



The Fellow Traveler and Other Stories

By Benito Mencias

If you hadn't been so busy scanning the heavens for the Russian "moon," you might have noticed that the coconut in your backyard was sprouting the dollar sign. And you might have seen a new meteor flashing across the constitutional skies — the Commission on Elections setting the stage for November 12 and letting nothing bar its way.

IT'S a metal sphere of 23 inches in diameter and 184.3 pounds in weight. The Russians call it *Sputnik*, meaning "fellow traveler." Early in October they threw it into an orbit 62 degrees away from the equator. The ball now revolves around the earth from an altitude of 559 miles at the tremendous rate of once every 96.2 minutes.

The launching of the "moon" was big news in the Soviet Union and the rest of the world. At the Russian embassy in Washington, where 50 scientists from 13 countries were being entertained after attending the International Geophysical Year rocket and satellite conference, an American physicist, Lloyd Berkner, asked to say a few words. "I am informed by the *New York Times*," he said, "that a satellite is in orbit at an elevation of 900 kilometers. I wish to congratulate our Soviet colleagues on their achievement."

It was, indeed, a good deal to crow about. For years now Buck Rogers and his travels from one planet to another made engrossing entertainment in the Sunday comic pages. Great adventure but pure fantasy. After the Russians had launched the "moon," one was not so sure Buck Rogers was so fantastic.

But the sober rejoicing of the scientists was soon chilled by the cold war. "The present generation," said an official Russian announcement, "will witness how the freed and conscious labor of the people of the new socialist society turns even the most daring of man's dreams into reality." That fixed *Sputnik* as a new element in the cold war picture, in the arms race that has been going on for years now between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The Americans were working on a much smaller satellite. The plan called for a ball 21.5 pounds in

weight to be thrown into an orbit at least 300 miles above the earth. Since this height would touch the edges of the atmosphere, the American "moon" was expected to "live" only a few days. *Sputnik*, well above the atmosphere, could keep going around the earth for years.

In terms of the cold war, the significance of the Russian achievement lay in the fact that, to launch *Sputnik*, the Russians used an operational ballistic missile driven by a rocket engine of extraordinary power. Two months ago the Russians claimed that they had perfected an intercontinental ballistic missile — a weapon of tremendous destructive power that could cross continents as it hurtles toward its target.

Sputnik itself is not regarded as too significant by a sector of American opinion as a weapon of war. *Time*, the U.S. news magazine, summarizes the situation in these words:

"Many imaginative military planners have dreamed of satellite fortresses armed with nuclear missiles to shoot at the earth below. All space vehicles must be lightly built to conserve weight. They would therefore be vulnerable, and since they are forced to move in predictable orbits, they should not be too hard to shoot down. One suggested method of dealing with a hostile satellite is to shoot a modest racket into its orbit, but moving in the opposite direction. The warhead would burst and fill the orbit with millions of small particles. Any one of these, hitting the satellite with twice its orbital speed (36,000 miles per hour) would have the effect of a meteor, punching a hole and sending a blast of flame and shock into its interior."

AT a coconut central in Alaminos, Laguna, the Philippine Coconut Administration (PHILCOA) inaugurated a new machine that can process oil direct from the coconut in one continuous operation and turn out coconut flour as a by-product. The inauguration coincided with PHILCOA's third anniversary. To

give the occasion the importance it deserved, Benjamin Salvosa, chairman of the PHILCOA board, invited President Garcia to see the machine in action. The President saw a new era of "unprecedented prosperity" for the coconut industry.

Mr. Garcia's statement might have been too optimistic. The export of oil and flour rather than copra has long been a ticklish problem. There is no doubt that the shipper — in this case the Philippines — would find the exportation of oil convenient and profitable. Oil, to begin with, takes less room and would therefore be cheaper to transport, whereas copra requires some care aboardship (it gets bone-dry, for example, if the hold is not well ventilated and thus lessens a good deal of its oil content). The trouble is that this arrangement would run into opposition by the oil expelling industries in the two major Philippine copra outlets — the U.S. and Europe.

The new machine — called the Hiller, after its inventor, Stanley Hiller of Berkeley, California — was the big development in the coconut industry during the year. In line with a research agreement, the machine would, when perfected, be distributed exclusively by the Philippine government in the Asian area. Industrialization of the coconut — to provide new jobs and spawn home industries — would therefore be in prospect.

Of more immediate significance, however, is the fact that PHILCOA, during the three years it has been in operation, has succeeded in putting Philippine copra on a par with the best in the international market. This is a tremendous achievement: three years ago Philippine copra was considered the worst in the world. In 1954 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned that unless quality was raised — some Philippine copra shipments were found unfit for human consumption — exports would be stopped.

Now Philippine copra is moving forward. Europe seems to be supplanting the U.S. as the main outlet — during the 1957 fiscal period, when Philippine copra exports totalled 984,500 metric tons, the European market accounted for 57 per cent of the Philippine production. And this did not mean that the U.S. was sliding out of the picture — under the Laurel-Langley Agreement, the Philippine duty-free quota for the 1956-58 period is 193,049 metric tons!

This development has a tremendous impact on the Philippine economy as a whole. During the fiscal year, exports of copra, coconut oil and desiccated coconut went up to a peak of \$187.5 million, over 39 per cent of the total export trade. This maintained the coconut industry in the position it has been enjoying since 1949 as the country's No. 1 dollar earner. The Philippine dollar reserve, down to \$180 million during the year, is the pivot around which Philippine economic development revolves.

HOW clean will the November elections be? The Commission on Elections — independent under the Constitution of all three branches of the government — is answering this question with a series of bold moves that is making people sit up and applaud.

Chairmanned by a former jurist and diplomat named Domingo Imperial, the commission got the big headlines recently when it observed, with great politeness, that the secretary of defense, Jesus Vargas, seemed to be taking undue interest in the election machinery. Some units of the constabulary had been deputized by the combination to keep order during the polls. To prevent any slips in implementation, these units met to discuss instructions from the commission. At every meeting Vargas was present, even, some reports said, to preside. This was what troubled the commission: for obvious reasons, it said, no appointee of a President running for reelection should put himself in a position where his motives might be misinterpreted. Add to this the fact that the commission had not named Vargas as a deputy.

As you might have guessed, Vargas resented this. His record in the military service, he said, reflected no tendencies on his part to exert undue pressure on behalf of the President. The commission's reply was that Vargas would expose himself to a charge of contempt unless he stopped attending the meetings. As secretary of defense, Vargas had the right of supervision over the armed forces, but not, insisted the commission, over units assigned to do election duty. Vargas bowed.

But this was not the end of the story — it proved to be merely a foretaste of what the commission meant when it promised to do its business. The provincial treasurer of Aklan and an assistant were reported to have opened three ballot boxes without authority to do so. During an investigation, official ballots were found in the boxes. The two men drew prison terms of three months each and a fine of ₱500. This was the first time the commission exercised its punitive powers under the election code.

In late October President Garcia signed an executive order establishing a barrio of Malitbog, Leyte as the new town of Padre Burgos. Creation of the town posed several problems to the commission — new ballots would have to be printed, new precincts opened and new inspectors appointed. Since the creation of the new town deprived voters of their residence in Malitbog, they would be disenfranchised. The election code, the commission pointed out, required voters to be in residence in their towns at least six months prior to the balloting. Recalling that it had officially suggested that no new towns be created 30 days before election day, the commission intimated that it would call on the President to explain.

Visibly angry, Mr. Garcia warned: "They had better not do that!"