

INTERVIEW OF LUIS A. BENAVENTE

by Howard P. Willens

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- Willens: Mr. Luis A. Benavente has served in many political capacities, including the Mayor of Saipan for several years, and he was a participant in the First Constitutional Convention. Luis, thank you very much for being available today. Could we begin with you giving us some background of where you grew up and where you were educated.
- Benavente: Well, I was born in Yap just before the war. Then, after the war, my family and I returned to Saipan. Then I went to school here during the Navy time. After completing Chalan Piao Elementary and my middle school, which was Hopwood, up to ninth grade, I left for Guam to continue my education there in high school.
- Willens: So you were educated up through the ninth grade here in Saipan?
- Benavente: Yes, that's correct.
- Willens: Were both your parents from Yap?
- Benavente: No, actually they're from Saipan, but just before the war, they moved to Yap knowing that war was coming. They moved to Yap, knowing that Yap is not very well fortified by the Japanese. They left just before the war.
- Willens: Did many of the Saipanese move away in anticipation of the war?
- Benavente: Well, one of my father's brothers went with him and his family. There were also a lot of people, especially those people from Tinian. When we returned after the war, a lot of them stayed over at Tinian and also some moved to Saipan.
- Willens: And your family was one of the group that came from Yap to Saipan rather than to Tinian?
- Benavente: Yes, that's correct.
- Willens: How old were you when you left Yap?
- Benavente: I was eight years old.
- Willens: Did you ever go back to Yap or any of the other districts?
- Benavente: Well, I went back in 1987, I believe. I went back to Yap. I was then a congressman serving the fifth CNMI Legislature. We went there for a conference in Yap—a conference for legislators, Pacific legislators.
- Willens: When you went to Guam, did you go to a public high school in Guam?
- Benavente: Yes, I went to George Washington High School.
- Willens: And when did you graduate from high school?
- Benavente: I graduated in 1959.
- Willens: And then did you continue your education?
- Benavente: Yes, I continued several years in the University of Guam. It was then the College of Guam.
- Willens: What did you study there?

- Benavente: I was studying education, and then I picked up some commercial courses. I did not of course complete college until several years after I worked for the Education Department here in Saipan.
- Willens: When did you return to Saipan then from Guam?
- Benavente: Well, I think I enrolled in the College of Guam in 1959, and then at the end of 1960 I came back. I started teaching in the elementary school—Chalan Kanoa Elementary School.
- Willens: How many years did you teach?
- Benavente: I taught there for one year, and then I moved up to [the] Trust Territory Finance [Section].
- Willens: What were your duties there?
- Benavente: I was an accounting clerk then, and I worked there for one year.
- Willens: And then what did you do?
- Benavente: Then I moved down to the Naval Administration, I believe. Yes, I worked under the economic development [officer].
- Willens: That would have been in approximately 1962.
- Benavente: Yes. Let's see . . . 1961, 1962, about 1963.
- Willens: In 1962, there came a point at which the United States government transferred administration for the Northern Marianas, specifically Saipan and Tinian, from the Navy to the Interior Department. Do you remember that change in administration?
- Benavente: Yes, I think in 1962 it was transferred. In fact, like I said, I worked at the Trust Territory headquarters in the Finance Section.
- Willens: Did you work for the Navy Administration first and then move to the Trust Territory Administration?
- Benavente: No, I think I didn't recall it correctly. The Navy was administering the school system in 1961. And then in 1962, it was transferred to the TT [Trust Territory government].
- Willens: Looking backwards now, what in your judgment was the significance in the change in administration from the Navy to the Department of the Interior?
- Benavente: The military administration was not as effective as the Trust Territory government, in the sense that the military was here for a purpose. But the Trust Territory government, I think, was administering the island to help us develop ourselves in many ways.
- Willens: So your recollection is that the Trust Territory Administration, when it assumed responsibility here, was more interested in economic and political development of the people than the Navy had been?
- Benavente: Yes, I think so.
- Willens: There are some people I've talked to who remember the Navy Administration fondly, because they remember that the Navy Administration always could provide the money that was needed for particular infrastructure or other needs of the islands. Do you have any sense that the Navy Administration was more generous with funds for the community than the Trust Territory Administration was?
- Benavente: Well, they had a lot of funds, but I think they used those funds for their own use. But, of

- course, it benefits also our island. I didn't see any, for example, training for local people. They're not much involved in an administrative capacity.
- Willens: You think that the Trust Territory Administration was more prepared to train local people than the Navy was?
- Benavente: Well, of course, the TT hired more people and put them in the administration, while during the Navy period not very many are getting administrative positions because they're [the Navy] managing their own administration.
- Willens: Were you aware of the training unit that the Navy was operating here on Saipan?
- Benavente: Yes, I heard about the NTTU, which is Naval Technical Training Unit. I heard that they were training a lot of Chinese up at Marpi.
- Willens: For what purpose?
- Benavente: Well that, I do not know, really, but I can assume that it was for a military purpose.
- Willens: As a result of that facility being operated here on Saipan, the island under Naval Administration was closed to outsiders, isn't that correct?
- Benavente: Yes, they restricted us from going into their facilities, for example in Marpi. Only those people who were working there are allowed to go in.
- Willens: There also were restrictions on people coming into the island, isn't that correct?
- Benavente: Yes, I think so, too.
- Willens: What was your sense of the impact of those regulations on the development of the island?
- Benavente: Well, in a way it restricted us from developing ourselves, because we cannot move. Most of the time we were not allowed to participate or to go in their areas. So I think this was very restrictive in a way that, you know, they're working secretly and they're not allowing local people to be involved in that.
- Willens: President Kennedy did issue a directive in late 1962 permitting free entry of U.S. citizens and investments into the Trust Territory. Was that a development that you favored?
- Benavente: Yes, of course, because we needed investors and people from outside to develop our island, because if only we could do it, I don't think it would be possible to advance ourselves economically, and educationally, too.
- Willens: Where did you work after 1962 and 1963? Did you stay with the Trust Territory for several years?
- Benavente: Yes, I worked up to 1964, still [with] the TT.
- Willens: That was in the financial area?
- Benavente: No, in economic development. During my time there I established the Saipan Credit Union under the direction of the late Olympio Borja and George Davis. So I established the Saipan Credit Union and it's still alive.
- Willens: What purpose did the Saipan Credit Union serve in those early years?
- Benavente: Well, to help employees put in savings, and then later on they can borrow money at a very low interest rate.
- Willens: Was it used to help fund some of the small businesses that developed on the island?

- Benavente: It is used for personal use, for example, to buy cars, to buy materials for their homes, repairs and things like that.
- Willens: Was it really the first local banking institution of any kind?
- Benavente: Yes, I believe it was the first one, the Saipan Credit Union.
- Willens: Now, while you were working in the Trust Territory Administration, were you focused principally on the Marianas, or were your responsibilities throughout the six districts, when you were working with the economic development area?
- Benavente: We were only dealing with our local, you know, Saipan and Tinian and Rota, for only the NMI area.
- Willens: And how long did you continue working for the Trust Territory in that area?
- Benavente: Well, of course, the Trust Territory continued from 1962 and on. But after I worked in economic development, I moved back to education and taught at Hopwood.
- Willens: Hopwood High School. And when did you go back to teaching?
- Benavente: I think it was in 1965.
- Willens: And how many years did you continue teaching?
- Benavente: About four or five years, and then I move up to the administration.
- Willens: The District administration or the,
- Benavente: No, no, school administration as a vice-principal about 1969.
- Willens: And then what did you do?
- Benavente: Then, about a month or so under that capacity, I moved up to principal. It was I think in 1970 they completed the Marianas High School. But then several months later, there was a riot among the students.
- Willens: And what year was that?
- Benavente: I think in 1970, early 1970.
- Willens: What prompted the riot, as you recall?
- Benavente: I think some of the students from other districts and the locals had a fight. And unfortunately one of our students, a local student, was stabbed by a student from another district. Then it was a big riot. Then they decided to shut down the school, and it was only about March or April.
- Willens: Of 1970 or 1971?
- Benavente: 1970.
- Willens: Was that Hopwood High School or another school?
- Benavente: No, no, Marianas High School, because I immediately moved from Hopwood High School (Junior High School) to Marianas High School.
- Willens: So they closed down the school? For how long?
- Benavente: They decided, or they mentioned to us (all the principals), that they were going to close down the school because nobody wants to take it over. There were about three or four vice-principals then. But when we had a principals meeting, and I thought why close down the school when there are still three or four months left. So I suggested to the administrator that I'll take it over and see if we can get the students back. So they accepted

this proposal, although they were reluctant. But I finally took it over. Then I called in all those students who were expelled and suspended, and I told them if they really wanted to go back to school, they have to do certain things. They have to follow the school regulations. So they all came back. I sent the guy, the student, back to his home island without smearing his name, just to transfer him out to avoid any further confrontation with the local students.

Willens: Did you remember what prompted the argument among the students?

Benavente: Frankly, I don't know exactly, but it was started in the school bus.

Willens: Did it have anything to do with the differences between the Northern Marianas people and the other districts?

Benavente: It could be.

Willens: In terms of their future status?

Benavente: No, I don't think it is that reason. I cannot say.

Willens: Many of the political leaders in the Northern Marianas have a background in education. Many were teachers in the 1950s and the 1960s, as you were. Was there something about the educational training, you think, that encouraged people like yourself to ultimately get involved in politics?

Benavente: Well, at that time I became involved in politics, I think it was way back in 1966.

Willens: Let me ask you this question. The Marianas District Legislature was created in 1963, and many of the political leaders who were active in the Saipan Municipal Council ran for the District Legislature, including Ben Santos, Felipe Salas and many others. When did you first become involved in politics?

Benavente: It was in 1966 when I ran for the Municipal Council, and I served for two years. It was part-time then, a part-time Council. We had meetings maybe once, twice a week or so, or whenever there was a need for us to meet.

Willens: What were your principal responsibilities as a member of the Council?

Benavente: Well, we looked after the functions of the municipal government. We had a Mayor and the Council. The Council legislates things that are related to our local needs. And also we had this Congress of Micronesia, so we make laws not to conflict with it.

Willens: After the Marianas District Legislature was created in 1963, wasn't there some kind of a conflict between the Saipan Municipal Council on the one hand, and the District Legislature on the other, as to which body had what responsibility?

Benavente: Yes, I think politics is so complicated that people tend to want to be involved, to be in any legislative body. They want the title and so forth. This is what I call it duplication of efforts, it is too much, too many legislative bodies, you know. What is a Municipal Council for, when there is a higher legislature? So I think it's all political maneuvers by people who like to be in politics.

Willens: There are some who say that there are still too many governmental entities here.

Benavente: I do agree. In fact, why should we have bicameral legislature? We should have a unicameral one because it's a waste of public funds. We have now the Mayor, we have the Municipal Council, we have the CNMI Legislature, we have the federal laws. It's so much that we ought to cut down. And that's a lot of waste. Like, for example, the Mayor. We have the

Governor. The Mayors of Tinian and Rota get more privileges than the Mayor of Saipan. But why? Of course, we have the Governor here, but we're one entity.

Willens: You mention you were in the Municipal Council for two years. Did you decide not to run again, or did you run and were you defeated?

Benavente: No, I decided not to run anymore.

Willens: Why did you make that decision?

Benavente: Well, I was somewhat bored, and I did feel that we were not very effective. So, why should I stay?

Willens: What subjects were you teaching in school?

Benavente: I was teaching business math, and some English, and other subjects like social studies.

Willens: During the 1960s, there were many resolutions passed by the Municipal Council and the District Legislature expressing the aspirations of the Marianas people to become U.S. citizens and become part of the United States. When did you first become aware of the political status issue and the need for the people here to ultimately make some kind of a decision as to their future?

Benavente: What year did you say?

Willens: During the 1960s, there were several resolutions passed, some of which urged reintegration with Guam as a way of becoming part of the United States. Did you have a position in the 1960s as to what kind of future political status was best for the Northern Marianas?

Benavente: Well, there was the question as to whether we want to reintegrate with Guam. But, at that time, I felt that it was not going to work out, because our population here is so much smaller than Guam and Guam will of course have more say than the Northern Marianas.

Willens: Were you a member of the Territorial Party at the time?

Benavente: I was under the Popular Party.

Willens: You were in the Popular Party?

Benavente: Yes.

Willens: The official position of the Popular Party was for reintegration with Guam, whereas the Territorial Party wanted some direct relationship with the United States. So you took a view that was somewhat different from the majority of the members of the Popular Party.

Benavente: Yes, that's right. I was on the side for the U.S. relationship [rather] than Guam, because I know Guam has a different governmental structure, although it [has] practices like the U.S. But I [would] rather move to the U.S. and be under the U.S. than be under a governmental entity, like for example Guam, that is also learning. Why should we go under Guam or be with Guam?

Willens: As you saw the situation in the 1960s, did Guam seem to have a much better political status and more self-government than the people in the Northern Marianas did?

Benavente: Yes. Of course, Guam was more advanced in government, because it had been under the United States for a long time.

Willens: Were there any aspects of Guam's political status that you thought were not good and should not be followed?

- Benavente: Yes, it is my opinion that the local people [in Guam] seem to have a different feeling toward people of Saipan as a result of the war. There are a lot of people from Saipan who were sent by the Japanese, and they were involved in punishing the people of Guam. So the feeling is still there.
- Willens: The feeling among the Guamanian people.
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: Well, there came a time in 1969 when the Guamanian people voted on a plebiscite about reintegration, and they turned down the proposition that the Northern Marianas should be integrated with Guam.
- Benavente: That's right.
- Willens: Do you think the memories of World War II were a contributing factor to that result?
- Benavente: I think it was one. And also they are looking at us as more primitive people. So I think they think that they are better off than us, so I think that is one of the factors [in] refusing to unite Guam and Saipan.
- Willens: Well after that vote, did the Popular Party change its view and recognize that reintegration with Guam was no longer attainable and therefore they ought to seek a more direct relationship with the United States?
- Benavente: Yes, I think the feeling was changed because we were rejected by Guam so, you know, why continue.
- Willens: As far as you were concerned, you were perfectly happy to be rejected by Guam?
- Benavente: Yes, right now I am, and I wasn't wrong when I made that decision, or had that opinion, that it is better to have a political relationship with United States than with Guam.
- Willens: Some people have told me that the principal objective of the people here in the Northern Marianas was U.S. citizenship, that they felt that U.S. citizenship carried with it certain privileges and opportunities that they thought were very important. Would you agree with that?
- Benavente: Oh, yes, because, for example, I experienced it myself going to school in Guam. Every time I had to go there I had to fill out a visa, I had to go to immigration and be given a hard time by the Guamanian immigration officers there, so why not seek for a better opportunity? By being a U.S. citizen, you have more privileges like Guam.
- Willens: Did you become active in Popular Party politics during the late 1960s and the early 1970s?
- Benavente: No. In fact, I moved out from the Popular Party in 1972 and I ran on an independent ticket for the office of Mayor.
- Willens: In 1972?
- Benavente: 1972, yes.
- Willens: Did you receive a nomination from the Popular Party or the Territorial Party?
- Benavente: No, I ran under independent. I just collect petitions from friends, you know.
- Willens: And what was the result?

- Benavente: The result was pretty bad. Unfortunately, the Mayor was handling the board of registration, and it happened that I never missed, my family never missed any election, you know voting, and at that time in 1972 our names were out.
- Willens: What do you mean . . . ?
- Benavente: We were not in the voters register.
- Willens: Your father had been Mayor of Saipan.
- Benavente: I know, yes, and we have been voting. In fact, my father was still alive when I asked him and he is one of the Popular Party leaders. And he ran for Mayor and he won under the Popular Party.
- Willens: How long did he serve as Mayor?
- Benavente: I think a little over 12 years, or more.
- Willens: Twelve years. And he was one of the active leaders of the Popular Party during the 1960s?
- Benavente: Yes, and I asked his permission if I could run as an independent against Sablan, so he said you go ahead if you feel that you can run, feel that you can do things for the people, then you go ahead, and gave me his blessing.
- Willens: Did you try to get nomination of the Popular Party and they picked somebody else?
- Benavente: No, I didn't seek the nomination of the Popular Party. I was disappointed then with the Popular Party administration of the municipal government. I somewhat felt that they were not doing a good job for the community.
- Willens: How long had your father been out of office in 1972?
- Benavente: In 1972, I think about two years. He was serving as a judge, district judge.
- Willens: But somebody took over as Mayor after your father, and you were dissatisfied with the way in which the municipal government was being administered?
- Benavente: Yes, that's why I ran against the incumbent Mayor.
- Willens: There apparently were very few examples in the early 1970s of people running as independents. It seems to have become more common now in recent years. What's your general sense of whether that's a good idea or bad idea?
- Benavente: Well, at that time I think I was the first one to run on an independent ticket. And I feel it all depends, right now there are so many independent candidates running. I don't know, probably dissatisfaction with the present Legislature or the Party. And maybe another reason is they just want to be recognized, they want a position or maybe they are looking for a job. But of course there are many reasons. I can assume that they are dissatisfied with the Party and also the way the Legislature is operating.
- Willens: In 1972, the United States agreed to separate negotiations with the Northern Marianas, and the Marianas District Legislature created the Marianas Political Status Commission. Were you involved to any extent in the appointment of members to the Commission?
- Benavente: No, I was not involved in that at all.
- Willens: The Municipal Council appointed two members to the Commission. One was Ben Camacho, I believe, and I forget at the moment who the other was. Did you keep in touch

- with the Popular Party leadership as the Marianas Political Status Commission began its work?
- Benavente: No, because like I said, in 1972 I broke off from the party.
- Willens: Did you stay out of politics then for several years?
- Benavente: Yes, because I went back to teaching up to 1973, when I left for the States to get some more education in Oregon.
- Willens: That's when you went to Oregon State or the University?
- Benavente: Oregon State in Salem.
- Willens: And what did you study there?
- Benavente: I studied psychology and also business administration.
- Willens: And when did you return?
- Benavente: In 1976. In January, early in 1976.
- Willens: Now I gather that you ran for Mayor again in 1976?
- Benavente: Yes, in fact after I came back, I decided to run again against the same Sablan.
- Willens: Which Sablan were you running against?
- Benavente: I think it was different now, but Sablan didn't run that time, but under the Popular Party Ben Camacho and Mitch Pangelinan.
- Willens: Were running?
- Benavente: Were running against me.
- Willens: So there was a three-way election in 1976?
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: And it was you against Ben Camacho and Mitch Pangelinan? But Mitch Pangelinan and Ben Camacho were both active members of the Popular Party.
- Benavente: They had a collision at that time and . . .
- Willens: Within the party?
- Benavente: Within the party, and that's why Ben decided I think to still run for Mayor under that Party.
- Willens: And did you run under a Party label at that time?
- Benavente: Yes, I ran under Republican.
- Willens: How did that come about?
- Benavente: Well, I was elected because of the split votes for the other two. So that's how I got in.
- Willens: So you were the winner in a three-person race.
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: Was there any question about whether there should be a run off?
- Benavente: I don't recall there was any, but I think it was a significant number of votes that I garnered that time.

- Willens: I gather that you were in the United States at time that the Covenant was put before the people in a plebiscite in 1975?
- Benavente: That's right. I was there in the States and, in fact, Pete Tenorio, the former Lt. Governor, had been sending me information.
- Willens: Did you vote by absentee?
- Benavente: Yes, I did.
- Willens: What was your assessment at the time as to the future political status that had been negotiated with the United States? Did you think generally it was an attractive alternative, or were you dissatisfied with some aspects of it?
- Benavente: I looked at it as attractive, but I was thinking that we decided too early. It was very early to make that decision, although I agree with the idea.
- Willens: That's an interesting point, and you are not alone in that sentiment. Why did you think it was too early for the people to make this kind of choice?
- Benavente: Well, I see that the U.S. Government under the TT has a lot more to do here as far as infrastructure, and you know there is a lot [left to do]. They have been ignoring us, in economic, education, and other things.
- Willens: You were generally very dissatisfied with the TTPI administration of the community?
- Benavente: Yes, eventually when I see that the TT has so many islands to tend to, and I feel that the TT was not giving us much as attention as it should. And I felt that it had a lot more things to accomplish here before we should move to a [new status]. I felt that if we move too early, then we were going to be cut off and required to start all over again.
- Willens: Did you think that the TTPI was devoting more resources and attention to the other five districts than to the Northern Marianas?
- Benavente: I cannot say that really, but of course we had so many districts—Yap, Palau, Ponape, Majuro, and what have you—and I think they have more money to spend, you know, in a vast area. I still think that the TT did not give us as much help as they should have.
- Willens: So you had the sense at the time that if the Northern Marianas stayed within the Trust Territory for more years, two, four, five years, there would be pressure on the TTPI to devote more resources to infrastructure and other needs?
- Benavente: Yes, I feel that way. Or, if it was that early, then the negotiating team should have brought to the attention of the U.S. that before we get into this relationship, the U.S. should first develop our infrastructure. For example, the dock, the airfield, the roads, the water and the power. Those should be included in the negotiation—that we will [move to a new status], however, these things must be done first. This is aside from whatever funds you are going to give us for this kind of relationship.
- Willens: What do you think were the important factors that persuaded the Northern Marianas people to go in a direction separate from the other five districts?
- Benavente: Because we feel that the other districts are holding us back, because of the limited funds provided by the TT. We saw that we are more advanced than the other districts, and if we continue to wait until the other districts develop, then it is going to take us forever to advance.
- Willens: Were there cultural and other differences that you think were important?
- Benavente: That's one of the reasons that we decided to separate. We know very well that we are

different people, different cultures, and we cannot get along. For example, right now the FSM [Federated States of Micronesia], I don't think those states are going to stay together that long, because they are different.

Willens: I would like to hear your views on that. Did you think back in 1974 or 1975 that the other five districts would in fact stay together, or did you think that even within those five districts they would end up going different directions?

Benavente: I didn't see that they were going to get together, unite. I didn't see that, because I know that they are different cultures, and when you mix up people it's very hard to get along eventually.

Willens: You believe today that the Federated States may have some of these same internal problems?

Benavente: Yes, I have that feeling that it's going to be difficult, it's not that smooth. There is going to be a time that they are going to have some misunderstanding, because of political ambition and other things.

Willens: Where there any other aspects of the Covenant that you were concerned with?

Benavente: Can you be more specific on that?

Willens: Well you mentioned generally the point of view that it may have come too soon, and that there should have been more time for a greater investment in the community by the TTPI. Were there any specific aspects with respect to the political relationship or the level of financial assistance or any other aspects of the Covenant that you remember being concerned by?

Benavente: Yes, by this Section 702. I think they have a different interpretation of the Covenant. The Congress says that they don't have to provide funds. We take the position that they have to, and you know these things should have been resolved way back, as to whether this is a guarantee. Congress should not make other interpretations than what it is. I think that is one aspect that should have been resolved.

Willens: Okay. Let me skip now the Constitutional Convention period, which we will want to talk to you about. I am interested in your subsequent political career. After the Commonwealth government was installed in January of 1978, did you seek any political office at that time?

Benavente: Yes, about eight years later. Yes, in 1986 I ran for the CNMI Legislature.

Willens: Had you served as Mayor for several of the years since 1976?

Benavente: Yes, 1976 to until the Commonwealth was installed. Of course they cut off my term. It should have been four years, but because of the new form of government, my term was shortened.

Willens: Did you run reelection as Mayor in 1977?

Benavente: No, I decided not to.

Willens: Did you go back to teaching at that point?

Benavente: No. In 1978 I worked for the Legislature, after I got out from the Mayor's office.

Willens: And how long did you do that?

Benavente: I worked up to 1982 when the Tenorio administration [came in].

- Willens: Until Governor Tenorio?
- Benavente: Governor Tenorio was elected.
- Willens: And then did you take a position in his administration?
- Benavente: Yes, I worked under the Lt. Governor.
- Willens: You worked under Lt. Governor Pete A. Tenorio.
- Benavente: Pete A. Tenorio, yes.
- Willens: And what did you do in that capacity?
- Benavente: I was working as an assistant in community services. You know, if there is any complaint or anything that the community would like to be helped on or like to be done, then I move in and coordinate.
- Willens: What was your impression of the first Commonwealth administration under Governor Camacho? I gather that you worked for the Commonwealth Legislature during that period. I understand the Legislature was controlled by the Territorial or Republican Party,
- Benavente: The Republican Party, yes.
- Willens: ...and the Executive Branch was controlled by the Democratic Party. What is your assessment today of that first Commonwealth government?
- Benavente: Of course, it was just the beginning. And it is kind of difficult to assess it because there are so many needs. And it only took one term for the Governor to continue his work, but I felt that he didn't do much for the Commonwealth in his first term.
- Willens: What were the most important problems that the new Commonwealth government had to deal with, as you remember it?
- Benavente: Well, we have to deal with the infrastructure, of course, like water, sewer, and power. Those are the main things that should have been addressed.
- Willens: My understanding is that funds were available for that purpose. Is it your recollection that the Administration did not expend the available funds for those purposes?
- Benavente: Yes, I feel that way I think the Administration had its own priorities. I don't know, maybe very small priorities. I am not looking at the big problems that we faced, but the funds that were available were not used properly. They could have been used in other ways.
- Willens: Can you think of any specific example?
- Benavente: Like, for example, the politicians here, they want to have a basketball court for each district and other things that are not essential to our economic development. In that way, they use funds rather than (you know) using them for road construction or water services.
- Willens: Did you recall it being significant that the two branches of government were controlled by different parties? Did that generate a lot of political dispute?
- Benavente: Would you be more . . .
- Willens: Well, the Legislature that you worked for was under the control of the Republican Party, and the Executive Branch was under the control of the Democratic Party. Some people have told me that political difference generated disputes and made it difficult to accomplish certain objectives.
- Benavente: Yes, I think that's true. Because of that, the Administration and the Legislature do not

cooperate. Whenever the Legislature has things in mind to be done, the Administration will say no because this is not our idea, so they turned it down. And also the Legislature, when the Administration has a different idea, says no, it's not our idea, and it's not to our political benefit.

Willens: Well, we just had a recent election, and we are now faced with the possibility of a replay of those early years. We will have a Democratic administration in the Executive Branch and a Legislature controlled by the Republican Party. What do you think is the proper way to deal with this kind of problem?

Benavente: I think if the Legislature puts up something, ideas that it feels there is a need for our community, then set the political aspect aside. And if the Administration feels that that kind of project is for the benefit of the entire community, then they should work together, rather than, you know, it's not my idea, that kind of attitude. They should work together regardless of who brought up the idea first. If it's for the good of the community, then let it be done.

Willens: What persuaded you to run for the Legislature?

Benavente: Well, I think we needed people up there that can help and who can make some decisions, rather than being manipulated and thinking for somebody else.

Willens: You ran as a Republican candidate?

Benavente: Yes, I did.

Willens: And how long did you serve?

Benavente: I think probably you recall that when I was elected, my votes and other candidates are tied, and we have to be reelected. And then there was also a problem where the U.S. citizens were not allowed to vote.

Willens: What year was this now?

Benavente: It was in 1986.

Willens: I see.

Benavente: So I think we went to court again for that kind of nonsense.

Willens: What happened?

Benavente: The court voided the ballots.

Willens: Because the U.S. citizens were entitled to vote.

Benavente: Should, yes. Right.

Willens: So did you then have to run again?

Benavente: Then we have to run again for the third time.

Willens: You have had a series of unusual experiences as a candidate. But you ultimately won?

Benavente: Yes, but I won already six months into that term so I didn't serve the whole term. It was way behind, and I couldn't do much.

Willens: You were in the lower house?

Benavente: Lower house, yes. And it was a coincidence that my father also when he ran for Mayor against Sablan, he had a tied vote too, and then . . .

Willens: Were you running against a Sablan?

- Benavente: Yes, it was Sablan, Lupe Sablan, former wife of David Sablan. Yes, she was Sablan.
- Willens: Did you run for reelection?
- Benavente: No, I decided not to. I was so disappointed when I went there. All the committees were taken, nothing was available. I didn't serve that much, really.
- Willens: People today generally remember Governor Tenorio's Administration as having been a successful one. Do you have any judgment as to the strengths and weaknesses of that particular Administration?
- Benavente: Yes, during Tenorio's Administration I think they did a lot of good things.
- Willens: Did they focus more on infrastructure?
- Benavente: Yes, because at that time I think we see more money from the federal [government], in regards to road construction. We received more funding from the U.S.
- Willens: And do you think the money was used reasonably well for those purposes?
- Benavente: Most of it. I feel that they used it appropriately.
- Willens: I have also heard it said that he [Governor Tenorio] had served many years in the Legislature and was able to get along with the Legislative Branch better than Governor Camacho had been able to do.
- Benavente: Yes, I believe that Governor Pete Tenorio is more diplomatic, is more understanding than the previous Governor. Pete Tenorio seems be more willing to listen than trying to always fight against somebody who comes up with a new idea. He tends to listen.
- Willens: It was during the middle 1980s that the economic development here really began to take off. What is your recollection as to the factors that contributed to significant economic development here in the 1980s?
- Benavente: Well, for one thing, I think the island being developing, the tourist industry also developed, and more investors learn about the CNMI's relationship with the U.S.
- Willens: You think the relationship with the United States was an important factor in persuading investors to come here?
- Benavente: Yes, because probably I feel that the investors feel more secure as far as investing in this part of the world. That is why they began to move in, and so the tourists were attracted by the many advertisements. I think at that time or during that time the CNMI is more exposed all over than previously.
- Willens: More highly publicized?
- Benavente: Yes, we have been publicized more, exposed to other people.
- Willens: Do you think that the local people have benefited from this economic development?
- Benavente: Sure, of course. There will be more jobs, although the salaries are still low, but it created more jobs for people who are jobless.
- Willens: The economic development also brought with it an increasing numbers of alien laborers. Do you consider that to be a current problem?
- Benavente: It is right now. We have so many alien laborers. However, we cannot always say that they are problems, because without these people the development would not have happened. Because we don't have the resources here to fill those jobs. A lot of people, the local people, are very choosey in as far as getting a job. They want highly paid positions.

- Willens: Most local people, or a very substantial percentage of them, work for the government?
- Benavente: That's right, and it shouldn't be that way. I believe that the government should restrict or have certain numbers of employees at a certain time. Because now the government is competing with the private industries. Just recently I have been looking at the base scale of the government. The lowest is I believe \$4.85.
- Willens: An hour.
- Benavente: An hour.
- Willens: And what is the comparable pay level in the private sector?
- Benavente: It's about \$2.15.
- Willens: Are you in the private sector now?
- Benavente: Yes. You see we are comparing. How do we go about getting local people. And that's the biggest problem—the government is competing with the private [sector] and they keep saying that you have to hire resident people. But how could the businesses do that when nobody is available. When the government pay scale is much higher than the private. So I wouldn't say that these alien laborers, you know, created most problems, but they are a problem because they are so many and a lot of them are not being controlled.
- Willens: You think that there should have been more control exercised over the past 10 years?
- Benavente: Oh, yes, definitely. When they hire alien labor for example to construct a certain project, like a road, as soon as that is finished they should be sent out. I mean forget about transferring all these [people]. And also the problem here is that the job specification is so specific, that if you are a plumber you cannot do anything else besides plumbing. And for a carpenter you cannot do plastering, you cannot do plumbing, although you might know how to do all those things.
- Willens: Who imposes those restrictions?
- Benavente: The Labor [Department].
- Willens: The labor union?
- Benavente: No, the Commerce and Labor Department. And of course the U.S. labor laws are also applicable to some extent. And that is really a bad practice. And now we have been trying to convince the Legislature to, when we hire a carpenter and that carpenter knows how to do plumbing, electrical, painting and so forth, allow the carpenter to do those related jobs. But they are so specific that it limits performance. They cannot perform other things, because if they complain, the employer will be penalized.
- Willens: During the past several months, there has been a considerable controversy over the Article 12 restriction on land alienation here in the Commonwealth. Do you have any views as to whether the Article 12 controversy has adversely affected the Commonwealth?
- Benavente: To some extent, yes. But I don't see anything wrong with Article 12. I think it's the people who are dealing with the investors or the so-called buyers. I think a lot of these advisors, consultants or attorneys misled a lot of these investors. Like for example, they might have been saying that Article 12 is unconstitutional and if we fight in court, it will be reversed. Then of course, knowing that he is a lawyer, they say yes, maybe that's a good idea, we will go ahead and do it any way.
- Willens: Do you think that most of the local people support the basic idea that land here in the Commonwealth should remain the hands of the local people to the extent possible?

- Benavente: Yes, it should be that way, and I feel the majority of our people like it that way.
- Willens: But there are some local people who complain about Article 12 because they say that they know what they are doing and they want to give a 55-year lease to some investors and they want to use money from other sources to buy land and then lease it. Do you feel the local people should have the right to exploit the land and lease it to foreign investors?
- Benavente: You mean a local CNMI descent buying from another CNMI descent and then lease it to . . .
- Willens: Yes, but using the money to buy it that is obtained from the foreign investors. That's been one of the patterns that has been the subject of some of the litigation. And I have seen some of the local people on television say that it's their right to lease to whomever they want to lease to and to borrow money from whomever they want to borrow money from?
- Benavente: Yes, if we are friends and you give me money to buy land, then I should be responsible for that land. And I could only lease you out for the specific years or a specific time according to the constitution. I shouldn't be buying it and then reselling it to you just to circumvent the law. If you have that in mind to circumvent the law, then that's another thing. But if, because I know that particular person, I have a better relationship than you, then probably if you're interested in that land, then you give me the money and I will buy it for you. But provided that the land stays in my name, yes. And I can only lease it for 55 years. But then if you put up another agreement underneath that agreement that's to circumvent the law that in case in the future it shouldn't be done that way. That's how I feel. But I don't see anything wrong with you giving me the money as a friend to help you get that piece of land for a business.
- Willens: Do you think if the whole question were put up to a vote in the community today, that the majority of the citizens would support some continued restrictions along these lines?
- Benavente: Yes, I think so. I think it would come out that way. We support it to remain as it is.
- Willens: Luis, we've gone somewhat out of natural chronological form here. I would like to turn back now to 1976 when you decided to run for the First Constitutional Convention as a delegate. Do you remember how you came to run as a delegate?
- Benavente: Well, of course the party was looking for candidates to come up with. Then I was asked if I am interested. So I decided that yes, I probably would.
- Willens: Do you have any explanation for why the Territorial Party was so much more successful than the Popular Party in electing delegates to the convention?
- Benavente: Well, I think the members in that Constitutional Convention are not primarily all Republicans. I think there are still quite a few numbers of Democrats.
- Willens: That's certainly true. The Popular Party, though, had been winning elections for the most part over several years, but the Territorial or Republican Party was successful in electing a significant majority in the convention. Some people have said that's because the Territorial Party went very far in reaching out for educated candidates, regardless of their past political service. Do you have any thinking along that line?
- Benavente: Yes, I think that there was a feeling the Republican side has more educated people, college education and so forth, while on the other side fewer had real formal education.
- Willens: The election for the Constitutional Convention was supposed to be a non-partisan election, isn't that correct?

- Benavente: Yes, of course it was non-partisan, but the Parties were still behind those people that are members of the Republican and Democratic Parties.
- Willens: So was it in fact partisan campaigning?
- Benavente: Yes, I can say that to an extent.
- Willens: Were you given some number on the ballot? I understand that the delegates were listed in some order on the ballot, and you were not permitted to indicate what your party affiliation was?
- Benavente: Yes, yes, that's right. But I don't know what number I had. I don't recall that.
- Willens: When the Convention delegates were all elected, did you play any role in organizing the Convention into committees and nominating officers for the Convention?
- Benavente: I wasn't much involved in that.
- Willens: Did the Territorial Party leadership meet among the delegates in advance of the Convention convening and decide who should be nominated to be the President and Vice President?
- Benavente: Yes, they had a caucus on that as to who was going to be supported for President, and so forth.
- Willens: And did you attend the party caucus?
- Benavente: Yes. I did.
- Willens: Do you recall any debate within the caucus about who the party should support for the president of the convention?
- Benavente: There wasn't much, because at that time the President was also serving in the Legislature.
- Willens: You referring to Larry Guerrero?
- Benavente: Larry Guerrero, I believe so, yes. And that is almost automatic that, you know, he really wanted also to be President. So rather than go against him, it would be best for the Party to go ahead and elect him.
- Willens: Did you express any preferences for one of the committees to serve on?
- Benavente: Yes, I did.
- Willens: There were three basic committees; and one was Government Institutions, one was Personal Rights & Natural Resources and the third, on which you served I believe, was Finance, Local Government and Other Matters.
- Benavente: Finance, Local Government, yes, right.
- Willens: So you did get the committee assignment that you wanted?
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: Did you desire that because you had served in local government and had some views?
- Benavente: Yes. I took it that way.
- Willens: Do you remember the two volumes of briefing papers that you received in advance of the convention?
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: Did you have the opportunity to read some or all of those briefing papers?

- Benavente: Yes. I read some of it. You know they are so voluminous.
- Willens: It was about 1,000 pages of paper and, as I recall, the members of the Convention did not have much time.
- Benavente: Yes, that's right. And it was so short a time [for the Convention]. It was only 50 days and, you know, actually it was kind of rushed. I feel that it shouldn't have been rushed..
- Willens: Do you have any idea where that 50-day limitation came from?
- Benavente: I don't know, I really don't know. I think because of the OTSP or something like that, because of funding limitation. That's why they cut it down to 50 [days].
- Willens: The legislation that authorized the convention did have the 50-day limitation. It came as a surprise to the consultants also. It seems it had been borrowed to some extent from proposals in the Congress of Micronesia for the Micronesian Constitutional Convention. It did impose a rather strict deadline. Do you feel that adversely affected the work of the convention?
- Benavente: In a way, yes. Because, you know, we were rushing our time, because at that time a lot of the members are working for the government or private sector. It's very hard to do two jobs. Like myself, for example, I was serving in the Convention, but then I still have to go back to my work.
- Willens: You were the Mayor?
- Benavente: Yes. I was the Mayor at that time. So I had to go back to my office and see, you know, what was going on. I am sure that some of the other members are that way also.
- Willens: The local government issue became a very important one. What do you recall about the early discussion in the Committee and the Convention about local government and in particular the desires for Rota and Tinian to have a greater responsibility for local government?
- Benavente: Well, I think that, again, I would say it is a political concern. They wanted more power. They are thinking that because of our geographic [location], they feel that because they are away from the central government in Saipan they will be ignored. Not thinking that we are going to be working as one entity. I felt that was the feeling, that they want more power.
- Willens: How could you as someone from Saipan respond to that?
- Benavente: Well, I feel that they shouldn't have that kind of attitude. They feel that they should be given more power than [is justified] with the small population. Why can't we work together? I feel that they are trying to segregate themselves from the main government. I said I think they feel insecure about being served by the central government.
- Willens: At one point, there was a proposal to have three lieutenant governors, one from each of the three major islands. Do you remember that proposal?
- Benavente: Yes. I didn't agree with that. Because it is all a waste of money, and they just want the name. It's political.
- Willens: There was an allegation from the Popular Party during the Convention that the Territorial delegates from Saipan had made a deal with the Territorial delegates from Rota and Tinian to give Rota and Tinian a greater responsibility for local government and to give them more representation in the Legislature. Do you remember hearing any controversy about an alleged deal along this line?

- Benavente: Of course, I would say that a party is a party. I mean, politics, they are playing politics, and they want to make Tinian and Rota happy. Thinking that in the future for election they must have the support from these two islands. That probably might be the deal—okay, we give you this much, and however in return, you know—so I think it is a political question.
- Willens: Were you personally a party in any discussions along those lines?
- Benavente: No, I wasn't.
- Willens: Before there were public hearings on the draft constitution, there was a deadlock with respect to the local government issue, and a special committee was created to try to work out some kind of a compromise. One of the issues was whether the Governor was required to delegate authority or powers to the Mayors on the three islands or whether he should have the discretion to do it but not be required to do it. Do you remember the discussion within the Convention as to whether the Governor would be required to delegate responsibilities for administering governmental services on the individual islands to the Mayors?
- Benavente: First of all, I feel that the Governor should delegate authority to the other two islands.
- Willens: Well, you were currently a mayor on Saipan. Did you feel that the Governor under the new Commonwealth should be able to supervise the administration of public services on the island of Saipan, or did you think he should be required to delegate to you or your successor as Mayor that responsibility?
- Benavente: I don't understand.
- Willens: You did say that you thought the Governor should delegate responsibility?
- Benavente: Yes, responsibility to someone at least. Either the Mayor or somebody there, a resident representative for the Governor.
- Willens: And you believe that should be done for Rota and Tinian?
- Benavente: Well, because, you know, they are away from the island many times.
- Willens: How about here on Saipan? What did you think was the best way to handle government services here on Saipan?
- Benavente: It should be the Governor that directs public works, for example. But, you see, first of all, I was not in agreement with the idea of having Mayors again in the islands.
- Willens: You were generally against the idea of the Mayors.
- Benavente: Yes, knowing that we have the Governor. I think it's only a repetition of their efforts. Right away there is going to be conflict because the Mayor will have some authority for that island and the Governor will have a different idea. So I think it is better if there is no Mayor and only the representative of the Governor should have responsibility for those islands.
- Willens: That was consistent with what you said earlier about your view that there were too many governmental levels in the Commonwealth.
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: This was also part of your feeling that maybe the Municipal Councils should be abolished too?

- Benavente: Yes. I do agree that those are unnecessary legislative functions. There is no need for that Council and the Mayor, I believe.
- Willens: Your view on that issue turned out to be a minority view.
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: Isn't that correct?
- Benavente: Yes, because I wasn't playing politics. I wasn't thinking about politics. I'm thinking of how the government should operate efficiently. That was my thinking.
- Willens: Do you remember the kinds of issues that came up at the public hearings? Let me refresh your recollection of some of them. In the draft constitution, there was a very large lower house proposed for the Commonwealth Legislature, and there were many criticisms of that. Do you remember the size of the Legislature being an issue?
- Benavente: Yes. I think so. I think double layers is too much. In fact, also creating a Mayor for the Northern Islands, and when you reach population of 1,000 there should also be a Senator. I mean, right now, I think people will not go up there. It's just a waste. There was a question about the size of the membership in the house.
- Willens: There also was some discussion during the public hearings about the issue of local self-government for Rota and Tinian and the powers of the Mayors. Do you remember what the sentiment of the public was on that issue? Were they generally supportive of your view, or were they generally supportive of giving the Rota and Tinian Mayors more authority?
- Benavente: People tend to be more quiet about that, because they don't want to hurt the feelings of the people of Rota. But I am sure that within themselves, I believe that they will disagree with the idea of giving more authority for the Mayor of these islands [Rota and Tinian] and why not here [on Saipan]. This is what is happening now. The Mayor of Saipan is only doing like road works, and other small things. His budget is very limited, while in Tinian and Rota they have sky limit funding. I think it is not fair to do it that way, because we are running as one government.
- Willens: Do you think that issue is ever going to be successfully addressed in a constitutional convention?
- Benavente: I don't think it will come about. Because, in fact, when there was the Second Constitutional Convention, I think there was also a question as to whether there was a need for the Mayors. I testified there. I had my written testimony in as a Mayor then opposing the idea of continuing the Mayor's office.
- Willens: And what happened at the Second Constitutional Convention?
- Benavente: Still, the Mayor's still here.
- Willens: So there was no serious consideration given to abolishing the position of Mayor?
- Benavente: That's right. This is a political issue, you know. People will not touch that issue. Very sensitive.
- Willens: There came a time near the end of the Convention when there was a debate about the size of the lower house and the number of representatives for Rota in the lower house. Specifically the Rota representatives or delegates in the Convention wanted to have two positions in the lower house, and the view of other delegates was that they should only have one. Do you remember the circumstances that led to a walk-out at the end of the convention?

- Benavente: Well, I don't know exactly, but if that's the question—the number of members for the lower house—I think we had a little meeting with the Saipan group discussing that, that it is not to our advantage also and the population in Rota is so small that, you know, why should they have that many representatives.
- Willens: So you recall a private caucus among the delegates of Saipan?
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: Did that include Saipan delegates from both the Popular and Territorial Party?
- Benavente: I believe it was both sides, but there's more Republican, more concern about future political strength.
- Willens: So, it is your recollection that the Saipan delegates almost unanimously agreed that there should not be two seats automatically assigned to Rota?
- Benavente: Yes, and also about the issue of apportionment. In that way, you know, Saipan also will increase when Rota is increasing.
- Willens: What do you remember about the apportionment issue?
- Benavente: Well, if I'm not mistaken, my understanding is that every certain number of votes in a certain district, when it increases by 1,000 or something like that, the number of members will be increased.
- Willens: So that's why the Legislature now has 18 people in the lower house, where at the time of the First Constitutional Convention, it was only 14.
- Benavente: That's right, yes.
- Willens: So there was a mechanism written into the constitution to reflect increases in population.
- Benavente: Increases, yes.
- Willens: Did you know any of the delegates from Rota and Tinian who walked out?
- Benavente: Yes, I know, Benjamin [Manglona].
- Willens: The four from Rota who walked out were Manglona? Ogo?
- Benavente: Yes, Ogo, yes.
- Willens: Manglona, Prudencio?
- Benavente: Yes, Prudencio.
- Willens: And Leon T-a-i-s-a-c-a-n.
- Benavente: Taisacan, yes. Leon Taisacan, yes.
- Willens: Four walked out, and four did not walk out, Greg Calvo, Pete Atalig, David Atalig, and Pete Dela Cruz.
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: Did you know why some decided to walk out and others decided not to?
- Benavente: Well, I think that the four that stayed had a different opinion from the Rota delegation. Although they are from Rota, they are staying here [in Saipan], and I think they disagree with the idea.
- Willens: Did all four who stayed with the Convention come from Saipan or . . .

- Benavente: No, they . . .
- Willens: . . . were currently residing in Saipan?
- Benavente: Yes, yes, working in Saipan.
- Willens: Well, what was your attitude when the walk-out occurred and threatened the work of the convention?
- Benavente: I think that was a very childish attitude. We are all educated people and this Constitutional Convention is not for immature people. Rather than walk out, why not think of something better. We have to negotiate or compromise. Why the walk-out? I think that's a very poor attitude for any group discussing issues that are of importance to the community.
- Willens: Were you generally satisfied with the Constitution that was produced at that Convention?
- Benavente: Yes, generally, but I still say that I think it was a very short time. It was a rushed work, and we should have been given more time rather than, you know, rush every day, every day. We should have been given more time. Maybe it could be 50 days, but it should not be a continuous 50 days.
- Willens: That's right. It certainly would have been better to have had a few days to reflect on what had been done.
- Benavente: Yes, to think about our work
- Willens: I certainly agree with that. I gather that you basically were and still are dissatisfied with the treatment of local government in the Commonwealth.
- Benavente: Yes, I still am.
- Willens: Were there any other aspects of the first Convention that you disagreed with in a significant way?
- Benavente: That's mainly my real concern about the time that we were given, the short time. And there was concern about funds, and they did not provide, you know, more funds so that we could extend our time. Because of the limited funds we are going to operate under that time limit. More funding should be sought from the U.S. so that we can, you know, work better than being pushed and rushed just to finish to meet the deadline.
- Willens: Luis, as I understand it, you basically disagree principally with the local government provisions of the new Constitution, but you were generally satisfied with the other provisions.
- Benavente: Yes, that is correct.
- Willens: And, just in concluding this interview, do you have any general thoughts about the way in which the Commonwealth has worked out over the last 15 years?
- Benavente: All we need is for the people here to work together for the common cause. Rather than just thinking about politics in life, I think people should come down and get together and work together for the whole benefit of the Commonwealth rather than just fighting between the parties as to who thinks first of a certain idea. Like I said, if it's a good idea, then both sides should consider it, and compromise if they need to, rather than, you know, always go against a proposal because of political concerns.
- Willens: All right, on that note, let's end the interview. Thank you very much for your help.