

MDD-3  
Friends, Romans, Countrymen.

April 12, 1964.  
Bogotá.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In the March Congressional Elections some two million, two hundred thousand Colombian voters voted, and four and a half million abstained. Some parties have declared this abstention 'militant', but it was not militant in the sense of organized, nor militant in the sense of demonstrative. People did not vote because they are bored. They are more easily bored by Congressional Elections than by Presidential Elections; they are bored with the 'unique experiment' of two-party government with both parties in at the same time; they are bored with the perpetual self-congratulation of the official press - the 'Cruz de Boyacá' for the Editor of 'El Tiempo'; they are bored, not yet exasperated, by the regular rise in food prices - when I return after a week's absence to the same restaurant for the same meal, I keep confusing necessary increases in the bill with petty attempts to exploit me, or a sign of unaccountable hostility. They were bored too by the vacuous slogans of the whole lack-lustre campaign: the hectoring poster-faces of bespectacled oligarchs, the lack of programmes, the lack even of promises. The only definite instruction on the walls read 'You too should vote for the liberation of Haiti'.

The only success was that of General Rojas Pinilla. He more than doubled his 1962 vote, and gained as many seats as the dissident Liberal M.R.L., previously the largest opposition party. He gave an interview, well-calculated to alarm, to the ill-informed correspondent of the 'New York Times', which showed a sense of humour, and now sits on his Melgar farm, three hours from Bogotá, the focus of some hopes and more fears. There are some judicial threats and some policemen to keep him there. Is it then now time to bury him, so soon after this success? Men more disgraced than he have regained lost power in Colombia - General Mosquera, living in a garret between two of his presidencies, paid urchins with sweets to shout vivas after him in the streets. Moreover, this has been one of the longest and driest and most damaging summers that anyone can remember: water is rationed, there is half as much milk as there usually is. The General has a little charisma. Nobody else has any, it is as if that was rationed too, as if the General was hoarding a small supply improperly obtained. All the same, I will hazard a burial, to do him some justice, and in doing so to make clearer the *raison d'être* of the present alliance of the traditional parties. For he is feared for what he did, and not only for what he tried to do.

Rojas Pinilla became President to end the 'political dictatorship' of the extreme conservative Laureano Gómez; his assumption of office needs no justification. In his own words:

'Never can it be too often repeated that the regime of the Armed Forces that began on the 13th of July, 1953, was an imperative necessity in the history of the nation. Not only had the institutions of the country gone quite awry, but so had the governing classes, a whole generation of them. If in those ill-fated days the military had not come into power, the country would have dissolved. No one can doubt this. Everything would have been trampled in the dust. The Liberals and most of the Conservatives were outcasts in the land of their birth.'

Gómez despised and, if he is still capable of thought and emotion, despises his country. He has written some elegant essays to say why, but unlike most of the essayists, who live in Paris, he despised the country with greater energy and purpose. His rule in the early fifties was the worst Colombia has known in this century; its theories were corporatist, its methods arbitrary and violent. The only force that could end it was the Army, and when as Commander-in-Chief General Rojas Pinilla refused a military mission' that was to get him out of the way, he was within a week or two the most popular President in Colombian history. The state of the parties, the conservatives divided and the liberals persecuted, rancorous and disorganised, did not allow any civilian alternative. Still less did the state of the country: the government of Gómez was truly a period of undeclared civil war.

The General did not possess an interesting past. He came from a minor, respectable, conservative family of Tunja, Boyacá, an agricultural department of the highlands. As a soldier he rose slowly, through no important political or social connections. In 1936 he was sent to Germany as 'the best artillery officer available'; the visit made no impression on him. He became the country's foremost expert on the construction of airports. During the years of political violence before his accession to power he held his forces as far as possible aloof. Against accusations that he did not, he has had by far the best of the argument, and neutrality under the rule of Gómez is a hard thing to prove. On the 13th of July, he was the Neutral Man of the Hour.

Yet in the short space of three years he was ejected; he hardly put up a fight, and not much of a fight was put up against him. The superior intelligence of his civilian opponents is clear enough, but the heroism is a myth. Why he had to go, and how they got him out - these are two almost unrelated questions. The answers to both are obscured by this myth of the democratic struggle, the support for which is found in his decision to have himself re-elected. But this decision was taken against the advice of his best advisers very late on.

Opposition to Rojas Pinilla's government arose as soon as it was apparent that he intended to make his own choices among the men of the traditional parties; he did not accept every name on the lists they handed him. The origins of the 'Frente Civil' are in this; they are not to be found in concern for democratic liberties, horror of corruption, or in bad business conditions, or in any of the other subsequent rationalizations, more or less rational, of this opposition. The old mediaeval cry of 'New Men in the Councils' was the first to rally important men against him; the General did not accept every Liberal recommendation for the Constituent Assembly, and thereafter he was faced with official Liberal opposition.

This led him into his struggles with the Press - the powerful Liberal dailies 'El Tiempo' and 'El Espectador'. He was baited into this. The President complained, with justification, that the government was silenced and travestied, that the existing press was an oligarchic monopoly, a 'super-state'.

But he never really succeeded in making himself heard or in silencing his opponents. 'The regime continued to force a daily diet of fifteen minutes government news and commentary on all radio stations'. That was not very much. Opposition papers courted the easy and ineffective martyrdoms he repeatedly - and the repetition is a sign of his weakness in these dealings - inflicted upon them. There were diplomatic complications - 'El Tiempo' has what is on its past history a curiously high reputation outside Colombia. Rojas himself lacked ruthlessness - his government can hardly boast one ruthless act. Banquets of complaint could be held without interruption; papers could change their names to avoid changing their natures. His great initial popularity led him to underestimate the danger of this opposition, and to look upon it as more personally offensive than politically dangerous: he was a very touchy man. But this press kept the old political allegiances alive, and gained the Frente Civil the popularity it needed to cover its essential designs.

The stories did not have to be true; take this quotation from an admirer of the General's wily detractors:

'The charge of anti-Liberal military operations was unjustified, but the issue of military privilege was well taken.'

Yes, 'sergeants were riding around in cars', as I was told by someone trying to impart the horror of those years. But the charge of military favoritism is too broad and unexamined. The increase in military expenditure was in large part necessary. Since the 'War of the Thousand Days', which was fought from 1899 to 1901, the Army had been neglected and despised. When the violence began in the late forties, it was too small and very badly equipped; some fourteen thousand men, the rank and file from the dregs of the nation, the rank and file without boots. There was no Officer's Club. General Rojas Pinilla

issued boots, built a Club, increased officer's salaries, increased the size of the Army. He was faced with a military necessity. His initial amnesty proposals to end the fighting between the parties had been accepted by most of the Liberal guerillas of the Llanos Orientales, but in other districts they were rejected. In many places things had gone too far for any amnesty; in the department of Tolima, there were more desperate guerillas, among them Juan de la Cruz Varela, a Communist, at the head of perhaps six, perhaps ten thousand men. The guerillas who did not accept the amnesty of 1953 easily outnumber the Colombian Army of 1949. To say that under the General's government the proportion of the national budget spent on the army vis-à-vis the proportion spent on education increased, and to imply thereby that he was merely buying regimented support, is absurd. Military expenditure did not get a very much larger share of the whole budget. The Club and the favours, justifiable as these were - there is such a thing as an under-privileged Latin American army - do not account for what increase there was. The government was fighting a war. It is not possible to fight well-armed and determined guerillas with recruits with no boots, and no aeroplanes, led by underpaid officers with no standing and no prospects.

It is natural for a soldier to care for soldiers. Rojas Pinilla did not go to excesses in that direction. He did use military men in what had previously been civilian positions. How competent they were it is impossible to say. Competence was not the issue. Here as elsewhere, the regime of Rojas Pinilla is examined microscopically; civilian, well-born incompetence is passed over un-noticed.

How competent his government was, unless one follows the opinions of North American business magazines, it is not easy to say.

Rojas Pinilla spent on public works. Some of these - notably the airport of El Dorado, of the General's own design - have been inaugurated subsequently and no credit given to him. He built roads. He cannot be held responsible for the national 'despilfarro', the luxurious waste of the high coffee profits of 1953-4. Government spending did not increase in proportion to national spending. His record in the control of prices is better than that of the present administration.- it is ironical that in his last year, when it is held that his direction of the economy improved, prices began to go up faster. What is most important in the politics of this country now is the popular belief that the General kept them down. Attempts to blame him for subsequent economic difficulties, and it is clear that he was crude at times and always uncertain in his policies, never convinced the populace and, for present troubles, cannot convince anyone.

But more was at issue in the controversies over the President's management than the question of technical competence as it is judged by the old importers and exporters and the established industrialists. His policy did contain a new orientation: he favoured, for himself and for others, the creation of large agricultural enterprises, especially cattle. Rojas Pinilla is from Boyacá, a farmer's department, and he put the money he made into land. His generals did too. There were fears that he was creating a new force whose strength might rival, and whose interest might conflict with, that of the traditional economy. It was a social threat too. The opportunities he signalled here are now being taken by more 'respectable' people.

So Rojas fell foul of the Banks and the National Industrialist's Association. This last made some impressive contributions to his opponents and the first closed their doors. It was that most un-proletarian protest, a bank strike, not a real strike at all, that precipitated his departure. When later the clerks struck for higher wages they received no reward.

His popularity had gone: his attempts to improve the social services were inefficient, he had failed to create a proper party of his own, he no longer toured the country. He had lost touch. He who had earlier tried to catholicize all the Universities fell out with the Church: it thought he was Perón, it resented his interference in the confessional trade-unions and some excesses of his troops, against the vague right of sanctuary. A small riot in the suburbs of Bogotá shouted 'Cristo si, Rojas no!'. His Generals did not like his clan, particularly his sinister son-in-law, Moreño Diaz. When the undeniable political incompetence of the President showed itself clear to all in his decision to have himself re-elected, all the cunning men about him, fat though a lot of them were, knew the dance would go no further. He had shocked the political sensibilities of the nation, and there were demonstrations - though nothing that could be called a 'national explosion'. The Generals persuaded him to go.

He went because he thought that he would be called back. He believed that all his great initial popularity could not have gone.

He went because he was not the man for shooting, nor was he in a position to order shooting if he had wanted to. The Generals would not have obeyed.

He left behind a Junta of five General-Presidents, among them men so compromised that it was unlikely that too much of minor national importance but of great personal importance would ever be investigated. They made him some promises that he may have been fool enough to believe.

He was not out-fought by the Frente Civil. In the words of President Valencia, its most aggressive leader:

'The heroes of May 10th (the day of his overthrow) are celuloid heroes made by General Rojas Pinilla himself. If he had not decided to go , he would still be here and President and for many years more.'

That is over-modest, but it is true that the work of the Frente Civil created conditions in which he could be overthrown - most important of all the agreements between the parties - and not true that it overthrew him. The reason for his going was his failure to hold together his own principal supporters. Besides his ambition, the fatal decision for re-election may have reflected these divisions as well.

He was not called back. He returned, and was tried by the Senate, which he justly complained was composed of his political enemies. Most of the accusation was taken up with petty charges of personal corruption, fit to make any Venezuelan laugh: pages and pages of the record are filled by an ill-proven affair over a paltry hundred-and-fifty-odd head of cows. Corruption here is not what you take from the state; it is what you do with it. It was all quite beside the point. The trial showed only that Rojas could not be tried without trying too many other people as well - the Generals of the Junta had been given the Cruz de Boyacá; that he was not very corrupt - and an old-established millionaire in the Presidency does not suffer the same temptations as a middle-class General; that there was a surprising amount of life left in him: the defence had the best of it, and the decision to cut the trial short was thought a sign of official fear of what the defence had to reveal.

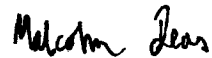
The real charges against him are, first, incompetence, and secondly, his attempt to have himself re-elected. The incompetence was essentially political: for all the faults and crudities of his government, and for all that they did to make peace between the previously warring parties possible, his successors inherited a far easier country than he did. He took over in conditions of anarchy: they did not. His government was better than he knew: he always tried to make political capital in the wrong direction. The Colombian oligarchy was unlucky in producing Laureano Gómez: it has received its compensation since in the political ineptitude of Rojas Pinilla. Of this his desire to perpetuate his Presidency is proof enough.

He says he has learnt a lot in the last six years. Perhaps he has. He is considered something of a martyr: if he 'martyred' 'El Tiempo', 'El Tiempo' has since done its best to 'martyr' him. He possesses the advantage of being deprived by the Senate sentence of his political rights. In the emptiness of this country's politics, he is the most obvious focus of protest.

He has aged much - but he has a good candidate in General Duarte Blum, the hero of his amnesty of 1953. In the easier politics of opposition, he has shown to better advantage - but his opponents are far warier than he was. He still has no press.

I do not think he will make another President. Nor do some of those who voted for him.

Yours sincerely,



Malcolm Deas.

Received in New York April 20, 1964.