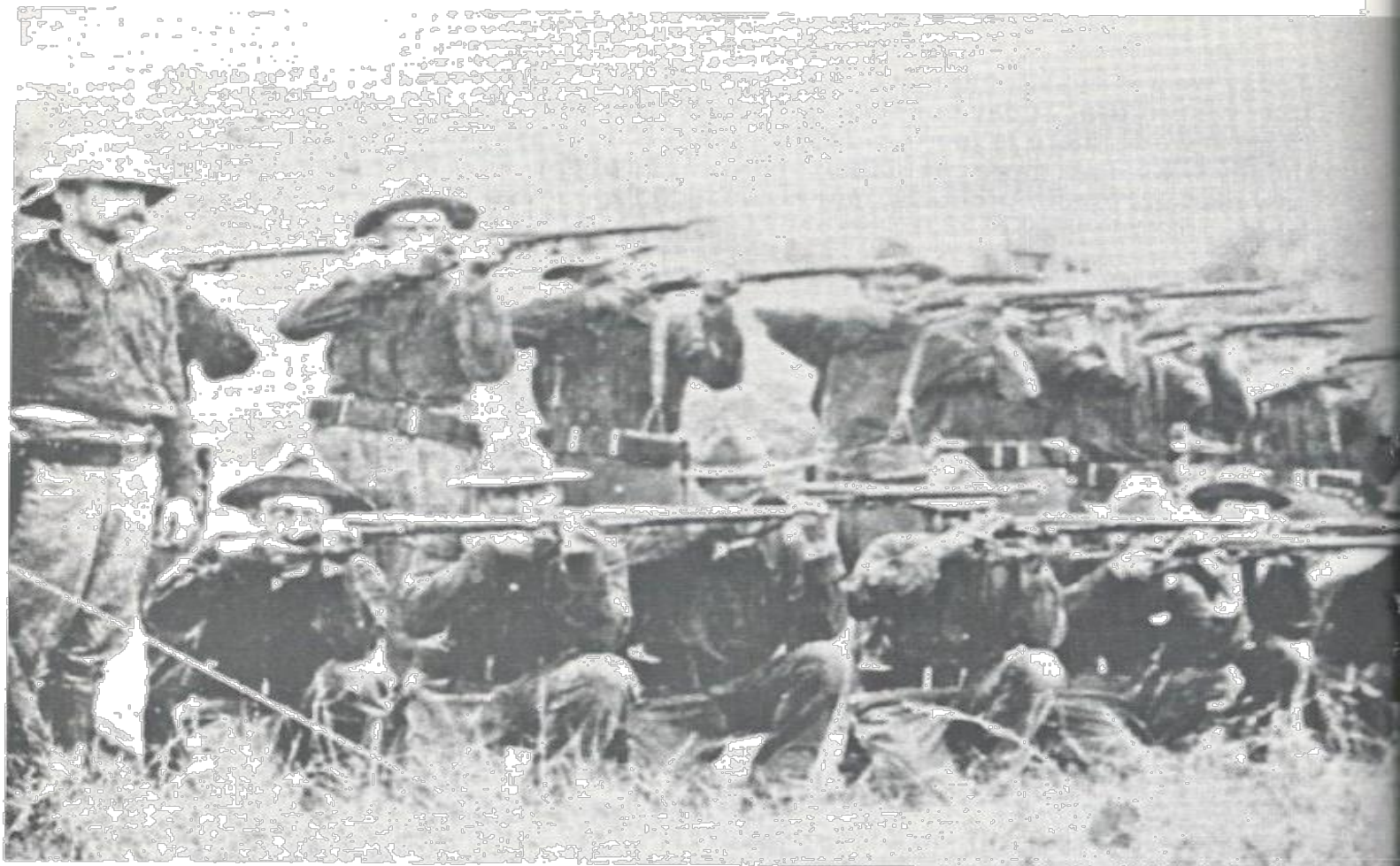
Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana offered another solution:

Today we are raising more than we can consume. Today we are making more than we can use. Today our society is congested; there are more workers than there is work; there is more capital than there is investment. We do not need money — we need more circulation, more employment. Therefore, we must find new markets for our products, new occupation for our capital, new work for our labor.



"I believe that there are three non-continental places of enough value to be taken by the United States. One is Hawai'i, the others are Cuba and Puerto Rico."

—James G. Blaine

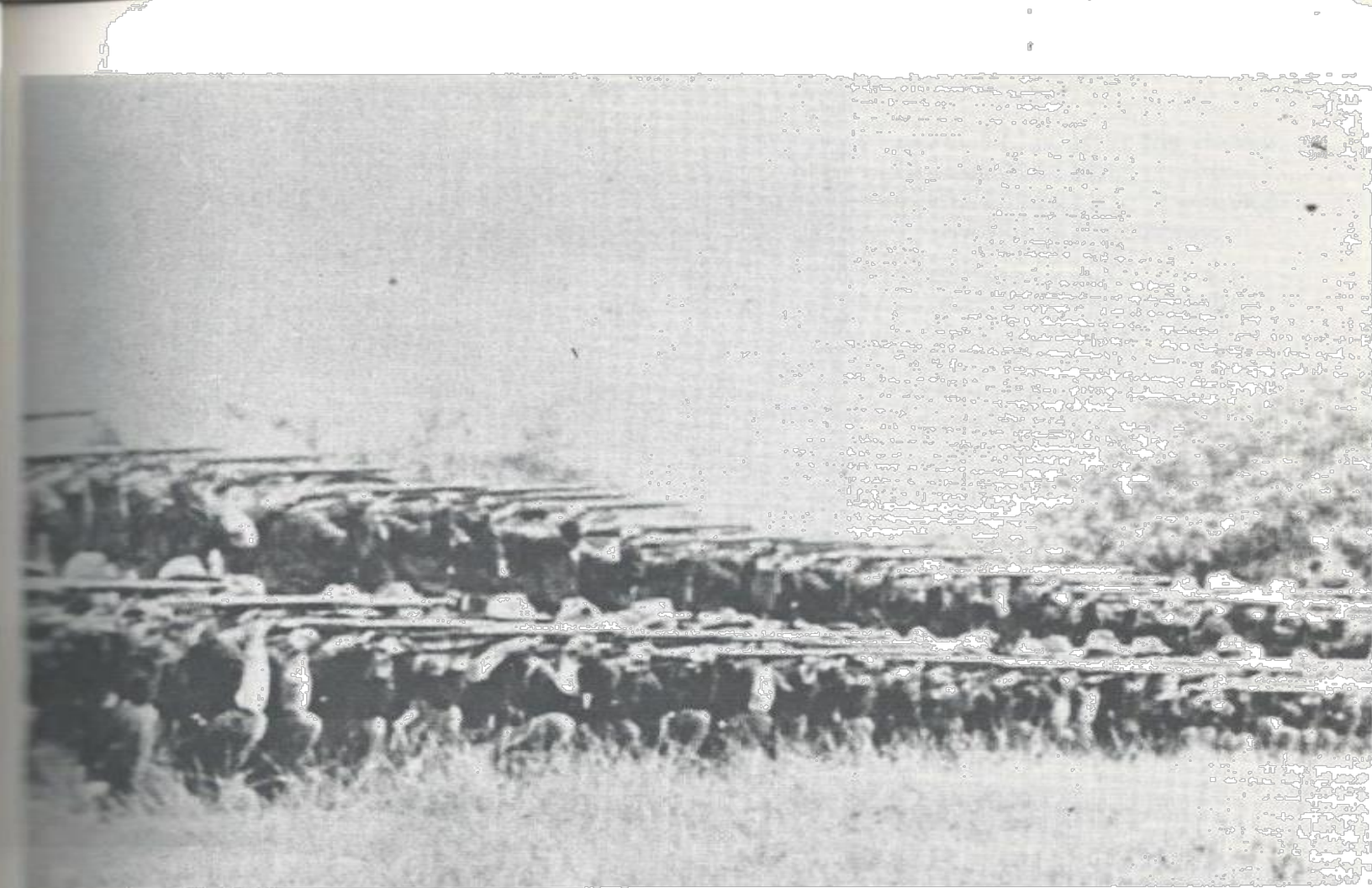


The U.S. economy had to expand overseas. The new markets, raw materials, and cheap labor were available in the colonial world, in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Latin America, in the Philippines and China. In the colonial world super-profits were to be made.

The Depression of the 1890s ended with U.S. invasions of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines in the Spanish-American War of 1898. The Spanish-American War revived the sagging U.S. economy; the newly conquered territories in the Caribbean and in the Pacific yielded immense profits to the monopolies. A small group of North American workers benefited from imperialism. In the form of higher wages and better working conditions, they were "bribed" by the monopolies. Washington politicians fostered a false patriotism and an ugly hatred toward the darkskinned peoples of the earth.

"Remember the Maine"

The immediate pretext for the Spanish-American War of 1898 was the blowing up of the *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana harbor in April 1898. President William McKinley accused Spain of dynamiting the ship, but Madrid affirmed its innocence and offered to pay damages. Given the weakness of the Spanish Empire it is extremely unlikely that Spain wanted to provoke a war with the U.S. It is more than likely that the U.S.



blew up the *Maine* to provoke a war with Spain and seize Spanish colonies. Wall Street financiers and Washington politicians were deaf to Spanish pleas for peace; preachers, newspaper columnists, and the war Hawks of 1898 screamed for invasion. On July 4th, 1898, three weeks to the day before the U.S. Army invaded Puerto Rico, the Reverend J.F. Carson told his congregation:

The high, the supreme business of this Republic is to end Spanish rule in America, and if to do that it is necessary to plant the Stars and Stripes on Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, on Spain itself, the U.S.A. will do it.

Joseph Pulitzer, and "Citizen" William Randolph Hearst, the tycoons of U.S. journalism, whipped up hysteria against Spain in their newspapers. Circulation rose and Pulitzer and Hearst reaped the profits. There was not a shred of evidence to prove sabotage of the *Maine*, but that didn't stop Hearst from fabricating interviews and forging documents. He told his readers that "the *Maine* was destroyed by treachery," that the ship was "split in two by an enemy's secret infernal machine."

War with Spain would have come with or without the *Maine*, as North American imperialists frankly admitted. In 1898 Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge stated that "the island of Puerto Rico . . . had constantly been on the minds of the Army and Navy from the very moment the war had begun; and this war was to constitute the last step in a relentless movement begun by the United States a century ago to expel Spain from the Caribbean."



US Army buries Indian dead after the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, 1890.

General Nelson A. Miles—Indian Killer

The man who directed the invasion of Puerto Rico was General Nelson A. Miles, the commanding General of the U.S. Army. North American imperialism could not have chosen a better man to represent its interests than General Nelson A. Miles. General Miles pledged "peace, democracy, and prosperity;" he delivered war, tyranny and ruin. So all colonialists and conquerors have operated since the ancient Roman Empire.

General Nelson A. Miles was a master of aggression, a specialist in the destruction of nations, and trained in the use of the BIG LIE. He spoke the revolutionary rhetoric of 1776. When U.S. troops invaded Puerto Rico General Miles proclaimed:

The people of the United States, in the cause of Liberty, Justice, and Humanity, have sent our armed forces to occupy the island of Puerto Rico . . . We have not come to make war upon the people of the country that for centuries have been oppressed, but on the contrary to bring you protection . . . to promote your prosperity, and to bestow upon you the advantages and the blessings of our enlightened civilization.

Even as he denounced Spanish oppression General Nelson A. Miles imposed Yankee oppression. In the mid- and late 19th century General Miles led a dozen military expeditions against the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Apache, and the Nez Perce Nations. General Nelson A. Miles bears major responsibility for the capture and the death of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Geronimo, and Chief Joseph, the major native leaders of the 19th century. General Nelson A. Miles directed the massacre of 400 men, women and children at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1890. To the native peoples of the continent General Nelson A. Miles promised Life, Liberty, and Prosperity, and he inflicted Death and Destruction.

Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces learned to distrust General Miles after his defeat and surrender. "General Miles promised that we might return to our country," Chief Joseph said from his captivity at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. "I believed General Miles, or I never would have surrendered." Chief Joseph went on to say:

Good words do not last long unless they amount to something. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now over-run by white people. . . . Good words will not give my people good health and stop them from dying. Good words will not get my people a home where they can live in peace and take care of themselves. I am tired of talk that comes to nothing. It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and broken promises.

It was not long before Puerto Ricans made similar observations about General Nelson A. Miles's good words and broken promises.



Spoils of War

In the mid 1890s the revolutionary movements in Cuba (led by Jose Martí and General Antonio Maceo), and in the Philippines (led by Aguinaldo) were on the verge of defeating the Spanish Empire and winning their independence. In 1898 the U.S. entered the war and snatched victory from the hands of the native forces.

In Puerto Rico the Spanish-American War lasted 17 days. No less than four U.S. Generals led 16,000 well-armed soldiers in the attack on the island. Off the coast of Puerto Rico, near Ponce, North American battleships threatened to destroy the city unless the citizens surrendered immediately.

Some Puerto Ricans believed that the U.S. had landed to liberate them from Spanish tyranny. But most of them viewed the North Americans as conquerors. Manuel Rodríguez, a Puerto Rican guerrilla fighter known as the "White Eagle," led his armed band against the U.S. troops and disrupted their plans for an easy victory. Mariano Abril Ostalo, a Puerto Rican journalist, described the new status of Puerto Rico as a U.S. colony:

To think that the Yankees are going to give us all their freedoms and all their progress for our pretty face is to think blindfolded . . . We could indeed have . . . an unheard-of manufacturing and business activity; but all this would be in their hands, monopolized and exploited by them.

Another Puerto Rican patriot wrote in 1898 that the people "will spill their last drop of blood and will sacrifice everything to obtain the separation of our small island from the barbarous colonial power and prevent its annexation to the Great American Republic." From exile in France, just before his death on September 16, 1898, Ramon Betances said:

No quiero colonia, ni con España, ni con los Estados Unidos. Quiero mi Patria Libre, Independiente, Soberana. Que hacen los Puertorriqueños que no se rebelan?

(I don't want a colony neither with Spain nor the United States. I want my country to be Free, Independent and Sovereign. Why don't the Puerto Ricans revolt?)

On December 1, 1898 the U.S. and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris. Under this agreement Spain ceded the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States. Spain renounced its claims to Cuba and Cuba became a U.S. protectorate. In addition, the U.S. received \$20,000,000 from Spain. No representative from the Puerto Rican nation was in Paris for the negotiations and no Puerto Ricans were consulted.

Puerto Rico went to the U.S. as the spoils of the Spanish-American War. President William McKinley was clear and direct about U.S. intentions. In 1898 he wrote:

While we are conducting the war and until its conclusion, we must keep all we get; when the war is over we must keep what we want.

The U.S. wanted Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines because they were a source of valuable raw materials, cheap labor, and markets for U.S. goods. Puerto

Rico meant profits for the corporations, and Puerto Rico was an economic stepping stone for the penetration of Latin America, as the Philippines were an economic stepping stone for the penetration of Asia, especially China. Puerto Rico would also be an important military base for the growing U.S. army and navy, a base that would protect U.S. economic interests.

In short, Puerto Rico was essential for the growth and development of U.S. imperialism. Cuba and the Philippines were equally essential, as U.S. imperialists recognized. Shortly after the end of the Spanish-American War, Senator Chauncey M. Depew, a Wall Street banker, observed:

The American people now produce \$2,000,000,000 worth more than they consume, and we have met the emergency and by the providence of God, by the statesmanship of William McKinley, and the valor of Theodore Roosevelt . . . we have our markets in Cuba, in Puerto Rico, in the Philippines, and we stand in the presence of 800,000,000 people with the Pacific an American lake. . . . *The world is ours.* (Emphasis added)

Now U.S. imperialism expanded around the world in quest of profit.

Under the Folds of the American Flag

To ensure its economic control of Puerto Rico the U.S. created a political and cultural structure — a colonial apparatus — that is still in effect today. In 1900 the Foraker Act (named for Senator Foraker of Ohio) labelled Puerto Rico a colonial possession and created a government on the island that was of, by and for U.S. economic and military interests. Puerto Ricans were neither U.S. citizens nor citizens of an independent nation, but subjects of the North American Empire.

Under the Foraker Act Washington D.C. replaced Madrid as the center of imperial power. The U.S. President appointed the governor and the heads of all government agencies. Most of these appointees knew no Spanish; all of them were ignorant of Puerto Rican life, history and culture.

Washington D.C. politicians regarded the Puerto Rican people as an inferior race. In 1900 Senator Henry M. Teller of Colorado frankly admitted, "I don't like the Puerto Rican. . . . Such a race is unworthy of citizenship." Senator Bate of Tennessee surveyed the new U.S. colonies and described the people of the Philippines and Puerto Rico as "savages addicted to head-hunting and cannibalism."

These racist attitudes underlie the colonial apparatus that was created in Puerto Rico. The judges on the island were appointed by the U.S. President. Judges' decisions were in effect irreversible because the Appeals Court for Puerto Rico was located in Boston, Massachusetts! All proceedings were, of course, conducted in English. The Chamber of Deputies, the only elected body on the island, represented a small elite; 87% of the population could neither read nor write and was therefore deprived of the right to vote. Moreover, the Chamber of Deputies was severely restricted in its powers. Any law it passed was subject to veto by the U.S. President, the U.S. Congress, the appointed Governor, or his Executive Council.

There was widespread protest against the Foraker Act and the colonial system it created. In 1909 the Chamber of Deputies denounced the law as "unjust" and called President William Howard Taft "openly and frankly imperialistic." A Puerto Rican



independentista noted that "one million souls are living in Puerto Rico in an unbearable state of tyranny under the folds of the American flag."

The military and political assault was supported by a cultural attack. The Puerto Rican people were injected with a large dose of North American values and the "American way of life." The colonial authorities tried to destroy the roots of Puerto Rican national identity, to bury Puerto Rico's history and twist its traditions. Under U.S. domination illiteracy dropped from 87% in 1900 to 50% in 1920, but education was not offered to the Puerto Rican people for purely humanitarian reasons. Industry needed a working class that could read and write the essentials of English. In 1903 Victor S. Clark, the U.S. Commissioner of Education on the island, noted that the "education system will give [the U.S.] a corps of young Puerto Ricans trained . . . in our industrial and commercial methods, who will be valuable pioneers in extending our commerce and in creating new markets for our manufacturers."

For hundreds of years Spanish was the spoken and the written language on the island; now suddenly all school classes were conducted in English—by U.S. law. Victor S. Clark justified these requirements on the grounds that:

English is the chief source, practically the only source, of democratic ideals for Puerto Rico. There may be little that they learn to remember, but the English school reader itself provides a body of ideas and concepts which are not to be had in any other way. It is the only means which these people have of communication with an understanding of the country of which they are now a part.

In 1917, two decades after the military invasion, the U.S. Congress tightened its political grip on Puerto Rico with the passage of the Jones Act. In hearings on the Act, Congressman Cooper of Wisconsin said, "We are never to give up Puerto Rico, for now that we have completed the Panama Canal, the retention of the island becomes very important to the safety of the Canal, and in that way to the safety of the Nation itself. It helps to make the Gulf of Mexico an American Lake."

The Jones Act was passed overwhelmingly by the U.S. Congress. It imposed U.S. citizenship on Puerto Ricans whether they liked it or not, whether they wanted it or not. To reject U.S. citizenship it was required by law to fill out extensive bureaucratic

forms. 288 Puerto Ricans went through this demeaning process; they were immediately labelled "subversives," denied their civil rights, and treated as aliens on their own island.

A month after the passage of the Jones Act, the U.S. entered World War I. As U.S. citizens Puerto Ricans were subject to the draft. On June 27, 1917 President Woodrow Wilson ordered the registration and recruitment of Puerto Ricans between the ages of 21 and 31. Denied democracy at home, 20,000 Puerto Ricans were pressed into service to fight on the battlefields of Europe in a war that President Wilson claimed would "make the world safe for Democracy."

Jose de Diego's "NO"

Jose de Diego, the President of the Puerto Rican Chamber of Deputies, revealed the fraudulence of Wilson's "democracy" and "New Freedom." He denounced the Jones Act in no uncertain terms:

Never was anything like this seen before . . . in the democratic nations of the world; one million, two hundred thousand human beings, who by law of the Congress of the Republic — which seems more like an order from the times of the low Empire — are deprived of their natural citizenship. . . . Puerto Ricans are reduced to the condition of foreigners in their own country, are exiled from their own land.

De Diego concluded that the Jones Act was "as-cutting as a guillotine . . . an attack on the liberty and honor of the Puerto Rican people."

Jose de Diego was the main spokesperson for Puerto Rican independence during the first two decades of U.S. rule. Born in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico on April 6, 1866, de Diego was a legislator, lawyer, poet, patriot, and above all a brilliant orator in the cause of Puerto Rican sovereignty. Today his words arouse the Puerto Rican people:

The refusal to submit, the protest against tyranny, the No of the oppressed has been the word, the genesis of the liberation of peoples; and even when the impotence of the means and the virtues of the ends . . . remove the revolutionary fire from the vision of the ideal, No must be and is the only word which will preserve the liberty and dignity of the peoples in servitude.

De Diego defended Puerto Rican culture and heritage against U.S. assimilation. He valued the language and the literature of his people and warned against its corruption by North American commercialism. In the tradition of Betances and Jose Martí, de Diego advocated Caribbean Federation — the union of Cuba and Puerto Rico. To those North Americans who claimed that Puerto Ricans "lacked combativeness" he declared:

The Puerto Ricans made a Puerto Rican revolution and helped in three Cuban revolutions. We sent two militia companies to Santo Domingo in the seventeenth century to fight the British . . . in the nineteenth century more than 1,000 Puerto Rican soldiers fought for Cuban freedom.

In 1917, the year of the Jones Act, de Diego dedicated himself to "fight for restoration of Puerto Rican citizenship, and for the creation of our Republic." A year later he died, still a young man. The task he set for himself was left for others to take up.