

## FOREWORD

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Although it has been under the American flag since 1898, very few of us know much about Puerto Rico. If fortunate enough to visit the island on one of the many cruise ships that regularly steam into the beautiful harbor of San Juan, tourists may spend a pleasant few hours strolling around and shopping in the historic Old City. Then they may reboard their liners for an overnight transit to another island without realizing that they had been just as firmly on U.S. soil as they'd been back in Port Everglades.

Today, no less than 50 years ago when *West Side Story* premiered on Broadway, the Stephen Sondheim lyric from that show still rings true:

*Nobody knows in America  
Puerto Rico's in America.*

I was aware that Puerto Rico was part of the United States—but rather vague about much else—until I started campaigning in the first-ever Puerto Rican presidential primary in 1979–1980. The late, highly distinguished Puerto Rican statesman Don Luis Ferré honored me with his support and began my education in the island's complex politics. It was also Don Luis (governor of Puerto Rico from 1969 to 1973) who converted me to the cause of Puerto Rican statehood. Though scarcely a vote-getter on the mainland and hotly controversial on the island, statehood has always struck me as the right and logical destination for Puerto Rico. I favored it as president and continue to support it today.

Far from being a Caribbean micro-state, Puerto Rico contains 4 million U.S. citizens; there is an equal number on the mainland. If Puerto Rico actually were a state of the union, it would rank twenty-sixth in

population, right between Kentucky and Oregon, and qualify for five or six congressional seats. Its hard-working, creative, and patriotic people have contributed much to the United States and to the Hispanic world as well. In particular, Puerto Ricans have fought bravely in all of America's wars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This patriotic service and sacrifice of Americans from Puerto Rico touched me all the more deeply for the very fact they have served with such devotion even while denied a vote for the president and members of Congress who determine when, where, and how they are asked to defend our freedoms. Only statehood can give them this. The chief problem with the current political structure of Puerto Rico—called *Estado Libre Asociado* (Free Associated State) in Spanish and “commonwealth” in English—is that it is impermanent. In 1952, Congress chose this odd-duck form of government, halfway between statehood and independence, in lieu of making Puerto Rico an “incorporated territory,” which Alaska and Hawaii were at the time.

As my talented former attorney general, Dick Thornburgh, clearly demonstrates in this book, status as a territory was never intended to be permanent, either historically or constitutionally. It was a temporary transitional condition leading to statehood. So Puerto Rico's lesser status as a “commonwealth,” not even an incorporated territory, is even more temporary and conditional, without being a transition to anything. The fact that Puerto Rico has managed to get along under this awkward, impermanent condition for over half a century is no justification to continue *Estado Libre Asociado*.

Recognizing the essential American democratic values at issue in this question, Dick Thornburgh's admirable work emphasizes the need for Puerto Ricans to determine their own fully permanent democratic status. This must be approved by the Congress, which the Constitution vests with full power “to dispose of and make all needful rules and regulations respecting the territory and other property belonging to the United States.” But the will to change must arise from the people of Puerto Rico themselves.

That is why in my first State of the Union Address as president in 1989, I said: “I've long believed that the people of Puerto Rico should have the right to determine their own political future. Personally, I strongly favor statehood. But I urge the Congress to take the necessary steps to allow the people to decide in a referendum.”

Dick Thornburgh brought his formidable intellectual powers and political skills to this issue as attorney general, more recently joining distinguished legal scholars from diverse perspectives on the status issue who offered their views to the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status in 2005, and out of that experience comes this bold and compelling book. While it is not my purpose here to evaluate or give an endorsement to every proposal within it, I do applaud the author's sincere efforts to resolve this lingering constitutional conundrum. He believes, as do I, that we owe this to the Puerto Rican people and to ourselves as the world's exemplar of democracy and equal rights.

George Bush  
Forty-first President of the United States