

Puerto Rican independence growing

By Antonio M. Stevens Arroyo

Statehood or continued commonwealth status? In the standard interpretation of the Democratic Primary held this March in Puerto Rico, that seemed to be the critical question.

But there is another alternative -- outright independence -- and many observers feel that the primary results demonstrate its growing appeal.

A large number of voters simply stayed home on March 16. They represent Puerto Rico's crumbling political center, which once supported the status quo in relations with Washington, but now favors complete separation from the U.S.

The independence movement today is not limited to wild-eyed radicals: it includes well-educated, relatively affluent Puerto Ricans, in addition to many of the island's impoverished majority. And it commands the respect of foreign governments and political analysts nearly everywhere in the world except the United States.

Puerto Rico is Hispanic, but all over the island U.S. power and influence predominates, and Anglo zones stand out -- big corporate downtowns, English spoken where the smart set congregates, the American flag, stateside ways of doing things. The proponents of statehood argue that more of this will save Puerto Rico. The independentistas argue that Puerto Rico is occupied territory.

Taking cues from the Palestine Liberation Organization, the independentistas are now adopting a triple strategy of cultivating international support, asserting their presence through selective acts of violence, and boycotting the political process the U.S. has exported to the island.

Two weeks before the primary, for instance, 21 delegates commissioned by an international Puerto Rican Solidarity Conference last year sat down in New York City to plan a world-wide strategy for the Island's independence.

The New York meeting spelled out a framework of political action to promote Puerto Rican rights to self-determination, including creation of a permanent international Committee of Solidarity, and an information office at the United Nations.

The independence movement claimed an added boost from the large number of Puerto Rican voters who stayed at home during the March primary. President Carter's victory over Senator Edward Kennedy was also so close that it virtually assured the "status question" will be debated during the November campaign. The small but well organized independentistas may now hold the balance of power between the two entrenched parties on the island.

The manner of President Carter's victory also gave credibility to the independence movement. On March 18,

Senator Kennedy complained to the Justice Department about numerous irregularities in the election -- and finally focused Washington's attention on control of the island's Electoral Board by the pro-statehood party.

The complaints provoked serious outbreaks of violence on the island, and attacks on campaign headquarters in Chicago and New York. The terrorism -- from both left and right -- shattered the image of a peaceful, grateful Puerto Rico that has been the cornerstone of Governor Carlos Romero Barcelo's strategy to convert the island into the 51st state.

"The primaries in Puerto Rico were supposed to draw the island closer to statehood," says long-time political observer Samuel Rene Quinones. "In fact, they have had just the opposite effect."

What the elections underscored -- and the terrorism reinforced -- was the weakening of the center position in Puerto Rican politics, a trend long predicted by the independentistas.

Important as the elections were, the New York City meeting marked the real coming of age of the Puerto Rican independence movement. Coming on the heels of a New Mexico Solidarity Conference supported by the parliaments of Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Columbia, Panama, Cuba and Nicaragua, the meeting launched the independentistas into Third World politics.

Indeed, on December 13, 1979, scarcely two weeks after the International Conference in Mexico, the General Assembly of the United Nations approved a resolution requiring the United States to initiate its withdrawal from Puerto Rico. The vote (105-7) demonstrated that not only does Puerto Rico have solid support from Latin America, the non-aligned movement and the socialist bloc, but a growing number of traditional U.S. allies in Europe are becoming aware of the Puerto Rican struggle and are parting company with the U.S. perennial contention that "Puerto Rico is an internal matter of the United States."

"The international office is a great advance for us," says Lally Lopez, Executive Director of the national Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee in the United States. "The problem has always been getting information to people. Once they realize what is really going on in Puerto Rico, they usually agree with us and back independence."

"This new maturity of the Puerto Rican independence movement has earned it the respect of most of the Third World. One delegate from Panama expressed the need for the island's independentistas to establish a provisional government, much in the style of the P.L.O., which has successfully undergone a metamorphosis from a radical, clandestine sect into a credible political arm of an oppressed people. "The Puerto Rican

independence movement," he stated, "is Latin America's P.L.O."

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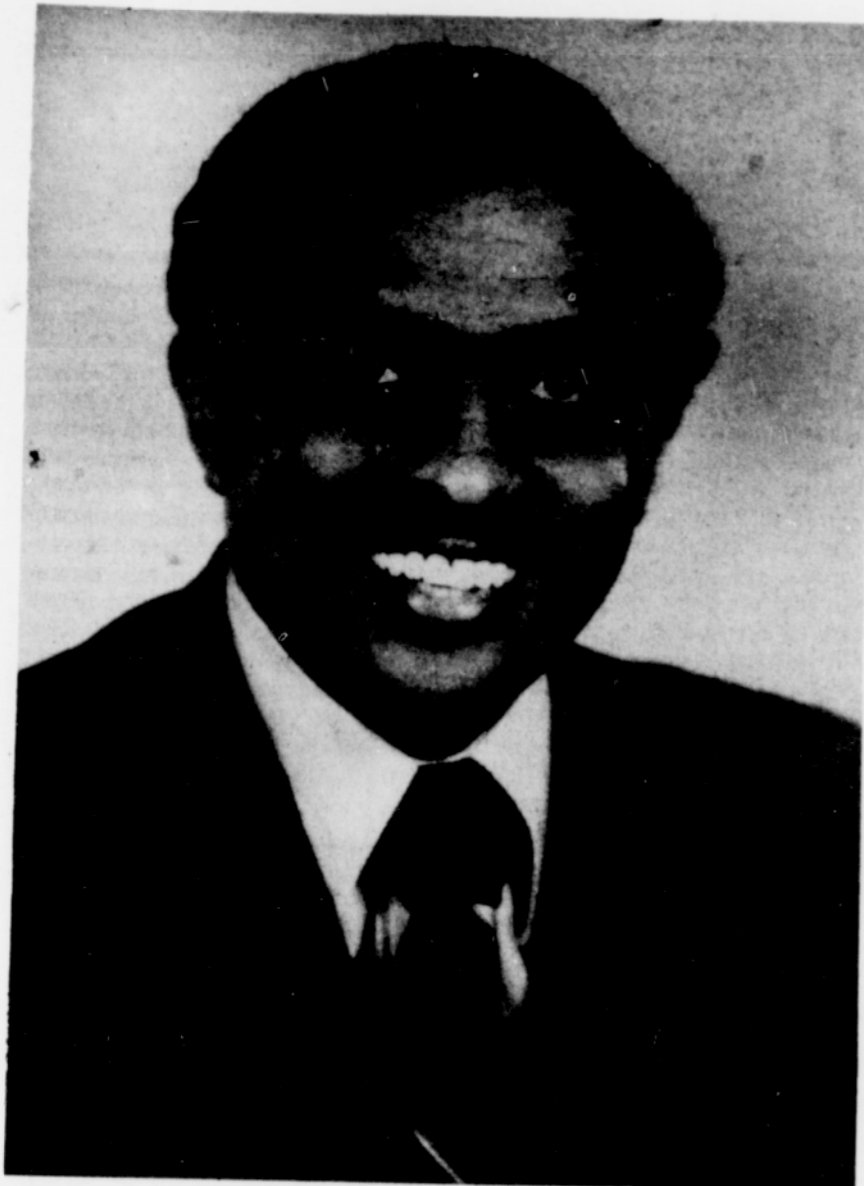
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Oregon Primary, Tuesday, May 20



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Caldwell is a graduate of Portland Community College where he earned an

Caldwell is a graduate of Portland Community College where he earned an Associate of Applied Science degree in Banking and Finance. He has also attended Portland State University and is a U.S. Army veteran. Civic activities include membership in the Portland Lions Club as well as board positions with the St. Vincent DePaul Child Development Center and the Junior Achievement program.

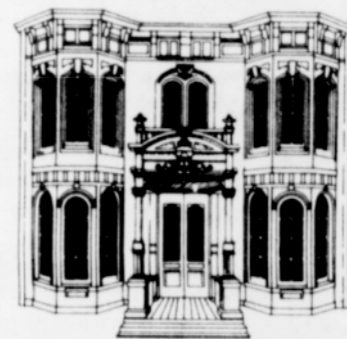
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