



COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES DEMOCRATS

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The U.S. Territories: History, Governance, and Their Futures April 2005

The United States presently maintains sovereignty over five inhabited territories that vary in population, land mass, and economic and political development. The U.S. was ceded three of the five territories resulting from war – Puerto Rico and Guam at the end of the Spanish-American War and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) as a United Nations Trust Territory at the culmination World War II. The remaining territories were either ceded to the U.S. by treaty (American Samoa circa 1900) or acquired through outright purchase (U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) from Denmark circa 1917).

The responsibility to set federal policy for each of these territories is charged to the U.S. Congress, as dictated by the Territorial Clause of the U.S. Constitution. Under Congress' authority, these territories have been able to exercise limited self-government. By the passage of Federal legislation, Puerto Rico and the CNMI have adopted their own local constitutions; the governments of Guam and the USVI, in lieu of a local constitution, are organized under separate Organic Acts for each territory. Congress gave plenary authority over American Samoa to the Secretary of Interior, who authorized the territory to adopt its own local constitution which was ratified in 1966.

Like the States, each territory elects its own head-of-state (governor) and legislators who serve in either a unicameral (Guam) or a bicameral legislative body. In general, Federal law applies to all the territories, and local legislative bodies are responsible for laws that have local application.

Except for the CNMI, Congress has authorized elected representation from each territory to the U.S. House of Representatives. The Delegate or Resident Commissioner (Puerto Rico) has all privileges afforded to State Representatives, except a vote on the House floor during final passage of legislation. Like their counterparts who represent the States, Delegates or the Resident Commissioner of the Territories can serve and vote in Committees, introduce bills and resolutions, and participate in Floor debates. Their true value to their respective constituencies lies in being able to participate in shaping Federal policy toward U.S. territories.

The Committee on Resources, and its counterpart Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, has historically worked in a bi-partisan manner when considering legislation that would affect Federal policy toward U.S. territories. In recent years, the Committee has considered legislation to strengthen government institutions to provide for greater transparency and accountability, exempt certain taxes from development bonds, and provide funding to upgrade half-century old infrastructure.

Today, after more than a century under the American flag and as a part of the American family, U.S. territories continue to struggle with a multitude of issues.

- Prior to becoming a part of the American family, their histories were that of colonized peoples. As such, a great emphasis is placed on their being able to protect their indigenous cultures and languages while still facing the day-to-day challenges to increase revenue, ensure basic services, and upgrade infrastructure.**
- Federal policy can either hinder or advance their economic, social, and political development, and it has long been the intention of Congress to be mindful of the unique circumstances faced by each territory and ensure that federal policy moves territories forward.**
- For colonized cultures there is a natural aspiration for political advancement through self-determination, and, in fact, an American tradition. This Committee strives to advance issues of self-determination that are constitutionally sound, and non-territorial and non-colonial.**

Aside from the original thirteen colonies which worked for freedom from English rule, nearly all States comprising the U.S. were at one time a territory. American tradition dictates, in large measure, that a territory would eventually become a State and contribute economically, socially, and militarily to the American fabric.

The U.S. territories of our modern era - though not States - already make these contributions to our nation. And unlike the histories of the majority of States which first came under the American flag through exploration of the West, the current U.S. territories were acquired as spoils of war, cession, and acquisition. These territories are strategic locations and offer us unique opportunities to project American values and secure our nation; and it is because of this that we must meet the challenges to assist in their well-being. They are, after-all, our fellow American citizens.