

# Fact Sheet:

## Puerto Rican Participation in the U.S. Armed Forces

February 2021

### Historic Background

- **Puerto Rico Becomes a U.S. Territory** - In 1898 the U.S. acquired Puerto Rico in the Treaty of Paris that ended the Spanish-American War and, by the following year, Congress had already authorized raising a unit of volunteer soldiers in the newly acquired territory.
- **Importance of Puerto Rico to America's Defense** - Among the reasons why the U.S. acquired Puerto Rico was the island's geostrategic location in the center of the Caribbean, which was critical to the defense of America's military and economic interests in the Atlantic and Latin America.
- **U.S. Citizenship, the Draft & Voluntary Service** - In 1917 Congress passed legislation granting U.S. citizenship to individuals from Puerto Rico making them eligible for the draft, and soon thereafter the U.S. entered World War I. Since then, all men over the age of 18 from Puerto Rico are required to sign up for the Selective Service, and during the periods in which the draft has been in force nationwide the U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico have actively participated. More importantly, the vast majority of Puerto Ricans have participated in the U.S. Military voluntarily.
- **Military Bases** - For over 70 years Puerto Rico served as one of America's principal military outposts in the Western Hemisphere. Important bases and facilities included Ramey Air Force Base, Roosevelt Roads Naval Base, Vieques Naval Training Facility, and the still operational Fort Buchanan, which served as the home of U.S. Army South for several years.

### Record of Service

- **Service in Numbers** - U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico have proudly served in all U.S. wars since World War I, and as part of all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. Historically, Puerto Rico has ranked alongside the top states in terms of per capita military service. Estimated contributions include:
  - **18,000 during World War I**
  - **65,000 during World War II**
  - **61,000 during the Korean War**
  - **48,000 during the Vietnam War**
  - **10,000 during the Gulf War**
  - **25,000 during Operations Enduring Freedom & Iraqi Freedom**
- **Borinqueneer Congressional Gold Medal** - The famed and highly decorated 65th Infantry Regiment, known as the Borinqueneers, and composed mostly of soldiers from Puerto Rico, served as the only Hispanic segregated unit in the Korean War. In 2016 they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor Congress can bestow on an individual or group.
- **Medals of Honor** - Nine members of the Armed Forces from Puerto Rico have received the Medal of Honor, our Nation's highest award for military valor.
- **The Ultimate Price** – Over 1,900 U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico have been casualties of war paying the ultimate price in defense of America's freedom, while lacking full voting rights and equality.

### We Continue to Serve

- **Active Duty** – Tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans serve on active-duty and reserves across all the branches of the U.S. Armed Forces today.
- **National Guard** - Approximately 8,400 currently serve in the Puerto Rico Army and Air National Guard, and since 9/11 they have carried out over 16,500 deployments, more than 34 states in the Union.

## Veteran Community

- **Number of Veterans** - According to the latest data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs well over 90,000 American veterans call Puerto Rico home.
- **Veterans Service Organizations** - Approximately 30 veteran service organizations are currently active in Puerto Rico, including: The American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Association.
- **Military Families** - A recent survey revealed that 52% of people in Puerto Rico have either served in the Armed Forces or have a family member that served.

## Why Puerto Rico's Current Territory Status Hurts Veterans

- **Democratic Deficit** - The political status of Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory denies veterans representation in the U.S. Senate and proportional representation in the U.S. House. Instead, they are represented by a single Resident Commissioner who can vote in committee but not on the floor of the House. As residents of a territory American veterans in Puerto Rico are also denied the right to vote for the President of the U.S. All of this notwithstanding the fact that more U.S. citizens live in Puerto Rico than in 21 states.
- **Unequal Treatment Under Federal Laws** - Under the territory status Puerto Rico is subject to federal laws, but the U.S. Congress can and often does treat Puerto Rico differently in ways that are detrimental to veterans in terms of economic opportunity, health, security and quality of life.
- **Lack of Economic Opportunity** - The island's current territory status has stifled its economic growth and development, forcing it into a prolonged economic recession. If Puerto Rico's territory status is not changed the most probable result will be a continued deterioration of the island's economy and consequently its trade and commerce with the states.
- **Population Loss** - Due to the territory's economic and security challenges, as well as its democratic deficit, Puerto Rico has lost more than 600,000 of its residents in the last ten years, including many veterans, who have chosen to move to the states to enjoy their full rights, benefits and responsibilities as U.S. citizens. This population loss is in turn exacerbating the island's challenges.

## Benefits of Statehood for Puerto Rico and the U.S.

- **Real Democracy** - Statehood would provide veterans in Puerto Rico with a permanent and dignified political status, equal representation in the U.S. Congress, the right to vote for President, and equal treatment under federal laws, validating the core principles and ideals—of freedom, equality, justice and government by the consent of the governed—that America was founded on, and for which they served and fought to defend.
- **Economic Growth** - Statehood for Puerto Rico would provide the island with a greater capacity to: reform its outdated government structures and economic model; attract investment; increase the island's global competitiveness; expand interstate commerce with the continental U.S.; restore economic growth; and, carry its fair share of the cost of the federal government. A resilient and thriving State of Puerto Rico would benefit the national interest much more than keeping the island in the current economically weak and undemocratic territory status.
- **Improved Security** - Statehood would help bolster the level of federal resources and attention to Puerto Rico's challenging security situation as a drug transshipment point to the U.S. mainland, helping improve safety and security for both island residents and stateside communities.
- **Geostrategic Importance**: Statehood would bolster the geostrategic importance of Puerto Rico for America and help offset growing regional influence from China, Russia and other powers seeking to increase their presence in the Caribbean and Latin America regions.