CONGRESSIONAL RECORD—HOUSE

The gentleman from West Virginia (Mr. RAHALL) and the gentleman from Washington (Mr. HASTINGS) each will control 30 minutes. The gentleman from New York (Ms. VELÁZQUEZ) will control 30 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from West Virginia.

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

Mr. Chairman, I have the privilege of representing the great State of West Virginia in this body, a State that was born in the crucible of a war. It is said that West Virginia is the only State to be formed by seceding from a Confederate State during the Civil War. In fact, the western counties stayed loyal to the Union, while Tidewater seceded from it.

Puerto Rico also joined the American family as a result of war. In 1898, during the Spanish-American War, the Island was invaded by the United States and was ceded to Spain by our country under the Treaty of Paris. The island's century-long history within the American family has been significant. Puerto Rico is a Commonwealth and outside the continental United States where the American flag was raised.

To the United States, it marked a milestone in our own political development. When once our Union of States was comprised of renegade English colonies, it seized its new role that we previously had fought against. Given our own experience, would anyone have imagined that our new colony would be disfranchised and kept unequal in our own political framework? Our commitment to Puerto Rico's advancement under the 1898 Treaty of Paris should be our guide.

If our measure of success is today's Puerto Rico, then I state Puerto Rico has done well by the United States. It is a showcase of democracy in the Caribbean. Having some of the highest voter turnout rates in our Nation, Puerto Rico has the ability to govern itself with its own States with its energy and enthusiasm in electing its leaders. Economically, it is a powerhouse in the Caribbean and considered a home away from home for many mainland Fortune 500 companies.

Equal in importance to Puerto Rico's political independence is the island's contributions to our own social fabric. Every aspect of American art, music, theater, and sport has been influenced by Puerto Rico's own culture and its people. And beyond such contributions, there remains Puerto Rico's patriotism, beginning in World War II, where Puerto Ricans served in the U.S. military. There is no doubt that many more thousands are currently serving in our Armed Forces, fighting our wars, and dying for our country.

To the families who have lost a husband, a father, a son, a brother, a friend, or a comrade in one war, I take this moment, as we all do, to salute you. We can debate political status, but what is not subject of debate is the patriotism of the people of Puerto Rico.

We are here today on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives because, in spite of what we have gained from each other, there has been no ultimate achievement in Puerto Rico's political status, which really is the greatest commitment the U.S. has to all of our territories.

Since the establishment of the current Commonwealth status in 1952, four popular votes have been held on the status of Puerto Rico in three plebiscites and one referendum, but none of them were sanctioned by this body, the Congress of the United States.

Going back just to the 1970s, at least 40 separate measures have been introduced in Congress to resolve or clarify Puerto Rico political status. In addition, Congress has held at least 12 hearings, and four measures have received floor consideration.

During the last Congress, the Bush administration issued the President's Task Force Report on Puerto Rico's Status which served as the basis for the legislation before us today: a task force, I would point out, was initiated and concluded by the Bush administration.

Indeed, the entire exercise has been bipartisan. The measure before us today is sponsored by the Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico, PEDRO Pierluisi, a Democrat. It is highly supported by a bipartisan group and the Governor of Puerto Rico, the Honorable Luis Fortuna, a Republican. And it was reported out by our Natural Resources Committee by a vote of 30-8.

With this history before us, I join those who say it is time for Congress to provide a permanent status for Puerto Rico with an unambiguous path toward permanently resolving its political status that is consistent with the U.S. Constitution.

When our Committee on Natural Resources considered similar legislation last Congress, it was inconsistent and examined the question of the constitutionality of the various status options available under the Constitution. And we continued that process during the current Congress. What emerged from that process was a clear consensus that the pending measure reflects the permanent status options that are reflected in the bill before this body today.

The Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico is to be congratulated for carefully crafting a bill which seeks to authorize a fair, impartial, and democratic process for self-determination for the people of Puerto Rico. The pending measure is straightforward. It authorizes a plebiscite in which the two voting options are presented: number one, present political status; or number two, a different political status. If option two prevails, then a second plebiscite would be conducted in which three options are presented: independence, free association with the United States, or statehood. Puerto Rico would then certify the results to the President and the Congress.