

THE REFORMULATION OF PEACE

By Eduardo Posada

“Look at this carnival of hawks which we have.” said the poet Juan Manuel Roca to Maria Mercedes Carranza. And he added: “Rhetoric of peace of the Pastrana government, we have now turned to a rhetoric of war”.¹ According to Roca, we all seem to be “happy, as if we were playing “little Tommy went to war”. Are we in Colombia in fact “happy” all of us, in this carnival of hope? How do we show it? Is there a rhetoric of war in government discourse today? How it is expressed?. Roca gives no examples. His assertion, shared by some in Colombia and abroad, need urgent examination.

Let us begin by the idea of a carnival of hope, a nation popularized in some circles with the results of the presidential elections, interpreted by many as an overwhelming expression of a mandate for war. Here there are several mistakes, and some superficial interpretation of the mind of the electorate.

First and foremost there is a trend to confuse the desire for security and the need of state of authority, with a supposed policy of “total war”. A great majority of Colombians certainly favor the attitude of an armed fist with the armed groups. Indeed, recent opinion studies indicate that 55% of Colombians want the President to insist on an “negotiated outcome”.² Weeks prior to the election, as was suggested in the third major survey made by the media, the candidate Alvaro Uribe was seen as “the best leader on the road to peace”.³

This leadership towards peace can take a number of roads. One of them was that which had been proposed in recent years, and was a frustrated journey through the process promoted by the previous administration. Its main elements -which have come to be called the negotiating model- where negotiation without a cease fire; a generous agenda, to redesign society; open dialogue without conditions; an extensive militarized zone for dialogue; and to the accompaniment of the international community.

We must again repeat that this negotiating model adopted by the government of president Pastrana was accepted by broad and important sectors of public opinion, when his government began in 1998.⁴ Only in mid 2001 did an alternative discourse seem to appear and by January 2002 it was generally recognized that the model, was in its death throes.⁵ However, one year after the process had begun, criticism was still limited. From the

¹ “We live here floating on our forgetfulness” La Conversacion, La Revista, El Espectador, 24 August 2002

² El Tiempo 24 June 2002

³ El Tiempo 3 May 2002

⁴ For a more detailed review of the continuity of Pastrana’s peace process and the dominant climate of opinion regarding peace in recent years, see Eduardo Posada, Malcolm Deas and Charles Powell Los principios de la paz (Bogota, Libros de Cambio Alfaomega 2002)

⁵ Any reading of the press would confirm this See for example >El Tiempo leader 14 January 2002. Sergio Fajardo “A new opportunity” ELÑ Colombiano 13 January 2002; Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo “The last gasp of the Caguan” 13 January 2002.; statements by Noemi Sanin and Horacio Serpa in Cambio, 13 January 2002.

academic world, a few and exceptional voices were heard. Among politicians, and from another point of view, Alvaro Uribe began to lead the dissenters.

According to Alberto Pombo, co-director of the magazine *Cambio*, President Uribe would be “a forward who would be difficult to mark, forcing the other side to change their tactics very quickly”. “The first shot” had been made in his inaugural speech “*in which he came out with a message of conciliation and negotiation with the armed groups* (my italics), when his enemies were expecting a right-wing flame thrower”. Perhaps. But this message of conciliation and negotiation referred to by Pombo did not “come out” in the inaugural speech. It had been expanded by candidate Uribe almost from the first moments of his campaigns. Let us review the elements of conciliation in that speech. There, the new President recalled that he had asked the UN Secretary General “for the good offices of the institution, to seek useful dialogue”. But he set conditions: we should “start from a relief for society” -the cessation of hostilities- as a framework explore “humanitarian solutions which would release kidnap victims, which will arise from agreements which see a definitive peace as something possible”. Previously, in the same text, he had indicated the nature of the government proposal “democracy is our offer for guns to be replaced by politics, and democratic security will be the instrument for politics to be practiced without arms, and with the right not to be killed”.⁷

A brief review of interviews, articles and speeches of the then candidate Alvaro Uribe would quickly show that in his inaugural message, the President only reconfirmed what he had already been saying throughout his campaign. In a “conversation” with former minister Fernando Cepeda on 8th October 2000, Uribe was already appealing to international mediation, and made specific reference to the United Nations as “the organ universally competent to protect citizens of any country in the world”.⁸ There he also opposed negotiation of the “National Agenda” with “irregular groups”, and expanded his proposal for peace in two stages: One, cease fire; and two, with no said term, demobilization and reinsertion. In return, the state would undertake with reforms, to provide all democratic security, so that when they practice politics they would not be killed. That reciprocity which the country must give to the regular groups for them to lay down their arms is the guarantee that they are going to practice their politics in a pluralist framework”.⁹

⁷ For an early criticism see the essay of Jorge Orlando Melo “Peace, a Utopian reality?” in *Semana*, 13 December 1999. See his subsequent paper “Negotiating processes, a strategy against peace?” *Medellin* 30 July 2001. For a criticism of the negotiation of a substantive agenda with the guerrillas see Marco Palacios in Francisco Leal ed *Los laberintos de la guerra* (Bogota, January 1999). See also in that book the essay of Malcolm Deas who warns of the need for minimum conditions, some “principles” for any negotiation with the guerrillas.

⁸ I have used the version published in *El Heraldo*, 8 August 2002- The text of the speech can be consulted in www.presidencia.gov.co

⁹ Despite the reiteration of the proposal to resort to the United Nations, made so early on, there were expressions of “surprise” when on the afternoon of his election, Uribe confirmed that he was willing to go to the UN in order to explore ways of reopening talks. Some even said that this was an “about-turn” in his program. Such “surprises” and interpretations suggest the poor quality of follow-up of political speeches. See my article “An announced mediation” *El Tiempo* 14 June 2002

As candidate, Uribe was very cautious in the use of words. “I have never spoken of war”, he said in an interview to *Cambio* on 26 August 2001: “my proposal has always been for order and democratic authority. For the FARC: a reasonable cessation of hostilities, international observation... and a flexible term for agreements for the laying down of arms and demobilization, generous reinsertion and the construction of democratic security by the State, in order to prevent former guerrillas from being killed”.¹⁰ And in another interview in *El Tiempo*, a month later, he again said: “Let us not talk of war. The Army is an expression of the state of law. They do not wage war. They fulfill a mission of authority which dissuades war. They have produced a containing effect on the violent groups, without which the violent groups would not negotiate.”¹¹

He made the same suggestion explicitly in the speech in which he launched his campaign on 21 March 2002: “authority does not wage war, and does not give up dialogue. The authority of the state protects citizens, dissuades the violent, and always creates conditions of peace. Let the men of violence make a hope in their road, suspend their terrorism, and make a cessation of hostilities possible, so that people may regain their peace of mind. I am not a friend of negotiating the social agenda at gun point, because this is a denial of democracy; but I offer the men of violence democratic security for them to practice politics without the gun, and without being killed, so that we may broaden our ideological pluralism”.

In Uribe’s rhetoric regarding conflict, we frequently find the expressions “the will of law”, “the state of law”, “transparent forces of law and order”, “legitimate authority”, “democratic security”.¹² Uribe did not close the door on dialogue with the “irregular armed groups” or the men of violence, either as candidate or as president. He has indeed demanded, as the above quotations show conditions for dialogue: the cessation of hostilities and terrorist acts, and international mediation. He has expressed his opposition to negotiation of the social agenda. He has in exchange offered to create the conditions so that they can lay down their arms, and reinsert themselves in the political life, with the central tool of his program: “the construction of a concept of democratic security can become our great offer to the guerrillas”.¹³

To suggest that we have turned towards a “rhetoric of war” therefore does not seem to me to be right - at least, this alleged hawkish rhetoric is not evident in the discourse of Uribe. It also does not seem to me to be correct nor fair to identify the climate of opinion today as “a carnival of hawks”. I believe that it would be more appropriate to refer to “the

¹⁰ In several previous articles for FIP I have quoted this interview which I believe contains some of the central points of Uribe’s program, which would be repeated during the campaign. “The guerrillas cannot impose reforms” *La Revista, El Espectador* 8 October 2002. For the subsequent detailing of these points see for example his interviews in *El Espectador*, 230 March 2001, *Cambio* 26 August 2001, *El Tiempo* 4 February 2002, “Desayunos de Votebien.com” date unknown, in the book of Oscar Collazos *EL poder para quien* (Bogota 2001); in his speeches to the Banking Convention in June 2001; to SAC, 8 November 2001; and to his campaign team when launching his candidacy on 21 March 2002.

¹¹ “No paras, no guerrillas” *Cambio*, 26 August 2001

¹² *El Tiempo* 4 February 2002

¹³ I have examined notions of authority and democratic security in earlier articles for FIP. See www.ideaspaz.org

reformulation of the peace process” as Fernando Cepeda has recently said.¹⁴ This re-thinking aims for a minimalist definition of peace, in contrast to the maximalist, utopian and almost anti-democratic notion which had been imposed in recent years. And a re-evaluation of security, as the basis of social order.

One may or may not agree with these ideas, with the validity of the presidential program, or the measures the government takes to put it into practice. But a constructive debate of opinion on the future of the nation -of achievable peace, together with the survival of democracy and freedoms- will demand that we abandon such a simplistic argument, so much in passion judgment, and begin to appreciate the meaning of the new answers in words. Above all, without greater conceptual clarity, we will refer from having any certainty of the correction which the government will take, and the climate of opinion which will accompany it, with regard to new politics to deal with the armed conflict.

¹⁴ See his article “The start of the Uribe presidency”, in www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis.asp