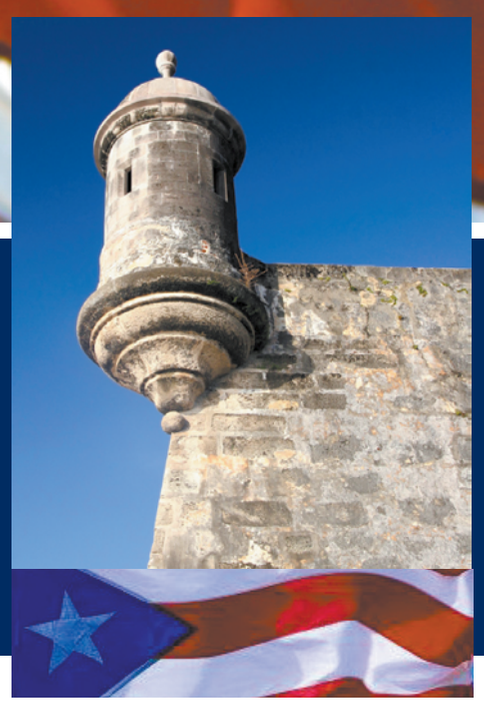
"EQUALITY": COME HOME!

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Abraham Lincoln
Gettysburg Address • November 19, 1863



Abraham Lincoln would never claim neutrality in fundamental issues such as rights, liberties and equality for the citizens of the United States of America.

At Gettysburg there were no neutrals. Whether correct or incorrect, Americans back then fought Americans to defend their rights and principles. Supreme decisions that affect the lives and rights of human beings abhor neutrality, because in such cases neutrality becomes a crime against democracy and humanity.

If Lincoln were living in this 21st Century, he would never accept that discrimination and colonial segregation of American citizens could be moral options for America, not even by consent. Colonialism, just as racial slavery, violates the values of liberty and equality. Yet that is precisely what some groups in Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico are proposing to do, as the island gears up to decide on the future of its political relationship with the US in an upcoming plebiscite.

And a decision must be made. After 113 years under our current condition as a territory of the United States, nearly four million American citizens in Puerto Rico still lack the full equality and liberties enjoyed by the citizens of other states. Our people have been full-fledged Americans since 1917 and are called to battle by the US Armed Forces. We are fully bound by the laws of the US Congress and the power of the Presidency. Yet, despite our American nationality, Puerto Ricans living on the island - or ANY American living on the island, for that matter - are currently denied the right to vote for the president and the vice-president. Moreover, we as American citizens do not have any representation whatsoever in the US Senate, and only have one (1) non-voting member in the House [a state of similar population would have 2 senators, plus six or seven House representatives].

In essence, the American values that Lincoln expressed at Gettysburg have never been bestowed upon Puerto Rico. We continue being the oldest and most populated colony in the world, despite the fact that we were born and live under the Constitution, the Flag, the Laws and the Citizenship of the United States. We lack voting and representation rights, and as Americans, we feel discriminated. We even feel forced to emigrate to the other 50 states in order to enjoy the citizen rights and opportunities denied to us here. Already more than half of the eight million puertorricans live in the continental US.

But groups in Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico that have historically opposed any type of change in this awkward relationship have already begun their rally against the proposed plebiscite. And they are using the same questionable "poison pill" tactics of the past, albeit a bit more sophisticated.

They claim that the Territorial Clause of the US Constitution legally allows Washington to deny democratic rights to citizens living in their own territories. And they point to how many times the US Courts have upheld this view.

They also believe we must remain as a colony, because supposedly 59 years ago we voted to become a colony. They believe we must accept this condition since, after all, every fiscal year they send us federal funds (though much less than a state with similar population and needs as ours would receive!).

They are the same ones lobbying the UN and the OAS to keep colonial discrimination in Puerto Rico from being investigated. The Puerto Rico Senate approved last Thursday two Senate Resolutions - SR 2162 and SR 2166 - clearly aimed at shining the spotlight on Puerto Rico's right to have all American citizens in the island enjoy the same democratic liberties as Americans on the mainland, and thus I support case number P-1105-06 filed by a group of Puerto Ricans at the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights of the OAS. It is my duty as President of the Senate of Puerto Rico to divulge the contents of these Senate Resolutions to all American citizens and the Federal Government.

I must also stop those that through deceit and fear, make Puerto Ricans believe that gaining equality as citizens under statehood would cost them their culture and their identity.

They are the same ones who question why many Puerto Ricans do not speak English, but yet do not ask what language Puerto Ricans speak when they are serving in war, when they are being judged under Federal law, or when they are paying their debts to the IRS. These people have even stated that our economy is not ready to join the Union as a state. But, the truth is that the Puerto Rican economy, with all its defects and virtues, is actually in far better shape proportionately than the economies of any other territory when they became states of the Union.

The real "Leit Motiv" of this small group in Washington is an anti-hispanic agenda. They actively seek the Hispanic vote and Hispanic donations for primaries and general elections, but do not want a Hispanic state.

And now they have gone as far as pushing to include the current colonial relationship as a "real" option for the voters in the upcoming plebiscite. They claim it would be the only way to impart "neutrality" and "fair play" to the process because a lot of voters in the island could only feel "represented" by the current political condition. To me, these neutrality and fair play arguments resemble those of slave owners of the 18th and 19th Centuries. When criticized for their crimes against humanity, these owners would parade their slaves around so they could declare how happy and well fed they were under their masters, even when treated as lesser people than white folk!

The truth of the matter is that no process that includes the colony as an option is fair play for Puerto Rico or for our nation. On the contrary, it would be just another trick, synonymous to saying "use your democratic vote to deprive yourselves of democratic rights." Would our nation be willing to perpetuate this kind of discrimination and segregation of rights under the pretext that that is what Puerto Ricans want? In our legal system, you cannot be a slave even if you wanted to be one. So how can we allow American citizens to be discriminated against and segregated colonially by either manipulation, or even their own will? This is certainly unfair and immoral.

Another great truth is that the main responsibility to solve this colonial problem lies on the Federal government and not on Puerto Ricans. Our only sin for more than one hundred years has been to trust that the White House, the Federal courts and Congress would take action. But they have never done so. Washington has held the property title over Puerto Rico since the Treaty of Paris of 1898, and has never given it up. With this property title and Law 600, Congress has kept a tight grip on all island affairs, thus Washington has the responsibility to put a clear end to Puerto Rico's colonialism.

But I think there is still hope. There is hope in President Obama and in the majority of people in Washington that, like Lincoln, believe we are all, or at least should be, equal. And to turn that hope into reality, our president must act so that Washington abandons its indifference, and especially abandons the lame arguments of neutrality and fair play used to extend colonial rule.

Unless there is that kind of action and determination from Washington, the liberty and equality agenda that Lincoln presented at Gettysburg will remain unfinished. During that famous speech, Lincoln concluded:

"It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom— and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

To the President I say, let us hope that the thousands of Puerto Ricans killed, injured or mutilated alongside their fellow citizens from the other 50 states in the battlefields of Europe, the Pacific islands, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, did not make that sacrifice in vain.

And I must also warn that all Hispanics in the United States will be keeping an eye on what Democrats and Republicans decide to do with Puerto Rico. And as long as the dignity of the Hispanic American citizens of Puerto Rico continues to be humiliated and manipulated in an effort to keep colonialism alive, those Democrats and Republicans will be seen as only interested in the Hispanic vote, and Hispanic campaign donations, while rejecting the equal rights of a potential Hispanic state.

We do not care for colonial "neutrality" or "fair play". Colonialism will never be fair for Puerto Ricans or moral for our nation, not even by consent. We want the truth to be told, and we need immediate action. We believe that 113 years of colonialism, discrimination and political segregation is more than enough. Getting rid of colonialism in Puerto Rico has taken our nation longer than the abolition of slavery. It is certainly "time to change". The time is indeed now. Equality, Come Home!

Thomas Rivera-Schatz
President
Puerto Rico Senate

SENATE
GOVERNMENT OF PUERTO RICO