

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Dr. Palacios' magic brew

By Erwin D. Canham

Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands

Two of the important steps along the road to self-government within the American system for the Northern Mariana Islands were the plebiscite last year by which they chose the United States, and the election in October, 1976, in which they elected the delegates to their Constitutional Convention.

In both these events, Dr. Palacios' magic brew played an important part. Setting up the arrangements for the plebiscite, my Saipanese advisers told me there might be rascals around who would try to vote twice. Of course, these rascals would not be Chamorros (the majority people in the Marianas) but slippery types from some other Micronesian district. So, they said, we must have safeguards.

How about a rubber stamp on their hands or arms, which would show up in a special kind of light to be installed at the polling places? I objected, saying I thought it an affront to make a mark on somebody's skin, and besides, the special ink and lamps were hard to come by, so far from the United States.

My advisers didn't mind the skin marking

but they yielded to my views and sought a different remedy. Francisco Palacios, a physician and party leader, came up with an idea. He said he could withdraw to his laboratory and mix up a red liquid in which each voter would be required to dip a finger at the time he voted. The dye couldn't easily be removed, so nobody could vote twice.

We put Dr. Palacios' magic brew into glass baby food jars and it worked pretty well. It could be removed with time and effort, but for Election Day enough clung in the crack between nail and finger to identify a voter, and not many jars of crimson fluid were upset on the polling tables. The voters were fascinated, many taking the mark as a badge of civic honor, and the members of the U.S. Congress before whom I testified on the matter were even more fascinated, saying it might work in their home districts.

The other day, before the elections for delegates to the Constitutional Convention, Popular Party leaders (in opposition to Dr. Palacios, who is chairman of the Territorial Party) came to demand the dye this time. They said there were still rascals about, registering un-

der different names — or even trying to vote under the name of somebody long in the graveyard — which shows how fast the Micronesians have learned U.S. political ways.

So I agreed to the continued use of the brew. Last year's supply was long gone; Dr. Palacios said his stock of ingredients was fresh out. We got 41 bottles of rubber-stamp ink at the store, and were lucky to get that. It was purply-blue, rather than red, not so persistent. Yet it worked pretty well. Now with elections to the Marianas Legislature coming up, the Popular Party demands a better brew. Dr. Palacios is busy as a vice-president of the Constitutional Convention. But by happy chance the chairman of the Popular Party is another physician, Carlos Camacho, and he has prepared Dr. Palacios' magic brew, and all is well on the finger-dipping front.

These are a few of the details in the dramatic process which is rapidly maturing in these islands far from the American mainland. There are at most some 6,000 eligible voters. They have produced leaders of great political skill. I would set them in competition against

political leaders anywhere and not fear the consequences.

They will be a lively part of the American political system. In the plebiscite, 95 percent of the estimated eligible voters came voluntarily to the polls and cast their ballots. In the election for the "Con-Con," about 80 percent came, although there were really no visible issues to bring them out. Compare that with the turnout in any mainland election and tell me whether these people are politically conscious and alert!

In the Con-Con election, of the 25 delegates chosen on Saipan, all but five have had some sort of college education. The average age of the delegates is a little over thirty. One woman (only one!) is among them. They are in the 50-day process of drafting a constitution. They have the example of 1787 to follow, and that helps, but they know what they want and they are going about seeking it zealously.

It is thrilling to watch, still more exciting to share.

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