

Latin American Newspaper Coverage of the United States Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

Media coverage of the civil rights movement in the United States grew rapidly in the early 1960s as journalists began to see that the protest movement had far-reaching political and social implications. This study is a comparative analysis of newspaper coverage of the struggle by five newspapers in Latin America. It concluded that, although there were different opinions as to who was responsible for the racial conflict, all newspapers in the study portrayed the violence and bigotry displayed as shameful. They depicted the civil rights demonstrators as warriors for a just cause, and presented racism as a global issue.

Keywords: civil rights, United States, Latin America, newspapers, race

Introduction

In 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace, following a wave of racial violence in his state, was asked if he was concerned about the image of the South in the rest of the world. Wallace responded, “It seems people in other parts of the world ought to be more concerned about what we think of them rather than what they think of us. After all, we’re feeding most of them. And when they start rejecting the foreign aid that Southern taxpayers send to them, then I’ll be concerned about their attitude toward the United States” (Hampton, 1987). This remark represented the viewpoint of many white southerners as they grappled with the civil rights movement and growing media coverage both in this country and on a global level. Members of the international media, particularly those representing Third World countries, were often derided as “outsiders” whose coverage was considered insignificant (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2006).

Despite the view that the media in Latin American countries were not taken seriously, they were, in fact, a force to be reckoned with. Latin American newspapers, with a readership totaling in the hundreds of millions, were very much interested in the civil rights struggle. However, scholars in the United States have virtually ignored how the civil rights movement was covered by the Latin American press. This study is a comparative analysis of coverage by the following newspapers: *Noticias de Hoy* (Cuba), *El Caribe* (Dominican Republic), *La Tribuna* (Peru), *La Prensa* (Nicaragua), and *El Tiempo* (Colombia). The study also examines the images present in news stories, editorials, columns, and political cartoons. It focuses on the following questions: What was the nature of the coverage provided by the papers? Were there differences in the way the civil rights movement was presented? To what extent did the newspapers compare the state of race relations in the United States to that which existed in their respective countries?

2. *Noticias de Hoy*

Noticias de Hoy was based in Havana, Cuba. By 1961, Fidel Castro had instituted state control of the press, and the paper became a voice of the Communist Party. Relations between Cuba and the United States deteriorated following Cuba’s close ties to the Soviet Union, the missile crisis, and the U.S.–imposed trade embargo. Coverage of foreign policy issues by *Noticias* reflected an ingrained hostility against the United States. One month after the failed attempt by Cuban exiles to invade the Caribbean nation at the Bay of Pigs, a group calling itself the Freedom Riders drew international attention to the plight of blacks in the Southern United States. The Freedom Riders, consisting mostly of black college students, traveled by bus from the north to the south to test a federal ruling requiring that all public interstate transportation facilities be desegregated (Henry, 2000). *Noticias*’ large front-page headline read “Fierce Racist Persecution in the States of Mississippi and Alabama.” The article described how the students were treated by police after they arrived in Jackson and Montgomery:

The police walked around the bus terminal as if they were planning to assault a military fortress. The sheriff made a command, and several police came in with their dogs. Thousands of hysterical whites screamed at the blacks, and demanded that they be lynched. The passive visitors were arrested and thrown in jail. ("Fierce Racist Persecution in the States of Mississippi and Alabama," 1961, p.1).

Political cartoons were aimed at racial violence in the South. One shows a member of the Klan standing next to an unidentified white man. Both men are attempting to topple a bust of Abraham Lincoln, whose image worldwide was that of a great leader who freed the slaves (appendix A). In addition to that illustration, *Noticias* featured a poem entitled "Terror in Alabama." The poet, who was not identified, was highly critical of race relations in the United States. The country, he said, was an uncivilized place inhabited by relentless "Yanquis" and "troglodytes in air conditioned caves" ("Terror In Alabama," 1961, p.7).

1963 was a pivotal year for the civil rights movement. Racial violence escalated throughout the country. The bombing deaths of four black children in a Birmingham church in September generated a considerable amount of discussion. A front-page editorial asserted that social conditions in the United States created an atmosphere of bigotry and racial hatred. The writer charged that the "dominant class" was afraid of the civil rights movement. He charged that it was not in the interests of organizations like the John Birch Society, many of whom represented the corporate elite, to allow blacks to have equal rights. Free reign was given to "aggressive groups" like the Nazi Party, which was said to be tolerated in Washington. The writer added bitterly, "Birmingham is a reflection of the United States" ("Let's Stop the Bloody Divide of Racism, 1963, p.1).

The paper seemed to downplay the passage of the Civil Rights Act by Congress on July 2, 1964. It chose instead to concentrate on the prevailing racism that gripped the country. On the day that the United States spoke about the ramifications of the legislation, *Noticias* discussed the disappearance of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi. One month later, the paper discussed how the bodies of Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner were found "in a badly decomposed state" ("Wave of Anger Because of the Three Integrationists in the United States," 1964, p.1).

Considerable attention was given to the 1965 voting rights crusade in Selma, Alabama. Demonstrators were beaten by state troopers near the Edmund Pettus Bridge. A wirephoto showed troopers on horseback. In the foreground lay a female demonstrator, who apparently was wounded in the attack. That same day a political cartoon once again depicted a battle zone. We see a white police officer, gigantic in size, with a gun in his holster and a club in his hand (Appendix B). The lower portion of his body is made of brick, and represents a voter registration building. In the foreground we see several blacks, small in size, lying on the ground. The officer, representing the powerful, dominant establishment, had beaten what was depicted as helpless, nonviolent people of color. The image of the large, self-absorbed white brute and law-abiding black victims would continue to be conveyed as a way of illustrating what was felt as the evils and contradictions of the capitalist United States. Sensationalist in tone, *Noticias* was used as a weapon to shame the country into re-thinking its political and social agenda.

3. *El Caribe*

On the opposite end of the spectrum was *El Caribe* of the Dominican Republic. The newspaper was considered to be conservative in tone. Like Cuba's *Noticias de Hoy*, *El Caribe* began its regular coverage of the civil rights movement in 1961. However, most of the news stories were taken from the Associate Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI). The newspaper described the Freedom Riders as persons who had challenged racial barriers.

In contrast to *Noticias*, *El Caribe* was pro-United States. A column by Miguel Garcia (1961) sympathized with the burden placed on the shoulders of President John Kennedy during the racial crisis. Garcia said trying to resolve the crisis just added to his other concerns in Latin America and other parts of the world. He spoke of the complex and difficult struggle that blacks faced in their quest for racial equality. The writer added, "It is regrettable that the Communists are spending so much time blaming the United States government for what has happened" ("Hard Words For President Kennedy," p.2).

The positive image of the federal government is illustrated by a political cartoon. (Appendix C) The cartoon shows a bald eagle, perched on the arm of a scarecrow. The eagle represents the United States. The scarecrow represents the Alabama State government. The scarecrow appears to be slightly off balance. The eagle, strong and powerful, is not intimidated. The stern look that he gives the crude figure suggests that the federal government would be keeping a watchful eye on what Alabama's leadership would be doing in the way of race relations in the future.

Like *Noticias, El Caribe* had harsh words for segregationists in Birmingham. The paper said the acts of brutality against black demonstrators must be stopped immediately:

There are still many powerful people living in the South, and they are supporting laws which maintain segregation. It is our hope that those men will wake up to the reality of our time and understand that blacks deserve the same rights as whites ("Racial Segregation," 1963, p.6).

A column by Jottin Cury (1964) blasted the state of Alabama for its horrific acts of injustice. Cury wrote that Alabama was contending for the distinction of having the most rabid segregationists in the United States. He said not much had changed since a black man named Jimmy Wilson was nearly lynched in 1960 in Montgomery for stealing \$1.95 from a white woman:

The recent accounts of Alabama bring to life, in large proportion, the case of Jimmy Wilson. Isn't the situation in Birmingham a continuation of the sad affair in Montgomery? We remember the Wilson matter and we see in miniature the view of the blacks who are brutalized by whites ("The Racial Hatred in Alabama," p.6).

The horrific incidents that took place in the United States prompted *El Caribe* to examine the state of race relations in the Dominican Republic. Reporter Radhames Gomez (1963) argued that Dominicans should admit that racial prejudice exists in their own country. Said Gomez,

From the exclusive social centers to the remote Dominican villages, there is employment discrimination. This particularly affects females. In fact, it is difficult to find a black woman employed in the large stores, commercial banks, or private offices" (They Say There Is Racial Prejudice in the Dominican Republic," p.4).

Gomez said, however, that racial discrimination is not nearly as extreme as in the United States. Such hatred was "repugnant" to those in the "civilized world." ("They Say There is Racial Prejudice in the Dominican Republic," 1963, p.4). *El Caribe* may have distanced itself from the Socialist perspective of Cuba's *Noticias de Hoy*, but it was in agreement that the anti-black sentiment in the United States was repulsive and an affront to thinking people around the globe.

4. La Prensa

La Prensa, Nicaragua's largest newspaper, put race relations in the United States in an historical perspective. Columnist Adolfo Calero-Orozco (1963) mentioned such significant events as the arrival of blacks as slaves on Virginia soil in 1619, the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. Calero-Orozco described the legalized system of segregation which followed. White southerners were depicted as incorrigible. Discrimination, said the writer, was "in the blood of whites in the South" ("History and Repercussions of the Racial Fight in Alabama," p.5). The racial attacks in Birmingham in 1963 were seen as a probable "sequel" to the uproar created by the enrollment of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi the year before. Calero-Orozco said it was "inevitable" that civil rights would be granted to all people regardless of race. However, it would take a "huge effort" from political leaders across the United States to bring this about.

Like the newspapers mentioned previously, *La Prensa* devoted much attention to the violence which ensued during the summer of 1963 in Birmingham. The paper ran perhaps the most famous photo of the period, issued by the Associated Press. It shows a police dog about to sink his teeth into the abdomen of a black demonstrator. A political cartoon (Appendix D) is a commentary on the assault, with a mother trying to comfort her small son as a large dog approaches. The mother says, "Don't be afraid, son. There is a spirit who will protect us." The "spirit" rising high above the mother and son is once again Abraham Lincoln.

In this instance, Lincoln is given a more “human” quality than that which was presented in *Noticias de Hoy*. It reinforces the view, upheld by many nations, of Lincoln as a benevolent father figure and protector. While *Noticias de Hoy* and *El Caribe* concentrated primarily on racial unrest in Alabama and Mississippi, *La Prensa* mentioned other southern states that were embroiled in racial conflict. For example, there were reports of Klan activity in Salisbury, North Carolina. There were also accounts of unrest in New Orleans, Charleston, and Savannah.

Despite the bloodshed and bitterness, *La Prensa* appeared to be optimistic about the future of race relations in the United States. The paper carried wire stories about attempts on the part of the federal government and political leaders to resolve the crisis. However, the publication seemed to feel that the South could not be counted on to straighten itself out. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were viewed as significant gains in the struggle for equality and justice for all citizens.

5. *El Tiempo*

El Tiempo was one of the largest newspapers in Colombia, another country which established a close partnership with the United States during the 1960s. The newspaper described “the Negro Problem” in the United States as an extremely serious issue. Like *La Prensa*, it felt the need to give readers a brief history lesson in order to explain why race relations was in such a sorry state. Columnist Mario Lamarzo Gonzalez (1963) wrote, however, that studying the cause of racism and doing nothing about it was like “giving aspirin as a cure for the bubonic plague” (“The Negro Problem in the United States,” p.15). He presented a positive image of blacks, writing that they had persevered in spite of incredible odds:

Blacks, who are known throughout the southern United States and have been seen directly and in books, magazines, and theatres, don’t feel inferior because of their color. They are proud and dignified. What weighs heavily on them is not being treated like human beings in the areas of education, housing, and employment (“The Negro Problem in the United States,” p.15).

El Tiempo described the Freedom Riders as “Crusaders of Liberty” who challenged racial barriers. The word “crusaders” in this context conjure up images that are similar to that of *Noticias de Hoy*. That is, blacks were engaged in a battle for a just cause.

In regard to the separation of the races in the South, an editorial referred to the scale of justice:

It would be absurd to say that there are two weights and two measurements. When the United States government defends all free men in the world, that includes people of color in the South. When the White House proclaims the validity of human rights, these rights are for all. Inside or outside the United States. Because freedom is the same, whether in Hungary or in Alabama (“An Accusation To Be Proud Of,” 1963, p.4).

El Tiempo compared the crisis in the South to the Civil War. Southern states were still arguing for “states rights” and were opposed to interference by the federal government in their affairs. The Kennedy administration was presented as having its hands full, contending with recalcitrant politicians like Governor George Wallace and Ross Barnett of Mississippi. United Press International (UPI) and Agence France Press (AFP) provided most of the information on the March on Washington and the role played by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King was described as a key leader in the fight for racial integration. One month later, a UPI wirephoto showed that the United States still had some ways to go. It showed a stained glass image of Jesus Christ in a black church in Birmingham, which had been destroyed by dynamite.

6. *La Tribuna*

In the 1960s, Afro-Peruvians, inspired by the civil rights movement, mobilized for political reform. *La Tribuna*, a passionate advocate of liberation for Peru’s large indigenous population, said the prejudice displayed in the United States presented “a contradiction” (p.6). The paper said it was interesting that a democratic country, recognized as “a leader in the fight for liberty” would find itself in this predicament.

The publication added that racial discrimination in the United States would affect its prestige in the rest of the world (“Anti-segregationism in the United States,” 1963). Like *El Tiempo*, *La Tribuna*, in an editorial, referred to the Civil War. According to the paper, conditions had not improved much since the abolishment of slavery. Several examples were given of this, including Arkansas governor Orval Faubus’ decision to bar black students from integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. An editorial writer asserted that Latin Americans, who live in a “mestizo (mixed race)” continent, “are very much concerned about the outbreak of racist insanity in the southern United States. He continued, “The indigenous population encourages the people in the United States who perpetuate and approve segregation to rise above the mental backwardness” (“The New Uncle Tom,” 1961, p.6.).

Like *El Caribe*, *La Tribuna* compared the racial attitudes of its readers to those of the United States. The paper considered Peruvians to be much more tolerant. One editorial began with the quote from Pedro Vargas, a local truck driver. Vargas said,

“Thank God I was born in Peru, where whites, mestizos, and blacks live in harmony and work together without prejudice and for a better country” (“Racism and Integration in the United States,” 1962, p.4).

The image being conveyed was that the federal government was doing the right thing in opposing segregation, but the measures being taken to bring about change were inadequate. However, when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, *La Tribuna* was optimistic that it would be a major step towards the establishment of equal opportunity for all citizens. It was not a revolutionary piece of legislation, said the paper. It simply stated that everyone, regardless of color, race, and creed, was entitled to rights that were guaranteed under the Constitution. Still, *La Tribuna* asserted that because the United States had been marred by lingering prejudice, the Civil Rights Act marked “a new road for people of African origin” (“Step Number One,” 1964, p.4.). The paper noted later that continued racial violence and hostile reaction to the bill indicated that the country had a long and difficult road ahead.

7. Conclusion

The civil rights movement was considered to be of significant interest to the newspapers in this study. There were differences in their depiction of the United States based on each country’s assessment of black-white relations and the perceived role that the federal government played in the struggle. Although the images presented were varied, they were unanimous in their harsh criticism of racial prejudice in the South. Cuba’s *Noticias de Hoy* was the most critical of the United States. Operating under the watchful eye of the Castro regime, the paper presented the country as corrupted by a social system that encouraged and benefited from racism. *Noticias* chipped away at the democratic, “liberty and justice for all” image of the United States. The federal government was presented as savage, aggressive hatemongers. The United States had a history of institutionalized racism, and its survival as a nation and a world power depended on the maintenance of the status quo. While *Noticias* presented the entire country in a negative light, the other newspapers reserved their criticism for the South. *El Caribe*, a conservative publication, portrayed the federal government in a positive light, depicting it as strong, reliable, and a protector of human rights. The paper seemed to focus primarily on the state of Alabama, noting that federal officials had quite a battle on their hands. *La Prensa* and *El Tiempo* differed from the aforementioned newspapers in that they put the racial crisis in an historical perspective. They discussed the slave trade in the United States and mentioned that since the nation’s beginnings, whites have engaged in a bitter campaign to deny blacks their civil rights.

La Tribuna’s perspective was similar to that of *Noticias de Hoy* in that it portrayed the United States as hypocritical. It asked, “How could a country, with its reputation as a beacon of liberty, discriminate against some of its own people because of the color of their skin?” *La Tribuna* portrayed blacks involved in the civil rights movement as strong, courageous, and dedicated. A common theme among the newspapers was that the violence and bigotry that took place as blacks fought for equality was shameful, and it shattered the image of the United States as the land of the free. Racism was presented as an international issue and something which necessitated a call for solidarity among people of color in Latin American and developing countries throughout the world.

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**NOTICIAS DE HOY
CUBA**



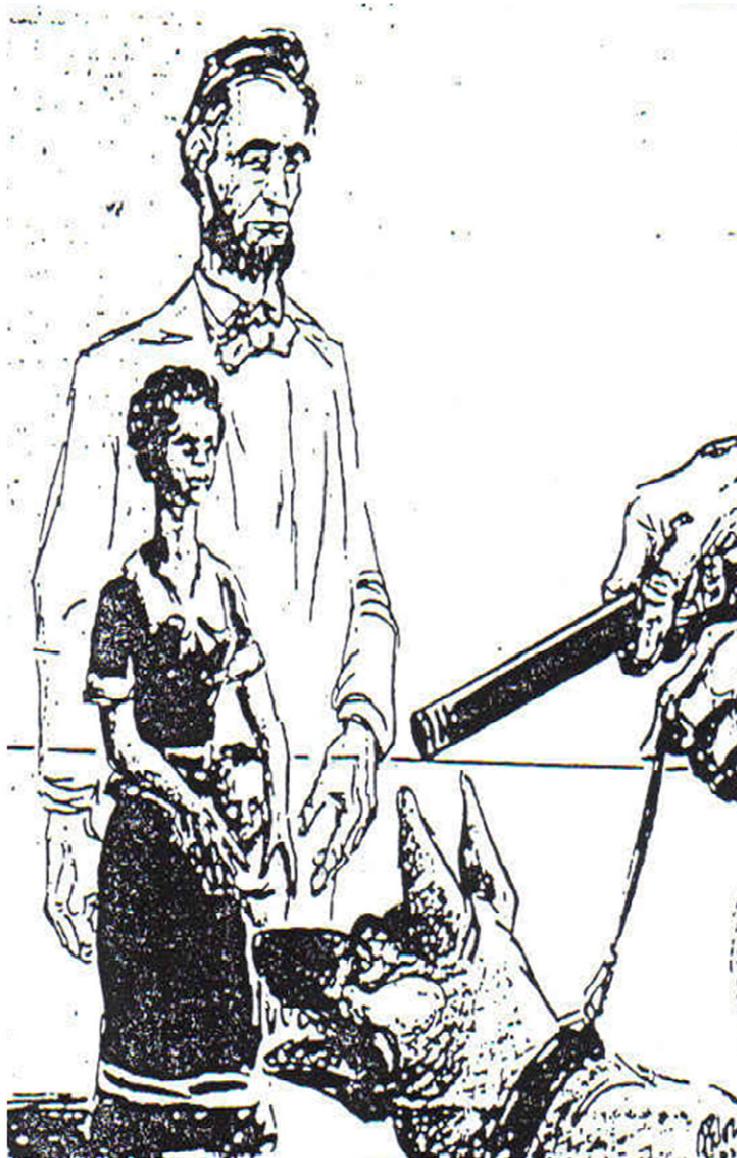
NOTICIAS DE HOY CUBA



EL CARIBE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



LA PRENSA NICARAGUA



La madre: No temas, hijo. Todavía hay un espíritu que nos protege.