Remarks by John A. Carver, Jr., Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Public
Land Management, at the Opening of the Virgin Islands Constitutional Con-
vention at Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, December 7, 1964

Mr. Chairman:

What you are undertaking to do in this convention constitutes the very
essence of democracy. It is, therefore, a truly thrilling experience for
me to have been invited to participate in the opening of so noble an inter-
prise.

The right of citizens, individuals and groups, to petition their
government is a cherished part of our heritage, explicitly set forth in our
constitution. Rarely, however, is it utilized in so formal and methodical
a way as you have chosen to plan for your own political future.

Your action in convening this convention is the ultimate answer to
those who practice tyranny at home but preach self-determination in the
distant halls of international deliberation. I hope that my presence here,
as a representative of the Federal Government to wish you well and to en-
courage the most fundamental kind of evaluation, will add one more spike
in the coffin in which we bury the lie of American colonialism.

For nearly four years now, I have wrestled with the wide variety of
problems that are committed to my office by delegation from the Secretary
of the Interior. But of all the responsibilities which he has given me,
that which places me in close, almost daily, contact with the offshore
territories is the most satisfying. In this, all the basic elements of
government are found. Each territorial entity, with its own personality,
is a separate microcosm -- a unique political phenomenon whose life
processes can be comprehended as a unified whole, whereas in the gargantuan
size and intricate workings of our Federal establishment there is given to
each Department but a slice or portion. The same is true, also, in our
fifth States. The situation in the territories lets us see representative
government as it was at the beginning of our Republic.

You are in the very enviable position of being able to make your
governmental institutions serve quite directly the needs of your com-
munity.

In one respect you are not completely free agents. Unlike the states
whose sovereign existence and powers are preserved by constitutional
format, the territories are peculiarly creatures of Federal discretion.
In a large sense you are direct participants in the exercise of a Federal
prerogative. We are both participants in a most interesting experiment--
the development of self-government by direct Congressional action.
This is the real essence of the process you are initiating here this evening. You are proposing to consider the basic elements in the delicate relationship that exists between your political community and its creator, the Congress of the United States.

Traditionally, changes in the organic powers and governmental structure of the territories have emanated from the source of that power—the Federal legislative and executive institutions. But I think it particularly fitting and proper that the moving force for change originate with those most directly affected, the citizens of the territories. Through this device, the Congress can be assured that the proposed changes represent the true desires of the territory. It will be a signal to the outside world that the principle of self-government is a working force in a truly democratic system.

This occasion has something of a nostalgic quality about it for me. Nearly four years ago, it became my good fortune to represent the Executive Branch of the Federal government at the inaugural ceremonies for Governor Paiewonsky.

This was my first direct contact with any of the territories over whose affairs the Department of the Interior exercises a degree of supervision. It has, therefore, been a most interesting experience to review the remarks I made on that occasion and the developments which have occurred in the four years of our relationship—to see what progress we have made and whether our predictions on that optimistic day had any validity.

I said on that occasion that it was not our intention to impose "administration" on the Virgin Islands or any other territory whose organic legislation provided for an elected legislature chosen by free people. That declaration has been adhered to. Your governor and your legislature have been left free to develop your own solutions to the problems that have come with maturity.

I said also at that time that "progress toward self-government will be found in the attitudes which exist in the hearts and minds of the people concerned and the manner in which that attitude is reflected in the exploitation of resources for the general good." In the context of our meeting here tonight, that statement was prophetic. For you are here convened to deliberate and to give formal expression to the attitudes which have developed in your community in the intervening four years of time.

In that four-year period, under the highly competent direction of Governor Paiewonsky and the responsibility and leadership of your legislature, the Virgin Islands have made monumental progress. Your educational and health programs have been upgraded to standards which were hardly imaginable in a short decade ago. The College of the Virgin Islands is a
realities. Diversification of business and industry is a fact. The virtues of the territory as a vacation spot are known throughout the mainland. Your election laws have broadened citizen participation in the governmental process. You have elected to take on the responsibilities for providing services -- power and water -- rather than rely on Federal management of those resources.

These are truly concrete evidences of progress and civic maturity. It is, then, wholly appropriate that you should now turn to the question of your governmental charter and the political instrumentalities through which you manage your own destinies for the future.

As in all facets of public affairs, the assumption of authority to express political aspirations carries with it a grave obligation to protect the broader national interest. As full citizens of the United States, you must assure that the recommendations coming from this convention conform to the document which establishes the ultimate Federal sovereignty, the United States Constitution. More than that, in exercising the democratic perogative of petition you must be ever mindful of the image of America as it is seen in other quarters of the world. Every element of my experience with the Virgin Islands generates confidence that you will be responsive to these basic obligations.

Above all, we must recognize that the work of this convention will only be a beginning. Ours is not a government of whim or proclamation. You are beginning a process of communication with the basic source of Federal authority in matters of territorial government -- the Congress. The role of my Department in this process cannot be a wholly neutral one, but it must be a responsible one. We shall do our utmost to make your communication to the Congress both meaningful and productive. We tender our good offices, both to make your deliberations fruitful and to promote understanding between you and the Congress.

Four years ago, I called for:

"... the creation of a social, economic and political environment which will permit the residents of the area to make a free choice as to their ultimate form of relationship to the United States."

Those four years have established milestones of progress toward that ideal. It is now for you to express the true hopes and aspirations of this community with respect to the ultimate political question of association with the rest of the broader national community.