

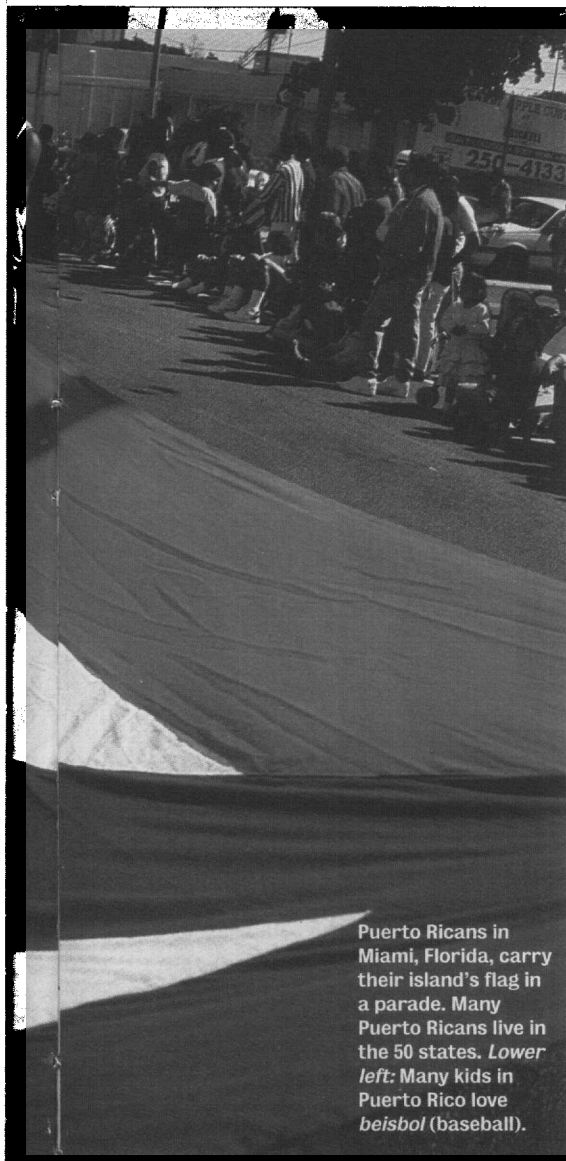


THE 51st STATE

Should Puerto Rico become the 51st state? Kids there see pros and cons.
by John DiConsiglio



Alberto Bazquez thinks of himself as just an average American kid. On warm spring afternoons, the 13-year-old races to the park after school to play *beisbol* (baseball) with his friends. By the time he gets home, his mom has dinner on the table. Tonight, they are having *arroz con pollo*—rice with chicken. After dinner, Alberto does his foreign-language homework: trying to memorize English vocabulary words for tomorrow's quiz. School, baseball, homework—Alberto's life is like that of many American kids. But, Alberto lives in Puerto Rico. The island, which is



Puerto Ricans in Miami, Florida, carry their island's flag in a parade. Many Puerto Ricans live in the 50 states. Lower left: Many kids in Puerto Rico love beisbol (baseball).

"I want Puerto Rico to become a state," says Alberto, who lives in San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital. "If we became a state, the world would know we aren't just some little island. People would respect Puerto Ricans as Americans."

Alberto may get his wish. Puerto Rico and its 3.8 million citizens could be on their way to becoming the 51st state.

The island has already overcome the first hurdle. In March, the U.S. House of Representatives agreed to let the people of Puerto Rico vote on whether or not to join the Union. After 12 hours of heated debate, the House voted 209 to 208 to approve holding a **referendum** (vote on a proposal). President Bill Clinton praised the House vote as a "victory for democracy."

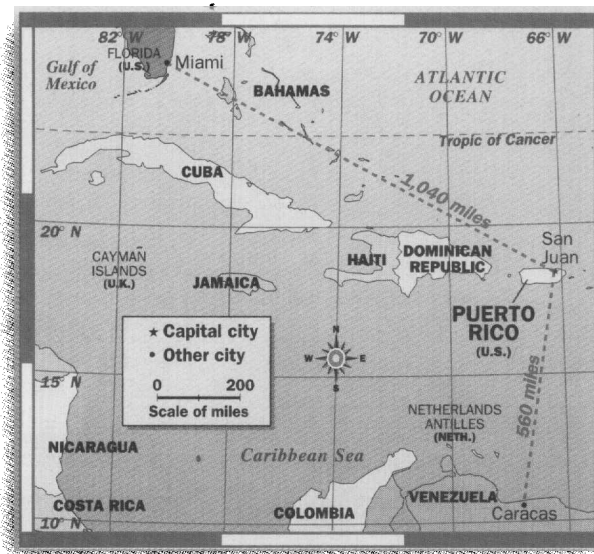
If the Senate approves the same measure, Puerto Ricans will be able to choose one of three options: become the 51st U.S. state, become an independent nation, or continue their status as a U.S. commonwealth.

Pros and Cons of Statehood

Puerto Rico has been under foreign rule almost from the time that Christopher Columbus discovered the island in 1493. Spain ruled Puerto Rico until 1898, when the U.S. won control in the Spanish-American War. Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917. The island became a commonwealth in 1952.

Commonwealth status means that Puerto Ricans have many, but not all, of the same benefits as Americans who live in the states. Puerto Ricans have their own government, but cannot vote in presidential elections. They have one representative in Congress, who serves on committees but cannot vote on bills.

Puerto Ricans are proud of their



culture, including music, language, and traditions. They even have their own Olympic team. Yet Puerto Ricans serve in the U.S. military. As many as 200,000 Puerto Ricans have fought in the U.S. armed forces since World War I.

Statehood would have both benefits and drawbacks for Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans would be able to vote for U.S. President. They also would gain voting representation in Congress, with two seats in the Senate and as many as six seats in the House.

Many Puerto Ricans would welcome the extra financial aid that would come with being a U.S. state. The island now receives about \$10 billion a year in U.S. government spending. As a state, it might get \$4 billion more. On the other hand, Puerto Ricans do not have to pay federal income taxes. If it became a state, they would.

Supporters of statehood say that it would help Puerto Rico attract foreign investment. Opponents fear that some industries now there might flee to neighboring countries to escape U.S. taxes.

Puerto Rico's economy could use a shot in the arm. The island relies heavily on tourism to boost its economy. Two thirds of Puerto Rico's residents receive some form of welfare. Per-capita personal income is less than half that of Mississippi, the poorest state.

Millions of Puerto Ricans have immigrated to the mainland U.S. As a result, Puerto Rican culture is already

STATE

about 1,000 miles southeast of Miami, has been the property of the U.S. for 100 years. In 1952, Puerto Rico became a self-governing U.S. **commonwealth**. The U.S. is responsible for Puerto Rico's defense, and most federal laws apply to the island. But Puerto Rico governs itself in most local matters.



FACTS to know

NAME:
Commonwealth of
Puerto Rico.

AREA:
3,434 square miles
(about 1.5 times the size
of Delaware).

The Spanish, who ruled Puerto Rico for 400 years, built the castle and city wall seen in this view of San Juan.

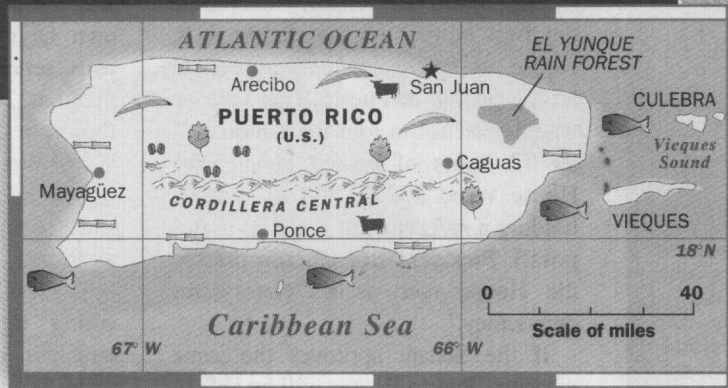
well established in New York and other U.S. cities.

Some Puerto Ricans worry that statehood would lead to an increase in U.S. influence on the island and its culture. They remember past attempts by Congress to force Puerto Rico to conduct government business only in English. Although both Spanish and English are official languages, fewer than one fourth of Puerto Rico's 3.8 million people are bilingual.

"Puerto Ricans have a very strong sense of their own identity," says Miranda Diaz, a history professor at the University of Puerto Rico. "The trick for them could be becoming an American state but not losing their Puerto Rican identity."

Split Decision

How would Puerto Ricans vote on statehood? Most residents are divided over becoming a state. A 1993 poll showed that 48 percent of Puerto Ricans wanted to stay a commonwealth, while 46 percent favored becoming a state. Less than 5 percent wanted Puerto Rico to be an independent nation.



ECONOMY OF PUERTO RICO

- ★ Capital city
- Manufacturing center
- 🐄 Beef
- ☕ Coffee
- 🐟 Fish
- 🍌 Fruit
- 🍷 Sugarcane
- 🌿 Tobacco

"Puerto Rico would be safer and cleaner if it were a state. There would be less poverty too," says Sergio Paliatio, 13, of San Juan. "But I don't want us to be too American. I like having our own Olympic team."

The U.S. Senate is not expected to vote on a Puerto Rican referendum until next year. Even then, its chances are doubtful. But that does not deter Puerto Ricans from imagining life as a state.

"We are part of the U.S.—but we are also our own island," says Juan Ramirez, 12, of San Juan. "So I feel like I'm American and Puerto Rican. But I want us to be more American."

POPULATION:
3,828,506 (another 2.7 million live in mainland U.S.).

LANGUAGE:
Both Spanish and English are official languages.

GOVERNMENT:
Self-governing U.S. commonwealth. Puerto Rico has about the same control over its internal affairs as do U.S. states.

ECONOMY:
Industries: tourism, pharmaceuticals, apparel, electronics, industrial machinery. *Agriculture:* Sugarcane, coffee, tobacco, tropical fruits.

Your Turn

1. What are the arguments in favor of statehood? The arguments in favor of staying a commonwealth?
2. Which do you support? Explain.