At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War of 1898, the New York Times concluded that “Porto Rico” [sic] was a charming winter resort, with considerable commercial value, and a valuable naval station positioned between two continents. “We are not pledged to give Porto Rico independence,” the editors concluded. It would be much better for her to come at once under the beneficent sway of the United States than to engage in doubtful experiments at self-government, and there is no reason to believe that her people would prefer it.”

In the Treaty of Paris, Spain ceded complete authority over Puerto Rico to the United States. The island became a “self-governing” commonwealth in 1952, with a bicameral legislature and a popularly elected governor. The “sway” of the United States over Puerto Rico, however, has not been entirely beneficent. And there is considerable evidence that many Puerto Ricans preferred – and prefer – independence.

In “War Against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America’s Colony” (Nation Books, $28.99), Nelson Denis — a former member of the New York State Assembly and editorial director of El Diario, the largest Spanish-language newspaper in the United States — tells the story of the resistance to colonial rule in Puerto Rico in the first half of the 20th century, which culminated in an assassination attempt against President Harry Truman and an armed insurrection led by Pedro Albizu Campos, the leader of the Nationalist Party.

“War Against All Puerto Ricans” draws on the personal correspondence, autobiographies of and interviews with Puerto Rican nationalists, family members, and friends. And Mr. Denis makes effective use of thousands of documents he obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. He demonstrates that authorities fabricated evidence that they acted in self-defense in the Ponce Massacre of 1936. He makes a compelling case that, having discovered that Luis Muñoz Marín, the leading politician in Puerto Rico, was a drug addict, the FBI blackmailed him to abandon his support for independence. And Mr. Denis endorses claims that Albizu Campos was subjected to radiation experimentation while he was in prison.
Mr. Denis is surely right that the colonial rule of Puerto Rico “is not a pretty story.” That said, “War Against All Puerto Ricans” is a polemic. Since he regards the Nationalists as freedom fighters, Mr. Denis gives them a free pass, even when initiate violence. He does not address, let alone take seriously, the arguments of advocates of commonwealth status for Puerto Rico. And his account of the policies of the U.S. government – and the attitude of Americans toward Puerto Ricans — is simplistic.

Intent on deploying “state sponsored terror to cow an entire population into submission,” Mr. Denis writes, “the United States cared more about Nazi war crimes in Europe than murder in broad daylight in Puerto Rico.” To the men in America, he adds, “Puerto Ricans were not equals, or citizens, or even fully human. They were animals. And so they could be shot on Palm Sunday like rabid dogs in the street.”

There’s no denying, however, that U.S. rule has not served Puerto Rico well. These days, unemployment and poverty rates are high and tens of thousands of people are fleeing the island. In 2014, Standard and Poor’s lowered Puerto Rico’s credit rating to junk bond status; Moody’s Investor Service reduced it one step lower than the S&P.

Mr. Denis insists there is a simple remedy for the island’s woes. It rests on an acknowledgement that “floating an American way of life at the expense of the entire planet is no longer sustainable” and “listening a little more to our artists and less to our corporations.”

Mr. Denis maintains that complicated solutions rarely work. In reality, they’re all we’ve got.

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