



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Keynote Address
Puerto Rican Bar Association of Florida
10th Annual Gala
Miami Beach, Florida
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Good evening. *Buenas noches*. I am honored to be here with you tonight, as the Puerto Rican Bar Association of Florida celebrates its 10th annual gala. I want to thank president Richard Robles, president-elect Anthony Suarez, the Association's board of directors, and the sponsors of this event for their generosity. I also want to acknowledge Justice Luis Gonzalez, whom you heard from earlier, and to again congratulate all of tonight's award recipients.

Although I spend most of my time in Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico, I always feel at home when I am in Florida, and it is easy to understand why. According to the most recent Census data, there are now over 912,000 Puerto Ricans living in the Sunshine State. That is a 90 percent increase from 12 years ago, when there were about 482,000 *Boricuas* who resided here. Florida will soon pass New York as the state with the largest Puerto Rican population. In our democratic system, there is power in numbers, and Puerto Ricans in Florida have become an influential force—economically, socially and, yes, politically.

I also have a strong personal connection to the state. My daughter Jacqueline graduated from the University of Miami, and my youngest son Rafael is currently a senior at the University of

Florida. If there are any Florida State graduates in the audience, I hope you will forgive me for my sins.

I also feel at home tonight because I am with fellow members of the bar. I was an attorney before I entered politics, serving for close to 20 years in private practice and for four years as Puerto Rico's Attorney General. Whenever I have the chance to speak with other lawyers, I always feel a strong sense of kinship, one that is rooted in our shared experiences and common values.

Representing Puerto Rico in Congress, as I have done since 2009, has been the greatest honor of my professional life. Every day I am grateful for the training I received in law school and in practice. Many of the skills I acquired during my legal career have helped me in Washington. The same methods I once used to convince a judge or jury of the merit of my client's case, I now use to persuade my fellow lawmakers of the value of legislation that I have introduced. In Congress, as in the courtroom, the most effective advocates are those who are well-prepared, who are principled but not inflexible, who are logical as well as passionate, and who can make a clear and concise argument.

My legal training has also enabled me to tackle the range of policy matters that come before Congress. Just as lawyers have to juggle multiple cases on different subjects, I must deal with a diverse array of issues on a daily basis. These include initiatives to promote economic growth and job creation in Puerto Rico, to reduce drug-related violence on the island, to increase funding for the local health care and education systems, to serve our soldiers and veterans as well as they

have served us, and to resolve the issue of Puerto Rico's political status, which has a profound impact on every one of the other issues I just listed.

I want to speak tonight, briefly, about the status question. As all of you know, Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States since 1898, and island residents have been U.S. citizens since 1917.

I know that many of you in this room were born in Puerto Rico and moved to Florida. Others of you were born in Florida, but your parents or grandparents were born in Puerto Rico, and *they* moved here.

While I cannot speak to every individual situation, I suspect that you, or previous generations of your family, relocated to the states to find better educational and economic opportunities. I imagine that the decision to leave Puerto Rico was difficult and even heartbreaking, but that you—or your parents or grandparents—simply felt that there was no other choice.

Let me be clear. The fact that you moved makes me sad but not angry. That is because I understand the reasons why you—and others like you—purchased a one-way airplane ticket from Luis Muñoz Marín airport to Miami or Orlando, Ohio or Texas, Connecticut or California. Life is precious; as human beings, we will go where we believe we have the best chance to achieve our dreams.

The hard truth is this: Puerto Rico has faced severe economic challenges for at least four decades, and the problems are getting worse, not better. By every metric—whether it is unemployment, household income, the percentage of the population living below the poverty level, or the amount of debt the government owes to bondholders—Puerto Rico lags well behind every state, and that gap is only widening. Puerto Rico’s longstanding economic model, which has essentially been to offer generous tax breaks to large multinational corporations to encourage them to invest in the island, has not delivered the desired results for the Puerto Rican people.

It is no surprise, then, that hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans have left, are leaving, or will leave the island in search of a better quality of life. Between 2000 and 2012, the territory’s population decreased by 4.2 percent. If the current trend continues, it is estimated that Puerto Rico’s population—now 3.6 million—will drop to 2.3 million by 2050. Pause for a moment to absorb that.

The Census data is like a dagger in the heart of any supporter of the *status quo*. As lawyers, you are experts at examining evidence in an objective way, and drawing conclusions based on that evidence. I submit that the case is clear and compelling. Puerto Rico’s current path has led to a dead end. The island needs a new path, and a new destination.

Legally and practically, there are only two alternatives to the current territory status. The first is for Puerto Rico to become a state. The second is for Puerto Rico to become a separate nation, either fully independent from or in a voluntary association with the United States. While both statehood and nationhood are dignified status options, I strongly support statehood. I know that

some, but not all, of you share my vision for Puerto Rico's future, and so I want to quickly outline my argument.

Perhaps the most obvious defect of the current status is that it deprives the people of Puerto Rico of political rights and civil rights. Federal law is supreme in Puerto Rico, just like it is in Florida. However, island residents cannot choose the leaders who make their national laws. They cannot vote for their president and commander-in-chief, even though they serve in large numbers in the U.S. military. They are not represented in the Senate, a body where each member wields great power. And they send only one representative to the House, the Resident Commissioner. In this role, I can introduce bills and vote on committees, but I cannot vote on the House floor. While 435 of my colleagues, from Maine to Alaska, cast votes on bills that affect my constituents, I am confined to the role of a spectator.

Likewise, the Supreme Court has held that, with limited exceptions, the federal government can enact laws that treat the territories differently than the states—and residents of Puerto Rico are treated worse than their fellow citizens under key federal programs, including nearly every social safety-net program.

The irony, of course, is that as soon as my constituents move from the *municipality* of Florida, Puerto Rico to the *state* of Florida, they instantly acquire the right to vote for their national leaders and the right to equal treatment under federal law.

Now, both statehood and nationhood would provide the people of Puerto Rico with full political and civil rights. If Puerto Rico were to become a state, its residents would have the same rights and responsibilities as their fellow citizens in the other 50 states. And if Puerto Rico were to become a sovereign nation, and that nation had a republican form of government, then island residents would enjoy full self-government and full equality under the law in that country. In short, both statehood and nationhood would provide a solution to the democratic deficit Puerto Rico confronts as a territory.

The other principal defect of the current status—which I have already alluded to—is that it harms Puerto Rico’s economy and therefore quality of life on the island. Because Puerto Rico is treated unequally under numerous federal grant and tax credit programs, it is deprived of billions of dollars every year that would otherwise flow to the local economy. The shortfall in federal funds means individuals have less money to spend, businesses make fewer sales, and growth is hindered. In addition, the quality of government services delivered in a range of areas, from health care to anti-hunger programs, is relatively poor. Finally, the Puerto Rico government must shoulder a disproportionate share of the financial burden of paying for these services. This leads to large government borrowing, excessive debt, higher interest payments on bonds, and the diminished ability to make other important investments for the benefit of the people.

Now, you do not need to be a lawyer to conclude that statehood, to a far greater degree than nationhood, would strengthen Puerto Rico’s economy and enhance quality of life. Just look at Alaska and Hawaii, the last two territories to join the Union. Statehood would mean equal treatment under all federal programs. Nationhood, by contrast, would mean that future

generations of island residents would not receive Social Security, Medicare, or federal unemployment insurance, to name just a few programs. Currently, the Puerto Rico government and island entities receive well over \$20 billion dollars a year in federal grants, federal contracts and other federal payments. As a nation, Puerto Rico would receive a package of foreign aid that would almost certainly pale in comparison. It is hard to see how nationhood would help, rather than hurt, the island's economy.

And let's be honest. An overwhelming majority of my constituents cherish their American citizenship, especially the hundreds of thousands who have served—or have a family member who served—in the military. But if Puerto Rico were to become a country, future generations of island residents would be citizens of the nation of Puerto Rico, not the United States.

So, from my vantage point, statehood—not nationhood—is the right and logical next step, the natural progression from territory status.

But this is not just my personal view. In November, Puerto Rico held a referendum on its political future. The results demonstrate that 54 percent of voters do not support the current territory status, that 61 percent favor statehood among the alternative options, and that more voters want statehood than any other option, including the current status.

This vote has changed the entire nature of the status debate. Now that American citizens living in an American territory have informed their national government, in a free and fair vote, that they do not consent to a political status that deprives them of the most basic democratic rights, it

is incumbent upon the federal government to take appropriate action in response. In August, a Senate committee held a hearing on the referendum. The committee chairman, Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon, said: “There is no disputing that a majority of the voters in Puerto Rico . . . have clearly expressed their opposition to continuing the current territorial status.” Chairman Wyden also made this powerful statement:

“For Puerto Rico to meet its economic and social challenges and to achieve its full potential, this debate over status needs to be settled. Puerto Rico must either exercise full self-government as a sovereign nation, or achieve equality among the States of the Union. The current relationship undermines the United States’ moral standing in the world. For a nation founded on the principles of democracy and the consent of the governed, how much longer can America allow a condition to persist in which nearly four million U.S. citizens do not have a vote in the government that makes the national laws which affect their daily lives? That is the question.”

In April, with my support, the Obama Administration requested an appropriation of \$2.5 million dollars to conduct the first federally-sponsored status vote in the territory’s history, with the specific purpose of “resolving” the issue. This funding was approved by the Republican-controlled House Appropriations Committee, which shows that Puerto Rico’s status is not—and should never become—a partisan issue. We will know within a few months whether this appropriation will become law.

Moreover, in May, I introduced a bill called the *Puerto Rico Status Resolution Act*. My legislation outlines the rights and responsibilities of statehood, provides for an up-or-down vote in Puerto Rico on the territory's admission as a state, and lays out the steps the president and Congress would take if a majority of voters favor admission. My bill already has 125 cosponsors from all over the country, including 12 Republicans, which is a major achievement in these highly partisan times. I should note that all 10 of the House Democrats from Florida are cosponsors of my bill, as are three House Republicans from this state.

I believe that the quest for Puerto Rico statehood is a fight for civil rights and human dignity. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution stand for the principle that "all men are created equal" and that there is no such thing as second-class citizenship in this country. This nation fought a war with itself to vindicate that principle. Later generations, including women and African Americans, had to struggle and sacrifice to become full and equal members of the American family. Like these earlier movements, the statehood movement is driven by the desire to perfect our Union. With discipline and faith, I am confident we will prevail. *Cuento con su apoyo.*

Thank you.