

Speech on the House Floor Concerning the 88th Anniversary of US Citizenship for Puerto Ricans

March 2, 2005

Congressman Luis G. Fortuño

At the end of the Spanish American War in 1898, Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States and became a territory under the Territorial Clause of the US Congress. It was not until 1917, by virtue of the passage of the Jones Act, that people born in Puerto Rico were granted the privilege of becoming citizens of this great Nation.

On March 2, 1917, exactly 88 years ago, Puerto Ricans became U.S. Citizens. We value our citizenship dearly, and over the years, Puerto Ricans have honored their citizenship by making major contributions to our great Nation. We have distinguished ourselves in the arts, the sciences, and sports; but most important of all, courageous Puerto Rican men and women have served our Nation proudly, defending our valued principles of freedom around the world.

Puerto Ricans have served with honor and distinction in the Armed Forces of the United States in all wars and conflicts since 1917 to this day, where 3,400 of our men and women are active in our Nation's war on terrorism, including 825 soldiers currently serving in Iraq.

Four Puerto Ricans have received the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award given for valor on the battlefield. Today, I want to again honor these four Puerto Rican heroes:

Private First Class Fernando García, USMC, Korean War, 1952
Private First Class Carlos J. Lozada, US Army, Vietnam War, 1967
Captain Euripides Rubio, US Army, Vietnam War, 1966
Specialist Hector Santiago-Colon, US Army, Vietnam War, 1968

18,000 Puerto Ricans served in World War I

During World War II, 65,034 Puerto Ricans, including 200 Puerto Rican women, served in the Armed Forces. More than 61,000 Puerto Ricans served in the Korean War, during which the 65th Infantry Regiment, comprised mostly of Puerto Rican soldiers, distinguished themselves for bravery. I would like to quote General Douglas MacArthur, who said in Tokyo on February 12, 1951: "The Puerto Ricans forming the ranks of the gallant 65th Infantry on the battlefields of Korea...are writing a brilliant record of achievement in battle and I am proud indeed to have them in this command. I wish that we might have many more like them."

More than 48,000 Puerto Ricans served in Vietnam. Of these, over 430 were killed and over 3,000 were wounded.

Close to 2,600 Puerto Rico National Guard volunteers, and US Army Reserve soldiers were mobilized for Desert Storm.

Puerto Ricans have always responded to the call of defending our Nation, and have had no qualms in shedding their blood on the battlefields to defend the cause of liberty.

On February 15 of this year, I visited Private First Class Emanuel Meléndez-Díaz, from Comerío, Puerto Rico, who is in intensive care in Walter Reed Army Medical Center from injuries suffered in Iraq as part of our global war against terrorism. I was deeply moved by the intense pride his parents showed in their son, and in the sacrifice he has made for our Nation. And yet I could not help but think that Private First Class Emanuel Meléndez-Díaz had not been able to vote for his Commander-in-Chief because he is Puerto Rican. This is morally wrong.

Today we commemorate the 88th anniversary of Congress granting US citizenship to the people of Puerto Rico, yet we still cannot vote for our President, cannot vote in this Chamber, cannot vote on legislation that affects us. Congress has an unfinished agenda with Puerto Rico. The four million US citizens that live in Puerto Rico should finally be given the opportunity to make an educated, fair, and democratic choice regarding their final status preference. After 106 years of territorial status and 88 years of being US citizens, we are tired of waiting. The people of Puerto Rico deserve better. We have earned our right to be heard.