



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
TERRITORY OF GUAM

Editor,
The Washington Post
1150 15th St. NW
Washington, DC 20071-0001

Dear Editor,

Here's a fresh idea for Stephen S. Rosenfeld regarding what to do with the colonial empire that resulted from the Spanish American War ("Forgotten Isles of Empire". Jan. 24, 1997). Instead of imposing some solution on Guam or Puerto Rico that's unworkable (annexation to another state?), let alone unwanted, how about doing something really revolutionary and give them what they desire? In Guam's case, that means ending the facilitation over the proposal for a new relationship and having the Administration come to some conclusion over Guam's proposed Commonwealth Act.

The people of Guam voted twice in plebiscites in 1987 to pursue an improved political relationship as a Commonwealth. Successive administrations (Bush, Clinton) did not respond to Guam's proposals. We hope that the Clinton Administration will complete its negotiations with Guam so that we can move the draft Commonwealth Act to fruition in Congress this spring.

One hundred years is a long time to wait for political dignity. Mr. Rosenfeld hit the mark in his comment that the United States must deal with this status issue now, simply because it is "the right thing to do."

Yours very truly,

Carl T.C. Gutierrez
Governor of Guam

Stephen S. Rosenfeld

Forgotten Isles of Empire

In the White House and out in America's farflung island territories, a head of steam is building up behind the notion that next year's centennial of the Spanish-American War is the undeniable time, the right time and perhaps the last time to knit up the war's lingering colonial legacy. That means cranking up right now.

The Philippines we gave back 50 years ago, and Cuba 95 years ago, though there we kept a base at Guantanamo. But Puerto Rico and Guam, which we took as coaling stations, are a standing taunt to 20th century public virtue. These are American territories where the federal government withholds full political rights from the American citizens who live there. They are undigested and largely unacknowledged bits of empire.

In Spain the loss of all these outposts is regarded as "the disaster." In the United States, they raise few pulses outside interested circles. Nor can it yet be said that the costs of neglecting these questions will be unbearably high.

But pondering attention to these vexing questions present and the right thing to do. A country with aims to civic pride and world leadership is bound to keep seeking a way to bestow on its citizens of different circumstances all privileges and duties of the house. That takes in Puerto Rico, Guam and the smaller territories that came to us from other than Spain—the Virgin Islands, American Samoa and the northern Marianas.

You will note the absence from that list of the District of Columbia, the most conspicuous display of the sun of limits on the political rights of American citizens. The District is different, but its plight does highlight the difficulties of melding American principle and practice in the island territories. The rights of self-government that the territo-

ries enjoy are more limited than those of the states, and can be stripped or altered at will by a Congress in which they are not represented.

For decades, Puerto Rico and Guam have been struggling to find a relationship to Washington—a "status"—that finally would satisfy local as well as national, including constitutional, tests. The effort has foundered on the difficulty of offering the smaller territories a status other than statehood—which is not realistically available to them—in which to enjoy full membership in the American family as an

Status choices for our overseas territories.

alternative to substantial local autonomy. The latter is what Guam is seeking, because statehood is not available, and what Puerto Rico presumably will seek if statehood turns out to be unavailable to it as well.

The fuss over whether Congress can or should make Puerto Rico teach in English in its public schools is simply the most recent battleground. A question of national identity is at play. Americanize and assimilate newcomers? Of course. But is it fair to compel Puerto Rico's reluctant already-citizens, as a condition of statehood, to set aside the language they have been speaking since the island was taken over, without their consent, 100 years ago?

At the moment, Puerto Rico is reaching out, through legislation submitted in Congress, for an accord that would define a set of status choices for Puerto Ricans and commit the United States to honor their decision in a plebiscite in 1998. Guam has underway a parallel project. Three of the possi-

ble choices are familiar from past Puerto Rican debate. The hybrid of commonwealth, long ascendant, is waning. Statehood is coming on in San Juan but forces tough issues of language, congressional seats and money in Washington. Independence has never had a following.

But something new is in the air—"free association." As established in the Marshalls, Micronesia and Palau, it accords nearly full self-government and international recognition in return for full U.S. authority over defense and a U.S. obligation to provide aid. By being voluntary and reversible, this arrangement avoids being stigmatized by the United Nations as colonial. In the ranks of those pondering the future of Puerto Rico and Guam, the possibilities of "free association" are being mulled.

That's not the only fresh idea being circulated at this moment when millennial ardor is reinforcing a reach for closure at the Spanish-American War's centennial. Peter Rosenblatt—who negotiated the "Compact of Free Association" with the Marshalls, Micronesia and Palau—would widen the quest and have the president invite the American and territorial parties to analyze a range of status options from full independence to full integration in the United States on terms of equality. Incorporating islands in an existing state, Hawaii, might do a good bit of it. Or amending the Constitution to somehow admit islands to the union other than as states.

It's not so important to start out with the right formula as to set up a process to produce the best options. The basic requirement is a commitment to the equality of our fellow Americans. The Spanish-American War was undertaken, at least nominally, to extend American rights to a benighted realm. Now that purpose of the war must be brought home.