



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Remarks as Prepared For Delivery  
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The International Foreign Language Honor Society (Phi Sigma Iota)  
United States Military Academy (West Point), New York  
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Good evening. *Buenas noches*. I want to thank Professor Jonathan Steigman, the Director of the Spanish Program in the Department of Foreign Languages, for his kind invitation to speak. And I want to thank the entire West Point community for the hospitality you have shown me this evening.

This is my first visit to the Academy, and it is humbling to be here. There is so much history and tradition on these grounds. Every cadet on campus walks—or, perhaps more precisely, marches—in the footsteps of giants. Ulysses Grant, George Patton, Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, Douglas MacArthur, Ray Odierno, and Martin Dempsey are among the many West Point graduates whose actions have shaped the destiny of our nation. They saved the Union in the Civil War, fought fascism and communism in Europe and Asia, and are waging a noble and necessary battle against ISIS, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Each of these leaders was once a young and anxious plebe. Every one of them had their mind, body and spirit tested—and ultimately strengthened—at West Point.

Standing here, it is natural to point to those cadets who went on to become generals, presidents and other figures of national importance. But, from my perspective, it is just as important to pause and reflect upon those West Point graduates whose names may never appear in the newspapers or history books, but whose heroism is no less real. I am thinking about the countless platoon and company commanders—young lieutenants and captains—who have trained their soldiers relentlessly for the crucible of combat; who have led their units on patrols, day after day, in harsh climates, through unforgiving IED-infested terrain; who have resisted every natural human instinct and headed towards bullets and bombs rather than away from them; who have risked life and limb to escort young Afghan girls to school or elderly Iraqi citizens to the ballot box; who have sat for countless hours with countless tribal leaders in countless villages, treated them with dignity, respect and patience, and tried—wherever possible—to address their legitimate concerns; and who have formed bonds with their fellow officers and enlisted soldiers of indescribable depth and intensity, bonds that perhaps no civilian like myself can ever truly comprehend.

These are the men and women that have come before you, and these are the men and women that you will become. West Point is a remarkable place for one overarching reason—because it produces outstanding citizens and outstanding warriors. So, please know how proud I am to be in your presence.

I am particularly proud because, this evening, you are being inducted into the International Foreign Language Honor Society—Phi Sigma Iota—for your achievements in the study of Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, and—my personal favorite—

Spanish. I should note that I have met multiple times with Professor Steigman and cadets studying *español* when they traveled to Puerto Rico in order to be immersed in the language. I have enjoyed their visits immensely, and I hope they enjoyed their time in *La Isla del Encanto*.

Tonight, with your indulgence, I want to use this opportunity to speak briefly about Puerto Rico, its political status, and the contributions that island residents have made in the U.S. armed forces for generations. And then, I want to explain why I believe the study of foreign languages and foreign cultures is so personally and professionally enriching, and why it is especially important for military officers.

Let me start with Puerto Rico, which is home to about 3.5 million people, roughly the same population as Connecticut. Puerto Rico is one of five U.S. territories, along with the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa. In 1898, Puerto Rico was acquired by the United States from Spain, following the Spanish-American War. In 1917, Congress enacted a law that granted American citizenship to individuals born in Puerto Rico.

As a territory, Puerto Rico is treated differently than the states. The most obvious difference is that island residents are not able to vote for president, they do not have U.S. senators, and—while I represent them in the U.S. House of Representatives—my voting powers are limited. In short, Puerto Rico is an American jurisdiction, but it lacks the most fundamental feature of American life: democracy.

Think about the contradiction. Over the years, U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines—including countless service members from Puerto Rico—have fought to liberate citizens of foreign nations from oppressive governments and to help those citizens secure democratic rights. Yet, it is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and these same basic political rights—rights that most Americans have come to take for granted—are still not enjoyed by the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico. I will not belabor the point, but I do hope you will reflect on the paradox.

Puerto Rico is different from the states in another respect. Federal law applies in Puerto Rico just like it applies here in New York, but the territory is treated worse than the states under key programs funded in whole or in part by the federal government. Puerto Rico is a wonderful place, filled with hard-working and talented people, and I am deeply proud to be Puerto Rican. But the reality is that, as a result of the unequal treatment Puerto Rico receives because it is a territory, the economic and social situation on the island is very difficult, and hundreds of thousands of my constituents are relocating to the states in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families.

Within Puerto Rico, there has always been an intense debate about whether the territory should seek to become a state, strive to become a sovereign nation, or choose to remain more or less as it is. In 2012, the government of Puerto Rico organized a referendum in which voters expressed opposition to remaining a territory and expressed a preference for statehood. Congress and the President responded to this historic vote by enacting legislation to enable Puerto Rico to hold the first federally-sanctioned status vote in its history, so we can resolve this issue once and for all. I expect that this vote will occur in 2017, that voters will reaffirm their desire for statehood, and

that Puerto Rico will petition Congress to enact a law admitting Puerto Rico into the Union on equal terms with the other states.

In addition to representing Puerto Rico in Congress, I am also the president of the pro-statehood party in the territory. I support statehood because I want my people to have equal political and civil rights under the American flag and because it is beyond reasonable debate that statehood would improve quality of life for my constituents far more than becoming a separate nation or maintaining the status quo.

My support for statehood is also informed by my view that if the people of Puerto Rico are treated equally in war, they should be treated equally in peace too. What do I mean by that? Well, as I alluded to earlier, residents of Puerto Rico have served in the U.S. armed forces in every conflict from World War I to Afghanistan. Indeed, historically, Puerto Rico has had among the highest rates of military service in the country. Nine soldiers and Marines from Puerto Rico have received the Medal of Honor for their actions in Korea and Vietnam. Although the cadets here may be too young to have seen the 1992 film *Scent of a Woman*, perhaps the older folks in the room remember when the main character in that movie, a gruff retired Army colonel played by Al Pacino, proclaimed with absolute conviction: “Puerto Ricans—always made the best infantrymen.” More seriously, as former President George H.W. Bush once put it: “Th[e] patriotic service and sacrifice of Americans from Puerto Rico touched me all the more deeply for the very fact they have served with such devotion even while denied a vote for the president and members of Congress who determine when, where, and how they are asked to defend our freedoms.”

The unit that perhaps best exemplifies Puerto Rico's rich and distinguished record of military service to this country is the U.S. Army's 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, a mostly Puerto Rican unit that 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—known as *Borinqueneers*—not only had to fight the enemy on the battlefield, but also had to overcome negative stereotypes held by their fellow soldiers. Last year, I worked with my colleagues in Congress and we were able to enact legislation to award the Regiment with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor that Congress bestows. In what has been one of the highlights of my congressional career, I attended a ceremony at the White House where President Obama signed the bill into law while surrounded by a dozen surviving *Borinqueneers*. These men are now in the twilight of their lives, but let me tell you—they still looked Army Strong.

This tradition of service continues today. Well over 20,000 men and women from Puerto Rico have deployed into combat since the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, with many serving multiple tours. There is a frame in my office in Washington, DC containing photographs of service members from the island who have died in the last 14 years. They are the latest in a long line of patriots from Puerto Rico who have fought—and fallen—for our nation. I hope this helps you understand why I feel so strongly about the statehood cause.

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Now let me turn to the subject of foreign languages. Given my background, I have a somewhat different perspective on this issue than the typical Member of Congress. In Puerto Rico, Spanish and English are both designated as official languages, and many people are fluent or at least

proficient in English. But Spanish is the predominant language spoken in our homes and communities, in our public schools, and in our local government. I went to a private high school where the quality of English-language instruction was good, I attended both college and law school in the states, and following graduation from law school I worked as an attorney at two law firms in Washington, DC. I still speak English with an accent and mispronounce words on occasion, as you can tell, but I am fully bilingual. By the way, I also learned Portuguese in college, but that was a long time ago and to describe my Portuguese as “rusty” would be far too generous. I like to believe that if I traveled to Portugal or Brazil, it would come back to me. But that may just be wishful thinking on my part.

I can tell you this, though. Mastering a second language—in my case, English—has changed my life completely. On a professional level, it has opened doors of opportunity for me that would otherwise have remained sealed shut. To the extent I have had some achievements in my career, most of those achievements would have been impossible if I did not speak both Spanish and English. English is spoken in over 100 countries, is the language of global business and commerce, and indeed has become the world’s *lingua franca*—that is, the most common means of communication for speakers of different first languages. So learning it is critically important.

On a personal level, knowing two languages has expanded my mental horizon and enlarged my perspective on the world. It has enabled me to form new friendships, to read more books and watch more films, and to gain more enjoyment and fulfillment when I travel. I also believe that knowing two languages has made me more attuned to the diversity of the world, more sensitive to the experiences of others and, therefore, more empathetic to their concerns.

Given my experience, whenever I meet students in Puerto Rico, I urge them to study English as well as Spanish. If they can learn a third or fourth language, like so many young people in Switzerland and other Western European countries do, that is even better. Learning a new language is a form of self-improvement, it is always personally and professionally enriching, and it is never a waste of time.

Now, in your case, I assume that all of you—or at least the vast majority of you—grew up speaking English at home and in school, and are now learning one of the eight foreign languages taught as part of the West Point curriculum.

It may help to put your individual efforts in broader context. According to a recent academic study that was described in *The Washington Post*, the 7.2 billion people on this planet speak over 7,000 languages. That is a rather daunting statistic. But nearly two-thirds of the world's population—that is, about 5 billion people—speak one of only 12 languages as their native language. Chinese has the most native speakers, at 1.4 billion. That is followed by Hindi-Urdu with 588 million, English with 527 million, Arabic with 467 million, Spanish with 389 million, and Russian with 254 million. Portuguese, German and French are also in the top 12, each with 100 to 200 million native speakers.<sup>1</sup> The only foreign language you are studying at West Point that does not make the list is Persian, but that language is highly relevant given the current situation with Iran. And, if you understand Persian, you can more easily learn Dari, which is widely spoken in Afghanistan, another country of considerable strategic importance for the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rick Noack and Lazaro Gamio, The World's Languages, in 7 Maps and Charts, *The Washington Post* (April 23, 2015).



In my view, learning a foreign language is important for all serious students, regardless of their career path, for several reasons. First, recent scientific research indicates that studying another language improves brain function and makes you smarter overall, increasing your ability to concentrate and sharpening your critical thinking.

Second, learning a foreign language tends to expose you to different cultures and traditions, and helps you see the world through other people's eyes. This does not mean that you should unquestioningly accept their viewpoints as morally or ethically valid, of course, but it is always worthwhile to try to understand the reasons why others may perceive the world differently than you do.

Third, learning a foreign language is humbling in the best sense of the term. An important part of the intellectual and emotional maturation process is realizing you are not the center of the universe and that the world is large and complex. Learning a foreign language gives you more confidence, but it also tends to make you less self-centered and self-absorbed.

Now, why is studying foreign languages particularly important for service members? To answer my own question, I want to read you something written by Dr. Abraham Kim, the director of an institute in Montana that, among other things, trains young American military personnel headed to Afghanistan in the local languages and cultures.

Dr. Kim wrote this about his own experience:

One of the most rewarding parts of learning foreign languages is that it helped me to make connections with people overseas. It is amazing how people's perception of Americans abroad change when they speak the language of the host foreign country. For me, it immediately transformed the way people perceived me from an outsider to a friend. Even though initially my conversation skills were quite elementary, it allowed me to build trust more quickly and to establish a stronger relationship with people. In my small way, through the time and resources spent to learn foreign languages, I was showing honor to the mother countries of these languages.<sup>2</sup>

As Dr. Kim points out, and as you know better than anyone, the role of the modern American soldier is complex and contingent on context. In some situations, you need to use traditional military force—rifles, grenades, artillery, tanks and attack helicopters. And you are better trained and better equipped than any other military force in the world for this function. But just as often, an officer needs to put his or her rifle on safety and be more like the mayor of a small town, trying to win over skeptical villagers, arbitrating their disagreements, building relationships, and getting them to trust you and like you so that they will help you. You can do all this through a translator, to be sure, but you are likely to be more effective if you can speak some of the local language. And, at the very least, you will get credit for trying, because making the effort to learn someone's language is a sign of respect, and—as Dr. Kim put it—can instantly convert you from “an outsider to a friend.” There is a good reason why the British Army

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<sup>2</sup> See Dr. Abraham Kim, The Importance of Learning Foreign Languages, *Montana Public Radio* (October 25, 2013).

recently announced that, starting in 2018, officers will need to be proficient in a foreign language in order to be promoted above the rank of captain.

By the way, any good foreign language class will include instruction on foreign culture as well, because to learn a country's language but ignore that country's culture is kind of like having a brain and no heart. And it can be dangerous. The Department of Defense website tells the story of an Army staff sergeant who did a tour in Iraq and learned how important it was for soldiers to understand both the language and the culture. He is quoted as saying:

When I went there, I had no clue. I was completely ignorant [of] the Middle East.

I had no knowledge of it [or] the culture of Islam. There's a lot of things that if you do wrong [in] their culture, then they can take that really offensively. It can antagonize them, and it can actually create a fight that didn't need to happen.

This same point was cited by British Army commanders as a reason for imposing the requirement that officers learn a foreign language as a condition for promotion. These commanders insisted that many of the errors made by British forces in Iraq and Afghanistan were rooted in a lack of understanding of the local languages and the local culture. As one British official put it: "Many of our forebears would have been embarrassed to see how little knowledge we arrived with in Iraq and Afghanistan. In our great grandfathers' time, when they served in those regions, they spoke the languages and knew the people."

The final point I would like to touch upon is the importance of foreign languages in the Army Special Forces, which is only growing in importance and which I suspect a number of you will ultimately join. In his book, *Imperial Grunts*, the author Robert Kaplan quotes a retired Green Beret as follows:

A Special Forces guy has to be a lethal killer one moment and a humanitarian the next. He has to know how to get strangers who speak another language to do things for him. He has to go from knowing enough Russian to knowing enough Georgian and Arabic in a few weeks, depending on the deployment. We need people who are quick cultural studies.

Perhaps the best evidence of the importance that Special Forces attaches to foreign language acquisition is the fact that the battalion coins for the Army's Seventh Special Forces Group, which is assigned to Latin America, are engraved in Spanish rather than English. The coin doesn't say "Special Forces." It says "Fuerzas Especiales."

And to come full circle, I am sure you would not be surprised to learn that the Seventh Special Forces Group has always been a particularly popular destination for talented, resourceful soldiers hailing from the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico.

I will end here. I want to thank you again for inviting me. I wish all of you the best of luck. God speed. Thank you.