

May 25, 2023

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Speaker  
U.S. House of Representatives  
H-232, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem S. Jeffries  
Democratic Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
H-204, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
S-230, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Republican Leader  
U.S. Senate  
S-221, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker McCarthy, Majority Leader Schumer, Leader Jeffries, and Leader McConnell:

As America prepares to honor the courageous service and sacrifice of our veterans this Memorial Day, we write to urge you to validate America's founding principles of government by consent of the governed and resolve Puerto Rico's political status. After nearly 125 years of becoming a U.S. territory, the inequality inherent to Puerto Rico's current political status dishonors and disregards the sacrifices of all Puerto Rican service members who have served since World War I (WWI) to today in every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Among the hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans that have served are the U.S. Army's 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, known as the "Borinqueneers." Their valiant defense of America's freedoms throughout WWI, WWII, and most notably in the Korean War earned the Regiment's soldiers one Medal of Honor, nine Distinguished Service Crosses, approximately 250 Silver Stars, over 600 Bronze Stars, and more than 2,700 Purple Hearts. Then on April 13, 2016, the U.S. House and Senate presented the Borinqueneers the Congressional Gold Medal for their distinguished service. After the enactment of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, the Regiment's contributions to our Nation were further enshrined with the designation of April 13<sup>th</sup> as National Borinqueneers Day.

The legacy of the Borinqueneers is undeniable, as they proudly defended the U.S. while simultaneously facing discrimination as the only all Hispanic segregated unit that consisted almost entirely of Puerto Rican service members. Despite the rightfully earned commendations and honors granted to the Borinqueneers, the fight to end the discrimination against Puerto Rican service members and all U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico is far from over. Currently over 90,000 veterans live in Puerto Rico and every day they are denied equal rights, benefits, and representation merely for residing on the island.

Puerto Rico's territory status denies U.S. citizens equal representation at the federal level with only a single non-voting member in the U.S. House, no representation in the U.S. Senate, and the inability to vote for our Commander in Chief. This inequality has led to an estimated 700,000 residents leaving Puerto Rico in the last two decades, seeking

equal treatment and better opportunities in the U.S. mainland.<sup>1</sup> This devastating exodus has reduced the island's vitality, ingenuity, and workforce, further exacerbating the unjust conditions of being the largest and oldest colony of the U.S.

The continuing discrimination against service members and all U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico is inherently unjust, undemocratic, and unacceptable. Only by promptly providing the island's residents a means to decide their political future can Congress truly honor the sacrifices the Borinqueneers and other Puerto Rican service members have made to defend America's freedom and democracy. Since 2012, voters in Puerto Rico have repeatedly rejected the island's territory status at the polls and favored statehood among the non-territory options. Most recently in 2020, 52.52 percent of voters on the island said "Yes" to Puerto Rico's admission as a state.<sup>2</sup> So it is undeniable that voters on the island want and are ready for change.

Last year the House of Representatives, finally responded to this demand for change by passing H.R. 8393, the *Puerto Rico Status Act*. H.R. 8393 would have provided voters on the island a choice for their future political status between the non-territorial options of "Statehood," "Independence," or "Free Association" with the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Despite bipartisan support with a vote of 233-191,<sup>4</sup> and due to the limited time that remained the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, the proposal was not discussed in the Senate. However, now in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress you have a new chance to do what is right by holding hearings and taking action on a reintroduced version of the legislation, H.R. 2757. While this bill is not perfect, it does represent a significant step forward in the legislative process, and Congress must build on and further refine that foundation.

For over a century, a key part of U.S. national security strategies has been the role played by America's five territories, including Puerto Rico. As the current great power competition with China and others has intensified, the value and importance of Puerto Rico must not be taken for granted. Puerto Ricans have served America's military proudly and valiantly, and we are prepared to continue doing our part to ensure America remains a beacon of democracy and freedom throughout the world.

However, Congress must deal with the unfinished business of Puerto Rico's political status to settle the question definitively and continue strengthening its geopolitical standing. America simply cannot afford to continue keeping Puerto Rico in a weak, uncertain and underdeveloped situation under the current territory status. Resolving this question will not only honor the sacrifices of our fallen, but will also demonstrate to the world America's enduring commitment and unwavering resolve to support democracy and freedom.

Therefore, we urge you to truly honor the service and sacrifice of the Borinqueneers and all other Puerto Rican service members on this Memorial Day. Support and pass legislation to provide the 3.1 million U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico a fair and binding choice

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<sup>1</sup> Génesis Ibarra Vázquez, *The island "loses" 174,000 residents*, El Nuevo Dia, Aug. 17, 2022, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/news/story/the-island-loses-174000-residents/>.

<sup>2</sup> P.R. State Elections Comm'n, *Official Plebiscite Results 2020* (Mar. 12, 2021), [https://elecciones2020.ceepur.org/Escrutinio\\_General\\_93/index.html#en/default/PLEBISCITO\\_Resumen.xml](https://elecciones2020.ceepur.org/Escrutinio_General_93/index.html#en/default/PLEBISCITO_Resumen.xml).

<sup>3</sup> Puerto Rico Status Act, H.R. 8393, 117th Cong. §5(a)(2) (2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Roll Call 529, Bill No. H.R. 8393, On Passage Puerto Rico Status Act*, Clerk of the U.S. H. of Representatives, <https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2022529> (last viewed May 11, 2023).

to finally resolve the island's political status. Thank you in advance for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

MG Antonio Vicens, U.S. Army  
National Guard, Ret.

BG Victor Pérez, U.S. Army National  
Guard, Ret.

BG Juan Rosado-Ortiz, U.S. Army  
National Guard, Ret.

COL Juan Rivera, U.S. Army, Ret.

COL Rafael Rodriguez-Mercado, U.S.  
Army

COL Adolfo Menendez Jimenez, U.S. Air  
Force, Ret.

COL Arnaldo Claudio, U.S. Army, Ret.  
(Combat Veteran)

COL Carlos Quiñones, U.S. Air Force  
National Guard, Ret.

COL Luis Berrios-Amadeo, U.S. Army  
Reserves, Ret.

LTC Dennis Freytes, U.S. Army, Ret.

CPT Anthony Paul Greco, U.S. Army,  
Ret. (Combat Veteran)

CW5 Carlos S. Quinones, U.S. Army, Ret.  
(Combat Veteran)

CW4/W4 Nixon Rosado Vélez, U.S.  
Army, Ret.

SSG Hector Ramos, U.S. Army, Ret.

SSG Eugenio Matias, U.S. Army

SFC Wilfredo Rivera, U.S. Army, Ret.  
(Gold Star Father)

SFC Angel Aponte, U.S. Army, Ret.  
(Combat Veteran)

SFC Nelson Velazquez, U.S. Army, Ret.

SFC Jimmy Hernandez, U.S. Army,  
Ret.

HMC Santos "Jay" Martinez, U.S. Navy,  
Ret.

SFC Jose O. Rivera, U.S. Army  
National Guard, Ret.

SSgt Justin Vélez-Hagan, U.S. Air Force

SGT Joel Segarra Ramos, U.S. Army,  
Ret.

SGT Hugo Guzman, U.S. Army

PO2 Gerardo Ramirez Vélez, U.S.  
Navy, Ret.

CPL Javier Mandry, U.S. Army

SPC Felipe Pineiro-Lopez, U.S. Army

SPC Jesus Guzman, U.S. Army, Ret.

PFC Juan Gonzalez, U.S. Army, Ret.

SA Luis Abraham Lausell, U.S. Navy