

COVER FEATURE

COLOMBIA -- A LAND OF LEGENDS

Colombia has a long and complicated history, an untapped potential and a pervasive old world charm. Truly a land of legends, its history is rich with a mixture of pre-Colombian Indian cultures, the most advanced of which was that of the Chibchas; almost five centuries of Spanish influence which pervades the strata of Colombian society from the omnipresent role of the Church to the national passion for bull fighting; and a turbulent beginning forged in the fires of colonization, piracy, revolution, conspiracy and growth.

Located on the northwest corner of the continent, Colombia, the only nation named after Christopher Columbus, is considered both an Andean and Caribbean republic; the only South American country having major seaports with direct access to the Atlantic and Pacific shipping lanes. Geographical position and topographical configuration have had a marked influence on involvement of Colombian history.

In 1500, the explorers Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci visited the Caribbean coast to be followed by Bastidas in 1502. Later, Columbus visited the area and attempted to establish the first Spanish colony on the American mainland at the Isthmus of Panama, then a part of what is now known as Colombia. Another quarter of a century was to pass before the first permanent Spanish settlement, the port of San Marta, was established on the Caribbean coast. By that time Balboa had discovered the Pacific and Colombia's western coast was explored by Juan de Andagoya, Ojeda, Amerigo Vespucci and others. The second Caribbean port on the Caribbean coast, Cartagena, was established in 1533 and is a flourishing city today.

The year 1536 saw Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada lead an expedition from San Marta up the Magdalena River to the plateau of Bogota where he defeated the Chibcha Indians. In 1538, he founded the city of Santa Fe de Bogota, destined to become the capital of the "New Kingdom of Granada" which included all of what is now Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama. Bogota is located in a high basin on the Eastern cordillera of the Andean mountain system, an area that was considered more livable, above the heat and malaria of the lower regions. The city offered a base of operations from which Quesada attempted the impossible task of consolidating his rule over a wilderness scarred by mountain ridges, impassable swamps, dense forests and inhospitable plains. Topography was to play a major role in the development of the country.

Colombia is divided by three ranges of the Andes mountains, accounting for the extreme contrasts of snow-capped ridges, great stretches of plains and equatorial jungles. The mountain ranges were an ever present barrier to communication and commerce. The central of the three major ranges extends like a massive wall for some 500 miles through the heart of the country, with its towering peaks climbing to 18,700 feet. In fact, until the early part of the twentieth century, the Magdalena River was the only link between the outside world and inland cities. The introduction of the airplane during the first decade of the twentieth century was a boon to Colombia in overcoming the land barriers to communication and commerce. The first scheduled airline was established in Colombia in 1912, far in advance of anything like it in either North or South America.

Extremes in altitudes have affected Colombia's income, industry, agriculture, economy, poverty and riches, revolution and forms of government. As it turned out, the isolation caused by the rugged terrain and the economic concentration resulting from reliance on a single crop -- coffee -- reinforced the power of a small group of wealthy families who traditionally ran the country and the creation of a peasant class that struggled through poverty, illiteracy and disease.

Life was at a subsistence level even when the area was a principal source of gold and emeralds for Spain's treasury. However, living conditions improved somewhat when the country gradually opened and more colonists arrived accompanied by members of the Church and military. Local independent government development in New Granada was far greater than it was in the surrounding territories. The same topographic barriers that slowed economic growth guaranteed a degree of local autonomy in the widely scattered towns and cities. However, royal decrees repeatedly put an end to emerging local democratic governments. Thus began the cycle, with its many variations and versions, that has formed the basis of Colombian government today.

One of the versions operated through a loose federation under a "presidency," ostensibly subject to the Viceroy of Peru. The presidency continued, with the exception of six years, for 175 years (1564-1739). It was also during this period that another element of Colombian history emerged -- the time of high seas piracy and coastal town pillage -- the period of the infamous English pirates, Drake and Morgan, whose forays diverted much of the gold and silver destined for the Spanish treasury.

Continued harassment by the pirates and other threats to the colonies saw the establishment in 1717 of a Viceroyalty of New Granada accompanied by more military power and authority to discourage the invaders. This arrangement lasted until the war of independence -- yet another bloody page in Colombian history. A revolution broke out at Bogota on 20 July 1810 shortly followed by a declaration of independence. Strong Spanish anti-revolutionary military actions followed soon after.

It was during this era that the young idealist Simon Bolivar, the soldier statesman, became the recognized leader in the liberation of northern South America from the imperial control of Spain. Born of wealthy colonial stock in Caracas, Venezuela on 24 July 1783, Bolivar was well educated by private tutors. He traveled to Europe to continue his education in Madrid, Paris, Rome, and throughout the continent. Departing Hamburg to the United States, he stopped in New York, Philadelphia and Charleston, returning to Caracas in 1807.

In 1808 Napoleon's invasion of Spain sparked a resistance movement in the South American colonies. That spark flared into open rebellion in Venezuela, when the Caracas City Council deposed the Spanish Viceroy and elected Bolivar to journey to London to seek British protection over the Venezuelan struggle for independence. His mission failed and was the first of many failures and disappointments.

The next few years Bolivar devoted his time to writing and to fighting the Spanish troops. His efforts were recognized by the colonists when they

bestowed upon him the title "El Libertador". Despite that reputation Bolivar experienced a number of defeats and frustrations for the next several years trying to work out a formula for liberation. Although he was able to establish the new Republic of Gran Colombia including New Granada, Venezuela and Ecuador in 1819, fighting did not cease. With the final defeat of the Spanish in 1824 victory was technically at hand; however, a lasting peace was another thing. Internal struggles saw the break up of Gran Colombia over the next two years. Bolivar's attempt to create a republic patterned after that of America was a disappointing failure. Insurrection in Colombia and Peru further disillusioned Bolivar and he was forced to resort to dictatorial methods just to keep the country together. Even after those unpopular steps Venezuela and Peru seceded from the Gran Colombia leaving Bolivar a bitter and broken man. He died on 17 December 1830 at the age of 47.

As it turned out Bolivar was right in his assessment of his compatriots whom he had led to freedom. They were unwilling or unable to come to grips with a democratic system of government. As he had anticipated, they were destined to govern or misgovern through dictatorial assumption of powers. The patterns of government for the next century did not differ much from what Bolivar had foreseen.

A series of constitutions and basic disagreements between the Church and State set the tone of Colombia's government. Although the Catholic Church dominated the religious life of the country, other religions were allowed to practice their beliefs unmolested. The military was ostensibly free to operate its own affairs through a "gentlemen's" agreement with the government in that it, the Army, would not try to seize control.

Political elements that grew out of the conflicts between the followers of Bolivar and his vice president, Santander, became the Conservative and Liberal parties. These parties dominated Colombian politics for many decades. Bolivar's followers, the Conservatives, advocated a strong centralized government, a close association between the Church and the government, and a limited franchise. On the other hand, Santander's followers, forerunners of the Liberals, sought a decentralized government, state rather than church control over education and other civil matters, and a broadened suffrage. Although these matters are no longer stressed, their imprints are reflected in today's government.

Insofar as the economic base of the country is concerned, coffee remains the mainstay of Colombian exports representing more than 62% of the total. Coffee, of course, is subject to international price fluctuations which, in turn, affects the broad base of the country's economy. Because of that, Colombia is attempting to diversify its export program and emphasize marketing of such nontraditional goods as emeralds, sugar, rice, cotton, clothing, cement, and flowers. This program to some degree has been successful and appears to be growing.

Although the current political atmosphere of Colombia is fairly quiet, the country is beset by many of the problems that plague other nations: unfavorable trade balances, recession, unemployment and slowed economic growth.

Other problems are the proverbial political dissidents and terrorists. Control of the latter category is given to the Minister of Defense, who is charged with the country's internal and external defense and security. Under his leadership responsibility for those tasks are given to the 110,000 members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and National Police. In addition to these responsibilities, the Ministry of Defense is concerned about counterinsurgency, counterguerilla, counterterrorist, and countercontraband activities. It is in the latter activities that the US and Colombian relations became joint ventures.

The record of these relations has been one of constructive cooperation. For example, the governments of both countries are concerned about the flow of contraband -- illicit narcotics -- especially cocaine from Colombia to the United States. The efforts of both countries to reduce, if not completely stop, the flow of cocaine continue to expand as evidenced by an eight-fold increase in US expenditures to combat the illegal drug traffic from Colombia.

In conclusion, an excerpt from the FY84 "Congressional Presentation Document" (CPD), is offered:

. . . Colombia is particularly important to US interests in Latin America. One of the leading democratic nations in the region, it recently installed a new administration, which was elected in show-case style, notwithstanding insurgents efforts to disrupt the electoral process. It is a respected, moderate voice in the region, able and willing to exert a constructive influence in hemispheric affairs. Its strategic position, overlooking both ocean approaches to the Panama Canal, also increases the importance of Colombia to US security interests. The Colombian Government is committed to countering the traffic of illicit narcotics, . . . It is . . . heavily involved in curbing armed guerilla groups, some of which have received support and training from Cuba. . . . Security assistance to Colombia is tailored to support Colombian efforts to modernize its armed forces, counter externally-supported guerilla movements and meet its . . . external defense needs. The program also serves to maintain strong professional US-Colombian military-to-military ties.

[Editor's Note: This brief precis was prepared by Robert E. Trapp, Executive Editor of the Journal, to give the reader a glimpse of the rich fabric of Colombia, its turbulent past and promising future. The precis is also intended as a lead in to the following cover feature prepared by the US Military Group (USMILGP) Colombia.]