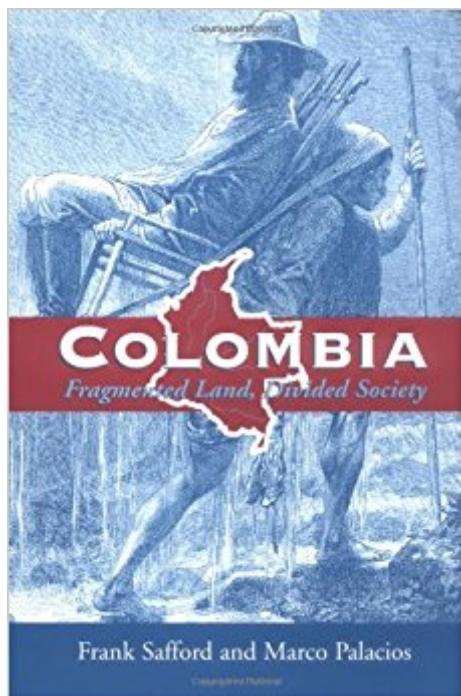


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Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society (Latin American Histories)



Synopsis

Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society is a comprehensive history of the third most populous country of Latin America. It offers the most extensive discussion available in English of the whole of Colombian history-from pre-Columbian times to the present. The book begins with an in-depth look at the earliest years in Colombia's history, emphasizing the role geography played in shaping Colombia's economy, society, and politics and in encouraging the growth of distinctive regional cultures and identities. It includes a thorough discussion of Colombian politics that looks at the ways in which historical memory has affected political choices, particularly in the formation and development of the country's two traditional political parties. The authors explore the factors that have contributed to Colombia's economic troubles, such as the delay in its national economic integration and its relative ineffectiveness as an exporter. The three concluding chapters offer an authoritative and up-to-date examination of the impact of coffee on Colombia's economy and society, the social and political effects of urban growth, and the multiple dimensions of the violence that has plagued the country since 1946. Written in clear, vigorous prose, Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society is essential for students of Latin American history and politics, and for anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the history of this fascinating and tumultuous country.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This is solid, well-informed political and economic history of a traditional sort...will help remedy the misunderstanding and scholarly neglect of Colombia so often lamented by Colombianists." --The Americas "A first rate survey." --Choice "Safford and Palacios' book is the best single volume introduction to the history of Colombia. The authors provide an intelligent, sophisticated and accessible synthesis that is a pleasure to read. It is ideal for classroom use." --Lyman L. Johnson, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Frank Safford is at Northwestern University. Marco Palacios is at El Colegio de Mexico.

The book provides good insights. However, the first part is written by Safford and the last part by Palacios. The part by Palacios is not as clearly presented. Further, the book is dated, so it does not cover the last 15 years.

For those interested in Colombia's history this book is an excellent introduction to the most important facts and literature. I think this book explains all facts with a very nice balance between economics and politics. It is recommended for all those interested in understanding the challenges of development in Latin America. There is also an edition in Spanish.

My husband is from Colombia and he loves this book. We are using it to study Colombia together as a family before we visit.

This book should be considered an economic history of Colombia, not a general history of the country. Economic developments, conflicts, and resolutions are discussed in great detail, while other aspects of history, such as politics, seem to be included only insofar as they give a basic setting and context for the economic discussions. Perhaps the most alarming flaw of this book is the near total lack of sources. The authors state their sources only on occasion, and often only when taking a direct quote. Other times, they make general references to "scholars", without naming any in specific. But by and large, the authors merely state facts. This is upsetting for any serious reader. Anyone, scholar or otherwise, who believes to be such an authority on a certain topic that they can simply make statements without any sort of justification or proof is gravely mistaken, and is even doing harm. Reporting the sources used to make certain statements is absolutely essential for others to examine and then verify or reject the author's assertions. This method of review and critique is the foundation of academic work. That the authors of this book chose to omit their

sources is unacceptable. Some critically important political events in Colombian history are barely touched. For example, the theft of Panama by the United States is contained to 4 pages, and even then, Safford's explanation of the resolution is about as deep as, "after the Panama melon dispute was settled..." (p.220-221). Other stories are not fully explained, leaving gaps in the chronology and making assertions by the authors and reappearance of certain historical figures quite a surprise. For example, on p.73 Safford mentioned the betrayal of the Comuneros by the upper class, but this betrayal was never previously mentioned nor was an explanation ever attempted. Also, consider the story of Antonio Nariño. On p.74 Safford reports that Nariño confessed his attempts of organizing an uprising to the archbishop, but Safford never explains why Nariño was compelled to confess in the first place (was his discovery inevitable?). Nariño was then released from jail in 1803 because he "seemed to be dying". No further mention of Nariño is made for several pages, which may reasonably be interpreted as meaning that he did in fact die shortly after his release from jail in 1803. Nariño then makes a miraculous comeback in Safford's story, as he is suddenly mentioned for his involvement in an 1809 plot to set up a junta in Santafé de Bogotá on p.83. Later, on p.106, Safford describes Nariño's return from prison in Spain, yet Nariño's arrest by the Spanish nor the reasons for his arrest were ever mentioned in the book. The discussion of the guerrilla movements and drug lords of the 20th century is rather simplistic, to put it kindly. The major player in Colombian policies and actions regarding narcotics and guerrillas has been the US, yet neither US pressure on Colombian politicians nor the presence of the infamous CIA are discussed in any depth (in fact, the CIA is not once mentioned). Even then, the motivation for the US to intervene in Colombian politics is attributed simply to the "zero tolerance" policy of the US (p.339), without any other possible motivations explored or even mentioned, the principal alternative being counter-insurgency. Important questions are not asked, and perspectives other than those preferred by the government (US or Colombian) are not considered. Notice that I am not suggesting that a better treatment of the issues would be taking an alternative, anti-government perspective. I am instead advocating a comprehensive discussion of the issues, as there are valid interpretations and explanations other than the official story offered by the US and Colombian governments, which is what Palacios sticks to. An example: Palacios completely fails to discuss, or even mention, the link between Colombia's paramilitaries and the US military. In 1959 and 1962, US counter-insurgency experts made recommendations to the Colombian military on establish and operate paramilitary groups, and at least by 1962, US military personnel had actually trained Colombian paramilitaries (Stokes, "America's Other War". p.69-71. Also: [...]]) In some finer aspects of the writing, the authors often introduce acronyms and refer to

events and groups well before defining what the original phrase is or describing the event or origins of the group. For example, the authors refer to the M-19 guerrillas on p.336-337 without any explanation as to who they are. The M-19 guerrillas are finally discussed in slightly more detail sixteen pages later (p.353), but even then not fully defined. Not until p.355 is it finally stated that the name "M-19" stands for the "19th of April Movement". This occurrence on p.355 is not even listed in the index. Another example: the authors refer to the "experience with Rojas Pinilla's ANAPO" on p.328, yet ANAPO nor the associated experience are discussed until p. 330. Referencing something before discussing it can prove very confusing for the reader, as it suggests that the reader completely overlooked a discussion of the topic in the previous pages when they in fact did not. The number of typos in the book is appalling. The typos include missing and added letters, the same word printed twice consecutively (this was especially common), missing words, and mixing prepositions. Quite a few typos were clearly the result of unfinished editing. The sentence structure is also curiously terrible. Many of the sentences were extremely clumsy, using so many commas that it was difficult to tell to which scope in the sentence a certain phrase pertained. The use of commas in many places was also simply wrong. But perhaps the most irritating tendency was to inappropriately start a sentence with "and". Connectives like "but" and "and" may begin a sentence when they are introducing a new thought (as in my previous sentence). However, in sentences containing a string of commas (a list, for example), the authors preferred to end the sentence prematurely and follow it with a short sentence beginning with "and" which merely included the last element in the list or thought. This is incorrect, and very noticeable and annoying when read.

A brilliant book...well written and meticulously researched. "Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society" easily exceeds the legendary work of American graybeard...David Bushnell. This book is essential reading for anyone attempting to obtain a special competence in Colombian affairs. Highly recommended.

Most academics in the field concede that this is the most comprehensive single-source on Colombia's history. The work on the 19th Century is particularly strong. My only misgiving is that the contemporary period is somewhat thin, and as such some of the present debates are about especially the armed groups are not as detailed as they could be. That said, this should be the starting point for anyone wishing to study Colombian history from pre-independence to the end of the National Front (1974).

However, in order to get a better understanding of the internal conflict in the 20th century it is advisable to complement its reading with 'Entre la legitimidad y la violencia: Colombia 1875-1994'.
Marco Palacios (2000)

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