

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Plaksett Op-Ed Published In Established D.C. Paper Castigates U.S. For Treatment of Territories

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett

In an op-ed published on Tuesday in [The Hill](#), Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett used the July 4th holiday to remind Americans of a very important holiday for U.S. Virgin Islanders that comes one day earlier, July 3rd, Emancipation Day. After building a foundation for her argument, Ms. Plaskett goes on to chastise the U.S. government for its treatment of the territories, whose citizens have been disenfranchised as they lack the right to vote for president of the U.S., or a representative in Congress with voting rights. All this while citizens in the territories continue to put their lives at risk on the battlefield to

defend America.

Read the full op-ed below.

Last week on July 4 we commemorated the Declaration of Independence, the affirmative document outlining the ideals of equality and democracy and upheld as a model around the world. For a small group of Americans, this year is also a centennial milestone. It marks 100 years that the people of the Virgin Islands have been part of the United States and have the honor to be part of Fourth of July celebrations. What many Americans are unaware of is the great importance of July 3 to Virgin Islanders.

July 3 marked the 169th anniversary of the United States Virgin Islands Emancipation Day. In 1848, 15 years before President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, enslaved Virgin Islanders under Danish rule organized and executed their own armed rebellion and won their freedom from chattel slavery. Those people of the Virgin Islands and Haiti executed the only successful violent overthrows by those enslaved in the Western Hemisphere.

Throughout this year, the islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John will commemorate the centennial of the United States' purchase of the Virgin Islands. The U.S., in its costliest per-acre land purchase, paid \$25 million in gold bullion for these islands with strategic military locations for protecting the Caribbean Basin and the Panama Canal. This sale, however, occurred without a vote by the native Virgin Islanders.

Virgin Islanders then spent a decade as citizens without a country, and now, alongside fellow territorial residents, hold no electoral votes and have no voting representation in Congress. Disenfranchisement in territories was originally a temporary step on the path toward statehood, but it has become a means to maintain the doctrine established by the Plessy v. Ferguson-era Supreme Court of "separate and unequal" status for the overseas territories. A federal appeals court decision, the Obama administration brief in *Tuaua v. United States* in 2015 and Congress's unwillingness to grant equal treatment requests made by territorial representatives all uphold that unequal status.

As a consequence of this disparate treatment, the Virgin Islands does not receive the same proportion of support in federal dollars as do states for school funding, roads and healthcare. The federal government matches 14 cents to every dollar of territorial funds but 30 cents to every dollar of other state funds.

In 1917, Virgin Islanders came to Washington to petition for not only citizenship, but also the responsibilities thereof, demanding to be included in the draft, committing our sons to defend this country. This tradition of patriotism continues today, with Virgin Islanders giving the ultimate sacrifice in military conflicts at three times the national average. These brave service members fight for a commander in chief they do not elect and protect the ideals of a nation that are not fully extended to them and their families.

Our territorial status is eerily similar to the status of the original 13 colonies. The colonists we commemorate every year revolted and wrote the Declaration of Independence because they were controlled by a government in which they held no representation. Today, territorial residents face the same treatment. How can we herald the actions of our Founding Fathers while simultaneously depriving fellow Americans of the same rights

those Founding Fathers fought so hard to achieve? Just as the colonists, we are subjected to the laws of an un-representational government. But just as the colonists, we will not stop fighting for the same representation that every other great American enjoys. A people who have made great contributions to this country — including Alexander Hamilton, Denmark Vessey, and Tim Duncan — still do not have equal citizenship. Democracy is not complete.

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