

Jaime Benítez

1908–2001

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 1973–1977
POPULAR DEMOCRAT FROM PUERTO RICO

Jaime Benítez was Puerto Rico’s leading scholar for nearly 70 years. From his first teaching assignment in 1931, he rose to become a major influence on Puerto Rican and American education, serving nearly 30 years as chancellor and then president of the Universidad de Puerto Rico. Elected Resident Commissioner in 1972, Benítez focused on solidifying Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth during his tenure in Congress. In many respects he was a consummate insider and a loyal member of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD), but Benítez never shied away from confrontations with party leadership. In the U.S. House, his animated personality and considerable intelligence won him friends on both sides of the aisle. Democrat Phillip Burton of California spoke of the “enormous commitment and concern and unique intellect [of] the Resident Commissioner ... and [of] what a joy it is to listen to and associate with such a decent human being.”¹

Benítez was born on Vieques, an island east of Puerto Rico, on October 29, 1908, to Luis Benítez and Candida Rexach. He counted among his ancestors some of Puerto Rico’s most respected 19th-century poets, Maria Bibiana Benítez, Alejandra Benítez, and Jose Gautier Benítez. When Jaime Benítez was seven, his mother, and then his father, died within a year of each other. Jaime went to live with an older sister in San Juan, where he enrolled in the public schools. In 1926 he moved to Washington, D.C., to begin studies at Georgetown University. He graduated in 1930, completing a master’s degree in law the next year. After passing the District’s bar exam, he returned to Puerto Rico in 1931 and accepted a teaching position at the Universidad de Puerto Rico. Benítez and his wife, LuLu Martinez, had two daughters, Clotilde and Margarita, and a son, Jaime.²

Founded in 1903, the Universidad de Puerto Rico was a middling institution when Benítez began teaching in

its political and social science department during the Great Depression. After taking leave to earn a second master’s degree from the University of Chicago in 1938, Benítez returned to Puerto Rico. He accepted another teaching position at the university, and three years later he became chancellor until 1966, when he became president of the university.³

Described by a contemporary as “vivid, voluble, ardent for his country’s good and obviously talented,” Benítez rebuilt the school’s curriculum from the bottom up, implementing far-reaching reforms regarding the teaching of Puerto Rico’s cultural heritage.⁴ Enrollment surged from 5,000 to roughly 40,000 students, and by 1964, under Benítez’s direction, the Universidad de Puerto Rico was known as “one of the great Spanish-language universities of the world.”⁵ The university opened campuses across the island and added professional schools for health care and architecture.⁶ Benítez became a standard-bearer for academic freedom and sought to implement policies safeguarding students and faculty from political pressures in and out of the classroom. “Politicians out!” was one of Benítez’s signature phrases; later, historians described his policies as “paternalistic.”⁷

Early during his tenure at the university, Benítez began an association with the PPD that lasted throughout his career. He was known around the San Juan area as a party stalwart, and at least one historian suggests that Benítez was appointed chancellor so that he could help implement the PPD’s broad agenda.⁸ By mid-century, Benítez had assumed a larger role in the island’s civic society and in international efforts to promote peace. From 1951 to 1952, Benítez was a member of Puerto Rico’s constitutional convention; his familiarity with democratic political institutions and his theories on government earned him the chairmanship of the committee on the bill of rights—



which worked to guarantee Puerto Ricans human, social, and economic liberties.⁹ Benítez's role in shaping the curriculum at the Universidad de Puerto Rico paved the way for his membership on the United States' National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) from 1948 to 1954. Benítez also served as president of the national association of state universities from 1957 to 1958.¹⁰

By the late 1950s, Benítez's relationship with PPD leadership had begun to fray. Puerto Rico's charismatic and immensely popular governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, suspected Benítez was molding a competing political group at the university, and in 1957 Muñoz reported a complete "loss of confidence" in his college administrator.¹¹ By 1960 the two had reportedly reconciled, but in the next decade they engaged in what the *Washington Post* called a "distressing and undeclared feud." The two formidable personalities were likely more similar than they imagined. Benítez, said a later governor, "was to higher education what [Luis] Muñoz Marín was to politics."¹² In 1966 the insular legislature appointed Benítez university president—a post which some observers described as less influential. Benítez relinquished the seat five years later.¹³

After Muñoz Marín stepped down from the PPD in the late 1960s, the new leadership nominated Benítez for Resident Commissioner in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1972. The PPD had lost elections across the island four years earlier to the upstart pro-statehood Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, or PNP), but by 1972 the PPD had regrouped, and many islanders again favored commonwealth status. Benítez's opponent in the general election was PNP incumbent Jorge Córdova-Díaz, a popular and ambitious candidate who had transformed the office of Resident Commissioner. But the PNP had come under heavy criticism for mismanaging insular affairs, breathing new life into the all-important status question. The general assumption was that any vote for the PPD "meant a vote for commonwealth status and permanent union with the United States."¹⁴ The election cycle that year was at all levels particularly and "untenably partisan," the *San Juan Star* lamented.¹⁵

"Benítez's vision of this island," wrote a political commentator during the election, "is deeply rooted in the era of the 40's when he made his greatest political and educational contributions to this island."¹⁶ In the 1970s, as in the 1940s, Benítez favored a position of "limited autonomy"—a stance that was distinctly at odds with Córdova-Díaz's and with the PNP's platform supporting statehood.¹⁷ Benítez reassured voters that all "Puerto Ricans are entitled ... to full participation and equality of treatment in all federal welfare programs" and then emphasized the Resident Commissioner's unique position in the House.¹⁸ Córdova-Díaz was known for his personable legislative style, and Benítez was equally popular for his "imagination, liberalism and intellectual creativity" which, the writer of an editorial hoped, would "help Puerto Rico to attain worldwide respect not merely for its social and economic attainments but for its cultural and human achievements as well."¹⁹

With a huge voter turnout, Benítez won almost 51 percent of the ballots in the general election.²⁰ Ever the educator, Benítez promised to inform his new House colleagues about the intricacies of Puerto Rico's political status. He also pledged to secure federal funding to help alleviate the island's "social problems."²¹

Benítez was the first Resident Commissioner to serve a full term under the new House Rules that were implemented as a result of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, giving Resident Commissioners the right to be elected to committees and to vote therein. During the 93rd Congress (1973–1975), Benítez was assigned to the Committee on Education and Labor given his background at the Universidad de Puerto Rico. Benítez was an animated speaker, reported the *San Juan Star*, with a "distinctive oratorical style in that he often twisted his body and arms into unusual shapes as he punctuated his talks with quotes from Cervantes ... Shakespeare, Ortega y Gasset," and other literary figures. "He was known for his histrionic style," the newspaper commented, "even when reading from the dry Congressional Record in 1973 as resident commissioner."²² In his opening remarks to the House on January 30, 1973, Benítez began a rather lengthy

talk on the U.S. military's continued use of the sparsely populated island of Culebra as a bombing range—an issue that defined his first session in office—by addressing the chamber in Spanish “to symbolize my deep feelings on this occasion,” he explained.²³ Puerto Rican Democrat Herman Badillo of New York, who addressed the Resident Commissioner as “Don Jaime” and who later became one of his close advisors, said he was “delighted to have him with us in the Congress.”²⁴

Benítez immediately pushed for a solution to what he called “the Culebran question.”²⁵ With support from a number of House Democrats, Benítez introduced H.R. 3224, seeking to hold the military accountable for promises to end training missions on Culebra. Two years earlier the navy had agreed to withdraw from the island, only to reverse course a short time later.²⁶ Benítez's predecessor had attempted to address this issue in 1972 but had run out of time. Many Members supporting Benítez's new legislation openly sympathized with Culebra's residents; Bella Abzug of New York declared that the events in the Caribbean demonstrated a “heartless attitude toward small and powerless groups.”²⁷ Benítez's bill never made it out of committee, but earlier in the month, Republican Senator Howard Baker had introduced accompanying legislation (S. 156) charging the U.S. Navy with “a breach of faith with the people of Puerto Rico.”²⁸ With pressure from Benítez and Baker, the outgoing Secretary of Defense stepped forward in May 1973 and promised the navy would withdraw within two years.²⁹ The final decision to relocate the testing range, Benítez said, “reinforces our faith in the basic integrity of the American system with its profound commitment to the fulfillment of understandings reached in good faith and in the pursuit of human values.”³⁰

Benítez kept a low profile for the rest of the 93rd Congress, but in a rare floor address in late July 1973, he spoke about the meaning and future of Puerto Rico's commonwealth. This became the foundation for his singular legislative effort in the 94th Congress (1975–1977). Attempting to explain the intricacies of the island's status, Benítez asserted that the frequent confusion and frustration experienced by both the United States and

Puerto Rico was an important part of their association—an experiment in democratic self-governance, Benítez said, that “continues to develop . . . from the needs, experiences, vicissitudes, conflicts, achievements, adjustments, contradictions, and aspirations inherent in 75 years of close relationship.” Benítez asserted that the confederation between the United States and Puerto Rico had been allowed to develop without clear goals or boundaries, and to rectify what he called a policy of “benign neglect,” Benítez began working with the White House to improve the federal-insular alliance.³¹

In the 94th Congress, Benítez continued to sit on the Education and Labor Committee, but in light of his recent effort to address Puerto Rico's status, he was also placed on the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee. After introducing a handful of unsuccessful education and revenue bills, Benítez submitted H.R. 11200, “a bill to approve the Compact of Permanent Union Between Puerto Rico and the United States,” on December 17, 1975.³² It was the most direct attempt to influence the state of Puerto Rican-U.S. relations since the constitutional convention (in which Benítez also played a role) in 1951. Puerto Rico would gain a greater measure of self-governance, including the prerogative to enter into binding agreements with other countries on a case-by-case basis pending presidential approval. The bill would also allow Puerto Rico one voting Member for both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate and would impose mainland standards for minimum wage at some point in the future. Finally, the bill would create a six-member commission to study and improve the federal-insular relationship.³³

Benítez's bill, though actively pursued in the House, received a cold reception from executive branch officials. It was referred to the Subcommittee on Territorial and Insular Affairs, which held four days of hearings in both Washington and San Juan, with testimony from more than 60 witnesses. The subcommittee approved H.R. 11200 on August 23, 1976, but as the 94th Congress began to wind down, the bill never made it out of the full committee. Looking ahead, Benítez hoped his measure authorizing the compact of a permanent union between the United



States and Puerto Rico would “be one of the first pieces of legislation to be approved by the 95th Congress.”³⁴

After his disappointment in the House, Benítez returned to Puerto Rico to campaign for re-election against a surging Baltasar Corrada-del Río, the PNP candidate for Resident Commissioner. Benítez had taken a calculated gamble by introducing H.R. 11200, believing it had the support of a majority of the islanders. But in his four years in Washington, the PNP had again surged in popularity, largely in reaction to the island’s poor economy. In a huge Election Day turnout—more than 1.44 million people voted for Resident Commissioner—Benítez lost to Corrada-del Río by about 3 percent (42,002 votes).³⁵ After the election, Benítez remained convinced that federal-insular relations played a negligible part in the outcome. “The fact is that the Commonwealth status has become so much part and parcel of life that Puerto Ricans don’t take it into account in their political decisions. As a result,” Benítez concluded, “the election turned on the bad condition of the Puerto Rican economy.”³⁶

After his electoral loss, Benítez returned to the classroom, teaching at the Inter-American University in Puerto Rico from 1980 to 1986 and consulting with PPD leaders when he was asked to. He retired to Condado Lagoon, outside Old San Juan, and spent a large part of his time in the city’s bookstores or in his personal study. He suffered a stroke in 1994. On May 10, 2001, he died at Auxilio Mutuo Hospital of respiratory complications. “He was an extraordinary Puerto Rican,” the island’s governor said, “a great educator and outstanding among our people, for his personal and professional attributes.... The debt the Puerto Rican people owe to Benítez has no limits, because there are so many things we have to thank him for.”³⁷

FOR FURTHER READING

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_____. *La torre: Revista general de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras, 1956–1971).

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Jaime Benítez,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Sanjurjo, Carmen Hilda. “The Educational Thought of Jaime Benítez, Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico from 1942 to 1966,” (Ed.D. thesis, Columbia University Teachers College, 1986).

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (30 January 1973): 2565.
- 2 Carmen E. Enciso and Tracy North, eds., “Jaime Benítez,” *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–1995* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1995); Paul Lewis, “Jaime Benítez, 92, Educator and Puerto Rican Politician,” 1 June 2001, *New York Times*: C15.
- 3 *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, “Jaime Benítez,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>; Carmen Hilda Sanjurjo, “The Educational Thought of Jaime Benítez, Chancellor of the Universidad de Puerto Rico from 1942 to 1966,” (Ed.D. thesis, Columbia Teachers College, 1986): 187.
- 4 Quotation from Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Stricken Land: The Story of Puerto Rico* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968): 93; César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 134–135, 203–204.
- 5 “Storm Signal,” 13 April 1964, *Washington Post*: A16.
- 6 Lewis, “Jaime Benítez, 92, Educator and Puerto Rican Politician”; “University Director Mourned,” 3 June 2001, *Orlando Sentinel*: K8.
- 7 See Sanjurjo, “The Educational Thought of Jaime Benítez”: 68–69, 77–78. For a detailed discussion of Benítez’s educational thought, see Jaime Benítez, “Cultural Values in a Frontier: University Services in Puerto Rico,” in A. Curtis Wilgus, ed., *The Caribbean: Its Culture*, Vol. 1 (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1955): 196–207.
- 8 For information about the relationship between Benítez and the PPD, see A. W. Maldonado, “Education Lives through Crisis,” 2 November 1960, *San Juan Star*: S-17; and Manny Suarez, “Benítez, Top P.R. Educator and Reformer, Dies at Age 92,” 31 May 2001, *San Juan Star*: 4. Carmen Hilda Sanjurjo notes that Benítez may have become an administrator at the university so that he “could ‘guide’ the institution towards helping this party [the PPD] carry out its social and economic reforms.” See Sanjurjo, “The Educational Thought of Jaime Benítez,” 59–60. See also Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*: 203–205.
- 9 Lewis, “Jaime Benítez, 92, Educator and Puerto Rican Politician.”
- 10 *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, “Jaime Benítez,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.



- 11 Lewis, "Jaime Benítez, 92, Educator and Puerto Rican Politician."
- 12 Fifty years later, after the two had died, the roots of their problems still had not been "made clear," according to another island newspaper. Manny Suarez, "Leaders Laud Benítez; Mourning Decreed," 31 May 2001, *San Juan Star*: 5.
- 13 Some mainland critics called the move to strip Benítez of his power "petty." See Maldonado, "Education Lives through Crisis"; "Storm Signal"; Lewis, "Jaime Benítez, 92, Educator and Puerto Rican Politician."
- 14 Margarita Babb, "Campaign Heads into Home Stretch: PDP," 23 October 1972, *San Juan Star*: 1; "An Editorial: Our Position," 3 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 1.
- 15 "An Editorial: Our Position." See also "On Political Status," 3 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 39.
- 16 Dimas Planas, "An Easy Choice," 4 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 46.
- 17 Planas, "An Easy Choice."
- 18 "'72 Campaign: Resident Commissioner," 5 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: S-7.
- 19 Ursula Von Eckardt, "How I Shall Vote and Why," 6 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 43.
- 20 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 21 Manny Suarez, "Benítez Will Press for More Funding," 9 November 1972, *San Juan Star*: 3.
- 22 Suarez, "Benítez, Top P.R. Educator and Reformer, Dies at Age 92."
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (30 January 1973): 2563.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 2566. Badillo, who had spent the last two years wrangling with Resident Commissioner Córdova-Díaz, was relieved to have Benítez in the House. Córdova-Díaz had caucused with the Republicans during the second half of his tenure.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 2565.
- 26 Many believed the navy did not feel obligated to honor its agreement with Puerto Rico's former governor. See Manuel Suarez, "Navy Reported Set to Yield in Fight with Culebra," 11 January 1971, *New York Times*: 19; "Navy's 'War' with Culebra Ends in a Truce," 12 January 1971, *New York Times*: 14; "Culebra 'Treaty' Signed following Misunderstanding," 12 January 1971, *Washington Post*: A7; "A Cheer for Culebra," 15 January 1971, *Washington Post*: A24.
- 27 For the Culebra debate, see *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (30 January 1973): 2563–2571. For Bella Abzug's quotation, see p. 2570.
- 28 *Congressional Record*, Senate, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (4 January 1973): 96; *Congressional Record*, Senate, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (15 March 1973): 8125–8129; Michael Getler, "Richardson Acts to Yield on Culebra," 25 May 1973, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 29 Getler, "Richardson Acts to Yield on Culebra"; "Navy to Quit Shelling Isle in 2 Years," 26 May 1973, *Chicago Tribune*: 5; "Culebra over Goliath," 28 May 1973, *New York Times*: 14; "On Culebra, a Promise Redeemed," 29 May 1973, *Washington Post*: A20.
- 30 As quoted in "On Culebra, a Promise Redeemed." Later, when people realized that no money had been set aside for the land transfer, Benítez introduced H.R. 8675 on June 14, 1973, which would have set aside "such funds as may be necessary" to complete the removal of the naval fortifications on Culebra.
- 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 1st sess. (31 July 1973): 27036; *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 2nd sess. (24 May 1976): 15133; *Congressional Record*, House, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess. (13 June 1974): 19300–19306.
- 32 For Benítez's lengthy introduction to the legislation and a history of U.S.-Puerto Rican relations, see *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (17 December 1975): 41451–41454. As during his election, Benítez viewed the 1970s through the lens of the 1940s. "We owe it to the new generations which did not participate in the struggles of the 1940s and 1950s to have for their own clarification a basic document reflecting the dignity and quality of our relationship," he said during his address on December 17th.
- 33 Congressional Research Service summary, THOMAS.gov (accessed 19 October 2011).
- 34 *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 2nd sess. (24 May 1976): 15133–15314; *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 94th Cong., 2nd sess. (1 October 1976): 35572–35573.
- 35 Henry L. Trehitt, "Steamy Reception Looms for Ford at Puerto Rican Summit," 23 July 1976, *Baltimore Sun*: A2; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 36 Interview with Jaime Benítez, Former Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico, "Should Puerto Rico Be a State?: No," 11 April 1977, *U.S. News & World Report*: 47.
- 37 Suarez, "Benítez, Top P.R. Educator and Reformer, Dies at 92"; Suarez, "Leaders Laud Benítez; Mourning Decreed."