



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
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Buenas noches. Thank you for the kind introduction. I am honored to be here with you to discuss Puerto Rico and its future, to celebrate the richness of Puerto Rican and Latino culture, and to pay tribute to those individuals, whether they are Hispanic or not, who have contributed so much to the Puerto Rican and Latino communities in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and the broader New England region.

Before I begin, I want to recognize a few of my fellow elected officials. The Mayor of Providence, Angel Taveras, is here. Mayor Taveras' parents were born in the Dominican Republic, *la tierra del merengue, la bachata y el mangú.* The Mayor of Fall River, Massachusetts, William Flanagan, is also in attendance, as is the Mayor of Cranston, Rhode Island, Alan Fung. Thank you for being here, gentlemen, and thank you for your service to your cities and to your country. I also want to make sure I acknowledge Dr. Pablo Rodríguez, a fine physician, a community leader, and the founder of Latino Public Radio. Dr. Rodríguez has achieved many things in his life, but I believe he will agree with me that his greatest accomplishment is to have been born in beautiful Fajardo, Puerto Rico!

I want to begin by giving you a few statistics that you might not be aware of and that will help frame our discussion. In 2004, there were over 3.8 million people living in Puerto Rico. Today, there are about 3.6 million. The territory's population, in other words, has declined by over four percent in that brief time period. An exodus of this scale typically takes place only in the event

of a natural disaster. Most of this population loss is attributable to relocation to the 50 states. Every day, people from Puerto Rico leave behind the island they love in search of better economic opportunities and improved quality of life in the U.S. mainland. As American citizens, of course, my constituents do not need a passport to begin a new life in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Florida or Texas. The only thing they require is money for a one-way plane ticket.

This loss for Puerto Rico, naturally, has been a gain for stateside communities. The Puerto Rican population in the states has skyrocketed, from 3.4 million in 2000 to 4.8 million today—a 41 percent increase. There are now over a million more Puerto Ricans living in the states than in Puerto Rico itself. For reasons having to do with culture, geography and climate, migration has been particularly strong to Florida, which is likely to soon overtake New York as the state that is the home to the most Puerto Ricans. But many states, in all regions of this country, have seen large increases in their Puerto Rican populations.

Consider Rhode Island, for example. In 2000, there were 25,000 Puerto Ricans living in the Ocean State. Today, there are 35,000—a 40 percent increase. Likewise, in Massachusetts, the Puerto Rican population has swelled from 200,000 to over 265,000 within the last decade.

So, what lessons do I draw from all of these numbers? Well, simply put, they reinforce the conclusion that Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. territory—which we have tried for 115 years—has failed to provide our people with the quality of life they deserve, and that it is time for this status to be discarded in favor of either U.S. statehood—which I strongly favor—or separate nationhood, which is a democratic and dignified status, but has little support in Puerto Rico and is unlikely to improve living conditions on the island.

Let me briefly explain the two main reasons why I oppose the territory status of Puerto Rico: the lack of political rights and the lack of economic opportunity.

First, let's talk about political rights. Although federal law applies in Puerto Rico, territory status denies us the right to choose the leaders who make our national laws, which govern nearly every aspect of our lives. We cannot vote for president, U.S. senators, and voting representatives in the U.S. House. Pause for a moment to reflect—in the 21st century—how outrageous that is. Consider the fact that, this week and next week, Congress is debating whether to authorize President Obama to undertake a limited military intervention in Syria. Men and women from Puerto Rico proudly serve in this nation's armed forces and would participate in any military action against Syria. Yet, I—their only elected leader in Congress—will not be able to cast a vote for or against such action. This makes me both sad and angry, and I suspect it makes you feel that way too.

Territory status also gives the federal government a license to discriminate against Puerto Rico. The federal laws that treat the residents of Puerto Rico worse than residents of the states are too numerous to count, but they include nearly every social safety-net program, like Medicaid, Medicare, and nutrition assistance. Some have argued that Puerto Rico *should* receive fewer federal funds than the states because its residents are not required to pay federal taxes on income they earn on the island. This argument overlooks that residents of Puerto Rico pay all federal *payroll* taxes, that nearly half of all households in the *states* do not earn enough to pay federal income taxes, and that—through refundable tax credits—federal law actually provides a substantial benefit to working families in the states that it denies to working families in Puerto Rico.

To illustrate, consider a married couple with two children living in Rhode Island that earns \$25,000 a year, and then consider an identical family living in Puerto Rico. Both families owe the same payroll taxes. But the Rhode Island family would receive over \$6,000 in federal tax credits, for a final income of over \$30,000. The Puerto Rico family, because it is ineligible for

these tax credits, takes home less than \$24,000. This is a useful example to bear in mind the next time you hear someone praise the supposed “tax advantages” of Puerto Rico’s territory status.

The current status also harms Puerto Rico in other—less tangible but equally important—ways. Consider the problem of drug-related violence, one of the most serious challenges that Puerto Rico faces. Since becoming Resident Commissioner, I have been pushing the federal government to allocate more law enforcement resources to Puerto Rico, just as the federal government has done along the Southwest border with Mexico and in high-crime cities like Oakland, Detroit, and Philadelphia. These efforts have finally begun to bear fruit, with the Department of Homeland Security deciding—under great pressure from me—to send additional personnel and assets to Puerto Rico.

But let’s be honest with one another. If the appalling violence we have been experiencing in Puerto Rico were taking place in any state, the response from the federal government would be immediate, it would be strong, and it would continue until the problem was alleviated. Even for the most well-intentioned federal officials, the U.S. territories are too often an afterthought.

It is also crystal clear from the evidence that the current status harms Puerto Rico’s economy and, therefore, the quality of life of our citizens, which is perhaps the main reason we are observing the massive population migration to the states that I described earlier. In the nearly 40 years that the federal government has published statistics, Puerto Rico’s unemployment rate has averaged 15.5 percent, risen as high as 24 percent, and almost never dipped below 10 percent. At no point in time has a state *ever* had an unemployment rate as high as Puerto Rico’s. The data on household income reveal a similar pattern. Indeed, whatever economic metric we use, the numbers show that Puerto Rico has lagged far behind the states.

Does anyone in this room think Puerto Rico’s economic performance is lagging because the territory’s people and political leaders are not as hard-working as their counterparts in, say,

Rhode Island or Massachusetts? To the contrary, our island is home to exceptionally bright and diligent people. We have not failed as individuals; our political system has failed us.

That is my case against the current status. Now let me briefly explain why I believe statehood, rather than nationhood, is the right and logical next step for Puerto Rico.

Nationhood would break or weaken the strong economic, political and social bonds that have formed between Puerto Rico and the United States since 1898, a prospect the overwhelming majority of my constituents reject. Statehood, by contrast, would perfect our union. Statehood would deliver to Puerto Rico what all free people deserve: full voting rights, full self-government, and full equality under the law. The state of Puerto Rico would have far more political power than the territory of Puerto Rico—in the form of two U.S. senators, five representatives in the U.S. House, and seven votes for president in the Electoral College. At the same time, in part by ensuring that Puerto Rico would receive equal treatment under all federal programs, statehood would strengthen Puerto Rico's economy and improve our quality of life, as the most recent examples of Alaska and Hawaii demonstrate. Indeed, I have never heard an objective observer argue otherwise.

Finally, I want to address perhaps the most common argument against statehood, which is that Puerto Rico's vibrant culture would be harmed if the territory were to become a state. I could not disagree more. Those who make this argument don't understand, or choose to ignore, how the United States has changed in recent decades. There are now over 52 million Hispanics in the U.S., a nearly 50 percent increase from 2000. By 2039, more than one in four individuals in the U.S. ages 18 to 64 will be Hispanic.

In addition, statehood will not change the fact that Puerto Rico is located in the Caribbean, 1,000 miles from Miami, and the fact that our culture draws upon the influence of Latin America, Africa and Europe, as well as of the United States.

Evolving from an unequal member of the American family to an equal member of the American family will not change who we are as a people. Our history, traditions, language, faith, food, arts, music, love of family, and embrace of life—these things are the essence of what it means to be Puerto Rican. Nothing, certainly not equality under statehood, could ever diminish their role in our lives. Our culture is simply too powerful and too intrinsic a part of who we are. If you need more evidence, just look at tonight’s event. Here you are, proud to be Puerto Rican while living in a state, celebrating Puerto Rican culture, eating delicious Puerto Rican food, and honoring local leaders of the Puerto Rican community in your state. Do you really feel like living in a state and cherishing your Puerto Rican culture are incompatible?

Ahora, permítanme hablarles en español por un momento.

Me encanta compartir con puertorriqueños que viven por acá en los estados pero llevan a la Isla del Encanto en sus corazones. Como congresista, a cada rato me encuentro boricuas que tienen sus hogares en los estados pero siguen sintiéndose puertorriqueños. Y no debe de sorprenderle a nadie, pues con el crecimiento tan rápido de la comunidad Hispana en los Estados Unidos, hoy en día es común escuchar buena salsa, ver un artista nuestro en el cine o en la televisión o encontrar algún chinchorrito donde venden lechón asado y arroz con gandules en cualquiera de los estados. Hasta en Washington, DC ahora hay una guagiita que vende comida puertorriqueña por toda la ciudad.

Y es que nadie puede negar que son muchas las aportaciones que hemos hecho los puertorriqueños a la nación Americana. En las artes, las ciencias, los deportes, la política, los negocios, y el servicio militar; en fin, en todas las áreas. Indudablemente, los boricuas hemos contribuido significativamente en el proceso de crecimiento de los Estados Unidos durante el último siglo, trabajando hombro a hombro con nuestros conciudadanos. No siempre ha sido

fácil, pero por nuestra perseverancia hemos reclamado el espacio que nos merecemos en esta sociedad y que nos hemos ganado por nuestros esfuerzos.

Que Dios los bendiga y ¡QUÉ VIVA PUERTO RICO! Thank you.