



## **Hurricane Maria Brings Out the Hypocrisy in “American Citizenship” for Puerto Ricans** **By Carlito Rovira**

In the days following the massive devastation caused by Hurricane Maria news reports have emphasized the “American citizenship” of Puerto Ricans. But why are Puerto Ricans suddenly being projected actively as American citizens when, traditionally, this has not been the case?

The same media outlets have discovered that most people in the U.S. do not know that Puerto Ricans hold U.S. citizenship. For many North Americans—who often suspect that people who speak Spanish and come from a territory in Latin America are “illegal”—the concept of Puerto Ricans as “citizens” must be baffling indeed.

What is needed to clear up the confusion is a discussion of the origins of Puerto Rico’s relationship with the U.S. and the peculiarities of Puerto Rican “citizenship.” The contradictions of that relationship have been vividly captured in the savagely unequal deployment of relief to Houston, devastated by Hurricane Harvey, and Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, the underlying reason for the different responses—the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico—has not been clearly understood.

Puerto Rico was one of four countries colonized by the US in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898. In 1917, then U.S. President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones–Shafroth Act, commonly known as the “Jones Act.” It imposed a second-class version of citizenship on Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico. The U.S. government expressed its imperial arrogance by ignoring opposition to the law by an organized sector of the island, including outspoken figures like Luis Muñoz Rivera and Jose De Diego.

The law identified the people of the island as “statutory citizens,” a new concept never before applied to anyone, anywhere, which means that certain rights and benefits of citizenship do not apply. Puerto Ricans residing on the island are denied the right to vote in Federal elections and the ability to declare bankruptcy, among other rights and benefits.

The double standard in the supposed “American citizenship” for Puerto Ricans was fueled by the same racist logic of the not-so-hidden second-class citizenship status this country maintains for Indigenous People and African Americans, only in the case of Puerto Ricans the second-class status was actually spelled out in the Jones Act itself instead of just existing de-facto.

The U.S. rulers concocted a way of disguising the fact that they had conquered and colonized a distinct

nation, in a separate territory, with a separate economy and a distinct history, culture, language and national-identity. In short, the Jones Act allowed the U.S. rulers to disguise their colonizing intent and undermine the existence and identity of another nation.

At first many Puerto Ricans believed that “U.S. citizenship” would benefit them. But they soon discovered the opposite.

### **Statutory Citizenship and World War I**

On April 6, 1917, barely a month after the imposition of “U.S. citizenship” on Puerto Ricans, the U.S. declared war on Germany. This was a war like none that had come before. It engulfed all the industrialized capitalist countries of the world. Their aim was the seizure of each others’ colonial possessions in order to obtain new commercial markets, new sources of raw materials and the labor of already-conquered and colonized people which they could then exploit for profit.

It was a struggle of global proportions facilitated by the most ruthless capitalists of the various imperialist countries. U.S. rulers did not want to be left out of the expected lucrative feeding frenzy, and so they sought ways to persuade the broader U.S. public to support corporate America’s desires to join one side in the conflict.

By November 1917, just 8 months after the imposition of citizenship, the military draft was applied to Puerto Rico. This came after government and military officials realized that Puerto Ricans were reluctant to voluntarily join the U.S. Armed Forces. About 20,000 young men were taken and sent to kill or be killed in the trench battles of Europe. Many of these soldiers died or were maimed as a result of highly lethal chemical weapons used in this war. But the death toll among these soldiers is still unknown because U.S. military officials kept no records of Puerto Rican battle casualties.

It was of no concern to the warmongers in Washington that these Puerto Rican men did not have the slightest clue what the war was about in the first place. If we consider the chronology of events it becomes clear that the Jones–Shafroth Act, which imposed “U.S. citizenship,” was simply designed to use young Boricuas as cannon fodder.

### **2nd Class “American Citizenship” and the Social & Economic Life of Puerto Rico**

Today it has become indisputably clear that all of the facets of the Jones Act, especially its economic component, are designed to diminish and destroy the Puerto Rican nation—as Puerto Rican nationalist leader Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos predicted. Giant U.S. corporations are now the sole beneficiaries of the imposed American “citizenship” in Puerto Rico. While it is true that Puerto Rico receives limited benefits from the colonial relationship it has also been historically subjected to a range of laws that benefit only the billionaires of Wall Street, and this is the primary effect. Not only are these avaricious capitalist enterprises exempt from paying taxes to Puerto Rico, they also extract from the country an annual average of \$30 billion in profits. For an island with a population less than 3.5 million this is one of the highest rates of colonial exploitation per-capita in the world.



Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos

And now there are new austerity measures known as the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which aims to forcibly collect an imposed \$73 billion dollar hedge fund debt by shutting down public schools, libraries, hospitals, and other public services, as well as eliminating pensions and reducing the minimum wage. This simply reveals what the aims of the U.S. colonizers have always been, since they militarily invaded Puerto Rico in 1898.

The draconian measures of PROMESA have become the latest version of U.S. colonial policy in Puerto Rico. Combined with the fact that Puerto Ricans residing in all U.S. territories constitute the second poorest nationality, this makes “American citizenship” for Puerto Ricans more meaningless than ever before.

When President Trump came to Puerto Rico it was certainly not to assess the damage caused by Hurricane Maria. Despite his stupid behavior of throwing paper towels at a Puerto Rican audience and offending them with false claims of how much money Puerto Rico was “costing the federal treasury,” etc., he was consistent by expounding the traditional racist views of U.S. colonialism. Trump was insidiously reminding Puerto Ricans, in his own disrespectful style, how worthless their “U.S. Citizenship” really is.



What Trump was expressing in this humiliating scene was not unique but the general disposition of U.S. colonialism.

Puerto Rican citizenship, in the truest meaning of the word, can only come about when the Puerto Rican people achieve the freedom to exercise their human rights: that is, to exercise their right to political independence and self-determination free from the domination of the U.S. colonizers. The U.S. rulers shall then be brought before justice and forced to provide Puerto Ricans with the reparations due to them.

**QUE VIVA PUERTO RICO LIBRE!**