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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT A WELCOME EVENT

Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport
San Juan, Puerto Rico

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THE PRESIDENT: Buenas tardes! (Applause.) It is good to be back in Puerto Rico. (Applause.) It is great to see so many familiar faces, so many advocates for the island. First of all, I want to acknowledge Congressman Pierluisi is here. Where is he? Right over there. (Applause.) My great friend, Andres Lopez. (Applause.) Francisco Pavia. (Applause.) Senator Bhatia. (Applause.) Governor Fortuno. (Applause.) And I know that we've got some former governors here today, along with leaders of local parties, and of the House and the Senate.

I am so grateful for the unbelievable reception. As you know, the last President to come to San Juan and address the people of Puerto Rico was John F. Kennedy, nearly 50 years ago. (Applause.) Now, at the time, I was about four months old -- (laughter) -- so my memory of this visit is a little hazy. What I do remember is that when I came here to campaign, I promised that I would return as President of the United States. (Applause.) And although my hair is a little grayer -- (applause) -- than during my first visit, I am glad to be able to keep that promise to the people of Puerto Rico. (Applause.)

But this is only one part of my commitment to families here on the island. Because when I ran for President, I promised to include Puerto Rico not just on my itinerary, but also in my vision of where our country needs to go. And I am proud to say that we've kept that promise, too.

First of all, we've addressed the question of political status. In March, a report from our presidential task force on Puerto Rican status provided a meaningful way forward on this question so that the residents of the island can determine their own future. And when the people of Puerto Rico make a clear decision, my administration will stand by you. (Applause.)

I also know that there are plenty of other issues that the island is facing. When President Kennedy was here, he addressed the relationship between Washington and San Juan, and he also spoke about tackling what he called, "the difficult problems of education and housing and employment."

In that same spirit, we've been trying to make sure that every family on the island can find work and make a living and provide for their children. That's why our economic plan and our health care reform included help for Puerto Rico. (Applause.)

That's why we're increasing access to broadband and investing in education. That's why we're helping to grow local tourism and health care and clean-energy industries. We're giving Puerto Ricans the tools they need to build their own economic futures.

And this is how it should be. Because every day, Boricuas help write the American story. (Applause.) Puerto Rican artists contribute to our culture -- and by the way, I don't know if you noticed, but Marc Anthony decided to show up here today. (Applause.) Puerto Rican entrepreneurs create American jobs. Even in the NBA finals, J.J. Barea inspired all of us -- (applause) -- with those drives to the hoop. That guy can play. (Applause.) Next time I'm down here I'm going to have to -- next time I'm here, I'm going to have to play some hoops. (Applause.)

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge all the Puerto Rican men and women who serve in our country's uniform. (Applause.) Give it up for our veterans. Thank you. (Applause.)

One of those veterans is Juan Castillo. Juan fought in World War II, and he fought in the Korean War. Today, he's two months away from his 101st birthday. (Applause.)

Juan's legacy is carried on by Puerto Ricans in Iraq and Afghanistan; men and women like Chief Master Sergeant Ramon Colon-Lopez, of the United States Air Force. In 2004, Ramon's team was going after a high-value target in Afghanistan. His helicopter was seriously damaged by hostile fire. In the thick of battle, he didn't know how large the force that he was up against. But he pressed on anyway, and his team killed or captured 12 enemy fighters. Because of his bravery, he was the first Hispanic American to be awarded the Air Force Combat Action Medal. (Applause.)

And I tell this story because for decades, Puerto Ricans like Juan and Ramon have put themselves in harm's way for a simple reason: They want to protect the country that they love. Their willingness to serve, their willingness to sacrifice, is as American as apple pie — or as Arroz con Gandules. (Applause.) The aspirations and the struggles on this island mirror those across America.

So I know that today a lot of folks are asking some of the same questions here on the island as they're asking in Indiana or California or in Texas: How do I make sure my kids get the kind of education that they need? How can I put away a little money for retirement? How can I fill up my gas tank? How can I pay the bills?

Everywhere I go, I see families facing challenges like these, but they're facing them with resolve and determination. You know, these problems didn't develop overnight here in Puerto Rico or anywhere else, but that means we're not going to solve them overnight. But, day by day, step by step, we will solve them.

We are going to be able to improve our education system here in Puerto Rico and all across America. (Applause.) We are making strides to improve our health care system here in Puerto Rico and all across America. (Applause.) We are going to put people back to work here in Puerto Rico and all across America. (Applause.)

Maybe some of you remember that when I was here in 2008, I spoke in front of the Cuartel de Ballaja, a site that had been home to so many chapters of Puerto Rican history. Today, Puerto Rican workers are writing the next chapter by turning the building into a model of energy efficiency. They're making HVAC systems more efficient. They're putting on a green roof. They're installing 720 photovoltaic panels. When they're done, it's estimated that the energy savings will be 57 percent. And Puerto Rico will have taken one more step towards creating a clean energy economy.

Those are the kinds of steps it will take for Puerto Rico to win the future and for America to win the future. (Applause.) That's what we do in this country. With each passing decade, with each new challenge, we reinvent ourselves. We find new ways to solve our problems. We push forward.

And we do so in a way that gives every one of our people a shot at the dream that we all share — the dream that if you're willing to work hard and take responsibility, you can build a better life for your family. You can find a job that's secure, provides decent wages, provides for your children, provides for your retirement. That's what people are hoping for, and it's not too much to ask.

Puerto Rico, I don't need to tell you that we're not there yet. We're not where we need to be. But in these challenging times, people on this island don't quit. We don't turn back. (Applause.) People in America don't quit. We don't turn back. We place our bets on entrepreneurs and on workers and on our families. We understand that there is strength in our diversity. We renew the American Dream. We have done it before. We will do it again.

Muchas gracias. Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you, Puerto Rico. (Applause.)