

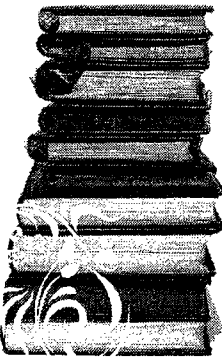
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Thursday, July 24, 2008

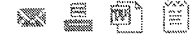
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Living history



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Living history

Two weeks ago, the *Press* published a lengthy reprint of a speech delivered by Ernest Gruening to the Alaska constitutional convention in 1955.

At the time I worried about whether devoting our newshole to that might not seem like an academic exercise, too many words on a subject too abstract to most of our readers to mean much of anything.

But the gap separating history from news isn't always as wide as we might imagine. Although we're celebrating 50 years of statehood this year, it's not so long ago that history was being lived out.

I was powerfully reminded of that last week when I sat down for coffee at Kaladi Brothers with Senator Kenneth McClintock of Puerto Rico, who was in town to attend the Council of State Governments West's annual meeting. Senator McClintock is an ardent supporter of statehood for the island commonwealth, and it occurred to me during our conversation that if they succeed in making Puerto Rico the 51st state, I might be around to see, well, if not its 50th anniversary celebrations, then at least something of the stability that Alaska now enjoys in its status of a state.

McClintock is the president of Puerto Rico's Senate, which makes him one of the more powerful men in the commonwealth's government and political structure—he credits himself with the lion's share of Hilary Clinton's victory in the primaries there, as her local campaign chair.

In fact, it was those primaries—which elect voting delegates to the Democratic and Republican National Conventions—which McClintock credits with putting the issue of Puerto Rican statehood back in the forefront on the island, because it "reminds people that we vote in June [but] not in November."

The war in Iraq is another reason. Puerto Rico sends its young men and women into the armed forces, but never gets a vote for who their commander-in-chief will be, or where the Congress might send them.

Senator McClintock is a charming and affable guy and it's clear that he's both deeply committed to the cause of statehood and soundly drilled in his arguments for it.

For my part, I don't know enough about the issue to separate the empty rhetoric from the solid arguments.

So instead I try to stick to questions on Alaska. Has he talked to people here about our experiences early in statehood? Are there lessons to be drawn from Alaska's experience?

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"As in all things, you'll have different opinions," he says in answer to the former. "Most people do think that statehood's been good for Alaska."

As far as lessons, he says, Puerto Rico should follow the example of Alaska and—assuming a "meaningful" vote (more on that in a minute) is allowed and favors statehood—form a statehood commission within the commonwealth government.

He remains vague and elusive about any possible downsides there might've been to Alaska's statehood, until I ask about what Puerto Rico ought to do differently than Alaska if it becomes a state. Negotiate good terms of admission, he says. Alaska, he says, "didn't adequately protect against" the federal government tying up most of its lands for instance. Touché.

He also points to the partisan opposition to statehood that both Alaska and Hawaii encountered. Lyndon Johnson and Everett Dirksen both opposed admission, hoping, respectively, to forestall the addition of a Democratic Alaska and a Republican Hawaii. Oops.

"If LBJ and Everett Dirksen got it wrong what makes you think you'll get it right?" McClintock asks Republicans in today's Washington, who are leery of adding another blue state. (While he openly admits to wishing Puerto Rico would be blue, he confesses "I'm afraid that Puerto Rico would be a swing state.")

What about independence? Some Alaskans wanted that instead of statehood, and some still wish we'd been given at least a vote on that. And just like Alaska, Puerto Rico has its own independence movement.

McClintock flashes a smile as though he's been waiting for this one:

"Two votes in the Senate are worth more than one vote in the General Assembly," he replies.

What comes next, according to McClintock, is a vote in Congress on House Bill 900. That would authorize a federally approved vote on the issue of statehood. Thus far, although Puerto Ricans have voted down the question of statehood in past non-binding referendums, McClintock says that those were meaningless: "If it's not a vote that has federal approval it's just a glorified opinion poll."

By the end of our conversation I'm still too ignorant to have formed an opinion about whether Puerto Rico ought to be the next state. But I'm swayed enough by his arguments—and the principles of self-determination—that I'm sympathetic to his pleas for some action from Congress on that delayed vote.

"We've heard every conceivable excuse—and inconceivable excuses—for failure to act," he says. Which sounds a little like something Ernest Gruening might've said.

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