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OPINION AND COMMENTARY

The virtues of smallness

By Erwin D. Canham

Salpan, Northern Mariana Islands
You can observe the problems of government either macro- or micro. Here in Micronesia, we have everything tidily on a miniature scale. For an anthropologist, for a political scientist, it is tremendously interesting.

Right now, and until early December, 38 delegates recently elected by a tiny (5,075 voters) but massive (80 percent) turnout are drafting a constitution. They are solicitously advised by a team of "experts" from the United States but they are making their own decisions.

They are extraordinarily talented politicians. Just think: under four foreign rulers for four centuries. Spanish, German, Japanese, American. Three decades under the American trusteeship, with a slow start from 1945 until about 1960. Thereafter they have taken off. Yet the adult voting population in the Marianas is not much over 6,000 people. They could fit into a few city blocks in Brooklyn or Los Angeles.

Yet from this tiny base have come a score or more of men and some women who will

certainly develop greatly as time goes on, whose political talents are sophisticated and acute. A good many others are not far behind. It fits into a theory of leadership which I have believed for many years and can only now test extensively. It is that the quality of leadership in a small community may well be just as high as the quality in a great metropolis. And sometimes higher. I have felt that the lawyers, the teachers, the bankers, the newspapermen, the other leaders in my native Maine community were of a standard that could be matched against megalopolis. And the same thing goes, I believe, for any representative healthy, lively community across the American nation.

It is manifestly the case here. There are special problems. Take language. The major native language in the Marianas is Chamorro. Politics is conducted bilingually, with some times a little in another vernacular language, Carolinian. Yet the leaders here have surmounted the language barrier. The affairs of the Constitutional Convention or "Con-Con" are conducted in English, as are all the formal

affairs of government.

Steadily, Marianas people are replacing mainland Americans (expatriates, we are called) in the posts of government and other affairs. Next year the first native governor will be elected.

In paying tribute to political talents, I do not seek to mislead. There will be the same problems of corruption and inefficiency and demagoguery that are manifest in mainland United States and elsewhere in the world. This is no utopia. But there are leaders acutely conscious of the dangers with some sense of what needs to be done to avoid them. How they will succeed remains to be seen.

One big advantage in the Marianas as compared with most other districts in Micronesia is that we do not have an inherited chieftain system. Traditional leaders do not come to office by virtue of birth. In other districts, like Yap particularly, the power of the traditional leaders must run in harness with elected democracy. It is a difficult combination. Here, everybody knows everybody else, and

most of the Chamorros are related in some way or other. There are four or five big families. Many names are duplicates of Spanish derivation, like Sabian and Camacho and Cabrero and Ada and Villagomez.

This interrelationship makes politics awfully personal. And intimate. It is part of the micro-scale, rather like a New England town meeting. I grew up in such a community, which may be one of the reasons why I find it comfortable here.

Anyway, this part of the American nation knows and relishes the opportunities of self-government. The people and their leaders are proud to be pioneering in nation-building in 1976. There is little false confidence, much awareness of problems and pitfalls. But they are making no small plans. The scope is large, the scale is tiny. The United States deserves to know more about what is happening here under the Stars and Stripes.

Mr. Canham is the Resident Commissioner of the Northern Mariana Islands.

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