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# Opinion: A Non-Voting Delegate Seat Requires Skillful Federal Leadership, Not Confrontation

## Submitted opinion by congressional candidate Delia L. Smith argues that because the V.I. delegate lacks a House floor vote, voters should prioritize federal experience and practical leadership to protect recovery funds and rum cover-over revenues now.

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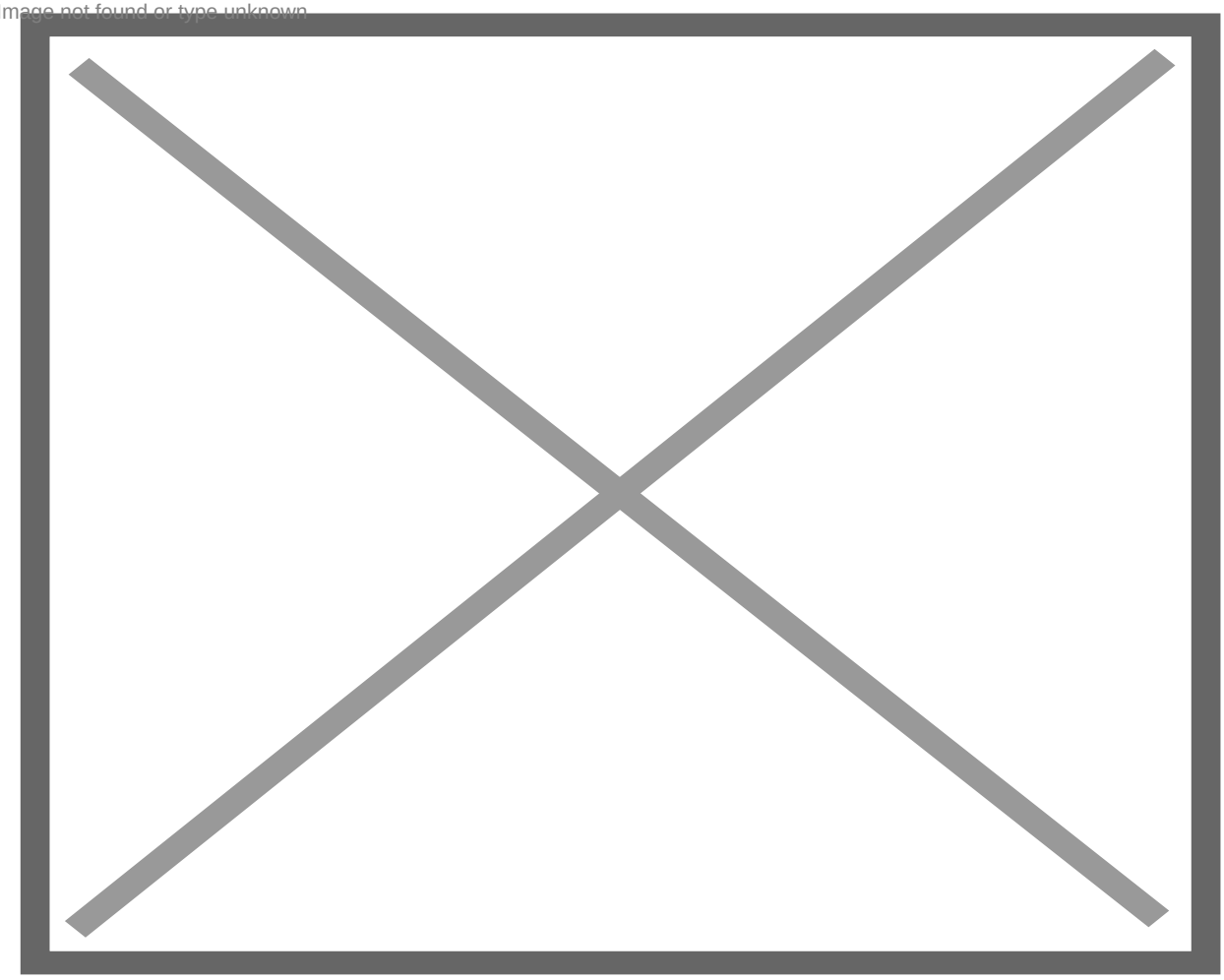

**Delegate to Congress candidate Delia L. Smith.**

**Editor's Note:** The following is a submitted opinion, submitted on Sunday, July 5, by Delia L. Smith for Delegate to Congress. It reflects the views of the author and does not represent the opinion or endorsement of the V.I. Consortium, its ownership, editors, or

staff.

Every Virgin Islands voter should weigh one hard fact before voting this election: our Delegate to Congress cannot cast a vote on the House floor. That reality should shape how we vote. A Delegate with no floor vote can still advocate powerfully for our district, but only if she is an effective leader.

This election is about leadership. There is broad consensus about the problems we face. Our focus must therefore shift to asking ourselves who can best persuade a Congress that owes us no favors to work on our behalf. An approach built on confrontation would either close the doors to our success or make them harder to open. The choice for voters is to elect a leader who will work skillfully within the system, not against it.

The stakes are enormous. Since Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, the Virgin Islands has been allocated more than $20 billion in federal recovery funding — more than four times our annual economy and roughly $230,000 per resident. This funding determines whether families receive dependable electricity, children attend safe schools, patients have functioning hospitals, and seniors receive the care they deserve. Protecting that investment will shape the Territory for generations and will require a Delegate who can master federal systems, not work against them.

I have spent my entire career doing exactly, starting as a secretary in the Attorney General's Office while attending the UVI as a young, single mother, then later serving as an Assistant Attorney General. For nearly two decades, I served as an Assistant United States Attorney, and in 2021, I was appointed by President Biden as the first native, female Virgin Islander to lead the U.S. Attorney's Office for our District. In that role, I held the most powerful figures in our own government to account, without fear or favor.

Take the rum cover-over. Nowhere does skillful leadership matter more than on the revenue that keeps our government running. Rum production is roughly a quarter of our entire budget that funds pensions, schools, hospitals, and police. After years of uncertainty, the higher $13.25 rum cover-over rate was locked in permanently. Puerto Rico currently draws the lion's share of the cover-over, well over 70 percent. They are not asking to change the formula, and neither should we. Hence, reopening that hard-won formula to chase a percentage-of-sales approach would be unwise.

A Delegate's political capital is finite. Spending capital to reopen a formula the larger territory will fight to keep is counterproductive. Moreover, advocating an increase of the rum cover-over tax rate before a Congress committed to cutting taxes on behalf of a non-voting member is a losing battle. The better path is to grow the cover-over by producing more gallons, backing Cruzan Rum and Captain Morgan, courting new distillers, and expanding exports. More gallons mean more jobs and more revenues for our Territory.

We must protect our wins and keep growing our economy. The Virgin Islands has weathered too many setbacks to settle for an approach that runs against Washington. We need a leader who has navigated the federal government, held the powerful to account, and can turn a non-voting seat into real gains.

Washington rewards preparation, persistence, and relationships. Those are qualities I will put to work every day for the people of the Virgin Islands.

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