

Special To The Star

By FERNANDO PICO

# Time for a change



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The teaching of Puerto Rican history in our high schools and universities is still, by and large, in the grip of the traditional school of historiography which dominated the University of Puerto Rico's history department from the late 1940s to the late 1970s.

Even if it is independentistas or statehooders who may teach it at a given institution, the history taught still bears the imprint of Arturo Morales Carrión, Lidio Cruz Monclova, Ricardo Alegría, Aida Caro, Luis Manuel Díaz Soler, Labor Gómez Acevedo and other researchers and teachers of the same period at the university.

What distinguished this entrenched school of Puerto Rican historians is a particular vision of the historical process of Puerto Rico and a particular notion of how to go about researching and writing it.

Their Platonic model of what Puerto Rico is incarnates itself in certain stages of our collective past.

The Puerto Rican Taino Indian, the Puerto Rican African slave, the Puerto Rican Spanish settler are researched and portrayed in terms of what the model Puerto Rican should be. Their particular stories are told in terms of the history into which they are eventually to meld; no conflict is so severe, no particular trait is so prevalent, no institution is so foreign that it cannot eventually be subsumed into that finished product, the Puerto Rican identity.

Thus this traditional school plays down the history of our internal conflicts: the slave conspiracies, murders and escapes, the brutality of the conquest of the Indians, racial discrimination, economic exploitation, political turmoil, rampant criminality, acute misery.

In erradicating or shunting aside most evidence of these phenomena, these worthy historians were probably acting under the impression that to give Puerto Ricans a positive and homogeneous image of their past, especially their past under Spanish dominion, one should not play up conflicts which after all had happened long ago and were forgotten.

At the risk of projecting passivity on the past, they strove to elaborate a positive image of Puerto Rico, especially in comparison with the United States. The history of exploitation and of past struggles did not serve that purpose.

How successful their historiographical model has been can be measured by what the average Puerto

Rican university graduate these days can state coherently about our collective past:

— That the English and the Dutch tried to wrest San Juan away from Spain.

— That there was slavery here but it wasn't as bad as in other places and in any case did not leave a heritage of racial discrimination.

— That frustrated by a long wait for special laws some Puerto Ricans plotted against Spain, staged an uprising at Lares and failed, since they did not have the backing of the general population.

— That although autonomy was granted in the end by Spain, Puerto Rico became involved in the final phase of the Spanish-American war, and thus American troops "came" to Guánica.

— That conditions thereafter improved in the measure that Puerto Rican learned the virtues of the ballot box and legislated away disease, ignorance, and poverty.

This is all the history that most educated people in Puerto Rico care to know, and burdened with so little baggage they can happily inform their North American fellow citizens that Puerto Rico doesn't have much of a history.

What worries one most about that crass model, with which the traditional historians are as uncomfortable as the new ones, is that in it historical causation is simplified to the limit. Most things happened because external forces willed them on us; what we have done on our own has been possible because external forces permitted it.

Thus the initiative ever reverts to the outsiders; and it is no surprise: you can count proper names in any of our traditional history books and will find there more names of foreigners than of Puerto Ricans.

If the history of Puerto Rico has been taught as the history of what outsiders have done in Puerto Rico, what surprise is there in reading contemporary columnists who actually seem to believe that the solution of our problems rests on Washington's initiatives?

Thus, ironically, the history that was written to lead Puerto Ricans to have a positive image of themselves has resulted in some Puerto Ricans' vision of our historical process as one manufactured and modeled from outside.

It is time for a new history.

IT'S TRADITIONAL... PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS ALWAYS HAVE SLOGANS THAT SUGGEST NOBLE PURPOSES AND GRAND FUTURES... THERE WAS KENNEDY'S 'NEW FRONTIER'

JOHNSON'S 'WAR ON POVERTY'... CARTER'S 'NEW FOUNDATION'... FIRST REAGAN HAD 'NEW BEGINNING'... NOW HE HAS 'FREEDOM'S NEXT STEP'... WHATEVER