



Woodrow Wilson & The Puerto Rico Issue

His Administration's Role in the Enfranchisement and Citizenship of
Puerto Ricans, and Whether Wilsonian Self-Determination Has Double
Standards

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Woodrow Wilson, as the leader who presided over America's participation in the First World War, the enfranchisement of women under the Nineteenth Amendment, and the unfortunate revival of the Ku Klux Klan, was one of the most consequential presidents in U.S. history. Most remarkable, though, is Wilson's impact on U.S. foreign policy. Under "Wilsonianism," the United States transitioned from its long-standing neutrality to becoming a major actor on a liberal international world stage; President Wilson's Fourteen Points espoused concepts like free trade, self-determination, and an international body of countries – the League of Nations – that would come to dominate global policymaking.

"For three generations, critics have savaged Wilson's analysis and conclusions; and yet, in all this time, Wilson's principles have remained the bedrock of American foreign-policy thinking." – Henry Kissinger

THE TEXT OF THE FOURTEEN POINTS

PRESIDENT WILSON'S Fourteen Points, as set forth in an address made before the joint session of Congress, on January 8, 1918.

- 1 Open covenants of peace openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.
- 2 Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas outside territorial waters alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action or the enforcement of international covenants.
- 3 The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.
- 4 Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.
- 5 A free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.
- 6 The evacuation of all Russian territory, and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy, and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their goodwill, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.
- 7 Belgium, the whole world will agree must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.
- 8 All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.
- 9 A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.
- 10 The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development.
- 11 Rumania, Serbia and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan States to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan States should be entered upon.
- 12 The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.
- 13 An independent Polish State should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.
- 14 A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small States alike.

How do we grapple with and scrutinize the foreign policy legacy of the ever-consequential, ever-controversial President Wilson? How do his "moralistic" ideals hold up when we consider the Wilson administration's role in continuing the arguably colonial administration of Puerto Rico? Is Wilson being hypocritical when he promotes self-determination and sovereignty at a time when the United States denies San Juan its independence? This presentation seeks to explore these questions.

Before President Wilson: Hemispheric U.S. Foreign Policy: Monroe

Since 1823, U.S. hemispheric foreign policy has been dominated by the Monroe Doctrine. This message from President James Monroe warned the great European empires and nations that the young United States would no longer tolerate their colonization and interventionism in the Western Hemisphere. One of the first times the Monroe Doctrine was invoked was in defense of Mexico's sovereignty under President Benito Juarez in 1865. The diplomatic and military pressure exerted by the United States helped Juarez oust Mexico's French-imposed client state under Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg.



Before President Wilson: Hemispheric U.S. Foreign Policy

Decades later, as Latin American countries fell behind on debt obligations to European creditors, a renewed threat of armed interventionism from European states loomed. In December 1904, President Theodore ("Teddy") Roosevelt issued the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which reiterated long-standing U.S. opposition to European military power in the Western Hemisphere. With this corollary, the United States also assumed responsibility for securing international good behavior from Latin American nations. Like an international police force, the Roosevelt administration would "carry a big stick" in diplomacy to keep the rest of the Americas responsible for their debt obligations while protecting them from external threats.



Timeline of Puerto Rico Under American Administration

SPANISH AMERICAN WAR BEGINS: APRIL 25, 1898

AFTER LONG DELIBERATIONS FOLLOWING THE SINKING OF THE U.S.S. MAINE IN HAVANA HARBOR, THE UNITED STATES DECLARES WAR ON SPAIN.

TREATY OF PARIS: DECEMBER 10, 1898

THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR ENDS WITH A DECISIVE U.S. VICTORY. SPAIN CEDES CUBA, GUAM, AND PUERTO RICO TO THE UNITED STATES AND ALLOWS FOR THE PURCHASE OF THE PHILIPPINES FOR \$20 MILLION.

FORAKER ACT (ORGANIC ACT OF 1900):

THIS CIVIL LAW CREATES A CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT IN PUERTO RICO ADMINISTERED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. THE U.S. PRESIDENT APPOINTS PUERTO RICO'S GOVERNOR AND AN 11-MEMBER EXECUTIVE COUNCIL. THE ACT ESTABLISHES THE POSITION OF RESIDENT COMMISSIONER, A NON-VOTING MEMBER OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. THE ORGANIC ACT OFFICIALLY DESIGNATES PUERTO RICO AS AN "UNORGANIZED TERRITORY" AND GRANTS PUERTO RICANS THE STATUS OF "U.S. NATIONAL," A DISTINCTION BELOW CITIZENSHIP.

JONES-SHAFROTH ACT OF 1917:

THIS ACT OFFICIALLY DESIGNATES PUERTO RICO AS A U.S. TERRITORY AND GRANTS PUERTO RICANS U.S. CITIZENSHIP STATUS WITH SOME LIMITATIONS. IT EXPANDS PUERTO RICO'S LOCAL LEGISLATURE TO BECOME BICAMERAL WITH A SYSTEM OF CHECKS AND BALANCES BETWEEN THE ISLAND'S OTHER BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT. IT EXTENDS RESIDENT COMMISSIONER TERMS TO FOUR YEARS.

Timeline of Puerto Rico Under American Administration

CRAWFORD-BUTLER ACT / ELECTIVE GOVERNOR ACT OF 1947:

AMENDING THE 1900 ORGANIC ACT, THIS ACT ALLOWS PUERTO RICO TO ELECT ITS GOVERNOR.

PUERTO RICAN FEDERAL RELATIONS ACT (1950):

THIS CONGRESSIONAL LAW THAT, ONCE ACCEPTED BY PUERTO RICAN VOTERS IN A REFERENDUM, AUTHORIZES A CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION TO DRAFT A CONSTITUTION FOR THE ISLAND THAT INCLUDES A REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT AND A BILL OF RIGHTS.



The Executive Council of Charles H. Allen's Administration, the island's first civilian governor. (National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution)

The Jones-Shafroth Act

The Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917, congressional legislation signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson, granted U.S. citizenship to anyone born in Puerto Rico on or after April 11, 1899. It also reformed the island's political system to resemble that of a U.S. state's bicameral legislature by creating a local Senate with 19 members to join a pre-existing House of Representatives. The House was expanded from 35 to 39 members. The Jones-Shafroth Act also laid out a separation and balance of powers similar to that of the U.S. state system, where Puerto Rico's governor (still a U.S.-appointed official until 1949) has the authority to veto any law passed through the local Congress, and this legislature can in turn override the governor's veto with a two-thirds majority vote. It laid out the creation of an executive council, like the U.S. president's cabinet, made up of department heads.

With the passage of the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act, Puerto Rico's 1900 Foraker Act (Organic Act) was updated. A bill of rights was enacted, ensuring that civil liberties of Puerto Ricans aligned with those guaranteed by the Constitution to other U.S. citizens.

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Calendar No. 522

PICK UP

[COMMITTEE PRINT.]

64TH CONGRESS,
1ST SESSION.

H. R. 9533.

Report No. 579

9533

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IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

MAY 18 (calendar day, MAY 24), 1916.

Read twice and referred to the Committee on Pacific Islands and Porto Rico.

[Omit the part struck through and insert the part printed in italic.]

Calendar by
JUN 30 1916
Mr. Shapf
Reported with amendments?

AN ACT

To provide a civil government for Porto Rico, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*
3 That the provisions of this Act shall apply to the island of
4 Porto Rico and to the adjacent islands belonging to the
5 United States, and waters of those islands; and the name
6 Porto Rico as used in this Act shall be held to include not
7 only the island of that name but all the adjacent islands as
8 aforesaid.

BILL OF RIGHTS.

10 SEC. 2. That no law shall be enacted in Porto Rico
11 which shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property

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Why Was Jones-Shafroth Important?

The Jones Act addressed many injustices facing native Puerto Ricans since the island was claimed by the United States. Despite being “burdened with practically all the duties of a citizen,” Puerto Ricans had no voting power. Before the Jones Act, a stateside Puerto Rican could not vote in general elections or have elected legislative representation on the local island level. Puerto Ricans could not enter consular services of the United States or receive many of the protections and privileges guaranteed to U.S. citizens under the Constitution. Further, the U.S. territory now had a more democratic, institutionally backed political system.

While the Jones Act aligned native Puerto Ricans much more with the fundamental assurances and rights of other Americans, it is worth noting that it did not eliminate all disparities. Supreme Court cases like *Balzac v. Porto Rico* in 1922 maintained that Puerto Ricans, though now citizens, were still not entitled to certain provisions highlighted in the U.S. Constitution, like the Sixth Amendment right to a speedy public trial. As the island was deemed an “unincorporated territory” and not a state or an “incorporated territory” bound for statehood like Hawaii or Alaska, certain privileges were still arbitrarily withheld. Over time, these asterisks around the rights and entitlements of Puerto Rican U.S. citizens would be amended.

Ultimately, by endowing living and future Puerto Rican-born members with nearly full citizenship, the Jones-Shafroth Act granted them the ability to migrate across the Union more freely and legally, not as quasi-foreigners but as Americans.

Wilson's Role in Puerto Rico and Jones-Shafroth

"THE ARGUMENT FOR THE PROPOSED AMENDMENTS OF THE ORGANIC LAW OF PORTO RICO IS BRIEF AND CONCLUSIVE. THE PRESENT LAWS GOVERNING THE ISLAND AND REGULATING THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES OF ITS PEOPLE ARE NOT JUST. WE HAVE CREATED EXPECTATIONS OF EXTENDED PRIVILEGE WHICH WE HAVE NOT SATISFIED. THERE IS UNEASINESS AMONG THE PEOPLE OF THE ISLAND AND EVEN A SUSPICIOUS DOUBT WITH REGARD TO OUR INTENTIONS CONCERNING THEM WHICH THE ADOPTION OF THE PENDING MEASURE WOULD HAPPILY REMOVE. WE DO NOT DOUBT WHAT WE WISH TO DO IN ANY ESSENTIAL PARTICULAR. WE OUGHT TO DO IT AT ONCE."

WOODROW WILSON, ANNUAL MESSAGE TO CONGRESS, DECEMBER 5, 1916

Though the Jones-Shafroth Act was a congressional effort, it is safe to label President Woodrow Wilson as a supporter of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans. Not only did the president not veto the bill, but he also publicly promoted the need to amend the injustices of Puerto Rico's governing laws as one of three key topics in a 1916 annual address to Congress. Notably, he was supporting the rights of Puerto Ricans about four months before the United States entered World War I in April 1917.

Yet it is possible that Wilson's advocacy of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans through the Jones-Shafroth Act may not have been entirely benevolent. Correspondence from then-Secretary of War Newton Baker to President Wilson in 1916 states that "the gift of American citizenship will destroy the Independent party in P.R. and put an end to the [Jose De] Diego agitation." At least according to Baker, an ulterior motive in granting citizenship would be to clear out growing calls not just for the island's independence, but for a potential pan-Antilles movement that would aim to join the brother and sister peoples of the Caribbean into a larger union.

At this point, though, the idea that President Wilson sought to explicitly thwart Puerto Rican self-determination by extending U.S. citizenship is merely speculative based on correspondence he received from others, not on what he himself has written.