

Remarks by John A. Carver, Jr., Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Public Land Management, at the Opening of the Virgin Islands Constitutional Convention at Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, December 7, 1964

Mr. Chairman:

What you are undertaking to do in this convention constitutes the very essence of democracy. It is, therefore, a truly thrilling experience for me to have been invited to participate in the opening of so noble an enterprise.

The right of citizens, individuals and groups, to petition their government is a cherished part of our heritage, explicitly set forth in our constitution. Rarely, however, is it utilized in so formal and methodical a way as you have chosen to plan for your own political future.

Your action in convening this convention is the ultimate answer to those who practice tyranny at home but preach self-determination in the distant halls of international deliberation. I hope that my presence here, as a representative of the Federal Government to wish you well and to encourage the most fundamental kind of evaluation, will add one more spike in the coffin in which we bury the lie of American colonialism.

For nearly four years now, I have wrestled with the wide variety of problems that are committed to my office by delegation from the Secretary of the Interior. But of all the responsibilities which he has given me, that which places me in close, almost daily, contact with the offshore territories is the most satisfying. In this, all the basic elements of government are found. Each territorial entity, with its own personality, is a separate microcosm -- a unique political phenomenon whose life processes can be comprehended as a unified whole, whereas in the gargantuan size and intricate workings of our Federal establishment there is given to each Department but a slice or portion. The same is true, also, in our fifth States. The situation in the territories lets us see representative government as it was at the beginning of our Republic.

You are in the very enviable position of being able to make your governmental institutions serve quite directly the needs of your community.

In one respect you are not completely free agents. Unlike the states whose sovereign existence and powers are preserved by constitutional format, the territories are peculiarly creatures of Federal discretion. In a large sense you are direct participants in the exercise of a Federal prerogative. We are both participants in a most interesting experiment-- the development of self-government by direct Congressional action.

reality. Diversification of business and industry is a fact. The virtues of the territory as a vacation spot are known throughout the mainland. Your election laws have broadened citizen participation in the governmental process. You have elected to take on the responsibilities for providing services--power and water--rather than rely on Federal management of those resources.

These are truly concrete evidences of progress and civic maturity. It is, then, wholly appropriate that you should now turn to the question of your governmental charter and the political instrumentalities through which you manage your own destinies for the future.

As in all facets of public affairs, the assumption of authority to express political aspirations carries with it a grave obligation to protect the broader national interest. As full citizens of the United States, you must assure that the recommendations coming from this convention conform to the document which establishes the ultimate Federal sovereignty, the United States Constitution. More than that, in exercising the democratic prerogative of petition you must be ever mindful of the image of America as it is seen in other quarters of the world. Every element of my experience with the Virgin Islands generates confidence that you will be responsive to these basic obligations.

Above all, we must recognize that the work of this convention will only be a beginning. Ours is not a government of whim or proclamation. You are beginning a process of communication with the basic source of Federal authority in matters of territorial government--the Congress. The role of my Department in this process cannot be a wholly neutral one, but it must be a responsible one. We shall do our utmost to make your communication to the Congress both meaningful and productive. We tender our good offices, both to make your deliberations fruitful and to promote understanding between you and the Congress.

Four years ago, I called for:

". . . the creation of a social, economic and political environment which will permit the residents of the area to make a free choice as to their ultimate form of relationship to the United States."

Those four years have established milestones of progress toward that ideal. It is now for you to express the true hopes and aspirations of this community with respect to the ultimate political question of association with the rest of the broader national community.