

OFFICE OF THE PLEBISCITE COMMISSIONER

Mariana Islands District
Saipan, Mariana Islands 96950

Erwin D. Canham
Plebiscite Commissioner

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June 19, 1975

The President^a
United States of America
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

It has been a fascinating and intense task to serve as your personal representative in administering the June 17 plebiscite in the Northern Mariana Islands. I have enjoyed every minute.

In your letter to me of April 11 you told me I would be "responsible for assuring that the plebiscite is conducted objectively, impartially, and in a manner which will guarantee that the people of the Northern Mariana Islands are able to exercise freely their right to determine their future political status".

Thus my role throughout was to remain entirely neutral from the issues of the plebiscite but to work actively to support and ensure a free political process.

With the aid of an exceptionally able Executive Director, N. Neiman Craley, Jr., a former member of the House of Representatives from Pennsylvania, who has had nearly a decade of experience in Micronesia, I did the following things:

- . Established with all groups in the Northern Marianas my intention to remain neutral;
- . Set up an Advisory Committee representing the major entities, for and against the Covenant, in the Marianas;
- . Appointed a Voter Registration Board to carry out the difficult task of creating an entirely new registration list;
- . Issued guidelines for unhampered and equitable use of radio and television by the campaigners;
- . Published the essential texts and explanatory material relative to the plebiscite in English, Chamorro, and Carolinian, whenever possible;

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. Established and enforced regulations for the actual voting and appointed poll workers and election judges representing pro- and anti-Covenant groups in equal numbers;

. Made sure the votes were accurately counted and tabulated, also under the surveillance of representatives of both sides.

Our most challenging task was to produce the entirely new list of registered voters. You will appreciate that most such lists are cumulative over years. Ours had to be ad hoc. In a few weeks we registered 5,344 persons, which compares with an estimated total of 5,880 possible eligible persons. We registered an additional 125 absentee individuals. Challenges as permitted by the Secretarial Order were presented to the Voter Registration Board and subsequently to the Special Plebiscite Appellate Court, and 90 names were removed from the list.

Thus a total of 5,379 persons were registered and able to vote, which is 91.5 percent of possible eligibles. (I invite comparison with any voting precincts in the United States.) Of these registered persons 4,999 cast valid ballots either in person or absentee, which is 92.9 percent. I am sure you will agree that these are remarkable percentages, proving the intense interest of the Marianas people in the historic issue to be decided and the efficacy of the processes of registration, campaigning, and voting.

Finally, as of course you know, 3,939 persons voted in favor of the Covenant of Commonwealth, or 78.8 percent, and 1,060 voted against. The results evidence the ardor of the Northern Marianas people in their desire for political union with the United States.

I believe a perfectly free election was held. It may interest you, as an old hand at the political process, that at the 18 voting places on Plebiscite Day we recorded only 8 cases of uncertain registration and of these 4 were finally able to vote and 4 could not.

The campaigning was lively but orderly. There was no violence. Generally, a very good spirit prevailed throughout.

We had the great benefit of a visiting mission from the United Nations Trusteeship Council. It consisted of James Murray, United Kingdom, Chairman; John Melhuish, Australia; Bertrand De Lataillade, France. They conferred extensively with me, discussed matters with various Marianas political leaders and individuals, observed the campaign activities and political education materials, and kept a sharp eye on voting procedures and counting of the ballots.

There are divisions in the Northern Marianas based on ancient ethnic differences. My staff and I tried very hard not to polarize or intensify

these differences, for the future of society and government here depends in no small measure on reducing majority-minority discriminations and fears.

The campaign and the voting inevitably reflected these differences but we did all we could to soften them.

I have greatly appreciated and enjoyed the privilege of serving as Plebiscite Commissioner. Not many other Americans have had such an opportunity and I am deeply grateful to you and to the Secretary of Commerce Rogers C. B. Morton, who was Secretary of the Interior at the time of my appointment. I have been provided assistance when I asked for it from High Commissioner Johnston, various elements of the Trust Territory Government, and the Marianas District Administration. When it became apparent that we might have problems requiring the aid of an attorney - as indeed proved to be the case - the genuine independence of my function was supported by the able services of John C. Craft, Esq., of Kansas City, Missouri. Most of all, however, I have benefitted from the assistance of Mr. Craley, whom I referred to earlier. He was detached from his function as Special Assistant for Legislative Affairs to the High Commissioner to serve me as Executive Director of the Plebiscite. His long experience, knowledge, and sensitivity toward the peoples of the Northern Marianas were of indispensable value.

Again, thanks for a most gratifying opportunity.

Respectfully yours,

Erwin D. Canham

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June 19 - PDN (Joan King)

"The mission chairman for the United Nations Trusteeship Council James Murray of Scotland, yesterday said he was very impressed with the "good humor," 'friendliness,' and 'political maturity' of the Marianas electorate."

June 17 - PDN (Joan King)

"UN Mission Chairman James Murray indicated both sides were disappointed in the UN mission.

The anticovenant people want the plebiscite stopped, and the procovenant side wants the UN to influence the US Congress to get the covenant approved, Murray told the Advisory Committee.

Murray said the duty of the mission was to observe whether the Marianas was carrying out an act of "free political choice," not to stop the plebiscite or influence the U.S. Congress.

Asked after the meetings if he thought there had been a "fair registration" of voters Murray said he had no comment.

"It's not over yet, and we have not submitted our report," Murray said.

June 16 - PDN (Joan King) - Tinian & Rota trip

U.N. Representative Chairman James Murray of the United Kingdom, perspiring in his tie and jacket and with a monocle at his right eye, said, "you are all very politically mature people."

Etc. See final paragraphs of article

June 15 - PDN (Borja)

2 articles -

June 16 (MNS)

In a meeting with the United Carolinian Association Friday June 14, UN representatives told the UCA that nothing can be done to postpone the Northern Marianas plebiscite. Chairman James Murray of the UK told a crowd of about 150 at the meeting hall in Garapan Village that the mission cannot ask that the election be postponed because their (UN) one week visit is "to observe" and "not interfere with" the plebiscite.

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