

*Nationbuilding and Civil War: Diverging Views of State and
Society in Late 19th Century Colombia*

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“We have always been divided, in the colony we were creoles and Spaniards ... at the time of the revolution we were patriots and royalists ... at the beginning of independence civilians and militarists ... ”

Alfonso López Michelsen, President 1974-1978,
Address to the Liberal Party Institute 2003¹

Conservatism is not dogmatic, what it offers is a coherent and logical philosophy about life, about the cosmos, about God, about man and society in relation to politics. These general ideas are the product of reflection on the most significant philosophies over thousands of years, but they are not perfect and evolve in association with social experience.

If liberalism is the party of rights, conservatism is the party of order and tradition.

Colombian Conservative Party 2015²

¹ <http://partidoliberalcolombiano.info/PartidoLiberal/EILiberalismo/Historia/tabid/142/Default.aspx>.

² <http://partidoconservador.com/pensamiento-y-doctrina/>.

The second half of the 19th century in the western world witnessed internal and international conflicts which were associated with decolonization, quests for national identity, state or local versus national power, inter-elite competition for political and economic power, and class conflict: Italian and German unification; the Cuban war for independence against Spain, the Aguinaldo insurrection in the Philippines, the U.S. Civil War, the Juárez Liberal revolution and the war against French imperialism in Mexico, among others. These conflicts and movements were part of a broad nation building process in the nineteenth century.

The process in Colombia in the course of the century was a painful one. Strong states' rights and loose confederations with weak central governments characterized much of the century until 1886 and the adoption of a new constitution with a stronger executive and enhanced centralized powers. Throughout the 19th Century competing factions struggled for control of the Colombian political agenda, some of the conflicts based on real ideological differences and others on little more than struggles for power and the political and economic spoils associated with that power. From independence to 1900 the country experienced some nine civil wars, fourteen localized conflicts and at least three military coups, culminating in the War of a Thousand Days at the end of the century (1899-1902). The Colombian conflicts, I would argue, reflected divergent views of state and society among competing elites, including an element of class conflict, although that aspect has not been well developed in the literature. Elites differed over the role of the state in society, over State-Church relations, over federal versus central political structure, over slavery before emancipation and then over the treatment of free labour, over trade and taxation policies, and over political pluralism. Typical of inter-elite conflicts neither Liberals nor Conservatives wavered over the rights of private property. After the late 1840s when competing Colombian elites coalesced into political parties every armed conflict involved Liberals fighting Conservatives. This paper examines the course of the Liberal-Conservative conflicts in the late nineteenth century, the efforts to establish a stronger central state, and the culmination of those conflicts in the War of a Thousand Days at the end of the century.

In spite of its importance in Colombia's national history until recently there was relatively little scholarly analysis of the Thousand Day War which ended the century of

conflict.³ There were local and regional studies, including an important one by David Johnson on Santander where the war began and where the most important battles were contested,⁴ a good deal of hagiography focusing on Liberal or Conservative generals and political leaders, an insightful brief overview, “La Guerra de los Mil Dias” by Oxford Historian Malcolm Deas, who also provided an important assessment of the fiscal problems which faced the country in the course of the century.⁵ Helen Delpar published an excellent study of Colombian Liberalism but it concludes the analysis in 1899 on the eve of the War of a Thousand Days.⁶ To date there is only one solid monograph of the economic and political history of the late 19th century by Charles Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict*. More recently, the centennial of the war saw the publication of an excellent collection of essays edited by Gonzalo Sánchez and Mario Aguilera. Prior to that the best account was that of Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo Castillo in the multi-volume *Nueva Historia de Colombia*. Marco Palacios and Frank Safford’s *Colombia: País fragmentado, sociedad dividida*, is an outstanding and detailed analysis of Colombian history and includes an insightful account of late nineteenth century political and economic history.⁷

At the end of the 1840s competing political factions coalesced into Liberal and Conservative parties. Liberal Generals held power for most of the decade and into the 1850s with sporadic but intense fighting against Conservative opposition. In 1848 then Minister of Finance José Eusebio Caro (1817-1853), a Santander poet and politician, quit the Liberal government of General José Hilario López and together with Mariano

³ Gabriel García Márquez likely did as much as any historian to make the Thousand Days War and the later Colombian violence an integral part of Colombian historical memory in two of his most significant novels, *A Hundred Years of Solitude* and *No One Writes to the Colonel*. The most comprehensive and scholarly collection of essays on the Thousand Days War and its context is Gonzalo Sánchez and Mario Aguilera, eds., *Memoria de un país en Guerra: Los mil días* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2001).

⁴ David Johnson, “Lo que hizo y lo que no hizo el café; los orígenes regionales de la guerra de los Mil Dias,” *Revista de la Universidad Industrial de Santander, Humanidades*, 20, no. 1 (enero-junio, 1991): pp. 77-86.

⁵ Malcolm Deas, “Reflexiones Sobre la Guerra de Mil Dias,” *Revista Credencial Historia*, no. 121 (enero 2000); Deas “The Fiscal Problems of Nineteenth Century Colombia,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 14, no. 2 (Nov. 1982): pp. 287-328.

⁶ Helen Delpar, *Red Against Blue: the Liberal Party in Colombian Politics, 1863-1899* (University of Alabama Press, 1981).

⁷ Charles Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict in Colombia, 1886-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986); Gonzalo Sanchez and Mario Aguilera, eds., *Memoria de un País en Guerra*. Palacios and Safford *Colombia: País Fragmentado, Sociedad Dividida* (Bogotá: Norma, 2002).

Ospina Rodriguez (1805-1885) established the modern Conservative Party. In 1851, the López government disestablished the Roman Catholic Church and abolished slavery. Conservatives revolted, more in opposition to the anti-clericalism than to emancipation, although there was disenchantment over the lack of compensation and concern over relations with recently freed slaves. Previous efforts to abolish slavery in the country had included a lengthy transitional period for the liberation of children born of slave parents. In Cauca, where slaveholding was important but declining, such prominent slaveholders as Sergio and Julio Arboleda objected to the lack of compensation but also to the Liberal's use of freedmen as troops in the fight against Conservatives. Julio Arboleda, for instance, wrote in his periodical: "Who are these men, almost all negroes, who, armed, cross and recross the streets of Cali? They are freedmen who have been armed by the government."⁸

Conservatives regained political power in 1855 following yet another civil war. In 1860 Liberals revolted against the government of Mariano Ospina Rodriguez in a conflict that lasted three years and led to the establishment of almost two decades of Liberal rule. The 1863 Constitution which marked the end of that conflict, renamed the country the United States of Colombia, provided for separation of Church and State and the confiscation and sale of Church and Indian lands. Whether Colombian Liberals were influenced by the Juarez reforms in Mexico or not certainly they used the Mexican example to provide further justification for their own measures. The New Granada Official Gazette reprinted the Mexican legislation in 1856.⁹ The new Constitution was fundamentally a Radical Liberal document in which most power resided with the states and the central government had limited authority. It was a confederation of nine states each of which elected its own president under its own electoral rules, and the president of the country was elected by a majority vote of the states, with each state having one vote. The central government retained the power to collect customs duties which were the main source of revenue. The Constitution enshrined basic civil liberties, freedom of

⁸ From Marco Palacios and Frank Safford, *Colombia*, pp. 394-95. In 1851 there were 10,621 slaves in Cauca, representing 3.3% of the population in the state, a decline from 21,599 in 1835 when slaves represented more than 10% of the population. Palacios/Safford, p. 354.

⁹ See Robert Knowlton, "Expropriation of Church Property in Nineteenth Century Mexico and Colombia: A Comparison," *The Americas*, 25, no. 4 (April, 1969): pp. 387-401.

expression, freedom of the press, freedom of association and more controversially freedom of religion and freedom of education. At the same time the Liberals expelled the Jesuit order. That federalist constitution remained in effect until 1886.¹⁰

During the Liberal era the governments of General Cipriano de Mosquera (1798-1878) and his successors sought to improve the transportation infrastructure needed to facilitate Colombian access to international markets, focusing on road, railroad and harbor development on both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts. In the 1850s through the 1870s, until coffee gained preeminence, tobacco dominated Colombia's exports, along with gold and quinine. By the mid-nineteenth century precious metals as a share of exports fell as coffee gained importance. In 1850 coffee represented only 8% of Colombian exports; by 1885 it had risen to 12%. The most dramatic increase took place over the next fifteen years. By 1898 coffee represented 49% of exports, tobacco only 3.3% and gold 17.4%. Quinine, which had risen as high as 30.9% of exports in the 1881-83 years, by 1898 had fallen to less than 1%.¹¹ As Safford and Palacios have noted, the significant expansion of tobacco cultivation and quinine extraction served as a considerable stimulus to the economy of the Upper Magdalena River valley and the eastern Cordillera region, with the economic opportunity drawing labour into the regions. As Catherine LeGrand has demonstrated, given the absence of immigrant labour in Colombia in the nineteenth century, landholders and entrepreneurs had to depend on domestic sources, and in the agricultural sector this meant attracting independent frontier squatters into tenant farming and wage labour on larger estates. Fabio Sanchez and others have argued that conflicts over land and weak enforcement of property rights contributed to Colombia's comparatively weak economic performance in the nineteenth century. The country's export growth was below the Latin American average well into the twentieth century.¹² As well, the heavy reliance on customs duties as the main source of government revenue, made the country highly vulnerable to fluctuations in price and demand in the global market. As Thomas Fischer notes,

¹⁰ Alvaro Tirjada Mejía, *El Estado y la Política en el Siglo XIX*, in J.G. Cobo Borda and S. Mutis Durán, eds., *Manual de Historia de Colombia* (Bogotá: Procultura, 1982).

¹¹ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, Table 10.1, p. 470.

¹² Fabio Sanchez, Maria del Pilar López-Urbe, Antonio Fazio, "Land Conflicts, Property rights, and the Rise of the Export Economy in Colombia, 1850-1925," *The Journal of Economic History*, 70, No. 2 (June 2010): pp. 1-3. Catherine LeGrand, "Labor Acquisition and Social Conflict on the Colombian Frontier, 1850-1936," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 16, no. 1 (May 1984): pp. 27-49.

Colombia could not control international prices for its dominant exports, and this uncertainty in turn made it difficult for the country to achieve any sustained economic growth, although even on the eve of the War of a Thousand Days, Colombia had a favourable balance of trade. The efforts on the part of Liberal governments at mid-century to dismantle the mercantilist structure and institutions were important but in themselves not sufficient to stimulate significant development.¹³

Other than in minerals and agricultural products Colombian enterprises producing processed and industrial goods were not competitive in international markets. There was considerable success in exporting hides as well as cattle regionally, notably to Cuba. The high cost of internal transportation, and its absence in most parts of the country in the late nineteenth century, was a major factor in keeping Colombian products out of the global markets. The success of coffee exports, however, encouraged imports, in particular luxury goods not readily available in the country or if available considered of lower quality. There was still significant domestic production which remained in the domestic market, of such products as aguardiente, cereals, rope, textiles, footwear, machetes, most of which were consumed by the primarily rural population.¹⁴ Luxury imports, primarily from Britain, France and the United States, benefitted primarily the upper echelons of Colombian society, however, and also undercut domestic producers of those products. When the buying power of the upper classes declined, as during civil war when treasure was diverted to unproductive purposes, or during the 1890s when the price of coffee fell, imports suffered and customs revenues fell accordingly. In the 1870s textiles constituted more than 40% of imports from Britain, followed by paper products and leather goods. Metal products constituted less than 1%.¹⁵

The Colombian focus on the export economy and growing products for that market enhanced the economic and political power of those states and communities along the Magdalena River, the main transportation route to the Caribbean, whether

¹³ Fischer, ""Desarrollo Hacia Afuera y 'revoluciones' en Colombia, 1850-1910," in Sanchez and Aguilera, *Memoria*, pp. 33-58. For the trade balance see Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, Table 11.4, p. 469.

¹⁴ Fischer, "Desarrollo Hacia Afuera," p. 41.

¹⁵ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, Table 10.3a, p. 378. Fischer, "Desarrollo Hacia Afuera," p. 40.

those states were Liberal or Conservative.¹⁶ Conservatives and Liberals supported the expansion of Colombian commerce although Conservatives tended to be protectionists and Liberals free traders. As Marco Palacios has indicated, however, not all free trade advocates were Liberals. Such leading Conservatives as Julio Arboledo, José Eusebio Caro and Mariano Ospina Rodríguez were strong supporters of free trade.¹⁷

The Liberal era proved to be highly unstable, politically and economically weak, characterized by ongoing conflict among the states as well as between the states and the central government. Conservatives took up arms once again against the Liberal government in 1876, in part as a reaction to the Liberal attempt to put public education under the control of the State rather than the Church. The revolt was quickly suppressed but did not end opposition. By the late 1870s some moderate Liberals, led by Rafael Nuñez, sought to strengthen central political power. Nuñez was a Cartagena politician, one of the few coastal politicians to achieve central power in these years. He held a number of important posts in the Liberal governments, then lived in New York, France, and finally Liverpool where he was Consul. His time in Europe altered his political perspective, increasingly viewing the decentralized confederation as weak and fractious, although his political philosophy remained Liberal. Moving away from the Radical Liberals Nuñez won the presidency in 1880 and 1884 under a National Party label with the support of some Liberals and a broad spectrum of Conservatives.

The Nationalist faction of Conservatism dominated politics from the early 1880s until the War of a Thousand Days. Nuñez led what became known as the Regeneration. He facilitated the adoption of a new centralized constitution in 1886 under which Conservative governments held power until 1930, when voters elected moderate Liberal Enrique Olaya Herrera, the first Liberal elected since the 1870s. The Constitution adopted in 1886, which endured until 1991, abolished the confederation system, transformed the states into departments regulated by the central government, and allocated a remarkable degree of power to the President, who was elected for a 6 year term by the national legislature and was eligible for immediate re-election. The President appointed all department governors, and the governors in turn appointed the municipal mayors, with the exception of the mayor of Bogotá who was also appointed

¹⁶ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, pp.367-346.

¹⁷ Marco Palacios, *Coffee in Colombia, 1850-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 2.

by the President. As a reflection of the Conservative view of state-Church relations, Roman Catholicism was established as the state religion. Divorce was now prohibited and those marriages of previously divorced individuals were retroactively annulled. This was in some ways ironic since Nuñez himself was a religious freethinker but believed the Church represented one of the few institutions which could provide social as well as political stability. In contrast to radical Liberals, Nuñez advocated a strong central state and scientific education as vital for the promotion of material progress.¹⁸ Under the Regeneration a literacy requirement for voting in national elections was introduced and the death penalty was reinstated.

During his years in office Nuñez sought not only to strengthen central power but also to modernize the economy, focusing on the expansion of roads and railroads and improving port facilities.¹⁹ The Panama Railroad, connecting Colón and Panama City, had already been constructed in the 1850s. The completion of the railroad contributed significantly to making Panama by far the wealthiest state in Colombia, but transportation development on the continent lagged. Even in Panama the much heralded construction of a canal met one challenge after another until the early twentieth century, including the U.S. opposition to French involvement in its construction.²⁰ The principal cities of the Caribbean coast, Santa Marta, Cartagena and Barranquilla, as in the case of Panama, were far more connected with global markets than was the interior. With the completion of a railroad in 1871 connecting Barranquilla on the Magdalena with Sabanilla, the coastal port, Barranquilla moved ahead of its coastal rivals as the main Caribbean port, moving goods from the Magdalena River and serving as the entry for imported products.²¹ In spite of progress in Panama and on the Caribbean coast, the lack of funding combined with rivalries among the states and between the states and the central government along with a formidable geography made it a challenge to develop a transportation network that would enhance overall

¹⁸ Clark, "Colombian Positivism," p. 40.

¹⁹ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, p. 473. . By the end of the century, however, the country had only eight short rail lines, the most successful of which was the Panama Railroad, constructed by U.S. capital prior to the American civil war. By 1892 the country had only nine thousand kilometers of telegraph lines.

²⁰ See Stephen J. Randall, *Aliados y distantes: Colombia y los Estados Unidos* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1992), and David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

²¹ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, pp. 352-53.

economic development. There was a desperate political and economic need to connect Bogotá to the main cities in the interior and on the Caribbean coast. Recognizing that need Liberal politicians in the 1870s promoted the development of the Railroad of the North, but by the end of the century only forty-seven kilometers of track had been laid. Overall, even by the end of the War of a Thousand Days, Colombia could boast of only 645 kilometers of lines, and these were often dispersed rather than forming part of a coherent network. In contrast to Mexico and Argentina Colombia lagged far behind. Lacking domestic capital Colombian authorities had to turn to European or American companies for railroad construction but there was little interest on the part of foreign companies given the absence of clear financial incentives.²² The absence of a solid banking system added to the country's challenges in the second half of the century. Commercial banks began to emerge in the 1870s, one of the most stable of which was the Bank of Bogotá, but the lack of regulatory provisions and of a national bank until the Regeneration led to ruinous competition among the private commercial banks.²³ Telegraph connections were established between the capital and the Caribbean coastal cities by the 1880s, but land transport remained problematic, and navigation on the Magdalena River, so essential to the movement of goods and people, was often a challenge to navigate.

Liberals versus Conservatives and the Coming of War

The decades of conflict in the second half of the nineteenth century between Liberals and Conservatives, among the states and between the states/departments and the central government provided the context in which the most devastating civil conflict of the century erupted in 1899. There were short term causes of the war, but at the heart of the crisis was a half century of conflict between the two political parties. Every scholar of the period accepts that there were fundamental differences between Liberals and Conservatives over the country's political structure, the economy, civil liberties, relations with the rest of the world, if not religion itself then certainly relations with the Roman Catholic Church. The Liberal-Conservative divide that emerged in the course of the 19th Century was not simply one between landowners on the one hand and

²² Fischer, "Desarrollo hacia afuera," in Sanchez, ed., *Memoria*, p. 42.

²³ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, pp. 436-441.

merchants and entrepreneurs on the other. Indeed, more recent scholarship by Colombian and foreign historians has stressed that it is very difficult to distinguish in a meaningful way between the two parties on the basis of class and occupation in the late 19th century. Both elite groups were interested in land and commerce.²⁴ Frank Stafford has shown that although many large landowners in the 19th century were Conservatives, especially those from the Cauca Valley, they did not limit their activities to their haciendas. He cites the example of Vicente Borrero, one of the more prominent Conservatives prior to his death in 1877. A large landowner, he was also a lawyer, professor and merchant.²⁵ Although occupational differences between Liberals and Conservatives were not significant there were nonetheless fundamental differences in values and vision between the two factions by the late 1840s and 1850s when more formal parties took shape, although the terms liberal and conservative had been used for decades, and those divisions sharpened as the century progressed. A Tolima Liberal Rafael Rocha Gutierrez drew perhaps one of the sharpest lines between the orientation of the two parties when he wrote in 1887:

...one of them personifies old traditions, theocratic influence, repression as the only means of government, severity in punishments, authority as the supreme guide of public or private conduct, and the centralization of authority as the basis of stability. The other represents the equality of classes, religious liberty, the will of the people as the sole instrument of government, mildness in punishment and the rehabilitation of the criminal, the decentralization of authority; in short, the democratic idea.²⁶

Helen Delpar in her outstanding study *Red Against Blue* has provided the most systematic attempt to profile the Liberal leadership in the years leading up to the War of

²⁴ Frank Safford, "Social Aspects of Politics in 19th Century Spanish America: New Granada, 1825-1850," *Journal of Social History*, 5, No. 3 (Spring, 1972): pp. 344-70. Both the New York Times and Washington Post carried considerable coverage of the conflict in both Panama and on the continent. Both stressed the economic crisis, the worthless paper money, the impressment of people into the government forces, and the brutality of the fighting. As with much of the secondary literature there was no analysis of why the rebels were fighting.

²⁵ Safford, "Social Aspects of Politics in 19th Century Spanish America: New Granada, 1825-1850," *Journal of Social History*, 5, No. 3 (Spring, 1972): p. 351.

²⁶ Cited in Helen Delpar, *Red Against Blue*, p. 65.

a Thousand Days. How did they differ from their Conservative counterparts in terms of regional origins, race, family lineage, wealth and occupation? Regionally, the majority came from Eastern Colombia, notably Santander which was the site of the beginning of revolt in 1899. There were few from western Colombia and with the exception of Rafael Nuñez rarely from the Caribbean coast. Not surprisingly they came primarily from prominent and wealthy families but with a few exceptions not from those families that were part of what remained of a small colonial aristocracy. One exception was Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera, President of the United States of Colombia 1863-67, who traced his lineage to the nobility of Medieval Spain and came from a wealthy landowning family in Popayan in the southwest. Like many of his generation and class he was tutor educated, spoke at least four languages and had a justified reputation as a mathematician and historian. Most Liberals were lawyers or had legal training and some combined politics with commerce, banking and the export-import economy. Conservative leadership on the other hand tended to come from Cundinamarca state, the location of the national capital, or from Cauca in the southwest. Hence Cipriano de Mosquera as a Liberal was a regional exception. Occupationally, Conservative leaders engaged in law, commerce, banking, mining and landholding, but were less involved in the export economy.²⁷ There was little to distinguish the two parties in terms of race. These were all, with few exceptions, members of the elite and hence Caucasians and mestizos dominated. The contrast in both parties between the leadership and the rank and file was of course striking. How rare it was for an Afro-Colombian to achieve prominence in Liberal ranks is reflected in the fact that Ramón Marín, the Liberal guerrilla leader in Tolima during the War of a Thousand Days was known as “El Negro Marín.” The 1851 census indicated that 17% of the population was white, 13.9 % Indian, 3.8% Negro, 47.6% mestizo, 13.1% mulato and 4.7% zambo. By 1912 there had been a remarkable “whitening” of the population, 34.4% claiming white, 10% Negro, 6.3% Indian and 49.2% Mixed. The shift was a clear indication of the social preference for the European heritage.

Liberal versus Conservative Political Philosophies

²⁷ Delpar, *Red Against Blue*, p. 58.

Colombian Liberals and Conservatives by the second half of the 19th Century were increasingly worlds apart in their political philosophies. For Liberals the early influences appear to have been Jeremy Bentham and the French writer Antoine Destutt de Tracy, who was also of interest to Mexican liberals and Russian Decembrists. Colombian Conservatives were sufficiently concerned about the subversive influences of Tracy that Conservative governments banned his work from universities. Adam Smith's ideas on political economy, notably competition and free trade, may have worked their way into Colombian thought primarily through the writing of French political economist Jean Baptiste Say. In the second half of the 19th century John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer were influential among leading Colombian Liberals such as Rafael Nuñez, the major figure who made the transition from the Liberal regimes prior to 1876 to the Regeneration governments after 1886.²⁸ Nuñez urged that Mill's System of Logic be a required university text and he also recommended that courses in sociology be introduced into the national university curriculum, an initiative that was not well received in an educational system dominated by the Roman Catholic Church.²⁹

For much of the century Liberals supported free trade along with policies that would make labour relatively available and less expensive. They had thus supported the abolition of slavery and subsequently the breakup of Indian lands (resguardos) and the expropriation and distribution of Roman Catholic Church lands. Liberals tended to be anti-clerical and opposed to any state religion, although Liberal opposition to the Roman Catholic Church was less of a religious issue than one directed at the Church's economic and political power, its influence over the masses, the significant economic power it had from tithes and landholding and the fact that it was often the only real institutional authority in many of the more isolated parts of the country. In 1851, a Liberal government disestablished the Roman Catholic Church and abolished slavery. Conservatives revolted, although the revolt was not only a reaction to emancipation. In

²⁸ In spite of the fact that the Regeneration governments established the basis of modern conservatism in Colombia, Nuñez never claimed to be a Conservative. His main biographer, Indalecio Lievano Aguirre was a prominent Liberal and the preface to the biography was written by Eduardo Santos, Liberal President from 1938 to 1942. The biography was written as a graduate thesis in 1944 and published in 2013 by Random House Colombia.

²⁹ Delpar, *Red Against Blue*, p. 61. Juan Pablo Osterling, *Democracy in Colombia* (New Brunswick, N.J.: SUNJ, 1989), p. 173 stresses the French influence on Colombian Liberal thought.

Cauca, where slaveholding was important but declining such prominent slaveholders as Sergio and Julio Arboleda objected to the lack of compensation but also to the Liberal's use of freedmen as troops in the fight against Conservatives. Julio Arboleda, for instance, wrote in his periodical: "Who are these men, almost all negroes, who, armed, cross and recross the streets of Cali? They are freedmen who have been armed by the government."³⁰

The two founders of the Conservative Party, José Eusebio Caro and Mariano Ospina Rodriguez embodied the political values of conservatism in the latter half of the 19th century. Ospina is considered a prominent example of a Colombian Positivist. As Minister of the Interior in the 1840s he rejected the application of Bentham's utilitarianism in Colombian education as well as the sensualist doctrines of thinkers such as Tracy. He was nonetheless not opposed to science per se and viewed it as compatible with religion, but he promoted what he considered the "useful" sciences. For Ospina morality was the key to progress and an effective educational system was one which created moral citizens.³¹ Caro was a poet and essayist as well as a politician. As with other Conservatives he rejected the utilitarianism of Liberal doctrine. Caro died in 1853, with the result that it was his son, Miguel Antonio, who carried on the Conservative agenda. He became one of the leading conservative politicians and intellectuals in the second half of the century, one of the authors of the 1886 Constitution, Vice-president under Nuñez in 1892 and effectively president with Nuñez's death. On the one hand he was a strong supporter of universal suffrage, consistent with Liberal values, at least for election to the lower house, but he advocated a more corporatist approach for the Senate to balance the popularly elected lower chamber. As a Catholic nationalist he viewed the Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish language as critical unifying forces in a complex and diverse society. He thus rejected the application of utilitarianism in education and in its place compulsory Roman Catholic education. Caro referred to his principles as Christian Socialism and rejected Liberal notions of free labour, which in the European context he argued had subjected labour to worse conditions than earlier under serfdom. As a hardline Catholic

³⁰ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, pp. 394-95.

³¹ Meri Clark, "The Good and the Useful Together: Colombian Positivism in a Century of Conflict," in Gregory Gilson and Irving Levinson, eds. *Latin American Positivism* (Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 27-48. Ospina Rodriguez was a prolific writer and his essays constitute an important source for understanding Colombian conservative thought in the 19th century.

Nationalist Caro in fact argued that even the Conservative Party was contaminated by Liberal ideas. For Caro civilization was the application of Christian principles to society.³²

1899: The Nation Moves To War

In seeking to understand what led to the actual outbreak of civil war in 1899 some scholars stress the lengthy exclusion of Liberals from all higher political office as well as from the bureaucracy during the Regeneration years. Young Liberals especially were thus driven by a self-interest that may have had little to do ideology. As the result of short and unsuccessful Liberal revolts in the 1890s many leading Liberal opponents of the Regeneration governments were either imprisoned or forced into exile to avoid imprisonment. The property of Liberals in revolt was often confiscated. Once war broke out in 1899 departmental governors, Conservatives all, had full political and military ability to impose forced loans and expropriate property, both of which targeted more affluent and prominent Liberals.³³

Economic factors, however, were crucial. The decision to abandon the gold standard and to print unsecured paper money undermined domestic and international confidence; the decline of international coffee prices reduced the flow of hard currency from abroad, and customs revenues on which the central government depended declined sharply. The central government by 1899 was in effect bankrupt. The country's international credibility had also been compromised by the decades of infighting and failure to bring the Panama Canal to conclusion. By the time war broke out in Santander discontent on the Isthmus was feeding a strong secessionist sentiment.

Charles Bergquist argued in *Coffee and Conflict* that the split between upper middle class groups was determined primarily by their relationship to the export-import economy. He demonstrated that the decline of coffee prices combined with

³² Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, *El pensamiento político Colombiano en el siglo XIX* (Bogotá, 1963). Hesper Eduardo Pérez Rivera, "El nacionalismo católico colombiano: un 'estilo de pensamiento', (1870-1946." <http://www.bdigital.unal.edu.co/1508/7/06CAPI05.pdf>. Accessed 7/16/2015.

³³ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, pp. 249-50 (English edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

transportation difficulties in getting produce to market in the 1890s and the devaluation of the peso contributed to widespread unemployment and poverty in Santander, where revolt began. By the 1890s Santander produced more than 60% of Colombian coffee exports. As the coffee industry had expanded there during the previous twenty years many workers had migrated into the coffee producing areas, and they were significantly impacted by the decline in prices and increased unemployment.³⁴ As David Johnson has suggested, although peasants may not have understood or been familiar with the intricacies of paper money, the country's fiscal policies, or export taxes, they clearly understood their desperate economic plight and were ready recruits for the caudillos that led the fighting.³⁵ With the decline of coffee prices coffee producers and the commercial elite tied to coffee exports and the central government, in debt and lacking revenue from customs, faced bankruptcy. Yet, the coffee crisis alone does not explain why the war was nationwide. When war broke out there were coffee growers and merchants on both sides of the conflict, suggesting that economic factors alone do not account for the split. Both Santander and Antioquia produced coffee. Both were characterized by small landholdings. Yet, the former was Liberal and the latter Conservative and remained that way through the 20th century. Nor was the difference strictly one of class. In some areas of the country, as in Santander, Liberals were the elites. In others such as Cauca, Liberals were more inclined to be the landless struggling against large landowners.³⁶ Occupation, place of birth or levels of education do little to help us understand causation. Pérez, for instance, who opposed war, came from a family of very wealthy farmers near Bogotá. He was well educated in law but never practiced, entering directly into politics. Parra, who also opposed war, on the other hand was from Santander, the Department that led the revolt which he opposed. He was not well educated but made a fortune as a merchant. Bergquist found that of 91 Liberal military officers who were captured by government forces in late 1900, one third of them were merchants, 13 were farmers, 10 were artisans, 6 lawyers and 6 students, the balance unknown.³⁷ Bergquist's argument that this represented evidence of class

³⁴ Sharecroppers, as distinct from the merchants and hacendados who controlled coffee exports, were primarily outside the monied economy. Only in Antioquia, where service tenants dominated, did they receive wages. Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, p. 264 (English edition).

³⁵ Johnson, "Lo que hizo y lo que no hizo el café," p. 83.

³⁶ Safford, "Social Aspects," pp. 360-61.

³⁷ Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict*, p. 162.

conflict is rejected by among others Frank Safford and Fernando López-Alves, both of whom argue that the same classes could be found in both parties.³⁸ Nor does examining the senior officers on both sides of the conflict in terms of class prove insightful. The government's commanding General Prospero Pinzón Romero, for instance, was educated in law, became a judge, established a Bogotá newspaper, served as governor of two different departments and served as Minister of War. On the Liberal side General Rafael Uribe Uribe was also born in Antioquia on his family's country estate, although the family was in poor economic conditions during his youth. He attended the University of Antioquia, then a local military academy before obtaining a law degree. He was a professor of constitutional law and political economy before being appointed Attorney General of Antioquia. General Benjamin Herrera, thought to be the main Liberal military strategist during the war, was from Cali in the Cauca valley in Southwest Colombia, a Conservative area of large estates. In other words there simply is no clear pattern based on occupation, class or even region.

We need to know more about class, race and ethnic relations at the local and regional level if we are to understand the conflicts of the late 19th century as more than just inter-elite rivalries. As Frank Safford has demonstrated Liberals were the elites in some parts of the country, notably Santander, but in other regions such as Cauca Liberals were more likely to be the landless struggling against large landowners.³⁹ Yet, little of the extant literature goes beyond an analysis of those elites. For instance, the over concentration in the literature on elites has neglected the role which freed slaves may have played in the civil conflicts of the 19th century. Slavery,⁴⁰ though less important in Colombia than in the United States, was abolished only a decade earlier in Colombia in January 1852.⁴¹ At the time of independence there were an estimated

³⁸ López-Alves, *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America 1810-1900* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 125. Add Safford!

³⁹ Safford, "Social Aspects of Politics in 19th Century Spanish America: New Granada, 1825-1850," pp, 360-61.

⁴⁰ Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, "Esclavos y señores en la sociedad Colombiana del Siglo XVIII," *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, 1 (1963): pp, 3-62.

⁴¹ Oscar Vargas Velarde, "La Abolición de la Esclavitud en Colombia y Panamá," <http://tribunaldecuentas.gob.pa/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/La-abolici%C3%B3n-de-la-esclavitud-en-Colombia-y-Panam%C3%A1.-Magdo.-Oscar-Vargas-Velarde.pdf>. Accessed 8/7/2015.

90,000 slaves in the country, and Colombia like other slave societies in the Americas experienced slave resistance, including the Palenques of escaped slaves. We know that during the wars of independence in the province of Cartagena where people of African descent constituted a demographic majority, they played an important political and military role;⁴² yet, when one moves to an examination of the civil wars of the late 19th century historians seem to have lost sight of their existence. We do know that In Cauca in Southwest Colombia where slavery had been important, former slaves, Afro-Colombians, appear to have been vigorous in asserting their rights to citizenship after the 1850s. Cauca was 13% Black, by far the highest percentage of any of the states at the time of emancipation.⁴³ Popular Liberals asserted their rights to petition for the resolution of grievances, for the right to use land without paying rent, and the right to hold land if it was being worked. Popular Liberals in the region expressed resentment about the haughty attitudes of their former masters and hacendados in turn complained about the attitudes of their former slaves.⁴⁴ Those lower class Popular Liberals, who demanded free land and the rights of free labour, were natural supporters for national Liberals in the civil wars of the period. Yet, we know very little about the ideas and roles of the lower sectors of Colombian society in those years. We do know that there was little difference between the racial attitudes of white and mestizo elites, whether Liberal or Conservative, both of whom supported the policies of mestizaje/miscegenation.

Fernán González and Marco Palacios have stressed the importance of the internal migrations of the nineteenth century in influencing the guerrilla phase of the conflicts and especially those groups which were somewhat outside the influence of traditional political and economic institutions. They note for instance the area in the Department of Cauca from the Patía valley to the borders of Tolima where guerrillas gained the support of Paeces and Gambianos indigenous groups. The Patía valley was an area in which escaped slave communities had been established and where freed slaves had become established late in the colonial era. It was considered an area in which social

⁴² Marixa Lasso, "Race War and Nation in Caribbean Gran Colombia, 1810-1832," *American Historical Review*, 111, no. 2 (2006): pp. 336-361.

⁴³ Palacios and Safford, *Colombia*, p. 261 (English edition).

⁴⁴ James Sanders, *Contentious Republicans: Popular Politics, Race and Class in Nineteenth Century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 25-49.

banditry flourished and which was resistant to government forces.⁴⁵ Such populations were influenced less by any ideological adherence to either the Conservatives or Liberals than by their self-interest in resisting government control. In general as Fernán González has argued, the guerrilla dimensions of the Thousand Day War were widespread, especially in the Magdalena Valley and areas where societies lacked cohesion and social control, where the presence of the State was weak and the advance of latifundios on the frontier produced conflict with the initial settlers in the areas. In his view the guerrillas were composed of landless campesinos, small landowners and squatters,, independent workers, Negroes from the coast, Indians from the Guajira. A smaller were artisans, domestic servants, and a few students.⁴⁶

It is important in seeking to understand the lengthy civil war that ended the 19th century to distinguish between the immediate causes of the civil war and the more fundamental and broader differences in political philosophy which characterized the Liberal-Conservative divide. It is evident that neither party was monolithic. Rafael Nuñez, one of the leading intellectual Liberals of his generation was instrumental in establishing the conservative constitutional order which dominated Colombian politics for more than forty years; and Miguel Antonio Caro, one of the most important conservative intellectuals and politicians of the second half of the 19th century thought the Conservative party was contaminated by Liberal ideas of individualism. The War of a Thousand Days itself was, in contrast to the deeper divisions over political values in the two main parties, primarily a struggle for power among competing elites in the context of extreme economic crisis and a repressive central government which for more than a decade had systematically excluded members of the opposition party from meaningful participation in the nation's political institutions. There may well have been a class dimension to the conflict, as Charles Bergquist has argued, but we need to have more evidence to be conclusive, and we certainly need to know far more about the leaders and members of the guerrilla groups which characterized the final two years of the war. At least one of those guerrilla leaders, Tulio Varón, "El Machetero", in Tolima, inspired FARC more than sixty years later, naming one of its Fronts in his honour.

⁴⁵ Fernán González, "De la Guerra Regular," pp. 113-114; Palacios, *El Café en Colombia*, p. 296.

⁴⁶ González, *De la Guerra Regular*," pp. 116-117.

A combination of ideological, political and economic factors drew the country into civil war at the end of the century. The longstanding ideological and political differences between Liberal and Conservative were important ingredients in leading to conflict, but without the economic crisis occasioned by the fall in international coffee prices it is unlikely that war would have come in October 1899 or that it would have been so protracted. That said, the length of the war and that fact that for two of the three years of conflict guerrilla warfare was the norm, suggest that there were additional underlying factors associated with conflicts over land as well as poverty and inequality. Thomas Fischer cites the reports of a Swiss academic, Ernest Rothlisberger, travelling in Colombia in the 1880s, who argued that ideology had little to do with the savagery of the civil conflicts but rather with the desire to take vengeance on those who had allegedly perpetrated atrocities against them on previous occasions. Rothlisberger also commented that religion was not the real divide between Liberal and Conservatives. There were freethinkers among Conservatives and Catholic fanatics among Liberals.⁴⁷ The War of a Thousand Days was on the surface a conflict between Conservatives holding political power and Liberals out of power. Party lines had hardened by the 1890s. By then leading families were one or the other, and that continued for much of the 20th century. That said, the division among Conservatives between Nationalists and Historicos represented fundamental differences in approach to governance and nation building. The historicos supported more pluralistic participation in governance, including full participation by Liberals, freedom of the press, the elimination of paper money not backed by gold, a more significant focus on public works, and some administrative decentralization to empower departments and municipalities.⁴⁸ Some Liberals were skeptical about even the historicos' position. Liberal leader Eusebio Morales writing in the *North American Review* highlighted that perspective when he suggested that a Historical Conservative was just a Nationalist Conservative out of power.⁴⁹

Party hatred and ideology aside, the immediate cause of war in 1899 rests more firmly with rational self-interest, whether it was the exclusion of Liberals from all levels

⁴⁷ Cited in Fischer, "Desarrollo hacia afuera," in Sanchez, *Memoria*, p. 44.

⁴⁸ Fernán González, "De la Guerra Regular de los 'Generales-Caballeros' a la Guerra Popular de los Guerrillos," in Sanchez, ed., *Memoria*, p. 108.

⁴⁹ Morales, "Political and Economical Situation," p. 355.

of government, the economic impact of the decline in coffee prices, or the bankruptcy of government and those tied to coffee exports which triggered open warfare. What applied to competition within Conservative ranks might also have applied to the conflict between Liberals and Conservatives, although with more venom.

There is little question that by the end of the 1890s the country was in disarray. By 1899 there was widespread lack of confidence in a weak central government. The infrastructure plans initiated by Nuñez had made little progress. A series of initiatives to build a Panama Canal, including under contract with Ferdinand de Lesseps, had failed, and the failure of Bogotá politicians to recognize the implications of failing to act decisively on the canal issue in dealings with the United States fed the frustration and secessionist sentiment in Panama, sentiment that went beyond a simple competition between Liberals and Conservatives.

Starting in the Department of Santander in October 1899 Liberals revolted against what they viewed as the autocratic Conservative government controlled by Vice-President José Manuel Marroquin, who deposed the aged and infirm elected President Manuel Antonio Sanclemente.⁵⁰ The early stages of the war, and in particular the battles of Peralonso in December 1899, which was a Liberal victory, and that of Palonegro the following May which represented a decisive Conservative victory, were essentially traditional battles. With the defeat of the main Liberal army in Santander, for the next two years guerrilla warfare characterized the conflict.⁵¹ Regional Liberal elites formed their militias from dependent peasants and labourers, while the Conservative government employed often violent forced conscription to supplement the very small professional army, a Guardia Civil, which was established under the 1886 Constitution, which also provided for a professional military academy.⁵² Photographs and contemporary accounts of the conflict reveal many child soldiers in the ranks on both sides.

⁵⁰ Sanclemente remained technically President until his death in 2002.

⁵¹ Fernán González, "De la Guerra regular de los generals-caballeros a la Guerra popular de los guerrilleros," in Sánchez, *Memoria*, pp. 107-125.

⁵² The Nuñez government in 1888 established a National Police, initially under the Minister of Government and later Minister of War, but its jurisdiction was initially limited to Bogotá

The Aftermath of Conflict

The war ended with two treaties in 1902, the surrender of General Rafael Uribe Uribe in October on the hacienda Neerlandia, and the following month that on the USS Wisconsin, which settled the war.⁵³ As an indication of just how fragmented the country was at the conclusion of the war the Neerlandia treaty was signed by the delegate of Liberal General Rafael Uribe Uribe on behalf of opposition forces in Magdalena and Bolívar and by Urbano Castellanos, representing the Commanding General of government forces in those departments. Rebels were allowed to retain their revolvers and personal items and were provided with safe conduct passes and assistance in returning to their homes. The Treaty provided for the release of all Liberal prisoners, whether political or military.⁵⁴ The treaty of Wisconsin was signed 21 November 1902 by representatives of General Herrera and by General Victor Salazar, among others, representing government authority. The Treaty provided for full amnesty for rebel forces, the immediate release of political and military prisoners, the discontinuation of any legal proceedings against rebels then in process, and the restoration of rebel civil rights. The final treaties granted amnesty to combatants and promised free elections and political reforms. In 1907 the Colombian Congress passed Law number 4, providing for a general pardon for the political and common crimes committed during the preceding civil wars. The law applied to both government forces and revolutionaries. As with the Neerlandia Treaty, the Wisconsin Treaty⁵⁵ provided for safe conduct passes for rebels adhering to the Treaty and assistance for rebels to return to their homes. The Treaty included a provision important to Panamanians and U.S. officials, to the effect that the Colombian Congress would expedite negotiations over the canal. There was a further commitment to address political reforms and to reform the country's monetary system, in particular addressing the issue of paper currency which had been a central problem in the previous decade. Consistent with the spirit of the treaties leading Liberal general Herrera was subsequently elected to the Chamber of Representatives in 1905, later served as a senator and in 1914 Minister of Agriculture. Uribe Uribe served in a

⁵³ The best account in English of the military course of the conflict is by Geoffrey Demarest, "War of the Thousand Days," in *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 12, no. 1 (Spring 2001): pp. 1-30.

⁵⁴ Tratado de Neerlandia, Documento 5 in Sanchez, *Memoria*, p. 415.

⁵⁵ Tratado de Wisconsin, Documento 6, in Sanchez, *Memoria*, pp. 418-410.

diplomatic capacity under the postwar Conservative governments but remained a leading advocate of Liberal values. He was assassinated in Bogotá in 1914.⁵⁶

The War of a Thousand Days contributed to an estimated 100,000 deaths, many from combat, many from dysentery, yellow fever, malaria, or post-combat infections. The war also cost the country its most prosperous and strategically important department, Panama, where the weakness of the central government to control rebellion on the Isthmus combined with some slight of hand by the Theodore Roosevelt administration to facilitate its secession. The loss of Panama may have been beneficial in fostering a sense of nationalism since continental Colombians and Panamanians had little cultural or political affinity in any event.⁵⁷ The Thousand Day War did contribute to a stronger sense of national identity, and the loss of Panama gave Colombians a country (the United States) and an American leader (Theodore Roosevelt) on which to focus their enmity if only for a generation. The war contributed to nation building in the sense that it temporarily and militarily resolved the open conflict between the two parties. Liberals and Conservatives alike recognized the disastrous consequences of their frequent civil wars and in the interest of inter-elite solidarity at least temporarily put aside their differences as they did at the end of the 1950s civil war. The broad amnesty that was part of the final treaty facilitated that reconciliation and enabled those prominent Liberals who had actively participated in the war to play a meaningful role in the political and economic life of the country. It was evident that the Regeneration governments were not viable, since the top down consolidation of power after 1886 excluded a significant portion of the population from active participation, not only the masses but also leading Liberals and others who opposed the governments. As Fernán González has indicated the Regeneration governments depended for their survival on a network of local and regional caudillos rather than a broad base of popular support.⁵⁸ The experience of the War of a Thousand Days War also stimulated the government of

⁵⁶ Luis Zea Uribe, "Los últimos momentos de Uribe Uribe," *Credencial Historia*, no. 179 (Nov., 2004). His <http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/revistas/credencial/noviembre2004/uribe.htm>. Accessed 8/17/2015.

⁵⁷ David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 154.

⁵⁸ Fernán González, "De la Guerra Regular de los 'Generales-Caballeros' a la Guerra Popular de los Guerrillos," in Sanchez, *Memoria*, pp. 107-143.

General Rafael Reyes Prieto (1904-1909) to further professionalize the armed forces under the leadership of a Chilean military mission. The Reyes government also added a naval and cadet school, although in spite of these initiatives Colombian governments for the first decades of the twentieth century showed little enthusiasm for the military, at least until war with Peru in 1932.⁵⁹ Yet, it is difficult to conclude that overall the civil wars of the second half of the nineteenth century contributed in any positive way to building the Colombian nation. The cost of those conflicts in human lives and treasure lost is impossible to measure, wasting resources which could have been better allocated to economic and social development. As Thomas Fischer has observed, the death of so many young men weakened an already inadequate labour market in the countryside and contributed to the inability of exporters to meet their credit obligations. Bankruptcies often resulted in the transfer of the ownership of valuable land to foreign creditors.⁶⁰ Perhaps ironically for the next half century Colombia was peaceful internally, at least superficially democratic with elections honoured by competing parties, and at least superficially prosperous with the infusion of foreign investment in the 1920s, but as the subsequent history of the country attests the more fundamental issues of class and inequality that were masked by this focus on inter-elite rivalries were yet to be resolved. Institutionally and economically the country remained weak. Although it possessed a strong central constitution it lacked central banking, well-developed infrastructure and the financial resources to modernize the economy. Nation building remained a work in progress as Colombia moved into the twentieth century.

⁵⁹ Historia del Ejército Nacional de Colombia, Centro de Estudios Históricos del Ejército. <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/index.php?idcategoria=204551>. Accessed 8/26/2015.

⁶⁰ Fischer, "desarrollo hacia fuera," in Sanchez, *Memoria*, p. 48.