

**Transcript of Video: “Statements to the Natural Resources Committee on Occasion of the 6/16/21 Status Hearings”**

**Link to video:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzC7QwYO5dw>

**Introductory Remarks by Dr. Zavira Jordan:**

*Las declaraciones que haré hoy son dirigidas al Comité de Recursos Naturales con respecto a los proyectos de la Cámara de Representantes federal, el H.R. 1522 y el H.R. 2070, y en defensa de las voces de Puerto Rico que votaron en su mayoría en el plebiscito por la estadidad en noviembre 3 del 2020. Hoy, junio 16 de 2021, se discute en el Congreso de los Estados Unidos el futuro de todos los que habitamos en la isla de Puerto Rico. Se discute nuestro futuro y el destino de nuestro estatus. Yo había preparado un mensaje para presentar en las vistas sobre estatus en el Congreso. No estaré deponiendo en persona, pero no quise dejar que el mensaje permaneciese en silencio. Mi mensaje no solo le pertenece al Congreso, sino a Puerto Rico. Así que hoy, 16 de junio de 2021, el mismo día que se están tomando decisiones sobre nuestro bienestar y sobre el futuro de nuestro destino, les entrego mi mensaje. Recuerden que aquí no le estaré hablando al pueblo de Puerto Rico, le estaré hablando a aquellos que tienen nuestro futuro en sus manos. Le estaré hablando a los miembros del Comité de Recursos Naturales de la Cámara de Representantes del Congreso de los Estados Unidos para que nuestras voces sean escuchadas.*

**English Translation:**

The statements that I will make today are directed to the Natural Resources Committee regarding the bills before the U.S. House of Representatives, H.R. 1522 and H.R. 2070, and in defense of the voices of Puerto Rico who voted in their majority in the plebiscite for statehood on November 3, 2020. Today, June 16, 2021, the future of all of us who live on the island of Puerto Rico is being discussed in Congress. Our future and the fate of our status are being discussed. I had prepared a message to deliver in the public hearings in Congress. I will not be testifying in person, but I did not want to let the message remain silent. My message belongs not only to Congress, but to Puerto Rico. So today, June 16, 2021, the same day that decisions are being made about our well-being and the future of our destiny, I deliver my message to you. Remember that here I will not be addressing the people of Puerto Rico, I will be addressing those who have our future in their hands. I will be addressing the members of House Natural Resources Committee in Congress, so that our voices are heard.

**Statement by Dr. Zavira Jordán:**

I speak to all members of the Natural Resources Committee.... How did you come to be here today?

This is my first question.

Clearly, none of you were born into the positions you now find yourselves in.

Some of you might be here because you found yourself enchanted by a career in politics.

Some of you might be here because life, for some strange or unexpected reason, put you into the position you now find yourselves in.

Call it destiny, call it struggle or perseverance.

You are all here today to make decisions for tomorrow.

What are we discussing today?

This is my second question.

You are all here today to make a decision as to the future of more than 3 million people, and more than them, a decision for those who are not born yet, but will be born under the terms of the decision you will make today.

What does it take?

This is my third question.

I understand clearly, as an American citizen, the difficulty of these proceedings.

Last night, on the website of <https://statehood.dc.gov>. I read the blueprint of Washington DC path to statehood. The website outlined what was begun by Mayor Muriel Bowser and the New Columbia Statehood Commission, and what is known as the “*Tennessee Plan*” and I quote, *Under the Tennessee Plan, the prospective state’s electorate votes on statehood and ratifies a constitution, without an enabling act, and then uses this as a basis to petition Congress for admission. This approach was pioneered by Tennessee in 1796 and used by Michigan, Iowa, California, Oregon, Kansas, and Alaska to gain admission to the Union.*

Congress approved statehood for Tennessee, making Tennessee the 16th state of the Union in 1796.

In Puerto Rico, we have done every step according to the Tennessee Plan....

We have a constitution, ratified and put into effect since 1952. We have held a more than one referendum in which the majority of the people have voted, unequivocally for statehood. We have had “dream teams” of representatives to fight for our rights, right there on the doorsteps of congress.

Before the new special delegates under Law 167 of 2020 swear in on July 1<sup>st</sup> of this year to defend our rights; not only statehood, but for our democracy, there was the Democracy Commission, or as we better know it, in the island *La Comision de la Igualdad*, created and put into effect by former governor Ricardo Rossello. This commission was composed of appointees in the task of lobbying in Congress to approve Puerto Rico’s request for statehood.

I ask you, what more does it take to make the will of my people be Heard? If we have done practically everything in our power to attain our Union within the United States.

Does it take sacrifice?...

We have sacrificed our sons, and daughters, and fathers, and mothers... Since 1917, the fateful year in which we became American citizens, we have fought and sacrificed as Americans not only in World War I, but also in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. We have fought and we will continue fighting and sacrificing in every war in which the nature of democracy and liberty is at stake. Together, side by side, with our brothers and sisters, citizens of the United States of America.

So as you see, thousands of Puerto Ricans have sacrificed to defend the American flag, which holds 50 stars, but has room to add one more singular star. If not many more....

Does it take history?

When the United States fought the cold war against Cuba and Russia, we stood as an emblem of democracy and freedom, when so many decided to turn their backs against the United States, until President Ronald Reagan proclaimed his famous words in 1987....

*"Mr, Gorbachev..... tear down this wall."*

I ask the same thing today as former president Ronald Reagan asked then on that fateful day.

Please, tear down this wall of indifference.

Tear down this wall of anti-democracy.

Tear down this wall now, and once and for all....

You might be asking yourselves.....

Maybe before I tear down this wall of indifference, it takes more suffering.

Well, I'll tell you this....

We have suffered enough.

Hurricanes, earthquakes, the terrible imprint of the COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

We have suffered, and we are used to suffering.....

Still, We the people of Puerto Rico, stand strong. Because, United we stand, and divided we fall.

But maybe.... just maybe.... it does not take sacrifice, nor history, nor suffering. Maybe it takes a little bit of Politics. For one cannot be so naïve, so as to think that the principles of which you stand for politically speaking, could possibly be dismissed in such a historical decision.

It lives within you, your political party, it is like the blood which keeps your heart pumping....

But, let me tell you something about my people.....

They could either be democrats or republicans....

I'll tell you this....

Do not be deceived by the fact that only because we speak Spanish and we enjoy the freedoms of this United States, that the majority will immediately choose to be one way or the other; democrat or republican.

Do not be deceived by the fact that many of us are God fearing people, and enjoy the benefits of Capitalism, and hold dearly and close to our hearts our traditions, that we will be one way or the other; republican or democrat.... Most immigrants from Cuba who migrated to Florida after escaping the Castro dictatorship of communism, found their principles to be more attached to that of the Republican Party. But most Hispanic immigrants who migrate for economic or social issues who end up in California or New York have found their principles to be more Democratic leaning.

I have always chosen to remain bipartisan in my leanings when it comes to bringing up the issue of statehood for Puerto Rico. It is a question of simply letting go of those things which have politically bound us to think one way or the other.

Democracy, Freedom, Justice is as bipartisan as it gets.....Truth is equally bipartisan.

We the People of Puerto Rico, American Citizens of this United States, are not willing to wait any longer. All I can tell you is that the People of Puerto Rico will hold in very high esteem those who decide to recognize our voices.

We will not forget the decision made by all of you today. A decision easy to ignore and be indifferent to. Unless your decision makes history, which it will, and so all of your names which abide by our democracy shall be remembered...

Before I conclude, I will ask of all of you, (Hold one finger up and keep it there)

Just one last question...

For all of you elected officials, whether democrat or republican, whether if chosen by destiny, or here, through your own struggles and perseverance through it all..... If the United States does not protect the democracy of its territories, how could it possibly protect itself?

When it comes to doing the right thing, there should be no right or left. There should only be up, equality and justice, or down, indifference.

This is a court, and the decision of this jury, will decide the fate of the Island of Puerto Rico, and 3 million people, and those who are not born yet, but will be born under the terms of the decision you will make today.

The future of this Island belongs to our sons and daughters.

They will stand in place of us, who have failed them.

They are stronger than us, for they have suffered every possible ordeal capable of human suffering. They are not so easily defeated.

They will fight, and they will persevere.

I'll let them speak for themselves.... Thank You.

**Statement by Mr. Juan Camilo Ruiz-Pinzon:**

Dear Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the Committee:

I stand in support of H.R. 1522, the Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act, and to speak against H.R. 2070, the Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act. My reasons to support the Admission Act are simple: respecting the will of Americans as was expressed in the best self-determination mechanism a free country can offer: the ballot box, enfranchising 3.3 million Americans not adequately represented in their government, and to provide full constitutional coverage and equal protection of laws for Americans in Puerto Rico.

H.R. 1522 responds to the call Americans on the island made last November, where they voted YES to Statehood in a referendum modeled after the ones held in Alaska and Hawaii before becoming states. Statehood received more votes than any political candidate or party. It won in all senatorial districts and in 33 of the 40 representative districts. In the 8 that lost, YES to Statehood still got more votes than the candidate who was elected. The last plebiscite showed that: support for statehood overcomes partisan politics and that Puerto Ricans can differentiate between partisan politics and political status.

Although the pro-status quo party won the Legislature, that fact does not and must not erase or ignore that in the same elections, Statehood won. I would like to remind people, who object the results of the plebiscite because they say that 53% is not enough, that it is the absolute majority of the electorate. With lesser margins: laws are passed, judicial and executive appointments are confirmed and politicians, including presidents, are elected. That's called living in a democracy.

The filing and cosponsorship of the Admission Act tells 3 facts that speak for themselves:

First, it was introduced by Puerto Rico's elected representative in Congress, not by another member representing another district. Second, it shows that admitting Puerto Rico as a state is a bipartisan effort representing a diverse movement from all sides of the political spectrum. Third, two members cosponsoring this bill hold leadership positions in the House: Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik.

The Self-Determination Act is flawed and contradictory for the following reasons. It says that the Legislature of Puerto Rico has the inherent authority to call for a status convention but ignores that, by that same authority, our duly-elected leaders have called for referendums. It says that it recognizes our natural right to self-determination, but ignores that Puerto Ricans themselves already exercised that right and chose statehood. It gives the fantasy that there are multiple options when there are only two: statehood or independence. It is not time-bounded, complicates the issue with unfamiliar voting formats and unclear definitions of choices, and tries to bind Congress in a potential exercise of legislative entrenchment; therefore making the proposed referendum non-binding.

Statehood means complete protection of the U.S. Constitution to more than 3 million Americans who somehow, just by living on the Island, lose equal protection of many laws. It means equal justice under the law; self-government; and upholding the ideals and values upon

which the United States was founded, and for which thousands of Puerto Ricans have fought and died for without being able to enjoy them on the Island.

Justice John Marshall Harlan, dissenting in *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), wrote:

“The idea that this country may acquire territories anywhere upon the earth ... the people inhabiting them to enjoy only such rights as Congress chooses to accord to them is wholly inconsistent with the spirit and genius, as well as with the words, of the Constitution.” Justice Harlan was known as the Great Dissenter for his dissenting opinions in cases that restricted civil rights. Dissenting in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, he argued that the constitution was color-blind and that all citizens should have equal access to civil rights. In 1954, he was vindicated in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

And now, it is up to you to vindicate once again a Justice who stood in the right side of history.

### **Statement by Ms. Zuleyka Rivera:**

*¿Por qué Puerto Rico debe ser estado? Puerto Rico debe ser estado porque los ciudadanos puertorriqueños tendríamos los mismos derechos que los demás estadounidenses. Así tendríamos representación en el congreso para todo lo relacionado con los programas de los diferentes departamentos, ya sea salud, educación, trabajo, seguridad, economía, entre otros. Adicional, tendríamos el derecho de votar por el presidente en las elecciones generales cada cuatro años. Esto nos ayudaría a que se defendieran nuestras ayudas, salarios, programas y asistencia en todos los ámbitos. Otro derecho sería el tener salarios justos y razonables como los tienen los otros estados. Siendo el estado 51 no nos sentiríamos discriminados por ser una isla como ocurre actualmente por no tener representación congresional. Tanto nuestros jóvenes y adultos tendríamos mejores oportunidades educativas y laborales. De esta manera nuestros policías, maestros, enfermeros y los demás profesionales estarían mejor pagados y así no tendrían que irse de la isla.*

*De ser Puerto Rico un estado, no seríamos discriminados ni rechazados por ser un territorio como ocurre ahora mismo. Nuestros hombres y mujeres han servido en las fuerzas armadas y así se sentirían bien valorados y aceptados como los demás de los otros estados; pues han sido marginados a pesar de haber dado hasta la vida en muchos frentes de batallas.*

*Para tener todo lo antes expuesto, es necesario que seamos el estado 51 de la nación norteamericana con los mismos derechos y privilegios que tienen los otros 50 estados. La mayoría del pueblo puertorriqueño así lo expresó en las elecciones. Llevamos más de 100 años siendo una colonia y necesitamos la igualdad. A nivel personal yo quiero quedarme aquí, quiero que mi familia y amigos regresen y quiero que volvamos a estar unidos pues se han ido a los estados a buscar un mejor porvenir. ¿Pero y por qué irnos? si es aquí donde debemos estar y sé que si logramos lo que tanto anhelamos que es convertirnos en el estado 51, sucederá.*

### English Translation:

Why should Puerto Rico become a state? Puerto Rico should become a state because Puerto Ricans would have the same rights as other Americans. We would have representation in Congress for everything related to the programs of the different departments, either health, education, work, security, economy, among others. Additionally, we would have the right to vote for the president in the general election every four years. This would help us to defend our aid, salaries, programs and assistance in all areas. Another right would be to achieve fair and reasonable wages as the other states have. Being the 51<sup>st</sup> state, we would not feel discriminated against for being an island as it happens currently for not having congressional representation. Both our young people and adults would have better educational and employment opportunities. This way our police, teachers, nurses and other professionals would be better paid and so they would not have to leave the island.

If Puerto Rico were a state, we would not be discriminated against or rejected for being a territory as it happens right now. Our men and women have served in the military and would feel well valued and accepted like the rest of the other states; because they have been marginalized despite having given up life on many fronts of battles.

To obtain what I have expressed, it is necessary that we are the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the American nation with equal rights and privileges that the other 50 states have. Most of the people of Puerto Rico expressed this in the election. We have been a colony for more than 100 years and we need equality. On a personal level I want to stay here. I want my family and friends to come back and I want them to let us be united again because they have gone to the states to look for a better way to come.

### **Statement by Ms. Bianca Cardona, Esq.:**

Women in Puerto Rico have played an important role in the development of history. If we study women from a social context, women, as in other countries, have been marginalized in the most important sectors, such as politics, employment and equal rights. For years women in Puerto Rico were only considered for domestic work, and were prevented from being part of the development of the society in which they lived in, the culture and above all were limited to the achievement of their ambitions they had as women. However, it is important to note that, although in the first half of history women had a social boom, after the American colonization of the island, women began to capture quotas of social participation, forming an essential part of our history.

That is why today I am proud to be part of this effort, representing women, because just as we have fought in the past to advance women's rights, today I fight for the equality of all Puerto Ricans, socially, economically and politically.

The history that defines the people of Puerto Rico has been one full of stumbles, uncertainties and stagnation. While we have managed to overcome in a Puerto Rico that is suffering an economic and political recession, we must aspire to guarantee a stable future for the generations that are growing up and those to come. The political euphoria that we are experiencing at this time is the

result of people who are tired of coming to a Puerto Rico with limitations and no hope for development.

The people of Puerto Rico, aware of the problem of our territorial relationship, have expressed themselves in different ways to demand that the U.S. Congress take action on our social, political and economic future. The plebiscite on Puerto Rico's status have been one of the main forums in which the people have expressed themselves on the preferential status for Puerto Rico. However, other mechanisms have also been used to raise the issue of Puerto Rico's disadvantaged status in its relationship with the United States.

Today, the United States is composed of 50 states, 48 of which are often referred to as mainland states, to differentiate them from Alaska and Hawaii, both because of their location and because of their insular nature. As are the island territories, such as Puerto Rico.

Since the independence of the thirteen British colonies on July 4, 1776, the United States did not officially stop growing until President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the incorporation of Alaska and Hawaii as the 49th and 50th states, respectively. The construction of the country, mainly throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, was the result of various forms of territorial expansion. On one hand, much of the territory was acquired through purchases and transfers of British, French, Spanish and Mexican territories; among other examples, we find the cases of the purchases of Louisiana and Florida. On the other hand, the United States acquired some territories by conquest from other political entities, such as the Republic of Texas or the United Mexican States.

In the case of Puerto Rico, it became a part of the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War, which culminated in the Treaty of Paris of December 10, 1898, between Spain and the United States. The Treaty of Paris set a precedent for the United States as it was the first time it acquired a territory without the intention of making it a state. The expansionist policy of the United States in the 19th century, before the Spanish-American War, reflected a theory: that of incorporation as a territory in preparation for statehood. All territories acquired multiplied their original population and dissipated boundaries with a view to integrating them as members of the American nation.

The Treaty of Paris provided that the political conditions and civil rights to be conferred on the territories acquired under the treaty would be determined by Congress. This idea practiced by the United States in the colonization of Puerto Rico was contrary to the value it preached as a nation, since it was precisely on those principles that it based its independence.

[Other states have adopted admission mechanisms, such as the Tennessee Plan, which has achieved the admission of 34 territories, including the State of Tennessee.] The Tennessee Plan is a strategy that was founded in 1795 for the incorporation of Tennessee as a state of the Union. As part of the process, a referendum was held in which the majority of the people voted in favor of admitting Tennessee as a state. A law was then passed to elect a legislature with two senators and representatives, who would go to the United States Congress to represent the mandate of the people and achieve the incorporation of Tennessee as a State of the Union.

For its part, Puerto Rico has taken different mechanisms that emerge in the self-determination of the people to determine its political future. As part of these mechanisms, Puerto Rico passed



legislation in 2017 to adopt the Tennessee Plan and held a referendum of the people, where Statehood obtained 97% of the voters' support. Accompanied by that process, the Act of Admission was filed by Resident Commissioner Jennifer González Colón. Due to the extraordinary circumstances that occurred with the atmospheric event of Hurricane María and the devastation it left on the island, unfortunately the process was hindered.

Puerto Ricans were recently granted the opportunity to express themselves again, this time under a particular plebiscite, where the people were asked if they wanted Statehood, Yes? Or No? As a result of the plebiscite, Statehood obtained 52.5% of the votes. [Following this, the legislature approved Laws No. 1654 and No. 1675, for the adoption of the Tennessee plan, this time with a delegation elected by the people of Puerto Rico. The delegation is composed of 6 members, 2 Senators and 4 Representatives, who have the duty to represent the mandate of the people of Puerto Rico expressed in the status plebiscite of November 3, 2020.]

Accompanying this process, the Puerto Rico Admission Act was filed under HR 1522, by our Resident Commissioner, Jennifer Gonzalez and Florida Representative Darren Soto. The bill was filed on March 2, in commemoration of the 104th anniversary of the granting of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans. Since the filing of HR 1522, it has the support of 60 members of Congress , including senators and representatives, such as Alaska Representative Don Young.

Finally, Puerto Rico finds itself in a historic scenario, where for the first time, after 123 years as a territory of the United States, and more than 500 years of colonialism, Puerto Rico will have the opportunity to be admitted as a State of the Union. Puerto Rico has in its favor the number of U.S. citizens residing in the territory, with approximately 3 million citizens according to the most recent census. This would represent a significant electoral weight, which would give it more political power than 25 states in the nation.

For all the aforementioned reasons, the Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act, HR 1522 should be taken into consideration in order for the Puerto Rican people to be able to ratify the results of the past plebiscite.

Thank you for your time.

**Statement by Mr. Ricardo Marrero-Passapera:**

Puerto Rico has been a territory for more than 500 years, first of Spain and now of the United States. Therefore, it should not be foreign to our will that the status is an issue that moves us as Puerto Ricans. As a result of the discussion on the status, six (6) plebiscites have been held to decide between the options of Statehood (annexation), Independence (separation) or Commonwealth (current status), as well as the approval of evaluation committees on the status of Puerto Rico.

The Foraker Act of 1900 formally represented the non-incorporation of territories as a state, thus granting greater powers to Congress and the President to administer the territory. This unequal treatment over the other states of the nation led to the argument that Puerto Rico was treated as territory and not as part of the union. Under this premise and through the insular cases the legal

creature of the United States Congress, was named "unincorporated territory" was established and validated, maintaining as a foundation that we belong to, but are not part of [the United States]. This doctrine was validated by Associate Justice Edward Douglass White in his opinion offered in the case of *Downes v. Bidwell*, for the controversy that asserted whether it was constitutional for Congress to impose through the Foraker Act a tariff on trade between Puerto Rico and the United States, in light of the Uniformity Clause.

The great changes resulting from the military conflicts between the countries of the Western Union, and the intervention of the United States in these conflicts, led to changes in the civil and political order in Puerto Rico. President William Howard Taft took the initiative to propose the granting of American citizenship for Puerto Rico, which culminated in the approval of the Jones-bill, which was finally signed by President Woodrow Wilson on March 2, 1917. This bill was the product of great controversy, due to the conditions that were imposed, since it would grant citizenship without the motivation of admitting Puerto Rico as a state.

This act leads us to argue about the violation of the value of equal treatment of American citizens. The first violation we must recognize is not having the right to vote for those members of Congress who pass federal laws that apply to Puerto Rico, not having fair representation in Congress, and not being able to vote for the President of the United States.

Interpreting what is expressed in the Constitution of the United States, this closes the doors to the millions of Puerto Ricans residing on the island, to have full equality as the rest of their fellow citizens, by applying federal laws without the consent of the governed, with the argument that the right to vote will be recognized only to the residents of the states.

Under the colonial condition imposed on us and not being a state, Puerto Rico does not have the right to the electoral college because the territories do not meet the requirements established by the 14 Amendment, which establishes that: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof are citizens of the United States and of the States in which they reside. [...]", so the territories are not part of the United States for constitutional purposes.

Under this premise presented by the Congress, we allude to international law on the establishment of the "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" ratified by the General Assembly in December 16, 1966.

Under the Treaty of Paris, the Congress of the United States is granted plenary powers over the territory, and it was provided that it would have the responsibility not only to determine the civil rights, but also the political status of its inhabitants. In this matter we must mention that Congress has not taken forceful action to define Puerto Rico's status under the regimes of international law and the U.S. Constitution.

These rights began to be discussed after the approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948, adopted by the United Nations (UN). This declaration emphasizes the equality of rights that all human beings should enjoy. Article 2 states: "No distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be an independent country, a territory or under any other

limitation of sovereignty. By this declaration Puerto Ricans residing on the island should have equal rights and duties as citizens residing in one of the fifty (50) states.

We must mention that the precedents set in cases subsequent to the creation of the Commonwealth create ambiguity in the fact that Congress continues to have plenary powers over and above the sovereignty that was recognized to Puerto Rico in 1952. The final determination made by the Supreme Court in the case of *Puerto Rico v. Sanchez-Valle*, and the establishment of the PROMESA Act, which creates the Fiscal Oversight Board, demonstrated the permanence of Puerto Rico as a territory subject to the plenary powers of congress, which violates international agreements on the self-determination of peoples and the value of equal rights.

Finally, we would like to allude to the Constitution of the United States, where in its preamble establishes the expression "We the People of the United States"...

This declaration marks the core value of the nation's constitution and the intent by which it is created. The cases brought to abolish slavery in the nation, as well as other movements such as the petitioning for women's right to vote, used this consensus to argue that the term "We the people" refers to the inclusion of all American citizens in the rights outlined in the U.S. Constitution.

Therefore, we believe it is meritorious to take action on what this resolution proposes, to promote equal rights and social justice for U.S. citizens residing in Puerto Rico, so that they may enjoy the right to vote for the president of the United States. It is important that the U.S. Congress take action on the referred case and enforce the rights of the Constitution for all U.S. citizens with equality.

The bills before the House Committee on Natural Resources, chaired by Congressman Grijalva, allude to taking action in favor of the freedom of determination of the people of Puerto Rico on the future of their relationship with the United States. Certainly, the guarantee of the right to self-determination of the people of Puerto Rico has been guaranteed in all the processes of expression of the people through the various plebiscites held since 1967, until the last one held on November 3, 2020. But in order for the value of the people's right to self-determination to be realized, Congress has the duty to take action in favor of the democratic expression of Puerto Ricans residing here on the island.

HR 1522, introduced by our only congressional representative, Jenniffer Gonzalez, and Congressman Darren Soto, for consideration by the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives, sets precedents in the history of the admission of territories as a state of the union. It also ensures concrete action on the mandate sent by the people of Puerto Rico last November 3 in favor of statehood, with the ratification of the results and the approval of the President of the United States.

In contrast with HR 2070, presented by Congresswomen Nydia Velázquez and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who presented a bill that seeks the creation of a status convention that is unprecedented in the processes of admission of territories to the nation, and historically only the colonies who have wished to betray themselves towards the formation of an independent Republic, have accepted it.

With much respect to this Congress and members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, I submit that HR2070 does not represent the will of the people and I request that it not be taken into consideration. The only piece of legislation that provides the tools for the advancement of the

Puerto Rican people and that represents the will of the majority of the Puerto Rican people is HR 1522.

Thank you.

**Statement by Mr. Rodney Ríos:**

I would like to begin by stating that it is my sincere hope that this brief message helps to state the facts and clear the air regarding the issue of Puerto Rico's status. Too often in the status debate we get lost in a labyrinth of myths, contradictions and mutual recriminations, which in the end help no one and contribute little or nothing to a solution. Former president John Adams once remarked that "facts are stubborn things". I wish then to focus exclusively on the facts of this issue.

First, statehood for Puerto Rico does not entail annexation. From the historical record, it is clear that through the Treaty of Paris in 1898 the United States annexed Puerto Rico. After annexation there arose the question of what Puerto Rico's status would be in regards to the rest of the country. This question was not pertinent before 1898; before then it was understood by our founders that all territories that were acquired permanently by the United States would, eventually, become states of the union as long as they met certain criteria. The requisites for statehood are and were that the territory had a republican form of government, the resources to maintain a state government and the desire of that Territory's people to become a State of the union.

It was only after the acquisition of Puerto Rico that the idea of permanent territories, colonies to put it another way, reemerged as an option. Sadly, I believe this was so because of the stain in our country of racial discrimination, an evil which we have long fought to defeat. As such, it comes as no surprise that the Supreme Court concocted through judicial hocus pocus the idea that some territories were to be incorporated and destined for statehood, and that others were to be unincorporated and would be forever cursed to be at the mercy of the changing whims of Congress. Now, this sounds very different to the principles of self-determination that have guided this country since the Founding.

In any case, President Calvin Coolidge once stated in relation to Puerto Rico that "It would not be difficult to demonstrate that the existing status of Puerto Rico is much more liberal than any other status in its history; that its people have more control of their own affairs, with less external intervention; that its people enjoy freedom and the protection of the law." He was right. Since annexation the Puerto Rican people have been free and made great progress. Imperfect progress, but progress, nonetheless. The simple fact of the matter is that Puerto Rico is better after annexation than before.

However, one of the fundamental principles of a free society is that citizens vote for the people that make and execute their laws. There can be no freedom without popular sovereignty; in America the people govern. And here lies the crux of the issue. Puerto Ricans are American citizens; and citizenship in America is supposed to be

only one. Furthermore, being citizens for more than a century, it has been long understood in American history, that a political community composed of American citizens has an inalienable right to statehood. Moreover, as former Puerto Rican Governor Rafael Hernández Colón once noted, there has never been a political entity composed of American citizens that has separated

from the Union. This must also be taken together with the fact that Puerto Ricans have never favored independence. Independence, then, would not only be antidemocratic, but it contrary to our traditions and constitutional order.

This brings us to the 2020 plebiscite. For a long time it was teased by the enemies of political equality that statehooders should organize a simple yes or no vote on statehood to solve the issue once and for all. This was done in 2020, and the people voted by a majority for statehood. States, as is clear from the historical record, create themselves before admission to the Union by whatever mechanisms they deem fit.

Historically speaking, Puerto Ricans have voted only to create a local government to preserve that commonwealth status, and since 2012 the people have voted for statehood on numerous times. As such, to pretend to continue a fruitless and pointless discussion by including independence or free association in a self-determination process, is a mockery of the democratic vote of Puerto Ricans. It is also an ignorance of the history of Puerto Rico and our deep commitment to permanent union.

We in Puerto Rico are not asking for alms, or to be maintained. Do not listen to the voices of gridlock from the extreme right or left. We Puerto Ricans are not victims; we have borne the price of freedom in every war from World War One to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are a free, proud and noble people. What we are demanding as our right, as our heritage, is for a chance to have our political rights and powers as a State of the Union. To have equal footing, as the doctrine is called. To have the power that all other states have through voting representation and the Tenth Amendment protections of residual and shared sovereignty of a State in relation to the federal government.

In sum, Puerto Rico has an organized political system, a desire for statehood, and the resources to maintain a state government. All requirements for admission have been met; additionally, Puerto Ricans do not want independence, and they are American citizens. It would

be a shame if this Congress were to end without heeding the voice of the people and it decided to side with obstructionists and in favor of the discriminatory precedents of a bygone era. We have come very far as a nation; it would be a stain in our national honor to keep citizens without representation at this day and age. I hope this Congress is wise enough to approve a federal statehood plebiscite which will resolve this issue once and for all. We are all ready and a century too late. Thank you for your time.