

Study U.S. territorial history, forget about Guam statehood

As Guam gears up for a controversial plebiscite on self-determination to decide the ultimate political status of the territory, it might be worthwhile to consider the relationship between the island and the U.S.

government historically, within the context of American territorial policy and relations.

Early European-American expansion from the Eastern seaboard to the West Coast of California and, eventually, to Alaska and

Hawaii, was not only anticipated (Federalist No. 38), but was characterized by the American people settling the territories first, while the flag, or U.S. government, followed.

Each of the Western territories were expected to eventually become states in the American union. The process of admitting new states into the union (incorporation) was not without political difficulties and compromises. For instance, Utah gave up the practice of polygamy to obtain statehood and Nevada gave up more than 70 percent of its land to become a state. However, in each instance, the will of the people of the Western territories was eventually persuasive in the U.S. Congress, and statehood was granted.

The experience of the U.S. offshore territories (Puerto Rico, Guam, CNMI,

U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa) is entirely different. Each was and still is extensively populated by inhabitants with considerably different linguistic, ethnic, historical and cultural traditions.

And the American people did not settle in the offshore territories prior to the federal government's annexation of them (the federal government went first and the American people have not followed). To date, the number of mainland Americans living in the offshore territories is quite small. There is, therefore, a pronounced social, cultural and political disconnect between the inhabitants of the territories and their elected representatives and mainland U.S. citizens and their elected representatives (Leibowitz, 1998).

In the case of Guam (and the other offshore territories) there is not a large enough mainland American population to result in the petitioning of Congress for full inclusion into the American union (statehood). And this is not likely to change in the future as most mainlanders that come to Guam are on limited military tours of duty or other limited-term contracts. Moreover, many of those who come to Guam eventually leave and return home for a variety of reasons, but largely because of social, cultural, economic and political differences.

Furthermore, even if the people of Guam were to genuinely pursue statehood, it is highly unlikely that the U.S. Congress would grant this status for Guam since:

▲ Without a sufficient mainland American population on island, there will not be a direct representative connection between the island populace and

their elected representatives in Washington, particularly in the House of Representatives, and

▲ The U.S. Senate would be extremely opposed to granting Guam two Senate seats, making the island (with a population of approximately 150,000 inhabitants) equal with states such as California, New York, Texas and Florida — states with populations in the tens of millions.

In his dissenting opinion in the Supreme Court decision *Downes vs. Bidwell* (1901), Justice John Harlan appropriately stated: "Whether a particular race will or will not assimilate with our people, and whether they can or cannot with safety to our institutions be brought within the operation of the Constitution is a matter to be thought of when it is proposed to acquire their territory by treaty."

Evidently, the federal government's decision to acquire Guam and the other offshore territories was a profound mistake. A century of American colonial possession of Guam (and the other offshore territories) is sufficient evidence that union between the island and the United States is very unlikely.

There is not sufficient will on either side for integration to successfully occur.

It is, therefore, high time that the inhabitants of Guam begin to soberly contemplate eventual and ultimate independence from the United States, as the relationship between the United States and Guam (as with the other offshore territories) is rooted in irreconcilable differences.

E. Robert Statham Jr. is an associate professor of political science at the University of Guam.



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