

News from Senator

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
TUESDAY, MAY 12, 1987

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR BOB DOLE

PUERTO RICAN STATEHOOD REFERENDUM

THIS YEAR WE ARE CELEBRATING THE TWO-HUNDRETH ANNIVERSARY OF OUR CONSTITUTION. IT IS A CELEBRATION NOT ONLY OF THIS HISTORIC DOCUMENT, BUT ALSO A CELEBRATION OF OUR FIFTY-STATE UNION.

IT IS A TIME FOR REFLECTION ON JUST HOW FAR THIS COUNTRY -- AND ITS FIFTY STATES -- HAVE COME IN THAT SHORT TIME; AND HOW MUCH FURTHER THEY CAN GO IN THE YEARS AHEAD. SO IN THAT BICENTENNIAL SPIRIT, I BELIEVE IT IS PROPER TO CONSIDER IF OUR FLAG SHOULD ADD ONE MORE STAR BEFORE THE END OF THIS CENTURY. SPECIFICALLY, IT IS TIME TO GIVE THE CITIZENS OF PUERTO RICO THE OPPORTUNITY TO VOTE ON STATEHOOD.

THERE IS ONE THREAD WEAVING THROUGH THE RICH HISTORY OF THE ISLAND OF PUERTO RICO, FROM 1897 WHEN AUTONOMY WAS GRANTED FROM SPAIN, TO TODAY -- PUERTO RICO'S UNSETTLED POLITICAL STATUS.

ONLY ONE YEAR AFTER OBTAINING AUTONOMY, THE ISLAND WAS TAKEN BY 16,000 U.S. TROOPS DURING THE SPANISH AMERICAN WAR, AN ACTION WHICH BEGAN THE LONG AND UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP THAT PUERTO RICO AND THE UNITED STATES HAVE SHARED FOR ALMOST A CENTURY.

WHILE OUR RELATIONSHIP IS ONE OF FRIENDSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP, THE ULTIMATE STATUS OF PUERTO RICO HAS, IN EFFECT, REMAINED UNSETTLED.

SINCE GAINING COMMONWEALTH STATUS, 9 BILLS ATTEMPTING TO GRANT STATEHOOD TO PUERTO RICO HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED IN THE U.S. CONGRESS, YET NONE HAS PREVAILED AND THE ISSUE REMAINS OPEN.

OF GREATEST IMPORTANCE TO ME IS THAT, SINCE 1917 WHEN THE JONES ACT GRANTED UNITED STATES CITIZENSHIP TO PUERTO RICAN RESIDENTS, THESE U.S. CITIZENS -- CITIZENS OF THE MOST PROMINENT DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD -- HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO VOTE ON THE ISSUE OF STATEHOOD ON ONLY ONE OCCASION -- IN 1967.

HOWEVER, EVEN THE RESULTS OF THAT ELECTION -- OR "PLEBESCITE" -- WERE DISTORTED BECAUSE IT WAS OFFICIALLY BOYCOTTED BY THE POLITICAL PARTY REPRESENTING STATEHOOD AND THE PARTY FAVORING INDEPENDENCE.

THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE OF PUERTO RICO TO SPEAK ON THIS MATTER SHOULD NOT BE HINDERED AND SHOULD NOT BE IGNORED. PRESIDENT GERALD FORD, WHO HEADED THE 1976 REPUBLICAN TICKET WHEN I PROUDLY SERVED AS HIS RUNNING MATE, PROPOSED A REFERENDUM AND PROCESS FOR STATEHOOD IN 1976.

AND, IN 1979 WHEN EFFORTS WERE BEING MADE IN THE UNITED NATIONS TO CALL FOR INDEPENDENCE FOR PUERTO RICO, I JOINED IN THE INTRODUCTION AND PASSAGE OF A RESOLUTION CLEARLY STATING THAT THIS WAS AN ISSUE FOR PUERTO RICO AND ITS PEOPLE TO DECIDE.

IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, MORE THAN ONE-QUARTER OF A MILLION PUERTO RICANS HAVE SIGNED A PETITION FOR STATEHOOD, CALLING FOR ACTION BY THE CONGRESS. BUT THE CLEAR MAJORITY OF PUERTO RICANS MUST SPEAK, MUST DESIRE STATEHOOD, AS HAS BEEN THE TRADITION FOR ALL STATES GRANTED ADMISSION TO THE UNION BY THE CONGRESS.

THEREFORE, TODAY I AM INTRODUCING A BILL TO FACILITATE THE THE DEMOCRATIC PROPOSITION OF ALLOWING THE PEOPLE OF PUERTO RICO TO DECIDE WHETHER THEY WISH TO JOIN THEIR COLLEAGUES -- THE U.S. CITIZENS IN THE 50 UNITED STATES -- AS THE 51ST PARTNER IN THE UNION.

THE BILL WOULD PROVIDE FOR A REFERENDUM ON THE QUESTION "SHOULD PUERTO RICO BE ADMITTED INTO THE UNION AS A STATE?" THE REFERENDUM WOULD BE HELD BETWEEN JANUARY 1, 1989 AND DECEMBER 31, 1994 IF THE GOVERNOR OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF PUERTO RICO REQUESTED THE REFERENDUM. THE DIRECT COSTS OF CONDUCTING THE REFERENDUM WOULD BE PAID BY THE UNITED STATES, AND THE GOVERNOR WOULD INFORM THE PRESIDENT AND THE CONGRESS SHOULD THE PEOPLE OF PUERTO RICO DESIRE TO BECOME A STATE.

STATEHOOD, INDEPENDENCE OR ANY STATUS CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT BE FORCED ON THE ISLAND AND THE U.S. CITIZENS WHO RESIDE THERE. THE DECISION MUST BE MADE FIRST BY ITS PEOPLE AND THEN BY THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES.

IT WAS NOT SO LONG AGO THAT HAWAII AND ALASKA WERE VIEWED AS DISTANT, EXOTIC LANDS. IN FACT, BY THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, THE UNITED STATES MEANT 45 STATES.

IN THIS YEAR OF BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION, I CAN THINK OF NO BETTER WAY TO HONOR THE DREAMS OF OUR FOUNDING FATHERS THAN TO GIVE OUR CITIZENS IN THE CARIBBEAN THE OPPORTUNITY TO VOTE ON STATEHOOD.

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