

It is a rare thing to vote on, peace.

Or at least it's a rare thing to vote on directly; usually, elections are for candidates that are more or less likely to pursue peace. Peace is merely implicit, subtle shading in the background, a question of what if and then what, by turns ominous and hopeful. Peace seems too big, too consequential to be put to a vote, like putting God on trial.

But yesterday, without much fanfare in North American media, Colombians voted—directly, shockingly—against peace.

The Colombian people—or at least the sparse 37% of them who turned out to vote—rejected a peace deal signed by the leftist rebel group FARC and the Colombian government.

And so there is no official end to a six-decade struggle that has displaced five million people and killed upwards of 220,000 more. Conflict continues in Colombia. The dream of a Western Hemisphere without wars is deferred another day.

This whole thing is so shocking—the ravaging conflict that's made Colombia the country with the most number of internally displaced people after Syria, the peace deal after years of negotiation between mortal enemies, the intrigue and geopolitics, the rejection of a deal that polls had shown passing by a wide margin—that it seems to take a page from some twisted version of Colombia's famed literature of magical realism. The improbable becomes magically, terribly real.

I have neither the space nor the knowledge to explain here the entire history of the conflict—for that, refer to a history text, a professor, or a Colombian. Know that it is a complex and violent one, intricately tied (even still) to the United States, its Cold War Era policies, and drugs. (The War on Communism has given way to—or been consumed by, morphed into, spawned, as some Hydra growing new, bellicose heads—the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism and the War on Obesity and the War on Poverty, and all the rest. (This is an interesting prepositional usage, declaring “war *on*”, rather than “war *against*”; it implies a certain, vague (and certainly vague) all-encompassing tremendousness—*on* as in “top of”, as in “not off”. The war is never off.))

Colombia has long been our closest ally in Latin America, both through its own volition and as the result of coercion. A September 10th New York Times investigative piece brilliantly highlights some of the most recent cooperation between the two countries, under the administration of previous Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, allowing right-wing paramilitary warlords and drug-runners drastically reduced sentences in the United States—in large part, some critics say, because the murderous paramilitary groups took part in fighting the “evils of Communism” embodied in the FARC.

The winners yesterday were again those on the far right, including the previous president Uribe, who was a vocal opponent of the agreement. Ironically, the FARC and the Colombian government—the groups whose conflict was in question—found themselves in the same boat, both deeply disappointed by Sunday’s results. It’s back to the negotiation table in Havana for both parties as uncertainty reigns again.

The only thing that the United States news media could think to compare the result to was the Brexit vote this June as Britain voted to leave the European Union. While, sadly, I understand how this metaphor may be one of the more effective ways to convey to a United States audience just how shocking and significant the vote was, these are not the same thing at all. One is about leaving an economic consortium; the other is about laying down machine guns, establishing peace, and sending five million people home. To compare the two is to equate money to human life, economics to existence.

It’s a shame that we in the United States, as an (un)informed citizenry, know and care a great deal more about Great Britain than we do about our American neighbors in Colombia. This is a particular shame given how much the U.S. has done to Colombia as a country; it’s a whole lot more than we’ve done to the UK, although we were borne from them.

But, then again, there are a whole lot of shames in the world, and the shame of ignorance or apathy isn’t near the top of the list.

I think it more of a shame, in a world of violence, to reject peace for war when the option is given. The rhetoric of the campaign against the peace deal was that it didn’t punish harshly enough the FARC rebels. In this instance, “No justice, no peace” is a vindictive cry.

If we pay attention perhaps there is a lesson here for the United States and its own upcoming election: The “no” vote on peace won by just half a percentage point, countering all predictions that “yes” would win handily. This is no Brexit, but paired with Brexit and the surprise success of the far-right in elections across the globe, it is proven: shock is the new norm. It’s all about who shows up on election day. Peace, that most full and fleeting of things, was just a few breaths—a few bodies putting envelopes in the ballot box—away.

Now who knows how many more breaths will be lost before it can be found again.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/world/americas/colombia-cocaine-human-rights.html? r=0>