

Brave April days in Our America

By Tom Whitney

Cuban independence hero Jose Marti would have regarded all but two of the nations attending the seventh Summit of the Americas, April 10-11 in Panama, as representing “Our America,” all territory south of the Rio Grande. That event has been a victory for Our America, and so too was another big day in Colombia on April 9 as marchers commemorated Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, assassinated 67 years earlier.

The watchwords on both occasions were: independent political action, no more war, and social justice. Admittedly social justice took the stage at the OAS (Organization of American States) summit — with Cuba, its leading continental protagonist, serving as proxy.

Cuban President Raul Castro headed the Cuban delegation in Panama. The OAS, sponsor of such summits and until recently a faithful U. S. servant, had expelled socialist Cuba in 1962. Now Cuba was back.

The day before the Summit opened, Colombians marched for justice and for peace. They were demanding a peace agreement between Colombia’s government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Negotiations have been under way in Havana for over two years. Demonstrations take place every year in Colombia on April 9, but the outpouring this year was huge, with 300, 000 marching in Bogota and one million [throughout the country](#).

At the previous OAS Summit three years earlier, Latin American and Caribbean nations warned there would be no future summits without Cuba. They were standing up for independence from U.S. dictates going back decades.

Indeed, when Gaitán was killed on April 9, 1948, in Bogota by a single gunman, U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall was presiding over a continent-wide gathering there aimed at setting up the OAS. It would be implementing U.S. cold war objectives throughout the region. Marshall, on the scene, endorsed a Colombian government claim that communists killed Gaitán.

Now much later the U.S. government was on the defensive at an OAS summit. It had accepted Cuba’s presence and was in trouble over Venezuela. Criticism throughout the region had greeted the U.S. decision in March to sanction Venezuela’s revolutionary government and Obama’s statement representing Venezuela as a U. S. security threat had proved embarrassing.

In the end, a seemingly humbled United States, together with U.S. plans already announced for improving relations with Cuba, combined to fashion a new kind of OAS Summit. Dialogue and relations based on mutual respect were possibilities now.

The idea of independence likewise inspired marchers in Colombia on April 9. Once freed of the constraints of war and repression, they could shape their own future. Gaitán was their mentor.

Having served as congressman, senator, or cabinet minister over many years, he led efforts toward land reform, education for all, and labor rights. Historians say this pre-eminent leader of the Liberal Party would have become president in 1950. Yet in the two years or so leading up to April 9, 1948, a wave of violence overtook Colombia. Endowed with great oratorical gifts and charisma, Gaitán launched a great campaign for peace and social reform.

On February 7, 1948, in Bogota, Gaitán delivered his famous “Oration for Peace.” Directing his words to President Mariano Ospina Pérez, Gaitán explained that:

Colombians “from the entire country and every latitude ... have gathered in this plaza, birthplace of our liberties, to express their irrevocable decision to defend their rights. Two hours ago [they arrived], yet not a single shout has been heard. In their hearts they only hear the beat of emotion. During great storms subterranean force is much more powerful, and has the power to impose peace when those who have the power to do so, don’t. ... You who are a university person must understand that those capable of carrying out a party’s discipline ... of honoring emotion through silence ... as with this immense multitude ... might very easily act upon the stimulus of legitimate defense”

Gaitán’s death ruined hopes for social justice in a context of peace. Within days of his murder, some 3000 Colombians were dead and 200,000 more would die over the next ten years. Hunting down bands of rural insurgents affiliated mostly with the Liberal Party, the Army did most of the killing. Guerrilla groups started to identify themselves as communists and in 1964 Marxist-oriented FARC insurgents took up arms against the government. They wanted agrarian rights and political power.

The United States subsequently weighed in on the side of Colombian governments with advice, money, troops on the ground, equipment, airbases, and prisons. But civil war came to a stalemate, and both the Colombian government and the FARC want the fighting to end. The FARC is calling for a constituent assembly. Peace is in the air and the U.S. government is paying attention.

In February President Obama endorsed the talks in Havana by naming diplomat Bernard Aronson as Special Envoy to the negotiations. The United States in effect joins the April 9 marchers in supporting negotiations, thereby backing away from a violent past, exactly as happened at the Panama Summit.

Some observations are in order:

Up against unified and combative resistance throughout the region, the U.S. government has embarked upon a strategic retreat.

That marginalized peoples in Colombia and elsewhere in the region have not given up on mass struggle for justice is good news. A *Pax Romana* - peace enforced by tyranny – is probably unlikely.

That Cuba was this Summit’s star attraction was no accident. Sociologist C. Wright Mills encapsulated Cuban voices for his 1960 book *Listen Yankee*: “What’s happening here [in Cuba’s revolution] is one kind of solution for the

peoples of the hungry nations that make up the continent to your south ... Cuba today is coming to represent and to be understood as representing – a way out ... in Cuba certainly, and maybe also everywhere in our part of America.”

Lastly, the Panama Summit demonstrated the crude side of official U.S. scheming. The Obama administration may be on a new course with Cuba and, having bowed to pressure, may have tolerated Cuba’s return to the OAS, yet old ways do persist. Somehow [Felix Rodriguez](#) and other rabid Cuban-American counter-revolutionaries received credentials as “civil society” representatives in Panama. That U.S.-employed agent of violence, murderer of Che Guevara, was there in no way as a messenger of peace.