

# Robert A. Underwood

## 1948–

TERRITORIAL DELEGATE 1993–2003  
DEMOCRAT FROM GUAM

Robert Underwood served five terms as Guam’s Delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives before running unsuccessfully for governor. As Guam’s third Delegate, Underwood continued his two predecessors’ push for commonwealth status for the tiny island in the Western Pacific. His experience as an educator, along with his respect for Guam’s Chamorro culture, shaped much of his legislative agenda during his time in the House. Using his position to draw attention to the pressing needs of the territory, Underwood fought for increased recognition for Guam and for its inclusion in federally funded programs. “When you’re a small territory, the nexus of your relationship to the federal government is the basis for your representation in Washington,” Underwood noted. “It’s always trying to understand that and take advantage of it and try to fix the problems with that. That’s the nature of the representation that comes from a small territory.”<sup>1</sup>

Robert Underwood was born July 13, 1948, in Tamuning, a town on the west coast of Guam. Both his father, John, and his mother, Esther Flores Taitano, were teachers.<sup>2</sup> After graduating from Tamuning’s John F. Kennedy High School in 1965, Underwood attended California State University in Los Angeles, earning a B.A. in history in 1969 and an M.A. in history in 1971. Influenced by his mother’s vocation as a teacher, Underwood embarked on a 20-year career in education.<sup>3</sup> From 1972 to 1976, he was employed as a high school teacher, a school administrator, and a curriculum writer for Guam’s public schools. He then worked at the University of Guam from 1977 to 1992 as an instructor for and a director of the Bilingual Bicultural Training Program, a director of Project BEAM (Bilingual Education Assistance from Micronesia), a professor of education, the dean of the College of Education, and the academic vice president of

the university. During this period, Underwood also earned an Ed. D. from the University of Southern California in 1987 and graduated from Harvard’s Management Development Program in 1988.<sup>4</sup> Underwood married Lorraine Aguilar, a teacher, and the couple had five children: Sophia, Roberto, Ricardo, Ramon, and Raphael.<sup>5</sup>

In 1992, Underwood left the University of Guam to challenge four-term incumbent Ben Blaz in the election for Guam’s congressional Delegate. Long active in the debate on Guam’s political status, Underwood was familiar with the issues affecting the island and pledged to use his experience in public policy to help Guam at the national level.<sup>6</sup> He used his strong ties to the community, built during his career as an educator, and his familial connections, which included his grandfather James H. Underwood, a former U.S. Marine and the postmaster of Guam.<sup>7</sup> He directed a successful grass-roots campaign, walking to small villages and meeting with voters.<sup>8</sup> Underwood’s electoral prospects received an unanticipated boost when an impending typhoon postponed voting in Guam for nearly a week. Thus, Guamanians knew before going to the polls that William J. (Bill) Clinton had succeeded in his bid to unseat President George H. W. Bush. This was an important development since both Underwood and Blaz had emphasized the significance of Guam’s having a Delegate from the same party as the President.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Underwood benefited from a desire for political change and bested Blaz with 55 percent of the vote.<sup>10</sup> “I feel gratified, but that has to end real quick,” Underwood remarked. “There’s a lot of work ahead.”<sup>11</sup> In subsequent elections, Underwood cruised to victory. In 1994 and 1996 he ran unopposed. He faced minimal opposition in his final two elections, defeating Manuel Cruz, a labor union president, with 76 and 78 percent of the vote, respectively.<sup>12</sup>





During his first term in the House, Underwood was assigned to the Armed Services, Natural Resources, and Education and Labor Committees. He remained on Armed Services and Natural Resources throughout his five terms in the House but left Education and Labor after the 103rd Congress (1993–1995).<sup>13</sup> Lacking the ability to vote on the final passage of legislation, Underwood used his committee work as a vital tool to represent his constituents. His spot on Natural Resources—an essential seat for Territorial Delegates—allowed him to weigh in on and influence legislation affecting Guam and the other U.S. territories. Located west of the International Date Line, Guam was a strategic U.S. military stronghold because of its proximity to East Asia. As the U.S. military presence on the island grew after World War II and the Cold War, Guam's economy became closely linked to the armed forces. Underwood's seat on the Armed Services Committee allowed him to cultivate military connections and monitor any changes that might affect the island. In addition to his committee workload, Underwood also chaired the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus during the 106th Congress (1999–2001).

Underwood wasted no time taking up the issue of Guam's political status. Since the passage of the Organic Act in 1950, which granted Guamanians U.S. citizenship and limited self-government, the island's political future remained a significant topic of debate. Underwood, a longtime advocate of Chamorro rights and increased independence for Guam, backed the commonwealth movement. On March 30, 1993, he introduced his first piece of legislation, the Guam Commonwealth Act. The measure called for the creation of a commonwealth with full self-government, the preservation of Chamorro culture, and the "mutual consent" of Guam and the United States for federal policies affecting the territory. Although the measure did not make it to the floor for a vote, Underwood introduced the legislation multiple times during his House tenure. In 1997 he took to the House Floor asking his colleagues to consider commonwealth status for Guam. "The 100th anniversary of the Spanish-American War marks an important time period for the

United States to, in a sense, come face to face with its imperial past and come face to face with what hopefully will be in the next century a more perfect union not only for the 50 States and the District of Columbia, but all the people who live under the American flag," Underwood declared.<sup>14</sup>

As a nonvoting Delegate, Underwood faced unique challenges. "So essentially we are Members, but not entirely," Underwood said, explaining the role of Territorial Delegates. "The island or jurisdiction each respective delegate represents is not often afforded the attention that their jurisdictions deserve, and by our unique status we must introduce very unique legislation tailor-made for our respective jurisdictions."<sup>15</sup> Underwood drafted legislation that focused primarily on issues that pertained solely to Guam, and particularly on protecting the interests of its native inhabitants. One such matter concerned lands that had been taken from the Chamorros by the U.S. military after World War II. "Returning Federal excess lands to the people of Guam is not just a good thing to do," Underwood told his House colleagues. "It is the right thing to do, the just thing to do."<sup>16</sup> The freshman Delegate achieved a major legislative victory when his bill, the Guam Excess Lands Act, became law in 1994. The new law transferred more than 3,000 acres of federal land to Guam for parks, new schools, and affordable housing.

Bolstered by this success, Underwood sought to tackle a related long-standing dispute between Guam and the United States. The federal government owned a substantial portion of the island, whose land mass was little more than 200 square miles. In the wake of security demands after World War II, the U.S. military took control of large tracts of land in Guam. With the end of the Cold War, the local government called for the return of the unused land. Criticism of the American government intensified after the U.S. military relinquished a substantial stretch of land in 1994 to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for use as a refuge.<sup>17</sup> In response to frustration over U.S. land practices, Underwood introduced the first Guam omnibus legislation in congressional history. He considered the Guam Land Returns Act, a provision giving Guam the right of "first refusal of declared excess lands" by the federal government,

the most important segment of the bill. The Guam Delegate hoped to develop a process for acquiring excess land that would differ from the standard practice, which gave federal agencies interested in obtaining the unused property priority over the local government.<sup>18</sup> Labeling the topic “one of the most contentious issues in Guam history since the end of World War II,” Underwood guided his bill through the House. It became law in 2000.<sup>19</sup>

Following the lead of his predecessors, Antonio Won Pat and Ben Blaz, Underwood drew attention to the hardships Guamanians endured during World War II. During Japan’s three-year occupation, the people of Guam suffered forced labor and internment. Although he was born a few years after the war ended, Underwood had a personal connection to the period; he had lost his two older siblings (as infants) during the occupation. Reflecting on his parents’ reaction to their loss, Underwood said, “They taught me that in the midst of difficult circumstances, we should learn lessons about dignity and courage and not bitterness or resentment.”<sup>20</sup> Inspired by the Chamorros’ strength, Underwood focused his legislative energy on reparations for the victims of the occupation. During the 107th Congress (2001–2003), he oversaw the passage of the Guam War Claims Review Commission Act. The bill, which became law in 2002, established a commission to oversee and settle claims made by Guamanians after World War II. Although the law did not authorize any payments, it was viewed as an important step in the eventual monetary compensation of the victims of the war.<sup>21</sup> In the interest of his constituents’ safety, Underwood also asked American military personnel to search for unexploded mustard gas bombs left in Guam during World War II.<sup>22</sup>

Underwood’s goal of ensuring fair treatment for all Americans often extended to other U.S. territories. In 1996 he inserted language into a telecommunications bill that would extend domestic rates and access to new technology to Guam and other Pacific territories.<sup>23</sup> He also introduced legislation to extend federal benefits for low-income, disabled, and elderly U.S. citizens to qualifying residents of Guam and the Virgin Islands. As a lifelong educator, Underwood wanted U.S. territories included in national

education policy, and he expressed frustration when Guam, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands were omitted from President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind proposal.<sup>24</sup> “We will not be ignored and we will be included so that every child, whether they are from California, Texas or more familiar locations like Guam will not be left behind,” Underwood said.<sup>25</sup> Although he was able to secure more federal funding to build schools and train teachers, Underwood wanted additional federal money for public education in Guam.<sup>26</sup>

Underwood also fought to preserve Guam’s unique cultural identity. Underwood had chaired the Chamorro Language Commission before coming to Congress, and had led a movement to incorporate the Chamorro language and culture into the curriculum at the University of Guam.<sup>27</sup> His commitment to protect Guam’s indigenous customs and traditions continued during his House tenure. In 2001 Underwood achieved an important victory when he convinced the Food and Drug Administration to allow the importation of betel nuts into the U.S. mainland. Chewed by many Pacific Islanders, the betel nut, a product of the areca palm tree, was a significant part of the Chamorro culture.<sup>28</sup> In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), Underwood introduced a bill to establish a standard time zone for Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. Signed into law in 2000, the new legislation “will prove to be a source of pride when people refer to our time zone as Chamorro Standard Time,” Underwood remarked.<sup>29</sup> Rather than criticizing legislation that would declare English the official language of the U.S. government, Underwood sent House Members a “Dear Colleague” letter poking fun at the bill by offering a mock “Ketchup-Only” measure. “I was surprised to learn salsa has replaced ketchup in sales as our nation’s leading condiment,” Underwood wrote. “I hope you share my concern that a country built on ketchup should take steps to ensure the predominance of this vegetable as our national condiment.”<sup>30</sup> Speaking at the Democratic National Convention in 2000, Underwood highlighted the unique nature of Guam and the other Pacific Islands, concluding his speech in Chamorro as a tribute to his native land.<sup>31</sup>



In 2002 Underwood announced his decision to not seek a sixth term in the House. “Ten years in Washington is a long time, and I had hoped to have a good career in Congress, and I felt that I’ve done well, but it’s also time to come back home,” Underwood observed.<sup>32</sup> Still interested in public service, he entered the race for governor of Guam in 2002. In the campaign against Guam senator Felix Camacho, Underwood, heavily outspent by his Republican opponent, employed a grass-roots strategy like the one he used when he ran for Delegate.<sup>33</sup> Underwood ultimately lost the election, garnering 45 percent of the vote to Camacho’s 55 percent.<sup>34</sup> “This is not the end. It is just another chapter,” he told his supporters after the loss.<sup>35</sup> But four years later he again lost to Camacho. Named professor emeritus by the University of Guam in 2000, Underwood was selected as the university’s president in 2008.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, “Robert A. Underwood,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

## NOTES

- Jennifer Yachnin, “Guam Delegate Hopes to Exchange Long Flights for Governorship,” 26 September 2002, *Roll Call*: 14.
- Biographical information about Delegate Underwood appeared on his 2002 campaign website for governor of Guam, “Underwood & Ada for Governor and Lt. Governor,” <http://www.underwoodada.com/?ua=profiles> (accessed 7 November 2002).
- Yachnin, “Guam Delegate Hopes to Exchange Long Flights for Governorship.”
- Underwood’s curriculum vitae was posted on the University of Guam’s website, <http://www.uog.edu/dynamicdata/PresidentsOffice.aspx> (accessed 11 January 2012).
- Biographical information was obtained from press coverage of Underwood’s initial run for Congress in 1992. “Robert Underwood,” 2 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 3.
- Underwood’s campaign materials underscored his familiarity with important issues in Guam and his desire to bring change to the island. See “The Time Is Right for a Change,” 4 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 27.
- Robert F. Rogers, *Destiny’s Landfall: A History of Guam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011): 267.
- Marshall Santos, “Democrats Win 2–1 Advantage,” 9 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 3.
- Tambra A. Bryant, “Guam Dems: Clinton Win Would Help Underwood,” 4 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 3; Frale Oyen, “Election Postponed,” 3 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 1. According to the Constitution, only states can participate in the electoral process.
- “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- Donovan Brooks, “Grassroots, Media Use Called Key to Success,” 11 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 7.
- “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; Jacob Leon Guerrero, “Underwood to House: Halt A–76,” 12 April 2000, *Pacific Daily News*: 5A.
- When the Republican Party took control of the House in 1995, many committee names were changed, including Armed Services, which was renamed National Security during the 104th and 105th Congresses, and Natural Resources, which was renamed Resources for the rest of Underwood’s tenure. Before the 104th Congress, Natural Resources was known as the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee—a name dating back to 1951. For information on committee histories and name changes, see Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947 to 1992*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1994).
- Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 1st sess. (10 February 1997): H401.
- Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 1st sess. (29 June 1999): 4999.
- Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (18 May 1993): 2500.
- During World War II, the U.S. military seized a large tract of land in northern Guam that made up nearly one-third of the island. In 1994 the military relinquished the land it no longer needed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which added the area to an existing national wildlife refuge. Many Guamanians thought the land should have been returned to them. There was also concern that the new wildlife reserve would lead to more destruction by the brown tree snake, which was introduced to the island during World War II and which devastated many indigenous bird species. William Branigin, “Guam Sees Predator in Wildlife Effort: Expansion of Refuge Acreage Smacks of Colonialism,” 15 April 1994, *Washington Post*: A21.
- Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 2nd sess. (30 October 2000): 11574.
- Yachnin, “Guam Delegate Hopes to Exchange Long Flights for Governorship”; *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 2nd sess. (30 October 2000): 11574.



- 20 Robert Underwood, "Recognize Chamorro Character," 13 July 2011, *Pacific Daily News*.
- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (30 January 2001): E49–E50; *Almanac of American Politics, 1998* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 1997): 1565; Dionesis Tamondong, "Delegate Returns to Hall," 6 July 2000, *Pacific Daily News*: 2A.
- 22 Steve Limtiaco, "Delegate Urges Federal Action on Buried Weapons," 4 October 2000, *Pacific Daily News*: 5A; *Almanac of American Politics, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2001): 1698.
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (1 February 1996): 2237.
- 24 Tanya M. C. Mendiola, "Underwood Wants Guam Included in Education Plan," 2 February 2001, *Pacific Daily News*: 7A.
- 25 Scott Radway, "Delegate Wants Unity," 9 August 2001, *Pacific Daily News*: 1A; Mendiola, "Underwood Wants Guam Included in Education Plan."
- 26 Radway, "Delegate Wants Unity."
- 27 "Robert Underwood," <http://guampedia.com/robert-underwood/> (accessed 7 January 2011).
- 28 Theresa Merto, "Delegate's Address Encourages Listeners," 9 August 2001, *Pacific Daily News*: 3A; *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 2nd sess. (30 October 2000): H11574.
- 29 Theresa Merto, "Chamorro Time Measure Awaits Clinton's OK," 17 December 2000, *Pacific Daily News*: 5A.
- 30 Emily Hancock, "Guam Delegate Pours It on English-Only Measure," 20 October 1995, *Houston Chronicle*: 14.
- 31 Steve Limtiaco and Dionesis Tamondong, "Underwood Steps Up," 19 August 2000, *Pacific Daily News*: 1A.
- 32 Limtiaco and Tamondong, "Underwood Steps Up."
- 33 Theresa Merto, "The Count Continues," 6 November 2002, *Pacific Daily News*: 1.
- 34 "Results," 6 November 2002, *Pacific Daily News*: 3.
- 35 Scott Radway, "Underwood Keeps Spirits High upon Defeat," 6 November 2002, *Pacific Daily News*: 2.