Statement of the **Hon. José F. Aponte-Hernández,** ***Speaker*** of the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico, on H.R. 900 and H.R. 1230

On behalf of the nearly 4 million U.S. citizens who reside in Puerto Rico, which my fellow 50 representatives and I proudly and responsibly represent in our House of Representatives, let me recognize the importance of this hearing and the significance of the legislative process which in earnest begins today. Thank you for responding to the petition brought forth to you by our Legislative Assembly.

This morning, I come before you not to express my personal position and choice with regards to what I consider to be the most beneficial status option for the people of Puerto Rico; but rather, as an opportunity to inform the United States House of Representatives of the three main initiatives undertaken by the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico throughout the past two years with regards to the political status of Puerto Rico and the basis for these.

First and foremost, I would like to share with you the historic achievement originated and spearheaded by the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico that resulted in the measure referred to as the ***Substitute to House Bills 1014, 1054 and 1058***[i] (Enclosure 1). As per Section 7 of that substitute bill, the people of Puerto Rico would have been provided with the opportunity to vote yes/no on the following proposition:

> We, the People of Puerto Rico in the exercise of our right to self-determination, demand from the President and the Congress of the United States of America, before December 31, 2006, an expression of their commitment to respond to the claim of the People of Puerto Rico to solve our political status among fully democratic options of a non-colonial and non-territorial nature.

As anyone involved may attest, that measure was a product of honest and frank negotiations with fellow representatives of the three delegations in the House (thus representing the traditional status options in Puerto Rico), as well as with the Governor of Puerto Rico by means of his party's minority leaders both in the House and Senate. The result was a status bill which garnered the ***UNANIMOUS APPROVAL*** in both chambers.

That included not only the vote of members of the majority pro-statehood New Progressive Party; but also, those of the minority pro-independence Puerto Rican Independence Party and the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party. Sadly in an unexpected move, Governor Acevedo-Vilá vetoed the measure after ***all*** of his conditional amendments were included and after his minority leaders had indicated that the Governor would sign the aforementioned measure. History and the people of Puerto Rico will judge him for not being truly committed in addressing this issue and for having fear of the future and the inevitable consequences of change and self-determination.

It is noteworthy to point out that eight and half months later, the first recommendation proposed in the Report by the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status was almost identical to what was proposed in the Substitute to House Bills 1014, 1054 and 1058. Definitely, the historic consensus first achieved in our House of Representatives provided

the President's Task Force with *the* keystone from which to begin an irreversible process that would result in Puerto Rico's self-determination.

Second, on April 21, 2005, the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico approved House Concurrent Resolution 25 (Enclosure 2), which petitioned

> Congress and the President of the United States of America to respond to the democratic aspirations of the United States citizens of Puerto Rico in order to ensure that with all deliberate speed, they provide us with an electoral method through which we, ourselves, may choose which shall be our political relationship with the United States of America, if any, from among fully democratic non-territorial and non-colonial alternatives.

Third and finally, on February 12, 2007 the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico approved House Concurrent Resolution 102 (Enclosure 3), which requests

> the 110th Congress to respond to the democratic aspirations of the people of Puerto Rico with all deliberate speed, accepting the recommendations contained in the Report of the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status, of December 22, 2005, providing through legislation for the holding of a plebiscite by virtue of which the people of Puerto Rico may express themselves regarding if they desire to continue as a territory of the United States of America, subject to the plenary powers of Congress, or if they desire to undertake a constitutionally viable course of action towards a permanent status that is neither territorial, nor colonial and to order the establishment of a Joint Committee, bestow it with its duties and for other purposes.

As you may see, this recent mandate of the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico is totally in line with ***H.R. 900***, formally known as the "Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2007." Furthermore, let me be as clear as possible when I state that a majority of the members of the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico fully support congressional approval of H.R. 900.

Nonetheless, on behalf of a majority of the people of Puerto Rico, let me request that the celebration of any initial referenda be done within the timeframe of the 110th Congress, so as to avoid any conflict with any future Congress and also, because the US citizens who reside in Puerto Rico have been denied with such an opportunity for much too long. Also, in order to conclude the long overdue problem of Puerto Rico's self-determination, you must make certain that the status options provided in any referendum to the US citizens who reside in Puerto Rico be limited to those that are constitutional viable, non-territorial, non-colonial and fully democratic in nature. In other words, they must be limited to options that guarantee full self-government by the people of Puerto Rico.

On February 28 of this year, Representative Nydia Velázquez filed ***H.R. 1230***. This measure supported in Puerto Rico by Governor Acevedo-Vilá and his Popular Democratic Party proposes the recognition of "the right of the People of Puerto Rico to call a Constitutional Convention through which the people would exercise their natural right to self-determination, and to establish a mechanism for congressional consideration of such decision." I wish that this Subcommittee may have the time and opportunity to seriously consider what is proposed by this measure. Particularly, I would like for you to ponder... how democratic would it be for a select and limited group of individuals to

decide the future of all Puerto Ricans as to our final status option? Moreover... wouldn't the calling of a constitutional convention run contrary to our entrenched concept of participatory democracy and the constitutional principle of one person, one vote?

Therefore, I believe it would be extremely important to request legal opinions, from both the United States Department of Justice and the Congressional Research Service, as per the constitutionality of both measures.

I commend Chairman Rahall, Ranking Republican Member Young and this Subcommittee in addressing the issue of Puerto Rico's self-determination. To many people, Puerto Ricans seemingly do not get their act together as to what do they want to do... the kind of relationship that we would like to have with the United States. Then, among so many pressing issues facing *our* Nation... immigration... the war against terrorism... the fiscal deficit... budget priorities... just to name a few... does it make sense to spend time and effort in dealing with such a controversial issue?

Let me convey to you why it is the *right* thing to do.

This Congress represents the citizens of the greatest Nation in the face of this Earth. Most nations around the World look upon *us*... the United States of America... to provide the political, economic and moral leadership as the undisputed leader of the Free World. As such, we are *the* beacon of freedom and democracy.

Today this Nation has thousands of our brave men and women who serve in *our* Armed Services risking their lives in order to provide hope and guarantee freedom and democracy in Irak and Afghanistan. Among those everyday heroes, there are many Puerto Rican soldiers serving in the various branches of the U.S. Military who have responded to the call of duty and ably served in the military operations in this War against Terrorism; including several units and or detachments of our U.S. Army Reserves and National Guard. Sadly, many have also paid the ultimate sacrifice to *our* Nation by giving their lives in this war effort.

Yet, this should come as no surprise to anybody, as Puerto Rico is the proud home of many of our Nation's military heroes, including four recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Let me tell you the brief story of ***Captain Euripides Rubio***, from Ponce, Puerto Rico, who was one of the four Congressional Medal of Honor recipients. His tremendous sacrifice occurred in November of 1966. Although he himself suffered three serious wounds as part of an intensive fire fight, he was helping to evacuate other wounded personnel when he discovered a smoke grenade had fallen too close to friendly lines. In preparation for friendly airstrikes, the smoke grenades were used to mark the Viet Cong position. Captain Rubio intended to avert an unnecessary tragedy and ran to reposition the grenade. He was immediately "struck to his knees" by enemy fire. Despite his many wounds, he grabbed the grenade, lumbering through the deadly onslaught of enemy gunfire, and made it to within 20 meters of the enemy position. Hurling the already smoking grenade into the midst of the enemy, he fell for the final time. His death

made a difference. The hostile position was destroyed because the friendly air strikes were able to use the repositioned grenade as a marker.

This moving anecdote is no different from that of Fernando Luis García, Carlos James Lozada, Héctor Santiago-Colón or many of the close to 1,300 Puerto Ricans who have given their lives in the service to *our* Nation. Probably, Gen. Douglas MacArthur put it best, when he said "I wish we had more like them."

Regretfully, I have to remind everyone of the extreme irony of the service of so many of my fellow Puerto Ricans. *Our* Nation... the United States of America... has allowed for the sacrifice of so many of our men and women to be somewhat in vain.

We have fought valiantly and without objection ever since we came under the American flag. Yet, this flag which stands for freedom, liberty and justice everywhere it flies does not protect my fellow Puerto Ricans from **disparate and discriminatory treatment by *my* Nation**. We fight for liberty and democracy all over the World... yet we have been denied one of the most basic of human and civil rights... **the right to *self* determination**.

For example, how contrary to the values and principles that have always defined *our* Nation is it to have so many servicemen go to war and, sometimes even giving their lives, without having the basic fundamental right to vote for their Commander-in-Chief or for the Members of Congress who have the right to declare war. This discriminatory practice has been validated by Supreme Court decisions that incredibly are still valid today, such as **Balzac v. People of Porto Rico** and more recently in **Harris v. Rosario.**

In the latter case, appellees claimed that the lower level of AFDC reimbursement provided to families with needy dependent children in Puerto Rico violated the equal protection guarantee of the Fifth Amendment of *our* Constitution. Surprisingly, the United States Supreme Court disagreed and found that Congress is empowered under the Territory Clause of the Constitution to "...treat Puerto Rico differently from States so long as there is a rational basis for its actions." In other words... ***can there be a truly rational basis to discriminate with regards to the need of children who are U.S. citizens just because they happen to live in Puerto Rico?*** I guess none of you would feel comfortable with such decision making. Could there be something more un-American? After all, wasn't disparate and discriminatory treatment from the British Government what led our forefathers to independence and later establishing this *more perfect union*?

Furthermore, the paradox and the inequity of living in the "Commonwealth" of Puerto Rico... the "unincorporated" U.S. territory... the "oldest colony in the World" (as aptly described by former Chief Justice José Trías-Monge, who also happened to be the primary legal scholar involved in the forging of our current "commonwealth territorial arrangement")... is such that if any of you decide to move to Puerto Rico and maintain the desire to vote in federal elections as an absentee voter of your last state of residence, you would be denied the right to do so, as we are neither a state of the Union or the District of Columbia, nor a foreign or overseas jurisdiction under the Uniformed Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986. On the other hand, if you happened to

be in Tehran, Iran, P'yŏngyang, North Korea, Havana, Cuba or any other rogue nation where there is no U.S. Embassy, you just need to go to the U.S. Interest Section of the appropriate foreign embassy in order to cast your ballot (assuming that you already filled out in advance a Federal Post Card Application for an absentee ballot). As a U.S. citizen, don't even think about moving to Puerto Rico if you wish to continue exercising the most fundamental of rights of *our* democracy... of any democracy... the right to vote for those who legislate and make decisions that may affect your daily lives in any way or manner. In other words, we do live in a ***land of unequal rights***.

Even though we may have been blessed with many of the benefits of ***our*** citizenship... America cannot tolerate... and ***our*** flag --defended by the blood of so many of ***our*** people-- cannot be put to shame by further legitimization and a continuation of the misguided policy of ***separate and unequal***.

Do these policies make any sense to you? I guess they would only makes sense to those who feel comfortable with categorizations such as those that describe Puerto Rico... as foreign in a domestic sense... belonging to, but not a part of the United States... separate and *unequal*. ***Is it possible to have colonialism by consent?***... or slavery by consent for arguments sake? Was separate but equal valid and acceptable? Can there be consent to discrimination? Can there be true democracy in Puerto Rico with unequal rights under the law? That is the moral challenge before you today.

To those of you who might be somewhat confused with our political reality, let me state for the record that Puerto Rico is not a sovereign state in association with the United States. There is no compact in our case, as opposed to the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Freely Associated State of the Republic of Palau, all of whom negotiated compacts with the United States. Neither are we recognized by any other country as being a sovereign state.

The United States is the only sovereign in Puerto Rico. In accordance with Article IV, Section 3, Clause 2 of the United States Constitution "[t]he Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States." That is why the people of Puerto Rico come before you time after time... because primary constitutional authority rests exclusively in the Congress.

Thus, even though the official name of our government in Spanish is "Estado Libre Asociado", we are not a free associated state (as the name of our Government in Spanish claims to be) with *our* Nation... but rather, ***we are just the U.S. territory with the largest degree of internal self-government by virtue of an act of Congress***.

As the proud American citizen that I am, I cannot possibly be satisfied or resign myself to being less than a full-fledged citizen of *our* Nation. To me it would be just like if African Americans would have remained satisfied with the untenable condition of segregation... as if separate but equal could ever be right.

It is clear that your fellow citizens from Puerto Rico can no longer remain within the current arrangement. Change towards a final solution that needs to be fully democratic, non-territorial and non-colonial has to take place. We cannot be denied the inalienable right to self-determination; whereby we would be able to achieve a status option that provides for full self-government, be it either under independence, free association or statehood.

This human and civil right firmly entrenched in the constitutional principles of *our* Nation, as well as in International Law, requires that the people of Puerto Rico be given a ***true and fair*** exercise of their right to self determination. But in order to have a ***real and meaningful*** process of self-determination, we need to know what Congress and the President of the United States understand as ***constitutionally viable*** and ***politically acceptable*** from among the possible status options. If not, we would only have a futile process, just like our three locally sponsored status plebiscites that led to nothing, while further confusing our people as to what is really attainable under our three traditional status alternatives (regarding this last point I would respectfully refer you to ***H.R. 4751*** from the 106th Congress, whereby this same committee had the opportunity to analyze the contents of the "Enhanced Commonwealth" alternative still proposed by the Popular Democratic Party).

In other words, without an expression by Congress and the Executive Branch, as to what is constitutionally and politically viable, everything would be a charade. For example, periodic elections in the People's Republic of China or in Cuba do not make them bastions of democracy.

That is why I commend ***our*** President, George W. Bush, for his vision and continued commitment in addressing this issue... in trying to put an end to this ***unfinished business of American democracy***. He was firm and resolute in providing leadership on an issue that thirsts for a high moral ground.

To that end, President Bush made sure that the directive begun by former President William Jefferson Clinton, whom I also should commend as per the establishment of the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status, would be successful in achieving its stated objectives. Amidst all the efforts generated by people who do not want this issue to move forward, the President did not allow the members of his Task Force to stray from the course of clearly and correctly addressing this issue. Seldom has such leadership been exercised by a President with regards to the political aspirations of your fellow citizens who reside in Puerto Rico.

On December 22, 2005, President George W. Bush's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status made public its Report on the issue, which included a series of recommendations for the United States Congress to consider and act upon. That Report represents the final work product of a group of responsible and highly professional individuals which represented most of the important agencies of the Executive Branch. In earnest, they devoted more than a year in analyzing the issue, studying documents and meeting with members of Puerto Rico's three political parties on multiple occasions. The result was a surgically

precise and legally correct document that is crystal clear as to what needs to be done to resolve this issue.

As you may be fully aware, there are people, both in Puerto Rico and here in the mainland, who would rather not have this issue take center stage at the national level. One could easily denominate them as the powerful "Forces of Inertia". You may have heard them talk about self determination, but their track record in torpedoing any step that may lead to the exercise of full self-government befits Dr. Kevorkian.

As all of you know, it is easier to kill an initiative than to convince others about its importance and merits. Therefore, since they are very able as to what they do in order to achieve their nefarious goal, there are three important myths that I want to dispel from your minds.

First myth... that Puerto Ricans need to get their act together first and present the federal Government with the solution to this issue.

I would begin my reply by formulating the following question... how could we get our act together if the people have been confused and misinformed for decades as to what is truly available under each of the traditional status options?

The role of the Federal Government in providing for a final solution to our centuries old dilemma is essential to this process, not because we feel or act as subservient to anyone (as that would be totally un-American), but because we fully respect and adhere to the rule of law; and ***under the current Commonwealth territorial arrangement we do not have the power... nor the right... to change our current status or relationship with the United States in a unilateral manner***. The recognition of this congressional power over those of us who reside in Puerto Rico is a legal and political reality over which we have no control. Nonetheless, that does not mean that any process undertaken by the Federal Government would preclude or inhibit continuous dialogue and negotiation by the people of Puerto Rico regarding the specifics and details of each option, the process or processes that need to be undertaken to finally enable this final choice by our people, as well as the implementation of the selected option.

For the past thirty years, the political and ideological blocks in Puerto Rico have been bogged down in a political quagmire. No side commands a solid absolute majority. Misinformation and confusion as per the future and our real status options reigns supreme. That is the reason for the results of the three plebiscites of local initiative (1967, 1993 and 1998). None have led to anything, particularly those of 1967 and 1993 where the option of "Enhanced Commonwealth" resulted as the winner (although that may also be the fault of proponents who really did not want Congress to take action with regards to their status options or to the issue in general). Why would a constitutional convention be any different?

Therefore, it should become clear that, in order to resolve this issue once and for all, the Federal Government, and Congress in particular need to assume their constitutional

prerogatives and responsibilities over the nearly four million U.S. citizens who reside in Puerto Rico. Failing to do so would only complicate the problem further.

Second myth... that Puerto Ricans do not wish to change their status... why force something that they do not want?

This myth is based on pure misinformation.

Some people in the mainland may ask... haven't Puerto Ricans long favored Commonwealth in plebiscite after plebiscite? NO.

Back in the early 1950's when the Commonwealth territorial arrangement came into life, no plebiscite or referenda among options was ever held. In strict accordance with Public Law 600, on June 4, 1951 a referendum was held whereby the people of Puerto Rico were presented with the question whether we wanted to follow the path to have a Constitution of our own or remain subject to an Organic Act. Then, on March 3, 1952 the people of Puerto Rico voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Constitution as it was drafted by the Constitutional Convention whose members they had elected. As you see, neither process could ever be confused with a true process of self-determination... as there was never a ballot in which voters were provided with status choices.

In the first plebiscite or status referenda ever conducted, held in **1967**, almost ***60%*** of voters favored an "***Enhanced Commonwealth***" option. Statehood achieved close to 40%, as the Puerto Rican Independence Party boycotted the plebiscite accounting for almost no votes in favor of Independence. As I have indicated before, there was no concerted effort undertaken by commonwealth advocates for Congress to take action on the vote.

The next plebiscite was held in **1993** and another version of "***Enhanced Commonwealth***" won the electoral vote; this time though, with a plurality of less than ***49%*** of the vote. Again, the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party took more than half a year to inform the House Subcommittee with jurisdiction over Puerto Rico regarding the results of the 1993 Plebiscite. The result was a subcommittee hearing on October 17, 1995.

Then, in **1998**, in a plebiscite in which the ***current Commonwealth*** (or status quo) was an option... that option failed to garner ***1%*** of the vote. Therefore, as anyone may see... there is clearly ***NO*** mandate by the Puerto Rican electorate to maintain our current Commonwealth territorial arrangement ***as is***.

Befitting the level of confusion and misinformation that exists among Puerto Ricans with regards to true contour of the options that would be really available... the write-in column, titled "**None of the Above**", garnered over ***51%*** of the vote. It is important to point out that voter participation in these plebiscites hovered around 75 to 85% and in poll after poll, people select this issue as either the most important one that needs to be addressed. or at the very least among their top 5. Obviously, this shows the existence of a

clear consensus among Puerto Ricans, overlapping ideological and party lines, yearning for a resolution to this issue.

Third myth... that the White House Report which is the basis for H.R. 900 is skewed towards statehood and unfair in its treatment of Commonwealth.

This myth has two different fronts.

First... the procedural one... that the initial round was presented in order to corner the supporters of Commonwealth with the choice of rejecting "to pursue a Constitutionally viable path toward a permanent non-territorial status with the United States," while sponsoring an "artificial majority" of pro-statehood and pro-independence supporters who would obviously vote in favor of such a proposal.

This argument is completely flawed for a couple of reasons. On the one hand... on what grounds would commonwealth supporters reject the aforementioned language proposed by the President's Task Force for the first round? Don't they want to establish and clarify once-and-for-all that their "Enhanced Commonwealth" is constitutional and a permanent non-territorial status? After all, pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party legislators voted unanimously in favor of language that was even stronger in its stance with regards to the issue in the Substitute to House Bills 1014, 1054 and 1058.

On the other hand... any coalition of voters which might favor the aforementioned language proposed by the President's Task Force for the first round do not constitute an "artificial" grouping; but rather, a true measure of the consensus in Puerto Rico that transcends ideologies and party lines with regards to the need for a final resolution to this centuries old dilemma.

Second... the substantive one... that the Report contains a biased and incorrect description of the current Commonwealth territorial arrangement; and furthermore, that it is incorrect as well in not recognizing Free Association as an option in the second round proposed in its second recommendation.

With regards to the Report's description of our current Commonwealth territorial arrangement, I would just reiterate what I have stated earlier in this testimony, as well as the legally sound conclusions reached by the United States Department of Justice on this same issue as included in the Task Force's Report.

As per the supposed intentional omission of Free Association, the reason for its non-inclusion is very simple. Free Association is a legitimate decolonizing option as recognized by International Law and by our own political experience with various strategic territories in the Pacific Ocean which *we* had previously held in "trusteeship" for several decades after the Second World War. The Report does not contradict this reality and *our* own experiences. On the contrary, the Report recognizes Free Association, albeit as an offshoot of separate sovereignty or independence. The reason for the position taken by the Task Force in its Report is based in constitutional, legal and political restraints of

our Nation, as ***only Statehood and Independence can truly be permanent options***. On the other hand, if Puerto Rico were to become a sovereign nation in free association with the United States, such a relationship would be based on a treaty... but everybody has to keep in mind that ***no treaty can unilaterally force the United States to relinquish its constitutional and political prerogatives to withdraw unilaterally whenever it may see fit***.

This shows the sound legal positions taken by the members of the Task Force and their commitment in making sure that the people of Puerto Rico may understand the implications of each option in the most clear and precise manner.

Besides all the compelling arguments for Congress to address the issue of Puerto Rico's self-determination... for many of you there could be another very important reason for this issue to be resolved now... that is the ***cost of Puerto Rico to the American taxpayer.*** In a book titled *"Pay to the Order of Puerto Rico: The Cost of Dependence to the American Taxpayer"* Alexander Odishelidze and the renowned Arthur B. Laffer concluded that our current Commonwealth territorial arrangement "is enormously costly to the American people... over the past 20 years alone, it has been a ***$200 billion drain on the American taxpayer.*** From my perspective, the worst part of it all is that it has been equally, if not more costly for the Puerto Rican people, who are taxed in ways they cannot see... by growth that has not occurred... and sound policies that cannot develop and flourish in dependency."

Today, ***Puerto Rico receives over $20 billion a year in federal funds***, although in essence, and particularly with the current misguided policies in place at the state level, we certainly need more. The failed economic policies of which Governor Acevedo-Vilá has been part, demonstrate the total bankruptcy of the current Commonwealth territorial arrangement. There is no economic model for the future wellbeing of our people. The only manner in which they have masked the severe limitations and failure of their model is by bloating the government payrolls and forcing outward migration to the mainland.

The economy is stagnant, if not close to becoming paralyzed. Even though our **unemployment rate** has been hovering **between *10 and 12%*** for the past few years, the reality of our bleak situation can be further understood by looking at our employment participation rates. For example, according to the 2000 Census, Puerto Rico's **employment participation rate** was at ***40.7%***; well below the 63.9% of the U.S. mainland. Many of your fellow citizens who reside in Puerto Rico have just lost any hope for employment and have rather decided to live on welfare. That is why over 50% of all Puerto Ricans live below the federal poverty level.

A primary solution of the past two pro-commonwealth administrations has been a sharp increase in the government payrolls. Puerto Rico's daily English newspaper, The San Juan Star, reported on September 6, 2005 that the previous ***Calderón-Acevedo Vilá Administration was responsible for increasing government payrolls by 14.37% between 2001 and 2005***.

Under Commonwealth, and particularly in the last five years, ***migration*** to the mainland has increased dramatically. Researchers in Florida have indicated that every month, close to an average of 5,000 Puerto Ricans move to the Greater Orlando area. With our social and economic situation worsening year after year... what could we expect next? If there were various real concerns that were discussed after the Katrina temporary displacement of many Gulf residents... ***what would an exponential increase in a permanent northward migration of our people cause here in the mainland?***

Worse of all, rather than being an agent of hope, the current Administration of Governor Acevedo-Vilá has not provided a concrete and realistic plan for broad-based economic development. In addition to their ineptitude in dealing with the socio-economic needs of the majority of Puerto Ricans, the current Commonwealth territorial arrangement limits the effectiveness as to what could really be done to improve the quality of life for all our people.

Madam Chairwoman, Puerto Rico is fast approaching one of its most critical moments in its history. Your fellow citizens from your neighboring islands have waited for far too long... many have even become skeptical of the prospects of congressional action on this issue. There is a growing feeling across ideological lines is that our current situation is totally untenable. Are you aware how many times we have come before Congress full of hope, only to return back to our Island empty handed and completely disappointed?

For example, this hearing brings back bittersweet memories of another one held almost seventeen years ago; specifically on June 28, 1990, when the then Subcommittee on Insular and International Affairs was considering H.R. 4765, also known as the "Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act." To those that remember that hearing they may find an eerie resemblance with this one. The arguments and the positions undertaken by the three political parties are practically the same. Some of the political leaders from our Island who were witnesses that day are also here with us this morning. Just as today, that hearing was chaired by the delegate from the United States Virgin Islands. Regretfully, what spurred so much optimism to us in Puerto Rico back then, led to utter disenchantment a few months later.

Over 200 years ago the citizens of the thirteen original colonies had strikingly similar grievances against the British Government. On March 23, 1775 Patrick Henry eloquently declared

> Shall we try argument? Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years. Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? Nothing. We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves. Sir, we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with

> contempt, from the foot of the throne! In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. ...Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

These are truly ominous words that, in a way, I dread and fear. As a Puerto Rican and proud American that I am, I still have a firm belief in ***my*** Government and in this Congress. Thus, I hope that my Nation pay close attention to its history and to the principles that led to the independence from the United Kingdom and the subsequent establishment of a more perfect union.

To that end, it is important to heed the words of Congressman José E. Serrano from the previous hearing by this Subcommittee, when he expressed that "[m]y country has held my patria in bondage for more than a century... I want it to end."

Congressman Serrano... we fully agree with you! It is time to put an end to blatant discrimination and to colonialism by ***my*** Nation with regards to ***my*** people... and ***the time to act is now!***

WE THE PEOPLE... your fellow citizens who reside in Puerto Rico are ready to act. ***The ball is in your court.***

May God enlighten you to act according to what may be best for your fellow citizens who reside in Puerto Rico.

May God bless America... and in particular ***all*** my fellow Puerto Ricans who place their hopes for their future in ***your*** hands.

Thank you very much.