



War, Modernity and Remembrance

The Puerto Rican Soldiers in Korea (1950–1953)

BY SILVIA ÁLVAREZ CURBELO

WHEN IN 1949, COLONEL WILLIAM HARRIS WAS ASSIGNED TO be the new commander of the 65th Infantry Regiment, his Army buddies kidded him about the “rum and Coca Cola” unit he was about to command in Puerto Rico. Not even the beautiful beaches and the alisio winds that welcomed him when he arrived at Isla Grande Airport in San Juan were able to dispel his misgivings about the new post: an ethnic unit in an island described by Washington insiders as “the powder keg of the Caribbean.”

His worst fears increased when he learned of the upcoming Portrex Maneuvers to be held at the neighboring island of Vieques. The Army’s Third Division, one of the most-decorated units in World War II, would play the gallant rescuer in the training exercises and the 65th Infantry, the role of the rebel enemy. When the war games ended, to the dismay of the Third’s top brass and Harris’ disbelief, the 65th, the gorkha army, was victorious.

Four months after the maneuvers, the Korean conflict began. Because of its recent notoriety, the Puerto Rican regiment was one

of the first units to be sent to the war theatre. General Matthew Ridgway, highly impressed with the 65th performance, had made the suggestion himself.

The Puerto Ricans had become American citizens in 1917 and were called for military duty when the United States entered into World War I that same year. The imperial eyes saw the Puerto Ricans as lazy, stupid, instinctive, and incapable of comprehending simple orders but they needed manpower. It was suggested that they could be assigned to menial tasks since their fighting spirit and racial constitution was always called into question. The assessment was not a surprise. The island, a giant sugar plantation under American rule, was governed in tutorial fashion and the colonial subjects were generally seen as children, of mixed breed and unfit for civic responsibilities.

In the late 1930s, as another war loomed in the horizon, an educated and progressive Creole elite entered the political arena in Puerto Rico under the populist leadership of Luis Muñoz Marín. The Popular Democratic Party’s rise to power was linked to the United States’ need to secure the Caribbean basin as Hitler’s armies advanced uncontested through Europe. The prospect of war jump-started the modernization process in Puerto Rico.

From left: Puerto Rican Soldiers embark to Korea, 1950; coming home, 1951

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Puerto Rico's road to modernization involved violent spatial and psychological displacements. Nearly a quarter of a million Puerto Ricans emigrated to the United States from 1947 to 1953. Several thousands more settled in the over-crowded cities of the Island as agriculture entered into a steep decline. The giant leap forward meant the death of rural Puerto Rico. However, those violent processes were mediated and mitigated by what Peter Gay has aptly called "alibis for aggression." The plight of the peasants and the immigrants was viewed as a necessary sacrifice so that Puerto Rico would enter into full-fledged modernity. The *diaspora* was interpreted as one of the achievements of our common U.S. citizenship. The Puerto Rican soldiers played a similar role. They stood as symbols of a political relationship that had superseded colonialism and achieved a partner status with the United States.

Although Colonel Harris's fears about his unit's efficacy seemed unfounded after their triumph in the Portrex exercises, the Korean conflict was to reveal the essential paradoxes posed by a relentless modernization process and by the ambiguous colonial condition of Puerto Rico.

THE BORINQUEENERS

On August 23, 1950, the 65th Infantry Regiment left San Juan. The landing at the Korean port of Pusan coincided with the beginning of the United Nations counteroffensive against the spectacular advances of North Korean forces. The 65th would soon earn the nickname of the "fire brigade" for its ubiquitous role in an ever changing front. While unit after unit of the US Eighth Army, along with the regular forces of the South Korean Army, fell into disarray, the 65th displayed a remarkable coherence and battle efficiency. On Christmas Eve 1950, American troops in full retreat were being pushed to the sea. Among them were the elite troops of the First Marine Infantry Division. It was the 65th that protected the rear guard of the Marines; the Puerto Ricans being the last to abandon the port of Humhang before it fell into the hands of the North Koreans. Inexplicably, the 65th was not singled out for citation. None of its members received the Medal of Honor in spite of their proven valor.

How can such courage by a "rum and Coke" outfit be explained? The 65th Regiment's effectiveness was due mainly to its ethnic cohesiveness. Colonel Harris ended up understanding that very

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well. Ironically, the Regiment was at its best when it was less Americanized. It is highly suggestive that during the Korean War the Regiment began to call itself "the Borinqueners." *Borinquen* is the Arawak Indian name for Puerto Rico.

War is always a rite of passage for a soldier, especially for a young recruit. It leads a soldier on a voyage to his inner self, but at the same time catapults an individual into a particular fellowship. More

akin to experiences documented in groups of Native American and Mexican-American soldiers, the Puerto Rican band of brothers linked a notion of territoriality to cultural and ethnic identity.

Patria (homeland, motherland) for a Puerto Rican soldier was without hesitation Puerto Rico. As a cultural and sentimental construct, *patria* was the amalgamation of real and imaginary landscapes, streams, hills and sunsets, of aromas, textures, and flavors that defined home; places of the heart where life, meaning and remembrance were possible.

In a distant Korea, where everything was so alien, the Puerto Rican soldiers went to extraordinary lengths to find some resemblance to the *Patria* they had left behind. At Christmas time, a month-long holiday in Puerto Rico, the soldiers tried to recreate the spaces of tradition. Many of the soldiers' accounts of the war emphasize the efforts to transform the sites of war into familiar sites; the artillery rumblings into Christmas carols or *aguinaldos*; or spike the dull military rations with a little *boricua* touch. This was as important as oiling the gun or changing a wet sock. Once, a group of soldiers got hold of a stray pig and they had a traditional pork dinner using the bayonet as the roasting pole.

Patria, thus, was the common topography of affections. When I interviewed Colonel Carlos Betances, more than forty years after the end of the Korean War, he would refer constantly to the soldiers under his command as "mis jibaritos." On the one hand, a *jibaro* is a peasant, specifically from the mountain-side. But it stands also as the generalized symbol of Puerto Rican identity. In referring to his soldiers with the affectionate "jibaritos," Betances, a U.S.-trained officer with impeccable credentials and flawless English, identified with and shared an essential affiliation crucial in the regiment's performance during most of its stint in Korea. For the 65th soldiers, achievements and failures, heroic deeds and above all death in the battlefield represented deeply felt cultural gains and losses

IDENTITY IN DISARRAY

The culturally-bonded regiment continued to display a remarkable record throughout the first six months of 1951. During the summer of that year, peace talks started between UN and North Korean representatives. Everything pointed to the end of the war.

In May 1951, Commander Harris was relieved from its command through a general rotation program. Shortly afterwards, many of the veteran soldiers in the 65th were sent back home and fresh personnel was flown to Korea. When the first troops returned to Puerto Rico, the government declared an official holiday. The triumphant heroes were returning home.

As the peace talks between the belligerents dragged with no end in sight, war became more irrational by the minute. It was then that many Puerto Rican NCOs were replaced by American NCOs. The regiment's morale began to suffer as the tenets of cultural bonding weakened and the situation in the ground changed to a stalemate type of war. In the letters sent to families and friends through 1951 and 1952, the 65th soldiers increasingly denounced the situation as hopeless. Even the appointment of a Puerto Rican commander, Juan César Cordero Dávila, a close friend of Gov-



Clockwise from top left: A tent mass for the 65th; packages from the home front; war as a rite of passage; Puerto Rican soldiers in the rugged hills of Korea.

ernor Luis Muñoz Marín, could not turn the tide. In fact, his appointment to lead the Regiment revealed the political complexity embodied by the 65th. From the moment that the Regiment was deployed in Korea, the soldiers fighting in the bloody hills were seen as an example of the alleged “compact” between the United States and Puerto Rico, the perfect metaphor of a new political relationship between the two societies. In 1948, Puerto Rico was allowed to elect its own governor; when the Korean War

erupted, Puerto Rico had begun to draft their own constitution. In 1952, the Puerto Rican flag and the Puerto Rican anthem were decriminalized fifty years after the U.S. invasion of the Island in 1898. It was only fitting that the new flags were sent to Korea and that Puerto Rican soldiers were encouraged to plant them in the conquered hills.

The Kelly Hill incidents in which dozens of Puerto Rican soldiers died during an ill-advised operation in September 1952 were

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

prompted, according to some participants, by the decision of Commander Cordero to take the objective as a visible token of Puerto Rico's loyalty to the United States, a kind of blood tribute. But, really the operation was an impossible task from the beginning. After two days of incessant fighting, the death toll was staggering. In no other moment of the war had the 65th lost so many men. Cordero was relieved from command as a convenient scapegoat. A new commander, Wisconsin-born Chester De Gavre, resented the ethnic profile of the Regiment. One of his first orders was that all his soldiers be clean-shaven. For a Puerto Rican male in the 1950s to shave his moustache was tantamount to a castration. The morale of the 65th was severely and irretrievably affected.

One month later, the Jackson Heights (another war-torn hill) incidents were even more serious. This time, in the face of insurmountable conditions, the Puerto Rican soldiers disobeyed orders to engage in battle. As many of them would testify in the court martial trials, they could not obey an order that was impossible to fulfill. Near two hundred soldiers were arrested on charges of "willfully fail [ing] to do the utmost to engage in the presence of the enemy" and "failing to obey a lawful command from a superior officer."

Court martial trials for 92 soldiers and one officer were hastily convened and held without providing proper counsel to the defendants. The government of Puerto Rico, caught in the middle of a potentially damaging affair that could jeopardize its political agenda, kept silent for nearly two months. On New Year's Eve, the incidents were made known by a local newspaper alerted by several letters written by the imprisoned soldiers to their families.

WAR AND THE SUBALTERN

The incidents that took place in Korea are part of a highly intricate process in which subordination and resistance mechanisms are intertwined.

During the frantic last months of 1950, the Puerto Rican soldiers were the perfect colonized subjects both for the Army's hierarchy and for the local elites en route to power. Two years later, when the war effort was becoming more and more chaotic with hundreds of soldiers dying for the sake of two or three yards of barren real estate, alterity was affirmed with ferocious force and the 65th returned to its homeland in disgrace.

Two minor military operations, today no more than casual references in the Korean War bibliography, illuminate the complexities and antagonisms inherent to every colonial relationship. In reading the transcripts of Lt. Juan Guzmán's court martial, the sole officer convicted for the Jackson Heights incident, one can see this fascinating tale of alterity developing. Until his departure to Korea this college graduate had been a career drill sergeant with a distinguished service record. His testimony reveals how proud he was of serving in the Armed Forces. But during the trial, Guzmán was portrayed as an incompetent and hesitant platoon leader. U.S. officers insisted on Guzmán's inability to understand English and his failure to comprehend simple orders. Although there were evident inconsistencies in the declarations made by the witnesses for the prosecution, the military judges summarily dismissed Guzmán's version of the events.

The same pattern is revealed in the other 90-plus trials. All exhibit a common trait: the Puerto Rican soldier was subject to a process of infantilization; his ability to speak and understand was consistently denied or questioned. In the end, all of the accused were found guilty and received outrageous sentences ranging from five to sixteen years of hard labor and dishonorable discharges. Eventually, after secret negotiations between the U.S. and Puerto Rican governments, all were granted clemency. The Regiment was reorganized with the convenient explanation that the Armed Forces had to be integrated and finally was disbanded in 1954.

The fact that one in every forty-two casualties in the war was a Puerto Rican is largely ignored by the Korean War historiography as the war itself is largely ignored and almost forgotten by histo-

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rians and the general public. Korea gives us the opportunity to examine the essential *desencuentro* and asymmetry that lies at the bottom of more than one hundred years of colonial domination. It shows the ambiguity of the "colonized" subject responses to imperial designs and the role of ethnicity both as an adaptation and as a resistance mechanism. The dramatic events of September and October 1952 were directly related to the loss of identity suffered by the Regiment. But paradoxically, the decisions made in the hills of Korea were also a collective affirmation of identity in the face of irrationality.

The Puerto Rican community knew better and hailed the moral resilience of its soldiers, black and white, on the face of discrimination and prejudice. In a still poverty-stricken land, a military career represented a way out from unemployment and despair for many Puerto Ricans. Many of them were young men from the countryside or small towns. In pursuit of a better future for them and their families—many of them came from families of ten or more children—the Puerto Rican soldier was willing to fight his heart out. But the Puerto Rican soldier performance was also an affair of *dignidad*, perhaps one of the most basic concepts in our cultural idiosyncrasy, a mixture of pride, courage, bravery, self-respect and patriotism.

The 65th soldiers genuinely believed that they were fighting for freedom and democracy as Puerto Rican Governor Muñoz Marín had told them when he bid them good-bye. The 65th veterans, many with tears in their eyes and broken voices, still cherish the regimental colors, but they also recall with sadness and disbelief the prejudiced color of war.

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LUCHA ERA SUICIDA

Revelan Soldados Juzgados En Corea

Por RAMÓN M. DIAZ
Jefe de Información de EL IMPARCIAL

De realizarse una investigación por un organismo imparcial, a miúdo demostraría que los militares puertorriqueños procedidos por negarse a pelear en Corea o a huir por cobardía, y a retirarse sin luchar, fueron juzgados prácticamente indefensos, y se suicidó frente a un enemigo numéricamente superior, que ocupaba además una posición ventajosa por la topografía del terreno. Así lo afirman los cartas que los jóvenes puertorriqueños prisioneros han estado enviando a sus padres, parientes y amigos en la isla. (Pasa a la página 3)

ABUSAN EMPLEO TROPAS BORICUAS FRENTE DE COREA

(INFORMACIÓN EN LA PAGINA 4)

LISTA DE SOLDADOS JUZGADOS EN PAG. 3

JOSÉ LUIS RAMOS, condecorado a 17 años. En foto de Manuel y Gertrude Ramon recibiendo en la Calle Real de San Juan.



Clockwise from top left: USS Marine Lynx carries the 65th Infantry regiment to Korea; war and remembrance; Gov. Luis Muñoz Marín hoists the flag; First Lady Inés Mendoza dances with a returning soldier; trial reveals discrimination.