

BOOKS

SO THE WORLD MAY KNOW

The photographer, as artist, seeks not only to capture the world: to depict it, but also to freeze an instant of life to make it last and above all to give it meaning. The photographer arranges the world in each frame. His job consists of constantly overseeing, of being a full-time observer, trained to select the decisive moment when life organizes itself, ready to capture the instant when the world becomes intelligible. The photographer takes years to prepare himself, he errs and tries again, he searches. Suddenly one day, he finds himself in the exact place and time, but if he is not lucky, this is worthless. The slightest variation of light, unexpected movement or poor placement can destroy the aesthetic, but if he knows how to use these to his advantage, he can even refine it. The photographer is an ally of fate. The thousandth of a second that passes between the harmonious image perceived by the eye and the shot set off by the shutter determines a vision of the world.

Photograph on the cover: **Yankee Patrol at La Chorrera.** One of the thirty seven thousand active members of the proud U.S. army that invaded Panama at dawn on December 20, 1989, walks down the middle of the street. He looks slightly down toward the left. Behind him, unfocused figures of other soldiers in camouflage uniform follow him. In the background, blurry silhouettes can be made

out of almost spectral civilians who watch them. The soldier's expression seems to hover between distrust and irritation. His hands firmly grasp the machine gun ready to fire. Against whom? He moves downhearted. He walks slowly as if measuring his steps. His gaze extends beyond the picture, searching for something, someone who threatens him. Is he afraid? Ashamed? It is impossible to decipher him with certainty. In any case, as the Mexican photographer Héctor García said at the presentation of *Que el Mundo lo Sepa* (May the World Know It), his attitude denotes "a state of mind that is not the supposed morality of an army conscious of the justice of its actions and its cause".

Behind a photograph, a real event is in effect captured, a happening that suggests a reading within its context. This reading is in no way unanimous, the same for each reader. All readings put a whole system of references into play: the viewer's political convictions, his information, his experience. There is no innocent, ingenuous, natural reading. Nevertheless, the real fact of war invalidates any analysis, it has an impact at first sight and it provokes reactions that touch even the most divergent group of readers in the same way. The photographer who captures the instant of agony, indiscriminate destruction, or violent death on his film, gives his images a predominant meaning: **horror.** An almost universally shared reading that appeals more to sentiment than treason. Already in the 1960s the enormous coverage given to the Vietnam war in newspapers and on television mobilized public opinion against it. To prevent similar effects, the U.S. government prevented media access during the first hours of the invasion of Panama: neither television cameras nor photographers, not even their own journalists were allowed to enter.

Photograph on page 36: **El Chorrillo General Defense Quarters.** A desolate, Dantesque space void of human presence. In the foreground a pile of rubble appears: scorched sheets of metal, twisted iron rods, walls collapsed as a result of the explosion of some of the 417 bombs dropped by the F-117 Stealth bombers during the first fourteen hours of the invasion. In

the background towards the right a fifteen story building remains standing with gaping holes from artillery strikes and the charred remains of fire in the paneless windows. **Here a strange craft was put into use that penetrated walls with its fiery tongue, melting furniture, consuming machines and converting human bodies into ashes but without damaging constructions.** The magnitude of the event is overwhelming. From any conceivable angle, the photograph would show almost the same, a vision of apocalypse. Reality overflows into all shots. The maximum achievement of the most modern bellicose technology of the world anticipates hell.

After three days of ground transport and of dodging road blocks of U.S. soldiers on highways, the Mexican photographer Luis Humberto González, who has worked for international magazines such as *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and his companion, reporter Carlos Fernández Vega, arrived in Panama City. Although they were not in time to witness the "lightning" invasion, they managed to cover for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, the military actions against resistance battalions, the smoldering ruins of the General Defense Quarters at

El Chorrillo, the prepotent attitude of U.S. troops and the disorder and devastation in this small Central American country after December 20. As a result of this journalistic effort, a book was published, entitled *Que el Mundo lo Sepa*, which offers a different version of the same tragedy. Its images are an invaluable testimony to what happened in Panama, while at the same time it is an evident refutation of the point of view of the invasion given by the major international news agencies. In its images, U.S. soldiers are not seen sharing candy and smiles, but rather bullets against resistance battalions; welcome ceremonies for the "marines" are not seen but rather solitary graffiti that say: "Yankee go home" or "Gringo go home"; nor are support meetings for Guillermo Endara shown, but rather the concentrations of those left homeless in Balboa college.

Photograph on page 53: **Endara "Ratified" as President by the Electoral Tribunal.** Guillermo Endara stands, looking upward as if searching the heavens for the words that he utters. His right hand rests softly on the presidential sash. The historical image of the ultimate politician is summarized in the gesture that eternalizes him. Endara's expression is solemn

May The World Know It Que El Mundo Lo Sepa



Luis Humberto González

and eloquent, that of the politician who has achieved his ultimate dream. However, his pose has something artificial, something so well known. It is a pose that seems overacted, that has been practised so many times in front of the mirror that it turns out to be a caricature of itself. Endara is ratified as "Sovereign President" by an electoral tribunal under strict observation. He finally assumes the office after being sworn in on a U.S. military base and thanks to the support of a foreign army.

The timeliness and the sharp eye with which Luis Humberto González captured a part of recent Latin America history has converted **Que el Mundo lo Sepa** not only into a book of 72 pages, 59 photographs and a bilingual (English and Spanish) chronology, but also into a living memory of the horrors of war and into a graphic allegation of the injustice of the U.S. cause.

Que el Mundo lo Sepa
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Jorge Arturo Borja