

# **Diplomats under Siege: The M-19 and the Dominican Embassy Takeover of 1980**

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## Abstract

*More senior diplomats were taken hostage in the Dominican Embassy siege of 1980 than at any previous terrorist event. Sixteen members of the Colombian guerrilla group, the M-19, captured fifteen ambassadors, including the American ambassador, along with diplomats from across Latin America and held out for two months before flying to safety in Cuba with millions of dollars in ransom. Using approaches from Area Studies and Diplomatic History, this article deploys newly declassified material from the UK, US, oral history testimonies and interviews with former M-19 members in Colombia to explore how events in Bogotá marked a new trend towards highly visible and performative security ‘spectaculars’. It argues that in the short term, the Bogotá siege was successful for the hostage-takers because it delivered unprecedented national and international profile for the M-19 whilst demonstrating their affective acuity in rallying supporters to their cause. But in the long term, states were determined to avoid a repetition of this episode and other embassy attacks. Enhanced diplomatic security has become the norm whilst for some states it has paved the way for the now-familiar ‘fortress’ embassy. Importantly, the Bogotá case raises the wider questions of how states along with diplomatic captives respond to hostage-taking. It highlights how the study of diplomacy can benefit from recent trends in performativity and emotions, offering a more global and interdisciplinary understanding of modern diplomatic practices and security.*

**Keywords:** *diplomacy, hostages, terrorism, performativity, Colombia*

## Introduction

On the afternoon of 27 February 1980, fifteen ambassadors and several senior diplomats from around the world gathered at the Dominican Embassy in Bogotá. A cocktail reception was being held to celebrate the independence of the Dominican Republic from neighbouring Haiti in 1844. An aged guard greeted the guests at the door whilst several *lagartos* or “lizards” – tolerated professional party crashers who were regular fixtures on the embassy circuit – entered the building. Across the road from the Embassy, a group of twelve youths were kicking around a football.<sup>1</sup> Unbeknown to the guard and the guests, the *largartos* and the youths were members of the *Movimiento 19 de Abril* (M-19) – an urban guerrilla group described in Colombian and US intelligence assessments as the ‘most volatile’ of the country’s numerous armed groups.<sup>2</sup> The embassy was just across the road from the university football ground and most of the guerrillas wore sports clothes and then ‘jogged into battle’.<sup>3</sup>

The leading *largarto*, known as *Comandante Uno*, or First Commander of ‘Operation Democracy and Liberty’, was Rosemberg Pabón. Upon entering the embassy Pabón opened fire, thereby signalling the start of the attack.<sup>4</sup> Once the US ambassador’s bodyguards realised that an attack was taking place, they returned fire resulting in the death of a M-19 guerrilla and

bodyguard. Meanwhile, policemen who were patrolling the nearby Universidad Nacional heard the gunfire and rushed to join the ‘small, ineffective force of security men who were no match for the heavy firepower’ of the M-19.<sup>5</sup> The guards were over-powered and the M-19 were able to seize control of the Dominican Embassy, holding fifty-seven hostages, including the ambassadors of Austria, Brazil, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Israel, Mexico, Switzerland, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela, Apostolic Nunciature to Colombia and diplomats from Bolivia, Jamaica, Paraguay, and Peru. More senior diplomats might have been caught in the net, but the ambassadors of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania had left the reception early in a group just before the attack.<sup>6</sup> The Spanish ambassador had chosen to come but arrived late and found the door closed.<sup>7</sup> The British ambassador, Kenneth Uffen, was perhaps the last to arrive only to find that gunfire had already broken out and so also avoided being bagged.<sup>8</sup>

The exchange of fire lasted for three hours and ended with a M-19 member holding the US ambassador, Diego Asencio, out of a window demanding a ceasefire.<sup>9</sup> The M-19 issued their demands swiftly. Communicating through the former foreign minister, Alfredo Vásquez Carrizosa, they demanded the release of 311 political prisoners of various organisations in police custody or prison, a payment of US \$50 million, accompanied by a threat to kill two hostages every ten minutes.<sup>10</sup> The siege was not only one of the most serious diplomatic hostage situations in living memory, but also signalled the growing ambitions of the M-19 to establish themselves as the foremost urban terrorist organisation in Latin America.

The Colombian government took Pabón’s threat to blow up the Embassy seriously. Colombia was in the midst of a long running civil war with numerous active armed groups. Only one month earlier, at the height of the Guatemalan civil war, a group of protesters supported by the *Comité de la Unidad Campesina* (Committee for Peasant Unity, CUC) and the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (Guerrilla Army of the Poor, EGP) took over the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City. A mysterious fire and an assault by the Guatemalan security forces led to the death of thirty-seven people inside the embassy – everyone except the Spanish ambassador and one protester managed to escape the burning building.<sup>11</sup> The latter was later kidnapped from hospital, tortured, and dumped in a university campus. President Turbay assured international governments that he ‘he did not want another Guatemala and would do all within his power to avoid the provocation of the terrorists.’<sup>12</sup>

The threat of captivity and hostage-taking was the dominant theme of the Cold War.<sup>13</sup> But from the 1970s, this was an era of security ‘spectaculars’ and seizures where embassies

were the theatres of resistance. The terrorist tactic of embassy seizures was a variant on the hijacking of planes and political kidnapping from the late 1960s and early 1970s, and as aircraft security improved, embassies became the new 'vessel' for holding hostages.<sup>14</sup> Although hostage-takers were of diverse origin, including competing groups of Palestinian militants operating abroad, an increasing number of embassy attacks were carried out on home territory, often as a response to internal political turmoil.<sup>15</sup> The 'uncertain boundaries' of embassies in law and culture were exploited to communicate local grievances to an international audience, and at times, to resist Western intervention.<sup>16</sup>

Between 1970 and 1980, terrorists and militant groups seized embassies on forty-three occasions in no less than twenty-seven countries and made a further five unsuccessful attempts to storm diplomatic facilities.<sup>17</sup> The cost was mounting and in 1979 alone, the American ambassador in Kabul and the British ambassador in the Hague were assassinated. Global statistics for diplomatic casualties have not been centrally collated, but by 1993, a total of 186 US personnel were commemorated on Department of State plaques for their deaths overseas in service to their country, most of whom died in this spate of embassy-related violence in the late twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> The seizure of embassies became an especially fashionable form of protest in Latin America. During a single decade, twenty-one embassy seizures took place on a continent that was already one of the world's historical hotbeds of insurgency and social unrest. Some European countries considered withdrawing their representation from the main cities altogether. Even those not yet ready to 'pull out' were quietly reducing their staff numbers.<sup>19</sup>

The Dominican Embassy siege marked one of the biggest diplomatic hostage crises of the twentieth century. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to this extraordinary event.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, wider discussions of diplomatic security remain limited and detached from mainstream debates on global terrorism.<sup>21</sup> Whilst International Relations and Diplomatic History have shared epistemological commitments, deep methodological divergences and divides over nomothetic and idiographic approaches have somewhat resulted in the marginalisation of Diplomatic History.<sup>22</sup> [This is perhaps best demonstrated by conceptualisation of diplomacy in International Relations as a tool of statecraft rather than a constitutive part of the international system.](#)<sup>23</sup> R. Smith Simpson, made a forceful case for interdisciplinary exchanges and diplomatic training as early as 1968.<sup>24</sup> But, his call for 'politico-historical studies pointing out the similarities and differences between past and current diplomatic practices' as 'one of the resources urgently needed for a realistic

understanding of diplomacy' remains to be comprehensively explored.<sup>25</sup> For the study of diplomatic hostage-taking and broader issues in diplomatic security, this lacuna raises questions about how states, along with diplomatic captives, respond to hostage-taking.

This article triangulates the proceedings of the M-19's takeover of the Dominican Republic's embassy in Bogotá using a variety of primary sources from the UK, US and Colombia. It draws on generous declassification in the UK, the Foreign Affairs Oral History Programme in the US, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, and the National Security Archive Colombia Project, and complements Anglo-American perspectives with interviews with former M-19 members in Colombia and Spanish language literature. Deploying approaches from Diplomatic History and Latin American Studies, the article demonstrates how performative armed action delivered an unprecedented national and international profile for the M-19 whilst demonstrating their affective acuity in rallying supporters to their cause. Embassy seizures and hostage-taking generally are perhaps two sites where the study of diplomacy meets the history of emotions. For the states involved, the protracted negotiations reflected a complex system of signalling and bargaining that constituted multi-level body politics, whilst Pabón and the captive diplomats engaged in a remarkable form of multi-stakeholder diplomacy, which proved to be rather effective in achieving a peaceful settlement. In seeking to contribute to the gap in politico-historical studies between past and current diplomatic practices, the article asks how this global spate of embassy attacks and seizures have shaped diplomacy and embassy security more generally, most notably in the emergence of embassies in fortified or private compounds, referred to as the 'fortress style'.

### **Performativity and Profile: *El Movimiento 19 de Abril* (M-19)**

The M-19 was little known outside Colombia before the 1980 embassy siege. It emerged following the Colombian presidential election of 1970 – one of the most fiercely contested in the republic's history. In the spotlight was Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, a former military dictator who led the country for four years with support of Colombia's two main political parties following a peaceful *coup d'état* 1953. He became an unlikely frontrunner in the 1970 election on a populist platform that challenged the ruling political elite. On 19 May, Rojas Pinilla lost by just 63,000 votes. Amidst accusations of electoral fraud and widespread unrest, a state of siege and curfew was imposed.<sup>26</sup> Named after the day of the allegedly fraudulent election, the M-19 emerged as the intellectual militants of the Colombian armed conflict and marked the

emergence of the country's first urban guerrilla organisation. Following a nationalist and populist political agenda, they rejected what they saw as the 'ideological cannibalism of the left'.<sup>27</sup> The group's leadership and membership included well-educated professionals, academics and students – a far cry from the largely illiterate and poor peasants who formed the vast majority of the membership of the country's rural insurgencies, such as *Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN).

From the outset, the M-19 displayed a taste for the theatrical. Their signature strategy of *propaganda armada*, or armed propaganda, sought to disseminate ideological messages.<sup>28</sup> On 12 January 1974, five days before their first operation, the M-19 presaged its appearance in a series of advertisements starting in *El Tiempo*, the country's leading national newspaper: 'Parasites... Worms? Wait M19'. More advertisements followed in the most popular newspapers in the country's cities: 'Low on energy... Bored? Wait – M19'. On the day of the operation, *El Tiempo*'s front page carried an advert in the left hand corner: 'It's coming... M19 arrives today'.<sup>29</sup> The M-19's flamboyant entrance onto the Colombian political scene began by breaking into the Quinta de Bolívar museum in Bogotá, the historic residence of the *Libertador* Simon Bolívar. Six guerrillas stole a sword and epaulettes once thought to be owned by the Latin American icon, and left copies of a notice proclaiming that the sword 'points its tip at those who exploit the people.' The mystery grew when the M-19 placed more advertisements asking for leads on the relics generating huge levels of interest. The front cover of *Alternativa* magazine, Latin America's most exciting literary publication in the 1970s, read: 'Bolívar's sword appeared. It is in Latin America!'<sup>30</sup> *Propaganda armada* was intended to be as thrilling as performance art; it created an event, and a memorable media spectacle.

On 30 December 1978, the M-19 over-reached itself. It carried out a spectacular operation that would almost cripple the organisation, and ultimately led to the embassy siege. Unbeknown to the authorities, and practically under their noses, the guerrillas successfully tunnelled under a street in Bogotá over the new year holidays and entered Cantón Norte, a military base in the capital city. They left with a haul of an estimated 5,400 weapons,<sup>31</sup> including mortars, rocket launchers, machine guns and ammunition.<sup>32</sup> Following the arms robbery, the M-19 issued a statement claiming responsibility for the theft and made demands for agrarian reform, salary increases for workers, an end to the state of siege and abrogation of the infamous 'Security Statute' – a measure introduced by president Turbay imposing severe sentences for civil unrest that placed crimes against state security under military jurisdiction.<sup>33</sup>

The symbolic and public nature of the operations now generated wider publicity. Using *propaganda armada* and performative armed action to carry out secret and often bloodless operations, the M-19 were able to situate themselves in the menu of leftist doctrines and guerrilla groups whilst promoting a more nationalist and populist ideology. The media spectacle shifted public attention to the Colombian state's security policies and politically engaged the urban population who were some somewhat detached from the country's wider counter-insurgency campaigns. Accordingly, the M-19 were able to generate unprecedented sympathy from the urban middle-classes who were often entertained by the media appearances. Yet for the government and military, the emergence of Colombia's first urban guerrilla group; an increasing number of bomb attacks, kidnappings and assassinations; and general social unrest involving dissident students and striking workers represented a 'potential threat to stability' that had not existed a decade before.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, immediately following the weapons raid there was an all-out offensive on the M-19 and the country's other insurgent groups. Despite their relative success, the M-19 was a rather small and eccentric organisation, estimated to number no more than 400 members and mainly operating in Colombia's three principle cities, Bogotá, Medellín and Cali, not in the vast rural mountainous areas that their more historic insurgent counterparts operated.<sup>35</sup> They struggled to withstand the aftermath of the weapons raid. In an internal bulletin, the M-19 leadership admitted that the Cantón Norte operation was 'a mistake precisely because it was spectacular enough to have brought into action the whole weight of the government's counter-force.'<sup>36</sup> In October 1979, the Minister of Defence, General Camacho Leyva claimed that many M-19 members had been captured and ninety-five per cent of the stolen arms stolen in January 1979 had been recovered. The impending trials of 219 alleged M-19 members, including the group's leadership, seemed to substantiate the General's reassurances.<sup>37</sup>

At the eve of the Dominican Embassy siege the M-19 faced the looming threat of self-eradication. This is perhaps indicative of the uneasy balance between generating publicity and support through 'spectacular' and performative armed action whilst evading the attention of the authorities. Inspiration for embassy takeover came from a spate of spectacular hostage successes by urban terrorist groups in Latin America over the previous decade. Perhaps the most important example was Uruguay, where the Tupameros guerrillas had captured the British ambassador. He was eventually released after president Allende of Chile brokered a complex deal in which a large ransom was paid and hundreds of Tupameros prisoners mysteriously 'escaped' from their prison.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, alongside high-profile attacks on American

diplomatic personnel and company executives involved in internal labour disputes, the Argentine ERP (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*), better known as the ‘Montoneros’, generated a record \$61.5 million USD in ransoms between 1970 and 1974.<sup>39</sup> Several other multi-million dollar ransoms followed, including Britain’s highest known ransom payment.

## **Performativity and Diplomacy**

Embassies have long occupied a peculiar space in international affairs. In the popular imaginary, embassies are often associated with the glamour of hobnobbing at cocktail receptions, chauffeured cars, and luxury residences. In stark contrast, the lives of many diplomats and their families are determined by the perceived level of urban insecurity, threats of local violence, state of relations between the home and host states, and increasingly, the politics of intervention. For embassy staff representing their country abroad, it is often ‘where ‘home” and “foreign” encounter each other’.<sup>40</sup> In spatial terms, embassies are characterised as ‘uncertain boundaries,’ that is, ‘territories in urban space that do not come under the administration of the countries in which they are situated physically’ and where the ‘legal space belongs to other countries with other laws, rules and traditions.’<sup>41</sup> The construction of embassies, particularly by wealthier states, is a relatively new phenomenon dating to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reflects a form of national architecture where the identity of a state is projected internationally.<sup>42</sup> Thus, combined with their political role in international diplomacy, embassies and the space they occupy are reifications of the nation state, whilst the ambassadors and diplomats observe and serve this reification.

Diplomacy is inherently a performative practice and well-documented from antiquity to the modern day. Age-old metaphors of performing arts abound discussions of diplomatic relations from the eighteenth-century notion of a ‘concert of nations’ to signify global concord, ‘diplomatic theatre,’ ‘diplomatic dance,’ and ‘diplomatic choreography’.<sup>43</sup> The central role of diplomats in communication, mediation and negotiation consists of a speaker, a subject and an audience and so is always ‘performed’.<sup>44</sup> These performative and regulated processes of communication expose diplomacy and diplomatic practices as more than functional and structural elements of the international system and reveal the intersubjective nature of the ‘international’.<sup>45</sup> As official representatives of their nations, diplomats are status symbols. Accordingly, the special status afforded to diplomatic missions, formalised in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, states that missions are ‘inviolable’ and that diplomats



‘should be protected by the State in the performance of his functions’ and ‘not be liable to any form of arrest or detention.’<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, the practice of states is much more dependent on reciprocity than formal law. This can lead to diplomats feeling somewhat hostage to the restrictive whims of their host.<sup>47</sup> Writing of his experience in the US embassy in Moscow, George F. Kennan, one of the most celebrated twentieth century diplomats, confessed that he ‘chafed under the “restrictions of a diplomatic status”, particularly, “the compulsion to political inactivity, self-restraint and objectivity.”’<sup>48</sup> Distinguished historian and former Canadian diplomat, James Eayrs, highlighted the difficulties in performing diplomacy arguing that ‘the modern ambassador is under severe occupational stress.’ He observed that the traditional defences against violations of diplomatic immunity were crumbling as early as the 1960s ‘for they consist solely of whatever resources of restraint and courtesy a community may muster out of its sense of civic virtue and enlightened public policy.’ Following the abduction of the American ambassador to Brazil in 1969, Eayrs remarked with considerable foresight ‘that this case seems to be first of its kind’ but ‘political kidnapping will become as common – and as successful – as political hijacking’, describing diplomatic missions as ‘not so much mile-stones as mill-stones, hostages rather than status symbols.’<sup>49</sup> In representing states through the lived experience of diplomatic performance and as symbols of the state, personal capacities, social agility and adaptability are frequently tested. This is most acute in cases of hostage-taking, and where the study of diplomacy meets the history of emotions.<sup>50</sup>

We know little about how states and captives respond hostage-taking.<sup>51</sup> One of the key demands in such situations are ransom payments, which together with other aspects of terrorist events, present special challenges for international historians. Relevant documents are often withheld for exceptionally long periods of time and witnesses, including family members, can be reluctant to speak, or advised to say ‘as little as possible’.<sup>52</sup> The Bogotá siege presents a fascinating case to explore the affective responses of states and hostages precisely because of the scale of the crisis that involved no less than twenty representatives of external governments. This reveals a complex system of international signalling and bargaining between the host and external states, captive ambassadors, M-19 guerrillas, members of international organisations along with domestic audiences and news media, that can be characterised as multi-level body politics – the negotiation for ambassadors as state symbols or diplomatic bodies involved diplomacy both through and beyond states.

First, external governments carefully constructed an outward show of hardness combined with inward concession, pressing the Colombian government to meet some, or even all, of the demands to secure the release of the hostages. Second, for the host country's government and military, the M-19 siege marked the expansion of *propaganda armada* and constituted a significant addition to its existing security dilemma. The injury to military pride following the weapons raid in January 1979 together with the growth of urban insurgency in Latin America resulted in a difficult trade-off between meeting international diplomatic obligations and deterring future armed action. Finally, Pabón worked in an uneasy alliance with a captive team of ambassadors to manage the M-19 negotiation position, both fearing that the embassy might be stormed by the military, reflecting a remarkable form of multi-stakeholder diplomacy.<sup>53</sup>

## **The Dominican Embassy Siege**

The Dominican Embassy siege offered the M-19 an extraordinary opportunity. First, the advertised formal celebration of the Dominican Republic's independence ensured the presence of numerous foreign dignitaries. Most importantly for the M-19, this included Diego Asencio, the US ambassador to Colombia. He was not hard to spot, arriving in an entourage of two cars with a team of guards. Pabón, the commander of the siege, recalled that once he was informed of the arrival of Asencio and his entourage, it simply 'did not matter how many other diplomats from other countries were present'.<sup>54</sup> Although there were clear ideological differences between the urban and populist M-19 and the country's rural Marxist armed groups, such as the FARC and the ELN, historical US security support for the Colombian state in suppressing internal dissent was an issue that united the country's revolutionary militants. Second, the M-19 was well aware of the lack of security and correctly anticipated that relatively few within the embassy would be armed. Third, the embassy seizure offered an opportunity to draw international attention to the M-19's political agenda that sought to highlight human rights abuses at the hands of the Colombian state, and above all, free its many captured comrades.<sup>55</sup>

The M-19 used the public stage provided by the embassy siege skilfully. One of the novel features of the occupation was that the M-19 permitted their hostages to speak to their respective embassies, families and government at least once a day by telephone, as well as, allowing telephone interviews with some foreign media outlets. The M-19 won further sympathy when they acceded to the government's demand that all female hostages be released

as a condition for the start of dialogue. Moreover, the acceptance of NGO involvement, Red Cross supplies, compassionate release of the Austrian ambassador whose wife was ill, and the M-19's willingness to allow medical practitioners to make frequent visits to attend to hostages all gave a human face to the insurgents. These rather even-handed practices were widely publicised in the national and international press. This represented a more elaborate form of *propaganda armada* in which the diplomats as international status symbols served to maximise the publicity of the occupation to an international audience consisting of external governments, families of the captive ambassadors and news media. Colombia's minister of foreign affairs, Diego Uribe-Vargas lamented that the M-19 had succeeded in appearing as 'reasonably-minded protestors.'<sup>56</sup>

The Colombian government were no less sensitive to the concept of an international stage. Although overwhelmingly generated by domestic politics, they carefully framed the embassy siege in terms of the spectre of 'international terrorism' and its threat to international society.<sup>57</sup> Publicly, Uribe-Vargas, stated that 'the government has realised that the violent occupation of the embassy was a reflection of the new types of war being waged in diverse regions by terrorist groups against legal regimes.'<sup>58</sup> Privately, he viewed it as a Latin American problem, spurred by Brazil's Carlos Marighella, who preached a shift from rural to urban guerrilla action.<sup>59</sup> This wider trend in guerrilla tactics was a result of the urban reality – from 1950, in a mere three decades, Latin America transformed into a largely urbanised region highlighting the strategic inadequacy of Ernesto Ché's rural-centric foco theory. Moreover, cooperation between urban guerrillas extended across the region. The co-founder of the M-19, Toledo Plata, trained with the Montoneros in Argentina, and it is widely thought that one of the M-19 members in the embassy siege was in fact an Uruguayan Tupamaro, suggesting a degree of regional learning and knowledge transfer amongst several revolutionary groups.<sup>60</sup>

Despite this sophisticated understanding of the international stage, there was widespread disagreement within the Colombian government and military on how to approach negotiations with the M-19. Some opposed any negotiations with the group, insisting the government could not be seen to be surrendering to terrorism. Military officers expressed a similar view and warned that the negotiations would be protracted. Most interestingly, military officials also recognised that the assault was 'a precursor of things to come' pointing towards another M-19 event five years later when the group took over the Palace of Justice in which 300 civilians were held hostage.<sup>61</sup> Here, the absence of foreign dignitaries and a hardening of attitudes against the strategy of *propaganda armada* permitted a counterattack by the military

that left ninety-eight dead and fourteen ‘disappeared’.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, governments outside Colombia combined an outward show of hardness with inward concession, pressing the government to meet some or even all of the demands in order to secure the release of the hostages and avoid ‘serious international problems’.<sup>63</sup>

On 2 March 1980, president Turbay authorised negotiations with the M-19. Remarkably, the key to the resolution of the siege was the direct participation of the hostages themselves reflecting a form of interdependency and multi-stakeholder diplomacy between the M-19 and captive ambassadors. Under the direction of Pabón, the captives were asked to elect a ‘hostage committee’ consisting of ambassadors to represent the hostages to the M-19 and Colombian government.<sup>64</sup> The group led by the envoy of Mexico, Ricardo Galán Méndez, who enjoyed extensive experience of dealing with terrorism and hostage crises in his seasoned diplomatic career in Haiti, Honduras, France and Nicaragua, began tutoring their captors about how to extricate themselves with dignity, and even a degree of success. Eventually, the committee began analysing government proposals for the M-19, ‘suggesting new avenues of discussion, and even rewriting guerrilla manifestos to take out the more egregious ideological screeds and then pointing out where the government had made perhaps not readily apparent concessions.’<sup>65</sup>

The captive ambassadors moved the negotiations forward by facilitating communications between their captors and the M-19 high command who were in prison. One of the major impediments to the talks was that the captors were not getting instructions from their superiors. Their initial orders had come from the M-19 command, ‘most of whom were in jail’ following the military weapons raid in Cantón Norte. Pabón and his fellow guerrillas in the embassy were receiving some counter offers on the part of the government that they ‘considered interesting’ but were not able to accept these because they had been given so little flexibility by their leaders. Asencio suggested to their captors that they produce a tape recording of the offers they were considering and ask the International Committee of the Red Cross, which would visit them from time to time, to convey the tape to the M-19 leadership. The answers that came back were ‘ambiguous’ and ‘not particularly helpful.’ This was nevertheless a remarkable achievement in multi-stakeholder diplomacy.<sup>66</sup>

Negotiations took place in a cream-coloured van parked some way outside the embassy and in full view of the world’s media. This site added to the perception of transparency and generated affective appeal through *propaganda armada*. Several ambassadors joined with the lead M-19 negotiator, Carmenza Cardona Londoño, known as ‘la Chiqui’, in the van. As la

Chiqui approached the van, accompanied by her negotiating partner, ambassador Galán, a huge red, white and blue tricolour M-19 flag was unfurled whilst the Colombian national anthem was played. So powerful was the sense of performance that even the government negotiators stood to attention in respect to the anthem of their country.<sup>67</sup>

For the M-19 and the Colombian government, the principal issue was that of prisoners. The M-19's demand for the release 311 'political prisoners' was their central objective, since the team that occupied the embassy was receiving its orders from higher echelons of the M-19 that were themselves in prison and wished to be free. This was not well received by the government and judiciary. For the minister of foreign affairs, Uribe-Vargas, the 'political prisoners' in question were not 'misguided and harmless idealists, but common criminals, who in the course of their criminal activities, have never stopped at any moral barrier'.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in the midst of deteriorating security conditions in the country and a hardening of measures to deal with the growing threat of insurgency in both rural and urban Colombia, the release of prisoners was the only demand that the country's leadership was not willing to meet from the outset.<sup>69</sup>

Huddled in the van outside the embassy the Colombian government negotiators unfurled complex constitutional arguments. Firstly, Colombia's constitution made the release of prisoners rather improbable. Unlike its Latin American counterparts, the country had largely steered away from excessive executive power. President Turbay was obliged to uphold the law and any attempt to release prisoners would have resulted in congressional action against the leader. Executive action was also opposed by the country's leading military figures, including the commander in chief, General Sarmiento, who was concerned about the impact releasing prisoners could have for the future of democratic institutions in Colombia.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, there were clear legislative and legal barriers to releasing prisoners. Whilst Congress did enjoy the authority to legislate pardons, this could only be legally achieved for those prisoners who had been convicted. The vast majority of the 219 M-19 members that were captured following the robbery of the military armoury were still awaiting military trial. Attempts by president Turbay to speed up the M-19 trials by decree to allow the possible release of some prisoners required Supreme Court justices to deem this action as constitutional.<sup>71</sup> These political and legal barriers led much of the political leadership and military to suggest that they could resist the M-19's central demand and still achieve a peaceful resolution – an optimistic view that was not always shared by the governments of the hostages, or indeed the hostages themselves.<sup>72</sup>

The M-19 hoped that the daily telephone contact between the hostages and their respective governments would work in their favour by encouraging external governments to apply pressure on the Colombian state to meet their demands for prisoner release. The Turbay administration took the risk of resisting international pressure and this eventually delivered dividends. By 19 March 1980, the M-19 radically reduced their demand of the release of 311 prisoners to 20. But, this revised list of prisoners consisted of core M-19 members whose release would require the Executive to break the law and risk losing the support of the Colombian military at a critical moment in the Republic's history of insurgency.<sup>73</sup>

After further negotiations through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Colombian government and the M-19 reached a peaceful agreement. On 27 April 1980, the guerrillas and remaining hostages were accompanied by members of Commission, government officials, and the Red Cross and given safe passage to board an aircraft bound for Cuba with crowds cheering whilst they travelled to the airport. On arrival in Havana, they were greeted with further cheers by M-19 supporters. No members of the group were released but some of 'important prisoners', allegedly belonging to other armed groups, such as the FARC, were reportedly freed.<sup>74</sup> Although the M-19 maintained that the ransom was not their central demand, they secured a handsome payment of US \$2.5 million. Most remarkably, the siege resulted in no casualties since the first day of the siege, a stark comparison with, for example, the contemporaneous Iranian embassy siege in London and the fate of their terrorist counterparts in similar operations around the world.

## **International Actors**

The negotiation over diplomatic bodies involved diplomacy both through and beyond states. As well as displaying forms of multi-stakeholder diplomacy between the M-19 guerrillas and captive ambassadors, the diversity of international actors involved in the negotiations is reflective of the increasingly complex nature of the forms and functions of modern diplomatic practices. The Bogotá episode offers early examples of 'third-party reconciliation' diplomacy, which has emerged as a feature of global intrastate conflict resolution.<sup>75</sup> Fidel Castro emerged as one of the most important state mediating actors in receiving the M-19, but also for future negotiations between Colombia and its armed groups, most notably in the 2016 FARC peace accord. Castro's aims in receiving the M-19 were not necessarily ideological. He was aware of how much press coverage hostage situations received, and it was well known that Castro liked to be seen as an international mediator. He had successfully aided the Canadians in resolving

a hostage crisis by receiving *Front de Liberation du Québec* in 1973, and in later years, he offered to intervene with the Ayatollah in the Teheran embassy hostage issue 'but got nowhere'.<sup>76</sup> Other elements of the third-party reconciliation include the International Committee of the Red Cross who provided humanitarian support to the captive hostages and the Organisation of American States Inter-American Human Rights Commission that facilitated the negotiations between the government and the M-19.

For the Colombian government, the main fear was that concessions would inspire further media spectacles.<sup>77</sup> The key objective was to 'minimise terrorist gains'. The US took a strategic view and therefore shared a similar sentiment and preferred minimum concessions to the M-19's demands to 'discourage the recent wave of attacks against diplomatic establishments'. However, as representatives from the affected countries worked together to resolve the siege, clear differences emerged with a majority of countries favouring almost anything to secure the quick release of hostages and levelling criticism at the Colombian government for the slow pace of negotiations. Three weeks into the siege, dramatic tension increased when Fernando Gómez Fynn, the Uruguayan ambassador, managed to escape from the embassy whilst being shot at. Privately, the international community insisted that Colombia's international obligation to protect diplomatic persons was paramount.<sup>78</sup>

Payment of ransom was a central concern for all states involved. The Colombians privately encouraged 'the idea that other governments or private institutions might contribute to a ransom pool', whilst rejecting the internal payment of ransom citing legal and constitutional constraints. For the US, the offer of asylum was an 'undesirable solution', and the position on ransom payments was an unequivocal refusal. By contrast, other states, such as Austria expressed a 'willingness to receive' the M-19 hostage-takers and 'grant asylum'.<sup>79</sup> During the negotiations, some European countries pressed for a collective *démarche* by the European Economic Community demanding stronger action to free the hostages, while others pressed for calm and patience. There were continual rumours that some countries were privately offering money for the release of their ambassador. One well-informed official in Bogotá reported: 'I have reason to believe that ransom negotiations are underway in respect of some of the hostages. There is the prospect that softies could be released, leaving the hard-line country personnel in captivity.'<sup>80</sup>

Countries that publicly took a hard line behaved differently in private. The US loudly declared that there should be no concessions. But, behind the scenes the State Department worked on the issue round-the-clock looking for compromise. In Washington DC, this was the

main issue for the head of the State Department's Office for Combatting Terrorism, Anthony C. Quainton, and his deputy, Samuel Eaton. Meanwhile, it dispatched two 'advisers' including the deputy director of the State Department Office for Combatting Terrorism, Frank H. Perez.<sup>81</sup> Perez recalls that his primary purpose was 'to make sure, first of all, that the Colombian government didn't storm the embassy and try to free the hostages and get them killed in the process.' Perez did not engage in direct talks with the M-19 but nevertheless 'conferred and negotiated on a daily basis with the Colombian government and the other countries that had hostages inside.'<sup>82</sup>

Quainton and his team had their work cut out. The multi-stakeholder diplomacy between Pabón and the captive ambassadors made the State Department anxious that the diplomats, including Asencio, had gone native and were too close to the guerrillas.<sup>83</sup> They knew that ambassadors Asencio and Galán were increasingly friendly with the M-19 leaders and whom 'they would sort of counsel' in preparing their negotiation strategy.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, Asencio was frustrated because he was telephoning the State Department regularly but was not being listened to and rightly suspected that he was seen by everyone on the outside as a victim of Stockholm syndrome, where terrorist and their victims gradually converge.<sup>85</sup>

But Quainton's biggest problem was in Washington DC. As time passed, pressure grew at the top to do something decisive. President Carter decided he should have a review of the situation, and there was a National Security Council staff meeting. At that meeting, a military aide in the White House presented the case for the use of a SWAT team. He described how it could be done and asserted confidently: 'we can do this in a few minutes, with no casualties', adding, 'we know we can do it. We've studied it and we know we can do it.' Deputy secretary of defence, Graham Crater, was even more zealous: 'let's go. Let's do it. This is what we should do. We should have done it a long time ago.' The Latin Americanist on the National Security Staff also argued for the use of commandos.<sup>86</sup>

The State Department and the CIA, and particularly the CIA director, Stansfield Turner, argued strongly against it. Quainton pointed out: 'There's no guarantee that you won't have any casualties. The first casualty will be our ambassador. Moreover, I think our policy will work. Give it time.' Turner, who enjoyed a much more senior position, weighed in on the side of the diplomats and judged the use of commandos 'a big risk.' The State Department worried about the chain of command, noting that if Carter read the wrong box in his night reading and gave the wrong order it could be 'an absolute disaster.' The decision reached was that the US should have a SWAT team in readiness but should not act.<sup>87</sup> This was only a few weeks before



the ill-fated Operation Eagle Claw designed to rescue the hostages in Iran and clearly this capability was not yet ready or refined.

Asencio, the American ambassador and the key hostage for the M-19, felt under extreme pressure. He recalls that at one point their captors had become frustrated with the government position leading Pabón to issue threats: 'perhaps we should begin executing the hostages one by one. That would sort of grab their attention real fast.' Asencio was naturally keen to offer a countervailing view, arguing that 'one of things that every negotiator knows is you draw things out as much as possible so you can gather intelligence and also make the other side nervous and anxious to deal.' He insisted that the government were doing this rather better, and so encouraged the M-19 to engage in competitive foot-dragging. Asencio's advice prevailed and Pabón 'got away from the idea of shooting people.'<sup>88</sup>

Publicly, the Israelis had also hung tough during the crisis. The captive Israeli ambassador had enjoyed tormenting the M-19 terrorists by repeatedly telling his captors that if anything happened to him 'there would be no place on earth where they could hide'. He added that a crack team of commandos would find them and 'hunt them down like dogs.'<sup>89</sup> In fact, unbeknown to their ambassador, the Israelis had also sent out an adviser.<sup>90</sup> This adviser privately pressed the Colombian government to concede. Quainton confided that the Israelis 'were far from robust in resisting the demands of M-19'. They drew a sharp distinction between issues involving the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in which they were 'unyielding', and issues like this, that did not impact on the nation's interest, and so were 'ready to extricate their people regardless'.<sup>91</sup>

Through the crisis, the M-19 clearly considered a commando assault to be a serious threat and took measures to actively discourage this. Although the British ambassador had evaded capture, Britain's SAS was still viewed as the most likely source of external expertise for any attempt to overpower the M-19. Although events in Bogotá preceded the Iranian embassy siege in London, the SAS had regularly been loaned to other countries for regime security or during hostage crises.<sup>92</sup> In early March 1980, the British embassy in Spain received a recorded cassette claiming to be from the 'Commander of M-19 in Europe'. The guerrillas insisted they had intelligence that the SAS had been dispatched to Bogotá and threatened reprisals against British diplomatic staff in Europe if they intervened.<sup>93</sup> London quickly issued a public denial that they were sending specialist anti-guerrilla units to Bogotá to assist the government.<sup>94</sup>

This posed a problem for the British, since they now viewed their own embassy as a likely target for future attacks and wished to improve security. For more than ten years, the FCO had sent roving teams of SAS personnel to inspect the security of posts that were deemed to be in dangerous places. During the last inspection, the SAS had taken a dim view of the competence of the locally employed Colombian guards. London wanted to take up the option of sending out a security team from Keenie Meenie Services, a private company run by former SAS officers, on a three-month basis. But they feared that this defensive and precautionary action would add credence to rumours that the UK had sent out an SAS team to help attack the embassy.<sup>95</sup>

Eventually, Pabón and his fellow guerrillas made off with the equivalent US \$10 million dollars at current prices. To the dismay of many governments, the M-19 publicly gloated over the considerable sum that was paid as a ransom. Where did the money come from? When quizzed about this some years later, Eaton was vague and replied; ‘I don’t know who paid the money ... I think it was the Venezuelans’.<sup>96</sup> Asencio offered a different story pointed to the Israelis: ‘since the Israeli ambassador was one of the hostages, the Jewish community in Colombia got together and raised the ransom.’ He added that the president of Colombia issued a statement saying since the Dominican Embassy was the property of the Dominican Republic, the exchange of money between the Jewish community and the terrorists was not occurring on Colombian soil and could proceed.<sup>97</sup>

Fear of M-19 reprisals cast a long shadow. In June 1980, months after the siege was over, the Colombian government asked major financial centres around the world for help in tracing the cash from the ransom including the US, France, Germany and Switzerland. They had carefully noted the serial numbers of all the bank notes handed over to the M-19. They expected British help because London had taken a lead in countering international terrorism. But Britain was reluctant to assist, not only because this was a complex process but also, they feared that news of this effort might get back to the M-19. London thought reprisals against staff in Bogotá were likely, underlining how this event had sent a chill even through countries that did not have hostages taken.<sup>98</sup>

### **Why the siege was a success for the M-19**

In the short term, the termination of the siege appeared to be a major political triumph for president Turbay. Although he conceded that his hard line ‘Security Statute’ was untenable in

a modern democracy, Turbay was able to safeguard his internal political position, keep the military in check, preserve the constitution, and meet his international obligations in bringing a peaceful solution to the siege. Non-traditional diplomatic actors, including expert assistance from the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Organisation of American States Inter-American Human Rights Commission and several private Colombian citizens with experience in negotiating with the country's insurgent groups such as the M-19 and the FARC, were widely regarded by US assessments as a contributing factor to this success.<sup>99</sup>

Ultimately the siege was a well-managed stage by the M-19 and represented a serious blow to the government. By abandoning their core demands, engaging with NGOs, allowing medical care to reach the ailing hostages and releasing all female hostages, the M-19 showcased humanity alongside their militant cause. Moreover, it was ultimately the M-19 who received the credit for the bloodless outcome of the siege. By April 1981, a year after the siege ended, the group's membership saw a significant increase from an estimated 400 members to 800-1,200.<sup>100</sup> Whilst president Turbay avoided appeasing the demand for the release of M-19 prisoners, his unwillingness to embark on genuine investigations into allegations of wrongful arrest and torture of civilians by the security forces had undermined the legitimacy of the government at both home and abroad, and gave the M-19 further credibility.

The siege coincided with increased international attention on the issue of human rights violations in Colombia from the late 1970s. Detailed reports of human rights abuses at the hands of the security forces appeared as the military's offensive on the country's insurgent groups progressed. Publications and reports from Amnesty International, and the acknowledgement of evidence relating to human rights abuses at the hands of state security forces by the International Court of Justice, International Commission of Jurists, Organisation of American States and the Catholic Church, and NGOs within Colombia gained international traction and brought widespread condemnation of some of the more dubious counter-insurgency practices in the country, namely extra-judicial killings, rape and torture.<sup>101</sup> One of the most prominent internal figures bringing attention to this issue was the former president Carlos Lleras, who publicly acknowledged the extent of human rights violations in his country.<sup>102</sup>

Arguably, the increased international pressure on the Colombian government put president Turbay in a rather difficult position.<sup>103</sup> The government and security services were increasingly operating under the watchful eye of the international community. Following the siege, president Turbay attempted to defend his administration's action against insurgent

groups in a letter to the Secretary General of Amnesty International.<sup>104</sup> He acknowledged human rights violations in the country's past but argued that the reports failed to take into account the major internal security dilemma the government faced pointing to the increasing levels of drug production and rising membership of armed groups. During the early 1980s, governmental attempts to broker peace and improve its international image failed. President Turbay's offer to extend a form of amnesty, recognising 'the quality and intelligence of the leaders and inviting them to pursue their aims by means of normal political opposition and the ballot box' was not well received by leaders of the country's armed groups. Moreover, by 1985, the country's highest court, Council of the State, condemned the former president and his defence minister for tolerating 'institutionalised torture.'<sup>105</sup>

Meanwhile, the use *propaganda armada* in the embassy episode had firmly established the reputation of the M-19 as one of region's foremost insurgent groups. This secured new support and training from Cuba, along with the Argentine Montoneros. During the 1970s, Havana's support for revolutionary movements in Latin America was practically non-existent, which is remarkable given Cuba's contemporaneous adventures in Africa. No Cubans were known to have operated with any insurgent group in the region from 1971 to 1978, nor were they known to have supplied rebel groups with arms and ammunition during the mid-1970s. Moreover, relatively few Cuban-trained insurgents during this period returned to their native countries to carry out operations against their own governments and international targets.<sup>106</sup> But, the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1979 and the success of the M-19 accelerated this revival and saw Cuba renew its commitment to actively fermenting violent revolution across Latin America.

Havana had maintained contact with the M-19 for several years. Cuba now provided tactical advice for the group despite clear ideological differences – the M-19 favoured the politics of nationalism and populism rather than Marxism. But, the M-19 and Cuba were united in their opposition to the Colombian government. Relations between Cuba and Colombia had deteriorated by Bogotá blocking Havana from a seat on the United Nations Security Council in late 1979. Strained relations between the country's leaders, together with the success of the M-19's embassy seizure, saw a sharp increase in direct support from Cuba to expand the group's operations. By October 1980, 200 Colombian insurgents arrived in Cuba for training via Panama, the majority of whom eventually returned to their native country to wage a revolutionary struggle.<sup>107</sup>

By March 1981, president Turbay suspended relations with Cuba. He accused Castro of arming and training the M-19 enabling them to expand their influence in rural areas. Colombia's suspicions were aroused by the interception of a large quantity of arms in near Pasto in the south-west of the country that included fifty rifles, seven submachine guns, 60mm motor high-explosive ammunition, rockets, landmines and dynamite, some of which were suspected to have reached Colombia through Angola where Cuban forces had been active since 1975.<sup>108</sup> Whilst contemporary debates on Castro's legacy have largely focussed on the impact of the Marxist leader's domestic record, this episode reveals how the consolidation of Cuban support to Colombian insurgents contributed to the growth of future armed action and speaks to the rather neglected regional record of Castro's revolutionary foreign policy. By the end of the siege, the M-19 had not only secured regional support for their armed struggle, but also established themselves as one of the foremost urban terrorist organisations in Latin America.

### **Resisting 'Spectaculars' and the Rise of Embassy Security**

As James Eayrs predicted in 1971, hostage-taking has been a growing trend over the last half century. From the taking of hostages on airliners in the 1960s, to the capture of embassies and parliaments in the 1970s and 1980s, through to the seizure of ships and their crews by Somali pirates in the 2000s, we have seen an increasing international awareness of how the seizure of individual or groups of citizens has constituted a fruitful way for criminals, political radicals and even malignant states to coerce democratic governments.<sup>109</sup> Liberal governments are especially vulnerable to such pressure. Hostage-taking evokes affective responses; leaders of states display a fear of being embarrassed by the failure to free their citizens, which combines, and is at odds with a fear of damaging their state's international standing through a perception of appearing weak. In turn, the response of states is often guided by emotive responses that had little to do with ameliorating the grievance behind the initial abduction and promoting restorative justice, but which has everything to do 'performing' diplomacy.

For the Colombian government, deterring further attacks of *propaganda armada* was a key concern.<sup>110</sup> Embassy seizures constituted a particularly performative and public variation on this theme and were emblematic of terrorism in the late twentieth century. More focused on creating drama than death, they accorded with the idea of 'terrorism as theatre' in which each actor or participant plays a role designated to transmit the terrorist's message to select or multiple audiences.<sup>111</sup> For the external states with captive ambassadors, this was a complex

system of signalling and bargaining that constituted multi-level body politics in which the safety of their own took precedent but was dependent on the safety of other diplomatic ‘bodies’.

Specifically, the Bogotá episode offers some classic juxtapositions. It underlines how hostage-taking confronted decision-makers with multiple dilemmas. Most importantly, short-term pressures, often from the public, press and relatives ‘to be seen to be doing something’ conflicted with a longer-term awareness that concessions might fuel further attacks protect ambassadors as ‘status symbols’. But we actually know very little about the historic reactions of democratic states to the seizure of their ambassadors. Although the narrative of the Bogotá siege is unusually transparent, more generally, states have often contrived to render their responses remarkably opaque.

What is clear is that Bogotá, along with several other episodes, triggered an affective reconsideration of state responses to embassy attacks and hostage-taking. While states were willing to negotiate, and even facilitate discrete ransoms for kidnapped individuals, there was an increasing concern about ‘spectaculars’, typically the seizure of parliament buildings and embassies. Even in 1980, as we have seen, there was significant pressure at the highest level to launch a paramilitary rescue in Bogotá, pressure that arguably manifested itself a few months later in the failed attempt to rescue American hostages in Tehran. Thereafter, enormous work was devoted to developing specialist commando teams to deal with these situations which offered a robust counter-theatre that confirmed the implacability of the state. Ten years later, commando assault was becoming the norm.<sup>112</sup>

More generally, embassies have evolved from foreign outposts once deemed a ‘safe space’ for face-to-face diplomacy to high-security compounds. Armed security, concrete barricades, checkpoints and roadblocks are not an uncommon sight outside embassies across the world, particularly where buildings are deemed to be too old or too expensive to undergo security upgrades. Spain’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation has responded to threat of embassy attacks by providing surveillance to all general consulates in Europe and deploying agents from *Grupo Especial de Operaciones* (GEO), an elite unit of the National Police to improve security in the Middle East, Latin America and Africa. Embassy relocations, particularly by Western states, have also seen a marked increase. In recent years, the UK’s the Foreign Office has become one of the country’s biggest commissioners of new buildings, whilst the US has battened down the hatches with ‘fortress’ embassies.

Whilst embassy attacks were not limited to the US, the superpower was the highest profile target in 1980s and remains so. This has prompted widespread changes for American embassy security. The Inman report of 1985 was considered by some as the first attempt by the US to deal with the threat of terrorism to foreign service personnel. Given the increasing level of threat from terrorist groups throughout the 1970s, the report made important recommendations for the move of international intelligence operations to more secure facilities, preventing embassies from collateral damage in an escalating street war between covert operatives and their terrorist opponents like Hezbollah. But the report also sought to specifically deal with the tightening of US diplomatic security generally.<sup>113</sup>

The 'Inman Standards' recommended a regular 'setback' space between American embassies and the outer walls. However, the high-cost of these changes, estimated to be \$3 billion USD in 1986, resulted in low levels of implementation across US diplomatic facilities.<sup>114</sup> In 1998, following two deadly attacks at the US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, the Bureau of Overseas Building Operations (OBO) was established to implement a system to expediate the security of diplomatic facilities with a standard embassy design that is known as 'fortress style'.<sup>115</sup> Alongside this shift, vast private armies have been recruited to protect diplomats and their missions.<sup>116</sup>

Historically, urban terrorism has presented embassies with special challenges. The emergence of embassies in fortified compounds, encircled with huge walls that are physically cut off from their cities has been tied to representations of American power in the midst of the on-going Global War on Terror. The US embassy in Baghdad is perhaps one of the most important architectural projects in this regard – occupying 104 acres, six times larger than the UN complex in New York, and virtually impenetrable. Whilst the security for the personnel who reside and work in the complex was clearly of primary concern, critics have warned of the dangers of 'remote-control diplomacy' from such compounds, which raises the wider question of security, set against openness, in modern diplomacy.<sup>117</sup> This tension is perhaps most apparent in the context of emerging forms of multi-stakeholder and third party reconciliation diplomacy that have been central to developments in international conflict resolution. It is perhaps best captured by the former US ambassador to Iraq, Edward L. Peck, who complained that the embassy consisted of 'a thousand people hunkered behind sandbags'. He added: 'I don't know how you can conduct diplomacy in that way'.<sup>118</sup>

## Conclusion

The M-19's siege on Dominican Republic's embassy in Bogotá is a crucial episode in Cold War terrorism and international diplomacy. Indeed, there was much at stake – more senior diplomats were captured than at any previous terrorist event, and the siege remains one of the most serious diplomatic hostage situations in living memory. Arguably, the politics of the Cold War, and subsequently, the Global War on Terror have placed diplomats on the frontline of global conflicts.<sup>119</sup> The continued threat of attacks against diplomatic missions remains a serious issue for international diplomacy. Yet, debates on wider shifts in diplomatic practices and diplomatic security are detached from mainstream International Relations. The proceedings of the Bogotá episode offer insights into the performative nature of diplomacy and embassy seizures that reveal early examples of multi-stakeholder and third-party reconciliation diplomacy as means to a peaceful outcome to hostage-taking. But the peaceful outcome delivered the most significant dividends for the M-19.

Within Colombia, the skilful use of *propaganda armada* led to the dramatic rise the M-19's profile. In the following months, the group's membership increased by two to three-fold and they made the rather unusual transition from urban to rural insurgency. By the mid-1980s, operations extended to beyond Colombia's major cities to number of the country's departments – the Southern Front in Putumayo, and a Western Front that included areas in Caldas, Quindío, Tolima, Valle del Cauca and Cauca.<sup>120</sup> This period of expansion was also followed by heightened cooperation, particularly between the M-19 and emerging indigenous armed resistance in Cauca, an area of conflict that was already home to several insurgent groups, including the Sixth Front of the FARC, widely known as one of the most militarily aggressive factions, and the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL).<sup>121</sup> M-19 military training, equipment, and arms was key to the later establishment of the *Movimiento Armado de Quintín Lame* (MAQL).<sup>122</sup> Remarkably, an unpublished national opinion poll from 1984 revealed that Colombia's guerrillas enjoyed a seventy-five per cent favourable rating.<sup>123</sup> More widely, the M-19 saw the increased support and training from Cuba, Libya, Nicaragua, Argentina and Uruguay.

The diversity of countries involved in the Dominican Embassy siege is particularly interesting for examining state responses to hostage-taking. The way institutions behave when multiple nationalities comprise the abducted reveal uneven state responses where an outward show of hardness is contrasted with inward concessions. It also brings to the fore questions of pragmatism versus principle, and cooperation and coercion between competing state bodies



that might place a premium on the sovereign nationality of the individuals kidnapped above any wider appeal to a coherent international collective response. Transformations in diplomatic security since the era of ‘spectaculars’ have not always resulted in the reduction of terrorist threats against diplomatic targets. In the context of the Global War on Terror and the roll out of ‘transformational’ and ‘expeditionary’ diplomacy, we can expect the expansion of high-risk diplomatic deployments and remote-control diplomacy behind fortified compounds.

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### **Notes**

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