

At the Center of the Storm

San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz and the Response to Hurricane Maria

Epilogue

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Mayor Cruz did not spend much time debating her options. To her, the answer was clear: It was time to speak to the public and forcefully counter the “good news” narrative now coming out of Washington. Acting US Secretary of Homeland Security Elaine Duke’s remarks had certainly provoked her, but it was the continued delayed delivery of essential aid, such as food, water, and medical supplies, that had pushed her to the breaking point. She could no longer wait patiently, hoping that the situation would change, while visiting one community after another that looked, in the words of Gloriana Salgado, “like a bomb had hit them.”¹ As Salgado bluntly put it: “She was just tired of [realizing] every single place she went, ‘Okay, that person, [if] I don’t take them to the hospital right now, they’re going to die.’”

Cruz thus convened her communications staff and instructed them to contact the many news and media outlets that had flocked to San Juan and inform them that she would be holding a press conference later that day. Although the mayor was confident in her decision, some of her key advisors urged her to reconsider her strategy. Cruz recalled, “Three people very dear to me from my staff, who have worked with me for a long time, [said], ‘Don’t do it. Don’t do it. You’re going to kill your political career.’”² But Cruz held firm. “I will die if I don’t say this. I have to say this,” she told them. “Truth is like a bubble,” she later explained. “It always comes up to the surface. So, I decided to do that, even knowing that I was risking the help that was going to come from the US government.”

Speaking in front of a mass of cameras from her command center at the Coliseum, the mayor proceeded to aggressively criticize the federal government’s efforts and directly called on the president to bring an end to the crisis. “We are dying here. And I cannot fathom the thought that the greatest nation in the world cannot figure out logistics for a small island of one-hundred miles by thirty-five miles long. So, mayday, we are in trouble.”

Cruz continued, “I will do what I never thought I was going to do. I am begging, begging anyone that can hear us, to save us from dying. If anybody out there is listening to us, we are dying, and you are killing us with the inefficiency and the bureaucracy. [. . .]” The mayor then gestured behind her to a pile of donated supplies, explaining, “This is what we got last night: four pallets of water, three pallets of meals and twelve pallets of infant food—I gave them to Comerio, where people are drinking [from] a creek. So, I am done being polite. I am done being politically correct. I am mad as hell. Because my

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people's lives are at stake. [. . .] I am asking the members of the press to send a mayday call all over the world. We are dying here. [. . .] Mr. Trump, I beg you to take charge and save lives."³

Broadcast widely by TV networks, newspapers, and social media, Cruz's remarks had the desired effect of putting Puerto Rico front and center. Along with subsequent media appearances, they also elevated Cruz's public stature, making her a household name well beyond Puerto Rico. But as some of her advisors had feared, the mayor had also provoked the president, who began attacking her in intensely personal terms. Cruz and her advisors now had to spend valuable time and energy countering his and his advisors' criticism, which started with Trump unleashing a series of tweets on the morning of Saturday, September 30, just hours after her press conference.

First, the president alleged that Cruz was politically motivated. "The Mayor of San Juan, who was very complimentary only a few days ago, has now been told by the Democrats that you must be nasty to Trump," he wrote. He followed with two more tweets several minutes later. "Such poor leadership ability by the Mayor of San Juan, and others in Puerto Rico, who are not able to get their workers to help. They . . ." he continued, ". . . want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort. 10,000 Federal workers now on Island doing a fantastic job."⁴

Over the ensuing days, the political tensions between Cruz and Trump continued to escalate. Yet at the same time, relief efforts also began to expand dramatically. A portion of the aid, including a massive ramp-up of military support, had been in the works well before the press conference,⁵ but Cruz's remarks also led to a wave of celebrities, NGO workers, and representatives of various local and state governments descending on San Juan. They brought with them essential supplies and goods, as well sustained media attention, which helped keep Maria fresh in the minds of people outside Puerto Rico.

Cruz saw this influx of aid as justifying her actions. She said, "I got criticized by politicians here saying that I was putting at risk all of the help. [But] the opposite happened. Help started coming to us from places I had never heard [of]. Private organizations, [like the] Hispanic Federation. [. . .] Chicago, Miami Beach, Boston. [. . .] I have a box full of letters from people I've never seen. [People wrote,] 'Here's \$100, here's \$5, here's \$1. Do what you need to do with this.' So we had to start a foundation because we needed a structure to get all this money [from the] donations.ⁱ People started flocking here and saying, 'Okay, we want to help you because you have cried so hard and so loud that we heard you.'"

At the same time, San Juan officials began to coordinate more closely with federal authorities. For instance, relations between the city and FEMA began to gradually improve, especially after the agency assigned a highly experienced official to work directly with San Juan's leadership. "He was very instrumental," Héctor Rivera said, "in making sure that the city of San Juan got the resources needed to have a faster recovery."⁶

But even as city-federal relations improved at the operational level, Cruz, the president, and senior members of the Trump administration continued to trade barbs. On Tuesday, October 3, just days after he had launched his Twitter tirade against Cruz, Trump visited Puerto Rico for the first time since Maria. During his visit, he made a point to praise the island's governor, Ricardo Rosselló, who had

ⁱ San Juan officials and community leaders established the nonprofit organization, "Somebody Help Us," in late October/early November of 2017 as a mechanism to receive and manage these donated funds.

continued to speak more positively of the Trump administration's efforts. Although the president did not directly name Cruz, his remarks clearly criticized her decision to speak out the previous week. "[Rosselló's] not even from my party and he started right at the beginning appreciating what we did," Trump said. "Right from the beginning, this governor did not play politics. He was saying it like it was, and he gave us the highest rates [sic]." ⁷

And even though both Cruz and Trump attended the same briefing, the president ignored her, soliciting comments instead from other politicians like Rosselló and Puerto Rico's non-voting Congressional delegate, Jenniffer González-Colón, who also praised the administration's efforts. Later, Cruz told CNN, "I would hope that the president of the United States stops spouting out comments that really hurt the people of Puerto Rico, because, rather than commander in chief, he sort of becomes miscommunicator in chief." ⁸

Cruz's comments alluded to several other controversial moments during Trump's visit, including his comparison of Maria to Katrina. "Every death is a horror," he declared, "but if you look at a real catastrophe like Katrina, and you look at the tremendous hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people that died, and you look at what happened here and what is your death count? Sixteen people, versus in the thousands." ⁹ Critics pointed out, however, that the death count from Maria was still rising. Moreover, there was little point in comparing the two disasters, both of which were historically devastating events. ¹⁰ (After considerable debate over the number of fatalities attributable to Maria, the Government of Puerto Rico eventually accepted the findings of a study by The George Washington University, which concluded that the storm caused the deaths—directly and indirectly—of 2,975 Puerto Ricans.) ¹¹

Later in the day, Trump fanned flames even further by nonchalantly tossing rolls of paper towels into a crowd during a visit to a church outside of San Juan. ¹² Media outlets across the US and abroad played footage of the incident for days, prompting many critics to take the president to task for not appreciating the gravity of the situation and disrespecting the survivors. Cruz joined the chorus, blasting Trump for his behavior at the church. "This terrible and abominable view of him throwing paper towels and throwing provisions at people," she said, "it really—it does not embody the spirit of the American nation, you know?" ¹³

Trump later attempted to counter this criticism in an interview with former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee that aired on the Christian television network Trinity Broadcasting, "They had these beautiful, soft towels. [. . .] Very good towels. And I came in and there was a crowd of a lot of people. And they were screaming and they were loving everything. I was having fun, they were having fun. They said, 'Throw 'em to me! Throw 'em to me, Mr. President!'" To which Governor Huckabee replied, "You were a rockstar!" ¹⁴

Following the president's visit, Cruz and members of the Trump administration continued to publicly vent about one another. For instance, on October 8, after Cruz had tweeted criticism that FEMA was not doing enough to support an overwhelmed hospital in San Juan, the agency's administrator, Brock Long, made an appearance on ABC's Sunday morning news program "This Week." Although Long had been booked on the program to discuss Hurricane Nate, the host also asked him to address Cruz's comments. In response, he characterized the mayor's complaints as "political noise" and stated that

“we [the Trump administration] filtered out the mayor a long time ago.”¹⁵ The next day, in a press briefing held at FEMA headquarters, Long criticized what he saw as the politicization of the response, alluding to political differences between Cruz and Governor Rosselló. “What I’ve experienced firsthand, is a successful response relies on unity, okay,” he said. “To give you an example, when you can’t get elected officials at the local level to come to a joint field office because they disagree with the politics of the governor that’s there, it makes things difficult and the information fragmented.”¹⁶

Such public squabbling and finger-pointing would continue. But in a sense, it no longer mattered. By airing her frustrations through the media, Cruz had achieved her most urgent goal of putting the spotlight on San Juan and Puerto Rico, which in turn helped to dramatically accelerate and expand relief efforts. This allowed her to put the ongoing criticism in perspective. “You can’t be too concerned about yourself,” she later observed. “You really have to decide what’s important. Is it politics? Or is it doing the right thing?” For Cruz, the right thing meant doing all she could to advocate for her constituents during the darkest hours. “I will never ever feel bad about using every frigging platform available to me to ask for help—because help did come. And it saved lives.”

Endnotes

- ¹ Interview with Gloriana Salgado, Special Assistant to the Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, January 31, 2019. Unless noted, all other quotations by and attributions to Salgado are from this interview.
- ² Interview with Carmen Yulín Cruz, Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, February 1, 2019. Unless noted, all other quotations by and attributions to Cruz are from this interview.
- ³ Arelis R. Hernández, Mark Berman, and John Wagner, “San Juan Mayor Slams Trump Administration Comments on Puerto Rico Hurricane Response,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 2017, accessed June 11, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/29/san-juan-mayor-slams-trump-administration-comments-on-puerto-rico-hurricane-response/?utm_term=.954a92988992. See also: Amanda Holpuch and Lauren Gambino, “‘Close to Genocide’: San Juan Mayor’s Dire Appeal to US for Puerto Rico Relief,” *The Guardian*, September 29, 2017, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/29/san-juan-mayor-criticizes-us-officials-for-calling-puerto-rico-relief-effort-good-news>.
- ⁴ Donald J. Trump, Twitter, September 30, 2017, available at <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/914087234869047296?lang=en>, accessed June 11, 2019; Donald J. Trump, Twitter, September 30, 2017, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/914089003745468417?lang=en>; Donald J. Trump, Twitter, September 30, 2017, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/914089888596754434?lang=en>.
- ⁵ Hernández et al., “San Juan Mayor Slams Trump Administration Comments on Puerto Rico Hurricane Response.”
- ⁶ Interview with Héctor Rivera, aide to Mayor Cruz, San Juan, Puerto Rico, January 31, 2019. Unless noted, all other quotations by and attributions to Rivera are from this interview.
- ⁷ David A. Graham, “Trump’s Puerto Rico Visit is a Political Disaster,” *The Atlantic*, October 3, 2017, accessed June 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/trump-puerto-rico-visit/541869/>.
- ⁸ Mark Landler, “Trump Lobs Praise, and Paper Towels, to Puerto Rico Storm Victims,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2017, accessed June 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/03/us/puerto-rico-trump-hurricane.html>.
- ⁹ Graham, “Trump’s Puerto Rico Visit is a Political Disaster.”
- ¹⁰ Landler, “Trump Lobs Praise, and Paper Towels, to Puerto Rico Storm Victims.”
- ¹¹ Milken Institute School of Public Health, The George Washington University, “Ascertainment of the Estimated Excess Mortality from Hurricane María in Puerto Rico,” August 28, 2018, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://publichealth.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/downloads/projects/PRstudy/Acertainment%20of%20the%20Estimated%20Excess%20Mortality%20from%20Hurricane%20Maria%20in%20Puerto%20Rico.pdf>.
- ¹² Landler, “Trump Lobs Praise, and Paper Towels, to Puerto Rico Storm Victims.”
- ¹³ Aleem Maqbool, “Puerto Rico: Trump Paper Towel-throwing ‘Abominable,’” *BBC News*, October 4, 2017, accessed August 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41504165>.
- ¹⁴ Emma Stefansky, “Donald Trump Defends Tossing Paper Towels into a Crowd of Puerto Rican Hurricane Victims,” *Vanity Fair*, October 8, 2017, accessed August 5, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/10/donald-trump-puerto-rico-hurricane-paper-towels>.
- ¹⁵ Ellie Smith, “San Juan Mayor’s Complaints Dismissed as ‘Political Noise’ by FEMA Chief,” *ABC News*, October 8, 2017, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/san-juan-mayors-complaints-dismissed-political-noise-fema/story?id=50353414>; ABC News, “‘This Week’ Transcript 10-8-17: Aftermath of the Las Vegas Mass Shooting,” October 8, 2017, accessed November 7, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/week-transcript-10-17-aftermath-las-vegas-mass/story?id=50345749>.
- ¹⁶ Joel Achenbach and Arelis R. Hernández, “FEMA Administrator: Puerto Rico’s Politics, Lack of Unity, Hindering Hurricane Response,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 2017, accessed July 31, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/fema-administrator-puerto-ricos-politics-lack-of-unity-hindering-hurricane-response/2017/10/09/f1711996-ad10-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html.