



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Statement as Prepared for Delivery  
The Center for Puerto Rico Equality & Advancement (CPREA)  
Spring 2011 Status and Economic Policy Briefing  
The President's Report on Puerto Rico Status: The 51st State?  
2237 Rayburn House Office Building  
*May 3, 2011*

Good afternoon. *Buenas tardes*. Welcome to you all. *Bienvenidos a todos*.

I want to begin by thanking Rafael Rodríguez, the President of the Center for Puerto Rico Equality & Advancement, and the members of CPREA's Board of Directors, for organizing today's discussion on the report recently released by the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status. Rafa: you run a terrific organization with a vital mission, and you should be proud of the work you do.

I also want to welcome our moderator, Jeffrey Farrow, and our four highly distinguished panelists. At the risk of embarrassing him, I would like to say a few words about our friend, Mr. Farrow. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to assert that there are probably no more than a handful of people, living or deceased, who have done as much as Jeff to advance the cause of just treatment for Puerto Rico and the other U.S. territories. Over the years—in his capacity as staff director of the House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, senior aide to President Clinton, and trusted advisor to Governor Fortuño and myself—Jeff has established a record of achievement that is both broad and deep. His intellect and institutional knowledge are widely—and justifiably

—recognized. Less well known perhaps—but just as important, in my view—are his integrity and generosity. Jeff, we are privileged to know you, to learn from you, and to have you with us today.

Because I have already made many public statements expressing my views on both the status and economic components of the White House report, and because I want to do more listening than talking this afternoon, I will limit myself to just a few brief words about the report’s status section.

With respect to status, I think the report gets all the important points right and puts some persistent myths and misperceptions to rest, once and for all. Let me give a few examples:

*First*, the Report states that resolution of the status issue should be an urgent priority, expressly recognizing that “the long-term economic well-being of Puerto Rico would be dramatically improved by an early decision on the status question.” This declaration is directly at odds with the prevailing orthodoxy among the leaders of the local Popular Democratic Party, who are frequently heard to proclaim that the Puerto Rico government should be focusing on economic issues rather than the status issue. The truth, as the Task Force well understands, is that the Island’s economic problems are largely a consequence of our status problem.

*Second*, the Report expresses supports for the government of Puerto Rico conducting a plebiscite process under local law, and recommends that the President and Congress support any fair,

transparent, and swift effort that reflects the will of the people. The Report further states that, if this local process produces a clear result, Congress should act on it quickly with the President's support. In other words, the Report confirms my oft-stated view that, in the wake of the historic House passage of H.R. 2499 and the unprecedented letter from Senators Bingaman and Murkowski to President Obama, the ball is squarely in Puerto Rico's court. The time for us to determine our political destiny—and to do so with a sense of purpose and without fear—is now.

*Finally*, and perhaps most importantly, the Report buries several myths long peddled by the PDP. Most fundamentally, the Report explicitly confirms what every reasonable person knows to be the case, namely that, despite the “Commonwealth” label, Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory subject to Congress's plenary power under the Territory Clause of the Constitution. Moreover, the Report states that, under any version of “Commonwealth”—that is, no matter how its proponents may propose to define or develop this status option—Puerto Rico will remain subject to congressional authority under the Territory Clause. Finally, the Report states expressly that the fundamental basis of the “enhanced commonwealth” proposal—namely, the establishment of a covenant or compact whose terms cannot be later changed by Congress without Puerto Rico's consent—is a non-starter constitutionally, since one Congress cannot bind a subsequent Congress. Simply put, with these thoughtful and well-supported pronouncements, the Obama White House has dealt a final, fatal blow to the notion of an “enhanced commonwealth.”

The government of Puerto Rico has already taken steps to act upon the Task Force's status recommendations. The PNP's Executive Committee, of which I am a member, voted to support one of the procedures proposed by the Task Force, namely a two-stage plebsicite in which

statehood, independence and free association would compete in the first plebiscite, with the winner facing off against the current territory status in the second plebiscite. Currently, the so-called Dialogue Commission—consisting of one representative from each of Puerto Rico’s three main political parties—is meeting with the aim of reaching a consensus about the best way to conduct the plebiscite process.

But let me be crystal clear: whatever the outcome of the Commission’s deliberations, a fair plebiscite process will take place. Thanks to the historic Task Force report, this process will be an exercise in true self-determination, not self-delusion. In other words, the Task Force report has paved the way for Puerto Rico to hold a consequential vote among the four real status choices. The ballot cannot and will not—under any circumstances—contain an “enhanced commonwealth” or “none of the above” option.

I, like so many of you, believe that the current territory status is fundamentally flawed. I, like so many of you, believe that statehood is the best choice on both moral and practical grounds. For us, as we prepare for the plebiscite process, the mission is clear. To educate, to advocate, to inspire, to fight—and to win.

Thank you all again.