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REGIONAL WHIP

March 31, 2017

*Congresswoman Stacey E Plaskett's remarks as prepared for Transfer Day
Centennial Ceremony:*

Today marks 100 years that the Virgin Islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John have been a part of the United States.

Acquired in the costliest per-acre sale in U.S. land purchase, the islands became the most easterly point of the United States and served to protect the Caribbean Basin and the Panama Canal. The Islands were to act as a naval base in possible submarine warfare against Germany during World War I.

The plebiscite for purchase was facilitated in Denmark at the time of the sale, and no vote was taken by the Virgin Islanders then living under the title of the Danish West Indies.

If there had been a vote by the people of the islands, under the then Danish serf system, merely 700 people would have met the qualifications to vote to have “unblemished character” and substantial income.

The people of the Virgin Islands during the Transfer ceremonies on March 31, 1917, were in effect a marooned people—citizens of no country. It would take a decade for Congress to grant U.S. citizenship to Virgin Islanders.

The sales document made almost no provisions for the people of the territory. Absolutely none of the remarkable \$25 Million in gold bullion was given to the islands but instead shipped—along with much of the wealth and records—to Copenhagen.

After the Transfer, Congress had the duty of sorting out the people who remained; forgotten by the islands' owners before the sale, and—unfortunately, it would appear—substantially ignored after the sale by the new owners.

Until the United States began ownership of territories, which have majority minority people, disenfranchisement in territories was viewed as a temporary condition. From the 1787 Northwest Ordinance until the acquisition of Puerto Rico, lands were deemed territories with the expectation that they would eventually become fully part of the Union as a state.

The disenfranchisement and unequal treatment of the people of the Virgin Islands are de jure law. The Insular Cases decided at the turn of the 20th century by the Plessy v. Ferguson-era Supreme Court established a doctrine of “separate and unequal” status for the overseas territories.

That status has been upheld by a federal appeals court decision and Obama administration brief in *Tuaua v. United States* in 2015 and by Congress' unwillingness to grant equal treatment requests made by representatives from the territories.

The Insular Cases laid the foundation for the structural inequality of the territories and today continue to hold those structural inequities in place.

Many of the groups in this country that advocate for voting rights and civil justice; fighting to sustain rights for domestic special interest groups and advocating for international human rights, brush aside the injustices of people living in the territories; unwilling to recognize the injustice to fellow Americans.

I say fellow Americans, because Virgin Islanders are in fact citizens of the United States, and have taken on the full responsibility of the American experience even before being part of the United States.

Revolutionary idealists such as Alexander Hamilton, who learned his system of banking and accounting in the merchant house on the island of St. Croix, and the island's planter, Abraham Markoe, who was an American Revolutionary financier and designer of the 13 stripes in the present American flag are Virgin Islanders.

Denmark Vessey, a free black from St. Thomas who gave up his freedom and his life to organize the Charleston slave rebellion, was a Virgin Islander. Judah Benjamin, a U.S. Senator and Secretary of State in the Confederacy rebellion; also a Virgin Islander.

The Virgin Islands have given great creators to this country before becoming a part of it, like William Leidesdorff, an early pioneer, and founder of present San Francisco; Edward Wilmot Blyden, the father of Pan-Africanism and Camille Pissarro, one of the founders of impressionism.

After becoming a part of the United States, Virgin Islanders came to Washington and petitioned to be part of the draft—requesting to give our sons to defend this country while it would not defend us.

We have given America Generals, Diplomats, Statesmen and performed the ultimate sacrifice in conflicts three times the national average fighting for a commander in chief we do not elect.

Individuals living in the Virgin Islands of the United States do not receive the same proportion of support in federal dollars as states for schools, roads or health care. Our congressional representative is elected through the same process as any other district and participates fully in Committee work. But our representatives have no vote on the floor on issues related to the country or even their constituents—often resulting in the territory being entirely left out of legislation, just as the Treaty of Transfer in 1917 left out Virgin Islanders.

It is this treatment that has led the United Nations to resolve that the Virgin Islands of the United States be one of the last colonies in the world. And it is this treatment which has led Virgin Islanders to have mixed feelings about this centennial commemoration.

What document will give us full inclusion as U.S. citizens no matter where we reside? When will the benefits of full citizenship extend to meet our now century-old willingness to take on the responsibility of that citizenship?

We must all do our part to answer these very relevant and important questions.

For my part, my office introduced a bill creating a Congressional Centennial Commission, which was signed into law by President Obama into law in 2016.

The Commission will work to not only highlight and engage the nation in the achievements of the Virgin Islands and its people but look at issues like status and the structural impediments that began with the Transfer and continue to present challenges to the territory.

In this Congress, I have sponsored House Joint Resolution 91, to push a Constitutional amendment to give Virgin Islanders and the people of the territories the right to vote and have a voting representative in Congress.

Who better than Virgin Islanders to exemplify the words of the song “land of the free and home of the brave?”

Land of the free; a revolutionary people from our first recorded history, the people of Ay-Ay— or present day St. Croix— presented Columbus with the first armed resistance in the “New World.”

Land of the free; on the island of St. John in the 1700’s, lived a people so proud, so hungry for freedom, that they were able to hold to freedom for six months causing the owners to enter agreements with other nations and bring an Armada to quell the rebellion.

Land of the free; in 1848, we became one of only two places to gain freedom through violent overthrow of slavery.

Home of the brave; who is more valiant than a Virgin Islander?

Who is stronger, more revolutionary, more willing to fight and resist and stand for what is right?

WE ARE!!!

And so what these ceremonies and this commemoration should show us, is that it is our ability to excel and achieve, even in the most harrowing of circumstances, that has created people to have contributed so substantially to this country.

We have enormous challenges, and we must look within ourselves and not anywhere else for the solution to OUR problems. And, we can.

It is that spirit of revolution, resilience, and innovation, which we have shared with this country that must now be brought within, as we forge our way forward and demand our equal treatment and create a future for our children.

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***Remarks during ceremony may vary from those prepared.*