

Braun, Herbert. *Our Guerrillas, Our Sidewalks: A Journey into the Violence of Colombia*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado. 1994.

Our Guerrillas, Our Sidewalks is a fascinating narrative of the 1988 kidnapping of Herbert Braun's brother-in-law, Jake Gambini, by ELN guerrillas, and Braun's participation in the negotiations for his release. But this is also a study of power. Power as wielded by Colombian guerrillas, power as understood by a Colombian liberal, and power as wielded by a capitalist working in Colombia.

It is difficult to write about Colombia and not write about violence. Indeed, Braun, an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia, has written about violence in Colombia in academic studies (the assassination of Gaitan, etc.). His latest book, however, is from the perspective of a participant in the continual slow dance of violence between criminals, guerrillas, security forces, and victims.

Kidnapping is big business in Colombia. It probably brings in an income of over \$100 million per year to several "corporations" (leftist insurgents such as the FARC, ELN, EPL) and many smaller "independent" criminal elements. Guerrilla or criminal elements now specialize in abduction, "maintenance," or negotiation with the "asset's" family or employer for "profit." Official statistics are hard to find or believe, but estimates range from 1,500-7,000 kidnappings per year in Colombia, of which only a handful are US citizens. One problem in collecting data on the topic is the fact that not only is kidnapping illegal in Colombia, so is paying ransom. The end result is that the victims and their families are at the mercy of both the kidnapers and the government. This has spawned a new "gray area" business by security companies specializing in ransom negotiation to avoid informing the police.

Our Guerrillas, Our Sidewalks offers a rare, though probably not a typical, in-depth personal glimpse into this business. Colombian kidnapers, especially those seeking to fund an ideological movement, take care to keep the "assets" healthy and somewhat comfortable. A dead kidnapee brings in no ransom, and several have been released because of severe health problems. Without giving away the plot of the book, the ELN cut short the negotiations with Braun and an unnamed consulting firm because Jake Gambini seized the initiative and forced the guerrillas* hand. In essence, he took a stand on principle and, through a stronger belief system than that of his captors, enhanced his family's negotiating position. Unfortunately, his methodology cannot be recommended to just anyone, and certainly this would not have worked anywhere else but in Colombia.

In the acknowledgements, Braun admits that this was not an easy book to write, especially as he deviated from his admittedly more comfortable academic style. This is evident in the format and content of the text. Early on the narrative concentrates on Braun's feelings regarding the guerrillas, the kidnapping, his family, and being Colombian, with heavy emphasis on the "angst" at being forced into confronting such an indignity. This is interspersed with quotes by guerrillas, politicians, and news clips of violence in general. The narrative then turns to the negotiation process and a chronicle of events (without much interpretation). Needless to say, the second half of the book reads more like an action novel, and is much harder to put down.

The first half of the book requires at least: an acquaintance with Colombian politics, history, and culture. Braun's angst overcomes the tone of the text at times, and the frequent quotes and clips hint at a study of the kidnapping phenomena in Colombia that never materializes. But for students of ideological and criminal violence it provides a glimpse of the liberal mindset not often displayed in public. One undercurrent is a latent anti-gringo feeling. "Nelson," a security consultant hired to advise the family, is berated at length for not being able to understand the situation fully (he's just a gringo, after all), but is occasionally given grudging praise for being consistently right in his advice.

But the most significant undercurrent is the glimpse of how idealists (in this case, Marxist guerrillas and admitted liberals such as Braun) often misunderstand and subsequently misuse the application of power. For instance, he was baffled that the guerrillas would hurt his family despite the fact that he had published articles favorable to their cause. He was baffled that his brother-in-law was kidnapped despite always treating his employees well, paying them well, and providing jobs in a rural area in need of employment. Braun misunderstood the guerrillas' use and interpretation of power: despite their rhetoric about improving

the status of the workers, they only saw Gambini as a wealthy exploiter from whom they could extort money. Gambini's (or Braun's) political views were irrelevant to the ELN; the money and achieving total power was not. For Colombian guerrillas, the end justifies any means.

The guerrillas either failed to understand or simply ignored the fact that through kidnapping they alienated actual or potential supporters such as Braun. But in this book, Braun never consolidates his ambivalent feelings toward the guerrillas, their cause, and their methods, leaving one with an ambivalent feeling about why he wrote the book. After spending a lot of time discussing the rebel's cause and his pre- and post-kidnapping opinion, the reader is left wondering what Braun now believes.

Gambini, on the other hand, being a capitalist businessman (of no stated political suasion), understood well the power being wielded by all participants. He knew that his value to his family was a constant, alive or dead. But, as viewed by the guerrillas, if the asset (himself) reduced its worth, the guerrillas' power was reduced proportionately, and eventually, might work against them. With this knowledge, he worked hard at reducing his value to the point of forcing the guerrillas to cut their demands and release him. His personal freedom was more important than life itself. To his credit, he had the personal fortitude to understand this use of power, and to succeed.

Our Guerrillas, Our Sidewalks is a difficult book to start reading, but after the switch from angst to chronological narrative, it is difficult to put down. The result of negotiations are foreseen well in advance, but the writing style keeps the tension high through the last paragraphs. But it is the insight into the liberal mindset regarding the use of power and the personal commentary on the business of kidnapping and violence in Colombia that make Braun's work a significant contribution to the study of conflict.

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