

FREE ASSOCIATION— BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

ESSAY | DEBATE

By the Free Association Task Force

In envisioning a brighter future for Guam, the people of this island should bear in mind two essential facts: our history as a United States territory and our far longer ancestral history as a CHamoru nation. Free association will create a government which acknowledges both ingredients of this history. It is the status, in contrast to the other two options, which is the most practical and the most likely to be achieved. It is the best of both worlds.

With free association, Guam would be recognized internationally as a sovereign nation with control over its political affairs. At the same time, we would also maintain a defined association with the United States, specifically in the area of defense. Free association would allow Guam to achieve sovereignty in partnership with the United States.



As part of Dr. Michael Lujan Bevacqua's Guam History class at the University of Guam, students were divided into three groups for their final project to advocate and debate the merits of statehood, free association and independence. Courtesy of Michael Lujan Bevacqua.

As the leaders and, more importantly, the people of Guam seek to shape our political future, we must be realistic. While we deserve the chance to determine our own destiny, much of our identity is already tied to the United States. We are proud to be CHamoru, and want to protect our culture and language. But there is a deep-seated loyalty to the United States that exists in our people as well.

While many of us proudly still speak CHamoru, we primarily converse in English. We wear American clothing brands, we watch American media. We have become Americanized and must accept that reality as we look ahead.

Free association with the United States is a transitional status, which can eventually lead to another political status. But in the interim we need to strive toward something that is workable and palatable for the people who will be impacted.

Our affinity for the American way should not be construed as an endorsement of our current unincorporated territorial status. We must accept the reality, as well, that our current status is not working out. We have unfunded federal mandates that we must deal with. Recently, unilateral changes in the U.S. federal tax code have created an extreme burden for our local government. Compact Impact and other regional affairs in Micronesia remain issues where the impact for us is very real, but our place in any negotiations is non-existent. Achieving free association would give us a place at the bargaining table.

Free association presents us with an opportunity to control Guam's land, air, seas and natural resources for our benefit, rather than for another country's benefit. The United States would still maintain its military presence, but would provide financial assistance to Guam in return for the military's use of land.

There is also evidence that our status as U.S. citizens would not be affected by a change to this political status, as it would if we became independent. Should we wish to, we could also create our own citizenship rather than seek to maintain citizenship ties with the United States. Bearers of a Guam passport could retain rights to travel freely within the United States, establish residency and work there, and volunteer in the U.S. Armed Forces without being drafted.

These rights are already enjoyed by existing free associations between the United States and the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Free association offers optimism for greater economic development through changes such as the removal of the Jones Act, control of our Exclusive Economic Zone and all of the ocean minerals and resources within, and the return of excess land to landowners. Free association gives us the autonomy to be creative in developing our island economy, making decisions with the best interests of Guam in mind.

With free association, Guam would be eligible to participate in programs offered by the United Nations, the Pacific Community and other international bodies catering to sovereign nations. Guam could tap into the programs of international agencies such as the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency and many others, helping us improve education, fisheries, health care and banking.

Four thousand years ago, CHamorus managed their resources, governed their clans and provided for their futures. Today, we have knowledge, skills, creativity and competence to manage our resources in the new millennium. We have survived wars, typhoons, earthquakes and more. We can surmount the challenges ahead.

Free association provides us with a confident future — sovereignty for Guam in association with the United States. Free association, the best of both worlds.