

PROVIDING FOR CONSIDERATION OF H. RES. 78, PERMITTING DELEGATES AND THE RESIDENT COMMISSIONER TO CAST VOTES IN THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE -- (House of Representatives - January 24, 2007)

(Mr. FORTUÑO asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. FORTUÑO. Mr. Speaker, as the only Republican afforded a vote by House Resolution 78, I rise to thank my distinguished colleague from Maryland, Majority Leader *Hoyer*, for introducing this resolution granting the five representatives of the nonstate areas of our Nation voting representation in the Committee of the Whole, but, perhaps even more importantly, for opening up the discussion of the status of the U.S. possessions and territories. That is what is going on here today.

I also rise to urge my colleagues who can exercise their right to vote on this amendment to the rules to give the representatives in the House from the District of Columbia, Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto

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Rico the only meaningful representation we can provide our constituents in the House of Representatives. However, I do this with some reluctance since I share some legal concerns as well as fervor, because this proposed representation will be so limited: A vote on amendments to bills in the Committee of the Whole with a revote in the event that our votes become decisive.

What the House really needs to do for the almost 4 million U.S. citizens that I represent before the Senate, the executive branch, as well as this House is to authorize a process of self-determination for Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico has been a U.S. territory since 1898, and we still remain disenfranchised. Puerto Rican Americans have been citizens since 1917, and we have served with distinction and honor in our Armed Forces and have defended our Nation in every battlefield around the world. Actually, as we speak, we have lost 54 of our constituents so far in the gulf war on terrorism.

What my constituents really deserve is the opportunity to seek equal representation and equal responsibilities in the Federal system or, alternatively, the freedom of a sovereign nation, even though the latter option has very little support among my constituents.

I am pleased that 110 of my colleagues in the last Congress agreed, including leaders on both sides of the aisle, such as the distinguished majority leader, Mr. *Hoyer*, to cosponsor the Puerto Rico Democracy Act. I am also heartened that the chairman of the committee of jurisdiction, the gentleman from West Virginia (Mr. *Rahall*) and the ranking minority member,

the gentleman from Alaska (Mr. *Young*) have indicated that legislation for this purpose is a priority this year.

The question now, however, is whether to give all the territories and the District of Columbia as much representation for our constituents that my four nonstate colleagues and I can constitutionally provide: A vote in the Committee of the Whole that will not be decisive on the amendments. Together, the five of us represent 4.9 million U.S. citizens, Americans who fight and die for the United States every single day. I respectfully request that they deserve this representation, limited as it may be, until our status situation is fully addressed, as I hope it will be fully addressed in the near future.