LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVE:  
THE PUERTO RICAN EXPERIENCE

REMARKS BY THE  
HONORABLE ARCILIO ALVARADO  
SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE  
OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE  
COMMONWEALTH OF PUERTO RICO  
AT THE  
SEVENTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF  
STATE LEGISLATIVE LEADERS

......

SAN JUAN, P.R.  
Nov. 13, 1965
Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, and guests:

Please allow me to again express our great satisfaction in having had the privilege of serving as your hosts for this Conference. It has been a hard-working and productive Conference and my colleagues and I have gained perspective from our participation in it.

The concern of state legislatures with the encroachment of federal power has its parallel in Puerto Rico's concern with its political status and we have a similar problem in establishing the proper balance between the powers of the Legislature and the powers of the Executive. We have discussed common problems, of legislative salaries, of committee organization, and the need for adequate professional and technical support.

But we all know that these are instruments -- necessary instruments -- but still merely parts of the machinery of legislation. By themselves they create nothing -- until geared to the prime mover. The prime mover, the force necessary to put the whole legislative machine into effective action, is legislative initiative.

Legislative Initiative:

What do we mean by initiative? I think it starts with understanding -- understanding the real needs and the real aspirations of our people. The next essential is imagination -- ideas for new and better solutions, a vision of a better future. But the
solvent for it all is leadership -- which is something we all can sense but cannot define. It is part push and drive -- and part pull and persuasion. It is partly innate -- of the leader's own personality -- and partly his dedication of purpose and his determination to achieve it.

Legislative leadership is especially difficult to define. By definition it is plural -- not singular. Within each chamber, leaders may differ and, with the two chambers that most of us have, such differences are likely to be multiplied -- not by two -- but perhaps by four. When differences are based on fundamental questions of fact or principle, our system is well-designed for their ultimate solution. But we all know that differences can sometimes be petty and self-serving. One peculiar necessity of effective legislative leadership is achievement of a workable degree of consensus. Effective legislative initiative is impossible without concerted leadership.

Should the National Conference of State Legislative Leaders ever decide to keep a record of great achievements by state legislatures, I honestly believe that the Puerto Rican epic which has been called its peaceful revolution, would surely occupy a prominent position on such a list. That revolution was fought and won by our country's legislative leaders back in 1940. I was not a legislator at that time, so this affords me the opportunity to evaluate objectively their enormous contribution. It was to the Legislature that the people looked for leadership, and it was from the Legislature that the people demanded immediate accom-
accomplishments. The Legislature responded, giving the people the laws that were so desperately needed in order to get our economy moving and to establish a more equitable distribution of the profits gained by increases in production. Clearly, the legislative power was there -- it had always been there -- all that was needed for its exercise was the strongwill of our legislators to make full use of it, with the unmistakable force of public opinion to support it.

However, this same legislature, as you have already heard, declined in initiative when its leader, Luis Muñoz Marín, then President of our Senate, went on to become our first democratically elected governor. A legislature elected on the same ticket and committed to the same party program as such a great leader as Muñoz, could not very well show its independence from that same leader, once he moved to the executive branch. Besides, we strongly believed in his enlightened ideas and programs and therefore, passed them into law without much ado.

Muñoz, as you know, has chosen to step aside. A new man, with new ideas, succeeded him. You have met Governor Sánchez Vilella and can see why we believe him a worthy successor. In his own, still experimental way, he is making new contributions to good government. Since his election as Governor and mine as Speaker of the House, we have had differences of opinion. But I have never questioned his right to act as he has done and he has never, to my knowledge, questioned my right to dissent. You will agree, I am sure, that constructive criticism is a necessary adjunct to good government.
Role of the Press:

Legislative leadership is officially affirmed or rejected every four years. But our press is daily, and has the daily right of affirmation or rejection. This is a basic right. The corresponding duty of the press is responsibility and we find, as you do, that it is often exercised in the breach. An irresponsible press is playing a major role in a local test of legislative initiative and leadership which is about to reach a conclusion.

We are now in the final stages of drafting a bill to reorganize the University of Puerto Rico, an educational institution vital to the future of our country. We have treated so important a matter with the utmost public responsibility. We have been working on it for more than two years. The subject was discussed in public hearings that were as extended and exhaustive as any I can remember. We then appointed a committee of distinguished educators to study the subject and propose what they thought to be the best solution. No conditions were attached to their deliberations. They enjoyed complete freedom to render the report they wished. They submitted a report and a draft bill. After careful study of their recommendations and after minor modifications, we are now ready to act.

But in spite of our painstaking efforts to deal with this subject in a responsible manner, there is one leading newspaper in Puerto Rico which daily makes our Legislature the object of some of the fiercest attacks that anyone can imagine, accusing
us of dealing with the reorganization of our University in a hasty and irresponsible way. If, in spite of these irresponsible attacks, the University reorganization bill is passed and signed into law, we will have demonstrated legislative leadership. If the bill is not passed and signed we will have failed in this effort to demonstrate initiative and leadership.

Puerto Rico's Peaceful Revolution:

It is my good fortune to be speaking to you after you have had time to become more familiar with our contemporary history. From previous speakers in this Conference, Governor Sánchez Vilella, Senate President Quiñones, Vice President of the House Mojica and Senator Fernós, you have learned something of the scope and significance of the peaceful revolution that we have been waging in Puerto Rico during the past twentyfive years.

I hope none of you will wince at the word "revolution". I realize that it is a term that has come into disrepute. In the light of recent events in our hemisphere it has almost become a dirty word. But I use it advisedly. I use it in the patriotic sense in which it was understood by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson and in which it is implicit in the Declaration of Independence. It was in that very sense that a vast majority of the people of Puerto Rico realized, a quarter of a century ago, that nothing short of a revolution -- albeit a peaceful revolution -- could lift our community out
of the doldrums of economic despair, political dissatisfaction and general stagnation in which we had fallen.

The words "peaceful revolution" will perhaps seem to you to be a contradiction in terms. But I assure you that the spirit that has permeated and characterized our efforts at seeking a better life for ourselves and our descendants has been truly revolutionary. And it is to the everlasting credit of the people and of the government of the United States that they had the wisdom to appreciate our need to wage a revolution and that they respected our right to solve our problems, within a democratic framework, as we best saw fit.

Out of this constant and remarkable endeavour by the Puerto Rican people during the last quarter century has grown this modern Commonwealth -- the living reality of the Associated Free State of Puerto Rico which you see all about you. Our community is a proud and dramatic example of what the processes of democracy can achieve when a resolute people, faced with the need to lift themselves by their own bootstraps, decide to buckle down and do the job that has to be done.

In solving our many urgent problems we have conscientiously avoided a doctrinaire approach. We very early realized that our best hope of dealing with our pressing economic needs was to adopt a flexible policy -- a judicious blend of capitalism and socialism. Because of this policy Puerto Rico is a country where public and private initiative have met on a harmonious common ground -- the ground of social responsibility. Social
motivation has been the key to our concerted effort. Both forms of initiative -- public and private -- have found a way to live together and work together in our community to produce one common result -- the amazing progress of a people with an Hispanic cultural background, freely associated with the United States on the basis of a common citizenship and a common dedication to the ideals of freedom and democracy.

Similarities and differences:

During your brief visit with us you have surely sensed that we, your fellow citizens in Puerto Rico, are in many ways similar to you -- and yet in many other ways, quite different. Let me give you an example of what I mean. As you entered this hotel today or passed by any public building while driving around San Juan, you will have noticed the flag of the United States and the Puerto Rican flag, flying together over the city in symbolic fraternity. Their function is to tell the world, day in and day out, that they are proudly flying together because it has been the free wish of both our peoples that we share a common destiny, and that it is possible for Puerto Rico's American citizens to exhibit and feel a deep pride in their American citizenship without belittling themselves as Puerto Ricans.

We are similar in many other ways. We share the kinship of spirit that flows from a common passionate belief in democracy. We share a common sense of justice and fair play. We are joined in our belief that the dignity of the individual, throughout
the world, is worth defending.

Yet we are also different from you in many ways. Our cultural background is rooted in the Spanish tradition. We deeply cherish the human and cultural values to which our Hispanic background has made us heirs. We resolutely seek to preserve a way of life that is characterized by the simple virtues of everyday living -- by a deep sense of friendliness, neighborliness, hospitality, human kindness, and by a firm conviction that the values of the spirit are the paramount motivating force in our lives.

Some of you represent constituencies where migrant Puerto Rican farm workers harvest your crops. Others of you have among your constituents groups of Puerto Ricans who have emigrated to the mainland and settled in your larger cities. You may have observed that these are a simple folk, ambitiously seeking a better way of life in the economic sense, yet proud of their traditions, full of friendliness, sometimes boisterous in their cheerfulness, but always sincerely ready to share and participate to the best of their abilities in the life of the community. These Puerto Ricans, the ones you meet on the mainland, because of the strong ties that bind them to their native land, are as much a part of the Puerto Rican community, as any of us living here on the island.

Then again, the increasing number of mainland-born citizens who have chosen to make Puerto Rico their permanent residence are also an important part of the Puerto Rican scene. Among them are a large number of the sons and daughters of Puerto Rican
emigrants, who were born on the mainland, but who have decided to come back and settle in Puerto Rico. All of these groups make up the Puerto Rican community.

Puerto Rico's contribution to the image of the United States:

Puerto Rico then, is unique in that in our midst two variations of a way of life, two branches of the mainstream of Western civilization have come in contact, placing us in a position to show the world what these two great cultures can do, in terms of liberty and democracy, for the good of their members and of mankind when they meet and work together on common ground.

The world knows that the United States is the strongest military and political power that has ever existed on this planet. The world also knows the United States as the greatest economic power that history has ever seen. The image of the United States throughout the world, however, is not that of a good neighbor, in spite of its generous financial and technical help and assistance to other countries. For a complex of reasons out of the past as well as of the present, it is a fact that the stigma of United States imperialism overshadows the intellectual and humanistic values that we, in Puerto Rico, know are basic traits of the American people.

As legislative leaders in your respective states, you must realize the urgent need to dispel these misconceptions and fears that large segments of the world hold concerning the allegedly imperialistic designs of the United States government. We need the
confidence and support of the non-alligned countries. In this vital task, on which the fate of the world may well hang, we in Puerto Rico are your best proof of the integrity of your intentions and of your inalterable policy of fostering and aiding the freely expressed political aspirations of all the emerging communities of the world.

The deep meaning of the Puerto Rican story, which must be told to the world in its full significance and dramatic intensity, is how vision and purpose can turn a seemingly hopeless situation into a dynamic reality, how the dream of abolishing want from among the scourges of humanity can be turned into a vitally moving force for the good of all mankind. It is our duty -- yours and ours -- to unfold this dream and the accomplished reality before the eyes of the people living in the underdeveloped areas of the Earth. If we do this, they will no longer be in a position to doubt that, in the world's present ideological struggle, the United States is on their side -- ready and willing to extend to them whatever help they may need to truly help themselves.

We, in Puerto Rico, are proud to join you in showing what freedom loving peoples everywhere can accomplish by closely working together towards the solution of any problem, within the framework of their democratic beliefs and aspirations. We are not, by any means, completely satisfied that we have perfected our unique Commonwealth relationship with the United States. But we are confident that we will be able to do so in the very
near future. When this has been accomplished, I strongly believe that the United States will be in a much better position to dispel the misconceptions harbored by so many governments and peoples regarding the intentions of the United States toward their countries. Puerto Rico knows that they are misconceptions. But what we know, the rest of the world needs to be shown. Puerto Rico can help the United States prove this to the rest of the world.

Therefore, when you go back to your homes and meet a Puerto Rican on the streets of New York or San Francisco, or in the farms of New Jersey or Minnesota, even if he still seems unadap ted and alien to the environment he has chosen to live in, think of him as a representative of a country that can be very useful in the achievement of a national purpose which is common to all United States citizens. Remember that back in Puerto Rico he acquired a background that is deeply rooted in democracy, in the simple virtues, and in a sincere regard for his fellow beings -- no matter of what color, creed or national origin. He is truly your fellow citizen, your partner in the American dream.

* * *