

OUR GUERRILLAS, OUR SIDEWALKS

A Journey into the Violence of Colombia, Second Edition



Herbert Braun

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HERBERT BRAUN

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Oxford

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Published in the United States of America
by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
A Member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowmanlittlefield.com

P.O. Box 317, Oxford OX2 9RU, United Kingdom

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Originally published in 1994 by the University Press of Colorado

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

The University Press of Colorado edition of this book was previously catalogued by the Library of Congress as follows:


Braun, Herbert, 1948—
Our guerrillas, our sidewalks : a journey into the violence of Colombia / Herbert Braun.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Gambini, Jake, 1932—Kidnapping, 1988. 2. Hostage negotiations—Colombia. 3. Guerrillas—Colombia. 4. Violence—Colombia. I. Title.

HV6604 .C72G363 1994
364.1'54'09861—dc20

94-33877

ISBN 0-7425-1859-0 (alk. paper)
ISBN 0-7425-1860-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Printed in the United States of America

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

This book is based on a number of different sources: (1) taped interviews that I conducted with the protagonists during the week of Thanksgiving 1988, three weeks after the events described herein came to a close; (2) my notes taken during the events, including taped recordings of all but one of the telephone conversations that served as the basis of the negotiations with the Colombian guerrillas; (3) interviews with leaders of the guerrilla movement conducted by journalists and published in Colombia; (4) a Colombian government-sponsored report on contemporary forms of violence intended for wide public distribution; and (5) newspaper reports and magazine articles published in Colombia and in the United States that I read while the events were taking place and shortly thereafter. I am responsible for the translations from Spanish into English. Notations on the sources used appear at the end.

I have changed the names of those who helped us during these events in order to ensure their privacy. I have kept the aliases that the guerrillas used as they negotiated with us. Their anonymity is thereby preserved.

In the second edition, the original postscript, written in 1994, appears as *Silencing*. I wrote the new journal entries, *Running*, in Charlottesville, Virginia, from July 9 to July 30, 2002, with a final notation on November 26, 2002, during my most recent trip to Colombia.

It's been many years now that we've been in this struggle. We've had, I think, one enemy, the worst of all enemies. You know what it is? I'm talking about the isolation of this struggle, which is worse than going hungry for a whole week. Between you, you of the city and us, we who've been out here, there is a huge mountain. It's not a distance of lands and rivers, of natural obstacles. Your voices and ours don't speak to each other. There's little about us that's known among you, and around here there's little of your history that we know.

— “Tirofijo” (“Sureshot”),
Colombia's preeminent guerrilla leader since
1949, currently head of the Revolutionary
Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), speaking
sometime in the 1960s, somewhere
in the mountains of Colombia

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TAKING

TICO

I knew what had happened just outside the village thousands of miles away when the phone rang a few hours later in my home in Charlottesville. It was still dark in Colombia that early in the morning. Most everyone was asleep, even though rural people out there rise early. They surrounded the entire area, gained control of the roads, and made sure that nothing would go wrong. Before anyone but a few of his guards could know what had happened, they were gone.

It felt as though I were out there in the jungle with him. And with them. I could tell you right then what they had done to take him away, even what they had said to him, and also how they would keep him day after day, far away in some isolated camp, always under a heavy cover of trees so that the army helicopters wouldn't detect that they were down there.

It's not that I, too, have been taken away by them or that a friend of mine has. I haven't been close to an experience like this one, at least not in a personal way. I was out there only for a weekend once many years ago. But I knew why they had taken him.

What I couldn't know was that this was the phone call that would bring the news I'd come to expect, that the time had arrived to hear those three dreaded words that had been out there for years, ready to be said, waiting to take us deep into the violence of Colombia.

This was the morning, with the day's third, or maybe even fourth, large mug of coffee already in hand, that I looked down longingly at the empty chair. I wasn't going to be settling down with the morning paper to carefully inspect the tiny box with the results of the latest stage of the bicycle race in Europe that was usually hidden away in the last page or so of the sports section. Cycling was on my mind. I always go for the sports pages first, but there's a special urgency in the summer when the racing season is in full swing. Our cyclists are famous. They're climbers. They ride high above the rolling hills where the coffee grows, scaling the long, steep inclines of three rugged Andes ranges that also isolate many of the nation's lawless regions. I've even told friends, although in jest, that Cecilia and I named our two children after Colombia's most famous cyclist.

I remember taking a small sip because the hot liquid was resting in my mouth when the phone rang in the kitchen. Still perspiring from the bike ride with the neighbors and shivering slightly, bending over in the morning sunshine to leave the mug on the windowsill, I recognized that I needed it next to me. After years of trying all kinds of shortcuts, I had returned to the German-made porcelain Melitta filter that my mother still uses, but only

after finally recognizing that the espresso roasted and extra finely ground beans render a dark, clear liquid like no other when it drips slowly through that one tiny hole.

The paper was under my right arm. Holding onto the mug, I had to use my foot to help open the screen door. The phone had already rung at least twice. It was too early for anyone to call. Had somebody maybe dialed the wrong number? If not, it would be bad news about Cecilia and the children in Mexico City or about my aging mother living all alone back in Colombia. Something had happened to one of them. The *Washington Post* fell onto the dining room table as I brushed past it. I carefully sat the mug on the cabinet next to me. My sister was calling from her home in Houston. Her voice wasn't easily recognizable, not at first.

"Tico?"

I must have sounded differently, too. But it was Ulla all right, asking whether it was me. Tico is my nickname, and most everybody, even my undergraduate students, know me by it, and I much prefer it to the Germanic Herbert that my parents loaded on me at birth. And besides, Tico makes me more like a Colombian.

Looking down into the coffee, I was filled with the realization that something had happened to my mother.

"Tico," she said again. "They took Jake."

I could feel my left hand holding onto my head. There they were. The three words.

"Where?"

"In Sabana."

Sabana de Torres. It was the village where Jake worked, where the company had its largest camp. They had got him way out there in the countryside. Jake was gone. It had happened.

Suddenly, strangely, I found that I had a second or two to take a big breath, for this deep feeling of calmness came over me. It wasn't relief that the news wasn't about my mother or about Cecilia and the children. And neither did it come simply from knowing that we were all still alive.

This was a feeling that would become so much a part of our lives. It came immediately. I did know what had happened, and that in itself must have been a relief. But what really must have reassured me at the time was the belief, the conviction actually, that I knew what would happen in the days to come.

Maybe I remember my first reaction so distinctly because I had probably never thought much about how I would feel once the news arrived. Or because my reaction was so at odds with the news. Right at the moment when we were thrust into a situation where others were in total control, not

only of Jake and his life but also of all of us, I was feeling that little could go wrong. Maybe the news was just too predictable and not only for us but for others as well. After all, few would be surprised to read in a newspaper that a man by the name of Iacopo “Jake” Gambini, an American oil executive, had been kidnapped by Marxist guerrillas in Colombia.

In any case, it's pretty clear that I didn't invent that feeling, and neither did I have to convince myself that I should have it. It was just there. Or maybe I remember it so well because we've all been trying so hard to hang onto it. When they came for him early that morning three months ago, it did all seem so predictable. Now each day, every hour really, is wearing on us, and we no longer know what's going on. Everybody here is playing it by ear. These are the words we all keep using again and again. Playing it by ear. Going one day at a time.

We've been ready almost from the start to take care of anything that might happen. After those initial hours of confusion following the phone call, we knew what had to be done. We've been prepared. Everyone has worked hard. But it's been of little use.

Now we're waiting, hoping to hear from them. I think we are beginning to wonder whether we will ever see him again. All this feels so much worse now than when Ulla's first phone call came. It's hard to explain, but my optimism is gone. I really don't think this will end well. It just doesn't seem right. Something is wrong. The problem is that I can't put my finger on what that something is. This is a terrible feeling to be living with, especially because I'm the one who is supposed to know. Ulla is counting on me.

But there is no doubt that this kidnapping has a bad smell to it. I think we all know it, but none of us dares to say what is going on in our minds. We don't say anything that might reveal our doubts. We are so careful with each other that it almost hurts to talk. There is a really heavy feeling here.

And then there's him. It's a strange feeling. He's dead to us but alive to others. He's gone from my and Ulla's life, and gone from the children, yet he's alive and suffering. It feels as though his kidnapping is worse than his death. Except that he might still come back to us. But if he does, what will he have gone through? Will he be all right?

But back then when Ulla called, there was that sense that we knew what the guerrillas would do. Everything was going to work itself out. It was supposed to.

So it was that I had taken that long breath, standing there in the kitchen. Jake was gone. It had to be the guerrillas that had him, probably the Army of National Liberation, the ELN, because it's the most powerful guerrilla organization out there.

For I understood that the guerrillas weren't going to hurt him. Right then I knew that. And I still believe it. For, after all, I do have plenty of good reason to. I know what the guerrillas are up to. But now I can also sense the need to believe in them, and I know that we've all been working hard to keep that feeling because there really isn't any other way to live through this. They have to return him to us.

ULLA

I wasn't at all nervous when Jake told me he was going to spend the night out there. He'd been in Sabana before. Well, not at night, at least not recently. But I knew that if he was thinking of staying overnight, that it was all right. He's no fool. But then I was never told how bad things were down there either. I would've been up here worrying all the time. But that wasn't right either. I should've known more.

I was so scared when I got that call from Vicente. I sat there stunned, thinking about what I had to do. All of a sudden it all happens. Something that was always in the background, all of sudden it's there. You've got to do the best thing. But what? I was scared because Jake wasn't in control. How do you tell your kids that their father's been kidnapped? I mean, all of a sudden you're dealing with outlaws, with guerrillas. How do you deal with a situation when there's guerrillas involved? Guerrillas are bad people.

JAKE

When they came I thought they were workers from a rig who were looking for me so that I could help them out somewhere. Then I saw all the guns and I knew. There were four or five of them. A couple were in green, army-type fatigues, but the others were dressed in civilian clothes with brightly colored shirts. They were heavily armed, all of them. The leader, a bearded man, about, oh, twenty-eight, thirty years old, told me to hurry up. "*Es un secuestro. Rápido. No le va a pasar nada.*" "This is a kidnapping," he said. "Quick. Nothing's gonna happen to you."

As I got up, my dog started to bite at them. I scuffled with them, just sort of pushing them away. I might have hit one. But they said they would shoot the dog. I said "No. Don't shoot him. I'll come along." I was thinking of

going off, of running. When we got outside, the watchman told me to go with them, that they wouldn't hurt me.

They grabbed my arms and pushed me out the gate into the truck. We headed out with me in the middle between the driver and the bearded one, and some of the other men in the back. We passed another car or truck, and there were more of them in there, probably about three or four. We went down the road, passed by the landing strip, and started going west. It was about 4:30, somewhere along in there. It was still dark. Very dark.

We must have traveled ten, twelve miles. He was having trouble shifting, and they were having trouble keeping up with each other, one car going way ahead. They would cuss. It was a sandy road. The truck in front of us stopped, and the other one pulled up behind us. They made me get into the other one. Same guys. I got in the middle again. We didn't talk. No conversation. Nothing was said. I tried to see if I could grab the steering wheel and go off into a ditch. Crash. Get away. Escape.

TICO

Jake was gone. There was work to be done. I had to think and get rid of all of my emotions. And they did just seep out quickly. I knew what we were up against, that this was something we could handle.

7:27. Looking at the digital clock on the microwave that had just heated up the coffee, I realized that they must have taken him a few hours ago, really early in the morning. He'd probably already been gone for hours, long before I'd gotten on the bike for that little spin with the neighbors. Maybe they took him while I was writing and waiting for the paper to be delivered. Was there a time difference with Colombia in the summer? After living for almost twenty years in the States, I still could not remember.

Jake always woke up so early, 3:30, 4:00, to work. It's one of the few things he and I have in common. That and coffee. Looking down at the cup again, I wondered whether he had been able to drink his. It was always the first thing he did.

Maybe they wouldn't have taken him if he hadn't been up and about. . . .
"Tico. It's happened! It's happened!"

Ulla was still on the phone. I didn't know what to tell her. The future had caught up with us. Now it was a reality. It was all too obvious, all too knowable.

Why in the hell had he kept insisting on going back out there?

For years I'd made sure that Ulla knew where to reach me should something happen to our mother, but also in case this happened to him out

there in the middle of what is called the Magdalena Medio, a huge, rich valley that lies between two of those mountain ranges. The guerrillas have a great deal of power there, and the government and the army only at times make their presence known.

Jake had always said that he had good relationships with all the different groups that operated out there. His company was the major employer in town. He kept saying that his workers respected him and that they knew they were doing better with him than working for anyone else in the region. Nobody had any reason to bear him a grudge.

That's the way he always put it. Bearing a grudge. His words. Not mine. But this had nothing to do with holding grudges. The guerrillas had ample reason to kidnap him. He employed people. He had others work for him, and it was through their labor that he had become rich. Good treatment of workers didn't do anything to change those central facts. That didn't mean anything to the guerrillas. Jake was a capitalist.

"Tico. Tico? I can't believe it. What are we going to do?"

But what could I tell her? I knew she was calling for support, for help. I know all about the guerrillas, for I am not like the other members of the family. My politics don't fit either, and I always used to say that the Americans should get out of Colombia, that the oil ought to belong to the nation. I sympathized with the guerrillas' ideals and kept having this gnawing feeling that I belonged with them. It's not that I'm the black sheep of the family or anything quite like that, but I hadn't gone into the business world or done anything that was really productive. I became a historian.

A few years ago I wrote a book, something like an oral history, about a day in Bogotá in 1948, for which I interviewed all kinds of people. That's what I do. I like to ask people questions about their past and about how they remember it, especially when they all remember it in vastly different ways and have conflicting views about it and about what is right and what is wrong. And that's what I had been doing early that morning before Ulla's call. This time it was about Mexican memories of the student protest movement of 1968.

But right then that day in 1948 was all around me again as I tried to think about Ulla, knowing full well that this was not the time to be roaming around in the past. But it was just over forty years ago, a Friday afternoon in April a few months before I was born, when Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the rebel leader of the Liberal Party and the country's most popular politician, was assassinated in downtown Bogotá. Angry crowds protested and looted, and they broke into the downtown hardware store where my father worked as the manager. My father always told me that Gaitán was little more than a

demagogue who irresponsibly aroused the emotions of the poor, whose emotions, he always added, were all too easy to arouse.

Colombians believe that Gaitán's death and the riot, known as the *bogotazo*, are a major turning point in Colombia, and they trace its descent into violence, into hell, to that day. There was one nation before the *bogotazo* and another one after. After Gaitán came *la Violencia*, a rural war in which as many as two hundred thousand Colombians lost their lives. Poor and middle-class people who felt they were Conservatives went around killing Liberals. Liberals did the same to Conservatives. The fighting out in the countryside seemed so senseless, so difficult to comprehend, that few Colombians to this day really have a feeling that they know what happened, and historians still don't quite know what to say about it. But most everyone believes that in some crucial way April 9, 1948, split history in two.

The guerrilla movement emerged years later, in the 1960s, out of the bands that had initially fought *la Violencia* in the name of the leaders of the Liberal Party. But when the urban leaders of that party returned to conventional forms of politics with their Conservative counterparts, the rural guerrillas were left out in the cold, struggling to defend themselves against the army. I have long believed that the guerrillas developed because the Liberal Party leaders turned their backs on their peasant followers and kept silent as the Conservatives went about violently dismantling all forms of independent and Liberal rural organization.

Whatever *la Violencia* actually was, I have always known that few, if any, of the leaders suffered from it and that it was regular people, rank-and-file members of the two parties, who lost their lives, their lands, their livelihoods. In Colombia, it's really always the poor who get left behind, holding onto the short end of the stick.

For me, Gaitán represented Colombia's last hope for a society without the most glaring disparities of wealth and power that I'd seen growing up. And right then I couldn't shake the idea that Jake's kidnapping had its roots in Gaitán's assassination. Colombia would have been an entirely different country had that day not happened. Would the guerrilla movement have become so powerful? Would he really have been taken away if there wasn't an "after Gaitán"?

I'd been hoping for years that some kind of a compromise could be found, some sort of an understanding between the government and the guerrillas, something to put a stop to all the years of fighting. At the same time I have always known, of course, that a compromise was impossible. The guerrillas had too many reasons to keep fighting, and the government didn't

really feel the need to defeat the guerrillas, assuming that it could if it tried. But I still hoped. It never happened. The guerrillas are still out there.

It was back in 1965 when I was a teenager that Camilo Torres, an upper-class Catholic priest who yearned for justice in Colombia, got into a black taxi just a block from our house and left for the mountains to join the ELN, at the time a pro-Castro group that wanted to bring the Cuban Revolution to Colombia. A few months later Camilo was gone, shot dead by the army. He had turned back in the midst of a hurried retreat to pick up a rifle, to keep it for the revolution. In that instant he had been shot. Camilo had thought the revolution was coming. Nobody back then could possibly have imagined that the guerrillas would still be in the mountains more than twenty years later.

Hundreds, even thousands, of them are still out there fighting. Many are dead. Others come to take their places. And now Jake was with them. Their faces kept staring up at me as I tried to come up with something to tell Ulla.

There was Tirofijo, or "Sureshot," the famous leader of the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. It is the oldest and largest of all the groups. And Manuel Pérez, the former Spanish priest who is the commander of the ELN. He's mysterious. Nobody knows much about him. He doesn't talk to the press. Everybody just keeps talking about a big blue helicopter that transports him all over the country. Alvaro Fayad. Jaime Bate-man Cayón. They founded the M-19 guerrilla movement after years of fighting with the FARC. Those two have always had a special sort of appeal for me. And Camilo, of course. And Camilo's friend Jaime Arenas, a university student who followed Camilo into the mountains. Only Tirofijo and Manuel Pérez are still alive.

GUERRILLAS

The first days are too difficult for the man of the city, because the change is just too great. The climate is warm and humid. During the last months of the year there is an unending winter. The period of rains is rigorous in the jungle, and the paths become slippery. There's mud all over the place, and diseases. The rivers overflow, and you can't even find wood to cook with because the trees turn humid to their very heart. . . . There are moments when clouds of mosquitoes make life impossible. No doubt the worst is the *pito* [tick] which rots the flesh where it bites. It produces a sore that just keeps gnawing away, going

deeper and deeper. The skin starts to stick. It doesn't hurt unless you're walking through the jungle, on roots, fallen trees, stones. Then it feels like a hot iron rod is being run through you.

At night, I would fall and roll in the dirt every five minutes, because I wasn't used to walking in the jungle. After four hours of marching my feet would be a wound of open blisters. You come from the city and your skin is real delicate. Two days later, with the humidity and the mud of winter, my feet were a red open sore. We would have to walk more slowly. The *candelillas*, little insects that make the life of the guerrilla impossible in the winter, are the worst. You have to burn them with iodine. The pain is just as bad as if you put your foot on a hot iron.

—Jaime Arenas, a university student
turned guerrilla

But I soon realized that the struggle wasn't going anywhere, not the ways things were. Our little group was always small, because people got bored and left. That was when anyone who wanted to leave could, voluntarily. Many did. In those two years we could've become a large force, of a hundred guerrillas, just with all those who joined. But there was never more than twenty of us because those who came left.

We didn't get into any battles with the enemy—not with the army or the police—and those of us who thirsted for a fight, we were bored to death. Finally we'd try an ambush, but it would fail. We would set up somewhere, lie on our stomachs for eight days, but nothing happened. It wasn't a place where the army would pass by.

In the seven years that I was in the IV Front, we must have had, on average, about one action a year. . . . Sometimes we would do something, anything, like rob some animals, or kill somebody, just so that the army would come around.

—“Antonio,” a guerrilla of the FARC

He felt that they wouldn't take him prisoner because he used to say that the oligarchy wouldn't be so stupid. They weren't going to keep him around as a constant banner of agitation . . . Camilo