

The Cartagena Incident

Affirming U.S. success

by Michael R. Czinkota and Irene Leoncio *

During the past days emotions have been running high about the U.S. Secret Service alliance with ladies of the night in Colombia. An 'incident' has mushroomed into a self-inflicted 'policy debacle'. Some policy makers, in describing this apparent scourge of mankind, appeared to recommend firing everyone who ever had lust in their hearts. The Senate majority leader's solution is to hire many more women for the Service. Others suggest that protocols and training for protective details need to be tightened; even the possible use of the 'honey trap' strategy is suggested by some. A merchant seaman with great experience writes in an editorial that the lesson learned should be to 'always pay your bill'! President Obama, who was the object of all the protection, used the annual White House correspondents dinner to crack jokes about the affair. I find all the public anxiety vastly misplaced, and the event's effect on the U.S. reputation misinterpreted.

Most of what has been reported portrays the affair as a letdown by and of the United States. Since fraternizing with female escorts violates the self-image of puritanism, weakens the state of bliss in a marriage, and possibly may distract officers from their duties the next day, the transgression of the Secret Service has been labeled as evil incarnate. However, there are not just vile aspects to the apparently unheard of one night stands. It is very important to interpret such occurrences as to their meaning in a local and global context. Experiences with night workers are not necessarily bad or useless. Here is a personal example which one of us wrote about in 1990:

“On a visit through various of the newly emerging democracies, I noticed never before encountered quantities of ladies of the night in hotel lobbies and restaurants. The fact that I was easily identified as a Western visitor appeared to contribute markedly to my attractiveness. The result were various conversations, a typical one of which is presented here:

O(Idest) (P)rofession: You American?

R(otund) T(ourist): Yes

OP: Interested? One thousand dollars.

RT: Isn't that a bit much? How much do you earn on your daytime job?

OP: I am a secretary and make \$ 40 a month. Here my price is \$ 1,000. Americans can afford it.

RT: Have you done any business yet?

OP: Not so far, but some day I will.

RT: What if I ask any of the other ladies?

OP: They also charge a thousand dollars. We have talked, and we are now a free market. But you have to stay with me. I talked to you first.”

There was much reflection of society in these conversations. First, there was the desire to become a private entrepreneur. With restrictions removed, the opportunity beckoned. Initiative, if left un-channeled, may, however, lead to unexpected and sometimes undesirable market manifestations. Second, the idea of profit was at the forefront of the mind. While the meaning of profit and the understanding of profitability can differ widely, it’s about the money! Reneging on a transaction is a betrayal of trust. Competition may be seen differently, as may market power, but it is a hard lot to have to knuckle under to others with power. Finally, relationships and expected outcomes must be seen in the context of both sides.

Here is why I consider the Cartagena incident a feather in the cap of the United States. It is no mean feat for a small country like Colombia, or for new ladies of the night to complain against the representatives of the most powerful nation in the world ... and to prevail. This is a triumph for the U.S. after decades of trying to endow others with equal rights and of proselytizing that any misconduct (even down to paying a bill) be addressed fairly and openly. The inability of U.S. Secret Service personnel to dictate terms was a breakthrough.

How does this compare historically when Rome’s pro-consuls served in the provinces, when Genghis Khan’s hordes swamped the steppe, when the Ottoman soldiers entered Constantinople? There may have been complaints and unhappiness on part of the locals, but there was no report, no reparation, and certainly no punishment of the troops.

The United States has brought new empowerment to nations around the globe. If one looks at one century of U.S. influence on the world, and asks: are countries better off? The answer must be yes. America has strengthened the power of the individual, the ability to state one’s case, to be heard, and to receive a remedy for injustice. In our research at Georgetown University’s business school, we call this ‘curative business’ where old unfairness and inequality gets fixed. What a glorious achievement!

Greeks must be proud every time their standard bearer leads all the other flag carriers into the Olympic stadium in commemoration of Greece having brought the games to the world. So will the U.S. be perennially proud for having propelled mankind up to the plateau of self-determination, actualization, assortment, and the pursuit of happiness. Now that’s much more important than the personal failures of a few men.

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