



**Ron de Lugo:  
A Life In The Arena**

**By Paul Leary, Ph.D.**

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In April 1910, 13 months after leaving the White House, Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris that still stands as the most compelling explanation of why people choose the rough and tumble of the political arena for a life's calling. Even allowing for TR's characteristic hyperbole, it still quickens the pulse of anyone who has run for office or undertaken any significant venture on the public's behalf. As Teddy Roosevelt memorably said:

*"It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again...who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while failing greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."*

In a career in the local and national arena that spanned four decades, Ron de Lugo made lasting contributions to the growth, prosperity, polity and pride of the United States Virgin Islands. No public figure was more influential in transforming the Virgin Islands' relationship with the Federal government over the last quarter of the twentieth century. He helped the Virgin Islands secure more resources from Washington and greater self-determination. As the first Virgin Islands delegate to the House of Representatives, he

enlarged the office's role from that of a glorified lobbyist scrambling for dollars to a respected player in the legislative process on Capitol Hill. He went to Washington determined to learn how to use the levers of power to benefit the well being and dignity of his island home, he executed that mission well and faithfully.

The de Lugo family has deep roots in the Virgin Islands. The founder of the local branch of the family was Antonio de Lugo y Suarez, who arrived in St. Thomas from Puerto Rico in 1879 at the age of 24. Antonio de Lugo and his descendants became a prominent merchant and land owning clan, acquiring extensive property in the Fortuna section of western St. Thomas and other Charlotte Amalie landmarks. Presaging de Lugo's involvement in community affairs, his grandfather Antonio headed the local committee that erected a statue in honor of King Christian IX of Denmark in Emancipation Garden in tribute to the king's support for the Colonial Act of 1906, which expanded local self-government. That statue still stands in its original place of honor. It was a fitting gesture for a family whose future generations would produce a son committed to eliminating the lingering vestiges of colonialism during the post-Danish period.

Another distinction enjoyed by the de Lugo family in the history of the Virgin Islands was Alvaro de Lugo's appointment as the first native-born Postmaster under American rule in 1935. His name has pride of place over the central post office in the heart of the capital. Again Ron de Lugo would follow in the steps of his predecessors. With the remaining of the Federal building on St. Thomas in his honor, his name will join that of Alvaro as a permanent reminder of the de Lugos' contributions over more than a century.

Ron de Lugo made many friends in Washington, especially among fellow Democrats, with whom he worked on behalf of

Presidents from John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. One of the great movements of Ron's lifetime—and our lifetimes—has been the struggle for racial justice and equality, a struggle that goes on to this day. It must have puzzled some of Ron de Lugo's colleagues in Washington how a "white" man could be returned time and time again to office by a largely "black" constituency. Their curiosity was rooted in mainland racial categories that do not apply to a Caribbean society such as the Virgin Islands. As a young man, Ron de Lugo made his first impression on the public as a host of a morning radio show who assumed the persona of a West Indian character he dubbed "Mango Jones." His voluble creation played upon the foibles and wisdom of the Caribbean everyman with a humor that can only come from intimate knowledge of a culture. Ron used his radio bully pulpit to foster the revival of St. Thomas Carnival in 1952 – and there is no more quintessentially Caribbean celebration. Displaying early gifts as a politician in the Virgin Islands context, he also chaired the St. Croix Christmas Festival in 1957. For those who know the islands, the ability to become prominently involved in the key elements of the two rival communities demonstrated a keen political sense and a remarkable ability to bridge what is usually an unbridgeable gap. We could add Kipling's comment that "East us East and West us West, and never the twain shall meet" a similar observation about our north and south main islands.

In the Virgin Islands context, it was not race that mattered – and racial identity is often a very fluid category here – but culture. Ron de Lugo is, simply, a Virgin Islander. He typifies the Creole identity so crucial in the history of our region. It was an identity recognized by no less a local personage than J. Antonio Jarvis, the great observer of Virgin Islands' ways. In *The Home Journal* of December 3, 1951, Jarvis observed:

*"What is a Creole in the St. Thomas meaning of the word? A Creole is a native whose family has been here for several generations and whose African heritage is blended with European blood and culture to form something special - a true St. Thomian. A true Creole will share and enjoy things no newcomer can really understand. Just as Mango Jones is able to strike familiar chords with his highly developed characterization of the happy-go-lucky, semi-literate, humorous yet bawdy and lovable native, so a real Creole understands the nuances of being part of an intricate social system."*

The election, or shall we say the creation, of Congressman Ron de Lugo started with Mango Jones. Only such an understanding from within of the complex currents of Virgin Islands life made it possible for him to succeed so well in our political arena.

Technically, of course, Ron de Lugo is not a native. He was born in New Jersey in 1930 to Angelo and Adelaide de Lugo when they were temporarily in residence in the Garden state. But he arrived in St. Thomas at the age of three, certainly young enough to be considered a fully formed Virgin Islander. He was educated at Sts. Peter and Paul School in St. Thomas and Colegio San Jose in Puerto Rico, and then enlisted in the U.S. Army, which whetted his interest in broadcasting. He was also involved, as a young man, in the local theater. Perhaps, like a later Republican politician who went from the silver screen to the White House, he realized that the private and public stages were not far apart.

With the popularity achieved by his radio broadcasts and his contribution to the creation of Carnival, Ron de Lugo returned to politics. He was first elected to public office in 1956, serving as both a legislator and administrator of St. Croix. His success in appealing to both St. Thomians and

Crucians was enhanced by his move to St. Croix in 1955 and demonstrated in his reelection to the senate. In 1964, he received the largest number of votes ever accorded an at-large candidate. The key decision in Ron de Lugo's political career, however, came in 1968, when he won the post of "Washington Representative." As an unincorporated territory of the United States, the Virgin Islands in 1968 had no official voice in the U.S. Congress, which nevertheless exercised full power over its inhabitants. Ron de Lugo was determined to change that.

When the decision was made to establish a purely local office of Washington Representative, the first thought was to make it an appointed post. With his eyes then on a larger prize, Ron insisted that it be an elected post. He wanted to speak as the voice of a people, not a lobbyist. What he had in mind was the creation of an office established by congress itself, one that in time could be expanded to leverage power and benefits for the people he represented.

With the help of sympathetic and influential Congressmen like the legendary Phil Burton of California, Ron de Lugo's efforts bore fruit in 1972 with the passage of Public Law 92-271, which gave both the Virgin Islands and Guam delegates to Congress with official standing. Ron later played a key part in the passage of Public-Law 95-556, which gave American Samoa the right to send a delegate to Congress as well. Now that he had a voice, he decided to speak as loudly as possible. He may not have been a "real" congressman with a constitutionally based vote on the final passage of legislation, but he was determined to act like one. He was also determined to understand how the congressional game was played and to use that knowledge to his constituents' advantage. Ron de Lugo was elected as the Virgin Islands' first delegate to Congress in 1972 and took his seat in the 93<sup>rd</sup>

Congress in January 1973. With the exception of a two-year hiatus after his run for governor in 1978, he served until he retired from public office at the end of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress in 1995. The voters returned him to office nine times. His vision of the office and his personal role was clearly expressed in a statement he made on the house floor in 1994:

*"From the beginning, my formal platform had two main planks. I wanted us to exercise more control over our own political destiny. And I wanted a better standard of living for our people...It was the desire to see us cast off the chains of colonial rule that led me to a career of public service."*

Ron de Lugo expanded the office of Delegate far beyond that of a lobbyist. The Virgin Islands' representative in Washington became, in all but name, a part of the full process of drafting the nation's laws and determining its budget and priorities. A key element of the strategy de Lugo used was to focus on the role of the committees and subcommittees, where the real work of Congress was done. He managed to secure a vote and seniority for the Delegate in committee, where it could be traded for the support of bills important to the Virgin Islands. He became a player in the game of legislation.

Understanding the link between party affiliation, seniority and power in the committee level and in party caucuses, he used his loyalty as a Democrat and personal contacts with the leadership to rise in the structure of influence during a period of unbroken Democratic ascendancy in the House. De Lugo managed to establish the sub-committee on Insular and International Affairs of the larger Committee on the Interior, which affectionately became responsible for most matters affecting the Virgin Islands and other territories, including Puerto Rico, the home of his ancestors. As chair of the

subcommittee, he wielded considerable power and was able to influence the structure of the executive branch's control over his home. Congress authorized the position of assistant secretary for insular affairs within the Department of Interior, a presidential appointment that considerably increased the bureaucratic clout of the interior office dealing with territorial administration. As chair of an important subcommittee of the committee of jurisdiction, de Lugo had significant influence with the assistant secretary.

The high water mark of Ron de Lugo's quest to expand the role of Delegate came in 1993, when he helped to secure the support of the Democratic caucus by giving all Delegates a vote in the Committee on the Whole House. Since a vote here was probably more important than the formal floor vote, which usually simply reflected the decisions made in the Committee on the Whole, he had effectively provided the equivalent of a full role for his office. The then minority Republicans vigorously protested - Delegates were usually Republicans - and even brought a court case, which they lost. However, with the advent of Republican majorities in the House in 1995, the Committee on the Whole vote was finished anyway as the Republicans simply stripped it from the House rules. But the episode stands as an excellent example of the de Lugo style: work the process and its personalities to the fullest.

Ron de Lugo used his power well. As a senior member of the three powerful communities-Public Works, Interior and Education and Labor-he ensured that the Virgin Islands enjoyed considerable Federal largesse. In 1968, the year he first went to Washington, flow of Federal funds to the Virgin Islands was barely a trickle: \$20 million. By 1990, at the height of the de Lugo era, the stream had become a mighty river of \$273 million. After Hurricane Hugo left a path of

destruction from the Caribbean to the Carolinas in 1989, Congress allocated an astounding \$735 million in disaster aid for the Virgin Islands, where the terrifying storm of the century had leveled homes, businesses and public facilities by the thousands. The result of that Federal aid is all around us, in our hospitals, our schools, our roads and our airports. The least among us have also benefited from welfare funds, pre-school programs, food stamps and nutrition programs for infants young children. While it would be simplistic to attribute all of these funds to de Lugo's efforts alone, it was certainly no accident that the surge in funding coincided with his successful efforts to expand the Virgin Islands voice in Washington. He presided over the office that played a key part in the financial revolution that created the modern Virgin Islands. He redeemed his promise to fight for a better life for his people. His contributions transcended simply channeling more money our way. In 1982, with great political courage and foresight, he engineered passage of the Non-Immigrant Alien Adjustment Act.

One of the less pleasant aspects of the growth of the modern, prosperous Virgin Islands and its Tourism industry was the way in which it depended upon the exploitation of labor from neighboring Caribbean islands. Brought in as supposedly temporary workers, they were subjected to the whims of their sponsors for continued residence, treated as inferiors, called by demeaning names, and generally excluded from full participation in the life and society they helped to build. The Virgin Islands had become home to many of them, and their exclusion from its life was both unfair and potentially dangerous. Did we want to create a permanently alienated underclass? Or did we want to integrate them into the community they had done so much to build?

Ron de Lugo worked tirelessly to grant these fellow Caribbean islanders permanent immigrant status, which

would not only give them security, but to start them on the road to citizenship and political equality. He succeeded, and we now have a political system in which Virgin Islanders of the Eastern Caribbean origins play a central role. We are all better off for this landmark change, whose effects will reverberate for generations. It was not easy. "[S]tormy and frequently bitter debates rose up in our islands," Ron noted on the floor of the House when he introduced this bill in 1982. "I know from the ten years I have been working on this that it was in fact one of the most divisive issues in our history."

In an era when the work of politicians and the deeds of government are so easily and often disparaged, it is well to remember the good that elected representatives can do when they put people's interests first. Ron de Lugo's struggle for justice for the previously excluded Eastern Caribbean immigrants may well be considered by history as his finest hour.

The second plank in Ron's political platform was to allow the Virgin Islands to exercise more control over its political destiny. He fulfilled his promise here as well. In 1976, he sponsored and pushed to passage Public Law 94-984, which authorized the peoples of the Virgin Islands and Guam to call constitutional conventions to draft constitutions for local self-government. In 1981, he was able to wrest from the Interior Department control over the returned Federal excise taxes on rum, which in the hands of local authorities provided the wherewithal to fund bond issues for infrastructure development. In 1984, at de Lugo's urging, Congress authorized the creation of a local appellate court system and expanded the jurisdiction of the territorial court, so that our judicial system could end the anomalous dependence on the Federal courts and act as a state court system. By then, he had so expanded the role of the delegate that in practice it was

hard to distinguish a Delegate from any other member of Congress. He also favored a re-examination of the political status of the Virgin Islands so that a new era of Federal relations could be born, but he wanted it done properly. His experience with the issue in Puerto Rico, in which he was heavily engaged, as well as his knowledge of how Congress worked, convinced him that any effort in this area had to be thought out and approached very carefully.

While de Lugo moved the process of self-determination farther than it had ever gone before, this part of his legacy remains incomplete. The local constitutional conventions held in 1979 and 1980 failed to win popular approval, largely due to the same social divisions that made the immigration adjustment effort so difficult. If another convention is held, as current Governor Charles W. Turnbull has proposed, then we may finally make proper use of the 1976 law. The fully empowered court system has not been implemented. These issues, of course, can be addressed by a new constitutional convention. The question of status remains the most difficult of all. Like our neighbors in Puerto Rico, we have not found a way to reconcile our attachments to the United States with the dignity of a fully equal political relationship. But there is just as much that one man and his generation can accomplish. By placing the issue of colonialism at the center of his political career, Ron de Lugo has set the direction for his successors to follow, even if he was not able to finish the journey himself.

There is another aspect of de Lugo's career in the Virgin Islands that is not well known in the Virgin Islands, but formed an important part of his legislative agency. As chairman of the Subcommittee on Insular an International Affairs, his responsibilities extended to the far reaches of the Pacific as well as to our neighbor, Puerto Rico. He worked diligently on issues affecting Guam, the Northern Mariana's,

American Samoa, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau. His contributions were myriad. In the case of Guam, he championed the same expansions of local control that he obtained for the Virgin Islands. He was a key player in the events leading to the establishment of the Northern Marianas Commonwealth and the status of Free Association achieved by the Micronesian states. He also fought for justice for the people of these islands, whether it was proper compensation for the victims of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands or Federal relief for those who suffered from Guam's typhoons. While he was certainly popular at home, in the furthest reaches of the American insular system, he was also greeted as a friend and fellow islander. The Delegate from Guam, Robert Underwood, made these comments on the floor of the House of Representatives when H.R. 495, which proposed the naming of the Federal Building on St. Thomas for Ron, was under discussion:

*"Throughout his political career, he made sure that his colleagues in the Territories knew that he was one of us; that we were fashioned from the same mold; that he walked in our shoes; and that he was always there to be of assistance. No amount of words and praise could adequately express our esteem for the accomplishments of our former colleague, Ron de Lugo. He was tireless advocate and great friend. He greatly deserves this honor."*

Perhaps the highlight of Ron's work as an advocate for the disenfranchised Territories of the United States occurred when his subcommittee was handed the hottest of political potatoes, the resolution of Puerto Rico's status. As we all know, there is no issue which inspires more emotion or rhetoric among our Caribbean compadres. When he started his work, a commentator sneered in the *San Juan Star* that giving jurisdiction over this issue to a body dominated by the residents of the small insular areas was like letting the monkeys run the zoo. Well, the monkeys ran the zoo very

effectively. At the end of historic status hearings chaired by de Lugo in San Juan, the leading newspaper *El Nuevo Dia* called him a "colossus". Navigating the reefs and shoals of Puerto Rican and national politics with skill, tact, fairness and diplomacy, de Lugo managed the house passage, by an overwhelming majority, of a bill that constituted a serious effort to resolve the Puerto Rican status question. Unfortunately, the measure was killed by a Senate Committee dominated by conservative voices fearful of the possible consequences of an open examination of this fundamental matter of self-determination.

Thanks to HR 495, sponsored by Delegate Donna M. Christensen, and strongly advocated by our former, the late Alexander Farrelly, the federal building will be officially renamed the Ron de Lugo Federal Building. A second member of this accomplished Virgin Islands family will have the honor of a permanent recognition of his life's work through the renaming of a major public building, Mango Jones, like Mr. Smith, went to Washington. But he stayed. And, m'son, he did a good job.

As Teddy Roosevelt recognized, the credit belongs to the man who was in the arena, who fought the good fight, and properly honored the community he championed. Ron de Lugo has been a true friend and faithful native son. He may have been bloodied in the arena, but he emerged unbowed. We are grate that this good man was our champion in the public arena, and we honor him for a career that made us a better people.

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