



Puerto Ricans Confront Trump & American Empire



By Julio Noboa Polanco

Donald Trump:

"...The best thing that ever happened to Puerto Rico is President Donald J. Trump"

"... but politicians like the crazed and incompetent Mayor of San Juan have done such a poor job of bringing the island back to health..."

Carmen Yulín Cruz:

"Mr. President I am right here ready to call you on every lie, every hypocrisy and every ill-fated action against the people of Puerto Rico..."



Carmen Yulín Cruz, mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico responded to President Donald Trump calling her "crazed and incompetent." (Getty Images | Source: CNN)

It would be a difficult and onerous task to compile all the lies, distortions and misinformation we read and hear from Trump and his supporters. In an era when a blatantly biased network such as Fox News, can openly call themselves "fair and balanced" we have to contend with more double-speak coming from the halls of power than what George Orwell could have even imagined.

As it is with every critical aspect of U.S. life, Trump and his Trumpists have launched quite a few hot air balloons about Puerto Rico that can easily be deflated. In addition to the above two quotes Trump tweeted the false claim that "*Puerto Rico got 91 Billion Dollars for the hurricane, more money than has ever been gotten for a hurricane before....*" Yet, the Washington Post promptly reported that the island had received just 11.2 billion!

Not too long ago, Trump refused to acknowledge that close to 3000 Puerto Ricans had lost their lives. Contrary to Trump's claim that his administration "*did a fantastic job in Puerto Rico*" after Maria devastated the island, a General Accountability Office report documented that FEMA "... failed to adequately house disaster victims, distribute financial assistance in a timely fashion or do enough to prevent fraud."

Miami Herald parent company McClatchy analyzed FEMA's public data and discovered that an average of \$1,800 was given to Maria survivors in Puerto Rico, compared to survivors of Hurricane Harvey last year in Texas who got \$9,127.

Ever since he was seen on international TV throwing paper towels out to a Puerto Rican crowd, there's been no love lost between Trump and Boricuas. Moreover, he has to contend with two Wise Latina Boricua women, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) here in Congress, and on the island the indomitable mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz. His denigration of Puerto Ricans, his statement about *shithole* countries, and his treatment of Central American asylum seekers are all part of his White supremacist attitude towards Mexicans, Blacks, Muslims, and other People of Color.

In classic imperialist style Trump also tweeted that "*Puerto Rico is just taking from the U.S.*" In an MSNBC interview Trumpist spokesman Hogan Gidley apologized for having referred to Puerto Rico as a *country* since he should have correctly labeled them as a mere *territory*. The colonial status of the island could not have been more clearly stated as it was from confused conservative Dinesh D'Souza who tweeted the following question: "*Normally colonies provide resources for the nations that rule them. What does Puerto Rico provide the US?*"

Not having, as Boricuas like to say, "*pepitas en la lengua*" my favorite Boricua sheroe, AOC promptly responded via Tweet to his ignorant inquiry:

- *Hundreds of thousands of soldiers to the US military*
 - *Nat'l supply of hospital IV bags & medical supplies*
 - *Historically, sugar, coffee, crops*
 - *A strategic port in the Atlantic*
- and Importantly for the 1%, one of the biggest loophole tax havens for the super-rich.*

It is revealing that this question:

- a. *comes from quite the colonial mindset of "what value is this territory providing us anyway?" (Do we ask that about Appalachia, etc?)*
- b. *implies that PR's current status is somehow an act of charity - also a sentiment rooted in colonialism."*

Given its colonial status, it is painfully clear that even before Hurricane Maria came to the shores of Puerto Rico, it was an island in economic, political and cultural crisis. The Commonwealth government was bankrupt, hundreds of schools were closed, all public services were drastically cut, and the Empire imposed a non-elected Fiscal Control Board, not to protect and ensure domestic well-being, but to guarantee the investments of bankers and financiers.

The unmasking of the island's colonial status was painfully evident in numerous ways, most notably by the inability of Puerto

Rico to declare bankruptcy, as do other cities and states, and by the continued imposition of the Jones Act with maritime laws denying islanders the right to receive goods from other nations.

For over 100 years this faithful colony has been a playground for tourists, a haven for corporate profits, a source of cheap labor, and also soldiers for the front lines in every military conflict since World War I. Despite being poorer than Mississippi, the poorest state, with barely half its annual income, Puerto Ricans nevertheless pay on average 20% more for U.S. products. Yet, incredibly, they represent the fifth largest market for U.S. manufactured goods in the world!

All this pertains to an island that before María had a poverty rate of 48% — now a meaningless measure given the literal struggle for existence millions of Puerto Ricans are confronting. Nevertheless, Puerto Ricans have maintained a sense of pride in their cultural identity, from the diminutive island mascot coquí frog to the massive mountains of *El Yunque* rainforest, from recognized artists such as Lin-Manuel to intellectual eminences such as Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

We united across our own deeply divided political lines to protest against the devastation of Vieques Island as a target for U.S. Navy bombing, and to demand the release of our most dedicated patriots jailed for decades as political prisoners, the most recent—Oscar López Rivera.

Puerto Rico has the dubious distinction of being the oldest colony in the world! Yet, even if the simple majority of islanders voted to become a state, it would not be their decision to make. It would be up to a Congress many of whose members are ignorant about Puerto Rican history and culture and uncaring toward its issues and problems. Given that over 20 states have fewer citizens than Puerto Rico, their representatives are unlikely to permit over 3 million Spanish-speaking, mixed-race residents to have more representation in Congress than their own state.

On the other hand, the struggle for Puerto Rican independence has been embraced and championed by some of our greatest leaders, thinkers and artists. Still this legitimate movement has been deliberately suppressed as much by outright violence and massacre as by political and economic colonization. For these and other reasons, those who vote for independence have been reduced to barely 5 percent.

Given the current unmasking of U.S. Empire, the long sought-after dream of independence may be considered by more Puerto Ricans than ever before, but would still require an extensive and



Working Families Party/Flickr

lengthy process of decolonizing our collective mind. Scholars have identified and discussed for decades the many aspects of our domination, which reflect psychological dimensions of profound political and cultural colonization.

In the political realm, Puerto Ricans are being denied a fundamental human right: the right to a voice and vote commensurate with their population.

Over 3 million American citizens living on the island cannot vote for president in the general election and have only one representative in Congress with a voice but no vote.

We were taught in public schools of the U.S. that in 1776, the slogan that encapsulated and energized the American Revolution against the British Empire was, “No Taxation without Representation.” After a century of American Empire, for Puerto Ricans it is “No Legislation without Representation,” an injustice that in many ways is an even more profound and damaging imposition of Empire on its own citizens.

What Trump has accomplished in Puerto Rico is to bring together that incredibly wide political spectrum within our small island; from socialist *independentistas* on the left to colonized seek-

ers of statehood on the right, they all hate Trump! Not since our common struggle to stop the Naval bombardment of Vieques have we been so united; this time in our disdain for Trump himself and everything he represents.

Nevertheless, the people of Puerto Rico are focusing profound efforts at recovery, despite having lost an estimated 70% of their agriculture after the hurricane. Our island is also experiencing a surge of “*si se puede*” attitude with people coming together and collaborating

in communities to rise up, restore, and rebuild.

In a symbolic event, it is interesting to note that a 400 year-old Ceiba tree in the island of Vieques, which had withstood decades of U.S. naval bombardment and was then ravished by Hurricane María, has come back to life and even blossomed again! To those who are confused about who Boricuas are, let me clarify: *We are not a simple territory, nor a mere piece of U.S. property, we have a history, we are a people, we are a nation.*

Bio: Julio Noboa Polanco is a writer, columnist, and social justice activist who served as Chair of the Esperanza Board in the 90s. He was also a columnist at the *San Antonio Express-News* for nearly a decade. His writings continue to appear in Texas (*Houston Chronicle*) and in Costa Rica (*Semanario Universidad*) where he and his wife now live. Recently retired as Assistant Professor of Social Studies from UTEP, his focus is on Latino History, Mexican American Studies, critical pedagogy and multicultural education.



S.O.S. Necesitamos Agua/Comida! photo via Ricardo Rosselló/Facebook