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George Will Gets It Wrong on Puerto Rico

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

George Will had a column on Sunday in the *Washington Post* about how Republicans can use the issue of statehood for Puerto Rico to bolster their standing with Hispanic voters. The article was dumb with a capital B. It read like a press release from the island's pro-statehood governor.

The issue of statehood for Puerto Rico is enormously divisive on the island. As Will noted, in the three most recent plebiscites on the issue failed to garner even a plurality even favor of statehood. He notes that the pro-statehood governor and his party won a resounding election victory two years ago, but is evidently unaware that the issue of corruption was the dominant concern, nor is he aware of the deep, and vicious, divisions within the pro-statehood primary.

Will's article, however, suffers from deeper flaws. First, many Hispanics in the U.S. are jealous of Puerto Ricans who are U.S. citizens and therefore do not have to jump through the insane hoops established by current immigration law. I do not see why a Mexican or a Guatemalan would set aside their suspicions of the GOP, which has turned violently anti-immigrant, because Puerto Ricans would be full citizens.

The greatest failure in Will's analysis is his inability to grasp why Puerto Ricans might not want their island to become a state. Puerto Rico is the only part of the U.S. that has a culture that was born in the Catholic Church. He quotes the governor to the effect that Puerto Ricans share many of the conservative values of the GOP, such as an opposition to abortion. But, he fails to grasp that the current GOP pays lip service to those social concerns while its unifying principle is a pro-capitalist mentality that is repulsive to a Catholic worldview. Note, I do not say "repulsive to Catholic values" because we are getting at something deeper than values. It is a way of life on the island, one that keeps the extended family at the center of the culture, one that puts common celebration of saints' days ahead of an increase in productivity, one in which even the growing evangelical presence on the island (which Will notes) does

not prevent those same evangelicals from insisting that a priest baptize their children and bury their dead.

?We don?t want to be Hawaii,? a Puerto Rican priest once told me. If Republicans think they can pull a fast one on Hispanics by pushing statehood for Puerto Rico, their morning coffee got spiked with too much good Puerto Rican rum.

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