

# Consolidating Power: The Making of Modern Colombia After the Panama Debacle

Jorge L. Sarmiento

After more than eighty years as a part of Colombia, the Republic of Panama declared its independence on November 3rd, 1903.<sup>1</sup> To this day, the memory of this loss continues to haunt Colombian historiography. When analyzing the Panama controversy, Colombian historians and political scientists tend to agree on the fact that this was one of the most important events in Colombian history. However, their reasons for attributing such importance to Panama's secession differ; some focus on the strategic territorial loss, while others highlight the change it incited in Colombian foreign policy. Nevertheless, the immediate loss of revenue, as well as the economic chaos and restructuring that affected the Colombian government, are two of the few facts around which there is an established consensus.

Another point of agreement is that the United States' economic hegemony played a fundamental role in the separation of Panama from Colombia and furthermore, that this intervention was an imperialist act.<sup>2</sup> I hope to unsettle the latter. Although it is tempting – and certainly not out of fashion in the popular press – to present Colombia as the victim of U.S. imperialist ambitions, this view is problematic in certain respects.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ernesto J. Castellero and Enrique José Arce, *Historia de Panama* (Panamá: R. de P, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> Teresa Morales de Gómez, *Historia de un despojo: el tratado Urrutia-Thomson, Panamá y el petróleo* (Bogotá, D.C.: Editorial Planeta Colombiana 2003)

<sup>3</sup> Enrique Santos Molano, *1903, adiós Panamá: Colombia ante el Destino Manifiesto* (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2004).

Analyzing U.S.-Colombian relations and their consequences through an anti-imperialist lens takes away agency from the smaller actor and obscures other consequences of Panama's secession. The role of the United States is certainly a force that has shaped Colombia's history; however, it is not the only one, and I would argue, not the most important one when it comes to the aftermath of Panama's secession.

Panama's separation did more than bring economic doom and political shame to Colombia. The political and economic consolidation of the Colombian nation-state were facilitated by this international incident. To explain this assertion, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of what nation state means. In fact, a critical reading of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* provides a helpful framework with which to analyze the development of the nation and nationalism that is essential to understand the Colombian situation. Although Anderson's analysis is helpful, when applied to Spanish America, it has a major shortcoming: it fails to account for the intra-national economic divisions that became problematic later on as the new republics tried to consolidate their power. A look at what became of Bolívar's Gran Colombia is enough to realize that vice-royal territorial divisions, print capitalism, and a sense of otherness are not enough to account for Spanish-American state formation. Even as a smaller political unit, Colombia still struggled to become a 'nation' and to create a strong state. The most salient example of this state of affairs is the Panamanian secession, which proved just how weak the Colombian nation-state was until that point.

It is equally important to highlight several key aspects of the politico-economic situation in Colombia between 1810, when it first attempted to gain independence, and 1902, which marked the end of Colombia's last civil war. This is necessary in order to demonstrate that there were more important factors at play, other than U.S. imperialism, which contributed to Panama's separation. At this point, the role of the United States in the conflict will be considered to present a holistic picture of Panama's secession in 1903. Once this has been established, the aftermath of Panama's secession will be analyzed, beginning with Rafael Reyes's presidency in 1904 and culminating with the ratification of the Thompson-Urrutia Treaty in 1921. The treaty settled any pending issues between Colombia and the United States regarding Panama's secession. In this last section, the paper intends to demonstrate the strengthening of the 'nation-state' both as a result of economic development that was national – rather than regional – in scope and of nationalist political rhetoric that U.S. intervention prompted. With this in mind, I hope to reset the traditional anti-imperialist narrative given that its limited scope renders it inadequate for any analysis of the consequences of Panama's secession. By presenting Colombia solely as a

victim of empire, Colombian historiography obscures, perhaps intentionally, the way in which the centralist Bogotá elite used the aftermath of the secession to finally consolidate its power.

### **Inside Colombia: 1810-1902**

With a history of territorial disconnect and internal conflicts, Colombia as a fragile whole had not confronted the changing continental economic reality – increasingly dominated by the United States – until Panama's secession in 1903. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Colombian political landscape was characterized by civil war and internal strife as members of the Liberal and Conservative parties competed for the control of national politics.

In order to demonstrate just how fragmented Colombia really was, it is important to talk about a period that historians have come to identify as *la Patria Boba* (the Foolish Fatherland). Traditional Colombian historiography identifies the *Patria Boba* as the period between 1810, when Colombia first declared its independence, and 1816, when the Spanish led a temporarily successful effort to re-conquest.<sup>4</sup> This period is identified as 'foolish' because of the fact that during those four years, internal squabble within neo-Granadine territory did not permit the formation of an organized resistance to maintain independence. According to David Bushnell, the situation was somewhat inevitable given New Granada's topography and the distribution of its population. He maintains that, "geographic separation thus came to reinforce all the basic socioeconomic and cultural differences among major regions, and the result was an intense sectionalism that vastly complicated the first efforts at political organization."<sup>5</sup>

One must pay careful attention to the denomination of the conflict within the territory of New Granada as 'sectionalism.' As such, it implies a certain unity that has been broken, or sectionalized, and this can be used as a tool to justify the existence of the Colombian nation. This is evident in Bushnell's work when he speaks of the "internal disunity" that led New Granada to declare independence in a "piecemeal fashion," meaning that different provinces declared independence at different times, culminating with the establishment, in 1811, of a "general government of sorts under the United Provinces of New Granada."<sup>6</sup> This traditional history creates a scholarly body of work that traces the

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<sup>4</sup> David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

existence of the Colombian nation to the very beginning of the wave of independence movements that swept across Spanish America. It is equally important to note what this history does not do: it does not mention that the rivalry within the different provinces in the Viceroyalty of New Granada was caused by forces greater than topography alone. As historian Alfonso Múnera points out, Foolish Fatherland is an all-inclusive term that implies the false notion that the internal disunity within what today is Colombia was a result of the inexperienced elite that led the independence movement.<sup>7</sup>

The misleading nature of the concept becomes clear when one considers that during the *Patria Boba*, the governing junta of Cartagena de Indias – arguably one of the most important commercial and military centers of the Spanish Empire – established the independent Republic of Cartagena of the Indias, wishing to remain autonomous from Bogotá (in the province of Cundinamarca).<sup>8</sup> A closer look at the differences between Cundinamarca and Cartagena – and the subsequent conflict between them – is essential to understand the regionalism that has been such a salient characteristic of Colombian history. With disparate economic realities and dissimilar social make-ups, the early dispute between Cartagena and Cundinamarca marked the beginning of Bogotá’s long and arduous nation-building mission.

One of the most important contributing factors to the opposition between Cartagena and Bogotá was the distinct nature of their economies. Because of its location in the Caribbean, Cartagena served as one of the busiest ports in Spanish America.<sup>9</sup> The Cartagena merchant elite organized the Commerce Consulate of Cartagena, which advocated for free trade in the Caribbean Sea and pushed particularly for trading wheat flour from the United States. The Caribbean elite’s economic project was a direct threat to the economic growth of Bogotá and its surroundings. As an important agricultural center, this region of Colombia cultivated wheat and other staples. Cartagena’s project would jeopardize the relative economic stability of the Andean region.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the conflict that emerged between Bogotá and Cartagena during the period of independence was not a result of simple political inexperience but rather the clash between two regions with distinct economic priorities that necessitated different policies.

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<sup>7</sup> Alfonso Múnera, "El Caribe colombiano en la república andina: identidad y autonomía política en el siglo XIX" (*Caribbean Studies*, 29 (2): 1996), 213-237.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>9</sup> Miguel Malagón Pinzón, "El Consulado de Comercio de Cartagena" (*Revista Estudios Socio-Jurídicos*, 3 (2): 2001), 51-57

<sup>10</sup> Múnera, "El Caribe colombiano," 220.

Society too proved to be an important barrier for the integration of these two regions. Cartagena was a crucial port for the importation of African slaves and this led to the development of a population that was heavily made up by people of African descent. This was in sharp contrast with Cundinamarca, where the population was more homogeneous and the majority of inhabitants were the descendants of Spaniards.<sup>11</sup> In Cartagena, racial mixing eventually gave birth to a prominent mulatto merchant class. Political activity there was “dominated to a great extent by mulattos and negroes” whose freedom within the new political order was guaranteed.<sup>12</sup> This, however, did not sit well with the ideological currents of the time, when people of color were seen as inferior and many argued that tropical climates were not conducive to the development of civilization.<sup>13</sup> Political leaders in Bogotá were very outspoken about their disdain, referring to mulattos and blacks in the Caribbean coast as savage and undisciplined. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the inhabitants of the province of Cartagena were so determined in their mission to maintain autonomy. In Múnera’s terms, “Cartagena’s independence effectively eradicated the possibility of peacefully integrating both provinces under one nation.”<sup>14</sup> Both provinces remained independent from each other until the Spanish dealt a decisive blow from which Cartagena never truly recovered. Bogotá opted to let the province fall to make it easier to impose control from the Andean capital.

Unlike traditional historiography maintains, the Colombian nation was not truly a nation since its beginning. The ruling classes of several provinces had very different projects in mind that, as demonstrated, pitted those within the ‘nation’ against each other. Cartagena and Bogotá were by no means the only provinces with differing economies and societies. Nevertheless, theirs is an iconic example of the pervasive disunity that has characterized a significant portion of Colombia’s history. By 1821 – only a few years after the *Patria Boba* – an army led by Simón Bolívar managed to liberate all of the Viceroyalty of New Granada, which included modern-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama and the Mosquito Coast in present-day

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<sup>11</sup> Ardila Urrego and Miguel Angel, *Intelectuales, estado y nación en Colombia: de la Guerra de los Mil Días a la Constitución de 1991* (Bogotá, D.C.: Universidad Central, Departamento de Investigaciones, 2002), 62.

<sup>12</sup> Múnera, “El Caribe colombiano,” 229

<sup>13</sup> Urrego, *Intelectuales, estado y nación en Colombia*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Múnera, “El Caribe colombiano,” 222.

Nicaragua.<sup>15</sup> The Province of Panama later issued a decree by which it officially joined Gran Colombia, Bolívar's dream republic. Recall the 'piecemeal' fashion with which Bushnell described Colombia's independence. This stands in sharp contrast with the notion espoused by some Colombian historians that Panama was an organic part of Colombia.<sup>16</sup> Since writing a history is a crucial endeavor for the creation of a nation-state, the existence of such narratives is not unexpected. However, it is certainly surprising that one hundred years after Panama's secession, some historians continue to promote the notion of a Colombian nation-state beyond the borders of the current one.

The Gran Colombian experiment went ahead, with internal disunity and regionalism making an appearance once again. With a weaker Cartagena, the protagonists of this second clash were the elites of Bogotá and Caracas as the engineers of independence sought to create a unified political entity out of the newly liberated territory.

Despite great efforts to set up this new republic, Gran Colombia was doomed since its official establishment in 1821 by the same debate between federalism and centralism that affected present-day Colombia throughout much of its history. Under the authority of Francisco de Paula Santander, Gran Colombia underwent a series of liberal economic, educational, and religious reforms. Discontent throughout Ecuador and certain sections of Venezuela caused by those reforms precipitated a constitutional convention during which Venezuelan General Antonio Páez declared Venezuela's independence, followed shortly by Ecuador.<sup>17</sup> The resulting constitution was approved only in the provinces of New Granada and Panama. They went on to write yet another constitution in 1832, when the Republic of New Granada was officially established.

The republic of New Granada was divided into sixteen provinces that largely obeyed the territory's topography. The difficult topography and the precarious state of the economy made it extremely difficult to move from one province to the other. In some cases, it was even difficult to move within provinces.<sup>18</sup> Even with fewer regions to worry about after Gran Colombia's disintegration, the Neo-Granadine state struggled to maintain its hold over a vast territory that was not easily navigable. Flirtation with federalism kept alive the provincial hopes of a more

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<sup>15</sup> Navarro Figueroa, *Dominio Y Sociedad En El Panama Colombiano (1821-1903): escrutinio sociológico*, (Panama : Impresora Panama , 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Gustavo Montañez, "El Istmo de Panamá y Colombia: de Puente natural a juego geopolítico de la unión" in *Colombia y Panamá: la metamorfosis de la nación en el siglo XX* ed. Heraclio Bonilla and Gustavo Motañez, (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2004), 177 – 200.

<sup>17</sup> Bushnell, *The making of modern Colombia: a nation in spite of itself*, 70 – 72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

autonomous government that would allow each one of the provincial elites to pursue their interests. In this newly established Republic of New Granada, one could speak of the existence of the Colombian state only because of the constitution.

Economic integration proved even more difficult. The provinces in the interior continued to be distinct from those in the Caribbean where (instead of agriculture) trade was the means of subsistence. Given the difficult topography of the nation, the Republic of New Granada was more of a collection of provinces rather than a unified state. Because of the poor state of the economy, the state had basically no means with which to actively enforce and oversee the creation of a stronger state. The nation was conspicuous by its absence.

The period between the creation of the Republic of New Granada (1832) and the separation of Panama from the Republic of Colombia in 1903 show this. Within this timeframe, the fragile State experienced seven civil wars and two name changes, a situation so grave that it resulted in the temporary secession of provinces like Cauca and Panama, among others.<sup>19</sup> After its final and deadliest civil war, The Thousand Day's War (1899-1902) centralism became, once and for all, the underlying premise of the Colombian state. This structure would also become that of the nation.<sup>20</sup>

As evidenced by this overview of the ninety-two years encompassed between 1810 and 1902, the Colombian state was characterized by its weakness and its consistent inability to maintain the central government's authority vis-à-vis the differing interests of its provinces. The end of the Thousand Days' War, showed the vulnerability "of the concept of a Colombian nation, with a political system that did not have the capacity to negotiate the most urgent problem of the country's international agenda: devising a treaty whereby the United States acquired the rights to build, through Colombian territory, a canal that would join the Atlantic and Pacific oceans."<sup>21</sup> This demonstrates that

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<sup>19</sup> Arango de Restrepo and Glora Mercedes, "Estado Soberano del Cauca: asociaciones católicas, socioabilidades, conflictos y discursos político religiosos, prolegómenos de la Guerra de 1876," in *Ganarse el cielo defendiendo la religión: Guerras civiles en Colombia, 1840-1902*, ed. Luis Javier Ortiz Mesa et al. (Medellín: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2005), 329.

<sup>20</sup> Brenda Escobar Guzmán, "La Guerra de los Mil Días vista a través de las memorias," in *Ganarse el cielo defendiendo la religión: Guerras civiles en Colombia, 1840-1902*, ed. Luis Javier Ortiz Mesa et al. (Medellín: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2005), 250.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Fischer, "Antes de la separación de Panamá: la guerra de los Mil Días, el contexto internacional y el canal," (*Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de Cultura* 25, 1998), 73. Translation mine.

the concept of a Colombian nation-state did not exist since the first declarations of independence in 1810. Furthermore, the problems of integration faced during the *Patria Boba* and again during the existence of *Gran Colombia*, albeit nuanced, exhibit a certain degree of thematic continuity. The relative geographic isolation of each province made it difficult to undertake a nationalizing project, exacerbated by the lack of government revenue. The role of historians in creating the Colombian nation-state needs to be emphasized once again. Throughout the years, they have provided the country with a history of unity that, as demonstrated, was not the case. Many of the works were quick to blame the United States and failed to recognize that the state was not very present in Panama, and that there were many other factors that were (at best) problematic in order to maintain Panama as a part of Colombia.<sup>22</sup>

### Global Geopolitics and Panama

The Province of Panama did not prove easier to integrate into the Andean republic, whatever its name was. In fact, before it declared its independence once and for all in 1903, the province had already entertained the idea four times. The last attempt, in 1840, lasted a year, after which the commercial elite agreed – under the promise of greater independence to set economic policy – to be a part of the Republic of New Granada.<sup>23</sup> Panama’s population and weather were not very different from that of Cartagena. Therefore, it is not surprising that the rulers in Bogotá were not too preoccupied with the province itself if one keeps in mind the social ideologies previously discussed.

Panama did not represent much, economically or socially, for the government in Bogotá. During its brief period of independence in 1840, Panama had approached Great Britain with the hope to either become a

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<sup>22</sup> “Much has been written about Panama – its canal, and its separation from Colombia – around the world. But very little has been written in Colombia, for it seems like Colombians have refused to systematically analyze this regrettable event... There are only three works that study this incident panoramically and systematically. Alvaro Rebolledo’s Book, *Reseña político-histórica del Canal Interoceánico*, published in 1930., Antonio José Uribe’s *Colombia y los Estados Unidos*, and Oscar Terán’s *Del Tratado Herrán-Hay al Tratado Hay-Bunau-Varilla* [...] Without a doubt, these are inspired by the highest sense of Colombian patriotism. However, they are at fault for lacking the impartiality and objectivity that such an analysis calls for, and that cannot be asked of any of its authors: Rebolledo belonged to a generation that was too close to the drama, Uribe participated in it and Terán was one of the antagonists” –Eduardo Lemaitre, *Panama y su separacion de Colombia*, (Bogotá : Banco Popular, 1972), 2-3. Translation mine.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 – 32.



part of the British Empire. Although Panama's elite later integrated the province back into New Granada, the idea of a possible British intrusion did not sit well with Santander's government in Bogotá.<sup>24</sup> This led Santander to search elsewhere in a preventive effort to protect New Granada's sovereignty.

Serendipitously, the United States was expanding to the West, thereby making transit through the isthmus a necessity as it exploited the mineral resources in California.<sup>25</sup> A treaty with New Granada proved most convenient. First of all, passage through the isthmus would significantly cut the distance traveled by sea to the West Coast (the alternative was around Cape Horn). Second, U.S. engagement in the region would check the ambitions of the British. It was this set of circumstances that led to the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty of 1846. Through this treaty, the Republic of New Granada granted the United States significant transit rights over the isthmus. In exchange, the United States was to guarantee New Granada's sovereignty and property rights over the isthmus as well as its political neutrality.<sup>26</sup> This treaty was the start of the stormy relationship between Colombia and the United States that ended in a highly publicized international incident.

The negotiations between New Granada and the United States worried a British Empire that still had Caribbean ambitions. It was in the spirit of avoiding future confrontation over such a crucial waterway that the United States and Great Britain signed the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, whereby they agreed that undertaking the building of a canal would only be considered as a joint enterprise between the two powers.<sup>27</sup> The strategic position of Panama had become evident to the largest world powers.

Two events in 1869 clearly showed for the united states of both Colombia and America that a canal must be built through the isthmus. First, there was the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the U.S.; this dealt a devastating blow to the isthmian economy that had, up until then, depended on the transit of Americans and their merchandise. The Colombian government realized that a canal had to be built to restore economic prosperity to the region. The second event was the completion of the Suez Canal; the United States government was newly determined to build a canal through the isthmus that would not only

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<sup>24</sup> Andres Celestino Arauz and Patricia Pizzurno Gelos, *El Panama colombiano (1821-1903)*, (Panama: Primer Banco de Ahorros y Diario La Prensa de Panama, 1993), 127-128.

<sup>25</sup> Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Araúz and Pizzurno, *El Panama colombiano*, 130.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

facilitate American expansionism but also keep British economic rise in check; or at least compete with it.<sup>28</sup> In order to justify its constant – and sometimes unwanted – interventions in Colombian territory during the many civil wars, the United States used the clause of the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty that called for the United States to maintain the neutrality of the isthmus. The Colombian government was eager to renegotiate a treaty in order to avoid further unwanted intervention. Renegotiation attempts failed, and the lack of a new agreement meant maintaining a status quo that the Colombian government was no longer willing to accept; it sought France as an ally. However, the French enterprise failed and that, coupled with a British Empire focused in Asia, left the United States as the only nation with enough capital to build the canal as well as the desire to build a hemispheric economy that rivaled that of Britain. The interest of the United States in the canal became even greater in 1898 when the U.S. acquired Guam, the Philippines, and Hawaii.<sup>29</sup> Because Great Britain had a vested interest in total control of the Suez Canal, it was not difficult to renegotiate the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty with the United States. This meant that negotiations between Colombia and the U.S. could start.<sup>30</sup> The treaty that resulted from these negotiations was the Hay-Herrán Treaty, which granted the United States rights over a zone of the isthmus to build the canal. One of the most controversial stipulations of that treaty was that it granted the U.S. perpetual rights over the canal zone. This, among other things, led the Colombian government to reject the treaty, a measure that the Panamanian elite, the Frenchmen, and Theodore Roosevelt did not appreciate. The secessionist voices in Panama became louder, arguing that as a part of Colombia Panama was economically doomed. A confluence between French entrepreneurial interests, Panama, and Roosevelt's resolve proved stronger than Colombia's sovereignty and on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1903, just a year after the end of the Thousand Days' War, Panama declared its independence. The Colombian government sent troops to put down the rebellion but the Panama Railroad Company refused to transport them to the other side of the isthmus.<sup>31</sup> Two days after the secession, the U.S. government recognized the new republic and a treaty quickly granted the U.S. perpetual rights over the canal zone. Panama was lost.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>29</sup> Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Araúz & Pizzurno, *El Panama colombiano*, 285.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 288 - 292

## After Panama's Separation: The Birth of Colombian Nation-State, 1904-1921

Until Panama's secession, Colombia had maintained a colonial infrastructure that was adequate for a colonial economy of imports and exports rather than for fostering a unified national market.<sup>32</sup> Although it is not certain whether or not this concern was already being discussed by the government before Panama's secession, its aftermath provides ample evidence that Colombian leaders wanted to focus on reshaping the economy in order to establish a strong state. Rafael Uribe Uribe, a notable Colombian general and intellectual, observed that:

“Without a squadron, without an army, without industries, and without diplomacy, we lack all that is necessary to ensure that a country is heard in the international arena. It can almost be said that such a country loses the moral right to autonomy in the midst of countries that are strong and civilized.”<sup>33</sup>

The words are harsh, but they show that he, like many others in the government in Bogotá, were aware of Colombia's challenges in the international arena. Sparked by Panama's secession, the central government knew that it had to take action in order to prevent other provinces from following Panama's example. The changes that Colombia underwent from 1904 to 1911 were crucial for the creation of the nation-state that the Bogotá elite had longed for.

Starting with President Reyes in 1904, the national government undertook reforms that, although modest, were veritable efforts to build a strong state and the capacity to build an imagined community (or at the very least, prevent the secession of other provinces). During his presidency, Reyes aimed to empower the central government and build a national economy at the expense of the regional economies that fractured the state. One of the first things he did was change the way in which public administrators were selected. For the first time, Reyes required that the candidates show expertise in the area of policy that they expected to be a part of. Another move to expand the power of the central government was the nationalization of the slaughter tax. His government also sought to stabilize Colombian currency, which suffered an inflation rate of 2,500 percent. This effort to maximize the government's solvency was undertaken partly to finance an infrastructural expansion. The

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<sup>32</sup> Darío Mesa, “La vida política después de Panamá, 1903 – 1922” in *Manual de Historia de Colombia: Tomo III*, ed. Santiago Mutis Durán (Bogotá, Círculo de Lectores, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Uribe Uribe, quoted in *Ibid.*, 95. Translation mine.

process of funds allocation for public infrastructure, mainly railroads and roads, was also streamlined to give more power to central government.<sup>34</sup> In a country prone to civil war, it is perhaps unexpected to see the implementation of such centralist reforms. Indeed, it is worth noting that these reforms encountered resistance from many who did not wish to see their regional autonomy reduced. However, the majority of congress agreed to Reyes' reforms because they were aware that if something was not done, secessionist tendencies in other parts of the country could become a reality. Reyes went farther than expected, dividing certain departments in order to prevent the concentration of power at the regional level, which led to the disruption of traditional regional allegiances.<sup>35</sup> Finally, a central bank was re-established in order to regulate the fragmented monetary markets that existed in the country.<sup>36</sup>

Reyes recognized that the economic resources with which to carry out infrastructural reform were limited. Therefore, he also took steps to ensure that Colombia was once again attractive to foreign investment. Among other things, he resumed service of Colombia's foreign debt, and accepted most the creditors' demands. Although Reyes's dictatorial powers were controversial, his decision to negotiate a treaty with the United States for the loss of Panama was even more polemical. He was aware that normalizing relations with the United States would open Colombia once again to American investment. However, Reyes encountered insurmountable opposition with regards to this, and by 1909 he had to leave office.<sup>37</sup> Although his presidency was slightly unconventional, in the words of historian Darío Mesa, "Reyes explained Colombia's problem as two-fold: first, building the material foundations of the modern State to then exercise as much State sovereignty as those foundations permitted."<sup>38</sup>

Though implementing reforms motivated by Panama's secession, Colombian government officials rarely discussed the incident.<sup>39</sup> One

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>36</sup> Carlos Eduardo Valencia, "Los costos fiscales para Bogotá de la pérdida de Panamá" in *Colombia y Panamá: la metamorfosis de la nación en el siglo XX*, ed. Heraclio Bonilla and Gustavo Motañez (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2004), 177 – 200.

<sup>37</sup> Bushnell, *The making of modern Colombia: a nation in spite of itself*, 160

<sup>38</sup> Mesa, *La vida política después de Panamá, 1903 – 1922*, 118.

<sup>39</sup> Such reforms included the redistribution of Colombian states, renamed departments, which were broken up in order to debilitate "the power of these territorial, subnational entities in order to avoid separations like Panama's". Montañez, "El Istmo de Panamá y Colombia: de Puente natural a juego geopolítico de la unión." 150.

historian has noted that, “paradoxically, after Panama’s separation, the governing elite was more interested in allowing the incident to fall into obscurity... They opted instead for silence, promoting a subtle national amnesia with regards to that subject.”<sup>40</sup> The silence was broken in 1911 at the University of California, Berkeley, where ex-president Roosevelt made controversial remarks that brought the Panama incident to the center of the international spotlight. In his speech, Roosevelt asserted, “*I took the Canal Zone*, [my emphasis] and let Congress debate, and while the debate goes on the canal does also.”<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt also wrote an editorial for *The Outlook* in October 7, 1911 in which he described Colombia as “utterly incompetent to perform the ordinary governmental duties expected of a civilized state,” described its government officials as “a succession of banditti,” and further justified his actions by claiming that the U.S. “did harm to no one save as harm is done to a bandit by a policeman who deprives him of his chance of blackmail.” The controversial public conversation that ensued was not very consequential in the sense that it did not help Colombia regain lost territory. However, the controversy did have a very important effect: it was a factor that helped legitimize – nationally and internationally – the existence of a Bogotá-led Colombian nation-state that had struggled to exist for almost a century but was now well on its way to building a strong state. Partially because of Panama’s separation, several key political differences were resolved, leading to a peaceful period in which capitalism expanded largely due to coffee exports.<sup>42</sup> The humiliation of losing national territory made it evident to Colombian politicians that internal strife could lead to more territorial loss, and that was a price they were no longer willing to pay.

Panama’s separation represented a flagrant disregard for Colombian sovereignty and a significant loss of revenue. As expected, Colombian government officials rushed to qualify Roosevelt’s remarks as an imperialist affront. Francisco Escobar, the Colombian Consul-General for the United States, immediately wrote a letter to Roosevelt which was published by the *New York Times* and other newspapers. Although certainly scathing towards Roosevelt, certain passages provide us with a glimpse of the complicated relationship between Colombia and the United States:

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<sup>40</sup> Montañez, 199.

<sup>41</sup> Anonymous, 1911. “*I took the Isthmus*”; *ex-President Roosevelt’s confession, Colombia’s protest, and editorial comment by American newspapers on “How the United States acquired the right to build the Panama canal.”* New York: [M.B. Brown Print. Co.].

<sup>42</sup> Charles Bergquist, “Panamá y los orígenes sociales del imperialismo norteamericano,” in *Colombia y Panamá: la metamorfosis de la nación en el siglo XX*, 177 – 200.

Sir: former presidents of the United States have stepped down from the highest position attainable by mortal man to again become private citizens of this great Republic, and have carried with them ... the dignity of their office and the respect of their fellow-countrymen. You have elected a different course and ... have forfeited the consideration due to the high office you once held. You can now pretend only to such respect as you as a man deserve. I say this to make it quite clear that I am addressing you as an individual, and do not wish to reflect either upon the Government or the people of the United States, for whom I have the deepest respect and regard ...

In default of argument, such is the unseemly language [presented above] you use to justify the rape of the Isthmus and refute the oft-repeated charges that you deal unfairly with Colombia; that you violated a public treaty [Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty] ... as to permit your friends who were interested in the Panama Canal Company to put through their \$40,000,000 deal ... that you prostituted the navy of the United States to the same end ... You hurl insults and slanders at the unfortunate country that you robbed of her most valuable possession...

In the introduction, Escobar takes care to make it clear that he is insulting Roosevelt and not the government of the United States. However, it is important to keep in mind the reforms that the Colombian government was trying to achieve. Although President Carlos Restrepo was now in power, he was just as committed as Reyes to continue strengthening the Colombian state. The fiscal reforms encouraged by Reyes did create more revenue, but the expansion of the national infrastructure envisioned by the president still required foreign investment. The weight of this consideration is evident in the consul's letter. By explicitly stating that he does not mean to insult the U.S. government, he is avoiding detrimental consequences for Colombia's relationship with the United States.

Another salient characteristic of Escobar's letter is the language with which he victimizes Colombia. In addition to referencing rape, he speaks of Roosevelt's unfair treatment towards Colombia, which is described as an unfortunate victim of robbery. Based on the state of the Colombian economy, the country did not have the means to go to war against the United States. The only option left was to take the United States to the Permanent Court of Arbitration and allow international law to do justice by the "raped republic." The United States never agreed to arbitration. Under those circumstances, there was little that the Colombian government could do but assimilate its loss.

Despite the fact that Colombia did not recover its territory, one must be careful to not dismiss the consequences of the 1911 debate. In

fact, a New York Times editorial read, “Why arbitrate a dispute as to which any just tribunal would certainly find against us? ... There are a great many people of the United States who would like to be able to look South America in the face without blushing.”<sup>43</sup> Together with the strengthening state, the international recognition of Colombia’s complaint legitimized the Colombian nation both to its inhabitants and around the world. The United States – partially seeking to ameliorate its image in Latin America and partially seeking to exploit Colombia’s coffee, oil, and other agricultural goods – sought to normalize relations with Colombia in 1914. This effort was welcomed by Restrepo’s administration. In the resulting Thompson-Urrutia Treaty, Colombia would agree to recognize Panama’s sovereignty in exchange for \$25 million in compensation, the right to transport its military through the canal, and the right to transport commercial goods through the canal subject to the same fees as the United States.<sup>44</sup>

Before the U.S. government was able to ratify this treaty, World War I started and American participation delayed its ratification. The Thompson-Urrutia Treaty was finally ratified in 1921, which brought a much-needed cash injection to Colombia. The fact that Colombia had access to the canal drastically altered economic patterns in its Pacific coast and the Valle del Cauca regions. Here, coffee exports benefited relations with the U.S., because access to the canal meant quick access to the American markets.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, transportation costs decreased further thanks to the new railroads funded by the Colombian government. This prompted the emergence of new economic patterns that, coupled with the other reforms, reduced economic regionalism in the country.

The efforts to consistently attract American investments were motivated by both the desperate economic situation of the country and the desire to acquire enough economic capital to actually build a nation-state. These efforts defined, for the first time, the foreign policy of the nascent Colombian nation-state. Given Colombia’s internal problems, its foreign policy was rather limited. It is true that there was commerce with Great Britain, the United States, and France, among others.<sup>46</sup> However,

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<sup>43</sup> Anonymous, 1911. “*I took the Isthmus*”; *ex-President Roosevelt’s confession, Colombia’s protest, and editorial comment by American newspapers on “How the United States acquired the right to build the Panama canal.”* New York: [M.B. Brown Print. Co.].

<sup>44</sup> Morales de Gómez, *Historia de un despojo: el tratado Urrutia-Thomson, Panamá y el petróleo*, 115.

<sup>45</sup> Montañez, *El Istmo de Panamá y Colombia: de Puente natural a juego geopolítico de la unión*, 151.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Pepper, *Report on Trade Conditions in Colombia* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907).

the most notable acts in the international sphere had to do with the Panama Canal, starting with the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty in 1846. It was then that the Colombian government started trying to organize its foreign policy.<sup>47</sup> In fact, several political scientists of different backgrounds have identified Panama as the guiding factor of Colombian foreign policy citing that year as a starting point.<sup>48</sup> However, it isn't until Panama's secession that an identifiable effort to build an organized foreign policy is conceived.

This what political scientist Martha Ardila argues in *¿Cambio de norte? Momentos críticos de la política exterior colombiana*. In her book, Ardila argues that Panama's loss was a catalyst in Colombian foreign relations as there was an effort to organize a policy that was, up until then, poorly defined. Ardila argues that Colombia has been in a position that she terms "active subordination." She characterizes the period from 1914 to 1930 as a pragmatic effort to approach each other almost entirely for economic reasons: the U.S. looking for raw materials, Colombia for foreign capital with which to push forward its project to build a modern nation-state (proyecto modernizador del Estado).<sup>49</sup>

This distinct form of Colombian foreign policy has been identified by Colombian academics as "réspice polum," looking towards the North Pole. In her description of this period, Ardila maintains Colombia's foreign policy in terms of an economic exchange – one where the United States has the economic capital Colombia needs to modernize. This reality drives foreign policy towards the northern neighbor. Although her analysis provides a helpful frame with which to understand this "opportunistic" view, it is narrow insofar as it excessively treats the State as an actor, which at some point lessens the responsibility of individual policy makers in Colombia. The policy of réspice polum was driven by the Bogotá elite that, as has been demonstrated, needed to build a nation-state. Additionally, the growing influence of the coffee producing elite, which would certainly benefit from an increasing relationship with the United States, was another factor driving the foreign policy decisions of Colombian presidents and diplomats.

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<sup>47</sup> Benjamín Ardila Duarte, "El área económica en las relaciones internacionales," in *Revista Credencial Historia* (Bogotá, Colombia. Edición 220. Agosto de 2006).

<sup>48</sup> See Stephen J. Randall, *Colombia and the United States: Hegemony and Interdependence* (Athens, G.A.: University of Georgia Press, 1992) and Martha Ardila, *¿Cambio de norte? Momentos críticos de la política exterior colombiana*. (Bogotá, Colombia : UN, Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> Ardila, *¿Cambio de norte?*



Although Colombia's access to the Panama Canal altered many of the regional economic patterns that were once damaging for national unity, the influence of exports on the nation's economy was ever increasing. The coffee-growing elite had a growing influence in Colombia's foreign policy as they looked to expand coffee's international market. This displaced earlier regional conflicts with different economic dynamics within the country. The development of Colombia's foreign policy can be seen as one more step towards the establishment of the Colombian nation, this time in the international arena.

The period of 1904 to 1921 was crucial not only for the economic development of the state and a defined foreign policy but also for the development of the 'model' Colombian citizen. By 1903, Bogotá's failure to create a nation-state was evident. Thus, the same time period in which the government oversaw the emergence of the Colombian state also oversaw the foundation of the nation. The ideology of the time viewed white as the desirable race. Panama, mostly inhabited by blacks and Native Americans, never really had a place in the national image of the Bogotá elite. Panama's separation made Colombia slightly more homogenous, and thus easier to imagine as one nation.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, Colombian intellectuals continued to attribute part of the country's woes to its racial make-up. In his book *Fronteras imaginadas: la construcción de las razas y de la geografía en el siglo XIX colombiano*, Alfonso Múnera describes the way in which the Bogotá ruling class envisioned the Colombian citizen. Citing a prominent Colombian intellectual, Múnera shows how the elite viewed Bogotá as the cradle for the best elements of civilization. This of course meant that the ideal Colombian citizen under Bogotá's leadership was white and 'civilized,' a concept that marginalized other groups within the nation while at the same time forcing them to be a part of it.<sup>51</sup> It was during this period of time that the image of the Bogotano prevailed in the Colombian imaginary as the ideal citizen, an idea reinforced by Bogotá's increased dominance of the state since 1904. This is, once again, evidence of a silencing of sorts that served a nation-building purpose.

Given the historiographical trajectory of the nation state, it may seem surprising to hear historians like Gustavo Montañez say that, "the greatest loss from Panama's separation was human, Panamanians themselves, whose talent, cultural diversity and potential is

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<sup>50</sup> Bushnell, 154.

<sup>51</sup> Alfonso Múnera, *Fronteras imaginadas: la construcción de las razas y de la geografía en el siglo XIX colombiano* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2005).

unquantifiable.”<sup>52</sup> On a superficial level, his statement represents the development of racial tolerance and appreciation for diversity that characterized the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, his work, one hundred years after Panama’s separation, is still reluctant to accept Panama’s loss. Indeed, he goes as far as suggesting that both countries should “owe each other a second chance and should start thinking about Colombia and Panama as one country.”<sup>53</sup> This pervasive unwillingness to accept Panama’s separation as definitive speaks to a body of work that imagines a nation-state beyond its capacity to govern.

## Conclusion

Neither the nation nor the state is organic. Therefore, the nation-state is not organic either; instead, it is built by groups of people who make a conscious effort to define what the nation state is and is not. In the process, certain characteristics become a part of the national image while others are excluded from it. This is certainly the case for Colombia, which, despite gaining definitive independence from Spain in the 1820s, had consistently failed to establish a nation-state until after the separation of Panama in 1903.<sup>54</sup> The loss Panama was largely an imperialist affront orchestrated by the United States. However, the fact that the idea resonated within the Panamanian elite so long after Colombia’s independence from Spain is further evidence of the Colombian nation-state’s failure.

Colombian historiography, even today, continues to victimize Colombia in 1903. The subsequent years, until 1921, are presented as a period in which the country had no choice but to seek the United States in order to ameliorate its economic problems. This narrative is

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<sup>52</sup> Montañez. *El Istmo de Panamá y Colombia: de Puente natural a juego geopolítico de la unión.* In *Colombia y Panamá: la metamorfosis de la nación en el siglo XX*. Edited by Heraclio Bonilla and Gustavo Motañez, 149.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 153. Original quote: “Parece cuestión de simple dignidad histórica que nuestros pueblos ensayen una segunda oportunidad y comiencen a pensar que Colombia y Panamá puedan volver a ser un solo país en el futuro.”

<sup>54</sup> “La separación de Panamá fue un hecho inequívoco que demostró el fracaso del Estado Colombiano y de sus gobiernos en relación con la búsqueda de alternativas viables y dignas para el asunto del canal. Fracásó el Estado porque en los términos de su significación formal, en aquella época, una de sus funciones fundamentales era el mantenimiento de la unidad territorial. [The separation of Panama unequivocally demonstrated the failure of Colombian state and its government in relation to the search for viable alternatives for the canal project. The state failed because, in the terms of its legal responsibilities, one of its fundamental functions was the maintenance of territorial unity].” Montañez, *El Istmo de Panamá y Colombia: de Puente natural a juego geopolítico de la unión*, 151.

problematic because, in portraying Colombia as a victim, it obscures the fact that Panama's separation facilitated the consolidation of power in Bogotá at the expense of other regions in the country. While it is true that losing Panama to unrestrained imperialism highlighted the absence of a strong nation-state, this phenomenon, in and of itself, is not necessarily a guarantee of future political unit. In Colombia's case, Panama's secession meant that the province that could rival Bogotá for control of the state was out of the union, effectively leaving the Andean capital as the unrivaled center of power in the country.

Determined to not allow another secession to happen – an idea certainly entertained by other provinces – the government in Bogotá spearheaded a series of reforms meant to consolidate its power and dismantle the ever-disharmonious influence of regional concentrations of power. This change was further facilitated by the opening of the Panama Canal and the subsequent normalization of relations between the U.S. and Colombia by means of the Thompson-Urrutia Treaty. These helped the Colombian state acquire the revenue necessary to build a modern state while altering the economic landscape of the country in a way that eased regional tensions between Bogotá and the rest of the republic. Colombia was the victim of empire; but its ruling class used the confusion that ensued to secure the nation-building project that it had been unable to maintain until then. Without Cartagena, without Caracas, and without Panama to resist, the Colombian nation-state was built from Bogotá. However, when the country as a whole is viewed as a victim, it is difficult to point to the actions of the central government as a steady effort to neutralize rivaling regions. Instead, the government's actions are written into history as somewhat heroic, ignoring the fact that in the process of building a nation-state in the image of Bogotá, other regions in Colombia continue to be marginalized.

Although American imperialist intervention as it regards Colombia and Panama has been amply discussed, the power shift that allowed the Bogotá elite to once and for all lead the nation-building project has not received much attention. Given the scope of American imperialism, this project may perhaps help raise questions about the consequences of American intervention in other countries.

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