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THE QUICKENING OF ALBIZU CAMPOS

How Fenianism Galvanized
the Last American Liberator

AOIFE RIVERA SERRANO



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NOTE TO THE READER

The term *American* refers to a native or inhabitant of the Americas: North, South, Central, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. When Pedro Albizu Campos was alive, he was known in the Spanish-speaking world as *el último libertador americano* (the last American liberator).

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IN THE NEWS

When Albizu boarded the ship in 1912 that would bring him to his new home for the next decade, the prevailing questions in US newspapers concerned the impending First World War, the Mexican Revolution, women's suffrage, Ireland's struggle for home rule, and US imperialism. It was also the same year that the United States, after stalling for fourteen years, held the first hearing on home rule for Puerto Rico. Though the US hearings initially claimed to discuss measures for home rule, they were adroitly used to introduce the idea of conferring US citizenship on the people of Puerto Rico.²⁶ This curious bait and switch proved to act as a ploy to derail any further discussion of Puerto Rican independence. Imposing US citizenship on Puerto Ricans would not only be indispensable for the survival of a statehood movement but would also nullify—the colonial regime believed—Puerto Rico's independence movement once and for all.

The US Senate hearings before the Committee on the Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico began the same year that British prime minister Herbert Henry Asquith introduced another home-rule bill for Ireland. Every home-rule bill passed by the House of Commons in England between 1912 and 1913 failed to pass in

the House of Lords. When one finally did pass in 1914, it coincided with Britain's declaration of war against Germany, and the bill's enactment was delayed. Many Irishmen fought futilely for Britain in the hopes that it would facilitate home rule, but the ensuing course of events, including further postponements to enact the bill, led to the Easter Rising of 1916. Thus we find that in the first decades of the twentieth century both Ireland and Puerto Rico were on the front pages of US newspapers at the same time, even discussed within the same article, over the same issue: their sovereignty. A New York daily paper made reference to both islands:

The Irish in Ireland as well as the Irish in America will be making frantic efforts for the "self-determination of peoples" as to their own country. We will hear a great deal about the "consent of the governed." At the same time if a question arose in regard to United States control in Puerto Rico . . . we would insist it was a domestic question to be settled by ourselves and would brook no outside interference. Possibly England will follow the same course in regard to the settlement of the Irish question.²⁷

When the British newspaper the *Morning Post* complained about the hostile attitude of US politicians toward British policies, it did so by showing that the pot was calling the kettle black:

There is no country in the world, but America, where such a deliberate affront to a friendly power would be offered. . . . It affects Anglo-American relations, no more than if the House of Lords were to recommend that the peace conference receive a delegation from the Philippines to hear the reasons why their aspirations for freedom from American control should not be realized, or a delegation from Puerto Rico with a similar mission . . . and there is no organized propaganda in this

country to free western islanders who are doing as well under the Americans as the Irish under the British.²⁸

A well-read student such as Albizu would have been familiar with the anticolonial statements comparing Ireland and Puerto Rico that were made by members of the American Anti-Imperialist League and the Irish American Union in the newspapers forwarded from the United States to Puerto Rico. The then English-only policy in Puerto Rico of the monolingual regime forced libraries to carry books and periodicals from the United States,²⁹ while 250 traveling libraries were kept in circulation among the rural schools to enforce the language assimilation policy.

The US press closely followed politics in the United Kingdom, especially after the House of Commons initially passed the Irish Home Rule Bill in 1912. The bill particularly angered the ruling nonnative population (British Protestants or their Loyalist descendants) in the north of Ireland, and they vowed to prevent enactment of the bill with any means at their disposal. They swiftly organized the infamous paramilitary group the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The UVF easily acquired weapons due to the support of British conservatives such as Bonar Law, who condemned the Home Rule Bill and publicly encouraged recruitment into the unsanctioned UVF, which reached close to 120,000 men.³⁰ The threat of a swarming mob of British Protestant Loyalists intent on crushing this sanctioned measure of devolved government was just the incentive that Irish nationalists—mostly natives in clandestine organizations—needed to become overt and establish an Irish army in broad daylight. Óglaigh na hÉireann (Irish volunteers) was mobilized by 1913.³¹ These were the headlines in Albizu's mind when he entered the University of Vermont as a freshman at the age of twenty-one.

The University of Vermont was the alma mater of E. N. Gerrish, the principal of the secondary school that Albizu had

attended in Puerto Rico. Although Albizu's grades could have easily gained him entry to any university in the Northeast, he was a colonial of color. Grades alone would not suffice, and a recommendation from Gerrish would only carry weight at Gerrish's own alma mater. During Albizu's freshman year—one of almost “unblemished excellence,”³² according to University of Vermont archivist Seymour Bassett—Albizu made such a huge impression on Professor Robert Thompson, the dean of engineering, that Thompson urged Albizu to apply to his alma mater, Harvard University.³³ Albizu would have needed little encouragement to go to Massachusetts, the seat of the US anti-imperialist movement and one of the hotbeds of US activity for Irish independence. The “Irish question” kept its place on the front pages of US newspapers for the next ten years, as Irish nationalists visited the United States on lecture tours. Between 1910 and 1920, Liam Mellows, Patrick Pearse, Diarmuid Lynch, Roger Casement, Nora Connolly, Francis Sheehy Skeffington, and Eamon de Valera all made their case to US audiences. Mrs. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, renowned activist and widow of murdered revolutionary Francis Sheehy Skeffington, spoke at the Harvard Union in January 1917 regarding the Easter Rising. Harvard students could also delve further into Irish issues by consulting one of the most comprehensive catalogs of printed material on contemporary and historical Ireland outside of the Emerald Isle, that of Boston's Public Library.³⁴ Their outstanding collection on modern Ireland covered a wide variety of subjects that included art, fiction, commerce, trade, history, statistics, politics, and biographies. The library archived newsletters and newspapers published in Ireland, including the *Belfast Weekly Telegraph*, *Cork Examiner*, *Freeman's Journal*, and the *Irish Weekly Independent*. The library even held a Spanish-language book, *Irlanda y las reformas de Gladstone* by Miguel García Romero, published in Madrid in 1894. A student of politics and revolution like Albizu could have easily followed every twist and turn of Ireland's

Irish officers and infantrymen who fought for the Union were actively recruited by Irish nationalists for the struggle back home in Ireland. . . . In this spirit, Albizu readily volunteered in the US Army in 1916, hoping to acquire military skills in World War I that he could bring back home to his own country.

arduous journey toward self-determination as it was covered both on the ground and in the United States.

Four books in particular stand out as complements to Albizu's thinking: *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* by D. P. Moran, *A Biography of Patrick Collins* by M. J. Curran, *Reconquering Ireland* by James Connolly, and *The Collected Works of Patrick H. Pearse*. The slim biography of Patrick Collins, an alumnus of Harvard Law and member of both the American Anti-Imperialist League and the Irish American Union, was published in 1906. It appears to have captured Albizu's imagination because he tried a strategy mentioned in the book. The biography explains the reason some Irishmen volunteered to fight in the US Civil War: to gain military experience they could later use when they returned to Ireland. Irish officers and infantrymen who fought for the Union were actively recruited by Irish nationalists for the struggle back home in Ireland:

It was from America that the Irish leaders hoped to secure trained officers to organize and direct the revolutionary movement. . . . The close of the Civil War gave freedom of action to officers and men who felt pledged to Ireland's cause.³⁵

In this spirit, Albizu readily volunteered in the US Army in 1916, hoping to acquire military skills in World War I that he could bring back to his own country. At this time, he would have also heard the stories of the thousands of Fenian soldiers ensconced in the British Army, a fifth column of nearly eight thousand serving in British garrisons in Ireland itself, by the late nineteenth century.³⁶ At his request, Albizu was sent to Camp Las Casas in Puerto Rico to train before being deployed to France. While there, Albizu confided to a fellow officer Ricardo Ruiz Curbelo his hope and asked Curbelo to help him recruit Puerto Rican soldiers—from within the company—for a future army of trained Puerto Rican men who would be prepared for armed

The colonial regime made it abundantly clear that any Puerto Rican who rejected US citizenship would be denied the right to vote for anything, or anyone, ever again, in their own homeland.

struggle against the United States, should it become necessary. Albizu's confidante Juan Antonio Corretjer relates the story:

Había confiado . . . que un contingente de tropa puertorriqueña pasado por la prueba de fuego de la guerra fuera, regresado veterano, el núcleo esencial de un movimiento independentista capaz de reorganizar la voluntad del país frente a los yanquis. La claudicación de aquellos veteranos, veteranos de bono de guerra, echó por tierra su esperanza.³⁷

([Albizu] had counted on a contingent of Puerto Rican soldiers who, having endured the fiery test of a foreign war and returned veterans, would become the essential nucleus of a separatist movement able to marshal the country's will against the Yankees. The submission of those veterans, bona fide war veterans, dashed his hopes).

According to Corretjer, Albizu was reported to the head officer, but, astonishingly, no action was taken against him at the time. Military authorities must have laughed at the informant; the mere notion was preposterous. Their attitudes would change with time.³⁸

If Albizu ever held out hopes that the United States would change its policies in the Caribbean, these were sorely tested when the United States invaded Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and then in 1916 offered Denmark \$25 million for the Danish West Indies (current Virgin Islands). Speculation appeared in newspapers indicating that the Danish islands might be administered from Puerto Rico. Clearly the so-called expansionist policy of the United States continued unbridled. In 1917, the United States officially purchased the Danish West Indies and also passed the Jones Act, which finally imposed US citizenship on the people of Puerto Rico.

Much to the chagrin of the United States, Puerto Rico balked; both houses of Puerto Rico's Insular Legislature unanimously

rejected citizenship.³⁹ Thunderstruck, the United States swiftly retaliated; the colonial regime made it abundantly clear that any Puerto Rican who rejected US citizenship would be denied the right to vote for anything, or anyone, ever again, in their own homeland.⁴⁰ In addition, the colonial regime proscribed Puerto Ricans from opting to keep their own identity by stripping them of their natural citizenship. To reject US citizenship, therefore, was to have no citizenship at all, making Puerto Ricans foreigners in their own land. The United States had boxed Puerto Ricans into an untenable position; every Puerto Rican now became stateless unless they accepted US citizenship. Puerto Ricans became *de facto* political hostages, and the United States successfully induced the first stages of the Stockholm syndrome⁴¹ into the body politic, and Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since 1917.

Shortly thereafter, in April 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and straightaway drafted twenty thousand Puerto Ricans for the very first time.⁴² In a staggeringly short period, the United States had engineered a new source of men for its segregated troops, advanced the emerging annexation platform in Puerto Rico, weakened the independence movement, and, with the purchase of the Danish West Indies, controlled the four approaches through the West Indies to the Panama Canal. Congressman Henry Cooper of Wisconsin pointed out what the United States gained through the imposition of citizenship:

We will never cede Puerto Rico since now that we have completed the Panama Canal the retention of the island is very important to the security of the canal, and in this manner to the security of the nation itself. It contributes to making the Gulf of Mexico an American lake. Once more I express my approval of this project to confer citizenship to these people.⁴³

More than one hundred years later, US presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush would still be trumpeting the strategic necessity of controlling the Caribbean,⁴⁴ but little had changed for the people of Puerto Rico. Despite fighting and dying in every US military action since World War I, Puerto Rico's citizens still cannot vote in US presidential elections and have no voting representation in Congress. This has been historically justified due to Puerto Rico's status as an unincorporated territory. Over a century into the colonial venture, the United States is still unable to marshal a native statehood movement in Puerto Rico strong enough to rally the overwhelming majority needed to take the necessary interim step that states must take before being admitted into the union: *incorporation*.