

Franklin Delano clobbered



by Frank Ramos
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They say that politics is Puerto Rico's favorite pastime and no wonder. There's always plenty of action and enough intrigue and scheming going on to satisfy even the most machiavellian among us. Look at the way the political tug-of-war between Gov. Romero and his erstwhile associate Franklin Delano Lopez has dominated the public's interest and newspaper headlines in recent days.

Although the final details aren't in yet, the battle between Romero and Lopez has apparently ended in a total victory for the governor. Lopez will not be running President Carter's re-election campaign in Puerto Rico and will probably be taking an extended leave as chairman of the island's New Democratic Party. Indeed, Romero will even be retaining his official neutrality in the presidential race despite White House insistence that he declare himself in favor of Carter's re-election.

In a way, the outcome of the Romero-Lopez confrontation was predictable. It was strictly a contest between a hard-punching heavyweight and a light-punching featherweight. Lopez's only card was his friendships with some of Carter's key aides, particularly Tim Kraft and Hamilton Jordan, which provided him a certain degree of access to the White House. But Romero had the political clout which Lopez lacked and the people in the White House are no dummies: they know where the political power lies.

What provoked the confrontation between Romero and Lopez, his one-time protegee? Basically, I think there were several factors that put the two men on a collision course.

The first factor involved Lopez's efforts to establish himself as Carter's "man in San Juan." With a bit of luck and some cunning, Lopez had jumped aboard the Carter bandwagon early, when Jimmy Carter was still anything but a household word. Through the years, he cultivated friendships with key White House figures like Kraft and Jordan. And he learned how to use these friendships to become a power broker, trying to serve as a "bridge" between those on the island who needed favors from Washington and the powers-that-be that could provide that help. His critics put it more bluntly: Lopez was an influence-peddler, they said, who used his contacts in Washington for political and economic gain.

Romero was obviously appalled by the idea that his one-time press aide was now pretending to be the principal intermediary between his administration and the White House. As Romero himself put it last December: "Lopez has been trying to set himself up as the contact point between the White House and my administration and I'm not going to allow that."

Still, Lopez may have been able to succeed in his self-appointed role as Washington's intermediary but he became a bit too cocky

and self-confident. The turning point came last October when Lopez appeared to go along with the New Democratic Party executive committee's nomination of a Planning Board official, José Rios Davila, to head the 1980 census locally. Unknown to the committee, however, Lopez had privately recommended another person, Carlos Smith, for the job. When the White House appointed Smith, the committee members were shocked.

By getting Smith appointed, Lopez had driven home his point: he was the man who wielded influence in the White House, not the NDP executive committee or the governor. But while making his point, Lopez also sealed his doom. Romero and the other New Progressive Party leaders decided Lopez had to go.

Another factor that apparently turned Romero against Lopez was the governor's suspicion, probably not entirely unfounded, that Lopez wished to convert the New Democrats into a second pro-statehood party that would participate in local elections. Romero was also obviously disturbed by the alliance between Lopez and Miami Mayor Maurice Ferre, whom the governor also suspected of wanting to run for office on the island. I can readily believe that Romero, when he learned that Maurice Ferre was planning to campaign here for Carter, called the mayor and

threatened to campaign against him in Miami if he went through with his plans.

(Incidentally, this writer was shown, confidentially, the purported text of the letter in which Maurice Ferre answered Romero. The lengthy letter is sharply critical of the governor for allegedly treating Puerto Rico as his own private turf. The word is Ferre had planned to make the letter public but was persuaded not to by his uncle, former Gov. Luis A. Ferre, and others in Puerto Rico.)

Lopez had steadfastly insisted that neither he nor Maurice Ferre had any plans to run for office here. But the governor obviously doesn't trust either one.

Another factor that influenced events was Romero's character. Romero is a tough politician with an instinct for the jugular. If he feels you've wronged him or betrayed him, he will make you bite the dust, no matter how close you may have been in the past. And there are no grey areas as far as Romero is concerned: you are either 100 percent for him or else you're against him.

After all, Lopez is not the first former Romero associate to feel the governor's wrath. Reinaldo Paniagua ran Romero's electoral campaign in 1976 but he was forced out last year as secretary of state after running afoul of the governor. Other victims of Romero's wrath are former Government De-

velopment Bank President Mariano Mier and former Education Secretary Herman Sulsona.

What happens now? Well, with the NPP now in Carter's camp (or is it Carter in the NPP's camp?), the March 16 Democratic primary shapes up as an election preview between the pro-Carter statehood forces and the pro-Kennedy commonwealth forces. Both sides can be expected to gear up for the confrontation but both sides also have their problems. Some of the statehooders are presumably Republicans and can be expected to vote in the Feb. 17 Republican primary. Theoretically, this should deprive the pro-statehood group of part of its strength, although it's quite likely that many statehooders will decide to vote in both primaries, if they can get away with it. On the commonwealth side, the problem will be getting out the Popular Democratic Party electorate, a large part of which is not very enthusiastic about participating in national politics. The betting right now is that the pro-Carter statehood group has the edge.

In any event, it's shaping up as a very good show that should preserve politics' role as our national pastime. If we could somehow persuade our politicians to do their thing on stage, it could even turn out to be our prime tourist attraction.