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Laureano Gomez.

July 30,1965.
Bogotá, Colombia.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Laureano Gómez died in the early afternoon of July 13, and was buried at noon the next day. A light rain fell on the mourners — his family, his party and his old chess-partners, an array of ex-Presidents, provincial Conservative chiefs in their best suits and black ties. It was a silent,rather frightened-looking crowd. The confusion of the nation's politics was momentarily stilled by the death of the greatest confounder of them all. The country paid its last respects to an enigma.

He was not really a reactionary, though for thirty-five years he was Colombia's most prominent Conservative, though at times he spoke in the accents of the Falange at its crudest. Though his greatest triumphs had Congress for their scene, he was not at heart a parliamentarian, still less a democrat. Jesuit educated, he would fight the Church or use it as it suited him. Though the results of his words might be barbaric, his style was elegant, at times magnificent. He was the best orator Colombia has produced, a speaker never effectively opposed, with the precision and force of Robespierre. His patriotism was of the sort that can only find expression in contempt and coruscation , yet he was faithfully followed by those he despised. Conservatives attracted by the Liberal Danton-figure Gaitán would still reserve for Gómez the supreme title of nuestro jefe y señor, our lord and master. He was called 'El Monstruo'— 'The Monster'; it is a half-admiring name, given to prodigies and indestructibles, which in France is given to actresses past criticism, and which in Colombia was given to him with something of the same awe.

Gómez was born in Bogotá on February 20, 1889. His family, Conservative by tradition, had recently moved there from the predominantly Liberal department of Santander, and could remember persecutions. Its standing, carefully obscured as is the tradition of Colombian biography, appears to have been modest, but Laureano received the best education that Bogotá then offered, and was a good pupil, for the Jesuits gave him a medal. He found his political vocation early, and soon after leaving school took to journalism in the Conservative cause, and more particularly for the group of his choosing within what was then a deeply divided party. His was the 'purest' of Conservatisms available, and his combative energies were devoted to its defence and advancement within the amorphous jumble of traditions and personalities that made up the party as a whole until the Liberals gained power in the early 1930s. For a year he was minister of public works.

But he had already shown that his real talents lay elsewhere. In the internecine struggles of the Conservative party, he perfected his technique for the destruction of his enemies. His weapons were precision and relentlessness, a studied lack of any sense of proportion about the real importance of the matter in hand that made him seem a maniac to his more easy-going contemporaries. In obedience to his father's wishes he had become an engineer; in following his political ambitions he became an administrative lawyer. With little interest in what an administration was doing, he watched it to see that it did not contravene the minutest regulation. An amateur rather than a dishonest tradition of government did lead to frequent contraventions, and these he stored up, and on occasion used with devastating effect. In this way he destroyed the aged and respected President Marco Fidel Suárez, who had mortgaged the preidential salary. Typical of the mentality of Laureano when roused was his insistence on the point that Suárez had, along with the salary, mortgaged the entertainment allowance, and as yet showed no sign of giving the receptions. Petty though they were, the charges were unanswerable, and Suárez had to resign.

The Conservative party fell from power before Gómez had completed his domination of it, and it was to remain in the wilderness for sixteen years. Laureano kept it together, Laureano was its dynamo. It had fallen through internal decay and a failure of confidence in itself, and accepted its fall with a resignation rare in Colombian history. It seemed at that time all to eager to be bought into oblivion with unimportant embassies and subordinate posts. That it rejected the temptation is one achievement of Gómez. Another is that it emerged as negativist and sectarian as it did.

The obsessively-detailed attacks on administrative corruption continued, but useful as such small-arms were for fighting on a narrow front against the leaders of one's own party, they could do little damage to the self-confident and progressive Liberal party in office. The Liberals woke from a long sleep ideologically refreshed, and were faced by a tired and discredited Conservatism without a thought in its head. In his first administration, the Liberal President Alfonso López was a splendid and fashionable leader. The tragedy of Gómez was that he sought to remedy his party's disabilities only by negation. Its ideology would be the opposite of the new Liberalism, and its leader the opposite of López.

Some degree of negation is a part of any party system, and a high degree is likely to prevail in the primitive democracy of Colombia. But few men in Colombian history have gone so far as Gómez in denegrating the personalities, actions and ideas of the enemy. The Conservative party had no strong philosophical objections to the Liberal program: later Conservative administrations were to accept and implement nearly all of it. Nevertheless, Gómez's attack on the form of the Liberal 'revolucion en marcha' was as thorough and persistent as any opponent of the content could desire. The ideology of the Liberals was democratic, so the ideology of Gómez now became authoritarian, corporatist, falangista. If López was modern in one way, then Gómez would be modern in another. So this overcoated, senatorial figure, who was never able to discard his own parliamentary habits, borrowed the language of fascist Spain, Germany and Italy.

The personal attacks on Liberal leaders increased in vehemence as the Liberal administration lost its impetus and its unity. Some hundred years before a prominent Liberal general had been accused of sniping at the enemy commanders with an exceptionally accurate private rifle. Gómez was less discriminating, but no more chivalrous. The effect of the Second World War on Colombia's economy was most immediately felt in increased speculation and black-marketeering. Government efforts to control this seldom worked, friends of the government frequently benefitted. Gómez exploited and intensified all suspicions in an already suspicious atmosphere. His tenacity was near insane, and his own party felt the strain as well as the Liberals, but by 1946 his first object was attained. A nervous and discredited Liberal party failed to agree on who its next President should be, and Laureano ably manoeuvred a Conservative into office.

His theories defeated in Europe, he now began to work for what the obituary writers refer to as "certain fundamental changes in the national institutions". But the methods he used were an intensification of the traditional, those that have always accompanied a change of ruling party in Colombia. He could not claim ignorance of these methods, as his own writings describe them with a detail, brilliance and disgust that no pther Colombian writer, let alone visiting political scientist, has equalled. Thus the attempt was paradoxical: the new Colombia was to be installed by using the old machinery, that is, with the help of the police, rigged elections, packed assemblies. The result was civil war and, after half-a-dozen years of fighting, a military regime. Gómez went into exile.

It was an inglorious end for 'El Monstruo', and it demonstrated that with his lack of real political creativity there went a certain timidity. In his own short Presidential term, from 1951 to 1953, he had kept himself hidden away. An unsociable man, he kept himself at a distance from the feelings he aroused, especially the hostility. He would speak on the radio so that when he had done the whole political country either loved him or hated him, so that not one neutral was left in his audience. But after that he would not be in the street, or at a Palace reception, but with his family*, his old chess-partners or his books. He kept in his Library a bust of Mahatma Gandhi, presumably as a symbol of the irresistibility of the principled civilian will, while he governed under a state of siege. After the longest career in opposition anyone could remember, he reached power too muddled and contradictory to last. The ideas and the methods he had used to preserve his party ultimately unfitted it for government.

That he was the preserver of Colombian Conservatism was admitted in the treaties the Liberals made with him in order to end military rule and set up the coalition government of the Frente Nacional. In this he was granted the measure of his historic achievement, but for him it was the pis aller of a disappointed man. It was ironic that on his death writers of both parties should praise him so much for it. It was to praise him for admitting that, on his own terms, he had failed. Perhaps that was the best they could do for the man who had lead his party up a blind alley, who had brought so much bitterness into politics, who had precipitated so many conflicts that need never have occurred. It was best not to mention the aspects of his career that were particularly his own, the achievements of the personality rather than those of the party.

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*"All godos (Conservatives) are like that — repressed." Liberal comment.

His peculiar influence on the course of events was disastrous.

Talents wasted through impatience, intolerance, and a failure to realize how means condition ends. An obsession with power in Colombia that found no satisfaction or cure. Observation without remedy. What follows is from an essay he wrote in 1928:

"Maeterlinck writes, in one of his books about insects, of a peculiar sort of ant that habitually carries around with it a special type of flea. These fleas are proportionately enormous, for they are the size of the ant's own head, which itself is proportionately twice the human size. These parasites carefully insert themselves one either side of the host's abdomen, so as not to unbalance it. The ant tries at first to get rid of them, but once they are dug in the creature has no hope of doing so. What saint in all the legends, asks Maeterlinck, has carried such a heavy nuisance around for a lifetime? And the ant does not only resign itself to the load, but nourishes the intruders as if they were its own children. Naturalists have not discovered any benefit for the ant at all.

It is similar in our politics and administration. In some regions of Colombia there is hardly a single village that does not have to carry the burden of its cacicques. So that balance is maintained, each party lodges its own specimen in the body of the municipality. This requires a little effort, but once they are there, they are there for good, and the municipality looks after them and cares for them, with more solicitude than is lavished on anything else.

... One of the most depressing sights that Colombia offers the thinking man is the tense inertia of provincial life. One returns after several year's absence to a village one has known well before. It has grown older. The trees in the plaza are cut about and broken. The streets have the same weeds, the fields round about the same rudimentary crops. It seems that no one has touched the stones scattered about in the road. The spout of the fountain is more awry. From the dirty tower the same ritual bell scatters on the wind the only spiritual sound the village ever hears. It is as if it were under a spell. No workshops, no workmen, not a chimney; not a single garden arranged by human hands, only the timid flowers of creeper weeds that crawl around with the same gloomy piety with which they cover the crosses in the cemetery.

A thin familiar donkey crosses the square carrying water in old wooden casks patched with tin. No sound comes out of the houses. A few ragged women slip by in the shadow of the mud walls. A small boy shoots at small birds. In the doorway of the aguardiente agency the half-dozen-or-so important men of the community sit on rude benches or broken chairs. They arrive in the middle of the morning and stay there until dusk, converse languidly, smoke, drink a little. In some wreck of a house, seated on the dirt floor, a score of flea-bitten and anaemic children parrot the alphabet in a monotonous chorus. And the fat cacique walks the corridors of the casa municipal, satisfied, laying his plans with three or four hangers-on around him. He is satisfied with being 'lord of all he surveys."

... The shadow of caciquismo is sometimes so dense that it lets in no light at all. Those of the countryside are federated, and give their electoral support to those who run the Department, and these in return sustain them in their respective municipalities. This pyramid of mutual services ascends to the highest positions in the state. It seems impossible to do anything about it: a sort of tropical anaemia of the will permits the parasites to continue indefinitely with the steady exhaustion of the people."

It was a dismal and pessimistic vision of Colombia, which its author never lost and never exorcised, for he too was partly under the spell, deranged by the same claustrophobic system. But strange to think that these words come from the pen of an "Architect of the Frente Nacional."

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Deas

Malcolm Deas.

Received in New York August 9, 1965.