The morning’s scenes offered a living tableau of the interpretation that he was about to deliver, a portrait of a nation “unbalanced in space . . . [and] in time.” Alberto Lleras Camargo had commenced the two-hundredth day of his presidency with a tour through the sprawling hillside complex of Popular Cultural Action (ACPO; Acción Cultural Popular), the Colombian Catholic Church’s most dynamic social initiative. Before viewing the facility’s state-of-the-art radio equipment, the technological heart of ACPO’s educational and spiritual outreach, Lleras met with a select group of young rural leaders who had come to ACPO’s classrooms from across Colombia’s Andean heartland. Their stories of home, of communities beset by sickness and isolation, and their aspirations for uplift, underscored for Lleras the necessity of national solidarity with the countryside. “You all,” he remarked, “are the messengers of a new Colombia, the Colombia that we all vehemently desire.”

We have no record of what the largely anonymous students whom Lleras addressed made of his words. But the speech that Lleras recited later that day—on the obligations that government, large landowners, and campesinos had to one another; on their collective task of leveling the nation’s inequities—roused excited comment in various corners of Colombia’s social and physical landscape. Broadcast through the air by ACPO’s powerful transmitters, and in print by many of the country’s leading publications, within a matter of days Lleras’ speech entered public consciousness as a penetrating summation of the president’s agenda. For a struggling but socially minded landowner in the coffee zones of southern Caldas, Lleras’s words rejuvenated hope that bureaucrats would concede to his designs for a land reform in miniature. One of Colombia’s most distinguished lawyers took
Lleras’s talk of responsibility as a rallying cry for his profession, an invitation to “throw ourselves into the task of promoting better understanding between all citizens, whose equal rights are frequently prone to violation by . . . elements whose [sole] rationale is force.”

The setting and the diffusion of Lleras’s oration signaled, no less than did the content of his message, the negation of force and a confirmation of rights. For the better part of the preceding decade, Colombia’s legislative institutions had lain dormant, shuttered under a constitutional state of siege that at times also silenced the country’s press. Lleras’s weekend tour through the highlands northeast of Bogotá, culminating in his appearance at ACPO, reaffirmed Colombia’s recent emergence from this authoritarianism. As Lleras’s retinue rubbed elbows with ACPO’s cassocked priests under a brilliant Andean sky, the president carved out time to speak with delegates of the recently reconvened local municipal council. If Lleras’s visit substantiated the deep relationship between the Catholic Church and the Colombian state, so too did his presence and words recast that Sunday in February as a celebration of temporal power and an expanding, democratic public sphere.

Before reconstructing the story of the creole peace, this book first introduces the larger tale of Colombian politics. Few figures were as closely linked to the arc of the twentieth century—not solely the changing fortunes of administrations or parties, but also the relationship between words and power—as Alberto Lleras. Part of a generation of lettered Colombians who did not initially conceive of their nation as a place of violence, Lleras labored to maintain convivencia in Colombian public life as well as global diplomacy. The shepherd of Colombia’s democratization and the primary exponent of the reformist possibilities that accompanied the transition, Alberto Lleras emerged in the late 1950s as the paramount messenger of a new Colombia (figure 1). But just as Lleras’s path indicated the will of many Colombians to move beyond force in all their affairs, so too did it expose the limits of urban Colombians’ engagement with the countryside—a divergence at the heart of struggles over violence, peace, and nation.

When Colombian Liberals spoke of politics, they commonly invoked two lexicons. The first was the language of party, which identified Colombians as belonging to the Liberal and Conservative parties, the two great collectivities of public life. The second lexicon became popularized in the middle third of the twentieth century by the Liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Even as he operated within the bipartisan logic, Gaitán’s humble origins led him to conceive of Colombia as divided into distinct corporate bodies. The largest of these, the país nacional, represented the popular, organic nation. The destiny of this authentic Colombia was
in turn steered by the \textit{país político}, the gentlemanly country of politics that ruled from the halls of power in Bogotá.\(^6\)

Though Gaitán never spoke of it, it is possible to discern a third division within his schema. The \textit{país letrado}, the lettered country, was the smallest of the three, a virtual subset of the country of politics. Like their brethren in the \textit{país político}, the writers, journalists, and lawyers of the \textit{país letrado} idolized the capacity of words both to describe and to transform the world around them. Working in different genres, from the printed newspaper page to the composition and exercise of the law, these men slid fluidly in and out of the \textit{país político} as circumstance and personal predilection dictated.\(^7\)

Alberto Lleras Camargo straddled the border between these countries of letters and politics. In the estimation of Colombia’s most famous journalist-turned-writer, Gabriel García Márquez—a native of the Caribbean coast who normally possessed little patience for the upland \textit{país político}—Lleras was “a great writer who was twice president of the Republic.”\(^8\) Yet Lleras started life distant from even the \textit{país letrado}. Born on the hardscrabble outskirts of Bogotá in 1906, Lleras
ultimately relied on a family birthright to escape his parents’ “nomadic poverty.” While Alberto’s father Felipe toiled on the marginal lands of rented farms, other relatives carried on the family vocation as schoolteachers. With Felipe’s death in 1915, these uncles and cousins eased Alberto’s entry into the capital city and its lettered circles. This move to the heart of Bogotá, which Colombians styled the “Athens of South America,” allowed Alberto to immerse himself in the written word. As he later described, he now had the opportunity to indulge already evident “literary passions” that otherwise “would have drowned amidst haciendas [estates] and country chores.”

In addition to learning alongside the children of the país político in Bogotá’s best schools, Alberto gained familiarity with the intertwined histories of his family, party, and nation. Alberto’s grandfather, Lorenzo María Lleras, had entered politics in the late 1820s as a devotee of Francisco de Paula Santander, Colombia’s hero of independence and early president. Over subsequent decades, Lorenzo María’s attachment matured into a deep identification with the Liberal Party, which claimed descent from Santander. At the same time, however, Lorenzo María stayed largely apart from the civil wars that consumed many Liberals and Conservatives, instead embodying the civic tradition associated with Santander. From prolonged stints in newspaper publishing and education, Lorenzo María evolved into a man of laws in his own right. His hand showed in the 1851 abolition of slavery and the establishment of church-state separation in the 1863 constitution—two of the Liberal Party’s signature accomplishments of the nineteenth century.

As he contemplated Lorenzo María Lleras’s legacies, the young Alberto also had to face up to the final act of Colombia’s nineteenth century. The War of a Thousand Days, which ended four years before Alberto’s birth, had confirmed the Conservatives’ unmaking of Lorenzo María’s Colombia. In the 1880s, the Conservative Party overturned the 1863 constitution, imposing—in alliance with the Catholic Church—a new order that survived an armed challenge from the Liberals at the turn of the century. The Liberals’ defeat in the War of a Thousand Days left the party largely excluded from national political life, and the Lleras family consigned to posts on the lower rungs of the education system.

Such political strictures helped to funnel Alberto Lleras into the país letrado. However, his decision to turn to journalism was ultimately his own. In an echo of his grandfather’s precocity, Lleras published his first newspaper article before his eighteenth birthday. Within two years, further displays of mettle won Lleras a paid position at El Espectador, one of the two main newspapers associated with the Liberal Party. The arrangement opened doors for the thin, unassuming teenager, plunging him deeper into the newspaper scene and bringing him into contact with influential politicians. He simultaneously emerged as a spokesman for his “new” generation of letrados, los nuevos, who sought to infuse the country’s intellectual and political currents with novel styles in order to “[raise public life] above small
ambitions and crude appetites." After four decades, the so-called “Conservative hegemony” appeared decadent and ripe for critique.

Other sectors of Liberalism meanwhile geared for a more frontal challenge against Conservative rule. This position’s maximum proponent was Alfonso López Pumarejo, the scion of a top Colombian banking clan. López’s life tightly tracked the era’s politics: his birth preceded the centralist constitution of 1886 by mere months, and by the 1920s his political activism fed into the growing travails of the Conservative regime. When the 1930 presidential contest came into view, López dared his party to discard its recent policy of electoral abstention and take on the Conservatives. Lleras received a preview of this argument when he met with López in Paris in 1929. Lleras had left Colombia for Buenos Aires two years earlier in search of new journalistic frontiers. The success he made for himself abroad only increased his stock back home. By the time of his conversation with López, the Liberals’ flagship newspaper, *El Tiempo*, had already extended him an offer to return. The combination of personal entreaties from Eduardo Santos, the paper’s editor, and López proved irresistible. The twenty-three-year old Lleras, whom *El Tiempo* hailed as “perhaps the most brilliant representative of the young Colombian intellectual generation,” returned to take his place in the countries of letters and politics.

Lleras found Colombia in the midst of monumental changes. Months after his homecoming, the Liberal presidential candidate beat a divided Conservative field, returning the Liberal Party to power for the first time in nearly half a century. To Lleras, this epochal shift paled next to the accelerating pace of history itself. If his semi-rural childhood had recalled the sixteenth century, and stories of his grandfather the nineteenth, after 1930 Lleras perceived the twentieth century developing in earnest. The unequal distribution of industrialization and urbanization—what Lleras’s ACPO speech would call “a disequilibrium in space . . . [and] in time”—quickly emerged as one of his central preoccupations. These would be, moreover, essential problems in the quest for development throughout Latin America.

Though the advent of a historical disjuncture after 1930 disquieted Lleras, he found solace in another conception of time. Lleras reckoned that national life moved through an unbreaking sequence of generations. The inception of the “Liberal Republic” in 1930 and Alfonso López Pumarejo’s election four years later signified the ascension of López’s generation, one senior to Lleras’s. Yet López overwhelmingly turned to *los nuevos* to direct his reformist project, dubbed the “Revolution on the March” (*Revolución en Marcha*). Looking years afterward at a 1935 photograph of López with his cabinet, García Márquez observed that none of the nine ministers equaled the age of the forty-eight-year old López, who “possess[ed] the mischievous air of a precocious father among his illegitimate sons.”

For the young men of letters and politics in that photograph, the Revolution on the March presented a chance to put their impulse for national renovation into practice. In his memoirs, Lleras remembered these years with López as “the best
part of my life, without any doubt.” To borrow a later formulation of García Márquez’s, “Liberalism . . . [became] not simply a political party but rather a mentality, a new point of view toward the nation’s problems.” “Back then, we had a feeling . . . of [r]enaissance,” Lleras admitted. “We saw ourselves resuming the legacy of the golden days of struggle against colonialism, fanaticism, the dullness and tarnish on Colombian life . . . [it] was an inversion [of decades of Conservative custom].”16

Lleras’s enthusiasm stemmed in part from López’s preferred methods. “He loathed physical force in the affairs of state and never resorted to it outside of [government],” Lleras explained in his 1959 eulogy for López.17 Adopting a strategy that called to Lleras’s mind the best traditions of their party, the Revolution on the March followed legislative avenues to transformation. A 1936 constitutional reform revived the state’s separation from the Catholic Church, while also fundamentally expanding the state’s powers relative to society and the economy. In response to mobilization by urban and rural workers, the governments of the Liberal Republic had already commenced debate on labor and agrarian reform. The constitutional reform now defined work and landed property in terms of their contribution to the social good, granting the state the legal authority to structure market relations.18 To Lleras, these steps marked the fulfillment of priorities fit for the twentieth century.

Though generational disagreements on these precepts restricted the content and real-world reach of Liberal reforms, they did nothing to impede Lleras’s rapport with López.19 Lleras was unchallenged as López’s most faithful disciple; their relationship ranked as the most influential of Lleras’s life. Under López’s tutelage, Lleras greatly enlarged his portfolio of activities in the país político. To be certain, the president enlisted Lleras’s clarity of thought and prose in conventional tasks. As López’s secretary within the Liberal Party early in the 1930s, and then within the presidential palace, Lleras continued to hammer away at a typewriter on speeches and policy declarations. He also advanced López’s platform by periodically stepping back into the editorial rooms of Liberal newspapers.20

The real maturation came in Lleras’s facility with the spoken word. In 1931, Lleras was elected to Congress and then selected to preside over the House of Representatives. His interventions before his colleagues benefited as much from his carefully crafted statements as from his authoritative speaking style. Lleras’s slight frame belied a surprisingly forceful baritone voice enhanced by the precise, classic Spanish diction of Bogotá. President López put this attribute to good use, too, by twice appointing Lleras as his interior minister (the youngest in Colombian history). Lleras thus became, in addition to the head of the state’s most important ministry, the face of the administration’s actions before Congress and the public.21

Lleras commenced a final pursuit in the 1930s, one that combined his dedication to civil political exchange and legal frameworks. Beginning in 1933, at the same conference where Franklin D. Roosevelt announced his Good Neighbor policy, Lleras attended hemispheric congresses contemplating changes to the existing
pan-American system. Lleras's time in Argentina had awakened an interest in inter-Americanism, a principle whose legal mechanisms were now being formalized. In the words of Lleras's primary biographer, exposure to this making of international diplomacy and law made Lleras into “the Good Neighbor” par excellence. Lleras saw national sovereignty and non-aggression as extensions of the democratic ideals he was working for within Colombia. Inter-Americanism therefore became another of his abiding concerns; in time, Lleras would become a foundational, global figure in the movement for regional solidarity and cooperation.

For Liberals of Lleras’s generation, exposure to the wider world in the 1930s and ’40s served to bolster the notion of Colombia and the Americas as a space of peace. Observing firsthand the rising tide of unfreedom in Europe sharpened these letras’ notions of nationhood. Writing in his journal from Berlin in late August 1939, Gregorio Hernández de Alba, a boyhood classmate of Lleras’s who had come to Europe to study ethnography, reflected that “never before in any city have I felt myself to be such a stranger . . . A stranger because of the language, because of the spirit. . . . In the back-and-forth of European politics, in the lack of conscience of these civilized peoples, in the tragedy that is upon us, that weighs on the air and on my Colombia, my wild America, where we still have peace, where we still live freely without obstruction, where the ethics and morality of people still have meaning.” This was a romantic portrait of Latin America, grounded in urban lifeways. But Hernández de Alba’s understanding of peace was entirely suited to the cresting wave of democratic, Liberal politics in Colombia.

And even in the global calamity that followed, Alberto Lleras remained fixed on the possibilities of peace. In early 1945, he embarked on the most frenetic months of his overseas career. With the end of the world war in sight, Latin American representatives gathered in Mexico City to discuss “problems of war and peace.” The February conference was in many regards a rehearsal for the founding meeting of the United Nations, scheduled for San Francisco just weeks later. Indeed, for Lleras—head of the Colombian delegation—plans for the United Nations overshadowed the Mexico City proceedings. Though they would fail to win over enough votes to halt the Allied powers’ domination over the U.N., the Colombian delegation eventually succeeded in adding language to the U.N. Charter that privileged “pacific settlement of local disputes through . . . regional arrangements or . . . regional agencies”—the possibility of a hemispheric iteration of “the universal system of peace and security.” Enshrined in international law, the inter-American system could endure in the postwar world.

The situation back in Colombia remained close to Lleras’s thoughts throughout this exhausting stretch of months. Mexico City’s thin mountain air and San Francisco’s morning fog injected small reminders of Bogotá into the conference proceedings. As he went about drafting a public summary of the U.N. delegation’s accomplishments, Lleras made sure to incorporate an admonition to the país
“Nothing will prosper,” he warned, “in an atmosphere of personalist, aggressive politics, where cooperation and collective labors are considered humiliating acts and rebellion is held in the highest public esteem.” “Colombia has been advancing until now a foreign policy born . . . directly from its internal politics,” Lleras concluded, “and it would be a grievous catastrophe for this republic, the better portion of its international aspirations for law, peace, justice, and security fulfilled, to have that foreign policy no longer coincide with the domestic, destroyed and disrupted by periodic convulsions.”

Lleras’s accusations cast a broad critique. He certainly had in mind anti-López Liberals, who had cooled the reforms of the Revolution on the March. However, to a greater extent, Lleras’s words targeted the Conservative most associated with the polarization settling into the country of politics. Laureano Gómez was in many ways his party’s foil to López: three years younger than López, Laureano also caused political headaches for the creaky Conservative regime of the early 1920s. Common cause against the political establishment had in fact prompted a young Lleras, at López’s urging, to make his first political speech a public defense of Gómez.

The 1930s brought out a very different Gómez. Known for his fiery style and a personality sufficiently forceful to grant him first-name recognition, Laureano gained a new moniker early in the Liberal Republic: “The Monster.” The reforms of López’s Revolution on the March redoubled the firestorm of criticism that Laureano and other prominent Conservatives unleashed after their party’s 1930 electoral defeat. Taking an opposite approach from Hernández de Alba, Conservatives projected the clash between right and left extremisms in Europe onto events in Colombia, reading the Revolution on the March as a vehicle for Communist infiltration. From the pages of his newspaper El Siglo, Laureano issued forth a constant stream of denunciations, attacking López’s government on everything from Conservative voting rights to the president’s personal finances.

The possibility of a second López presidency ignited Laureano’s most unbridled fulminations. As Lleras put it afterward, Laureano threatened “civil war if the [Liberal] candidate selected is not satisfactory to Conservatism. Civil war if the constitution of 1936 is not abrogated. Civil war if guarantees to Colombia’s workers are not terminated. Civil war if, in the end, the Conservative Party is not allowed to govern the Republic as it pleases.” The intimidation continued through the remainder of 1940. From New York, where he had lived since leaving office in 1938, López worried to Lleras that Laureano’s latest statements sought “to provoke and excuse in advance an [assassination] attempt against my person.” Violence threatened to reach into the highest levels of the país político.

In spite of López’s resulting hesitation, the residue of past ambition—combined with the encouragement of devoted partisans like Lleras—proved weighty enough to pull him back into Colombian politics. López cruised to an easy reelection in 1942. Doubts and regrets nonetheless resurfaced rapidly. The social bases of the
Revolution on the March, never consolidated in the 1930s, turned on López as he sought to manage the world war’s economic and political repercussions by tacking to the center. From the right, Laureano and the Conservatives afforded the president no quarter, pummeling him on a pair of alleged scandals. Chastened, López sought to resign. When Congress rejected this attempt, López requested leave from the presidency, hoping that his temporary departure from the political scene would calm the situation.

The government’s difficulties instead mounted. “It seems to me that we are rapidly entering into the national crisis that we have spent so much time discussing,” López said to Lleras in a February 1944 cable from New York. After Congress again denied López the possibility of permanent exit, he had little choice but to reassume the presidency in May 1944. His presence detonated Colombia’s conspiratorial atmosphere; when López traveled to the southwestern city of Pasto in July, mutinous army units squirreled him away.

In Bogotá, pro-López forces in the government scrambled to contain this unprecedented military challenge to civilian authority. Darío Echandía, the stately forty-eight-year-old Tolima native who had held power during López’s self-imposed exile, once more assumed the mantle of constitutional authority. Lleras hurried down from Medellín, and an hour after nightfall took to the radio to read statements of loyalty from senior military officers. So commanding was Lleras’s performance, so reassuring his voice, that decades later García Márquez remembered Lleras as having “maintained the country in an air of calm and confidence throughout the entire day, until the rebellion was defeated.”

The aura of credibility that surrounded Lleras during the Pasto uprising soon translated into unanticipated responsibility. Colombia’s democracy survived an armed threat only to fall victim to the worst vices of the country of politics: with the 1946 election approaching, and López politically debilitated, Liberal Party leaders turned their attentions almost exclusively to the presidential contest. Amidst this internal discord, in July 1945 Liberals in Congress finally consented to López’s third offer of resignation. To replace him, they selected Lleras, fresh off his triumph in San Francisco. Even as he solemnly assumed the presidential sash, Lleras remained an outsider, a Liberal who brought a proven capacity to govern mixed with an evident aversion to the país político’s politicking ways.

Just past his fortieth birthday, Lleras contemplated an impossible task: to serve as president in a labyrinth of others’ making. The impartiality expected of him amplified his own high standards, leaving him with a feeling of total isolation. Moreover, as Lleras confided to Eduardo Santos, the Liberals’ divisions left the Conservative Party with its “best opportunities since 1930.” Lleras stood adamant that his government would afford the Conservatives every possible guarantee. “They will get them,” he told Santos, “even if it costs me my life. And at the very least, I am conscious that it will cost me my reputation among my co-partisans.
I will also do everything necessary to guarantee a peaceful transition of power, if [the Conservatives] win.”

Win the Conservatives did. Though the Liberals outpolled the Conservative Party by more than 230,000 votes, the split Liberal presidential ticket ceded the outcome to the opposition. Though they retained control of Congress and the judiciary, Liberals had suffered their own 1930. However, to Lleras’s shock, the peaceful transition of power seemed a reality. In a radio address three days after the election, Lleras simultaneously implored his countrymen to eschew acts of force and congratulated them for their upstanding behavior to date. Allowing himself some of the rhetorical adornment that had long since disappeared from his writing, Lleras ended by saying that “it is as if assuming accidental representation of the Motherland [Patria] makes one better, more thoroughly, connect with it, in its dazzling grandeur.”

The concerns which Lleras had expressed ahead of the election morphed into a cautious optimism that appealed to what Lleras saw as Colombians’ best instincts.

By contrast, Lleras’s fatalistic prediction about his own fate came to pass. Blame for the Liberal defeat cascaded down on the outgoing president, as prominent party members denounced Lleras for capitulating to the Conservatives and not using the mechanisms of government as instruments to perpetuate Liberal power. His public persona battered and his duty fulfilled, Lleras immediately commenced his retreat from the country of politics. After founding Semana, a pioneering national weekly news magazine, Lleras received an offer to head the Pan-American Union. The disconnect between Colombia’s internal and external politics that Lleras had identified in San Francisco seemed wider than ever. Lleras therefore shifted scales, decamping from Bogotá to Washington to take up the work of building “democracy between nations.”

THE RELUCTANT EXILE, 1947–1957

More than at any other time of his life, over the remainder of the 1940s Alberto Lleras lived as a citizen of the Americas. The intense pace of building hemispheric institutions provided a welcome distraction from affairs back home. Lleras had, besides, few sources of information to draw upon. The 1946 election left the Liberal Party in disarray, leading many notables to join Lleras in exile. Domestic and international newspapers similarly remained transfixed on the country’s high political drama. Lleras’s urban myopia was thus of a piece with that of the país político.

Outside of Bogotá’s gaze, the 1946 election had unleashed energies quite contrary to those acclaimed by Lleras before his departure. Across Andean Colombia, provincial Conservatives seized on their party’s resumption of power to settle scores with local Liberals. The highest concentration of these clashes erupted in
the highlands that stretch northeast from Bogotá some three hundred miles to the Venezuelan border, an area where Conservatives had been subjected to similar treatment by jubilant Liberals at the end of the Conservative hegemony in 1930. However, the new Conservative terror came to far surpass any antecedent. It furthermore became more systematic as midterm elections approached, and departmental and local Conservative political appointees opted to rig the results through violent forms of electioneering. Rural Liberals found their political lives increasingly flattened, as Conservative officials and their deputized civilian posses blocked Liberals from entering town centers on election days, stripped them of their citizenship cards, and subjected them to outright beatings and assassinations.38

Usually at arm’s length, these two worlds—the diplomatic sphere occupied by Lleras, with its consecration of ideals of mutual security, and a burgeoning violence-as-practice in provincial Colombia—collided spectacularly in 1948. In early April, Lleras and the cream of the Americas’ political and diplomatic elite arrived in Bogotá to formalize a new inter-American alliance. Representatives of the twenty-one American nations ultimately did arrive at a charter for the Organization of American States (OAS). Violence nevertheless interrupted the proceedings: early in the afternoon of April 9, just blocks north of the capitol, a gunman fired four bullets into Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Lleras’s one-time companion in the literary groups that nurtured los nuevos, Gaitán had become Colombia’s most thrilling politician, the rare figure whose language aspired to transcend the basic cleavage of party. It had been Gaitán’s insurgent candidacy that tipped the 1946 election in favor of the Conservatives; and until April 9 it was Gaitán who seemed to be the future of the Liberal Party.39

In response to their idol’s death, Bogotá’s popular classes—Gaitán’s país nacional—took to the streets to express their grief and rage, burning, smashing, and looting central Bogotá. In towns up and down the rest of the country, radical Liberals and militants from smaller left parties lashed out at the symbols of Conservative rule and Catholic authority. The net result was a dramatic escalation in the scope of violence, as Conservative police and paramilitary forces meted out revenge against what they more and more saw as godless, upstart Liberals. Violence extended into even the país político, which—Laureano Gómez notwithstanding—had managed to preserve a modicum of its old, orderly rules. Liberal collaboration with the Conservative government, begun in 1946 and reinscribed in the confused aftermath of the Gaitán assassination, frayed as the 1950 presidential election approached. A shootout on the floor of Congress seventeen months after Gaitán’s death left one Liberal representative dead and another, who had been in Mexico City with Lleras, with a mortal wound through his leg.40

The unsustainable timbre of Colombian politics jolted Alberto Lleras into a rare intervention from abroad. “For three years I have kept silent on the Colombian political situation,” the OAS secretary general wrote from his Washington office in
the aftermath of the firefight. “The position with which the American governments honor me and honor Colombia obliges me to not interfere in the political struggle, which in spite of its rare violence nonetheless developed within constitutional channels and with good prospects for a normal outcome. Today this situation appears to have changed.” Lleras implored Colombians to rise above the Liberal-Conservative rift by forming an “unyielding and majoritarian party of patriots” that would “halt those who enact violence” and stave off “catastrophe.”

Lleras’s political inheritance—the legacy of laws imparted by his grandfather and the aversion to violence that marked Alberto as a child of the early twentieth century—seemed at grave risk. At the same time, however, that same set of convictions beckoned as a path out of the fearful night of partisan conflict.

Where Lleras dreamed of bipartisan cooperation, party leaders enmeshed in the thick of the political fight considered only partisan advantage. In order to overcome the Liberals’ continued if shrinking congressional majority, which threatened him with impeachment, President Mariano Ospina Pérez carried out a constitutional coup against his own rule in early November 1949. By closing Congress and other public bodies, this declaration of a state of siege paved the way for one-party rule. Laureano won an uncontested presidential election a short time later. With the “high-priest of political sectarianism” in control of his party and the state, the situation in the countryside deteriorated markedly; a later survey calculated that fifty thousand people died in 1950. Not only did violence against Liberals spike, but in far-flung pockets of the country, an armed Liberal resistance began to take shape.

Writing after his first visit to Colombia a little over a decade later, British historian Eric Hobsbawm ventured that Colombia had experienced “what is probably the greatest armed mobilization of peasants (as guerillas [sic], brigands or self-defence groups) in the recent history of the western hemisphere.” The Colombia that Lleras had known was no more.

Lleras meanwhile remained absorbed by his duties in Washington. The censorship regime imposed by the state of siege placed additional limits on news coming out of Colombia. “I haven’t learned anything distinct from the press clippings [a contact] sent me,” Lleras explained to Eduardo Santos in early 1952. Reflecting on the ideas of violence presented in El Siglo, Lleras added that “I saw the . . . editorial which divides the country between the bandits and the good guys, and which two days later gets corrected. I can’t figure out for myself what happened and I see from what El Tiempo says that no one can explain it there either.”

Lleras found himself torn. On the one hand, he styled himself an “exile . . . from public life,” swearing to a Liberal colleague that “I have the irrevocable intention to not return to active political participation in the rest of my days.” On the other hand, Lleras had never shed the patriotic wistfulness that had compelled him to abandon Buenos Aires in his twenties. This feeling was only made worse by Colombia’s diversion into authoritarianism. “I am obsessed with the idea of
returning,” he wrote to Santos in the closing hours of 1952. “I feel obligated to do something.” The germ of an idea was coming into being: Lleras envisioned what he termed “democratic education . . . partaking in the reestablishment of new conditions by means of a constant contribution to the formation of a democratic public opinion.” 45 The country of letters presented Lleras with a means of correcting what seemed Colombia’s deviant course.

A confluence of fortuitous happenstance and ill omen eventually opened the way for Lleras to reenter Colombia. Content at having guided the OAS through its inaugural six years, Lleras used the American states’ 1954 gathering— their first since Bogotá—to announce his resignation. At roughly the same time, the recently founded University of the Andes in Bogotá invited Lleras to assume its rectorship. Though Lleras had originally foreseen journalism as the best avenue to repay his outstanding debt to Colombia, he happily accepted the offer. According to one of Lleras’s biographers, the former president and international statesman “[thought] he had finally found the lost paradise of his youth.” As the university expanded its footprint on a verdant, hilly “corner of Bogotá,” Lleras shared with a confidant that “all this has me extraordinarily excited.” Fund-raising for the school moreover introduced Lleras to top Colombian industrialists, a connection that would later bear fruit at a critical juncture.46

Political changes at the national level further enabled Lleras’s reappearance in Bogotá. Laureano’s aspirations to redesign the constitution along corporatist lines, as well as his refusal to rein in militant provincial Conservatives, had triggered a military coup in June 1953. The new government of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla portrayed this intervention in politics as a temporary measure. Its initial pledges to curtail partisan fighting, end the state of siege, and return the country to democratic constitutional rule ensured it the support of sectors of the Conservative Party, as well as the Liberal leadership.47 Within the year, Rojas made good on his word through amnesty policies that attracted tens of thousands of combatants, many of whom demobilized in dramatic public ceremonies. Large swaths of the country, above all on the Eastern Plains (Llanos Orientales), enjoyed a newfound calm.48

Whatever these initial achievements, Rojas’s image as the purveyor of justice and peace floundered over the course of 1955. The government first made clear to the nation that the state of siege would in fact remain in place indefinitely, as a means to ensure peace and the enactment of the popular will. It then organized the grandest yet most absurd conventional military campaign attempted since the onset of interparty strife. In response to reports that fighters associated with the Colombian Communist Party had concentrated in the mountainous eastern Tolima county (municipio) of Villarrica, the Colombian Armed Forces evacuated much of the civilian population before unleashing tanks and the military’s own napalm concoction against entrenched local fighters. Despite the government’s vastly superior firepower, the offensive bogged down, generating ever larger
casualties. With the government facing a security crisis of its own choosing, Rojas dissimulated: even as the government claimed success in Tolima, it cited the recrudescence of partisan conflict as a reason to perpetuate the state of siege.\(^{49}\) It similarly used *El Tiempo*’s reporting on violence as an excuse to order the newspaper’s closure.\(^{50}\)

If Alberto Lleras had been able to stomach the thought of living under Rojas’s rule, the expanding curtailment of democracy pushed him to revoke his vows to himself. Barely a year had passed since his return to Colombia, but in the last months of 1955 the former president stepped back into the public spotlight. Shaking the rust off his pen, Lleras rejoined the pages of *El Espectador*.\(^{51}\) Through a series of smartly vitriolic and thoughtfully reflective columns, he took the government (whose head he rarely mentioned by name) to task for its excesses. Authoritarianism exacted a heavy toll on Colombia, Lleras argued. Rojas’s increasingly personalist government was “incompatible” with nearly every desirable institution and practice: “A free press . . . the parties . . . public corporations [i.e., legislatures] . . . moderate budgets . . . a level commercial balance . . . the nation’s foreign prestige . . . And so, one by one,” Lleras reckoned, “the ills that the nation feels and bitterly bears, match with the strict necessities of the regime.”\(^{52}\)

Lleras reserved his harshest criticism for Rojas’s abuse of emergency powers. Lleras’s time away from politics prompted no small amount of soul-searching, particularly regarding his own experience with the state of siege. President López’s 1944 abduction had also triggered the declaration of a state of siege, which Lleras and other officials prolonged for three additional months in order to give Congress time to consider all the emergency decrees issued during the crisis. Mortified that the Rojas government now cited this extension as precedent, Lleras admitted in December 1955 that he had “arrived at the conviction that what we did [in 1944] was wrong . . . it opened a fissure for the entrance of a State of Siege without any limits.”\(^{53}\) His generation of Liberals’ “contribution to the contemporary history of Colombia,” Lleras wrote mournfully, “is a sole institution, imposed on a pained and frightened nation: the State of Siege.”\(^{54}\) This self-reflection would fundamentally orient Lleras’s approach to democracy and violence after his eventual return to politics.

In the meantime, his earlier political career took on a different valence. What had been a liability in 1946 evolved by 1956 into an asset. Their options for political action increasingly constrained, Lleras’s fellow Liberals now saw virtue in his commitment to dealing with the Conservatives. At a March 1956 political convention, Liberals selected Lleras as the party’s sole leader. His mission would be to seek rapprochement with the Conservatives, on terms suggested by Alfonso López Pumarejo, who was himself enjoying renewed viability within the party.\(^{55}\)

Though his reentry into the *país político* was complete, Lleras expressed no remorse. He had, after all, received his copartisans’ consent to pursue the “party of
patriots” that he had called for in 1949. And, improbably, there were indications from Spain that the exiled Laureano Gómez would be open to the proposal. However, despite Lleras’s entreaties with Laureano’s followers in Colombia, months passed without a response from Laureano himself. Lleras finally resolved to travel to Europe to speak with Laureano in person.56

Neither Laureano nor Lleras, nor any of Laureano’s aides, left behind a record of the two exiles’ encounter in the Valencian seaside community of Benidorm. Photographs show Laureano supporting his weight with a cane, his face looking older than his years. The ocean air had not been enough to arrest further declines in Laureano’s health following a 1951 heart attack. Regardless, what Laureano termed “perfect tranquility, calm, and space” had produced a profound reassessment of Colombia’s desired political system. “I have been given [the opportunity] to reconsider many events,” Laureano later explained to a group of disciples, “arriving at a clear vision of that which constituted the great error of my life and glimps[ing] its terrible consequences in the destruction of the republic.”57

Conciliatory statements aside, previous battles had left their imprint on Laureano. Partisan fault lines over the recent past formed immediately. As he and Lleras collaborated at Benidorm on a joint statement of purpose, Laureano promoted a characteristically Conservative idea of violence, framing rural unrest as “banditry, [an] atrocious phenomenon which scorns morality and the law.” Lleras ceded this minor point, agreeing to denounce “banditry” in a section of the announcement “repudiat[ing] violence.” Elsewhere, however, Lleras turned back Laureano’s attempt to promulgate language describing “violence” as “a means of political struggle adopted by Liberalism since 1930.” To cast his “impartial regime” as the victim of Liberal machinations, Lleras warned Laureano, risked “a frenzied polemic about Liberalism’s responsibilities in the violence . . . which could spoil our intentions.”58 This tiff previewed the debates over the past that would animate Colombian politics within and beyond the país político for the better part of the next decade.

Nevertheless, the overall July 1956 Benidorm accord reflected an impulse to convivencia. (The accord’s opening lines, which refer to Laureano and Lleras in the third person, suggest Lleras’s journalistic touch.) The accord aimed to restore Colombians’ “common civic patrimony” through “a government or series of governments of broad coalition between the two parties” that would also return the country to constitutional rule and the exercise of popular sovereignty. Furthermore, the bipartisan coalition would seek “to give the people not only the reconquest of their lost liberty, but also a concrete vision . . . of the possibilities the immense majority of Colombians have to obtain a radical improvement in their living conditions.”59 More than is generally appreciated, then, Lleras and Laureano gestured to the social content of the government they hoped would replace Rojas. Developmental reforms would accompany the transition from authoritarianism.
The work of winning adherents to the Benidorm accord fell to Lleras. Lleras and López’s combined authority ensured that his own party leadership presented no problem. By contrast, outside of Laureano’s camp, the splintered Conservative Party required greater convincing. Shifting economic currents would ease Lleras’s task somewhat. Slackening global demand for commodities had already begun to squeeze Latin American economies, raising the stakes for governments throughout the region. The demands of balancing social and economic constituencies had brought Argentina’s Juan Domingo Perón crashing from power in 1955, and as Lleras journeyed back from Spain at the end of July 1956, Peru’s military ruler also faced ouster. Yet Rojas refused to alter his administration’s spendthrift policies or refrain from lining his own pockets, in spite of falling prices for coffee, Colombia’s dominant export. The parallels were not lost on observers. “Colombia is in for rough weather,” a U.S. businessman in Colombia remarked to diplomats. “When the coffee market goes to pot a real crisis will develop, and each month brings this closer.”

Contingent as well as conjunctural developments conspired against Rojas. Within weeks of Benidorm, an escalating series of missteps by the president further facilitated Lleras’s political work. In the predawn hours of August 7, Colombia’s independence day, a military convoy stocked with a thousand-plus crates of dynamite exploded in downtown Cali. As a stunned nation weighed the damages—which amounted to over a thousand dead and staggering material losses—Rojas took to the airwaves to denounce the accident as an act of “political sabotage” by the opposition and the Communists.

Lleras could scarcely believe his good fortune. “It is nice to put faith in the stupidity of others from time to time,” he stated in a letter to Laureano six days later. “The public reaction against this piece of nonsense was very encouraging . . . What matters is to pull people out of their complacency and let the SIC [Colombian Intelligence Service] take care of the rest. Its persecutions will bring them closer to our cause, which I am convinced now more than ever is shared by the totality of the country.”

Lleras’s calculation would prove prophetic, but not before Rojas stumbled again. The Cali tragedy stirred up rumors that military commanders had booted Rojas from the presidential palace. This story line about intramilitary frictions gained traction at the end of January 1957, with a *Time* article stating that Rojas had been demoted to “a kind of chairman of the board.” Though untrue, the accusation provoked Rojas, who had assimilated too well the example of Perón’s deposition by his former military colleagues. Even as his censors held the offending issue of *Time* from circulation, Rojas browbeat his top subordinates into publicly affirming the extension of his presidency for the 1958–62 term. The dictatorship’s pliant, extra-congressional legislature reconvened weeks later to grant a legal veneer to the maneuver, prompting the U.S. Embassy to comment that the “break in ‘constitutional continuity’ seems complete.”
With the issue forced, Lleras and Laureano’s Civil Front (Frente Civil) shifted to an openly oppositional stance. In fulfillment of their party’s commitment that a Conservative would stand for the coalition, Lleras and fellow Liberal notables joined with Conservative leaders to nominate Guillermo León Valencia as the parties’ candidate to oppose Rojas. The government retorted by detaining Lleras and other prominent Liberals as they set out to campaign for Valencia. This countermove catalyzed the response that Lleras had predicted eight months earlier, as thousands of urban Colombians took to the streets in protest.⁶⁵

These men and women had their own reasons for turning out against Rojas. University students in Bogotá, for instance, carried memories of classmates gunned down by the army during demonstrations three years earlier. The students’ willingness to turn out on the streets, risking even death, was all the more striking to contemporaries because they had come of age in an authoritarian Colombia. Here, one commentator described approvingly, was “a generation that reached 21 years of age without a citizenship card [cédula de ciudadanía] and since adolescence has fought against totalitarian systems of government, making it difficult to reconcile the thesis of the books they studied, which described a democratic Republic, and the certainty [that] jail and rifle[s] [could waiting be] around any corner.” Germán Arciniegas, Colombia’s most internationally renowned intellectual and one of Lleras’s fellow nuevos, would agree that “this is a generation that has suffered what we did not endure. [In] this perturbation of the free order which gives it [its] name . . . it defended its ideals with dead that we did not have.”⁶⁶

Known in some circles as the “generation of midcentury,” maligned in others as the carefree “Coca-Cola generation,” young Colombians were earning for themselves the enduring designation of the “generation of the state of siege.”

Other city residents felt pain primarily in their pocketbooks. While a continued slide in coffee prices added to the general economic malaise, beginning in 1956 the cost of living increased by nearly 20 percent. Various Conservative leaders predicted that this “economic situation would topple [Rojas], but there was no need to push him politically.” Lleras took the opposite stance, wryly joking that “I, being less of a Marxist, believe that it’s necessary to keep explaining to the people that the economic situation was created by Rojas [through his inflationary budgets and corruption]. If not, we run the risk that they will attribute it to divine providence.”⁶⁷

As the pace of events accelerated, urban Colombians left nothing to chance. Popular displays of resistance hit a crescendo in early May, after Valencia himself was arrested. One of the largest demonstrations saw forty thousand people, perhaps a quarter of the city’s population, turn out in the Caldas coffee hub of Pereira. Colombia’s bourgeoisie—Lleras’s onetime sponsors at the University of the Andes—likewise decided that it was time for Rojas to go. In a vigorous display of their organizational muscle, leading businessmen assembled a general strike that shuttered newspapers, schools, banks, and other businesses in major cities.⁶⁸
The endgame came quickly. As the government’s security forces ratcheted up repression against the public protests, the Civil Front rejected Rojas’s overtures. Within the government, the old rumors became reality; senior military officers worked throughout the night to convince Rojas of the necessity of leaving office. (The hurriedly arranged handover of $15,000 sealed the deal.) The news of Rojas’s abdication attracted a thunderous popular response: in its first report on May 10, hours after Rojas departed the country, the U.S. Embassy reported that Bogotá was “delirious with joy.”

An old aphorism reentered Colombian consciousness: “Colombia is a sterile land for dictatorship.” But how was democracy to be rebuilt? “Returning to the republic is not going to be an easy thing,” Lleras counseled in a June speech. The challenges facing the democratic transition were twofold. First, it remained for the parties to hammer out their coalition and realize the promise of convivencia. Second was the reestablishment of regular constitutional rule. Many conceived of this latter issue as the most pressing, for the democratization process rested on shaky juridical ground: the constitution made no allowance for a multiperson body to govern Colombia, as a junta of Rojas’s five top commanders was now doing.

While dealing with the political side of the transition, Alberto Lleras also furnished a framework through which these legal uncertainties could be resolved. Looking to recalibrate bipartisan rapprochement in the wake of Rojas’s departure, Lleras returned to Spain in mid-July to negotiate again with Laureano. At Sitges, outside of Barcelona, the two signed a second agreement that reiterated and built upon the joint statement reached the prior summer. Neither man left behind an account of this meeting either, but the final product shows Lleras’s hand even more than does Benidorm. The Sitges pact repeated Benidorm’s denunciations of violence and of the dictatorship’s sins, focusing on a return to the constitution. Positioning that “it would be foolish [to return to democracy only to have] the struggle for predominance between Conservatives and Liberals reopen,” the pact then prescribed designs to institutionalize convivencia. In order to strip partisanship out of state affairs, Lleras proposed the establishment of a meritocratic civil service. He also recommended that Congress and the presidential cabinet be divided equally between the parties for twelve years. A “very simple and concrete” popular vote would decide the constitutional revisions necessary to implement the plan.

The party chiefs thus handed the transition a solid blueprint. The junta saw the popular plebiscite as a means to establish its legal authority until the regular 1958 presidential elections. Backers of the Civil Front were more effusive. Laureano’s son and political heir Álvaro Gómez proclaimed that the Sitges agreement sought to resolve “the problems of an entire generation.” The recently revived El Tiempo celebrated the pact as the outline of a “new Colombia.” The país nacional concurred: upon Lleras’s return from Sitges, his car from the airport up to central
Bogotá found roads choked with enthusiastic well-wishers assembled more than a dozen deep on either side. After four years without electoral politics, and eight years without full bipartisan participation in elections, Colombia’s public sphere roared back to life. Popular mobilization during “the days of May” had demonstrated the urban país nacional’s stake in the country’s direction. The plebiscite now offered them the opportunity to enshrine the vision of a bipartisan, democratic Colombia as the law of the land. The outpouring was stunning: over 72 percent of eligible Colombians voted, the highest figure in the nation’s history. The “yes” camp garnered 95 percent of the ballots cast. In the minds of many Colombians, the confirmation of democracy marked a turning point in the nation’s entire history, what Lleras denominated the “inauguration” of Colombia’s “Second Republic.”

This shorthand for democratic renewal, and not La Violencia, would be into the 1960s the term by which urban Colombians described their era. It signaled the hope of Colombia’s transition as much as La Violencia would represent that feeling’s disappearance. News of anti-authoritarian struggles in neighboring countries further nourished Colombians’ optimism at the start of 1958. When Venezuela’s dictatorship collapsed in late January, one Bogotá radio news program (radioperiódico) announced that the “triumph is not simply a step forward in the history of our sister country, but one in the history of the whole continent. The fall of the despots continues on its unalterable course, until ours is a continent for liberty and the juridical-constitutional order.”

The plebiscite’s triumph also brought practical implications for political convivencia. For one, it underlined politicians’ cooperation with non-Rojas sectors of the military, a process that culminated in the abandonment of the term “Civil Front” in favor of the more inclusive “National Front.” Second, whereas Sitges had proposed establishing Conservative-Liberal parity in the legislative and executive branches, the plebiscite extended it to the judiciary, consequently putting an end to the possibility of “hegemonic [i.e., one-party] governments.” As the leader of the junta described it, the vote thus “fixed the indispensable bases to guarantee the mutual tolerance of our traditional parties and the transformation of their political customs.” Colombians had evidently found the formula to eliminate partisan violence.

While the new year of 1958 dawned with the formal rules of democracy settled, the political scene was growing increasingly turbid. Laureano’s triumphant return to Colombia in early October 1957 wrecked the Liberal-Conservative deals struck in the heat of the anti-Rojas struggle six months earlier. Exile had mellowed Laureano’s opinions toward the Liberals, but he seethed with unalloyed hatred at those Conservatives who had betrayed him to Rojas in 1953. So long as Laureano remained in Spain, Lleras had shown himself capable of keeping The Monster’s fangs in check. Now, the U.S. ambassador found Lleras to be “pessimistic and
cynical,” “very outspoken about the folly, the venom and the danger of Laureano’s course.” Lleras anticipated that Laureano would maintain the political following to make good on his anger, which “was obsessed by one thought: to get revenge on his political enemies—nothing else mattered.” Two favorite enemies, along with one fresh target, most attracted Laureano’s ire. Laureano’s predecessor, Mariano Ospina Pérez, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church had alternately orchestrated and endorsed the 1953 coup. Laureano’s gripe with Guillermo León Valencia, the Civil Front’s presidential choice, only dated to Valencia’s recent sidling up to Ospina Pérez. For the time being, though, derailing Valencia’s candidacy mattered more than old scores. Nearly as soon as he stepped off the plane, Laureano insisted to Lleras that Valencia had to go.80

Other Colombians joined Laureano in this sentiment, though for different reasons. Valencia’s personal bravery in early 1957 merely patched over his reputation as the Conservatives’ enfant terrible. Valencia could seemingly do no right as the transition advanced. Embarrassing gaffes on both domestic and international affairs left many questioning the appropriateness of Valencia’s candidacy. “We won’t say anymore that Dr. Valencia is an ignorant fool,” the hosts of the Conservative-run Bogotá radio news show Orientación told their listeners in early 1958. “It is Dr. Valencia [himself] who insists in making [us all] think that he is an ignorant fool.”81 The political class would return to this assessment in the years to come.

Lleras and other Liberal leaders resigned themselves to Valencia’s fate after the March congressional elections. In this first test of the National Front, Laureano’s slate won 59 percent of the Conservative vote. Such domination, a senior U.S. State Department official remarked, confirmed Laureano as the National Front’s “king-maker.” Liberals consented to Laureano’s dictate; Valencia was out as the coalition’s presidential pick. However, this result left few observers content. Speaking on a Conservative radio program, one commentator observed that “we . . . face a tremendous dilemma: the imposition of a candidate, or the salvation of the motherland. It has already been seen that the two things don’t work simultaneously.”82

Among the possible solutions that materialized in the weeks following was a proposal for Lleras Camargo to assume the presidential candidacy. This option seemed simultaneously viable and explosive. Colombian military intelligence officers estimated that the move would have the support of business interests, but warned that it would incite provincial Conservative bosses to violence or prompt the dissolution of the partisan pacts. The U.S. Embassy guessed that these grim scenarios would lead Lleras to turn down the candidacy, “in [the] interests [of] preserving bipartisanship and avoiding political strife.”83

Lleras did nothing to court the presidential mantle. Necessity, not ambition, had dragged him out of the private life he had pledged to live upon returning to Colombia in 1955. Practical considerations now magnified his continued reluctance: the entire pact with Laureano was premised on a Conservative occupying
the presidential palace from 1958 to 1962. Gómez was furthermore proving to be an erratic and unreliable partner.\textsuperscript{84}

Amidst this uncertainty, outside social groups pulled Lleras and Laureano along. By mid-April, business interests in Medellín—the country’s most powerful regional bourgeoisie, and key organizers of the days of May—launched a pro-Lleras campaign. Urban Liberals in particular leapt at the chance to express their political sentiments: more than one hundred thousand people congregated in Medellín to hear Lleras speak on April 20. Lleras played along with the hypotheticals, suggesting that in exchange for a Liberal candidate in 1958, the parties alternate the presidency and their pact be extended from twelve to sixteen years (which would guarantee a Conservative for the final term). It was a crucial gambit to gain Conservative support, and by April 24, a majority of Conservative congressmen had committed their backing. Lleras finally yielded to the pressure that night. As his acceptance speech filled the airwaves, U.S. diplomats reported that “central Bogotá [was] jammed with joyously shouting crowds and [a] mammoth imprompt[u] motorcade honking familiar dot-dot-dash for liberty and Lleras.” The scene, they added, was “reminiscent of May 10.”\textsuperscript{85}

There were ten days left before the election.

\textbf{DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT, AND VIOLENCE}

Uncertainty persisted through the middle months of 1958. “Very early in the morning of July 26,” a U.S. Embassy officer awoke to “impromptu celebrations and tootling horns all over” Bogotá. The diplomat “alertly tumbled out of bed onto the streets thinking the much rumored new coup attempt had finally struck.” Only later did he discover that the commotion had been sparked by news that a Pereira native had won Colombia’s first Miss Universe title.\textsuperscript{86}

In many regards, Alberto Lleras’s election as the National Front’s first president contained reasons for hope. Officials in Washington, for example, expressed surprise that Lleras carried the largely Conservative department of Antioquia by a margin of nine-to-one. Lleras, by contrast, was less sanguine. Just before the August inauguration, U.S. diplomats said that “Lleras of late has seemed much concerned with the magnitude of the problems he will have to face.” Lleras publicly declared that he felt “overwhelm[ed] by the almost physical weight of [this] responsibility,” while the radio program \textit{Orientación} commiserated that “the task that President Lleras Camargo has before him is certainly one of the least enviable in the world.”\textsuperscript{87}

Three sets of problems loomed largest. The first, civilian-military relations, was the most direct outgrowth of the dictatorship’s collapse. Two days before the May 4 election, midlevel military officers joined in a coup attempt with small numbers of radical Conservatives. Though the uprising collapsed within hours due to “a lack of coordination, bungling and a few strokes of sheer luck,” it drove home for
Lleras the importance of completing the separation of the military from politics. The president-elect therefore delivered a strident speech on the military's place in the Second Republic. As if to highlight his thin frame, Lleras stated that “[this] fragile civil symbol will be . . . the symbol of the national will. It can be broken with a grimace, with a gesture, without any effort. But if it is broken, the history of the republic, the honor of the Armed Forces will be broken with it.” In exchange for the military abstaining from politics, and thus retaining its honor, Lleras promised that the political class would not intervene in the armed forces’ internal affairs. The speech, widely considered his most influential, won him the enduring loyalty of the military command.

Management of the economy represented Lleras's second great challenge. Public as well as personal austerity became administration watchwords. In conjunction with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which had previously suspended operations in Colombia because of Rojas's economic mismanagement, Lleras imposed what he termed “the simple application of good sense and the most orthodox economic norms,” restraining imports and trimming certain state subsidies. By late 1959, U.S. officials would laud the Lleras government for “sustained performance” they found “outstanding, and possibly without equal in any other Latin American country faced with similar problems.” Though Latin America had not fully exited the economic conditions that had contributed to the democratic wave, for the time being Colombia was through the most politically taxing phase.

Economic stabilization also offered Lleras Camargo a forum to articulate his larger vision for the nation. The presidential inauguration of August 7, 1958, was “on the whole [an event] of quiet satisfaction, with nothing like the wild jubilation which exploded when Lleras originally accepted the nomination.” Lleras termed the event “an example of austerity,” which the country would need to emulate in order to escape from the deficits left by Rojas. (Time's coverage highlighted the absence of champagne from the inauguration festivities.) In subsequent months, pro–National Front radio programs reinforced this message, highlighting the contrast between Lleras's famously modest lifestyle and the avarice demonstrated by the Rojas family. Lleras thus became the National Front's moral center, as well as its architect.

By his estimation, Lleras inherited a country burdened by “the damages of 150 years of feudalism, injustice, faulty administrative and social arrangements, neglected popular education, misery and backwardness, sectarianism and violence, suitably topped off by an irresponsible and voracious dictatorship.” Economic belt-tightening would resolve the most recent issues. Larger questions of development required a renewal of the ideologies and practices of state that had sprung from the Revolution on the March. At the first meeting of Lleras's cabinet, his Liberal finance minister laid out a sweeping outline of the administration's “economic and social policy.” The government's overarching objective, he explained, would be to “facilitate relations between citizens and the State,” to
“correct . . . extant inequalities and try . . . to orient the energies of the country toward the achievement of clear objectives for the general interest.” The reformist inclinations of Lleras’s generation had a new lease on life.

The third and final challenge involved the modification of Colombia’s political culture, to root out violence-as-practice. “Convivencia, peace, [and] solidarity between Colombians are mere expectations,” Lleras noted ahead of the inauguration. “Hatreds, reprisals, impassioned words, and brutal acts are, still, unfortunately, the atrocious daily reality.” To break this cycle, Colombians’ relationship to the state would have to undergo a transformation, such that government would become “a site of confluence between the governed, and not the center of their disputes and the reason for their battles.” Lleras warned that without “the acclimatization of certain political customs of moderation that have only appeared for extremely short moments in Colombian public life . . . democracy is a fiction.”

The National Front agreements had started to return the país político to the civil practices of convivencia. In and along the paved streets, monumental squares, and ornate lyceums of the countries of letters and politics—the urban spaces where Lleras had mounted his campaign for an inclusive, stable Colombia—“the new climate of convivencia [was] palpable,” Semana reported in early 1959. Yet as his speech before the microphones of ACPO suggests, Lleras had other topographies in mind as he commenced his second presidency. “We have signed the peace, but not solely for the cities or for ourselves, but principally so that it flows mercifully over the countryside,” Lleras said weeks into the transition. “There lie the most innocent victims of . . . political hegemony and of its fatal consequence, dictatorship.” During his successive exiles from the country of politics and Colombia itself, Lleras had lamented the collective ignorance of the país político toward rural Colombia’s plight. In order to undo the damage wrought by partisan and military excess—to live up to his former ideal of Colombia as a space for peace—Lleras’s Second Republic would first have to reckon with the nature of violence in the provinces.