

41

“Yankee Imperialism” and Spanish
American Solidarity: A Colombian
Interpretation



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"YANKEE IMPERIALISM" AND SPANISH AMERICAN SOLIDARITY: A COLOMBIAN INTERPRETATION

On August 16 last, the anniversary of Santo Domingo's independence, the Congress of Colombia offered the customary congratulations to the neighboring island republic with which the country has always maintained very close relations. As originally presented these resolutions embodied phrases that involved a third power—the United States. For this reason they deserve our careful attention.

In the Chamber of Deputies, the original resolution expressed the wish that Santo Domingo might speedily recover its sovereignty, "ground under the heel of a foreign military occupation." This expression and the prayer of the Senate that "circumstances that deprived our Sister Republic of its sovereignty should cease to operate" were struck out of the final resolutions. A like fate overtook the Senate provision that the Minister of Foreign Relations should address the message to the President of Santo Domingo, Doctor Henriquez y Carvajal, now living in self-imposed exile.

"A Shameful Silence", proclaimed Eduardo Santos next day, on the front page of *El Tiempo*. "Timidity or rather inexplicable cowardice," continued this frank-spoken, liberal editor, "marked the failure of Congress to protest against the further occupation of Santo Domingo." This was the blackest crime yet committed by "Yankee Imperialism" in Hispanic America. An iniquitous domination, he averred, which "simply appealed to violence, rough, implacable, cruel. Suppressing all liberties, impeding every manifestation of free thought, [it] employed machine guns to dominate a people who refused to sacrifice their independence". Under such conditions the colorless greetings from the Colombian Congress savored of sarcasm.

The bitterness of Santos was inspired by resentment against that imperialistic aggression which once despoiled his own

country. But Colombia's suffering had not surpassed the woe of Santo Domingo. The latter's president was driven from power and its officials were without their salaries, because they would not accept a treaty that subjected them to an American protectorate. In solemn procession their women folk had offered their jewels to maintain their hospitals and other public charities without the aid of the usurpers. Their touching protest, eloquently voiced by their archbishop, had finally awakened an echo even in the American House of Representatives. Argentina had sent a warship to salute the Dominican flag, pointedly ignoring that of the usurper. Even the Parliament of Spain requested Washington to release its former colony from servitude. Only Colombia, "mutilated and grieving"—Colombia that had once "felt the pains of solitude and of abandonment"—Colombia, unwilling to acknowledge that another people had suffered more than itself—did not "dare express sympathy for a people among whom all rights have been violated and all liberties refused recognition."

Santos is obviously too rhetorical to carry full conviction, but he bears a reputation in Bogotá for saying what he thinks. "Not thus", he stated, "does a people preserve its right to live. Infamous is the pathway of aggression and suicidal. A hesitating course is not only suicidal but humiliating, and by pursuing it, we lose everything, even honor. Precisely because danger threatens us are we prohibited from keeping silence when neighboring peoples fall victims of the evil we fear".

To the same effect, but with more caution, writes Armando Solano in *El Espectador*. Counseling neither submission nor hostility, he pointed out that the greatest cohesive force in America was the United States, with which Colombia needed closer relations. From that power alone could their country obtain the capital necessary for speedy progress. Tacitly or through timidity European nations forebore to dispute with the United States for economic hegemony in Hispanic America. The United States could greatly aid in their economic development, but more to the point it could teach them important lessons in moral orientation. "On its intimate side the North American

people are loyal, sincere, pure, and generous. Its fireside life is patriarchal; its sentiments are pious and just".

The editor pointed out the antithesis, all too familiar to Colombians, between popular ideals and official life. To officials in the United States, Colombia owed her grievous past injuries, but this should not prevent a "noble and spontaneous" friendship with the North American people. Such a friendship required no shameful manifestations of servility. "He who renounces his personality, and denies his history, his name, his antecedents, his ideals, loses voluntarily and necessarily the right to call himself another's friend. . . . Servitude, vassalage, protectorates, have their rules", but they are not the precepts of friendship. The United States wishes friends, not slavish admirers. Public opinion there promptly responds to the call of justice and of urgent need. Business men and college professors alike protested against the "crime of Panama", and if the people at large knew more of its details they would long since have forced suitable reparation.

It is a false interpretation of patriotism that requires Colombians to prostrate themselves before "Yankee Imperialism". The people of the United States wish their Hispanic American neighbors to be friends. "Its public men are trying to elevate South America through education, wealth, and public hygiene, because they need our cooperation, not our shameful and sterile hesitancy". Above all they will not rejoice to find under a slightly brunette complexion the spirit of African subserviency.

The editor of *El Nuevo Tiempo*, the leading conservative organ, evidently felt called upon to defend the course of Congress. The resolutions as at first presented, he stated, would have been acceptable in a political club or a newspaper, or even when expressed by individual senators and representatives. But the Minister of Foreign Relations could not address the exiled president of Santo Domingo, unjustly though the latter had been treated, as long as the Colombian government maintained official relations with the United States. On Bolivia's natal day the minister did not feel impelled to send the resolutions then adopted to her recently exiled president. Very properly,

therefore, the Senate modified the Santo Domingan resolution to conform to diplomatic usage.

This defense provoked from Santos a prompt reply. Under the caption "Worse than it Was", he pointed out that international usage certainly would not require the Colombian minister to send resolutions to an American naval officer who, "contrary to all right, law, and justice, persecutes the Dominicans and with violence and the barbarity of brute force suppresses every manifestation of free thought. . . . Miserable will be the lot of us weaker peoples when Latin American countries recognize this military usurper as chief executive of Santo Domingo".

Such recognition, he continued, would be "simply criminal and make us accomplices in the offense committed against that people". Bolivia did not represent a parallel case. Its own people had expelled their executive and replaced him with the man of their choice. The Navy Department of the United States dominated Santo Domingo and the original protests of the Colombian Congress against that control differed little in wording from the resolution of the North American House of Representatives. In attempting to excuse the shameful silence of the final resolutions, *El Nuevo Tiempo* assumes a worse attitude than the members themselves. Words fail to describe the condition of Colombia, if its people are unable to express their sympathy with neighbors whose sovereignty is violated. But they do sympathize with the Dominicans and therefore, he concluded, "let us fold up this page inspired by the unjustifiable fear of certain parliamentarians—this page around which the editor of *El Nuevo Tiempo* has written so strange a border."

That same afternoon Augustín Nieto Caballero continued the discussion in *El Espectador*. "In an idealistic people like our own," he stated, "one will always encounter an echo of protest against force or a fraternal word for the fallen, although neither one or the other answers any practical end, and both because of obvious conditions are simply platonic. Such a habit may seem inconvenient and may arouse prejudice against us, but it is a beautiful habit worthy of sympathy and respect".

After this characteristic and truthful introduction, he adds that Colombia can do nothing for Santo Domingo. The latter is "a sheep fallen into the jaws of the wolf", whose fate the great Powers seem tacitly to accept just as they sanctioned the plundering of Colombia. While it will not materially aid the tortured island to know that Colombians mourn its lot, the news that "a noble people of America accompanies its people in their *via crucis*" will create a salutary moral impression. For this a fraternal greeting by those members of the Colombian Congress who most "feel the fate of the captive isle" would have been sufficient.

Nieto Caballero acknowledges that Doctor Henríquez y Carvajal—"today an austere wandering Jew"—is a great American personality, before whom even the citizens of the United States uncover. He flatters the discernment of the North American people, but they should at least try to merit the courteous exaggeration. As for the resolution, he felt that it should not officially emanate from Congress nor pass through the ministry of foreign relations. In the United States Congress had expressed itself vigorously over Ireland, but the Secretary of State had made no untoward representations to the British Foreign Office nor had the administration recognized De Valera. As little could the Colombian government officially approach a president who was without office. This course was harsh but necessary if the country was to avoid continual bickerings with other powers or maintain with them any relations whatever.

In his answer Santos informed Nieto Caballero that Ireland had never been free, so her case afforded no parallel to that of Santo Domingo. Moreover, he published a protest issued in 1856 by the Minister of Foreign Relations of New Granada, Lino de Pombo. The country that later called itself Colombia did not then hesitate to express its opposition when the United States recognized in Nicaragua a government supported by the filibuster, William Walker. That, in Santos's concept, was "a marvelous note which condensed with insuperable grace the sentiments and well-being of the weak American nations. It is all there, and all its phrases apply to the present incident.

It is a page of gold which may be read with pride, when thinking of what we were, and with sadness, when noting what has occurred yesterday and today. It is a lesson from the past that we ought to receive with respect and it should teach us the only way a free people can proceed to a realization of its destiny".

"As *El Tiempo* recognizes we are in accord with that paper in acknowledging the outrages committed by Yankee forces in the island of Santo Domingo", calmly wrote the editor of *El Espectador* that same day. "*El Nuevo Tiempo* is likewise in accord with our colleague and ourselves, and so are all newspapers and probably all citizens. The unmerited woes of a sister people undoubtedly arouse in the innermost being of each the noble sympathy that affords consolation and the noble indignation against the oppressor which serves to stimulate the oppressed".

Nieto Caballero believes in a popular expression of this sympathy; Santos in an official one. Such official action, the former thinks, would render international relations impossible. The plight of Ireland shows how international law limits the champion of public faith. If Colombia must always hold herself ready to break a lance in the name of mere justice, then it makes no difference whether a people finds itself oppressed by internal factions or by alien hands; whether it belongs to the same race and inhabits the same continent as its would-be defender; whether it seeks autonomy or simply freedom from economic tutelage. He enumerates a list of quarrels that await Colombia in both hemispheres, if it essays the doubtful role of world justiciar.

Their country, as his editorial caption suggests, must preserve a "Sense of Proportion". A newcomer in the concert of nations, it must not pattern after Tunja's municipal assembly. That body once declared war against Napoleon III. because he invaded Mexico. The purpose was idealistic; the outcome laughable. Such would be the result of a quixotic declaration by Colombia alone concerning Santo Domingo. If the country really wished to do something worth while, let her ministers exert themselves to bring about a collective note signed by all the chanceries of the continent.

In his "Final Words" Santos resents the irony of his fellow editor, but he is not less bitter against the invader of Santo Domingo. No other independent country in Hispanic America, within the last half century, had been invaded by Yankee military forces, deprived of its sovereign authorities, and subjected to alien courts-martial. "This is the supreme outrage committed by Yankee Imperialism in Latin America. The loyal sons of the Dominican Republic struggle unceasingly to end that outrage, to terminate that scandalous occupation. We have asked that the Congress of Colombia might lift up its voice in behalf of their sacred cause and by so doing bring into relief the solidarity that should exist among sister nations, menaced by the same danger. We have believed that such a course was rigidly in accord with the principles of American international law and conducive to the well-being of all countries bordering on the Caribbean."

Such being the case, Santos continued, Colombia should not hold its peace, but should follow the worthy precedent set by Lino de Pombo, seventy-five years before, in protesting against acts that deprive free people of their sovereignty. This action, whatever the importance of the protesting nation, was the privilege of every continental state. But when Santos had reiterated this idea, he provoked only an ironical comparison with the humble municipality of Tunja. "Let the tiger eat us one by one", he bitterly concluded. "When the lot falls to a neighbor, we will maintain serene composure, so as to afford no occasion for laughing at our manifestations of indignation or surprise. If the fatal day arrives for us, let us take care not to ask aid or sympathy from people of our race, nor from any one, and certainly not from the God of Nations, who, it seems, is a decided partisan of the law of majorities."

Nieto Caballero regretted the other's resentment. After all, he observed the following day, they did not greatly differ in sentiment. The words of Santos do credit to his heart and character, but he should not employ them uselessly. A simple note from the Colombian minister would not in the least help Santo Domingo, but it might once more arouse against Colombia

the resentment that seemed to be disappearing, even in the Senate of the United States. A protest would have been in order when the occupation began. Made today, after the people of the United States have promised to restore the sovereignty of Santo Domingo and when, in the midst of a presidential campaign, they are condemning the policy that violated it, its only effect would be to arouse the hostility of the entire nation and defeat the pending treaty that means so much to Colombia.

The editor of *El Espectador* prides himself on his patriotism as truly as does his colleague. "We feel," he avers, "what he feels and if we were in a position to challenge the Colossus, we should favor the organization of an expedition to liberate Santo Domingo with the same romantic and beautiful ideals that inspired the Crusades. But as we are weak and for that reason unequal to such a task, we prefer to show our deep sympathy for our captive brothers by means of the press, without exposing our country in a most noble but imprudent manner to reprisals that we could not measure until it was altogether too late".

Nieto Caballero spoke wisely, but even his moderate phrases contain few words of approval for the United States. Most of his contemporaries, especially those of the comic press, were far less charitable. A popular cartoon represented Uncle Sam astride the Colombian Congress, appropriately in the posture of the ever-present mule, before whose nose, at a safe distance, dangled a tempting morsel labelled "Twenty-five Millions". The familiar *motif* in its immediate application seemed to hit the popular fancy, but the response shows no growing fondness for the United States.

Nor should this tendency surprise us. For more than six years, Colombia has patiently awaited the ratification of a treaty that promised partial recompense for the purloined Panama Railroad—not for the revolted department itself. On various pretexts the chief despoiler—who openly boasted that he "took" Panama—and his friends, have put off this simple act of justice. The petroleum interests, it is charged, have used the deferred instrument as a club, wherewith to fight unacceptable decrees. Possibly they have acted with some justification, but the sinister

connection between their protests and the failure of the Senate to consider the treaty has been noted by Colombian leaders—noted and deeply resented. Not by such methods will the great Northern Republic improve its reputation in Hispanic America.

We must realize that this newspaper controversy is not a mere sporting exhibit of journalism in Colombia. Few important questions arise there, in Congress or in the press, that may not be turned to the disadvantage of the United States. Legislators debate the possible forfeiture of a contract with the Santo Marta Railroad. Immediately the discussion turns to the United Fruit Company and its methods, projected as they believe by the American government. The unsettled boundary with Panama arouses fears for the mining district of Chocó, where Colombian gold and American currency circulate together with distressful ease. A great banking corporation with ramifications throughout the Republic is, they charge, only the precursor of political as well as economic subjection. The wave of prosperity coincident with its operations appears but a temporary measure to lull them into fancied security. The recent fall in the price of coffee, hides, and other staples, with the consequent slump in exports, unfavorable exchange, and general commercial demoralization, seems to confirm their fears. Even men of saner views and of innate courtesy do not wholly escape these forebodings.

It is high time that our people awoke to the significance of this propaganda. Its psychological effect on a potential market of five million people is not to be despised. But the mischief spreads through all Spanish America. We remember that during the late war Colombia was one of the few American powers that neither declared war nor broke relations with Germany. Now its statesmen are unceasingly agitating closer commercial relations with Chile and Japan—an obvious slap at ourselves. We can only blame our past folly, and above all the indirect intervention of 1903, for this unfortunate situation. That event caused other dirt to fly than its protagonist intended. Therefore the sooner we clear up the dispute the better for both

countries. At least, favorable action on the treaty will remove pretexts for further journalistic discussion such as we have summarized above.

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