

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks on Signing the Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014 and Legislation To Award a Congressional Gold Medal to the 65th Infantry Regiment

June 10, 2014

The President. Thank you, everybody. Please, have a seat. Have a seat. Thank you.

Well, today I am proud to sign two bills into law.

Audience members. Yay!

The President. Love signing bills. One will support jobs strengthening our national infrastructure; the other honors military heroes from our history. Though they accomplish two very different things, these bills do what we want all our laws to do, and that's serve the American people by honoring our past and building a stronger future.

Now, the first bill I'll sign today is the Water Resources Reform and Development Act, also known as WRRDA, which will put Americans to work modernizing our water infrastructure and restoring some of our most vital ecosystems. During my State of the Union Address, I asked Congress to pass this bill by the summer, and I congratulate this outstanding crew for getting it done.

Bipartisan negotiators—[applause]. You had bipartisan negotiators—Senator Barbara Boxer, Senator Dave Vitter, Congressman Shuster, and Congressman Rahall—they set aside politics, they focused on what was important for the country and what was important for their communities, and as a consequence, we have a piece of legislation that's really going to make a good difference.

As more of the world's cargo is transported on these massive ships, we've got to make sure that we've got bridges high enough and ports that are big enough to hold them and accommodate them so that our businesses can keep selling goods made in America to the rest of the world. Meanwhile, many of America's businesses ship their goods across the country by river and by canal, so we've got to make sure that those waterways are in tiptop shape.

And this bill gives a green light to 34 water infrastructure projects across the country, including projects to deepen Boston Harbor and the Port of Savannah and to restore the Everglades. And with Congress's authorization, these projects can now move forward. So this bill will help towns and cities improve their commerce, but it's also going to help them prepare for the effects of climate change—storms, floods, droughts, rising sea levels—creating more adaptability, more resilience in these communities.

Traditionally, investments in our infrastructure have received strong bipartisan support. This hasn't always been true in the last few years. Right now we should be putting a lot more Americans back to work rebuilding our infrastructure. We've got two trillion dollars' worth of deferred maintenance that we could be getting done right now, especially because contractors are coming in under budget and on time. And there are a lot of guys with hard hats sitting at home.

So we could really be doing even more. The fact that this bill received some bipartisan support, I think, hopefully, sets a pattern for additional work that we can do on our transportation infrastructure. We need a transportation bill by the end of this summer in order

to make sure that projects all across the country don't get shut down. So we're looking forward to seeing this same team work hard on that.

I just want to be clear: If Congress fails to act, then Federal funding for transportation projects runs out by the end of the summer. That means more than 100,000 active projects, nearly 700,000 jobs, would be at risk. Fortunately, we've got some leaders here who, I think, can work with us to make sure that doesn't happen.

And the good news—last point I want to make about infrastructure: World-class infrastructure is one of the reasons that America became a global superpower in the first place. And the good thing about infrastructure projects is, they can't be outsourced. American workers have to do the job right here in America. So—and American companies—it has huge ripple effects. You need steel, you need concrete, you need engineers, you need architects. You've got folks who have Ph.D.'s and you've got folks who've got high school diplomas who can all benefit from the kinds of infrastructure projects that we've put together. So this should be really a high priority.

Now, for the second bill.

Shortly after Puerto Rico became part of the United States in 1898, a regiment of Puerto Rican soldiers was formed, and they served our Nation bravely ever since. In World War I, they defended the homeland and patrolled the Panama Canal Zone. In World War II, they fought in Europe. In Korea, they fought in mud and snow. They are the 65th Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army. They are also known as the Borinquen—I've got to get this right—Borinqueneers.

Audience members. Yes!

The President. See? I practiced before I came out. They are from the Taino name for Puerto Rico. And segregation that set them apart from their fellow soldiers, but their courage made them legendary.

They earned thousands of medals for their service in Korea. Today we are going to add to those accolades by awarding these soldiers one of the country's highest civilian honors: the Congressional Gold Medal.

One of them, I'm sure, would be very proud to see his son James end up in the White House someday. James Albino has been serving in my administration since 2009, both here in the White House and at the Department of Homeland Security. I know this is a proud day for his family.

I want to thank Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi, as well as Senator Richard Blumenthal, Senator Marco Rubio, Congressman Bill Posey. They led the efforts to pass this bill. And we are glad that we've got Puerto Rico's Governor, Alejandro Garcia Padilla, who is here with us today as well.

Only a handful of military units have ever received this award, and only one other Hispanic American has received this award, Roberto Clemente. That's pretty good company. So this is a proud day for the Borinqueneers and their families. It's a proud day for all of those whose lives they saved and whose freedom they defended. It's a proud day for all Americans, especially Hispanic Americans, who have made extraordinary contributions to our country, many through their military service.

So on behalf of the American people, we want to thank all the Borinqueneers and—for their extraordinary service. You've earned a hallowed place in our history.

And to those members of the 65th Infantry Regiment who are here with us today, I'd ask you to please stand and raise your hand so we can recognize you for your service.

All right. Okay. So I'm going to sign these bills. We're going to do the WRRDA first, these are the water folks. [Laughter] Then we're going to—then we're going to get our infantry up here. All right?

Audience member. Hooah!

The President. There you go.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:08 a.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Celestino Cordova, Rafael Gomez-Hernandez, Leonardo Martinez, Jose Pickard, Miguel Piñero, Ramon Rodriguez, Federico Simmons, and Arcadio Santiago, retired soldiers from the 65th Infantry Regiment, USA; and James Albino, Executive Director, President's Task Force on Puerto Rico. H.R. 3080, approved June 10, was assigned Public Law No. 113-121; and H.R. 1726, approved June 10, was assigned Public Law No. 113-120.

Categories: Bill Signings and Veto : Congressional Gold Medal to 65th Infantry Regiment, legislation awarding, signing remarks; Bill Signings and Veto : Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014, signing remarks.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Albino, James; Blumenthal, Richard; Boxer, Barbara; Cordova, Celestino; Gomez-Hernandez, Rafael; Martinez, Leonardo; Padilla, Alejandro Javier Garcia; Pickard, Jose; Pierluisi, Pedro R.; Piñero, Miguel; Posey, William J.; Rahall, Nick J., II; Rodriguez, Ramon; Rubio, Marco A.; Santiago, Arcadio; Shuster, William; Simmons, Federico; Vitter, David B.

Subjects: Congress : Bipartisanship; Decorations, medals, and awards : Congressional Gold Medal; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Environment : Climate change; Environment : Conservation :: Watersheds and estuaries, protection efforts; Environment : Water management policy, improvement efforts; Legislation, enacted : Congressional Gold Medal to 65th Infantry Regiment, legislation awarding; Legislation, enacted : Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014; Puerto Rico : Governor; Puerto Rico : Resident Commissioner; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts; White House Office : Puerto Rico, President's Task Force on.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400442.