

MDD-7

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

December 26, 1964.  
Bogotá, Colombia.

Present Discontents.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Carlos Lleras Restrepo, the official candidate for the next Presidency, cannot speak in public: his voice, on the one occasion he tried it, was immediately drowned by shouts and whistles more determined than he; if he tries again, the same will happen.

Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, the leader of the most active wing of the Conservative party, has come out strongly against his candidacy. These two men know a lot about each other, have fought in the past with no squeamishness about weapons, and Alvaro Gómez's opposition, which at first looked like threats made to obtain some quid-pro-quo, may turn into something more.

The peso has been devalued.

The House of Representatives is to make public its disagreement with the Senate on certain accompanying austerity measures by sticking up posters in all the larger cities attacking the Upper House.

There have been scandals in the Instituto Nacional de Abastecimientos, whose task it is to keep the prices of essential foods at a reasonable level; in electricity contracts; in the customs; and over 'sleeping bureaucrats' in some government departments.

The government has suffered a small wave of tactical, and thus to most people incomprehensible, resignations. The monetary crisis has made it far harder to keep up any appearance of dynamism: 'sobriety' and 'responsibility' are not widely popular, and this President has always shown a certain nineteenth-century reluctance in the defence and advertisement of his policies. In a democracy, he seems to believe, the people should judge a government by its fruits and its silent fruits alone.

He has announced his irrevocable decision to finish his term.

Vacuum and malaise.

It is a political vacuum and a political malaise. All is not well with certain industries, and there has been a devaluation, but it remains true that the political problem is the primary one. The devaluation was partial, and it was much better handled than its predecessors: precise, sensible, secret and, so far, small. In a country where there is such a small cushion of understanding between government and people, national pride in the peso and exaggerated fears of the effects of devaluing it can be much exploited by the government's opponents. Nevertheless, the general indifference to the present administration and the obscurity of the political future have had a strangely dampening effect: the government got off lightly; nobody seemed prepared to go to much trouble to attack its accepted mediocrity for ~~an~~ unspectacular fall in the peso, nor to make much effort amid the general uncertainty as to who the beneficiary might be.

The Frente Nacional, the sixteen-year pact that came into operation in 1958 and whereby the administration is equally divided between the two traditional parties, with Liberals and Conservatives alternating in the Presidency, has not yet run half its time. It looks elderly. Its leaders, although not all old, have all been prominent for a long time; for all that they would rather be thought of as rich men performing duties to which their station in life has called them, they are politicos from the most intensely political generations that the country has ever produced. Their style may be seigniorial in public, but their power comes from raking together the dying embers of the traditional party loyalties, the fire that the Frente Nacional was designed to reduce to a harmless glow. The regulator is beginning to look like an extinguisher, and the one prominent essentially party politician, Alvaro Gómez, is not by accident the only one who has broken its rules. With the name of Gómez — his father Laureano Gómez was the **extreme** sectarian Conservative President of the early fifties — he can never hope for popularity outside his own party, but he gains it inside by being overtly anti-Liberal. The leaders committed to the Frente Nacional, Carlos Lleras among them, are politically imprisoned: their partisan pasts, the dated political styles they learnt in the thirties and forties, their total lack of popular appeal, cut them off from any support apart from that of their own national and local squadrons, and the dwindling numbers of ~~these~~ who automatically vote Liberal or Conservative, 'Red' or 'Blue'. The present rules of the game, which they themselves drew up, prohibit any fierce and invigorating appeal to this last element, on whose trust and loyalty the system ~~nevertheless~~ depends.

So after six years of restored oligarchy they are being hanged with their own rope. What then?

The most common current answer is that there is then the Minister of War, General Alberto Ruiz Novoa. There are posters on the walls of Bogotá declaring 'To attack Ruiz is to attack the People'; the People give them little attention. The General is still making reforming speeches. He is a very available man.

He is forty-seven years of age, which is ten years younger than Carlos Lleras. He does not seem to be in a hurry. It is clear that he is not working against President Valencia; as some first thought, but closely with him. With the restraint of Ruiz, Valencia can finish his term. With the protection of Valencia, Ruiz can continue making a name for himself with all the prestige and attention given to the Minister of War. If Valencia, who would rather not be President but for Duty, and, more than that, Honour, does not finish his term, then Ruiz may at least do that, but it is far more likely that rather than someone else's discarded months he would like four full years, and wishes to remain Minister of War as long as Valencia's term lasts. He would then be the most prominent Conservative 'Presidenciable', and the most well-placed runner for 1970.

But he is mooted for 1966. As he is a Conservative, and as changes of party are not in the spirit of the agreement between the parties, and as opposition from Carlos Lleras is likely to be strong, this would mean the end of the Frente Nacional in its present form. The role of the Army would inevitably be far greater, many a civilian politician in limbo. There is much apprehension about what his policies would be, and they would certainly be austere, but more about his mere presence.

There should be some about the mere feasibility of making him President in a year and a half's time. It would be hard for the Liberals to swallow, and under provocation the old party loyalty that now looks so dead might revive. The political moratorium of the past six years has been far more effective on the level of National politics than it has in local government; I have talked to Liberals with very recent grievances against Conservative alcaldes. The more military Ruiz looks, the more acceptable on this local level, but the less so higher up. There he must find collaborators -- and I doubt that there would be many Liberals among them -- or rule increasingly through the Army. In high office under General Rojas Pinilla, he must be aware of some of the ways of how not to do that, but also of the insurmountable difficulties a resolute civilian opposition can create. There is a growing feeling, not only among his opponents, that the General should make himself clear: though the tempo of politics here is slow, I do not think he would be wise to continue the present enigmatic performance for longer than another six months if he has any thoughts at all for 1966.

If Carlos Lleras cannot do something for his popularity before then, even if he manages to secure the Presidency his position will be exceedingly weak. The Frente Nacional's majority in Congress — the dissident offshoots of the two parties can elect to Congressional seats — is very small. It will be hard to preserve, let alone increase, with Carlos Lleras running in his present form. A hostile Congress could paralyze his administration.

This analysis, which leaves out thieves in the night, presents you with an obscure future: an official Presidential candidate who might not make it, or who might make it only to be faced with a hostile Congress; a General with alternative dates for his ambition, whose rule might be more or less military according to what men or what party would work with him, and whose policies would be the more radical the more alone he found himself; two parties, which having had no recent national fights are of uncertain temper, fragmenting under the strain of a compromise that destroyed their *raison d'être*.

A hyper-critical people, a disappointing economy, three-quarters of the bandits gone but one quarter still active.

But this future is more obscure than dim. If there is a fight, it will not be like the last. General Ruiz is not General Rojas, and General Rojas could have been very much worse. The Frente Nacional was not made to last for ever, and that what was made to last for sixteen years may only last for eight should not raise universal cries of 'failure' and 'farce'. (It could mean that it had done its work rather sooner than expected.)

'Colombia is an open society but a static one.' Or do you prefer 'Colombia is a static society but an open one'? There is no justification for enthusiasm and there are no grounds for despair.

Yours sincerely,

*Malcolm Deas*  
Malcolm Deas.

Received in New York December 31, 1964.