

Mr. Ruben Berrios-Martinez

President

Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño

(Puerto Rican Independence Party)

Testimony

Before the Committee on Resources

United States House of Representatives

Hearing on the Report of the President's Task Force

on the Political Status of Puerto Rico

April 27, 2006

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appear before you on behalf of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, a national liberation movement that sustains the inalienable right of the Puerto Rican people to its independence, under any political status. It is necessary to confront and resolve the problem of Puerto Rico's political relationship with the United States.

I

Notwithstanding the President's Task Force Report on Puerto Rico's Status, if past is prologue, I am afraid that the inclusion of the "statehood" option in any bill foreshadows its legislative demise. The historical experience provided by the 1989 Johnston bills and the 1998 Young bill is the best evidence of what I have just said. Moreover, when you consider the failure of these legislative attempts long before the recent immigration issues came to the fore, a great deal of imagination is not necessary to predict what could happen now. If Congress is willing to build a wall along its southern border, would it seriously entertain the notion of incorporating a territory made up of 4 million Latin Americans as a state of the Union? Why would this Congress authorize a referendum offering a Latin American nation of the Caribbean a statehood option it is unwilling to grant?

This has not happened up to now, and it will not happen in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, I propose that, before going any further, any bill—based on the White House Task Force Report—omit any provisions relating to the second referendum it proposes between Statehood and Independence.

Any such bill should be limited to authorize a referendum: U.S. Territory, Yes or No. This is the only way to give it a chance to be approved in both houses of Congress. The version that has informally circulated around the Senate for some time already excludes the second referendum.

Due to time constraints I will not comment on other aspects. Instead, I wish to clearly establish my position regarding a fundamental aspect of the White House Report.

II

This is the first time that a White House Report publicly accepts what *independentistas* have consistently denounced at every step of the way over more than half a century: that “commonwealth” or the so-called *Estado Libre Asociado* constitutes a monumental hoax; that Puerto Rico’s current constitutional arrangement, by any other name is still the unincorporated territory it was before 1952.

It is ironic that, in the 1950s, because of that hoax, there was a revolution in Puerto Rico that cost lives and bloodshed—in Puerto Rico, in Blair House, and in this very Congress.*

During the Cold War years, while the United States used Puerto Rico as a military outpost, the Executive branch publicly proclaimed the alleged virtues of an imaginary “commonwealth.” Now that it no longer serves U.S. security interests, it has become a cesspool of social decay and economic dependence—and a breeding ground for statehooders. Now the White House has acknowledged before the world community what the Supreme Court and this very body in the previously mentioned 1998 Young bill had already recognized: the territorial and transitory nature of Puerto Rico’s existing political arrangement.

Anyone who truly believes in democracy must, as a matter of principle and morality, reject a territorial or colonial system that inherently contradicts the very essence of democratic rule. However, the White House, for the sake of consistency with the American electoral tradition, now recommends that the people of Puerto Rico be asked whether or not it wishes to continue its present territorial arrangement. Nevertheless, the underlying purpose of having Congress “dispose of the territory” shines through in the Report’s recommendation of periodic referenda, if at first the people of Puerto Rico should opt to continue under a territorial arrangement.

We cannot ignore—as these hearings evidence—that there are individuals who at this stage of the 21 st century boldly proclaim a right to a colonial arrangement. This is like espousing a right to subservience or political slavery—an inevitable consequence of five centuries of colonialism! They have not yet realized that in the 21 st century colonialism has been proscribed as an international crime.

Although the imagined “commonwealth” invented by Puerto Rico’s contented colonials does not, indeed, “fit” in the U. S. constitution, as recognized by the White House Report, there is a more powerful, albeit silent, reason for the US to discard any territorial form of “commonwealth” as a permanent solution. That reason is that territorial commonwealth remains an open door to statehood, the bridge to annexation, an open invitation to a dependent people to consolidate its dependency through the political power of the presidential vote and its larger-than-most congressional representation.

This is an offer hard to refuse—for a subordinate Caribbean nation imbued with a mind set of economic dependence. No wonder statehood parties garnered around 15% of the votes in 1952 and now account for nearly 50% -not counting some unabashed supporters of territorial commonwealth in the governor’s Popular Democratic Party who favor it as a statehood “lay-away.”

III

The problem with commonwealth is not just that it is a territory or colony. The problem is, again, that it constitutes a bridge towards statehood. Territorial commonwealth is a state without congressional representation that does not vote for the President. And statehood is undesirable not just because it would thwart Puerto Rico’s economic and spiritual development, but also because it is unacceptable to the United States.

The root problem of a Puerto Rican state for the U.S. is not an immigration problem, nor a multicultural or a “minorities” problem. These are problems that the United States has coped with in the past and will yet find a way of dealing with them in the future. Your problem is that you would become multinational. And the issue is whether your nation would be willing to accept a different nation, such as Puerto Rico, as a state of the Union.

The answer is a self-evident truth. And I have explained it in greater detail elsewhere and reiterated it in a 1997 Foreign Affairs article previously made available to your staff, which I request be made part of the record.

The United States—and particularly this Congress—must face the issue squarely. Puerto Rico’s unresolved status is a time bomb for the U.S. Now is the time to confront this problem and solve it—now that you face an immigration problem, now that you must devise a new policy towards Latin America for the 21 st century. This is a problem that can no longer be swept under the rug where the peril of its ramifications will accumulate. The problem should be resolved now, while rationality can prevail.

The U.S. need not confront problems such as those that afflicted Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union; or those in which Spain

is currently embroiled and which here, in the United States, would become even more complex due to the existence of an enormous Latin American minority within its borders. Moreover, after Puerto Rico, why not the Dominican Republic – where petition for statehood already occurred in the late 19th century? And why not Jamaica, where they already speak English?

The U.S. does not aspire to become a multinational state. Its goal with respect to Latin America could very well be economic integration, but not political integration. The Puerto Rican people must be told the truth.

IV

I recognize that it might be too much to expect you at this point to explicitly establish the requirements necessary for Puerto Rico to become a state –that boil down to assimilation, plain and simple. I propose a decolonization plan that would enable this Congress to fulfill its duty under the Territory Clause of the U.S. constitution and “dispose” of the territory of Puerto Rico.

First, authorize a vote, US territory Yes or No. After all, territorial commonwealth is the problem and cannot therefore be the solution. *Second*, for the sake of simplicity and to avoid past legislative pitfalls, eliminate any notion of a second referendum –if the U.S. is not willing to consider territorial commonwealth as a legitimate option, it should not flirt with a statehood option it is not willing to grant. And *third*, a time table should be agreed upon for the Puerto Rican people to convene a real constituent assembly that would, of course, exclude a territorial formula in any way, shape, or form.

(The term “constituent assembly” is the only salvageable term in the bill submitted by petition by the current governor of Puerto Rico –and even that is a concept historically proposed by the independence sectors.)

The constituent convention I propose is a real one, explicitly omitting any reference to Public Law 600 (1950) and any colonial or territorial option. The valid options it would consider would be independence, free association as defined by international law and the United Nations, and statehood.

Although you could theoretically be confronted with a statehood petition if that option were to prevail in a constituent assembly, I have no doubt that when you begin to tell the truth regarding the real requirements and expectations for statehood; when you begin to rectify your historical policy towards Puerto Rican sovereignty and send the corresponding signals with equal clarity, Puerto Ricans will naturally lean towards the options of independence and free association.

Finally, Latin America is ready for a new era of enlightened policies from its powerful Northern neighbor. The recent Montevideo Declaration of the Socialist International Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean (SICLAC) is indicative of the turn for the better that Hemispheric relations could take with the rational “disposition of the territory” of Puerto Rico in a manner similar to the one proposed. In the words of the Montevideo document:

[SICLAC] welcomes, along with the PIP, the historic step forward made by the formal acceptance on the part of the United States government that Puerto Rico continues to be a territorial possession subject to the full sovereign powers of the US Congress. This political conclusion was made in a document issued by the White House on 22 December 2005 ..., in which it is also recommended that Congress approve legislation which will allow the people of Puerto Rico to overcome their current colonial situation.

I cannot finish this presentation without discharging my obligation to denounce before this committee the assassination by the FBI on September 23 of last year, of independence militant, Filiberto Ojeda Rios; and to demand an end to the impunity of officials responsible for this outrage. This is not the time to slide backwards into violent confrontations of the past.

This Congress has a duty to dispose of the territory, and the people of Puerto Rico have a right to convene a constituent assembly to freely determine its future and put an end to colonialism.

The time is now.

April 27, 2006

Washington, D.C.