

# The Bogotazo

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**SECRET**

*Distant events shape the craft of intelligence.*

## **Jack Davis**

On the afternoon of 9 April 1948, angry mobs suddenly and swiftly reduced the main streets of Bogotá to a smoking ruin. Radio broadcasts, at times with unmistakable Communist content, called for the overthrow of the Colombian government and of "Yankee Imperialism." Many rioters wore red arm bands; some waved banners emblazoned with the hammer-and-sickle. A mob gutted the main floor of the *Capitola Nacional*, disrupting the deliberations of the Ninth International Conference of American States and forcing Secretary of State Marshall and the other delegates to take cover. The army regained control of the city over the next day or two. But not before several thousand Colombians had been killed. It was the *bogotazo*.

The reaction in Washington was also dramatic and swift. Congressmen and commentators alike lamented that Communist Russia had scored a signal victory in the Cold War. The recently organized Central Intelligence Agency in particular was rebuked for having provided no warning of this "South American Pearl Harbor." And on 15 April the Director of Central Intelligence defended the Agency's performance, first before a congressional subcommittee investigating the failure of US intelligence, and then before the Washington press corps.

This article attempts to assess the impact of the *bogotazo* on the history both of Colombia and of the CIA. The passage of two decades is a mixed blessing in this undertaking by one who was not a participant. Some formerly disputed aspects of the affair seem clear in retrospect; other

aspects remain or have become murky. Those among the readers who personally experienced this dramatic episode, either in Bogotá or in Washington, are urged to transmit comments to the editors of the *Studies*, so that a more definitive account can be written for the history of the Agency.

## **Bogotá: The Aborted Revolution**

One thing now seems clear amidst the confusion that still surrounds the *bogotazo*; Colombia in 1948 was closer to social revolution than it has ever been before or since. The old order was under challenge from a forceful and extremely popular politician, Jorge Eli cer Gaitfin, and the poor in the cities, especially Bogotá, were in a rebellious mood. But it was the assassination of the one that turned on the dreadful violence of the other. No one else was able to harness the savage energy of the mob; certainly not the feckless Colombian Communists, though they tried. The government preferred to blame the riots on Communist agitation and foreign intrigue, rather than to address itself to the underlying causes of popular discontent. Today, some twenty years later, the same elite, somewhat expanded and more enlightened, still controls Colombia. Indeed the bogotazo has served as an antidote to revolution, because the ruling classes now tend to avoid the excessive partisanship and disdain for the welfare of the masses that helped set the stage for the rising of the poor on 9 April—"Black Friday"—1948.

Throughout nearly all its history, political and economic power in Colombia has been monopolized by a small elite which has ruled through either the Conservative or Liberal Party, or through some combination of the two. Leaders of national stature who attempted to organize the masses against the oligarchs were rare. Gaitán was one such. He was himself of humble origin and mixed blood. He was a staunch antagonist of oligarchical rule and a spellbinding orator. His keynote was "I am not a man, I am a people."

Yet by 1948 Gaitán had captured control of the Liberal Party, which was the majority party even without his broad personal following. Only a split of the Liberal vote between Gaitán and an oligarch nominated by the Party had enabled the Conservatives to capture the presidency in 1946.

Gaitán was a strong favorite to win the presidency in the election scheduled for 1950. His role as Liberal Party leader, naturally enough, somewhat curbed his license to attack the oligarchs of both parties.

The *bogotanos*, usually resigned to their poverty, had turned bitter in the years immediately following World War II. Times were bad; the rich made their clever adjustments, but, the poor suffered simultaneously from soaring prices and declining job opportunities. Also, in the usual pattern of Colombian history, the return of the Conservative Party to power in Bogotá in 1948 meant that its partisans in the hinterland, with the help of the army and police, were intimidating their Liberal counterparts. Early in 1948 Gaitán had addressed a rally of 100,000 in Bogotá and demanded an end to government persecution and violence.

The *gaitanistas* were angered still further by the fact that their hero had not been appointed to the Colombian delegation to the International Conference of American States which convened in Bogotá on 30 March. Moreover, Foreign Minister Laureano Gomez, to the Liberals the most feared and hated Conservative leader, had been selected to head the Colombian delegation and thus had been "elected" president of the Conference. There is evidence that some supporters of Gaitán, apparently with his knowledge and perhaps mild encouragement, were considering the possibility of a *coup d'etat* for 1948. This probably reflected their awareness of the growing popular discontent and their doubts that a fair election would be held in 1950. In any case Gaitán's murder on 9 April also put to death a potentially revolutionary moment and the *bogotazo* was no more than its wake.

The assassination took place on a downtown street as Gaitán was walking to lunch. The murderer was apparently one of those fanatics or psychopaths we say may never be excluded from calculations on the safety of dignitaries. His motives cannot be known for certain, for he was battered to death on the spot by frenzied bystanders. Inevitably, charges were raised of the complicity of the Conservative Party, of the Communists, and of the US. But no strong evidence of a political plot has ever been produced.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally enough the outraged populace of Bogotá was convinced that the Conservatives were the culprits, and its vengeance was directed primarily toward the Party's symbols, though also toward those of the oligarchy generally. Laureano Gomez's newspaper building and his suburban estate were destroyed. The mobs that attacked the *Capitolio*

were looking for Laureano (though they were also shouting anti-US slogans). Cathedrals and priests as well as public buildings and commercial establishments were made targets, because the Church was associated with both the Conservative party and the old order.

What of leadership? Gaitán's stalwarts gave the mob some early political direction, hoping to topple the government. The red arm bands were the traditional symbol of the Liberal Party. The Communists had long planned to disrupt the Conference but before the assassination had attempted nothing risky or substantial. After the start they also did what they could to enlarge the disorders and to give them a political direction. From time to time they gained access to the microphones at radio stations captured by rebel forces. Through the Soviet Embassy they also had access to clandestine stations and to printing presses. But the Communists were neither strong enough nor popular enough to take command. Gaitán had stolen most of their thunder through his own populist appeals. In terms of both radio time and street leadership the bogotazo was mostly a *gaitanista* affair. In any case, frenzy and drunkenness soon diverted the mob from its interest in political vengeance and revolution, to violence and looting as ends in themselves.

There were many foreign radicals in Bogotá at the time, to advertise their causes in the publicity extended to the Conference of American States. Fidel Castro, then 22 years old, happened to be one of them. Thorough investigations indicate that he played only a minor role. Castro subsequently reported that he tried to turn the mob into a revolutionary force, but was defeated by the onset of drunkenness and looting. The episode may have influenced his adoption in Cuba in the 1950s of a guerrilla strategy rather than one of revolution through urban disorders.

Most of the police in Bogotá were pro-Liberal and *gaitanista* in their political loyalties. Many joined the mob or handed over their arms soon after the rioting began. In contrast, the army, slowly augmented from provincial barracks, stood by the government. The soldiers followed the orders of their officers and shot volley after volley, point blank, into the crowds. This—together with the steadfastness of the Conservative president, the growing concern of many Liberal leaders about the anti-oligarchical nature of the affair, and the unwinding of the mob's fury—brought a sharp reduction in violence within a day or two. But continued sniping, dislocations brought on by a general strike, and a dispute over the burial site for Gaitán kept the capital city unsettled for another week.

Events in the outlying cities were much less significant, though not devoid of drama. Some Communists were able to raise the Soviet banner over the town hall of Barranquilla. Apparently it took but one army officer to tear it down. Liberal partisans gained control of Cali temporarily. A presumptuous group of local Communists then declared the establishment of the "Soviet Socialist Republic of Colombia." Here too the army swiftly reestablished government control. The officer in charge was the then obscure Colonel Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, whose effectiveness and devotion to duty were duly noted in Bogotá.

As it turned out the *bogotazo* probably had its most lasting impact on the countryside. Political violence involving feuding Liberal and Conservative bands, never completely absent in Colombia, had been increasing in tempo since the return to power of a Conservative government in 1946. (The Liberals previously had ruled since 1930.) In the period before April 1948, the Conservatives, with help as we have indicated from army and police, had been getting the best of it. With the news of the *bogotazo*, Liberal partisans struck everywhere with fury. But soon Conservative bands had better arms and were able to retaliate. Rural warfare reached a new high level known as *La Violencia*, which was to claim more than 200,000 lives in the following decade. This remarkable bloodletting, stimulated by the *bogotazo* and nourished by the deeply rooted feuds between Conservatives and Liberals, also reflected the hard times economically, the attractiveness of violence as a way of life for many peasants, the ineptness of the government, and the senseless factionalism of the country's more civilized politicians.

The inability of the civilian leaders to curb either the rural violence or their own bitter political disputes opened the way for Rojas Pinilla, now a general, to take control as military dictator in 1953. He made progress in reducing rural warfare; but by 1957 his regime had become so arbitrary and corrupt that he was put out of office by the oligarchy and the military establishment. The former in particular feared Rojas' efforts to organize a mass anti-oligarchical party. In 1958, to curb such tendencies and to preclude future *bogotazos*, the civilian leaders set up a remarkable coalition government called the National Front that has prevented Liberals and Conservatives from competing for office directly.<sup>2</sup> They have over recent years considerably curbed their partisanship, and worked, with modest success, toward improved conditions for the poor. The National Front is scheduled to run to 1974. Another *bogotazo* is possible; but for the moment there is no

revolutionary leader of stature, and the poor, while perhaps discontented, are not seething.

## Washington: The Aborted Investigation

The Washington reaction to the Bogotá riots was heavily influenced by the initial responses in Colombia of the Conservative government and of Secretary of State Marshall. The Colombians charged that both the assassination and the riots were parts of a "premeditated movement inspired by Communists and undesirable foreign elements" to sabotage the conference. Marshall reported to the press that the riots had been Communist—inspired and as such were an extension to the Western Hemisphere of the tactics of subversion and violence that the Soviet Union was employing in Europe. He insisted that the conference continue in Bogotá (as it did), so that international communism would be denied a victory over the free countries of America.<sup>3</sup>

In 1948—the year of the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, of concerted Communist drives to gain power in France and Italy, and of the beginning of the Berlin blockade—a deliberate Soviet extension of the cold war to the Western Hemisphere was indeed a credible phenomenon to many US observers. The following is from a *New York Times* editorial (April 14):

"Backing up the findings of the Colombian Government, Secretary of State Marshall and other delegates to the Inter-American Conference have now likewise accused Soviet Russia, and its tool, international communism, of instigating the riots that wrecked Bogotá and cast a pall over the whole Western Hemisphere. Basing their judgment on first-hand information and personal observation on the spot, they see in the tragic events which interrupted their deliberations the same powers and patterns at work as in the attempted insurrections in France and Italy. And that makes Bogotá, as Mr. Marshall said, not merely a Colombian or Latin American incident but a world affair, and a particularly lurid illustration of the length to which Russia is willing to go in its no longer (cold war) against the democracies."

The US reaction to the *bogotazo*—in particular the talk of an intelligence failure and the search for a scapegoat—was conditioned not only by cold war jitters but also by election year politics. The Truman administration was already under attack from its Republican adversaries for, among other things, being inept and naive in the ways of combatting Communism. Governor Dewey, campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination, had been attacking Truman for the shortcomings of the recently-established Central Intelligence Agency even before the Bogotá riots. Then on 12 April he let loose the following blast:

"If the United States had the adequate intelligence service it should, it would have known about Communist plans for the Bogotá uprising in advance. Knowing what goes on in the world is just as important as knowing how to handle it. The Panama Canal is vital to our security. Yet because of the dreadful incompetence of our present government, we apparently had no idea what was going on in a country just two hours bombing time from the Panama Canal.

"During the war the United States had the finest intelligence service operating all over South America under J. Edgar Hoover. After the war Mr. Truman ordered the entire service discontinued. He cut off our ears and put out our eyes in our information service around the world."<sup>4</sup>

Dewey's attack in good measure reflected the prevailing attitude in this country toward the role of intelligence organizations. The shock of the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent wartime emphasis on prediction of enemy attack led many Washington observers to believe that all crises should be predicted in advance. Thus, only a grievous intelligence failure would have caused us not to have had prior warning of the Bogotá riots (especially insofar as they were part of a well-planned Communist conspiracy).

At least several congressmen thought so, including Rep. Clarence J. Brown (Republican, Ohio). On April 10, the day after the riots, Brown urged an investigation of the intelligence community by the House Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments. This committee had sponsored through the House the National Security Act

of 1947 under which CIA had been established. Brown let it be known that he intended to call first Admiral Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter, Director of Central Intelligence, and then representatives of the State Department and of the military intelligence services.

At this point the motives, actions, and interactions of participants become private and complicated. Hillenkoetter made some abortive attempts to quash the investigation. He apparently also became convinced that the CIA record on the matter was a good one. He discussed strategy with President Truman who apparently encouraged him to confront the congressional critics with the CIA record. Truman and his political advisors, *qua* Democrats, may have decided that such a course might strip Governor Dewey of a political issue and redound to the credit of the Administration as well as of the Agency.

In any case Hillenkoetter did appear on 15 April before an executive session of a special subcommittee of the Committee on Expenditures. Representative Brown, chairman of the subcommittee, opened by stating that it was authorized to investigate the CIA to "learn whether the Secretary of State and other high officials were promptly warned that a revolution was impending in Colombia, and that their attendance at the Bogotá Conference might endanger their lives and bring embarrassment to the United States."

From his hard charging testimony the Admiral appeared to be anything but a reluctant witness. He rebuked his critics by stating that CIA had known of "unrest in Colombia" and of the "possibility of violence and outbreak aimed primarily at embarrassing the American delegation and its leaders," and that this information had been transmitted to officials of the State Department.

He then read excerpts from classified CIA intelligence reports, based on information received from agents in Bogotá during January-March 1948. These talked of Communist plans to demonstrate against and block the progress of the conference. Some of the reports indicated that at least one advisor to Gaitán was an advocate of social revolution and was in contact with Colombian Communists and the Soviet Embassy.

Hillenkoetter in his testimony charged that Embassy officials in Bogotá had blocked the transmission to the Department in Washington of a key report. He said that this report, dated 23 March, indicated "confirmed information that Communist-inspired agitators will attempt to humiliate

[the] Secretary of State and other members of [the] US delegation ... by manifestation and possibly personal molestation," upon their arrival in Bogotá. (This would of course have taken place late in March.)

This was a period of endemic wrangling between State and CIA. Some Department officials believed that the Agency was trying to build an "empire" abroad; Agency officials for their part resented State's reluctance to provide cover for Station personnel and the interference of ambassadors with the transmission and dissemination of CIA reports. Thus, Hillenkoetter may have raised the issue of interference to spark congressional support for the Agency's position. Also, the Admiral apparently felt that he had erred in not disseminating this particular report (which had been transmitted to CIA Headquarters) on his personal authority as Director of Central Intelligence, and he may have wanted to present the facts of the case to the congressional investigators in the most favorable light.

In any case, his charges served to give the critics of the administration a new target for attack in the Bogotá affair—the State Department. Representative Brown made a big point of the interference issue at the hearings (and subsequently before the House and at press conferences). He said that Congress in establishing CIA had not intended for State to have the power of veto over Agency reporting and that he would work to see that the will of Congress prevailed on the matter. State, moreover, was now subjected to criticism from Brown for not having called off the conference after being warned by CIA of pending disorders.

Then, after the executive session, someone called in the press, perhaps Representative John W. McCormack (Mass.), the only Democrat at the hearings. And Hillenkoetter at the subcommittee's direction read his testimony—complete with excerpts from top secret reports and charges against State—to reporters at dictation speed.

State reacted the same night with its own news briefing. The State spokesman cited classified reports from the Bogotá Embassy warning of possible disorders and molestations of delegates during the Conference. The State reports were more general than the CIA documents but covered similar ground. The Department said that Secretary Marshall had known of these warnings before his departure, and had brushed them aside with "salty remarks," stressing that it was "quite ridiculous to suppose that the twenty-one American republics should even consider

being intimidated by the protestations of one kind or another from Communists, or anyone else." State made it clear it had received no warnings of assassinations or major rioting.

The story—of explanations, charges, and countercharges complete with release of classified information—became the lead item in major newspapers around the country on 16 April. That afternoon, for the benefit first of the House of Representatives and then of the Washington press corps, Representative Brown repeated his charges of an intelligence fiasco, now directing his fire mainly against the Administration and the State Department. The story thus again got prominent newspaper coverage on 17 April. Next came a period of weeks during which editorialists, political columnists, and radio commentators turned their attention to the story. Officials of CIA reported that the more perceptive journalists came around to supporting its role in the affair. Officials at State made the same claim.

When Secretary Marshall heard of the rousing events in Washington he ordered an end to the public dispute between State and CIA, and to the airing of classified documents. His authority was sufficient to have his will prevail, though he probably was aided by growing embarrassment among senior White House advisers and leaders of Congress. The Brown subcommittee never reconvened—despite the Chairman's public statements that he planned to call witnesses from State and the military intelligence organizations, and even Marshall himself when he returned to the country. Marshall's success in continuing the conference despite the devastation of Bogotá and in obtaining a resolution condemning international Communism soon produced news stories of US diplomatic successes and decreased attention to charges of intelligence failures.

## Inside CIA

As dramatic an event as the *bogotazo* was in the first year of the Agency's history, it is difficult, twenty years later, to point with confidence to any specific impact on the course of affairs. Admiral Hillenkoetter was convinced that the Agency's record of warning was a good one, and a number of critics were disarmed by his testimony. Yet some within the Agency appear to have reacted as if the Bogotá affair

had indeed been an intelligence failure, or at the least a warning of institutional vulnerability to charges of not having adequately forecast one or another crisis. The bogotazo thus appears to have been one event—perhaps a pivotal early event that led to a strong emphasis in reporting upon "beating the newspapers" on any story of crisis involving Communists. One veteran observer speaks of a "Bogotá syndrome," that is, an extraordinary concern with early warning of crises and emphasis on the Communist angle.

There apparently was soul searching on the intelligence side of the house as well. The Office of Reports and Estimates (so remembers one veteran) had discussed in staff meetings the possibility of disorders during the conference. The consensus was that the Colombian government would be able to control the disorders, and no warnings were published in the monthly *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States*, or in other serials or special reports. The *bogotazo* may have produced considerable pressure for greater attention to the publishing of warnings of possible crises, especially those with any Communist connection. Considering the Cold War atmosphere at the time and the mandate of the collectors to concentrate on Communist affairs, such developments on both sides of the Agency were probably inevitable, with or without the stimulus of the *bogotazo*.

The *bogotazo* may have been one factor (doubtless a minor one) leading to the establishment in 1950 of the Board and Office of National Estimates. Some observers and commentators during 1948 concluded that the Bogotá affair revealed weaknesses in the analysis and coordination of intelligence that exceeded in importance any weaknesses in collection. The Eberhart report to the Hoover Commission (i.e., the Report of the Committee on National Security Organization to the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government), of November 1948, made this point without specific reference to Bogotá:

"The greatest need in CIA is the establishment at a high level of a small group of highly capable people, freed from administrative detail, to concentrate upon intelligence evaluation. The Director and his assistants have had to devote so large a portion of their time to administration that they have been unable to give sufficient time to analysis and evaluation. A small group of mature men of the highest talents, having full access to all information,

might well be released completely from routine and set to thinking about intelligence only. Many of the greatest failures in intelligence have not been failures in collection, but failures in analysing and evaluating correctly the information available."

The assassination of Gaitán was very probably a private and irrational act and, as such, an unpredictable event. To that extent, so was the *bogotazo*.<sup>5</sup> Yet a closer understanding of Colombian politics at headquarters *might* have produced far greater concern about the attitudes of Gaitán and his devout followers, and less about the plans of the small and far from bold Communist forces. Secretary Marshall, however, would probably have dismissed warnings of political tensions as summarily as he did warnings of Communist disorders.

This is not to say that at the time all bands within CIA were attributing too much importance to the Communists as a factor in Latin American instability. The 12 May 1948 issue of the *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States* presents an analysis which has withstood the test of history:

"The disturbances which interrupted the Bogotá Conference are more properly attributable to the basic political and economic tensions prevalent in Latin America than to international Communist conspiracy. Without question the Communists were conspiring to embarrass and discredit the Conference, and they were quick to seize the opportunity afforded by the outbreak of violence. That outbreak, however, was clearly the spontaneous reaction of Liberal partisans, already on edge as a result of acute political tensions and party violence, to an assassination no doubt erroneously attributed to the Conservative government."



There are perhaps some lessons in the bogotazo for assessing contemporary crises in Latin America:

(1) When a critical situation is as fully developed as was the case in Colombia in 1948 (i.e., the presence of a rebellious popular mood, of a virile radical leader, and of reports of coup plotting), the intelligence community with its current resources on Latin America will almost certainly be tuned in generally. Complex problems of timing and interpretation, however, will probably still rise.

(2) The actual moment that gives birth to revolutionary violence or to violence without revolution will often depend on a chance combination of circumstances and will thus be largely unpredictable.

(3) Many potentially revolutionary situations will not produce social revolutions; strong leadership with broad popular appeal will almost always be an essential ingredient.

(4) Assessing the role of Communists in a revolutionary situation takes special care; their noise and dramatic presence may not be based on much actual strength and popular appeal.

(5) Finally, an outbreak of violence, even of dreadful violence, need not permanently weaken the reigning regime.

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## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1 The assassin was identified as Juan Roa Sierra. The Colombian police indicated that he was seeking revenge for a relative slain by an Army officer, who had been acquitted on 8 April on the strength of a legal defense by Gaitán. A subsequent government-sponsored study of the affair by Scotland Yard agents does not mention this story, but pictures Roa as a mystic with delusions of grandeur who had sought a political appointment from Gaitán and had been given a run-around.

2 Among other features, the office of president is rotated between the parties and the congress is divided equally between them.

3 Within a few days after the riots the Colombian government began reporting that the assassination had been a non-political act. In time

Marshall indicated that he believed that the Communists had taken advantage of the disorders but had probably not directly initiated them.

4 From a report on the speech in *The New York Times*, 13 April 1948.

5 Richard L. Stokes, in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, 17 April 1948, attributes the following to a State Department official: "Only Superman and Steve Canyon combined could have learned that, at 1:15 p.m., on April 9, six blocks away from the meeting place of the conference, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán would be shot to death by a personal enemy named ... Sierra. Such pinpoint predictions of acts virtually unpremeditated are beyond the power of any human intelligence service."

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