

Torrijos: Cruce de Mula y Tigre

Gabriel García Márquez

Cuando el Presidente de Venezuela entró en la Casa Blanca hace un mes, el Presidente Jimmy Carter le dijo, “Recuérdame tratarte al final, brevemente, el asunto de Panamá.” Aunque el tema no figuraba en la agenda oficial, Carlos Andrés Pérez iba preparado para aquella eventualidad.

“La última persona que vi antes de venir a Washington fue el General Torrijos,” replicó. “Además, anoche cené hasta muy tarde con los negociadores panameños, y esta mañana desayuné con los negociadores norteamericanos.” Al Presidente Carter le hizo mucha gracia aquel cúmulo de casualidades calculadas.

“En ese caso,” sonrió, “eres tú quien me tiene que contar a mí cómo están las cosas.”

De este modo, el tema que no estaba en el temario no sólo fue el punto de partida de las conversaciones, sino que habría de convertirse en el de mayor resonancia. Al día siguiente, Carter declaró en una rueda de prensa que la intervención de Carlos Andrés Pérez había sido decisiva para impulsar el nuevo tratado sobre el Canal de Panamá, e hizo, de paso, un cálido elogio del General Omar Torrijos y expresó su deseo de conocerlo.

El General Omar Torrijos vio por televisión la rueda de prensa de Carter en su casa de Mar de Farallón, unos

150 kilómetros al oeste de la Ciudad de Panamá, donde suele pasar la mitad de la semana descansando sin descansar. Escuchó las palabras de Carter inmóvil en un sillón de playa, chupando el cigarro apagado, y no dejó traslucir ninguna emoción. Pero más tarde, en la mesa redonda en que cenábamos con dos ministros y algunos asesores, hizo una evocación imprevista: “Cuando oí el elogio que me hizo Carter,” dijo, “sentí como un aire caliente que me inflaba el pecho, pero enseguida me dije, ‘Mierda, esto debe ser la vanidad,’ y mandé aquel aire al carajo.”

Conservo muy buenos y muy gratos recuerdos del General Torrijos, pero ninguno lo define mejor que éste. Es, además, un recuerdo histórico, porque aquella noche se estaban definiendo las cosas que habrían de culminar este fin de semana con la reunión de Presidentes en Bogotá.

Había sido una jornada tensa, intensa y extensa, agravada por un temporal del Pacífico que se rompía en pedazos con una explosión de cataclismos en las galerías de la casa, y que dejaba en la arena un reguero de pescados podridos. Torrijos, que es capaz de soportar días enteros con los nervios de punta sin perder el sentido del humor, sin perder la paciencia ni los estribos, se había debatido durante muchas horas entre la incertidumbre y la ansiedad, mientras esperábamos las noticias de Washington.

“El pueblo panameño,” decía, “me ha dado un cheque en blanco, y no lo podemos defraudar.” La idea de reunir a cinco presidentes amigos para someter a su consideración el borrador final del nuevo tratado estaba desde entonces dentro de su cabeza. Tan importante era para él ese respaldo político y moral, que para tratar de conseguirlo no ha vacilado en someterse a lo que más detesta en el mundo: la solemnidad de los actos oficiales.

¿Para qué carajo sirve la plata? Lo que faltaba por resolver aquella noche de Farallón era una simple cuestión de plata. Desde que se firmó el Tratado Burnau-Varilla en 1903, los Estados Unidos no le han pagado a Panamá sino 2.3 millones de dólares al año. Es un sueldo irrisorio. Ahora Panamá reclamaba mil millones de dólares inmediatos como indemnización por la sumas dejadas de pagar, y 150 millones al año hasta la recuperación total del Canal el 31 de Diciembre de 1999. Los Estados Unidos se negaban a aceptar no tan sólo las sumas, sino inclusive las palabras. Pagar indemnización, alegaban, implica la aceptación de haber causado un daño. Por último, aceptaron la palabra “compensación”, que, para el caso, era lo mismo, pero se empecinaron en regatear el dinero. Torrijos consideraba que, de todos modos, era un paso importante, porque clarificaba

una cuestión de principios, pero dio instrucción a Washington para que siguiera peleando por el dinero.

La firmeza de los Estados Unidos en este punto parecía obedecer a un razonamiento: Si Panamá ha obtenido hasta ahora todo lo que quería, no se molestarán demasiado por un simple problema de plata. Sin embargo, Torrijos no pensaba lo mismo. Uno de sus asesores le había aconsejado ceder, con el argumento alegre de que, “Al fin y al cabo, la plata es una cuestión secundaria.” Torrijos le replicó con su sentido común demoledor, “Sí, la plata es secundaria, pero para el que la tiene.”

En todo caso, valía la pena aguantar. En seis meses de Carter, las negociaciones habían progresado mucho más que con todos los presidentes anteriores, y esto permitía pensar que, por primera vez, los Estados Unidos tenían más prisa que Panamá. Primero, porque Carter necesitaba el Tratado para usarlo como bandera de buena voluntad en una política nueva hacia América Latina. Segundo, porque debía someterlo a la aprobación del Congreso de su país, y esa posibilidad tiene una fecha límite: Septiembre.

La verdad, sin embargo, parece ser que los cálculos de ambas partes eran equivocados. Las discusiones sobre el dinero se metieron en un callejón sin salida, y nadie había podido sacarlas de allí a principios de esta semana.

De modo que es muy probable que el General Torrijos, antes que nada, quiera consultar la opinión de sus colegas de cinco países sobre ese asunto crucial: ¿Qué diablos hacemos con el problema de la plata?

Su principal defecto: la naturalidad Hay que conocer al General Torrijos, aunque sea sólo un poco, para saber que estos callejeros sin salida lo mortifican, que lo mortifican mucho, pero no conseguirán nunca hacerlo desistir de lo que se propone. Al principio de las negociaciones, cuando no parecía concebible que los Estados Unidos cedieran jamás, le dijo a un alto funcionario norteamericano, “Lo mejor para ustedes será que nos devuelvan el Canal por las buenas. Si no, los vamos a joder tanto durante tantos y tantos y tantos años, que ustedes terminarán por decir, ‘Coño, ahí tienen su Canal, y no jodan más.’” Aunque los motivos de la devolución sean diferentes, la Historia está demostrando que la amenaza era cierta.

Si hubiera que comparar al General Torrijos con los prototipos del reino animal, debería decirse que es una mezcla de tigre con mula. De aquél tiene el instinto sobrenatural y la astucia certera. De la mula tiene la terquedad infinita. Esas son sus virtudes mayores, y creo que ambas podrían servirle lo mismo para el bien que para el mal. Su principal

defecto, en cambio, es lo que casi todo el mundo considera erróneamente como su mayor virtud: la naturalidad absoluta. Es de allí de donde le viene esa imagen de muchacho díscolo que sus enemigos han sabido utilizar contra él en su propaganda perversa. Hasta el Presidente López Michelsen, que muy pocas veces se equivoca en el conocimiento de la gente, dijo alguna vez que el General Torrijos era un jefe de gobierno folclórico. Hubiera podido decir, para ser exacto, que es de una naturalidad inconveniente.

En cierta ocasión, un embajador europeo se puso bravo porque Torrijos lo recibió sentado en una hamaca que, para colmo de naturalidad, tenía su nombre bordado en hilos de colores.

En otra ocasión, alguien vio mal que su secretaria lo ayudara a ponerse las medias. Los sábados, un pescador que se emborracha cerca de su casa de Farallón se suelta en improperios contra él y termina por mentarle la madre. El General Torrijos ha dado instrucciones a su guardia que no moleste al borracho, y sólo cuando se propasa en agresividad, él mismo sale a la terraza, le contesta con los mismos improperios, y hasta le mienta la madre.

Torrijos habría conjurado esa mala imagen si pudiera ser menos natural en algunas circunstancias. Pero no sólo no lo hace, sino que ni siquiera lo intenta, porque sabe que no

puede. A quienes se lo critican, les contesta con una lógica inclemente, “No se les olvide que no soy ningún jefe de Europa, sino de Panamá.”

Sólo los campesinos lo ponen contra la pared Aunque sus padres eran maestros de escuela y, por consiguiente, estaban formados en la clase media rural, la verdadera personalidad de Torrijos no se expresa en la cabalidad sino entre campesinos. Le gustaba hablar con ellos, en un idioma común que no es muy comprensible para el resto de los mortales, e inclusive se tiene la impresión de que mantiene con ellos la complicidad de clase.

En la Ciudad de Panamá, en cambio, se siente fuera de ambiente. Allí tiene una casa propia, la única que tiene y que compró hace quince años a través del Seguro Social. Y es grande y tranquila, y llena de árboles, pero raras veces se le encuentra allí. Más aún: una vez llegué de sorpresa a Panamá y, tratando de encontrarlo recurrí a la Seguridad Nacional. Al día siguiente, cuando por fin conseguí verlo, le pregunté con bromas de burla qué clase de Seguridad Nacional era aquélla que no había podido encontrarlo en doce horas. “Es que estaba en mi casa,” dijo él, muerto de risa. “Y ni a la Seguridad Nacional se le puede ocurrir que yo esté en mi casa.”

Sólo lo he visto una vez en esa casa, y parecía otro hombre. Estaba en una oficina muy pequeña, impecable, bien refrigerada, con fotos familiares y algunos recuerdos de su carrera militar. Al contrario de otras veces, llevaba su uniforme urbano, y era evidente que no se sentía cómodo dentro de ese uniforme formal, ni tampoco dentro de su pellejo. Yo tampoco me sentía cómodo, porque por primera vez tenía la impresión de no ser recibido como un amigo sino como un visitante extranjero en audiencia especial.

Tal vez por eso, cada vez que puede, Torrijos se escapa en su helicóptero personal y se va a esconder entre los campesinos. No lo hace, como podría pensarse, huyendo de los problemas. Al contrario, allí sus grandes problemas son más grandes. Hace poco lo acompañé en la visita a una de esas comunidades campesinas que se están desarrollando en todo el país. Los campesinos le rindieron cuentas de su trabajo en forma muy minuciosa y franca, pero al final le pidieron cuentas del suyo. También ellos, perdidos en la montaña, querían saber cómo iban las conversaciones sobre el Canal. Fue ésa la única vez que he visto a Torrijos contra la pared, haciendo un informe amplio, y casi confidencial, sobre el verdadero estado de las conversaciones, como no lo había hecho ante sus numerosos interlocutores en la ciudad.

Torrijos: A Cross Between a Tiger and a Mule

Gabriel García Márquez *Translation by Catalina Sherwell*

When the President of Venezuela entered the White House a month ago, President Jimmy Carter said to him, "When this is over, remind me to talk briefly with you about the issue concerning Panama." Although the theme was not on the official agenda, Carlos Andrés Pérez was prepared for such a contingency.

"The last person I saw before coming to Washington was General Torrijos," he replied. "Besides, last night I had supper till late with the negotiators from Panama, and this morning I had breakfast with the American negotiators." President Carter found that heap of calculated contingencies quite amusing.

"In that case," he smiled, "it is you, rather, who has to tell me how things stand."

In this manner, the issue that was not on the agenda not only became the starting point for the talks, but it would become, in time, an issue of the greatest resonance. The next day, in a press conference, Carter declared that Carlos Andrés Pérez's intervention had proven decisive in promoting the new treaty concerning the Panama Canal, and, at the same time, spoke warm words about General Omar Torrijos and clearly expressed his desire to meet him.

General Omar Torrijos watched Carter's press conference on television from the comfort of his home in Mar del Farallón, located approximately 150 kilometers to the west of Panama City, where he usually spends half of the week resting, without really resting. He listened to

Carter's words without budging in his beach chair, sucking the unlit cigar, and showed no sign of emotion whatsoever. But later on, sitting at the round table at which we were having supper with two state ministers and some of his advisors, he made an unexpected comment:

"When I heard Carter's flattering words," he said, "I felt as if a breath of warm air was puffing up my chest with pride, but immediately I said to myself, 'Shit, this must be vanity,' and, so, I dismissed that breath of warm air and sent it to hell."

I hold very good and pleasant memories of General Torrijos, but none of them defines him better than this anecdote. Besides, it is a historical recollection because that evening, certain matters were being defined that would finally culminate in the meeting of several presidents which is to be held this weekend in Bogotá.

It had been a tense, intense, and extensive day, rendered even more difficult by a storm coming in from the Pacific Ocean which broke up in pieces with an explosion of cataclysms on the galleries of the house, and which left rotten fish strewn all over the sand. Torrijos, who is perfectly capable of enduring whole days with his nerves on end without ever so much as losing his sense of humor, his patience or his bearings, had debated during many a long hour between uncertainty and anxiety, while we all awaited the news that would be coming in from Washington. "The people of Panama," he said, "have given me a blank check,

and we cannot let them down." Ever since then, he began toying with the idea of congregating five presidents, who are his friends, in order to submit the final draft of the new treaty to their scrutiny. Their moral and political backing was so utterly important to him that, in order to try to achieve it, he has not even doubted the possibility of subjecting himself to what, by far, he hates most in the world: the solemnity of official ceremonies.

What the hell is money good for? What still needed to be resolved that evening at Farallón was a simple problem concerning the money. Ever since the Burnau-Varilla Treaty was signed in 1903, the United States has not paid Panama the agreed amount, and has, in fact, only paid 2.3 million dollars per year. It is a derisive salary. Now, Panama has been demanding the immediate payment of one billion dollars as indemnification to make amends for the sum of money which the United States has been neglectful to pay, plus 150 million dollars every year until the government of Panama fully recovers the Panama Canal on December 31st, 1999. The United States government has refused to acknowledge not only the amount of money it owes, but also the choice of words. The Americans have argued that paying an indemnification implies accepting that they have caused some kind of damage. Finally, the Americans agreed to accept the word 'compensate', which, in any case, is exactly the same thing, but they have been stubborn to a

fault in haggling over the money. Torrijos has considered that this in itself has been an important step, nevertheless, because it made a matter of principle quite clear, but he has given Washington instructions to keep on fighting about the money issue.

The United States' firmness on this point seems to obey a certain kind of reasoning: If up till now Panama has gotten all it has wished for, the negotiators from Panama should then not be too upset over a simple money problem. Nevertheless, Torrijos does not think along those lines. One of his advisors had counseled him to yield to the Americans, basing his argument on the strange notion that "in the end, money is a matter of secondary importance." Torrijos replied with his devastating common sense: "Yes, money comes second, but only to those who have it."

In any case, it was well worth the while to bear and endure. In only six months of Carter's presidency, the negotiations have progressed a whole lot more than during the tenure of all previous American presidents, and this has allowed everyone to think that for the very first time, the United States is in a whole lot more of a hurry than Panama to pull the whole deal through. In the first place, because Carter needs the Treaty in order to wave it as a flag of good will in his new policies towards Latin America. Secondly, because the Treaty has to be submitted to the Congress of his country for its approval, and this possibility has a definite deadline: the month of September.

The truth, nevertheless, seems to be that the calculations made by both countries were absolutely wrong. At the beginning of this week, the discussions about the money were at a deadlock, and no one has been able to pull them out of the cul-de-sac they have fallen into. So, it is quite probable that General Torrijos, before anything else, would like to consult the opinion of his colleagues of five different countries on this crucial issue: What the hell do we do about the money problem?

His main defect: his naturalness One need only to know General Torrijos, even if slightly, to understand that these quarrelsome bullies mortify him greatly, that they mortify him plenty, but that they will never manage to make him desist from his aim. At the beginning of the negotiations, when it did not seem conceivable that the United States would ever give in, a high American official said to him, "The best thing you can do is turn the Canal back over to us without a fight. If not, we will fuck you over so badly during so many, many, many years that, in the end, you will finally say, 'Fuck it. Here, have your Canal back and just stop bothering us.'" Although the true motives for giving the Canal back are quite different, History has proven that the threat was quite real.

If one were in need of comparing General Torrijos with animal prototypes, one could easily say that he is a cross between a tiger and a mule. Of the first, he possesses its supernatural instinct and its precise finesse. Of the mule,

he possesses its infinite stubbornness. These are his two main virtues, and I believe that both could be useful to him for doing good deeds as well as for ill-doings. On the other hand, his main defect is precisely what everyone, quite mistakenly, thinks to be his greatest virtue: his absolute naturalness. This is what gives him that image of a wayward and ungovernable lad which his enemies have learned to use so well against him in their perverse propaganda. Even President López Michelsen, who rarely is mistaken in his judgment of people, once said of General Torrijos that he is a 'folkloric' head of state. He could have said, to be exact, that he has been gifted with an inconvenient naturalness.

On one occasion, a European ambassador got quite angry because Torrijos received him sitting in a hammock, which, to top his naturalness, had his name embroidered on it with multicolored threads.

On another occasion, someone considered it quite inappropriate that his secretary was helping him put his socks on. Every Saturday, a fisherman who gets drunk near his home in Farallón begins to curse loudly against him, and ends the whole scene by insulting his mother. General Torrijos has given his guards instructions that no one should bother the drunkard, and only when he outdoes himself in aggressiveness does Torrijos come out to the terrace to answer him with the same curses, and even goes to the extreme of insulting the fisherman's mother.

Torrijos would be able to exorcise this adverse image if only he could be less natural under certain circumstances.

Not only does he not avert this, but he doesn't even try to, because he knows that he can't. To whomever criticizes him for this, he answers with unmerciful logic: "Don't forget that I am not a European president, but rather the Head of State of Panama."

Only the campesinos can drive him against the wall

Although both his parents were school teachers, and, as a natural consequence he was raised in the rural middle class, Torrijos' true personality expresses itself fully only when he is among farmers (campesinos). He enjoys talking to them in a common language that is not too comprehensible to the rest of us mere mortals, and one is even under the impression that he maintains a same-social-class complicity with them.

On the other hand, he feels quite out of place in Panama City. There he has his home, the only one he owns and which he bought fifteen years ago through the Social Security System. And it is large and peaceful, and full of trees, but rarely can one find him there. Furthermore, one time I arrived in Panama quite unexpectedly, by surprise, and I had to recur to the National Security department to find him. Next day, when I finally got to see him, I asked, jeering at him jokingly, what kind of national security force was this that could not find him for at least twelve hours? "I was at my own home," he answered, laughing his head off. "Not even National Security could imagine that perhaps I can be found in my own home."

I have seen him in that house only once, and he seemed quite a different man. He was in a very small, impeccable and air conditioned office, accompanied by family photos and some souvenirs of his military career. In contrast to other occasions, he was wearing his urban uniform, and it was quite obvious that he didn't feel at all comfortable inside that formal uniform, nor within his own skin. I didn't feel comfortable either, because, for the very first time I was under the impression that I was not being welcomed as a friend but rather as a foreign visitor in a special audience.

Perhaps this is why every time he's able to, Torrijos flees onboard his personal helicopter and goes to hide among the campesinos. He doesn't do this, as one could assume, to escape problems. On the contrary, it is precisely there that his great problems become even bigger.

Not long ago, I accompanied him on a visit to one of these campesino communities that are springing up all throughout the country. The farmers gave him a detailed and frank account of their work, but at the end they also asked him to inform them of his own work. They too, isolated as they are in the high mountains, wanted to know how the talks concerning the Canal were coming along. That is the only time I have ever seen Torrijos driven against the wall, giving them a full and almost confidential briefing of the true state of the negotiations, such as he hadn't ever given to his numerous interlocutors in the city.