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Three Generals

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Three Generals have recently been receiving a lot of attention in the Colombian press: they are, in order of seniority, General Rafael Uribe Uribe, General Charles de Gaulle, General Alberto Ruiz Novoa. Any one of them is enough to shatter the traditional stereotype of a General.

The first, Uribe Uribe, was assassinated by a couple of drunken carpenters armed with axes fifty years ago this month, while on his way to Congress where he was to speak on legislation for the betterment of the conditions of the working classes. He was a universal man of intolerable virtue, a type of Latin-American statesman which has been passed over in the stock antithesis of caudillos and lawyers, the lack-of-noblesse d'épée and the lack-of-noblesse de robe, that from a distance appear to people the political stage.

He was indeed a General. He entered politics in a time of civil war and first made his name as a soldier, utterly fearless and a theatrical disciplinarian: he quelled the first murmurs against his first command by shooting a man out of the ranks with his own revolver, a trick he does not seem to have been reluctant to repeat. He is a legend of daring, chivalry and leadership. He cultivated these virtues with a single-mindedness, that in this time of suspicion of motives, appears little short of mania, and blew his own trumpet in letters to friends, enemies and family that make nauseating reading now. Even his contemporaries, more accustomed to such a style, found him hard to take. But brave and incorruptible he certainly was: once some of his fellow-officers, suffering from a surfeit of his virtue, followed him on a walk in the woods; to their delight the General took out a flask and began to drink something that looked like brandy: the teetotaler, they concluded, was a secret drinker, but when they approached they found he was drinking cold tea.

This exaggeratedly noble soldier is not a figure of much interest, and the first years of his political career, in which he cast himself in that mold, are not of much interest either. He came of a Liberal family of the hard-working people of Antioquia, and as a child saw his father beaten-up and imprisoned by the Conservatives, then in power. He fought in his first civil war at the age of sixteen, nothing more than an instinctive Liberal with family scores to pay off. He then turned to journalism, made some play with new ideas, and later, as the only Liberal member of Congress, made his reputation as the foremost critic of a corrupt and exclusive government. But for all the detail and sophistication of his speeches his politics were still simple: that Liberalism and Virtue and Uribe Uribe were synonymous, and that a change would come by war.

Against the opposition of the most experienced and eminent men of his party, he and the other bellicose elements launched an ill-organized and worse-considered revolution in the last months of 1899. Its cry was 'Liberalism and the Constitution of 1863' -- an unworkable document that had been drawn up in very peculiar circumstances that had long since disappeared. The result was a long and bloody war, closely followed by the loss of Panama.

In this war Uribe Uribe performed the expected prodigies of leadership, daring and fidelity, but he, and consequently Liberalism, emerged from it not so much changed, but with additions. The war and the loss of Panama had a very sobering effect. The Liberals lost a fight they should never have picked, that they had entered with the most primitive motives and which resulted in the general humiliation of the country. In his usual parading style, the defeated leader of the Liberals, a sort of military Gladstone, led the national re-examination.

His last thirteen years he filled with incessant worthy activity. He produced programs for reform in such quantity and detail that at the end there remained few aspects of national life that he did not cover, and few that he did not write about in a way that still remains interesting today. An importer of ideas on a vast and most useful scale, not an original man, he stated hardly-noticed problems and suggested solutions far too advanced, both by reading the most up-to-date European writers. His range was enormous: Indians, agriculture, education, transport, factory legislation, hospitals -- on everything he had his considered opinion. No other Colombian has thought as much about so many things. Had he thought about fewer, and more about the politically possible, he might have had more immediate practical effect. But that few of his proposals were realized in his lifetime and that many have still not been realized should not be allowed to hide his real importance: too 'noble' a politician, he became the focus of too many tensions and somebody set the carpenters on him, but he had given the Liberal party what social conscience it has.

His life was useful and, though he said so so often himself, noble. There were others like him. There are Generals and Generals.

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The most extraordinary General of all was in Colombia last month. The visit 'did not pass wholly without incident'. The most odd was the speech of President Valencia at the State Banquet, which lasted for three quarters of an hour, analysed de Gaulle's career in a way that the guest could not have altogether agreed with, dwelt warmly on Colombia's friendly relations with the United States and ended with the unexpected cry of 'Viva Espana!'. It was not for some time issued to the Press. In his defense the President has since said that de Gaulle will not hear a speech of greater importance anywhere else in Latin America. He will certainly not be told so many home truths at any other State Banquet.

For President Valencia's fault was to say the right things at the wrong time. Colombia has very little to gain from de Gaulle's visit. He won't butter much bread. France is not, and does not look like becoming, one of Colombia's principal trading partners. Cultured Colombians, though like many educated people everywhere they have read some French novels, are more interested in 'Hispanidad' than in 'Latinity', the General's version of 'Negritude'. Since Independence they have been more influenced by English and Spanish currents than by French.

All this would have taken much courtesy to hide; Valencia lacks tact, and did not hide it. His position is not secure, and he may have wished to buttress it by making it publicly clear to his self-invited guest that he did not consider it a compliment to be a pawn in his game, which is quite beyond Colombia's comprehension. I sympathize. The General passes, the French colony wipe away their tears, and all is the same as it was before.

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The General occupying public attention now is the Minister of War, General Alberto Ruiz Novoa. He is frequently referred to as 'un hombre muy preparado', a phrase used here of men who are capable as well as ambitious. Like Rafael Uribe Uribe he seems to have opinions on every subject. These do not all agree with those of other Ministers, but the General remains irrepressible, frequently defending his 'derecho de opinar' -- his right to air his opinions in public whether it embarrasses them or not.

He is against monopolies, hoarding, what he considers the excess profits and the excessive privacy of much Colombian industry, and on these subjects he appears very well informed. Moreover, his own fairly cautious and precise use of the term 'grupo de presion' has started a fashion: pressure groups are believed in, are believed to be bad, and Ruiz Novoa is their strongest opponent. He is more eager than the rest of the government to carry through a radical Land Reform, which he sees in the traditional terms of redistribution. It is perhaps unfair to judge him on a speech, but he here simplifies quite shamelessly. Nevertheless, on most technical questions he does appear 'muy preparado'.

And he is at the head of a better prepared army: selected officers have been given courses of degree standard in many not obviously military subjects: law, economics, political science. This is not necessarily sinister, but it might be very useful. The Minister is a serious career officer -- he led the Colombians in Korea and wrote a book on the military lessons of the war -- and his appeal is to similar serious men. He cannot yet be called popular, but he is highly esteemed by many civilian politicians and has talked long and deeply with economists, whose respect he also enjoys.

He is an ambitious man, and is not doing all this for nothing. His opponents start rumours of a golpe. The present stagnancy of politics might make a golpe possible, and de Gaulle's visit gave the army useful practise in occupying all key points in the city, but it hardly makes one necessary.

There is no law to stop Ruiz Novoa from resigning as Minister, leaving the Army, and standing against Carlos Lleras Restrepo, the 'muy preparado' but politically more compromised official Liberal candidate for the next Presidency, which under the rules of the Frente Nacional must go to a Liberal. Many dissidents have hinted that they might support him.

But his opponent is tough and wily. Few civilian politicians can have liked the General's references to 'Church and Army' as the only organized forces in the state. Unless he is right in that it does not look as if they will let him in. He is young, and could wait; he and his associates can continue as a 'grupo de presión' -- the Army is still fighting bandits and left-wing guerillas, and has a very close concern with some reforms. And if things go very badly ... he is well on the way to eclipsing the 'Ex-General' Rojas Pinilla as the obvious alternative to the Frente Nacional.

Yours sincerely,

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