



D.C. Advocates Pitch Statehood To Senate Panel, But Bill Unlikely To Move

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After the U.S. House of Representatives debated a D.C. statehood bill in 1992, the measure made it out of committee before being killed during a vote on the House floor. But a statehood bill debated yesterday in the U.S. Senate may not even make it out of committee — despite Democrats controlling the chamber.

D.C. officials and advocates on Monday made their pleas to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, whose chair, Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.), had introduced the bill that would make D.C. the nation's 51st state. Under the bill, the portion of D.C. controlled by the federal government would shrink down to encompass only the White House, U.S. Capitol, National Mall, and military installations, with the remainder becoming the State of New Columbia.

"We have tolerated this situation for a long time," said Carper during the hearing. "I think most people know it's just not right. It is incumbent upon those of us who enjoy the right and the privilege of full voting rights to take up the cause of our fellow citizens here in the District of Columbia and find a workable solution."

That solution — statehood — drew support from a bevy of D.C. officials, from D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton to Mayor Vincent Gray and D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson. They argued that the ongoing denial of democratic rights for D.C. residents could best be remedied by statehood, and that unlike in decades past, the city's financial prospects and management had improved to the point that it could sustain itself.

But the bill has drawn similar objections as it did 21 years ago, both on partisan and constitutional grounds. Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Ok.) said that the the nation's founding fathers created D.C. as territory free from the control of any specific state, and that granting the city statehood could pose numerous practical challenges for the federal government.

"D.C. statehood would significantly affect the federal government's operations, including use and access to water and sewer services, utilities, police, fire services, infrastructure, communications networks, the D.C. National Guard, D.C.'s unfunded liabilities and another benefits, and ability to control the aesthetics and condition of our nation's capital," he said.

He also said that the bill was unconstitutional, a point echoed by Roger Pilon, a constitutional scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute. Pilon argued that statehood could not be granted by Congress, least of all by shrinking the federal enclave as the bill envisions. "It strains credulity to believe that the Framers, when they drafted the Enclave Clause, imagined anything like the arrangements contemplated by this bill," he said.

Viet Dinh, a former official with the Bush administration, disagreed. "Courts reaching the merits would likely find the New Columbia Admission Act constitutional," he said. "Congress has constitutional authority to accept new states through simple legislation."

But despite the constitutional arguments, the bill's fate may well be decided by political concerns.

Coburn and Pilon criticized Carper for holding the hearing only months before the end of the Senate's session, and with no expectation that the Republican-dominated House would approve it. (The bill was introduced in Jan. 2013, alongside a companion bill in the House.) Those realities seemed to sink in with Carper, who after the hearing refused to say whether he would hold a vote in his committee.

In an exchange with an Associated Press reporter, he even seemed doubtful that statehood was achievable. "I'm not sure," he said of the prospects, though he did say that some Americans never expected slavery and other injustices to end.

But Carper did say that he would consider alternatives for D.C., including bills granting the city budget and legislative autonomy.

"What I wanted to do today was start a conversation," he said. "What I'm hopeful is is that the steps we've taken today, if we can't agree on statehood, if we can't agree on making sure folks have the right to vote in Congress if they live in the District of Columbia, are there other things we can address?"