

A historic opportunity derailed



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

Two weeks ago, the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status and President Barack Obama outlined, with a sense of urgency, the procedural options for Puerto Rico to vote this summer on its status preference, hoping that a clear mandate would result

so that the president and Congress could act upon it next year or soon thereafter. The president stated that this was a road map to address our aspirations. The Task Force also stated that if there is no decisive result this summer, it would proceed to prepare legislation to provide the options and the process for our self-determination and for Congress to act upon during 2112. The following are exact quotes from the Task Force report:

"Recommendation #1: The Task Force recommends that all relevant parties—the President, Congress, and the leadership and people of Puerto Rico—work to ensure that Puerto Ricans are able to express their will about status options and have that will acted upon by the end of 2012 or soon thereafter.

"...the Task Force recommends that the President and Congress support any fair, transparent, and swift effort that is consistent with and reflects the will of the people of Puerto Rico. If the process produces a clear result, Congress should act on it quickly with the President's support.

"The Task Force believes that the time to act is now, and recommends that, if there is no decisive result by a plebiscite this summer, the Administration, Congress, and stakeholders in Puerto Rico work as rapidly as possible to develop the legislation contemplated by the Task Force. The Task Force therefore recommends that, by the end of 2012, the Administration develop, draft, and work with Congress to enact the proposed legislation."

The New Progressive Party (NPP) has ignored the White House timeframe and has announced that it will schedule two plebiscites; the first one on statehood versus free association and independence sometime this year. The second one, between the winner of this contest—obviously statehood—and Commonwealth early in 2013, thus derailing a process which the Task Force said should be swift and would have had us expressing our will this year and the President and Congress acting upon it next year or early in 2013.

At no time in the past had the President of the United States or a White House Task Force addressed the issue of the status of Puerto Rico

with such a sense of urgency, outlining a specific timeframe for us to act. It is clear that, the White House has felt the frustration among us with regard to the U.S. responses to our efforts during the past 60 years to resolve this issue. It is also clear that the White House understands the economic plight in which we find ourselves and its relationship to the question of status. This is why the report states that the most effective initiatives to get our economy moving again cannot be decided until the question on status is resolved.

Given the position of the NPP, it should be obvious that there will not be a decisive expression on political status by the people of Puerto Rico this year or next. This is a reality that will not change.

Obviously, the NPP has not risen to the occasion. It wants the White House to deal on its terms, which are clearly unfair and political. The NPP apparently understands that statehood would lose the plebiscite against Commonwealth if it is held this year: On the one hand, because it has always lost the plebiscites against Commonwealth. On the other hand, because it has had to take very unpopular measures to deal with our fiscal problems, and we are still in a recession.

So the NPP leaders have scheduled the first plebiscite, which they are certain to win by a landslide, before the 2012 elections, and the second plebiscite for after the 2012 elections, so they will have the momentum going into the election year and a stronger position with which to win the election and go on shortly thereafter to defeat Commonwealth. This is their strategy. They are playing electoral politics with the right of self-determination of the Puerto Rican people. It is transparently unfair and it has been rejected not only by the Popular Democratic Party (PDP), but also by the Puerto Rican Independence Party and the Movimiento Unión Soberanista (MUS), which favors free association. This means that in order to have some sort of contest in order to claim victory in the first plebiscite, the NPP will have to create artificial opposition by providing generous amounts of public funds to ad hoc associations to conduct the independence or free association campaigns.

There is no reason, other than electoral politics, why the two plebiscites cannot be held this year. As a matter of fact, they could both be held in summer—the first one in June and the second one in late August. But it would not affect the White House timeframe if the second plebiscite were held as late as November. The Task Force would have sufficient time to work with Congress to act upon our decisive expression by 2012, or to develop with Congress the alternatives and the process for self-determination by the end of that year if there is no decisive expression.

It should be clear to all concerned that the NPP will not face off with Commonwealth in a plebiscite this year. Even if the White House engages in arm-twisting, they will not go through with it. They have thought this thing through and are willing to take whatever heat to maintain their position. This is a fait accompli.

It hurts deeply that the NPP has placed Puerto Rico in the position of losing a historic opportunity by rejecting the timeframe set by the Obama Task Force. In contrast, the PDP did rise to the occasion, but the bill presented by Sen. Alejandro García Padilla, along the lines recommended by the Task Force, will not be approved by the NPP majority. They will approve their own bill providing for the two plebiscites, one this year and the other in 2013.

Given the position of the NPP, it should be obvious that there will not be a decisive expression on political status by the people of Puerto Rico this year or next. This is a reality that will not change.

The Task Force must follow through with its plan to seek legislation from Congress and have it passed by the end of 2012. Such legislation would resolve the status gridlock by defining the alternatives and the process, and committing Congress to honor the result. The Task Force does not have to wait any longer to commence preparing this legislation because the NPP, which governs Puerto Rico, has already made it impossible for there to be an expression of the will of the people of Puerto Rico on its political future before 2012. If the NPP's moves to gain political advantage for statehood paralyze the Task Force, it will have failed both President Obama and the people of Puerto Rico. The time to act, as the Task Force said in its report, is now. ■

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