



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
Hispanics: Serving and Leading Our Nation With Pride and Honor
Fort Belvoir Community Hospital Hispanic Heritage Observance
Fort Belvoir, Virginia
September 18, 2013

Thank you very much for your warm welcome. As the Congressman from the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, I am thrilled to be here at Fort Belvoir during Hispanic Heritage Month to recognize the important contributions that Latinos have made to our national defense. As I look out at this crowd, I see both military personnel and civilian personnel. I see wounded warriors who have sacrificed so much for our country. I am honored—and humbled—to be in your presence. There are no words that can adequately describe my gratitude for your service, so I will simply offer you my profound thanks and wish you well in your recovery. I also see medical professionals from the Community Hospital who work day and night, with quiet determination and little recognition, to provide first-class care to the wounded warriors and other warfighters, to our veterans, and to their families. Fort Belvoir is the workplace for thousands of individuals who perform many different missions but whose ultimate goal is the same: to keep America strong and to keep the American people safe. When I look at you, I see men and women living professional lives of purpose and honor. I hope you feel tremendous pride in what you do, because your country is proud of you.

I would be remiss if I did not pause to acknowledge that it has been a very difficult week, given the tragic events that took place at the Navy Yard on Monday. I am sure your hearts are especially heavy, since the attack occurred on a military base not far from here, and those who lost their lives or were wounded are, in a very real sense, your brothers and sisters. Throughout the nation, American flags are flying at half staff in honor of the victims, and they and their loved ones are in our thoughts and prayers.

I know that you are all very busy, so I will not speak for long. But I do want to say a few words about the role of Hispanics in the U.S. armed forces. I want to begin by expressing this sentiment. It has always seemed to me that the modern military is the most relentlessly egalitarian of American institutions. Wherever there are human beings, of course, there will be instances of prejudice and discrimination, whether overt or subtle. But I have the intuitive sense that the military, to a greater degree than our civilian institutions, does not give a darn what your last name is, where your parents came from, how much money your family has, what religion you practice, what color your skin is, or if—like me—you happen to speak English with an accent. Perhaps it is because your mission—defending our nation from its adversaries—is so vital. Perhaps it is because this mission often entails great personal risk. Whatever the reason, it is clear that, in the military, where the stakes are so high, what matters is not *who you are*, but *what you can do*. With limited exceptions, you are not treated any worse—or, for that matter, any better—because you are Hispanic, or because your name is José and not Joe. You are measured, above all, by your performance. Competence, courage under fire, character, leadership, devotion to duty, loyalty to country—these are the qualities that matter.

Precisely because the military is the ultimate meritocracy, it comes as no surprise to me that Hispanics are participating in significant numbers—and excelling—in the Army, the Air Force, the Coast Guard, the Navy and the Marine Corps—on active duty, in the reserves, and in the national guard. According to the Department of Defense, Latinos constitute over 11 percent of all active-duty military forces. In 2011, nearly 17 percent of all new recruits were Hispanic, a three point increase from 2005, and this number is expected to increase further in the coming years. Like their peers, Latinos volunteer to serve for many different reasons, and it is important not to paint these motivations with a single, simplistic brush.

As you know, I represent Puerto Rico, which is home to 3.6 million American citizens. Despite not being able to vote for their Commander-in-Chief, residents of Puerto Rico have served in the U.S. armed forces in every conflict since World War I. The unit that arguably best exemplifies this rich and distinguished record of service is the 65th Infantry Regiment, known as the *Borinqueneers*, which won respect and admiration for their performance during the Korean War. Like society more generally, the U.S. military in the 1950s was different than it is today, and the men in the regiment—most of whom hailed from Puerto Rico—not only had to fight the enemy on the battlefield, but also had to overcome negative stereotypes held by their fellow soldiers. I am currently working on legislation to award the *Borinqueneers* with the Congressional Gold Medal, in recognition of their many acts of valor in the face of adversity. The Gold Medal is the highest award that Congress can confer upon an individual or group of individuals for outstanding and enduring achievement, and I believe the 65th Infantry Regiment is deserving of this honor. Only one Hispanic—Puerto Rican baseball legend Roberto Clemente—has ever been awarded the Gold Medal.

More recently, well over 20,000 men and women from Puerto Rico have deployed into combat since the attacks of September 11th, with many serving multiple tours. There is a frame in my office containing photographs of service members from the island who have died in the last 12 years. They are the latest in a long line of Puerto Rican patriots who have fought—and fallen—for our nation. The most recent photo was added on April 6th. On that date, insurgents attacked a convoy of American vehicles in Afghanistan. The attack generated a great deal of public attention because it resulted in the death of a brave 25-year-old Foreign Service Officer from the State Department named Anne Smedinghoff, who had recently graduated from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Less noticed, but no less tragic, the attack also killed a young American soldier from Juncos, Puerto Rico—the exact same age as Anne—named Wilbel Robles. I had the honor to meet Specialist Robles’ wife and children, to thank them for his service, and to present them with an American flag that had flown above the U.S. Capitol.

I want to end my remarks with a short story that, in my view, helps encapsulate the many contributions that Latinos, including residents of Puerto Rico, have made to the armed forces. My legislative aide recently participated in a congressional staff delegation trip to Alaska, where he visited a number of military bases. One of the bases he toured was Fort Greely, an extremely remote—and, in the winter, almost unbelievably cold—post located about 100 miles from the city of Fairbanks. As you know, Fort Greeley is a launch site for anti-ballistic missiles. The missiles are operated by the 49th Missile Defense Battalion of the Alaska Army National Guard, a highly specialized unit that draws talented soldiers from all over the nation. These soldiers constantly monitor intelligence feeds and, in the event a missile were fired from North Korea or

Iran towards the United States, would launch our own missiles to intercept it. As you can imagine, this is not a job for the faint of heart!

My aide and the other congressional staffers were allowed to observe an exercise conducted by members of the battalion in which they responded to a highly complex enemy attack. Well, of the six guardsmen that conducted the exercise, my aide was startled to learn that two of them—a lieutenant and a sergeant—were from Puerto Rico. Moreover, following the exercise, the commanding officer of the battalion told my aide that military police units from all over the country rotate to Fort Greely to conduct base security, and that more MPs come from Puerto Rico than any other U.S. state or territory. I can tell you that my aide almost burst with pride upon seeing and hearing all this.

Now, all of you know that Puerto Rico is a beautiful island in the Caribbean, with lovely beaches and a terrific climate. By contrast, the average winter temperature in Fairbanks, Alaska is about 20 degrees below zero, and it can get as low as 60 degrees below zero. Just thinking about it makes me wince. Nevertheless, Puerto Rico's sons and daughters in uniform have traveled thousands of miles to Alaska, traded *tostones* for reindeer meat, and shorts for long underwear, all to perform this critical mission for our nation. *That* is dedication. And it epitomizes the contributions that hundreds of thousands of Latinos are making to our national defense every single day.

Thank you for your service, thank you for your strength, and thank you for inviting me.