

The Times' editorial went on to read, "The bill is deliberately designed to unfairly make it harder for Puerto Rico to keep its current status as a territory with special benefits rather than as a State."

The fairest way to have a vote on this issue would have been to have a simple, straightforward ballot with three choices—statehood, Commonwealth, or independence. However, the proponents of this bill seem to know that the statehood option would not receive over half of the vote in a fair, simple, straightforward ballot. Each time Puerto Rico has voted on this issue, less than half the people have voted for statehood.

When Alaska and Hawaii were admitted to the Union, some 80 or 85 percent of the people in those States voted for and wanted statehood. This is not the case in Puerto Rico.

I have serious reservations about making a territory a State with less than half the people who really want that status. In addition, the last time this issue came up, it was estimated that it would have an immediate impact of several billions of dollars on the Federal budget. With the economy the way it is now, statehood for Puerto Rico would be even more expensive today. As one previous speaker pointed out, Puerto Rico could set up a vote on this any time they want, but the statehood proponents want Congress to rig the election in favor of statehood.

That is not the right way to do this, Mr. Chairman, so I oppose this bill. For all of these reasons, I urge my colleagues to vote "no" on this bill and to defeat the gimmick process that we are dealing with here today.

Ms. VELÁZQUEZ. Mr. Chairman, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. RAHALL. Mr. Chairman, I yield 4 minutes to the gentleman from New York (Mr. SERRANO).

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

Mr. SERRANO. I thank the gentleman.

So much has been said today about what this bill does. Yet so little is understood, perhaps, about what this bill really does. The bill continues to be a bill I support strongly because, if nothing else, the strength of it is that it begins a process.

When I have told many Members of what the bill doesn't do, they ask me, Then why do you support it?

I support it because it begins a process. I support it because, for the first time in 112 years, the people of Puerto Rico will have an opportunity to express themselves, to say what they wish. Then we don't have to act on it. I suspect that we will, but we won't be imposing anything on anyone.

Another argument is that this bill forces statehood on Puerto Rico, but that argument is made by people who say there is no majority in support of statehood in Puerto Rico. Therefore, people would be voting out of—what?—

ignorance. Well, I'll repeat what I have been saying all week.

I grew up in New York. I don't live in Puerto Rico, but I know one thing for a fact, not an opinion, which is that Puerto Ricans, from the age of about 10 or 12, know the status issue, discuss the status issue, and debate the status issue on a daily basis. It is the number one concern on the island. Therefore, no one will vote for statehood who does not believe in statehood. No one will vote for independence who is forced to vote for independence. No one will vote for free association who is forced to vote. They will do it because they believe in it and because they believe it is the right thing to do.

Some in Congress have asked, Why don't they do it on their own? Because, when they have done it on their own, we have ignored it.

Then there is another reason, one that may offend people if you don't present it properly: Puerto Rico did not invade the United States. The United States invaded Puerto Rico in 1898, and it has held it. According to the Constitution, it is up to the United States Congress to dispose of, if you will, the territory or to adjust the territorial status. If we tell them to do whatever they please, we will ignore what they do. If we tell them to do something, then it will be part of a process—again, that word "process." So it is our responsibility to tell them to hold this vote.

Now, if they hold the vote and determine that they wish to become an independent nation, we will then be able to say, Well, you asked for that with 45 percent of the vote. Can you go back and take another vote and come back with 80 percent? Similarly, if they vote for statehood, we could say, No, you didn't come here, asking us for a certain amount. You have to go back.

So my point is that this bill does not end the process. With all due respect to my colleagues on both sides who oppose the bill, do you honestly believe that Congress would give anybody statehood just based on the first simple vote? I can assure you that, if statehood is ever to come to Puerto Rico, there will be a vote to accept the results of Puerto Rico's vote. There will be a vote to grant statehood to Puerto Rico. Then there will be a vote asking the Puerto Ricans "yes" or "no" if they accept statehood. It is just not going to happen. The process will take years. We are not doing what people think we are doing.

What we are doing is being honest to the comments we make on a daily basis, which are that we go overseas to fight for freedom and independence, for the ability to be free people and to make free choices. Yet we're going to say today that we won't allow 4 million American citizens to simply advise us on this choice? That is a mistake. That truly is un-American. What do we have to fear—that the territory may ask for a change in its status? It might choose not to do so.

One very important point: People say that the Commonwealth is defeated. No. In the first vote, you can choose to remain a Commonwealth. In the second vote, you stop being a colony.

Vote for this bill.

Mr. RAHALL. I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. HASTINGS of Washington. Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from California (Mr. DANIEL E. LUNGREN).

Mr. DANIEL E. LUNGREN of California. Mr. Chairman, as an original cosponsor of H.R. 2499, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act, I stand here proudly in support of this bill. I am somewhat surprised by some of the criticism registered here. I understand how we can have differences of opinion, but to suggest that somehow this undermines the authority of the Congress of the United States or that it is somehow contrary to the Constitution is just beyond the pale as far as I can see.

As the gentleman who just spoke before me said, this is an attempt to get an idea of how the people of Puerto Rico feel about this very important issue. They are American citizens. People have raised all sorts of scenarios about what may or may not happen. Go back and look at how other States have been admitted to the Union. Ultimately, the decision is made by this Congress.

I remember reading about Utah. When they were a territory, Utah wasn't accepted in the Union until they changed a certain policy on marriage. It was an extraordinary change that was required, but that was what happened. Congress didn't supinely stand here or lay down there and say, Oh, yes. You've said you want to be a State. Therefore, we take no action.

This is a way of our getting a measure of the sentiment of the people of Puerto Rico. I don't see why we should be upset about that. I know there are some outside observers who have suggested that somehow this undermines the Constitution and that somehow there is the Tennessee's plot. Examine the history of Tennessee. Examine the history of the response of Congress. It is absolutely historically factual that Congress decides under what terms a new State will be formed, when and if we will accept a new State.

So all I am saying is allow this to go forward. Allow us to find out what the sentiment is here. Our good friend Luis Fortuno is not someone who shows little respect for the Constitution.

Pass this bill.

Ms. VELÁZQUEZ. Mr. Chairman, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I just want to ask the gentleman from California a question: So, basically, in listening to your argument, you are clearly stating that this is a pro-statehood bill, aren't you?

Mr. DANIEL E. LUNGREN of California. If the gentlewoman would yield, No.

Ms. VELÁZQUEZ. Reclaiming my time, Mr. Chairman, I would like to inquire how much time remains.