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La Política

By S. OMAR BARKER

IF all the natural born orators of the native New Mexican villages were laid end to end, they would still rise to rousing climaxes as soon as the next *campaña política* begins to infiltrate the brisk October air. For politics and political speech-making come as natural to these American descendants of the *conquistadores* and their colonists as does their taste for *chili*. And they like both hot. Juan, Pedro, Jesús María, Toribio, Melaquías, Fulano y Tal—every *ciudadano*, every *paisano*, be he tie chopper, farmer, *peón*, *vaquero*, *borreguero*, teacher, merchant, can and does upon occasion rise in his place at the *junta* and make a speech. Extempore, of course; modestly apologetic at first but blossoming surely into the full flower of ornate and vigorous oratory as he proceeds.

Or, even should he sign his name with a mark, he can preside with perfect ease and some considerable knowledge of parliamentary practice over a precinct committee or even over that larger, more formal and more gala *junta* gathered together to listen to the message of the *comitiva de candidatos* and *oradores* sent out from country or state headquarters to spread the party gospel.

Come with me, then, and meet this gentle, friendly—but fiery—*gente* in the emotional throes of a hard fought campaign. I am running for *representante* in a county where the majority of voters, largely rural, is native, and while I shall not be obliged to kiss any babies, it behooves me to observe many other amenities quaint and folkish. But it is no burden. It is a pleasure, as you shall see.

It is about 7:30 when our *comitiva* rolls into the little mountain village of Rociada. Most of the mud houses are dark, but there is a yellow glow of lamplight from all three of the windows and the door of the inevitable village dance hall where the gathered *gente* have patiently awaited our

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coming for the past half hour—the meeting having been announced for 8 o'clock! Strains of plaintive music drift out to us through the sharp night air. Obviously the stage is all set, lacking only the visiting actors.

But late (?) though we are, we do not drive directly to the lighted *sala*. There is an etiquette to be observed. Our driver, himself one of the visiting *oradores* and a Spanish-American, slows the car down to a walking speed. In this instance there has been no rendezvous agreed upon. We must loiter along until we are hailed. The delay is slight. Our headlights have been observed coming up the valley. The welcoming committee is ready. A tall, leathery faced, lean shanked young man in cowboy boots, new overalls, a pink shirt, a blue coat three shades too bright for Navy, and a weathered cowboy hat, steps into the glare of our lights. We stop. He steps to the side of the car.

"*La comitiva?*" he asks.

We signify that we are. He unbends and greets us cordially. Several of us he knows—he has been a delegate to the county conventions of our party. The rest are introduced. Handshaking all around. Handshaking? Hand-touching, rather, for unless he has caught the habit from *Los Americanos*, the rural Spanish-American does not shake hands. A gentle clasp, no more; yet none the less cordial for its lack of Nordic vigor.

"Come," he says, "our committee awaits you at the house of Don Juan Clemaco."

Presently we are escorted into a neat little parlor-bedroom with a *viga* ceiling. The room is empty of people. The whitewashed walls are plentifully adorned with lithographed Saints, sacred scenes and several tinted enlargements of members of the family, in many-curlicued gilt frames. Over the corners of these, and over the head of the bed hang drapes of heavy, hand-crocheted lace. All a little garish, perhaps, by daylight, but now the yellowness of kerosene lamplight mellows it all quaintly.

For a moment we of the *comitiva* are left alone. Then through a low door from the next room, whence comes the chicory-ish odor of coffee, there appear five men. They line up as if for a spelling match. Then one of them steps a little forward.

"Gentlemen," he pronounces, in Spanish, "as chairman of the committee of the *junta* appointed to extend our welcome to you, the honorable *comitiva*, who honor us tonight with your presence, I greet you. We have done the best that lies within our humble capabilities, and a goodly number of the people are assembled, ready to hear enlightenment upon the issues of the day from you, gentlemen, orators of the evening; but though the *junta* waits, this committee realizes that the labors of the campaign are arduous and tiring, and it is therefore fitting and proper that first you refresh yourselves, if by any chance the plain and simple offering of the good woman of this house may be found acceptable to your appetites. Gentlemen, what is your pleasure?"

Though there are but five of us, we also have, of course, a chairman. He rises. We have eaten supper before leaving town. It is early in the campaign and we are neither tired nor hungry. But does our chairman simply say: "No, thanks, we've eaten. Let's get on over to the meeting"?

No! He does not! He matches the local chairman in formal eloquence, a little more briefly perhaps, because he gets to do it oftener. He devotes his final burst to acceptance of the supper, of which we presently partake, after another round of introductions. The supper—but no, the subject of campaign eating deserves its hearing later when the evidence is all in.

Fortunately a committee of three arrives from the *sala* before the second round of *chili con frijoles* and sun-dried beef, to announce that the *junta* is ready to receive us. As we send them back to report that we, also, are ready, the five members of the welcoming committee distribute themselves among us, one to one, obviously a little embarrassed,

but determined. They stand at our elbows. In a few minutes the message committee returns, bringing along the band, consisting of two fiddles and a thumb-whanked guitar. Then, with the *música* in the lead, the procession sets out for the *sala*, some two hundred feet away. The message committee carries lanterns. The five members of the welcoming committee grasp the five left elbows of our five "orators," and thus, two by two, firmly if a little awkwardly escorted by our individual guards of honor, enthusiastically accompanied by the lively strains of "Casey Jones" (adapted), we march up the road and enter the *sala*.

Applause. From outside a few half-hearted cat-calls from young *bravos* of the opposing party, too loyal to their own to come in, but also too curious not to hang around.

The *sala* is a rough floored, oblong room, its walls lined all around with plank benches, invisible now under the packed-in bodies of the crowd. At one end is a rough table and a few chairs occupied by *la mesa*—those chosen before our arrival to preside over the meeting. The membership of *la mesa* is quite numerous for a gathering of a mere hundred or so people. At other *juntas* we shall arrive in time to observe their selection, a most ceremonious procedure requiring the choice of a *presidente*, *secretario* and from two to six *vice-presidentes*.

The crowd, for the most part, is distributed like a Quaker meeting, the men on one side and the women on the other; though apparently for better strategic control of their offspring, there are some groups where the *hombre* is seated beside his blackshawled *mujer*. There is also a sprinkling of "modernized" young folks who have preferred violation of old custom to separation from their "dates" during the speechmaking.

There are almost as many women present as men, almost as many young folks as adults, and almost as many babies and big-eyed *chiquitos* as there are laps for them to be bounced upon or knees for them to lean against.

The turn-out is gratifying. The giggling and whispered comments as we enter are not. Yet I know they do not arise from any desire to ridicule what, to a matter of fact Anglo, must seem a quite pompous entrance. One who does not know this native *gente* usually imagines, upon appearing before a crowd of them, that he is being laughed at. This is not the case at all. Native New Mexican crowds quite naturally giggle (the young ones) and whisper at such a time, whether from a half-suppressed sense of excitement or from embarrassment I do not know. Presently they will quiet down to a most respectful and silent attention, whether interested or not.

I shall not attempt to describe the garb of this Rociada gathering. Enough to say that there are among the women many fringed black shawls hooded over the head, and among the men enough toil-worn overalls and battered shoes to indicate clearly that here are sons and daughters of toil—and of the soil; poor folks, yet never too oppressed by their burdens to turn out for a *fiesta*, a *baile*, a *casorio*, a *junta política*. They are here tonight not so much from a solemn concern for the future of governmental affairs as from a perennial taste for *la política*, for political oratory, both as listeners and as perpetrators—if the opportunity offers.

Once inside the door I accept as nonchalantly as possible the increased guidance of the determined escort clutching my arm. There is a slight pause until we are all inside. Then all at once the fiddlers swing, about two chords ahead of the guitar, from "Casey Jones" into a most remarkable ear-version of "When You Wore a Tulip and I Wore a Big Red Rose," leading us the while on a circling promenade of the *sala*.

Cheers from the *bancos*. From our side, bows, nods, greeting to those we happen to know as we pass them. A few assorted grins from several of my nearer ranch neighbors who have come from across the mountain. Once

around. Twice around as the volume and vigor of the *música* increase. Three times around goes our gallant *comitiva*, and then:

"*Señor Presidente, honorables vice-presidentes, secretario de la mesa!*" proclaims the chairman of the local welcoming committee, mopping a red bandana across his perspiring brow with one hand and flourishing grandly with the other. "*Tengo el honor de presentar á esta honorable mesa y á esta honorable junta, los honorables caballeros de la comitiva que nos harán el honor de usar la palabra delante esta honorable junta esta noche sobre las cuestiones del día!*"

Thus, with a most pleasant and propitious, if somewhat lengthy, flourish, our meeting opens.

Thus far everything has been in Spanish, but now the chairman calls for an interpreter to say that "for the benefit of our Anglo-American fellow citizens who have honored us with their presence tonight, all the *discursos* will be interpreted into English; and the same interpreter will assist el Honorable Señor Bark', by translating his remarks into *Castellano*."

"*El Honorable Señor Bark'*," makes me smile! Most of these people and I have known each other by our first names ever since my childhood. Many a day have I picked up potatoes behind our Chairman as he forked them out for my father on our little mountain ranch just across the mountain; and for years it never even occurred to me that he had a last name; nor had he ever used mine. But tonight mutual "*honorables*" pass between us most differentially, for this is *la política*.

The prospective interpreter, however, is disappointed. All present *intienden español*, and I for my part, prefer to speak to my old friends and neighbors in their own native language.

National issues are passed over lightly. State issues are presented briefly. But upon county issues, the full flood of the *comitiva's* oratory is loosed in high flown phrases

and words a yard long, yet perfectly understood by every unlettered *paisano* in the crowd.

Presently, following another burst of fine Castillian adjectives from the chairman, I rise to do my stuff. It is my first political speech in Spanish and I am nervous. I need not be, for while I falter and stammer somewhat and make some quite ridiculous mistakes, nobody even so much as snickers at them. It is a typical Spanish-American courtesy, and my heart warms to them for it.

For hours the various *oradores* of our *comitiva* rise to their many-gestured climaxes. Promptly at the last word of each speech *los músicos* break gaily forth, often with some jingly ear-version of a once popular American tune, but sometimes with the sweeter, plaintive strains of one of their own native songs.

Finally the last *comitiva* orator has finished. One hears the soft, windy sound of snoring babies. A lamp begins to burn low, its kerosene all but exhausted. Another smokes. It is getting late. Pink dressed, dark eyed *señoritas* begin to stir expectantly on the hard *bancos*. Young *bravos*, who have been loitering outside, edge in at the open door. The aged chairman rises. Apparently the *junta* is about over. Time now for the dance!

But hold! Back in a shadowy corner a stooped, spindle-shanked old man rises from his seat. He clears his throat—rather unsuccessfully, for when he speaks his voice is a little cracked and wheezy.

"*Señor Presidente!*" he addresses the chair, tottering forward with his cane as he speaks. The young bucks scowl a little. They want to get to dancing. But the old *paisano* does not notice them. Neither does the chairman.

"*Señor Chavez!*" He promptly grants the floor.

Señor Chavez takes his time about getting to the front. His old legs are wobbly. His hair curls up in an uncombed fringe above the rusty brown collar of his antique coat. He

leans a little against the table as he turns watery eyes upon the crowd. Hoarsely, haltingly the words begin:

"*Señor Presidente*, (in Spanish) *aunque no soy orador* (although I am not an orator) compared to the distinguished and honorable gentlemen who have made use of the word here tonight, nevertheless (almost imperceptibly his voice is gaining clearness and vigor) it may be that there are a few things which an old man like myself may say upon the questions of the day. My friends and fellow citizens, for many years I have been a member of—(here he names the opposition party, and there is no doubt now about his voice clearing up!).. But I stand here tonight to tell you that the horse which will not jump the fence into another pasture when his masters have trampled down or stolen every blade from his own, is not worthy the name of a horse! He is a burro!"

Applause! More applause!

Following which Señor Chavez, in justification of his recent conversion, rises to heights of vigorous oratory that cause the best efforts of our *comitiva* to pale into mere amateur declamations. His voice has ceased to crack and quaver. It has become resonant, clear—and loud!

"*Aunque no soy orador!*" That inevitable apologetic opening! But don't you believe it! Oratory is one Spanish-American gift that age cannot wither.

The winning of Señor Chavez, be it understood, is a more considerable item of victory than you might think. It will mean at least eighteen more votes for our ticket in this precinct; for his *parientes*, his *gente*, over whom he wields a strong patriarchal political influence, number around twenty, and his delivery of their votes will hover close to 90%. It is this family bloc that must be the unit of calculation in rural New Mexico politics.

The real function of the *junta* is not so much to win votes out of hand by convincing arguments as to supply our partisans with ammunition.

"You ain't goin' to convince many in these meetin's,"

our astute Spanish-American county chairman has warned us. "What you got to do is furnish 'em with arguments they can use on their neighbors their ownelves between now and election. And *por vida de sus esposas*, if they want to make speeches, let 'em, if it takes all night!"

Strangely enough mere exposure of some neat little graft in county office, by the office holders of the opposition party, made no tremendous impression. But when we were able to show that names of various local citizens had been misused, even forged, to aid this graft, we began to get action. Even staunch partisans of the opposition who had been so used, reared their bristles. Graft was not so bad, but to be made unknowing partisans to such dishonesty would not be countenanced. A man's name was his own, its honor to be most jealously guarded.

By eleven thirty the last *orador* has had his *chanza*. It has been a good meeting, peaceable beyond our expectations. True, twice the young *bravos* outside have tossed small boulders in through an open window or contributed derisive comments or enthusiastic *vivas* at most inopportune moments. But this is nothing. Later in the campaign, at another village, we are to see some of our lights shattered by bullets and marvel at the sight of a middle-aged Anglo-American lady campaigner leaping like a startled roebuck from the middle of her address through a shattered window into the middle of the night.

But tonight the chairman pronounces adjournment upon an enthusiastic but peaceable meeting. Quite suddenly he drops his dignity. He waves a gay signal to the *músicos*.

"*Al baile!*" he cries, rushing to seize a partner. The dance is on.

If there is a Spanish-American in New Mexico between the ages of eight and eighty who does not dance, it is because he or she is suffering at the moment from a broken leg. What if the cupboard at home be bare, the flour bin empty? What if the ponies be too poor for the spring plow-

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ing, half the lambs dead in a late snowstorm, or the autumn crop caught by an early one? Tonight we will be gay! *Al baile!*

Nor does our *comitiva* plead fatigue and depart. To dance with the *gente* is part of the established etiquette of politics.

First a fast two step (probably "Casey Jones" again) to warm us up; then a waltz—"Cielito Lindo" if we are lucky; and then "*El cotilio! El cotilio!*" cries some spry oldster; and I, who am not of the cotillion generation and have never danced one, step bravely forth with my shy black shawled partner and whirl and whirl and turn and turn until my dizzy stomach cries out against all politics.

And well it might. For presently we are tendered refreshments. *Chicos! Chicos* are delicious—when you are hungry. Native field corn is plucked late in the milk, boiled or steamed, hung out to dry, and when cured to the toughness of young rubber, toasted to a gentle brown, preferably in an outdoor *orno*, and served on the cob. For a man with ten hours of hard labor directly ahead of him *chicos* are quite digestible.

Somebody once asked a most successful San Miguel County politician, astute, suave, debonair, what he considered the most severe hardship of the *campana política* in New Mexico. It was early in the morning after a night of *junta, baile* and *chicos*. Like a flash he answered:

"*Comer chicos de noche!* (Eating *chicos* at night!)"

So we dance and eat *chicos*, lingering yet awhile afterward for "conferences"—mostly homely, neighborly talk.

It is 3 A. M. or later when we finally start home. However the votes may go, our *junta* has been a quaint, friendly, stirring experience.

La junta . . . aunque no soy orador . . . Honorable Presidente de la comitiva . . . amigos y conciudadanos míos . . . las cuestiones del día . . . música . . . los derechos de la gente

... *el baile* ... *el cotilio* ... nor dare we omit *chili* and
chicos!

La política!

January Afternoon

By HANIEL LONG

The snow has the ripples wind and water leave
on fine white sand,
the worn rubbing of wood
which has known the elements a long time.
And on the graining of the snow
are bird tracks, rabbit tracks,
my own tracks—
momentary prints of the earth's creatures.
Round the dwarf trees are circles of bare ground.
I sit there in the sun
thinking of how summer and winter, love and death
are moods crossing the same face,
thinking of persons and places I have known
and their far away momentary life.