



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
Hispanic Heritage Month Event
Military Intelligence Readiness Command
Fort Belvoir, Virginia
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Thank you very much for that warm welcome. I am honored to be here during Hispanic Heritage Month to recognize the important contributions that Latinos have made to our national defense. I want to thank the Commanding General, Colonel Gabriel Toriano, who has been selected for promotion to Brigadier General, as well as Command Sergeant Major Robert Breck, and Chief Warrant Officer Israel Gonzalez.

This is my second visit to Fort Belvoir in the last two weeks, and it is good to be back on post. On September 18th, I spoke to military and civilian personnel over at the Community Hospital. I marveled at that state-of-the-art facility, where hard-working medical professionals provide first-class care to wounded warriors and other warfighters, to our veterans, and to their families. I will tell you what I told that audience. Fort Belvoir is the workplace for thousands of individuals who perform many different missions but whose ultimate goal is the same: to keep America strong and to keep the American people safe. When I look at you, I see men and women living professional lives of purpose and honor. I hope you feel tremendous pride in what you do, because your country is proud of you. There is no doubt that the Military Intelligence Readiness Command is an integral part of the Fort Belvoir community and that it is indispensable to our

nation's defense. Your motto—"Always Engaged"—underscores that your mission—to provide critical information to military commanders and civilian policymakers—is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

When I spoke at the hospital, it was a few days after the tragic events at the Navy Yard. I know this senseless attack continues to weigh heavily on your hearts, since it occurred on a military installation not far from here, and because those who lost their lives or were injured are, in a very real sense, your brothers and sisters.

Today, as you know, we meet under difficult circumstances as well. The federal government has shut down for the first time since the mid-1990s. Back then, the shutdown lasted over 20 days, and one can only hope that my colleagues in Congress will put the national interest above narrow partisan interests, and quickly reach an agreement on a temporary appropriations bill that is free from any toxic provisions. I know there are non-exempt civilian workers from this installation who would have attended today's event but are now being furloughed. Hopefully they will be back performing their important work in the very near future.

I know that you are all busy, especially because you may be short staffed, so I will not speak for long. But I do want to say a few words about the role of Hispanics in the U.S. Armed Forces. I want to begin by expressing this sentiment. It has always seemed to me that the modern military is the most egalitarian of American institutions. Wherever there are human beings, of course, there will be instances of prejudice and discrimination, whether overt or subtle. But I have the intuitive sense that the military, to a greater degree than our civilian institutions, does not give a

darn what your last name is, where your parents came from, how much money your family has, what religion you practice, what color your skin is, or if—like me—you happen to speak English with an accent. Perhaps it is because your mission—defending our nation from its adversaries—is so vital. Maybe it is because this mission often entails great personal risk. Whatever the reason, it is clear that, in the military, where the stakes are so high, what matters is not *who you are*, but *what you can do*. With limited exceptions, you are not treated any worse—or, for that matter, any better—because you are Hispanic, because your name is José and not Joe. You are measured, above all, by your performance. Competence, courage under fire, character, leadership, devotion to duty, loyalty to country—these are the qualities that matter.

Precisely because the military is the ultimate meritocracy, it comes as no surprise to me that Hispanics are participating in significant numbers—and excelling—in the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard—on active duty, in the reserves, and in the national guard. According to the Department of Defense, Latinos constitute over 11 percent of all active-duty military forces. In 2011, nearly 17 percent of all new recruits were Hispanic, a three point increase from 2005, and this number is expected to increase further in the coming years. Like their peers, Latinos volunteer to serve for many different reasons, and it is important not to paint these motivations with a single, simplistic brush.

While the narrative about Hispanic service in the military is generally positive, I should note that there is clearly room for additional improvement when it comes to the officer ranks. In the most recent Defense Appropriations bill, the House of Representatives observed that minorities, including Latinos, are underrepresented in the general officer ranks across all the services. The

House expressed support for Department of Defense efforts to conduct effective outreach and enhance recruiting programs in minority communities in order to improve diversity in the officer ranks. We must all strive to ensure that Latinos are fairly represented at both the enlisted and the officer levels.

As you know, I represent Puerto Rico, which is home to 3.6 million American citizens. Despite not being able to vote for their commander-in-chief, residents of Puerto Rico have served in the U.S. armed forces in every conflict since World War I. The unit that arguably best exemplifies this rich and distinguished record of service is the 65th Infantry Regiment, known as the *Borinqueneers*, which won admiration for their performance during the Korean War. Like society more generally, the U.S. military in the 1950s was different than it is today, and the men in the regiment—most of whom hailed from Puerto Rico—not only had to fight the enemy on the battlefield, but also had to overcome negative stereotypes held by their fellow soldiers. I am currently working on legislation to award the *Borinqueneers* with the Congressional Gold Medal, in recognition of their many acts of valor in the face of adversity.

More recently, well over 20,000 men and women from Puerto Rico have deployed into combat since the attacks of September 11th, with many serving multiple tours. There is a frame in my office containing photographs of service members from the island who have died in the last 12 years. The most recent photo was added on April 6th. On that date, insurgents attacked a convoy of American vehicles in Afghanistan. The incident generated a great deal of public attention because it resulted in the death of a brave 25-year-old Foreign Service Officer from the State Department named Anne Smedinghoff, who had recently graduated from Johns Hopkins

University in Baltimore. Less noticed, but no less tragic, the attack also killed a young American soldier from Juncos, Puerto Rico—the exact same age as Anne—named Wilbel Robles. I had the honor to meet Mr. Robles’ wife and children, to thank them for his service, and to present them with an American flag that had flown above the U.S. Capitol.

I want to end my remarks with a short story that exemplifies the many contributions that Latinos, including residents of Puerto Rico, have made to the armed forces. My legislative aide recently participated in a staff trip to Alaska to visit a number of military bases. One of the bases he toured was Fort Greely, an extremely remote post located about 100 miles from the city of Fairbanks. As you may know, Fort Greeley is a launch site for anti-ballistic missiles. The missiles are operated by the 49th Missile Defense Battalion of the Alaska Army National Guard, a unit that draws talented soldiers from all over the nation. These soldiers monitor intelligence feeds and, if a missile were fired from North Korea or Iran towards the United States, would launch our own missiles to intercept it. As you can imagine, this is not a job for the faint of heart!

My aide and the other congressional staffers were allowed to observe an exercise conducted by members of the battalion in which they responded to a highly complex enemy attack. Of the six guardsmen that conducted the exercise, my aide was startled to learn that two of them—a lieutenant and a sergeant—were from Puerto Rico. Moreover, following the exercise, the commanding officer of the battalion remarked that military police units from all over the country rotate to Fort Greely to conduct base security, and that more MPs come from Puerto Rico than

any other U.S. state or territory. I can tell you that my aide almost burst with pride upon seeing and hearing all this.

Now, all of you know that Puerto Rico is a beautiful island in the Caribbean, with lovely beaches and a terrific climate. By contrast, the average winter temperature in Fairbanks, Alaska is about 20 degrees below zero, and it can get as low as 60 degrees below zero. Just thinking about it makes me shiver. Nevertheless, Puerto Rico's sons and daughters in uniform have traveled thousands of miles to Alaska, traded *tostones* for reindeer meat, and shorts for long underwear, all to perform this vital mission for our nation. *That* is dedication. And it epitomizes the contributions that hundreds of thousands of Latinos are making to our national defense every single day.

Thank you for your service, thank you for your strength, and thank you for inviting me.