

Puerto Ricans: White, black or Hispanic?

The way Puerto Ricans view themselves can differ quite a bit from the way we are viewed by outsiders. This was surely a relevant topic during the base-building years of World War II, when the segregated armed forces of the United States increased its presence on the island. This column discusses some of the impact these institutions had on Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans during those years.

American troops started arriving in Puerto Rico soon after the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. On September 14, Brigadier General Daley announced that 1,700 troops from Texas, California, New Jersey, Iowa, Vermont, Delaware, and Virginia would report for duty in the Army's new Puerto Rico Department. These troops served to reinforce the infantry garrison already stationed on the island.

After the transfer order was signed, Secretary Woodring made public the names of the army units assigned to Puerto Rico. These included field artillery, coastal defense, ordnance, signal, medical, and quartermaster units. In addition to the troops, a reinforced anti-aircraft gun battery from Fort Winfield Scott, California was shipped from San Francisco.

Once the Naval Base at Isla Grande was commissioned on May 1, 1940, the Navy was able to accommodate its contingent of sailors. The base,

under the command of Captain V. C. Griffin, had a total capacity of 963 officers and 6,475 enlisted men. It was designed to service 48 seaplanes and 150 landplanes; though an additional 90 planes could be accommodated in an emergency.

Registration of Puerto Ricans for the draft began on November 20, 1940, five weeks later than in the United States. Selective Service was established under Lt. Col. Harry Besosa, and administered by 122 local boards. By 1941, 525,000 men, ages 18 to 64 were registered. An army reception and induction center was set up at Fort Buchanan, a basic training station at Camp O'Reilly, and an advanced training center at Camp Tortugero.

An "interesting feature in the program" was the assigning of inductees to racial categories. Puerto Ricans were separated into "white" and "black." This distinction was indicated as a reference in all sorts of lists or reports kept by the Army. Furthermore, quotas were set up. The ratios used at the time were "about four whites to one black." "Whites" were described as light-colored people of Latin origin, while "blacks" were said to be dark-skinned and of a different racial origin, such as Jamaicans or blacks.

According to Army records, by the end of 1941, "it had become apparent that Puerto Rican men induct-

ed under U.S. standards were drastically inferior to continental troops. They were inferior physically, mentally, and in other ways." In order to "weed out the most undesirable men," the War Department authorized the Commanding General of the Puerto Rican Department to release from active service "those Puerto Rican men who were ineffective or inefficient." Under this authority, by late 1943, about 3,250 Puerto Ricans had been released to the enlisted reserve. The language utilized in the Army reports racialized Puerto Ricans in such a way as to equate "darker" with "undesirable."

Implicit assumptions about the supposedly inferior character of darker people, which made them supposedly unsuitable for combat in the armed forces, make it difficult to distinguish the lack of specific skills from just being of a darker complexion. The conflation of racial categories and skill categories hindered the process of sorting out the actual problems the army may have confronted based on low literacy and lack of knowledge of the English language, from racial classifications.

Throughout the war years, Gov. Rexford Tugwell continued to urge Besosa to accept more Puerto Ricans into the Army, as a significant number were being rejected. A study titled Preliminary Analysis of Puerto Rican Selective Service Rejections

was commissioned after the war ended, and directed by Clarence Senior, the research director at the University of Puerto Rico, confirmed Gov. Tugwell's concerns regarding the Army's reluctance to accept Puerto Ricans.

According to Senior's study, the general rejection rate for Puerto Rico was higher than for the U.S. The rejection rates in the U.S. for the period between November 1940 and September 1941 was 52.8 percent for whites and 59.4 percent for blacks. Between April 1942 and December 1943, the rejection rates for whites decreased to 42.4 percent while that of blacks increased to 60.7 percent.

From April 1944 to August 1946, a total of 163,141 Puerto Ricans were rejected by the Army; of these, 136,445 were classified as "white" and 24,696 as "colored." Almost 50 percent were rejected due to "mental deficiency," which according to Senior, could be caused by the fact that the testing was done in English.

Fortunately, the Puerto Rico Induction Program report provided some insight regarding these rates. According to this report, from 1941 to April 1945, 91 percent of Puerto Ricans that presented themselves to the Selective Service were rejected and 79.1 percent of those screened and tested were also rejected.

Clarence Senior documents that



José L. Bólvivar, Ph.D.
Commentary

this rejection rate is much higher than U.S. mainland whites or blacks. According to Army records, from 1941 to 1945, 525,000 Puerto Ricans aged 18 to 64 presented themselves to the Selective Service. The Army screened or examined 224,559 of them, and ended up with 47,000 inductees. This number corresponded to an acceptance rate of 8.9 percent of all those that presented themselves to the Selective Service and 20.9 percent of all those screened and examined. It is interesting to note that due to the huge unemployment on the island, the Army labeled the induction program in Puerto Rico a "glorified Works Progress Administration" or a "WPA in uniform."

The performance of these men and women who served in the U.S. Armed Forces was exemplary.

The author's book "Guerra, Banca y Desarrollo: La Historia del Banco de Fomento y la Industrialización de Puerto Rico" is due out in November. On the Net: www.joselbolivar.com.

VOICES

Fifth column of crime

Certainly. If our politicians won't embrace medicalization of addictive psychotropics, the causer over a generation of the loss of 20,000 lives and dollars amounting to billions and immeasurable sorrow, it can only be because they're on the take, a percentage of what the addict pays for his fix goes to the lifestyle of luxury and ostentation that's a Puerto Rican politician's hallmark. And these are the fellows we wave the flag for, we squeal all over, we even go ahead and vote for them, the Red and Blue fiends.

Might God appear over Old San Juan and beam them all out of their comfy Capitolio and Fortaleza and over to Oso Blanco, where they belong? One reads the Bible with longing, for the times when Yahweh actually did this sort of thing.

Piero Andujar
Santurce

Pols, junkies and crime

To Will Sims:

You say physicians are more opportunistic merchants than healers and my experience with my octogenarian mom bears you out. But we do need the rascals.

While legislators are getting their bank accounts padded by narcotraffickers, there's no way dope won't remain commerce of criminals. But with a loud enough outcry an opposition party might ride on it to get themselves elected. Nevertheless, if you propose to sell addictive drugs like so much candy, parents will want your head on a platter and with good reason.

The stuff must be afforded the addict for

our safety. Though it would be unconscionable not to work to break the habit and craft a citizen out of the person. And we don't want business conniving to initiate the young on dope — like they did with tobacco.

Agustín Manzano
Santurce

Abuse of technology

Tasers were developed as a police alternative to shooting an attacker. Not as punishment for someone riot squaders have already subdued, but are still angry at.

Javier Acevedo
Ocean Park

Saw the news today, Oh boy!

On TV I saw [May, 29] that guy who on the highway to Caguas shot everybody up and my mind went back to a decade ago.

I was walking home up Ashford in the early evening and this young fellow, who had the build, if not the stature, of a riot squader, appeared out of nowhere and started punching me in the head and face. All the stuff I was carrying fell to the floor followed by my eyeglasses. I winced to catch my attacker's face, but no, I'd never seen him before. He was strong, never had I been hit so hard.

I glimpsed a cop nearby, but he wasn't about to tangle with this guy, he was voicing over a walkie-talkie what was going on, a frazzled police girl by his side.

Now on the street, I was still reeling from the blows, but then I managed to dodge and parry somewhat, a crowd was gathering. Then some big men who waited at a restaurant grabbed him from behind and held him and

he almost broke loose but someone else tripped him and they pinned him on the road.

Two cops drove in in a patrol car. They rushed in and were going to handcuff me, but some girls there hurriedly told them what had happened.

At the preliminary, as I told the judge the story, the fellow lunged at me and had to be restrained.

My glasses didn't break because I'd gotten them in New York City, where by law they're unbreakable plastic. But in bed that night I saw what looked like fissures across my field of view when I closed my eyes. I worried about damage to my retina. But in a few days they'd gone away.

Two weeks hence at the trial the guy approached me and said he'd been drunk, that he didn't remember anything, waving his arm dismissively, and that he was going to join the Army and added indignantly that I couldn't hurt his future like this. No, no apology.

The defense attorney, who looked like he was 17, haggled with the prosecutor, a short thin girl. The police had charged him with resisting arrest, which was absurd, he'd been subdued and all the cops had to do was cuff him and drop him into the patrol car. So the girl bargained that away for a guilty plea.

I spoke with urgency and told her this man had assaulted me for no reason at all, that everything pointed he was psychotic. That what he did to me was nothing, that next he was going to kill somebody, he needed to be institutionalized, at least checked out. She casually replied that a judge would never order psychiatric detention over a misdemeanor battery, that would be silly. I was entitled to my opinion, but the Court doesn't act on speculation.

Because he'd done a week at Oso Blanco,

the judge gave him credit for half the \$100 fine. I've no idea what became of him. I never saw him again and I don't follow crime news.

Joaquín Serrano
Condado

Accidental secretary

The resignation of the recently appointed Education Secretary, Odette Piñero, and past secretaries, shows the lack of scrutiny for this important position in the Governor's cabinet. Legislators forget the basic principles that go with the job. The role of secretary of education is to help the government in restructuring education policy and programs. He/she is supposed to report to the governor directly. He/she is also responsible for workforce preparation. It is his/her duty to ensure that the education system is coordinated with the growing needs and demands of the labor markets. Furthermore, the Secretary of Education is also responsible in developing and implementing good policies, and also contributes in deciding the financial policy for education. The Secretary of Education oversees the office personnel, monitor public school efforts, identifies districts not making satisfactory efforts, reviews and gives public comments on progress. The Secretary also has executive responsibilities and makes annual reports, concerning funding for education. This is not a job for an "Accidental Secretary."

Camilia Carrero de Santiago
Guaynabo

The Puerto Rico Daily Sun shall not be liable for errors, inaccuracies or delays in content, or for any actions taken in reliance thereon. Information published does not necessarily represent the opinion of the Daily Sun. We reserve the right to edit for space, clarity, civility, and accuracy.