

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

MDD-10  
 Revolvers.

May 10, 1965.  
 Bogotá,  
 Colombia.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
 Institute of Current World Affairs,  
 366, Madison Avenue,  
 New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

"Pero alguien sí podría hacer algo ..."

"But one would be able to do something ..."

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Last month I was asked three times whether I wanted to buy a good cheap unlicensed revolver, and on another occasion whether I could not help in getting further supplies from the United States. A friend on a visit to Mexico City was met with the greeting "So you are from Colombia? Then of course you will be wanting to buy a pistol." The Ministry of War announces for sale a variety of attractive weapons, and the press carries pictures of "un grupo de damas de la sociedad Bogotana" paying sporadic attention to a sergeant lecturing on the .38. Ho ho, a smiling lady is pointing one at the photographer! Guns are fashionable again.

This is more than just a logical reaction to kidnappings and robberies. It is a complicated symptom. Many hopes and fears revolve around the revolver, symbol, emblem and sign.

But before it is any of these it is merchandise. Demand, steady throughout the forties and fifties, fell off at the beginning of the present decade. It is now rising again. The official price for the most ordinary type is high. Otherwise the purchase is easy enough — all that is needed besides the money is the signatures of two respectable citizens. A determined man will find little difficulty in getting those, but he may find it harder to bring himself <sup>to</sup> more than <sup>pay</sup> double what the weapon fetches in republics where the army does not have a monopoly. Consequently there has been much gun-running.

This is not a very dangerous or difficult enterprise. Nobody knows exactly how many air-strips there are in Colombia, and a light aeroplane can enter and depart unnoticed. Along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts there are miles of beaches that serve just as well. Those who prefer to work on a larger scale can bribe the customs. When the price offered for coffee by the semi-official Federación de Cafeteros, which cannot sell the dollars it earns on the free market, is considered too low, then coffee is smuggled out to Venezuela in regular convoys. A jeep travels some way ahead making the necessary arrangements at each barrier. What is done to smoothe the exit of coffee can be done for revolvers coming in.

Their quantity is not decreased by the official attitude. The army, the police and the civil authorities have in the recent past been very careless in distributing arms to "citizens of good will." Some of the recipients were not citizens of good will; some were merely the distributor's allies in some nefarious scheme; some were poor and easily induced to sell. These lessons have not been learnt. The advertisements of the Ministry of War still carry the message that no farmer, traveller, salesman, businessman is complete without his gun. The official line is that the arming of good people makes the country safer. Who exactly the good people are officials have no sure means of knowing. The whole ill-organized campaign spreads alarm and despondency.

The reaction of the Bogotá rich is most bizarre. In the elegant barrios of the north of the city, groups have been formed to protect them in case of riot or robbery. To be invited to take a prominent role in one of these is something of a social distinction. The meetings have the atmosphere of a bridge-party under siege. The arrangements, the work of excited retired generals, have all the unreality and complication of manoeuvres: in such-and-such a case whistles will be blown — three long blasts and one short; if something else happens all those to the north of Calle 82 ... . More locks on the doors, more bars on the windows, more bullets in the cupboard.

To be armed is a mark of respectability. It shows that one has something to defend. Moreover, in the present circumstances it demonstrates a lack of confidence in the government and the public forces of order, and such demonstrations have always appealed to la gente bien. In a culture where politics arouses more interest than anything else, where political conversation is far more witty and ingenious than any other sort, this fascination is still rarely admitted. The respectable citizen prefers to appear uninvolved.

A bad government naturally reinforces this preference. The possession of a revolver, participation in the plans to defend the barrio — these parade the desirable a-political state of mind, the innocence of the ordinary rich. It does not flatter the police. That their numbers have not increased to keep pace with the growth of the city is true, but that is something of a rationalization of the activities in the north. To press for more police does not have the same appeal. It does not matter that what in the north looks like solidarity and respectability may be regarded in poorer districts as the oligarchs getting ready for the class war.

Outside the cities the meaning of the revolver changes. It is first apparent as the badge of petty officialdom. When I am in moods of Colombian patriotism, I try to recall Graham Greene's policeman who slapped his holster as if it contained all the Mexican Revolution. It is hard to make this enormous spiritual effort very often. Colombia is not revolutionary Mexico, and many armed Colombian officials are not even policemen. I asked a forester why he carried a cumbrous .45 around with him, and he replied that it was useful for killing snakes. He had not killed any yet, but he was always hoping to meet one.

Besides adding weight to such men, most of whom would have to go far out of their way to find a pretext for firing one off, a gun is the mark of the pioneer. Mexican films and westerns have had their influence here. Moreover, Colombians of the upper classes are urban in their manners, and have an exaggerated fear of life outside the towns. The countryside is for them alternately an arcadian paradise, where life is always said to be muy sabroso\*, or a hostile place full of snakes and robbers. At present the latter view predominates. The tendency to wear fancy dress that I mentioned in my last letter therefore gives way to wearing guns.

"One would be able to do something." Neither in city nor in country is it quite clear what one would be able to do. The gang that kidnapped the sugar millionaire Harold Eder, and later left him dead, is said to have numbered more than a hundred men. Another sugar baron of the same district travels around there with four bodyguards in a jeep ahead and another four behind. It will not help him if his time comes. And to draw a gun in a held-up bus is to invite a massacre. In normal circumstances the armed man may receive the respect due to un hombre serio; in others he will probably end up dead.

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\* An adjective of revealing vagueness with the literal meaning of savoury. The Colombian vocabulary is very weak for purposes of rural description.

The dangers of kidnapping and robbery are real enough, and the politics of deadlock and inertia under which they flourish seem likely to continue for some time. The general arming is the most obvious symptom of insecurity and disintegration, a confused reaction that appeals to the worst parts of the Colombian mentality. It itself makes matters worse. Is that the intention of those that encourage it, or are they themselves the prisoners of the same way of thinking? Kidnappings and robberies are symptoms themselves, symptoms that cannot be fought effectively by gilded vigilantes, more revolvers.

Yours sincerely,



Malcolm Deas.

Received in New York May 17, 1965.