

A History of US Intransigence, from Cuba to Colombia

by Tom Whitney

Cuba solidarity activists rallied in Bogota's Policarpo district on January 26 to celebrate Cuban national hero José Martí's 161st birthday. Martí, champion of "Our America" -- lands south of the Rio Grande River -- launched an anti-imperialist movement that persists in Cuba more than a century later. Colombian revolutionary struggle mirrors that durability.

U.S. intransigence toward Cuba is legendary. After all, the victory of the Cuban revolution was "the big fish that got away." The same intransigence is apparent now as the U.S. government deals with peace negotiations underway in Havana between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The United States is evidently adamant that the FARC not be allowed to achieve revolutionary goals through negotiations.

FARC negotiator Pablo Catatumbo thinks the U.S. government is undermining Colombian sovereignty, in view of **a recent *Washington Post* report demonstrating a direct U.S. hand in killing FARC leaders**. Its author Dana Priest learned from U.S. military and intelligence officials that for eight years CIA officials working in the U.S. Embassy have been **directing raids against the FARC**. They used bombs equipped with sophisticated guidance equipment built by Raytheon Company, secret funds, and intelligence provided by NSA intercepts. This covert program is in addition to U.S. Plan Colombia with its airbases, U.S. troops on the ground, and \$9 billion in military and police funding.

For **Catatumbo**, the report "confirms FARC pronouncements as to trans-nationalization of the Colombian conflict and the growing dependency and servility of the Colombian armed forces to the U.S. military apparatus." Colombia's army "is no more than a cogwheel inside the U.S. war-making machine [and] the Colombian insurgency. [The FARC] is fighting the most powerful imperialism ever existing on the face of the earth."

That U.S. raids continue during peace negotiation -- "secret information" about which is moreover leaked by high officials to a reporter -- may signal U.S. preference for continuing war in Colombia.

U.S. war against Cuba began in Martí's time and hasn't stopped. Afro-Cubans and Cuban students, unionists, and poor people routed Spanish colonialists and later rebelled, **went on strike**, and took to the streets in the name of national independence. U.S. governments sent in troops and supported dictatorships, while mounting democratic façades. The victory of Cuba's revolution shook U.S. bearings, especially because in 1959 the worldwide communist movement was gaining. "The Cuban Revolution was an alarm bell for North American politics and for dominant classes and militaries in Latin America," explains analyst Hernando Calvo Ospina.¹

It was in this context that the United States took note of farmer guerrillas in Colombia who were communists. Agitation for agrarian rights had been ongoing for three decades. Historian James Brittain points out, however, quoting Marc W. Chernick:

Unlike most areas of Latin America, where communism gained strength in urban and labor-export enclaves, in Colombia the Communist Party developed its greatest influence in rural areas, particularly the coffee regions, and among landless peasants and small farmers.²

Crisis erupted with the assassination on April 9, 1948, of charismatic Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, expected soon to become president. He had raised hopes for reforms that

would include rights for small landholders. Some 200,000 Colombians died over the next ten years as insurgent bands fought government forces in rural areas.

Gaitán's murder and deadly street violence played out in Bogota just as a meeting there headed by U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall was converting the old Pan American Union into the Organization of American States (OAS), envisioned as a tool for protecting Latin America and the Caribbean from communism.

During the 1950s, communist rural insurgents were establishing autonomous communities in southern Colombia that they defended with arms. In 1962 a U.S. Army special warfare advisory group headed by General William Yarborough investigated and recommended military action against rural self-defense communities. The group promoted use of paramilitaries. "[C]ivilian and military personnel [would be selected] for clandestine training in resistance operations. . . . [They] should be used to . . . perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States."³

Thus in July 1964, "[t]he most aggressive military campaign in Colombia's modern history" descended upon communist enclaves near Marquetalia in Southern Tolima.⁴ The 16,000 attacking Colombian troops used U.S. money, advisors, helicopters, and napalm. The countryside was devastated, but the insurgents escaped and soon established themselves as the FARC.

FARC commander Jacobo Arenas declared afterwards that "[i]mperialism is our main enemy. . . . If it were not for North American help, we would soon take care of the oligarchy" -- "Yankee imperialism is our enemy and also enemy of peoples throughout the world."⁵

Peace talks would follow, but the war continued. U.S. meddling affected the outcome of two sets of talks. In 1984, conservative President Belisario Betancur and FARC leaders agreed that fighting would end and insurgents would take up regular politics. Paramilitaries, however, decimated the Patriotic Union (UP) electoral coalition they, the Communist Party, and other leftists had formed. Paramilitaries killed thousands of UP electoral candidates and activists.

The FARC subsequently expanded throughout the country, even into cities. Peace negotiations in 1998-2000 in San Vicente del Caguán failed. FARC communications then with a Cuban official in Colombia shed light on why the FARC withdrew: "Commander Marulanda believes that the United States will intervene in the Colombian conflict and that therefore conditions of guerrilla war . . . will change, and on that account the guerrillas need . . . at least two years to gather resources and adjust tactics. . . ."⁶ FARC leader Manuel Marulanda was referring to U.S. Plan Colombia.

Later another Cuban diplomat passed on other Marulanda views to Havana: "He agrees with us that any advance in the peace process will be sabotaged by paramilitaries. He signaled that the United States is no help at all in the process of dialogues with the FARC . . . with their extraordinary accusations of narco-trafficking. . . ."⁷ Many observers say charges of drug-trafficking and terrorism are aimed at obscuring real reasons why the United States took sides in a faraway, class-based civil war.

Presently the U.S. government is a party of sorts to talks in Havana. FARC negotiators want peace with social justice. Central American precedents suggest the United States might accept peace as long as social wrongs aren't meddled with. The histories of anti-imperialist struggles in both Colombia and Cuba demonstrate, however, that U.S. forces at every level are engaged for the long haul.

Calvo Ospina told an interviewer recently that, "realistically and pragmatically, it will be decided in Washington whether or not the government in Bogota moves on and signs a peace treaty. . . . At this time, I don't see either government being committed to having peace with social justice materialize in Colombia."

Notes:

- 1 Hernando Calvo Ospina, *Colombia, Laboratorio de Embrujos*, Madrid: Foca, 2008, p. 86.
- 2 Marc W. Chernick, "The FARC: From Liberal Guerrillas to Marxist Rebels to Post-Cold War Insurgents," *Terror, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts*, eds. Marianne Heiberg, et al., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, qtd. in James J. Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia*, London: Pluto Press, 2010, p. 3.
- 3 Brittain, op. cit., pp. 268-269.
- 4 Brittain, op.cit., p. 12.
- 5 Fidel Castro, *La Paz en Colombia*, Havana: Editora Política, 2008, p. 76. The quote from Marulanda appears in Jacobo Arenas' book *Diario de la resistencia de Marquetalia* used by Castro. Castro's book is accessible at <www.rebellion.org/docs/75865.pdf>.
- 6 Castro, op. cit., p.105. Castro was summarizing the report of a Cuban Embassy official in Bogota who had met with FARC leaders negotiating with the government.
- 7 Castro, op. cit. p. 110.

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