

Explaining Variation in Colombian Counter-insurgency Strategy, 1982-2002

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For most of the second half of the 20th century Colombia has been plagued by internal violence. While many armed groups have come and gone, the current three-way contest between left-wing insurgents (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army [ELN]), right-wing paramilitaries (United Self-defense Groups of Colombia [AUC]), and government forces is among the most violent and dynamic in recent memory. The Colombian government's new offensive against FARC (and to a lesser extent the *paras*) has been surprisingly successful, beating back many rebel gains made in the late 1990s. But the Colombian counter-insurgency strategy was not always characterized by such an offensive, military oriented approach. This paper is a preliminary investigation into the variation across time of the Colombian government's responses to the armed groups within its borders. I present an overview of counter-insurgency theory and practices in other conflicts and then trace Colombian counter-insurgency strategy over time. Generally I find evidence of learning over time with considerable variation in approaches from one presidential administration to the next. I also find that the government has become more firmly committed to military, rather than political, solution.

1.0 Counter-insurgency Strategy

At a very basic level, the key to understanding counter-insurgency is through the lens of revolutionary or insurgency warfare itself. The most basic precept unifying the various strands of revolutionary warfare is the idea that political—not military—victory is the ultimate goal. Much the same is true for counter-insurgency. Traditional conventional warfare emphasizes overwhelming

fire power and has relied heavily on armor and long-range weaponry (either artillery or airpower) since WWI. Conversely, most insurgency warfare is characterized by small, mobile units who generally avoid direct confrontation with the stronger (and better equipped) state actors. Ivan Arreguin-Toft (2001) suggests that weaker actors win by employing strategies which prolong the conflict, similar to a rope-a-dope strategy whereby the insurgents win by not losing. They engage in hit-and-run tactics, often retreating to the jungle or countryside after surprising their opponents. Of particular importance is the insurgents' relationship with the civilian population. Civilians provide much needed intelligence, shelter, food, and ultimately the political support necessary to take over the government. Severing the link between insurgents and their civilian supporters is a key task of counter-insurgency (Thompson 1966).

Modern day counter-insurgency strategy is largely derived from the French experience in Algeria and Indochina (but prior to the wars of independence fought there in the 1950s and 1960s), as well as the British experience in Malaya. US military experience with counter-insurgency primarily occurred during the 1920s and 1930s in the Caribbean and Central America leading to the development of the Marine's Small Wars Manual (1940). (For an excellent treatment of the US Army's difficulty incorporating counter-insurgency techniques see Krepinevich 1986). Most simply, counter-insurgency (COIN) strategies emphasize limited firepower and countering the ability of the rebels to "swim like fish" in a Maoist sea. Bulloch (1996) notes that there are both attrition and maneuver oriented COIN strategies. Attrition examples include Saddam

Hussein's response to the Marsh Arabs and Kurds and, to a lesser extent, US Army actions in Vietnam. Attrition strategies typically focus on the physical elimination of the insurgent force and often countenance significant civilian casualties as well. In contrast, Bulloch describes maneuver strategies in the following manner: "Insurgent cohesion is identified and attacked by applying concentrated yet *discrete* force against critical weaknesses. Surprise, tempo, and simultaneity are used to overwhelm and unhinge the insurgent" (1996: 249, italics mine).

1.1. Counter-insurgency Tactics

In campaigns since the those in Malaya and Algeria these COIN strategies have manifested themselves in a variety of ways. At minimum there is a basic distinction between search-and-destroy and clear-and-hold methods. The differences in these approaches is relatively similar to the attrition vs. maneuver dichotomy above (it is also found in comparing US Army and US Marine tactics in Vietnam). Search-and-destroy methods emphasize physical destruction of the enemy. Clear-and-hold tactics place more emphasis on preventing insurgents from making use of the civilian population by clearing an area of rebel influence and maintaining a military presence in each "cleared" village. The government forces can then rely on villagers to provide them intelligence regarding the insurgents. Search-and-destroy tactics tend to focus on the military manifestation of the insurgency while clear-and-hold efforts look to eliminate its political base.

A similar dichotomy exists regarding the degree to which one should emphasize military options versus those that focus on “hearts and minds.” While the two are not mutually exclusive in theory, budget constraints often force a choice between the relative amount of resources dedicated to one or the other. Hearts and minds operations often include (re)building of infrastructure (roads, schools, hospitals), provision of food and clean drinking water, lifting of language or religious restrictions, and poverty reduction/employment programs. Each of these responses is designed to give civilians incentives to maintain their allegiance to the government (or whomever is countering the insurgency), thus preventing tacit cooperation with the rebels. As noted by Thompson, severing this link between the rebels and civilians is key; without the civilian support network (often cultivated in small towns and villages), rebels are deprived of both the information and materiel they need to survive.

Somewhere in-between a strong military response and the inducements provided through hearts and minds strategies are a host of repressive policies. These often take the form of emergency measures and include arbitrary detentions (similar to a suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus*), increased police search powers, non-jury trials (including those with anonymous judges), limiting or suspension of speech and press rights, and curfews. Additional forms of collective repression like demolition of houses and other property are also possible options.

Many state armies have a difficult time adjusting from traditional warfare described above to the highly mobile, small-arms dominated world of counter-

insurgency. Poor training, lack of equipment, inadequate intelligence, and over-reliance on armor and static defenses create innumerable opportunities for insurgents to engage in their preferred hit-and-run style war. Today there are also strong pressures on states to eschew the attrition model described above and avoid indiscriminate killings of civilians as part of an effort to eliminate the insurgents. The combination of international pressure and poor battlefield performance often gives rise to pressure for “irregular” military units that engage the insurgents on their own terms. State officials believe they can avoid the brunt of international condemnation by denying any formal relationship with the paramilitaries, while providing training, materiel, or other forms of assistance. But maintaining control while simultaneously denying it is a very fine line to walk. Many states have considerable difficulty reigning in the *paras* or death squads once they’ve opened Pandora’s Box. That these irregular armies often succeed where government forces fail makes them all the more difficult to demobilize. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Peru all are all experienced dilemma; Colombia’s experience is dealt with in more detail below.

2.0 Colombian Counter-insurgency

In many ways what is surprising about researching the Colombian government’s response to the armed groups within the state is how sparse the information on government actions is. Most accounts tend to focus on the adaptation or capability of the left-wing rebels. When discussion does turn to the government, attention turns to the its relationship with the paramilitary organizations. Human rights organizations document government abuses but

are less skilled at attributing those violations to an overall strategy or detailing changes in military operations and planning. What follows is an initial effort to describe how Colombian counter-insurgency strategy varied through the 1980s and 1990s. I proceed chronologically with each section emphasizing the approaches to the peace process, paramilitaries, and military deployments.

2.1 Betancur (1982-1986) and Barco (1986-1990).

After a relative lull in guerilla activity in the 1970s, the Colombian government did not aggressively counter the increased guerilla activity in the 1980s. The threat was generally construed as being that of bandits and criminals attacking property and targeting large landholders, not a potential revolutionary threat to the state. Broadly speaking “political” solutions were pursued through the 1980s; there was little if any commitment to countering and defeating the insurgency via official military means. Having just been through the survived the Turbay administration’s pursuit of the rebels (especially M-19) via “Narco death squads,” the decade began with the more conciliatory government of Betancur (Ruiz 2001).

The year 1982 is significant both for the inauguration of the Betancur administration and for the FARC 7th conference which took place that year. At those meetings FARC reversed its previous position and began actively exploiting the drug trade, primarily through “revolutionary taxes” (Rabasa and Chalk 2001). In the long run this obviously had dramatic implications for FARC’s finances and capabilities. However, the real windfall did not occur until after the dismantling of the Medellín and Cali drug cartels in the mid-1990s (Rabasa and

Chalk 2001). In the early 1980s, however, such gains were yet to be made, and the Betancur government was interested in a negotiated peace. Betancur's trifecta of amnesty, political reforms (including broadening participation), and regional economic development assistance would be offered by more than one subsequent administration. He also aggressively pursued drug traffickers (and their death squads), especially after the assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara (Ruiz 2001).

The immediate payoff of Betancur's strategy was a ceasefire beginning in 1984 signed by M-19, FARC and the EPL (Popular Liberation Army). Betancur offered amnesty to most insurgents, and many accepted (Ruiz 2001). FARC in fact began participating in the parliamentary process through its *Union Patriótica* (UP) party, which I will return to below. M-19, on the other hand broke the ceasefire after a scant 10 months by raiding the Palace of Justice. Subsequent clashes with state authorities left 100 dead, including many top M-19 leaders. This effectively spelled the end of Betancur's peace process, though FARC and EPL continued to abide by the terms of the ceasefire and participate in elections.

Virgilio Barco, Betancur's successor, continued the broad policy of pursuing a political (read: non-military) solution, though the terms under which he was willing to negotiate were less conciliatory. Fundamentally, however, he remained committed to Betancur's vision of a "political" solution to the insurgent problem. While he did address two issues which Betancur left off the table (including the question of disarmament), he maintained that the government should not offer

fundamental social and political reforms as part of the negotiating process. Ultimately, Barco's peace initiatives were unsuccessful (Chernick 1999).

The most important development during the Barco administration was the right-wing terror campaign against FARC's parliamentary wing, the UP. By the 1990 elections over 800 UP candidates or elected officials had been assassinated by paramilitaries, including two presidential candidates. The degree of government complicity/support for these operations is not clear. Armed "self-defense" groups were legal under a 1960s law, but were outlawed in 1989. Many authors, however, make a distinction between the rural self-defense units, the paramilitaries (with the implicit assumption of state support), the *sicarios* (the youth assassination squads generally associated with the cartels), and the Narco death squads (directly in the employ of the cartels). The latter two were generally regarded as criminals, while the former had some legal protection.

The cartels were essentially involved in their own war against both the government and leftist rebels who were thought to be considerable threats by the large land owners. Barco responded with force after Narco death squads assassinated Liberal party presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan (Ruiz 2001), arresting more than 11000 people. The cartels—especially Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel—responded with a campaign of terror. The death squads continued to attack leftist politicians, but now also state agents and elements of the press. Bert Ruiz concludes, "Under Barco the breakdown of law and order was utter" (2001: 172).

Regardless of the actors ultimately responsible for the assassination campaign, there was little if any government military action against *any* of the armed groups within Colombia. Barco's government pursued negotiations with the leftist insurgents, but not the right-wing paramilitaries. Those organizations did, however, lose their legal sanction in 1989 (the Narco death squads were always subject to criminal sanction, however rarely applied). But this only served to increase the number and power of the *paras* as they became completely independent of any state control (Cubides 2001).

On the whole, I argue that it would be a mistake to see the assassination campaign as part of a formally coordinated, government-led counter-insurgency strategy. It is more likely that the government was engaging in counter-insurgency by omission, allowing the paramilitaries (mostly affiliated with the cartels at this point) to fight their "dirty war" for them. The vision of multiple armed groups causing violence to spiral out of control suggests the lack of any coordinated counter-insurgency campaign, especially given the threat the Narco death squads posed to the government. Human Rights Watch (1994) reported that, "Throughout Colombia, extra-legal forces guerrillas, paramilitaries, social cleansing squads, militias and gangs have carved out territories that they rule with minimal government interference, whether because government agents fear intervening, are inefficient, or are corrupt." The government failed to effectively pursue either the military or political course in countering the armed groups within Colombia.

Gaviria (1990-1994)

In the wake of two failed peace processes in the 1980s, Gaviria was able to secure the demobilization of M-19 and several smaller rebel groups by 1992. While Gaviria pursued negotiations with M-19, he moved militarily against FARC who had steadfastly refused to consider the government's preconditions to negotiation.

By this point the threat from FARC had increased, largely as a result of their exploitation of the drug trade. By 1990 levels of violence in Colombia had increased dramatically; the assassination campaign against the UP, bombings and assassinations sponsored by the drug cartels, and rebel activity all combined to generate a homicide rate without parallel in Latin America. Possibly as a result, Gaviria pursued a more comprehensive (or at least multi-faceted) strategy than his predecessors. He combined an extensive peace process, military action, and a slate of repressive measures in an effort to stem the many violences within Colombia. Still lacking was any firm commitment to rural economic development which would have been the core of a hearts-and-minds strategy.

The key to Gaviria's approach was the calling of a Constituent Assembly. The Assembly convened to write a new constitution in February 1991 and finished in July. The convening of the assembly and writing of the constitution were done as part of the negotiated demobilization of the M-19 and EPL rebel groups. The new constitution promised a more open political system, greater decentralization, and also prohibited the extradition of native born Colombians.

Concomitant with these institutional reforms, was the integration of several insurgent groups into the political process. The new constitution addressed many of their demands for reform and provided them an opportunity for participation within the parliamentary system.

In addition to this negotiated peace process, Gaviria also pursued other armed groups though with less conciliatory tactics. Human Rights Watch documented the suspension of innumerable civil liberties including, including many associated with due process procedures. Several of these restrictions were directed as much at cartel members as insurgents as Gaviria attempted to dismantle the increasingly violent cartels. Pablo Escobar did eventually negotiate a surrender with Gaviria's government; he later escaped, declared war on the government, and was subsequently killed by government agents on information provided by the rival Cali cartel.

Along with these repressive measures, Gaviria exercised a number of military options. Most significantly, he made a major move against the FARC stronghold in La Uribe, Meta in May 1992. The following year, Gaviria announced a significant increase in military personnel (Chernick 1999). It's not immediately clear that the military efforts against FARC were successful; subsequent events indicated that they were able to maintain more than adequate operational strength. Meanwhile, the paramilitary groups were still active with different variants cooperating with the state and the drug cartels.

The campaign against the cartels, however, eventually led to the decline of centralized processing and distribution of coca in Colombia. This occurred in

conjunction with concerted defoliation and crop substitution campaigns in Peru and Bolivia (Marcella 2001). (As described below the collapse of the cartels was far from a unambiguous benefit to the counter-insurgency campaign in Colombia.) Thus, at the conclusion of the Gaviria administration four rebel groups had been disarmed and were participating in the electoral process and the drug cartels were significantly weakened. The stage was well set for his successor to further resolve the problem of Colombia's armed groups.

2.3 Samper (1994-1998)

Unfortunately, that successor was Ernesto Samper, whose narrow victory in 1994 was heavily subsidized by the Cali cartel. In some countries this could have been confined to a difficult, but purely domestic, scandal. But not in Colombia. Samper's connections to the drug cartels cost Colombia hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid when the Clinton administration decertified it as making progress in the war on drugs in both 1996 and 1997. The domestic political crisis and loss of significant sums of foreign aid paralyzed the Samper administration at the exact time that FARC and the *paras* were making significant advances in terms of both membership and capabilities. Faced with severe budget and political constraints, very few of the possible counter-insurgency strategies were available to the Samper administration.

The most significant change in counter-insurgency strategy in this period was Samper's nearly complete inability to continue Gaviria's success in demobilizing the rebel groups. Nearly all momentum was lost. Instead the self-defense groups united under the umbrella of the AUC creating a national

paramilitary organization where there had previously been a fragmented regional structure. Similarly, FARC leapt ahead in terms of strategy and capabilities crushing government forces in several direct encounters.

By the mid-1990s, FARC had developed sufficient strength to evolve from its guerrilla, hit-and-run tactics to what many call “mobile warfare” (Chernick 2001; Marks 2002). These tactics included multiple well armed brigades which were able to coordinate sophisticated frontal attacks on government installations. Through the 1980s, FARC made money off the drug trade through “revolutionary” taxes and protection payments. But after the collapse of the cartels, FARC became more formally involved in the processing and cultivation of coca (which had moved from Peru and Bolivia into Colombia) and derived substantially higher profits. With such augmented finances FARC was able purchase more advanced weaponry and pay salaries to each members, both of which greatly facilitated recruitment (Rabasa and Chalk 2001; Ruiz 2001; Marks 2002). Marks (2002) notes that FARC’s strength gains were not a result of mass dissatisfaction translating into insurgent support. Rather, they were able to buy their way to new levels of troop strength and armament.

With increased membership and improved firepower, FARC began directly confronting government troops in a series of spectacular attacks (Spencer 1997). The first major defeat of government troops was in 1996 at Las Delicias, Putumayo. Unlike previous campaigns, FARC’s explicit goal was now to completely eliminate government presence from key territories, the rebel equivalent of clear-and-hold. Included in this strategy was an effort to isolate

Bogotá from the surrounding areas. FARC troops stormed garrisons, set ambushes (as in February 1998 in El Billar), and otherwise devastated the fighting strength of the Colombian army (Marks 2002).

The military's inability to respond was the result of a number of competing factors. Strategically speaking, it was still expecting and preparing for FARC's guerrilla style warfare which avoided direct military confrontation with government troops. FARC's adoption of mobile warfare (including the ability to launch multiple, simultaneous attacks) required a similar strategic shift from the government forces. Unfortunately for the Army, such changes were not quick in coming. The Army continued to use static defenses and was repeatedly caught in well laid FARC ambushes. Nor did most units receive the necessary training. The Colombian army was dominated by conscripts, most of whom serve only a year. Under assault by increasingly lethal FARC forces, the Colombian Army lacked both the strategic orientation and personnel necessary to counter the new insurgent offensives (Marks 2002).

One policy that Samper did pursue was the reestablishment of government sponsored self-defense groups. Under the name of "*Convivir*" (living together), the Colombian government provided some small arms and training support to self-defense groups (Chernick 1999). This was a reversal of the government's official policy which had outlawed the paramilitaries in 1989. But the *Convivir* units were ultimately ineffective. They were "dismantled" before the end of Samper's term amidst suspicions that they were transforming into the more insidious paramilitary death squads (Spencer 2001); in all likelihood they

were co-opted by the AUC. Here again, the Colombian government was not able to maintain sufficient control of state agents in the hinterlands to effectively prosecute a counter-insurgency campaign that even vaguely abided by modern human rights standards (Rabasa and Chalk 2001). Colombia's difficulty establishing effective and humane civilian defense groups contrasts sharply with Peru's experience with the *rondas campesinas* and may explain why conflict is so continues in Colombia (Bejarano 1999).

These circumstances gave fresh life to the more independent paramilitary organizations. As FARC attacks increased, new self-defense groups began to emerge as a means of providing security and also retribution. Several of the larger groups came together to form the United Self-defense Groups of Colombia (AUC) in 1997 (Spencer 2001). With the government seemingly unable to provide security in the rural areas, many civilians turned to the *paras* for protection. As before, it is not clear the degree to which the government cooperated with or supported the *paras*. What is clear is that Samper's administration lacked a coherent response to the fast increasing violence in Colombia.

2.4 Pastrana (1998-2002)

Following the serious government defeats (including a spectacular attack at Miraflores in 1998) under Samper, Pastrana's strategies ran the gamut from most conciliatory to most hard-line. He began his administration with two key policy changes. The two new paths moved in rather different directions. Ultimately, the military course won out. But despite recertification by the United

States and the development of Plan Colombia, the new approaches to the armed groups did not result in significantly less violence at the end of the Pastrana administration. They did, however, pave the way for new approaches by Alvaro Uribe.

2.4.1 La Zona de Despeje

The first major change to Colombia's counter-insurgency strategy came in the form of a large demilitarized zone. Shortly after being elected, Pastrana went to meet with FARC leaders in an attempt to restart the peace process. As part of the terms of the negotiations and after a devastating defeat at Miraflores, Pastrana granted FARC a sizeable area free of all government agents. FARC insisted on such a zone largely as a result of its previous experience with demobilization and popular politics with the UP in the 1980s. While the establishment of the *despeje*, as it is known, did jump start the peace talks, it did not eliminate the violence.

Located near the center of the country, the *despeje* is approximately the size of Switzerland. It is very sparsely populated, however. That said, it gave FARC access corridors to Panama, Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and the Amazon basin, not to mention Bogotá. It came to serve as a major staging ground for FARC training and operations (Marcella 2001; Marks 2002). It also provides an opportunity for FARC to operate in a quasi-governmental manner providing social services, security, etc. In this manner it is a window into what a FARC-run Colombia might look like (Ruiz 2001).

2.4.2 Military Reforms

While FARC did return to the negotiating table, the progress on the peace talks was not able to outstrip the substantial strategic advantage that the *despeje* afforded FARC. But the government simultaneously embarked on a significant overhaul of the armed forces—especially the army. The primary goal was to make it more mobile and responsive. Among the larger changes were making five divisions currently in garrison mode available for deployment and the establishment of a rapid reaction force out of the existing COIN units (Marks 2002). Many of the key reforms were a result of changes in the military leadership; in fact, under Pastrana, two generals with significant COIN experience came to be in charge of both the armed forces and army. There was now a general belief that the political will for a more military-oriented solution was beginning to emerge. This view solidified when the peace talks collapsed in 2002.

Generals Mora and Tapias engineered a campaign that forced FARC to abandon its large unit assaults and return to smaller hit-and-run attacks (Ruiz 2001). The beginning of the government's resurgence came in July 1999. FARC units struck first at Gutiérrez (just south of Bogotá) and then at Puerto Lleras as part of a nationwide campaign. The Colombian military responded quickly with ground troops and close air support. Bert Ruiz concludes that, "The Colombian armed forces' use of air power was the difference between victory and defeat in the four day offensive" (2001: 140). Of particular importance was real time intelligence of rebel positions by the US Southern Command. While the

Colombian air force dominated the skies, the defeat convinced FARC to acquire surface-to-air weaponry which it is believed to have done in the following years.

2.4.3 Plan Colombia

The highlight of Pastrana's administration was the reestablishment of good relations with the United States. This shift brought about a windfall of much needed foreign aid. In 1999 the Clinton administration extended 289 million dollars in counter-narcotics aid. Among the provisions were a 950-man elite counter-narcotics battalion, a new CIA listening post, and additional support for the National Police. The following year, Pastrana coordinated the new Plan Colombia with the United States. Gabriel Marcella notes that Plan Colombia was "not a military strategy" (2001, 2003). Instead it linked "economic development and security to the peace process" (Marcella 2001). The original strategy was to seriously weaken FARC by eliminating its drug revenues. This would reduce FARC attacks and therefore diminish the need for the paramilitaries as well. Money was provided for defoliation, alternate crop production, military counter-narcotics assistance, and funds for economic development in an attempt eliminate FARC's coca financial base. But the Plan was not wholly successful. It naïvely believed that counter-narcotics actions were sufficient to counter the insurgency. By 2002, Colombian and American officials had changed their minds.

Meanwhile, Pastrana continued negotiating with FARC. Numerous concessions were extended, including repeatedly granting the *despeje*. None of these offerings were reciprocated by the insurgents, however. After more than

two years of negotiating, Pastrana had nothing to show for his efforts. Making use of his newly expanded and equipped military, he ordered the retaking of the *despeje* in early 2002 (Marcella 2003).

This amounted to a fundamental shift in Colombian counter-insurgency policy. The peace process was dead; there was now a concerted effort to defeat FARC militarily—something thought to be impossible just four years previously. This combined with the post-September 11th realization in the United States that large ungoverned spaces are significant security threats. The realities of the war on terror made the Bush administration more willing to engage in support of counter-insurgency operations than its predecessors, thus alleviating many of the budget constraints that prevented full implementation of previous counter-insurgency strategies. These factors all combined to give Alvaro Uribe a good deal to work with when he took office in August 2002.

2.5 Uribe (2002-present)

Uribe's counter-insurgency strategy, the Democratic Security Policy, is a combination of previously suggested reforms and several significant innovations. Its underlying premise is that territorial control by the Government is key to eliminating the armed groups in Colombia. Uribe came to government with a newly energized army which now emphasized offensive actions and FARC forces finally caught on their heels. His approach continues the shift toward a more military, security oriented approach with the intent of eliminating the insurgent threat.

Chief among Uribe's reforms are additional means of improving the Army's performance and mobility and facilitating territorial control by state agents. Uribe has sought to professionalize the military by rolling back conscription, extending the tours of senior officers, and eliminating the forward combat exemption for those with a high-school education (Marcella 2003). Uribe has also established a *carabineros* system which emphasizes local civilian participation as a means of improving territorial control (Marcella 2003). These efforts in the periphery combined with campaigns like Operation Orion in the cities which sought to eradicate FARC influence and recruiting structures among the urban poor (Marcella 2003). Additional emergency powers have also been established in "conflict zones" including the ability to arrest and detain civilians without a warrant (Jawahar 2004).

Finally, Uribe has begun something like a peace-process with the paramilitaries (the AUC in particular). In August 2003 Uribe proposed the first draft of the Alternative Penalty Law. His proposal offers sentences other than prison for paramilitary members who are found guilty as part of a judicial process. A revised draft was submitted in 2004 and has not yet passed. Nevertheless, it indicates a shift in strategy from all previous administrations: offering of concessions to the "criminal" paramilitaries while locking the FARC insurgents out of the peace process. This amounts to simplifying the strategic scenario: "reducing the number of non-state armed actors by carrying out negotiations with the ELN and AUC, while simultaneously engaging in open military confrontation with the FARC" (Pizarro 2003).

Using newly collected data, Restrepo and Spagat (2004) conclude that, in general, the approach is working. Lethal clashes with FARC have increased while killings of civilians have declined. While the government has made significant progress against the *paras* and insurgents (returning their number of attacks to historical averages), it is not yet clear that the Colombian military has the troop strength to permanently establish control throughout the country (Marcella 2003). In addition, there are still significant budget constraints; Colombian voters rejected a referendum in late 2003 to increase taxes to support Uribe's efforts. While a significant strategic shift has taken place, it is not clear that it will be able to be sustained without significant domestic reforms or foreign assistance.

3.0 Conclusions

After multiple iterations of peace processes, sponsorship of paramilitaries, and military campaigns, it appears as though the Colombian government has settled on a military clear-and-hold style approach. Its current emphasis on territorial control, civilian national guards, and paramilitary demobilization indicate a strategy premised on denying FARC the ability to move freely throughout the periphery. What follows are some general conclusions drawn from the last twenty years of Colombian COIN efforts.

While many analysts and politicians acknowledge the importance of rural development efforts as a means of limiting the insurgents recruiting (and financing, as rural poverty drives many to the drug trade), comparatively few funds are directed toward these ends. The Colombian government repeatedly

takes the bait and counters only the physical manifestation of the insurgency—the armed insurgents. Both Bulloch (1996) and Thompson (1966) strongly caution against such short sightedness, emphasizing the need to cut the rebels ties to the citizenry. One can argue, however, that FARC is not dependent on the mass peasantry; instead, they are extremely well financed and can coerce the support they need from the civilian population (Marks 2002). While FARC does not require civilian provision of materiel, they do need a constant supply of troops.

This question of the role of poverty in the recruitment of insurgents or extremists is a charged one. There are multiple findings in the civil war (Collier and Hoeffler 1999; Fearon and Laitin 2003) and terrorism literature (Krueger and Maleckova 2002) that deny the importance of “grievances” like poverty. I am generally sympathetic to such arguments. But given the complex way in which coca cultivation and possessing in sustaining FARC, there are good arguments for targeting funds for rural development in addition to sponsoring alternative crops as an addition to Colombian COIN strategy. This dynamic further suggests that we better explore the difference in the origins of civil violence and the mechanisms by which it is sustained.

Each administration had a different approach with regard to negotiating with the insurgents. The Barco/Gaviria approach was clearly most successful with regard to demobilization. But it is also unlikely to be repeated, especially with FARC. Given their experience with the UP, and the electoral failings of M-19 and the EPL, there is little chance FARC would consider their position

improved under parliamentary competition. If the government is able to successfully demobilize the AUC, the EPL (with its smaller force structure) may be willing to enter the political fold. But more creativity may be needed to get FARC back to the table.

Throughout the period, there was no consistent approach to the right-wing armed groups, whether they be Narco death squads, sicarios, self-defense groups, etc. Various governments alternated between legalization, toleration, and attempts at elimination. Unfortunately, the attempts at elimination were never as successful as the attempts at legalization. Thus the number of armed *paras* increases throughout the period. Colombia's inability to exercise state control through the country means that it fast loses control of these newly armed state agents (Bejarano 1999). Unlike Peru which had remarkable success with its *rondas campesinas*, Colombia was never able to effectively recruit civilians as loyal state agents or keep them that way once armed. Uribe's current negotiations are a novel approach—the first to recognize the *paras* as political actors and not criminals. But so long as the AUC enjoy success in fighting FARC and the ELN, it is unlikely they will be totally demobilized.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to FARC's evolution over the last two decades. Much of the political science literature focuses on the material incentives individuals have for participating in a revolution. These incentives clearly play a role in Colombia. But FARC's financial success also has more specific military implications. While revenues derived from the drug trade after the collapse of the cartels do facilitate recruitment (they are able to pay soldiers

more), they also allow for a fundamental transformation of the organization's political goals. FARC is now in a position to eliminate government influence by countering the government itself. The ability to purchase sophisticated arms and communications equipment doesn't just improve FARC battlefield performance; it changes the battles that FARC chooses to fight. I suggest that greater attention should be paid to what seem to be mundane military details of many of these conflicts. In studying wars, it may prove instructive to analyze the fighting.