

PREFACE

ONE NEED LOOK NO FURTHER than the recent coverage of Puerto Rico and Hurricane Maria to understand my reasons for writing this book. A lovely island sitting in the Caribbean and under U.S. rule since 1898, it has somehow evaded Americans' awareness as one of the last standing vestiges of New World colonialism. And now it is barely standing.

No soy de aquí ni de allá, we Puerto Ricans say, meaning "I am accepted neither here nor there." We were handed over as a trophy after the Spanish-American War, and we have been Almost-Americans ever since. Cuba immediately, the Philippines later, and other U.S. territories have gone on to full statehood, but Puerto Rico stays in limbo as it slowly collapses, like an old house no one can be bothered to look after.

And then the hurricane came and wiped out an electrical grid that was fragile and badly outdated. The system, which has changed little since it was created some 70 years ago, costs four times as much as electrical grids on the mainland when it functions at all.

When President Donald Trump finally visited the island, almost two weeks after the hurricane made landfall, he had already lashed out at the mayor of San Juan and insisted that nothing more could have been done. He took it personally that the mayor had warned that people were in real trouble, even dying, as a result of the flooding, the lack of power, and the overwhelmed and underfunded emergency services. Then he

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showed up, chided Puerto Ricans for being a drag on the national budget, and tossed out paper towels, as if they were party favors, to a passive crowd. And after either growing bored or seeing no further point in staying, he left an hour earlier than scheduled.

Watching the whole sad, inadequate response on television, I could not even focus on the president's actions. I was watching my fellow Puerto Ricans. When it took Trump weeks to show up, we said little. When he arrived and opened with a complaint about how much we were costing the United States, we said nothing. Everywhere he went, we stood and watched, waiting for something good to happen. When he tossed out paper towels as if they might mop up the flooding, we clapped, we smiled, we caught them, and were grateful.

When he said that the debt would probably have to be wiped out, we knew he was only saying so to get out of the room, and then he left and took his promise back. Of course, he did. And what will we do about it? Probably nothing. The island is saddled with a municipal debt of more than \$70 billion—not to mention an additional \$22 billion in bonds owed by the government-owned electric company—and almost half of its citizens live in poverty. But we are unwilling to take any steps to change our predicament. We wait for better days. This has forever been the way. But now Puerto Ricans, not from here and not from there, face the possibility that there will no longer be any “there.”

Growing up in New York City, Puerto Ricans had little standing and no identity. We seemed to be more timid than other groups. Perhaps because we always had somewhere to flee to, we chose not to stand and fight. As citizens of the United States, we are free to move between the island and the mainland, and with cheap travel, we could always go somewhere else when things got bad. I count myself lucky that I grew up in the time of the civil rights movement, among people who helped me take my sense of justice and aim it at something. I learned how to take my frustration at a system that abused its power over people and turn it into action. I was fortunate to grow up during a time when, as a teen and as a law school student, I could join African Americans in their fight for civil rights.

The Latino population in the mainland United States was tiny in the 1950s, but it has rapidly grown, and with our increasing numbers can come greater political power. This book aims to show what one determined Latino can do, and I hope it provides a path for others to follow. Moreover, I hope that the coming generations push further, do more, and

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can change the world. This will take not just hard work but also community- and online-initiated common cause with like-minded people.

I believe that education is paramount to success and that it must be more equitably provided to all. Better-educated children become more civic-minded adults, more effective citizens, and more willing advocates for the needs of their communities. This book tells my story. I spoke no English when I entered a school where no one spoke a word of Spanish to me. I was behind when I began, and I had to fight to catch up. I didn't do it alone—I had help and inspiration from my mother, from my church community, and from many other mentors.

I believe in Philadelphia. This city, my home for almost 50 years, has much to offer and much work to do. It's the ideal place for people who want to make a difference. It has taught me a great deal, and it has been good to me. I hope this book helps pay it back and pay it forward.

I was born into poverty and squalor, and bad things happened in my life. But I was also fortunate, even blessed. I made many mistakes, and I often had doubts, but I kept moving forward. I strove to improve life for everyone, and while I did not always triumph, I believe that I made a difference. This book is not intended as an instruction manual for community activism or for any other endeavor. It is simply my story, and I hope it will speak to those who read it, remind them of what's possible, and inspire them to keep working toward what they know to be right.