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Persistent Engagement in Colombia

Moyar/Pagan/Griego

JSOU

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Hector Pagan
Wil R. Griego
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On the cover. Members of the Colombian Decisive Action Force search for FARC fighters in the vicinity of the base at La Macarena. Photo used by permission of Newscom.

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Foreword

In this monograph, Dr. Mark Moyar, Brigadier General (retired) Hector Pagan, and Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Wil R. Griego analyze United States Special Operations Forces' (USSOF) assistance to Colombia in the context of decades of counterinsurgency and counternarcotics operations. While the case of Colombia is often cited as an exemplar of global Special Operations Forces (SOF) foreign engagement, the details of the engagement, and the reasons for its success, have not previously been addressed in a scholarly publication. This study represents the first comprehensive analysis of the persistent SOF engagement in Colombia. It draws upon the collective wisdom of numerous U.S. and Colombian government personnel, and the authors' own decades of experience in Colombia and other countries where the United States has undertaken prolonged partnership.

The authors attribute the success of SOF engagement in Colombia to the long-term development of human capital in the Colombian security forces. As trainers, educators, and advisors, U.S. special operators helped nurture Colombian officers and NCOs who would rise through the ranks into key positions of leadership. The huge improvements in Colombian counterinsurgency and counternarcotics performance were the result, first and foremost, of dedicated and skilled Colombian leaders.

After chronicling the history of SOF engagement and Colombia's security environment, the authors provide lengthy lists of lessons learned and recommendations. They emphasize the need to be selective in engagement, and identify critical criteria for choosing partners, such as leadership, institutional missions, operational requirements, and human rights records. They advocate long-term and persistent engagement, with special emphasis on training and education. In their estimation, SOF should seek to confer advanced skills to the greatest extent possible, which is a matter of special relevance today as the U.S. government contemplates how to use SOF in capacity building going forward. Because the Colombian security forces have made great advances at lower organizational levels, the authors provide advice on how SOF can and should contribute to development at higher levels. In addition, the authors draw upon the experiences of Colombia's

counterinsurgency and counternarcotics campaigns to make recommendations for future strategy and tactics.

As North Atlantic Treaty Organization participation in Afghanistan draws down and policymakers seek to bolster partnerships around the world, USSOF are increasingly deployed to assist foreign security forces. This monograph provides insights that should be valuable to any special operators involved in capacity-building endeavors. It also demonstrates once more the value of SOF in advancing U.S. security objectives through a global SOF network.

Kenneth H. Poole, Ed.D.
Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

About the Authors

Dr. Mark Moyar is a Senior Fellow at the Joint Special Operations University. He served previously as a professor at the U.S. Marine Corps University, where he held the Kim T. Adamson Chair of Insurgency and Terrorism. He has also taught at Texas A&M University, the Ohio State University, Cambridge University, and the Foreign Service Institute. He holds a B.A. *summa cum laude* from Harvard and a Ph.D. from Cambridge.

A frequent visitor to Afghanistan and other foreign conflict zones, Dr. Moyar has served as a consultant to the senior leadership of the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan. He has lectured at numerous military and civilian educational institutions, in the United States and abroad. A historian by training, he also writes and speaks frequently on subjects of contemporary national security as well as the relationship between past and present security issues. He is a member of the Hoover Institution Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict.

Dr. Moyar's articles have appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, and many other publications. His 2009 book, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (Yale University Press, 2009) ranks among the most original and influential theoretical works on counterinsurgency, presenting an alternative approach to counterinsurgency that is focused on empowering the right people rather than on implementing the right methods. The National Press Club hosted a day-long conference to launch the book, with General David Petraeus as keynote speaker. The NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan commissioned a Dari translation of *A Question of Command* for use in training Afghanistan's security forces, and the book is also widely read among the U.S. armed forces and civilian agencies.

Dr. Moyar's book *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) is one of the most acclaimed and controversial histories of the past decade, having been the subject of an academic conference at Williams College, several academic forums, and the book *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (Routledge, 2010). It was selected for the U.S. Marine Corps Professional Reading List. In 2007, Bison Books published a new edition of Dr. Moyar's first book, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*, which included a new chapter offering lessons for the contemporary practitioner. This book was selected for the USSOCOM Commander's Professional Reading List.

Dr. Moyar's most recent scholarly publication is "The Era of American Hegemony, 1989-2005," which constitutes the final chapter in the four-volume *Cambridge History of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). He recently finished writing a book on building partner capacity, which will be published in 2015.

Brigadier General (retired) Hector E. Pagan was born in Manhattan, New York, and was raised in Puerto Rico. General Pagan served in Panama with the 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces (SF) Group (Airborne), 1988-1990, as an A-Detachment commander and Battalion S1. He served in Operation Just Cause and deployed to El Salvador in 1989. From 1990 to 1992, he served in SF Branch, Total Army Personnel Command as a future readiness officer and captains assignments officer. He attended the Army Command and General Staff Course and then served as the executive officer, 1st Bn., 7th SF Group (Airborne). From 1994-1995, he served in the U.S. Army Special Operations Command as the chief, officer management, office of the deputy chief of staff for personnel.

He returned to the 7th SF Group (Airborne) in 1995, where he served as group operations officer, executive officer and deputy commander. From 1998-2000, General Pagan commanded the 2nd Battalion, 1st SF Group (Airborne) at Fort Lewis, Washington. After his tour with the 1st SF Group, he was assigned to the Special Operations Command South, Naval Station

Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, where he served as the director of operations, J3, from 2000 to 2002. Upon completion of the U.S. Army War College in 2003, He took command of the 5th SF Group (Airborne) in Baghdad, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He led the 5th SF Group (Airborne) in combat as the commander of the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Arabian Peninsula for two combat tours in 2003 and 2004.

In 2005, General Pagan served as the special assistant to the commander, United States Special Operations Command, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. In 2006, he assumed duties as the deputy director of the Operations Support Group in the Center for Special Operations in the U.S. Special Operations Command. He served as the deputy commander, U.S. Army Special Operations Command in November 2006 and in May 2007 assumed duties as deputy commander, U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, until July, 2008. General Pagan commanded the Special Operations Command South from July 2008 to September 2010 where he was in charge of Special Operations Forces deployments in Latin America.

He is a graduate of the Infantry Officer Basic and Advanced Courses, the Combined Arms and Services Staff School, the Special Forces Detachment Officer Qualification Course, the Army Command and General Staff Course, the Joint Forces Staff College and the Army War College. He earned a master's degree in management from Troy State University and a master's degree in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College. He is now retired and living in Apollo Beach, Florida. He works as a defense consultant and as a subject matter expert in the Spanish news media.

General Pagan's awards and decorations include the Defense Superior Service Medal with one bronze oak leaf cluster, Legion of Merit with one bronze oak leaf cluster, Bronze Star Medal with one bronze oak leaf cluster, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Army Meritorious Service Medal with one silver oak leaf and one bronze oak leaf cluster, Army Commendation Medal with one bronze oak leaf cluster, Army and Joint Service Achievement Medals, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal with bronze star device, Joint Meritorious Unit Award (2nd oak leaf cluster), Navy Meritorious Unit Commendation, National Defense Medal, and a Colombian Armed Forces Distinguished Service Medal.

Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Wil R. Griego was born and raised in New Mexico. Lieutenant Colonel Griego served in Panama with the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry regiment, 1993-1996. He then served with the 3rd Battalion, 7th SF Group (Airborne), 1997-2002, as an A-Detachment commander, Battalion S5, Company Executive Officer, and Battalion Assistant Operations Officer. From 2002-2003, he attended the Mexican Command and General Staff College followed by completion of the U.S Army Command and General Staff Course in 2004. From 2004-2005 he served as the J3 Iraqi Special Operations Forces Plans officer, Special Operations Command Central and Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Arabian Peninsula in Baghdad, Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was responsible overseeing the establishment of the Iraqi Special Forces Brigade.

Lieutenant Colonel Griego returned to the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in 2005, where he served as company commander and battalion operations officer. He led Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces (SF) Group (Airborne), in combat as the commander in Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom. From 2007-2009 Lieutenant Colonel served as a Senior Field Team Advisor, for the Joint U.S Advisor Planning Assistance Training Team, Cali, Colombia. After his tour with the Security Assistance Training Management Office, he was assigned to the Special Operations Command Washington Office, Pentagon, where he served as the Army SOF Liaison Officer in 2009.

From 2010-2012 Lieutenant Colonel served as the Special Operations Command Liaison Officer to the Colombian Joint Special Operations Command (CCOES) where he advised the CCOES on the execution of special operations against High Value Targets, Bogota, Colombia. He also served as the Senior SOF Representative, providing U.S. Chief of Mission and U.S. Country Team expertise and understanding of how SOF contributes to U.S. National Security Interests and Mission Strategic Plans.

In 2012 he served as the Special Operations Forces Liaison Element-Colombia, Bogota, Colombia synchronizing Special Operations Command South's strategic deployment of USSOF in support of Colombia's Counter Insurgency Plan "Sword of Honor" to defeat the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC).

In 2013, Lieutenant Colonel Griego served as the Project Manager for the Regional Center for Advanced Security Studies (CREAS) Bogota, Colombia. Responsible for developing and managing the CREAS; a multinational, interagency educational venue designed to strengthen relationships, build trust and foster cooperation among regional allies in the Western Hemisphere.

Lieutenant Colonel Griego is a graduate of the Infantry Advanced Course, the Combined Arms and Services Staff School, the Special Forces Detachment Officer Qualification Course, and the Army Command and General Staff Course.

Introduction

From its inception, the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has enshrined capacity building in its doctrine as the central pillar of the "indirect approach," which is the essential complement to direct action by U.S. Special Operations Forces (USSOF). USSOCOM Publication 1 calls upon Special Operations Forces (SOF) to train, advise, and assist partner-nation institutions in order to build their capacity, which in turn will reduce U.S. visibility, risk, and cost. It emphasizes "the need for persistence, patience, and continuity of effort" in capacity building.[1]

In recent years, USSOF engagement in Colombia has been hailed widely as an exemplar of effective capacity building activities, and as proof that persistent engagement is critical to success.[2] The duration and continuity of engagement have indeed been critical to successful capacity building, in Colombia and elsewhere. But they are only one part of the story, representing the quantitative side of SOF engagement. Much less attention has been devoted to the qualitative side of USSOF involvement in Colombia, which is no less important, although it is considerably less obvious and cannot be measured numerically. Taking the qualitative side for granted would be a major mistake, for history shows that providing large quantities of assistance over long periods of time has been no guarantor of success.

This monograph demonstrates that a combination of high quantity and high quality USSOF engagement bolstered Colombian capacity, and that it did so primarily by promoting the development of Colombia's human capital. Decades of exposure to USSOF personnel, together with training and educational programs established by USSOF, gave Colombian security professionals newfound technical expertise, which enabled them to make use of advanced technologies and techniques provided by the United States. These capacity building activities also implanted in rising generations of Colombian military and governmental personnel certain cultural attributes that made them more effective in their jobs. It should be added that other elements of the U.S. Government also contributed heavily to capacity building, which serves as reminder that SOF are well-advised to coordinate their capacity-building activities with those of other U.S. organizations.

U.S. decisions on which Colombians to engage, how to engage them, and what to teach them accounted for many of the capacity-building successes, as well as a considerable number of the failures. Consequently, a detailed analysis of those decisions yields rich insights on the qualitative side of capacity building, which should be valuable to both historians of the Colombian experience and practitioners seeking to build capacity in other countries today. At the same time, many of the key decisions were made by Colombians, independently of any foreigners, which has its own implications for capacity building.

This study begins with a brief discussion of Colombia's historical background, in order to set the stage for the events that follow. The main body is organized chronologically, with historical narration and analysis drawing out the causes of change over time. The concluding sections consist of a list of lessons learned and a set of recommendations for future conflicts.

Figure 1. Map of Colombia. Central Intelligence Agency map.

1. Historical Background

Situated to the immediate southeast of the Darien isthmus, Colombia is the northernmost country of South America and the only one fronting both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Its land mass, the size of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana combined, lies in the tropics and is bisected by the equator. The Andean mountains, which run in spurs from the southwest to the northeast, provide the elevation that affords much of the population reprieve from the tropical heat.

The Cordillera Oriental, the eastern spur of the Andean range, divides Colombia into two distinct geographic and social domains. Thirty-three percent of Colombia's national territory and 95 percent of its population lie within the cordillera or to its west. To the east lie a wilderness of savannah and jungle and a smattering of small human settlements whose residents claim that the government in Bogota has largely ignored them for most of its existence.

As European civilization took root in western Colombia, the dearth of governmental presence east of the mountains attracted bandits, runaways, and others seeking to escape civilized society and its arms of law enforcement. In the twentieth century, the weakly-governed wilderness attracted politically-minded insurgent groups, who found it well-suited to the establishment of paramilitary bases and mobilization of population. The government oftentimes left those insurgent groups alone so long as they restricted their activities to the savannah and jungle. Only when they headed westward into the mountains was the government certain to perk up and sound the trumpets of war.

Insurgency plagued Colombia throughout the second half of the twentieth century. *La Violencia*, a political and religious civil war that claimed over 200,000 lives between 1948 and 1958, saw the emergence of the insurgent groups that would dominate the political landscape for the remainder of the century and the first years of the ensuing one. Foremost among them were the Soviet-backed Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Cuban-backed National Liberation Army (ELN). Like most of the Communist insurgencies that erupted in the third world during the Cold War, these two groups were led by intellectuals and populated by poor farmers.

La Violencia resulted ultimately in a compromise that put a centrist democratic government in power, to the dismay of the radical leftists of the FARC and ELN. In the 1960s and 1970s, the leftist groups steered clear of the populous western sections of the country and were, in general, not very active anywhere. The national political elites lost interest in them, content to leave them be on the other side of the mountains.[3]

U.S. assistance to Colombia's military began in the 1940s, when the first classes of Colombian military officers attended U.S. schools of professional military education. U.S. assistance to the Colombian military soared in the early 1950s with the deployment of a Colombian combat battalion to the Korean War. In preparation for the initial deployment, Colombian soldiers received American training and education, and the Colombian military leadership reorganized its units along the lines of American units. Once in theater, the Colombian forces fought under the umbrella of larger U.S. units, which familiarized them with U.S. doctrine, tactics, organization, and military culture. Unlike some partner nations of more recent conflicts, the Colombian military did not go to Korea for purely symbolic purposes, but was instead inserted into the thick of the fighting. The participation of a Colombian Battalion in the Battle of Old Baldy, in which more than 20 percent of the battalion became casualties, assumed a prominent place in the pantheon of the Colombian military. Over the course of the war, 141 Colombians were killed and 556 wounded.[4]

The experience of the Korean War paved the way for long-term partnership between the Colombian and U.S. militaries. Throughout the 1950s, Colombia was the largest recipient of U.S. security assistance in Latin America. Much of this assistance was focused on developing officers through training and education. American advisors helped the Colombian military establish the *Escuela de Lanceros* at Tolemaida, which was modeled on the U.S. Army Ranger School. At some Colombian institutions of training and education, U.S. military personnel served as full-time course designers and instructors. In the 1960s, the United States enrolled Colombian military and police personnel at the School of the Americas in Panama and gave the Colombian military advanced technologies such as helicopters and communications equipment.[5] USSOF established an initial presence in Colombia during the 1960s, consisting of military trainers, civil affairs personnel, and psychological operations specialists, and they helped create new units.[6] In

1970, the first Colombian Special Forces battalion came into existence, and by the end of the decade the Colombian Special Forces had three battalions.

The drug cartels and narcoinsurgencies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have attracted more attention from U.S. scholars than any other aspect of Colombian national security, because of the magnitude of the insurgent threat and the extent of U.S. involvement. They are also the main focus of this study. But the historical context is crucial to the understanding of U.S. assistance to Colombia, especially the assistance provided by USSOF. Building partner-nation capacity, which has consistently been the U.S. Government's primary mission in Colombia, takes decades to achieve. Thus, any analysis of U.S. assistance must take into consideration the duration and character of U.S. assistance at least several decades in the past.

2. Rise of the Drug Cartels and Narcoinsurgencies

The emergence of narcotics as the dominant threat to Colombia's security began in the second half of the 1970s. The Colombian narcotics industry took off during this period, as the result of its decline elsewhere. Fruitful counternarcotics operations grew in Peru and Bolivia, which received extensive U.S. support, caused a migration of coca cultivation and processing from those countries to southern Colombia. Like most of their criminal predecessors in Colombia, the Colombian drug producers and traffickers concentrated their activities in the sparsely populated spaces where governmental presence was minimal. The leading organizers of the drug trade, however, blossomed in major cities, in the form of large criminal organizations like the Cali Cartel and the Medellin Cartel.

The FARC initially opposed the illicit drug industry, viewing it as a greedy capitalist enterprise on a moral par with most other capitalist enterprises. After observing for some time the massive profits to be made, however, they chose to enter the drug business in order to fund the revolution. Forming partnerships with drug traffickers, the guerrillas provided security to drug producers and traffickers, and in return the FARC received "taxes" from the drug lords. Soon, the FARC had the riches to attract new guerrillas, conduct large-scale military operations, and bribe government officials.[7]

American interest in Colombia surged during the 1980s thanks to the rise of Colombian cocaine shipments northward and the shocking terrorist brutality of drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, head of the Medellin Cartel. The successes of Escobar's mercenaries in wiping out Colombian police units and assassinating leading political figures convinced the Reagan administration that South America's drug traffickers were too strong for the region's civilian law enforcement organizations and their U.S. law enforcement partner agencies. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan passed Presidential National Security Directive 221, which declared illicit drugs a threat to U.S. national security and gave the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) a counternarcotics role of unprecedented size. The administration of George H. W. Bush further increased the military's role in South America by enacting the National

Drug Control Strategy of 1989, which allocated over $1 billion in assistance to military and law enforcement organizations in the Andean region.[8]

In 1989, following new acts of horrific violence in Colombia, President Bush dispatched USSOF elements, to include members of the U.S. Army's 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), to train Colombian military and police forces for operations against the big Colombian cartels. "The rules have changed," Bush announced. "When requested, we will for the first time make available the appropriate resources of America's armed forces."[9] At this same time, U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers, U.S. Navy SEAL teams, and U.S. Marines provided training to U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agents for operations in the Andes. The training included jungle operations, survival skills, first aid, communications, and weapons systems.[10]

In 1992, the Colombian government created the Joint Special Command, also known as Search Bloc, which took charge of armed operations against drug traffickers, hitherto the dominion of the Counternarcotics Police.[11] Over the next two years, Colombian special forces and the Colombian police dismembered the major cartels, with considerable help from the U.S. Special Operations Forces.[12] Drug trafficking thereafter splintered among a large numbers of small players. For the FARC, the destruction of the big cartels spelled higher drug revenues, as they could bargain more easily with small groups and enter new segments of the drug industry.[13]

The relative calm following the destruction of the cartels caused the U.S. and Colombian governments to shift their attention to regional counternarcotics cooperation. The United States reduced its support to the Search Bloc and other elite forces, resulting in a decline in the capabilities of those forces. Several U.S. Special Forces detachments merged to form a counternarcotics operational planning group, as part of a multinational effort to interdict drugs across the Andean Ridge. American Special Forces provided security to U.S. Air Force radar sites, assisted in the tracking of aircraft, and shared information with the Colombian military. They helped Colombian police and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency assemble target packages on drug laboratories.[14]

During this interval, the FARC and the ELN expanded their control over the rural population. By co-opting existing instruments of governance or creating new ones, they established shadow governments of the

sort employed in earlier Maoist insurgencies. They shut down or took over hospitals and schools that the government had built.[15]

In the mid-1990s, as the insurgents showed signs of increasing strength, the Colombian government decided to increase the use of its military in counterinsurgency operations. The Clinton administration, however, did not share the Colombian government's view that the military should assume a leading role in internal security. The American tradition of leaving internal matters to civil law enforcement inclined U.S. policymakers to demand that foreign partners adhere to the same model. The Clinton administration was, moreover, concerned mainly with the drugs that were leaving Colombia for the United States, not guerrillas whose ideology had been dealt a mortal blow with the fall of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the United States concentrated its aid on the Colombian National Police and insisted that it be used for counternarcotics purposes. By 1998, 90 percent of U.S. counternarcotics assistance was going to the Colombian National Police.[16]

Figure 2. Guerrillas from the FARC arrive in Cartagena del Chaira, a small town in the jungle of southeastern Colombia. Photo used by permission of Newscom.

The U.S. Department of State ordered its personnel in the Bogota embassy to make sure that helicopters, weapons, ammunition, and forces underwritten by the United States were employed exclusively for counternarcotics, not counterinsurgency, based on the belief that involvement in the counterinsurgency would drag the United States into a quagmire. In 1997, they insisted that resources provided by the United States and units trained by U.S. personnel be employed only in the areas where drug traffickers were believed to be concentrated, and prohibited their employment in areas where the insurgents reportedly congregated.[17]

Drawing a distinction between counterinsurgency and counternarcotics in Colombia made some sense when the Colombian narcotics industry emerged in the 1970s, but by the 1990s it distorted reality, and led to unwise policies. Insurgents provided protection to drug traffickers, rendering futile all attempts to concentrate resources against one and not the other. In some cases, the insurgents were producing or moving drugs themselves. The prosperity of both groups were mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing. Ambassador David Passage, the Department of State's Director for Andean Affairs, remarked in 2000, "It should have been obvious to anyone not willfully obtuse that the Colombian government was slowly but steadily losing control over its national territory to precisely those criminal elements—the narcotraffickers and drug lords, the FARC and ELN guerrillas, and the paramilitary groups opposing the latter—who were the source of both the drug trafficking and Colombia's deteriorating internal stability."[18]

The Clinton administration and the Colombian government also did not see eye-to-eye on the proper role of the police. The Americans wanted the Colombian police to focus on counternarcotics operations, but the Colombian government chose to employ the police extensively in counterinsurgency. As the Colombians pointed out, a certain amount of police participation in counterinsurgency was inevitable in light of the commingling of insurgents and drug traffickers.

The U.S. strategy of concentrating aid on the Colombian police also suffered from the fact that the police did not provide as much return on the investment of U.S. aid as the military did. For one, they were much more corrupt than the military. For another, they were much less capable of combating the guerrillas, despite extensive U.S. assistance.[19] While U.S. assistance to the police did contribute meaningfully to the improvement of police performance, it proved to be insufficient for the challenges at hand.

The Colombian military certainly could have made good use of additional U.S. assistance in the 1990s. For most of the decade, 80 percent of the 104,000-man army consisted of conscripts, while the other 20 percent were professionals who had volunteered. Conscripts who had not graduated from high school, comprising a slight majority of all the conscripts, were assigned to basic security tasks like guarding roads, bridges, oil pipelines, and electrical infrastructure. Conscripts who held high school diplomas were exempt from positions that could involve them in combat. The 21,000 professionals performed most of the combat missions.[20] The noncommissioned officers

(NCOs) of the Colombian military, like those of most of the militaries outside of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), had less authority and influence than American NCOs. The corporals and sergeants did not take the initiative as Americans of the same rank would.[21]

To combat the rise of the FARC and ELN insurgencies in the 1990s, the Colombian government formed three mobile infantry brigades, the *Brigadas Moviles*, each consisting of four 360-man counterguerrilla battalions. These brigades lacked aircraft and were stationed in remote areas with few roads, so they were mobile only in the sense that they were not tied down to one location. In 1996, the Colombian government expanded the Special Forces to four battalions.[22]

The Colombian government did not have enough police or security forces to combat the insurgents wherever they sought to establish themselves. Local self-defense organizations, a critical element of most successful counterinsurgency campaigns, were off the table, owing to a 1991 peace agreement deal with the insurgent group M-19 in which the Colombian government foreswore armed forces beyond the military and police.[23] Owing to the shortage of competent security forces, the government had to leave large numbers of municipalities to the insurgents without contest. In some municipalities, local elites organized and funded paramilitary organizations to fight against the FARC and ELN, at times with covert assistance from military officers. For many Colombians, the paramilitaries were a legitimate response to guerrilla depredations, and an essential one given the limited resources of the National Police and military. Some of the paramilitary organizations were indeed virtuous self-defense organizations. The paramilitaries would, however, acquire a bad name because a number of them engaged in wanton human rights abuses or entered the illicit narcotics business.

During the 1990s, international human rights groups denounced the Colombian military for supporting paramilitary groups that had been accused of human rights violations against civilians. Many of them argued that the United States should not support the Colombian military because it would facilitate further human rights violations. Human rights organizations spent much more time criticizing government forces and the paramilitaries than the guerrillas, much to the anger of the Colombian military and government, who perceived that many of these human rights groups were led by leftists who preferred the guerrillas to the government for ideological reasons.[24] Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the Americas division

of Human Rights Watch, admitted, "The country is so polarized as a result of this nightmarish internal conflict, and the issue of human rights is so politicized, that there is a tendency to overlook atrocities committed by the forces one may sympathize with."[25] Colombian and U.S. military officers also suspected that the insurgents planted false human rights accusations with these groups in order to undermine Colombian units that were especially effective.

Especially galling to the Colombian government was the willingness of the Clinton administration to accept allegations made by these groups at face value and employ them in making fresh impositions. The United States frequently demanded that the Colombian government punish the alleged perpetrators within the government and disband the paramilitaries, oftentimes without scrutinizing the allegations for their veracity. Although the Colombian military clearly did provide support to the paramilitaries, the extent and nature of the support were often very difficult to prove or disprove. According to diligent U.S. embassy investigations, some of the accusations of military complicity in human rights violations proved to be unfounded, while others were found to contain truth.[26] The Colombian government was, moreover, highly reluctant to turn against paramilitary forces, given that it shared political objectives with the paramilitaries, and given that the weakening of the paramilitaries would benefit insurgents who themselves were serial violators of human rights.

In 1996 and again in 1997, the U.S. Government decertified the Colombian government for aid because of human rights abuses, as well as for the corrupt practices of President Ernesto Samper. The decertification of aid led to the termination of nearly all U.S. assistance to the Colombian military, and some of the assistance to the police. The only U.S. military training that continued consisted of a small amount of training under the Joint Combined Exchange Training program, in which American SOF came to Colombia for short periods of instruction.[27]

These aid cuts could not have come at a worse time from the point of view of the Colombian armed forces. In 1996, the FARC moved from guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare, greatly increasing the danger to both the Colombian armed forces and the Colombian state itself. It formed larger combat units and expanded its logistical apparatus. The transition from guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare was a central tenet of Mao Zedong's revolutionary war theory, upon which the FARC relied heavily in formulating

its strategy. Mao had argued, based on his experiences in the Chinese Civil War, that insurgents could defeat the government decisively only by fielding conventionally organized and equipped military units. Those units, unlike guerrilla units, had the firepower to destroy large enemy units and conquer the major population centers. The FARC did not intend to attack the cities right away, but instead would wear down the police and military forces by attacking them in superior numbers in advantageous terrain.

In April 1996, a FARC ambush destroyed a 49-man Colombian Army convoy that was patrolling the Trans-Andean pipeline near the border with Ecuador. In August, the FARC conducted 22 simultaneous attacks on isolated police and military units. A FARC force of 800 men overran a regular infantry company, the first time the army had sustained such a large defeat. Some Colombians blamed the United States for these setbacks, because of its concentration of aid on the police rather than the military in the interest of counternarcotics. The U.S. Government, however, did not change its aid policy, convinced that the FARC still did not pose a serious threat to the government's survival.[28]

American pressure on the human rights issue intensified with the passage of the Leahy Laws in 1997. Named after its Congressional sponsor, Senator Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, the legislation banned U.S. funding of any foreign military unit for which there existed "credible evidence that such unit has committed gross violations of human rights." The provisions could be waived if the local government were acting to bring perpetrators to justice or if vital U.S. national security interests were at stake, but at the beginning such waivers were not granted in Colombia.[29] Soon after the passage of the Leahy Laws, the Department of State used it to justify withholding large amounts of aid to the Colombian Army.

For many Colombian officers, the Leahy Laws and their vetting procedures were unjust and insulting to their national honor. The top leadership of the Colombian Army found the Leahy Laws so objectionable that for a time it refused to accept any American assistance.[30] Some senior American officials sympathized with the Colombian military's viewpoint, believing that legislation's passage stemmed from unrealistic expectations among U.S. members of Congress. Ambassador David Passage, the Department of State's Director for Andean Affairs, remarked, "It is almost irrational to expect that a country fighting for national survival should be able to quickly or easily achieve the truly prodigious transformation necessary to live up to

accepted norms for human rights and civil liberties. It is also exceedingly difficult for police and military forces to transform themselves into professional and respectable guardians of democratic and constitutional law and order while under hostile fire from guerrilla and paramilitary forces which obey no human rights constraints and show no respect for civil liberties."[31]

Such arguments eventually gained traction with senior officials in the Clinton administration. In 1998, President Clinton issued a waiver for Colombia on the grounds that supporting Colombia was vital for U.S. national security. The waiver prevented sweeping cuts, but some individuals and units were still denied assistance because of human rights violations.[32] Even units without any recent record of violations were banned from receiving assistance because of transgressions many years earlier, when they were composed of entirely different individuals.

Meanwhile, the military situation worsened dramatically in 1998. At the beginning of March, the 52nd battalion of the newly created 3rd Mobile Infantry Brigade attempted to attack the FARC at El Billar but was ambushed and surrounded by a larger FARC force. The insurgents pounded the battalion for three days, killing 62 and capturing 43. It was the FARC's first ever victory over an elite counterguerrilla unit in pitched battle. In August, 500 FARC fighters mauled an army company and a police counternarcotics unit in Miraflores Guaviare. They killed 30 and took another 100 hostage. A FARC force of 1,500 seized Mitú, the capital city of the Vaupés department, in November, after wiping out its police force.[33]

The defeat at El Billar magnified growing concern among Colombians and Americans about the strength of the insurgents. Once a minor nuisance, the FARC was becoming a threat to the survival of the national government. Among the residents of Bogota, Medellin, and Cali arose fears that the insurgency would engulf their cities. To escape the danger, several hundred thousand affluent Colombians went abroad, most of them traveling to the United States on visas.[34]

3. Plan Colombia

The public alarm at the rise of the narcoinsurgents happened to coincide with elections for Colombia's next president. The ineffectiveness of Ernesto Samper's government in handling the insurgents had fueled dissatisfaction with his Liberal Party, to the detriment of its new candidate, Horacio Serpa Uribe. Andres Pastrana of the Conservative Party won the election by a margin of 50.3 percent to 46.6 percent, and took office in August 1998. Pastrana commanded the respect of U.S. diplomats, who anticipated that he would show the competence and integrity that had been lacking in his predecessor. To bolster counternarcotics operations and the effectiveness of the Colombian government more generally, the new administration drafted a new strategy entitled Plan Colombia, and sought large-scale U.S. and European aid to support it.

The deliberations within the U.S. Government over the aid package featured large disagreements concerning spending priorities. U.S. military advisors in Colombia favored inclusion of military aid for combating the insurgents of the FARC and ELN. Some U.S. civilian officials and members of the U.S. Congress, however, strenuously objected, warning that supporting Colombia's counterinsurgency would draw the United States into a quagmire similar to Vietnam. In their opinion, the United States needed to confine its aid to the realm of counternarcotics. Their recommendation ultimately prevailed, and hence counterinsurgency was not included in the plan. But U.S. policymakers did decide to fund increased Colombian military participation in counternarcotics as a central part of Plan Colombia, in belated recognition that the police could not operate in highly insecure areas on their own, even with extensive U.S. aid.[35]

Another debate concerned what types of counternarcotics aid to provide. Some favored focusing on "hard" counternarcotics activities involving coercion or force, like crop eradication and drug interdiction. Others wanted to focus on the "soft" activities of social and economic development, in the belief that poverty drove individuals to participate in the drug trade. In the end, three quarters of U.S. funds went to the "hard" side and one quarter to the "soft" side.[36] The proponents of the "soft" side were placated

with promises that the European Union would provide much of the "soft" assistance, though as it turned out the European Union did not fulfill those promises.[37]

The Pastrana government promulgated Plan Colombia in 1999, vowing to provide $4 billion of Colombian tax money and calling upon international donors to provide another $3.5 billion. In 2000, the U.S. Congress authorized $1.3 billion as the first installment of the U.S. contribution, which by 2005 would reach a total of $4.5 billion.[38] U.S. assistance under Plan Colombia surpassed all other aid packages the United States had ever provided to Latin American countries, and Colombia's annual allocations exceeded those of all other recipient nations except Israel and Egypt.

The large size of the U.S. monetary contribution to Plan Colombia and the publicity it received created the impression that Plan Colombia dramatically increased the resources available to Colombia's armed forces. That impression in turn led to the view that Plan Colombia was the main reason for the ensuing security improvements. In actuality, U.S. aid comprised at most seven percent of Colombia's defense budget.[39] It was not decisive in its magnitude, nor, as shall be seen below, was it the overriding reason for the security improvements at the turn of the century.

It is fair to say, though, that Plan Colombia had powerful effects. For one, it was concentrated on elite civil and military capabilities that were to play a disproportionately large role in intelligence and operations. For another, it was accompanied by an increase in the U.S. military advisory presence, from 160 military personnel to 400 military personnel plus 400 contractors.[40] Plan Colombia also permitted the provision of advanced technologies and other resources to Colombian military forces, resources that the United States had previously denied.

Plan Colombia provided counternarcotics funds to the Colombian Army's Aviation Brigade.[41] It also funded the creation of new military counternarcotics units, including Counternarcotics Battalions that possessed as many helicopters as U.S. air assault battalions, something that no other Colombian army units had ever come close to possessing. For the first of these battalions, Plan Colombia funds paid for 18 Bell UH-1N Twin Hueys that had previously belonged to the Canadian armed forces. Built in the 1970s, these Hueys were not highly coveted aircraft; the Mexican military had previously been offered these helicopters and turned them down. Nevertheless, they represented a momentous upgrade in capability for Colombian forces.

Each Counternarcotics Battalions was manned with roughly 800 troops, each of whom had been vetted for past human rights violations. In April 1999, 65 members of the U.S. 7th SFG(A) began training the first of the Counternarcotics Battalions. This battalion commenced counternarcotics operations eight months later. In 2000, the 7th SFG(A) began training two more Counternarcotics Battalions, one of which became operational in December 2000, and the other in May 2001. To give these battalions mobility comparable to that of the first battalion, the United States provided an additional 15 Twin Hueys, 13 UH-60 Black Hawks, and 25 Huey IIs. The Colombian military established a brigade headquarters to command the three Counternarcotics Battalions, along with a support battalion. All told, the 7th SFG(A) provided training to nearly 2,300 troops of the Counternarcotics Brigade, with light infantry operations, airmobile operations, and staff activities the principal areas of training focus.

Aviation accounted for a large fraction of the total U.S. aid to Colombia's military. Department of State emergency funding paid for helicopters for the Counternarcotics Battalions, and DOD funding paid for aviation infrastructure and fuel. U.S. funds paid for radar equipment that facilitated air traffic control and detection of airborne smuggling, and for various other forms of ground and airborne intelligence collection.[42] Airmen from AFSOC advised the Colombian Air Force in gunship and search-and-rescue operations.[43] The number of qualified Colombian pilots did not keep pace with the growth of the helicopter fleet, so pilots from other Latin American countries and the United States flew some of the aircraft, usually under contract with the Office of Aviation of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.[44] "Without U.S. contract flights and fuel support, the Colombians couldn't operate," remarked one American.[45]

Plan Colombia also included additional resources for the police. Plan Colombia enlarged the antinarcotics commandos of the police, the *Comandos Jungla*, also known as the *Junglas*, from one to four companies, and provided for paramilitary training of these commandos by U.S. Special Forces personnel.[46] State INL's Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS), the Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training (OPDAT), the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), the U.S. Marshals Service, and the U.S. Military Group (MILGP) all participated in capacity building for Colombian law enforcement under Plan Colombia.[47] U.S. funds also provided the police with two Black Hawks, 12

Huey IIs, and a number of Ayres S2R T-65 Thrush and North American Rockwell OV-10 Bronco aircraft.[48]

The authors of Plan Colombia recognized the need to bolster Colombia's judicial system in order to reduce the number of insurgent suspects who escaped imprisonment through bribery or judicial ineptitude. Using Plan Colombia funds, the Department of Justice provided training to more than 40,000 Colombian judges, prosecutors, police investigators, and forensic experts.[49] The U.S. Department of the Treasury and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also supported programs on judicial reform. Training courses emphasized personal integrity, in an effort to combat rampant bribery of law enforcement officials by drug traffickers.[50]

During the first years of Plan Colombia, official U.S. policy stated that the United States was not involved in counterinsurgency.[51] U.S.-funded units targeted "the narco-traffickers, those individuals and organizations that are involved in the cultivation of coca or opium poppy and the subsequent production and transportation of cocaine and heroin to the US."[52] The aviation assets provided by Plan Colombia were supposed to be used only for counternarcotics, not for counterinsurgency.[53] Official policy prohibited U.S. personnel from giving the Colombian government intelligence information obtained as part of counternarcotics operations if the information pertained to insurgent groups.[54]

The attempt to separate counternarcotics from counterinsurgency exasperated Americans and Colombians on the ground, who could see for themselves that the drug traffickers and insurgents were inseparable. Major General Gary D. Speer, while serving as acting United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) commander in 2002, remarked, "For the operator, it is very difficult to distinguish between the FARC as a drug trafficking organization and the FARC as a terrorist organization and the FARC as an insurgent organization. In my opinion, we have tried to impose artificial boundaries where one no longer exists."[55]

U.S. policy, however, also contained certain caveats that conceded the impossibility of separating counternarcotics from counterinsurgency. Department of State officials stated that because the Colombian police lacked the strength to operate alone in FARC dominated areas, the United States had to support the Colombian military in those areas as a protective shield. Therefore, the officials acknowledged, the Colombian military forces that were receiving U.S. support were certain come into contact with

the insurgents and engage them in combat.[56] U.S. policymakers permitted American-funded Colombian military forces to fight armed groups if they met them in "unplanned" contacts, a term sufficiently vague that commanders could use it to justify most any use of counternarcotics forces against the insurgents. Most encounters with the enemy were to some extent unplanned except for those few where the enemy's location was known precisely in advance.

In light of these realities, the Plan Colombia aid to Colombian military forces inevitably contributed to counterinsurgency. From the start, many ostensible "counternarcotics" operations harmed not only drug traffickers but also insurgents and those who were both insurgents and drug traffickers. The bolstering of Colombia's counternarcotics forces also benefited counterinsurgency in the longer term by building forces, infrastructure, and relationships that could be used more expansively against the FARC when U.S. policy changed after 11 September 2001.

In early 2001, the counternarcotics brigade moved aggressively into the Putumayo and Caqueta departments, the epicenters of coca production. With the benefit of air mobility and close air support, they inflicted casualties on guerrilla forces and disrupted the coca harvesting and processing that the guerrillas were protecting. Between December 2000 and April 2002, the counternarcotics brigade destroyed nearly 900 drug labs and detained 119 suspected drug traffickers. Troops from the brigade provided the security for police to reenter municipalities and conduct eradication operations, and served as ground security during aerial spraying of 59,000 hectares of coca to prevent the enemy from shooting down the spray aircraft. "The Counternarcotics Brigade is the best-trained and equipped unit in the Colombian Army," Major General Gary D. Speer, the acting USSOUTHCOM commander, said in April 2002. Because of the Counternarcotics Battalions, he continued, "no longer does the FARC own the military initiative in Putumayo and Caqueta Departments, but avoids head-on engagements against the Colombian military."[57]

The strictures against the use of American funds for counterinsurgency nonetheless had some very real and, from the point of view of Colombia's counterinsurgency, very harmful consequences. Large amounts of valuable intelligence information had to be withheld from the Colombians because of those strictures.[58] American-funded aircraft were often prevented from assisting Colombian security forces that were in contact with the FARC or

other insurgent groups, even when their employment could plainly spell the difference between life and death. An especially poignant example occurred in July 2000 during a guerrilla attack on a small Colombian police outpost. The 14 policemen held 300 attackers at bay for more than a day while radioing for help. Three Black Hawk helicopters sat at a base only 20 minutes away by air, but did not receive permission to assist the outpost because the United States had provided the helicopters for counternarcotics purposes whereas the policemen were under attack by insurgents. The policemen ran out of ammunition after 27 hours, at which point they surrendered to the guerrillas, who promptly executed them.[59]

The U.S. distinction between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency also led to disunity of effort, resulting in inefficiency and waste. As part of Plan Colombia, the United States provided $500 million in counternarcotics funds to convince farmers to switch from coca to alternative crops, but did not coordinate this campaign with the government's broader security strategy, since counterinsurgency dominated that strategy. Consequently, the alternative crop program was stymied by interference from the FARC, who used their military power to prevent farmers from making the switch.[60] When the government killed crops with aerial spraying but did not provide security or governance on the ground, as also occurred in many cases, they fueled anger among farmers who saw the government merely as an impediment to their livelihood.[61]

Plan Colombia coincided with some critical changes in the performance of the Colombian government, changes that were not caused by the increase in U.S. assistance but were critical to proper utilization of that assistance. Plan Colombia happened to occur at the same time as these internal changes because they were inspired by the same events, the government's military defeats from 1996 to 1998. One of these changes was the election of the new president, which reflected popular dissatisfaction with the government's poor showing against the insurgents. Another was turnover in senior Colombian military personnel, which came about much more easily than normal because of the crisis atmosphere of 1998. The newly elected Pastrana fired many of the top leaders of the armed forces and replaced them with highly reputed generals, foremost among them General Jorge Enrique Mora Rangel. These senior leaders, in turn, relieved many of the mid-level commanders in the Colombian army for ineffectiveness and filled their positions with more

competent individuals, which led to a sharp increase in combat performance and a decrease in human rights violations.[62]

This change in leadership stimulated a rise in self-confidence and independent thinking within the Colombian officer corps. Historically, Colombian officers had accepted the military doctrine that their U.S. advisors provided, which was almost invariably based on the U.S. military's own doctrine. Like most military organizations outside of Europe and its English-speaking former colonies, traditional Colombian military culture emphasized unquestioning obedience and strict adherence to established procedures. The training and education that the United States provided to the military of Colombia, and many other nations, transformed officers by teaching them to think for themselves and adhere less rigidly to doctrine.

Ironically, the rise in independent thinking among Colombians led to a loss of Colombian confidence in certain American doctrines and ideas. Heretofore, American advisors had informed the Colombians that they were fighting a guerrilla war and hence needed to disperse their forces. Issued at a time of general disinterest in irregular warfare within the U.S. military, this advice was influenced less by formal doctrine than by an interpretation of the Vietnam War that attributed U.S. failure to employment of conventional warfare against guerrilla opponents.[63] This historical interpretation was, in fact, inaccurate, as it underestimated the enemy's conventional capabilities and failed to appreciate that reliance on counterguerrilla warfare in the war's latter stages actually facilitated North Vietnam's ultimate victory.[64]

As American officers had learned in the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, Colombian officers learned from their experiences that counterguerrilla tactics were appropriate when enemy forces operated as guerrillas, but were a liability when the enemy shifted to positional warfare, as those tactics left small units vulnerable to large enemy forces and inhibited the coordinated movement of large numbers of soldiers. "We got caught in the counterguerrilla mode when the enemy shifted to the mobile mode," said one Colombian general. The Americans, he asserted, were wrong to separate guerrilla war from conventional war. "There is only one conflict, going from guerrilla war through mobile war to conventional war. It's all integrated. And we must be able to fight at all levels."[65]

In late 1998, bolstered by fresh leadership and fresh doctrine, the Colombian military began to turn the tide. Employing the tactics and equipment of conventional warfare, they blunted nearly every FARC offensive operation

from that point onward.[66] The Colombians moved large numbers of troops to engage large insurgent forces without heavy reliance on U.S. aviation assets, another indicator of the limited character of Plan Colombia. In 2000, the Colombian military had only 17 helicopters to cover an area more than six times as large as South Vietnam, much of which was beyond the range of existing air bases.[67] In another impressive show of flexibility and creativity, the Colombian army assembled armored truck companies to provide the necessary mobility.[68]

The Colombian military could locate and engage insurgent conventional forces because the assembly of large forces was highly visible from the air and on the ground, and the insurgents could not simply melt away after an attack when they had approximately 1,000 men on hand. When the insurgents operated in dispersed fashion, on the other hand, the Colombian military was rarely able to locate them. When they did find insurgents operating in small groups, they were seldom able to compel them to stand and fight, as the enemy could readily slip away and blend into the population or flee into the jungle. For most of the Pastrana presidency, the insurgents enjoyed a massive sanctuary in southern Colombia, as Pastrana granted them a "demilitarized zone" the size of Switzerland in response to their demand for such a zone as a prerequisite for peace negotiations.

Thwarting insurgency generally requires establishing a permanent security presence in the populous areas, in order to obstruct the insurgency's access to manpower, food, information, and other resources that provide the guerrillas sustenance, as well as to maintain an environment safe enough for governance and development initiatives to proceed. In the early years of Plan Colombia, the Colombian security forces had too few troops to maintain such a presence in much of the country. Between 1999 and 2001, the Colombian military increased its combat troop by 30,000 through the replacement of that many conscripts with professional soldiers, but it still was not enough to permit broad population security.[69]

The FARC's last string of big conventional attacks took place in the summer of 2001, culminating in August with a FARC assault on Barrancominas. A longtime FARC logistical and drug trafficking hub, Barrancominas had come into the possession of the Colombian Army in February. When the FARC massed to retake the area, the Colombian military brought superior firepower to bear and inflicted crippling losses on them. As a consequence of that defeat, the FARC leadership decided to discontinue big conventional

attacks and limit armed operations to guerrilla warfare and terrorism. Stepping back from the final phase of Mao's revolutionary warfare, it reverted to the earlier phases and sought to rebuild for future military escalation.

Henceforth, the FARC conducted asymmetrical attacks on soft targets, such as businesses, electrical infrastructure, and police stations, aiming in particular at the major cities. The Irish Republican Army provided training to the FARC on urban terrorism, a fact that came to global attention when the Colombian government apprehended three IRA trainers in Bogota. The FARC also targeted national elites for kidnapping and assassination. Their most notable success was the kidnapping of presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, whom they held in the Colombian jungle for six years. In the minds of the FARC strategists, these actions would weaken the government's will and force it to meet their demands at the negotiating table.[70]

4. The Uribe Era

The FARC's intensification of urban terrorism and guerrilla warfare in 2001 had the opposite of the intended effect. Rather than cowing the government and its supporters, it fueled their anger at the FARC. The combination of terrorist violence and intransigence at the negotiating table demonstrated the insincerity of FARC public professions about a desire for a negotiated peace. When Colombians went to the ballot box on 20 May 2002, they delivered a landslide victory to the candidate who expressed the greatest determination to vanquish the FARC by force, Álvaro Uribe.

For Uribe, the war against the FARC was very personal. In 1983, the FARC had killed his father during an attempted kidnapping, an event that set him on a lifelong mission to destroy the FARC. As president, Uribe demonstrated great energy and disregard for his personal safety, traveling routinely to the most dangerous and remote regions of the country. He filled his cabinet with individuals who showed the same resolve. When military commanders lacked conviction or were otherwise ineffective, he ousted them.

Uribe also brought a new strategic philosophy to the war. During the 20 years prior to his presidency, the conventional wisdom among Colombia's political and intellectual elites held that the violence was the result of political, social, and economic problems such as oligarchical rule and poverty. Therefore, the government had spent heavily on political reforms and social and economic development. Yet the violence had only increased. Uribe argued that instead of pursuing governance and development to achieve security, Colombia needed to pursue security first to pave the way for governance and development. Uribe declared,

> Security will not be the only concern of the National Government, but it will be the first. Economic development and job opportunities are equally dependent on the existence of a security environment that encourages investment, business, public spending on behalf of the community that is the objective of permanent depredation by the armed illegal groups.[71]

When Uribe took power, the police had no presence in 184 municipalities and a minimal presence in another 370.[72] To give the security forces more

personnel for securing these municipalities, Uribe imposed a "democratic security tax" on the wealthy and corporations, raising $800 million. In addition to funding a major force expansion, the tax demonstrated a newfound seriousness that increased the willingness of the United States to provide further assistance, especially in the realm of counterinsurgency.[73]

Uribe's ability to obtain additional aid from the United States also benefited from a subsiding of U.S. Congressional opposition to assistance beyond counternarcotics, resulting from heightened U.S. vigilance about foreign threats following the 9/11 attacks. In November 2002, President George W. Bush signed an executive order on Colombia that authorized the use of U.S. funds for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism as well as counternarcotics.[74] Thereafter, Colombian military units supported by the United States could operate in areas that had previously been off limits to forces not engaged in what the Americans had defined as counternarcotics.[75] In 2003, the U.S. Congress agreed to a Bush administration request for aid to the Colombian military to protect the Cano-Limon oil against insurgent attacks.[76] The following year, the Bush administration convinced Congress to accept an increase in the U.S. force cap from 400 DOD personnel and 400 contractors to 800 DOD personnel and 600 contractors.[77]

With Colombia's new tax revenues and the additional U.S. aid, Uribe created nine new mobile army brigades, on top of the existing eight. He increased the size of Colombia's police from 113,600 to 160,000. In addition, he created several new security forces that would prove invaluable in countering the FARC and ELN insurgents. Invoking an obscure law from the 1940s that allowed conscripts to serve part of their time at home, Uribe formed 40-man platoons of *soldados campesinos* (peasant soldiers). Trained as regulars and led by a professional NCO, they served for two years in their home towns. By 2006, Colombia had 598 platoons of *soldados campesinos* with 21,598 members. Uribe also raised 6,720 *carabineros*, policemen who received counter-guerrilla training and military weapons. Organized into 120-man squadrons, the *carabineros* were more mobile and better armed than the *soldados campesinos*.[78]

Uribe contended that transparency and accountability were critical to the expansion of the security forces. He insisted that the forces respect human rights, and he increased the amount of human rights training and education administered to army officers and soldiers. In light of ongoing reports of security forces murdering civilians, petty criminals, and drug dealers

and reporting them as guerrillas to demonstrate success to superiors, Uribe ordered numerous investigations into suspicious fatalities. Because of these investigations, the government arrested 247 members of the army and a handful from the police and civil agencies. Several prominent officers were compelled to resign as a result of the investigations. The commander of the army, General Mario Montoya, was himself forced out in 2008 for maintaining a command climate that put inordinate emphasis on inflicting casualties and turned a blind eye to unwarranted killings.[79]

This intensive scrutiny did not sit very well with military personnel who already believed that the civil authorities too often second-guessed them. It promoted a climate of risk aversion, with combat commanders reluctant to pursue the enemy for fear that they would be investigated if their troops killed anyone, even in combat. If their troops were found to have killed someone without adequate cause, they would face criminal prosecution. Uribe mitigated this dissatisfaction to some degree by his resoluteness in fighting the insurgents and his willingness to remove poor leaders from the military.

Uribe divided security into three lines of operation: offensive operations, area security operations, and special operations. The offensive operations were handled by military forces that moved rapidly by truck or helicopter. These units patrolled and attacked enemy forces to seize the military initiative and clear populous areas of insurgents. Lines of communication served as the targets of numerous offensive operations. The army positioned several new "high-mountain" battalions on the Andean mountains to disrupt insurgent movement on the mountain corridors that linked the insurgent base areas to the country's major population concentrations. Road security units used armored trucks to break up FARC roadblocks and secure the roads.

For area security, Uribe sent policemen to occupy all of the municipalities that had been abandoned. The police restored law and order in the towns, while keeping watch for suspicious activity. The *soldados campesinos* functioned as security shields for the police, conducting patrols and responding to police requests for help. Further out from the town centers were the *carabineros*, who secured peripheral areas and responded to larger enemy initiatives. In the event of very large enemy attacks, regular military units were summoned as reinforcements. Such attacks were rare, however, since the FARC continued to avoid conventional warfare. This multi-tiered security system proved highly effective in depriving the insurgents of their access to the population.[80]

Uribe created and led the interministerial *Centro de Coordinación de Acción Integral* (Coordination Center for Integrated Action, or CCAI), which coordinated civil governance and development in areas that had recently been cleared by the military. Since the 1950s, the central government had sought to orchestrate the introduction or reintroduction of government experts into conflict-ridden areas, but had never met with much success because of lack of emphasis from national and ministerial leaders. Uribe required that the ministries send representatives into these areas to provide services, and did not tolerate procrastination. USAID's Office of Transition Affairs and the U.S. Department of State provided personnel and other types of support to CCAI.[81]

Figure 3. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe gives a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Photo used by permission of Newscom.

CCAI concentrated resources in the department of Meta in southeastern Colombia and three national parks around the Macarena mountain range. Following the clearance of enemy military forces, police conducted crop eradication and then the civil ministries initiated quick-impact development projects. Because of the successes in these areas, they became the model for the rest of the country. In 2009, the Colombian government drafted the *Plan Nacional de Consolidación* (National Consolidation Plan) to apply the same methods elsewhere in the country. The Office of Transitional Initiatives of USAID provided financial and human resources that were critical to the implementation of the plan in those areas where it was concentrated.[82]

Uribe expanded coca eradication programs, both aerial fumigation and manual eradication of crops. The latter became increasingly widespread because farmers had adapted to spraying with ruses that protected their crops, such as planting coca under dense foliage, mixing coca with local crops, planting in national parks, and pruning coca plants after spraying.[83]

Both mobile and static security forces provided the protection required for eradication.

During 2003, Uribe initiated "Plan Patriota," a multiphase security campaign that concentrated security forces on strategically important sections of the country. The first phase, codenamed Libertad I, was intended to break up the guerrilla fronts that encircled Bogota. Libertad I differed from earlier security operations, first and foremost, in its duration. Previous operations had lasted no more than a few weeks, and as a result the guerrillas would sneak away during the operation and then return afterwards. In Libertad I, the military maintained a sustained presence. This campaign also involved greater dispersion of forces and greater intensity of patrolling than its predecessors. The 11,000 soldiers assigned to Libertad I were divided into platoon-size units that relentlessly scoured the entire area surrounding Bogota. When one platoon made contact, others nearby rapidly reinforced it. All told, Libertad I witnessed 197 clashes, resulting in a reported 225 guerrillas killed and 260 captured.[84]

The second phase of Plan Patriota targeted a longstanding FARC base area in southern Colombia. The army entrusted this phase to a joint task force of 17,000 troops, most of whom belonged to the army's mobile brigades. As in Libertad I, the troops dispersed into small units and patrolled intensively for prolonged periods. At first, the FARC stood and fought, but in the face of the Colombian army's persistence, improved small-unit capabilities, and effective use of close air support and aerial resupply,, the insurgents eventually withdrew into remote jungle locations.

Plan Patriota inflicted multiple wounds on the FARC. Casualties were substantial, which the FARC could ill afford at a time when its recruiters were struggling to bring in new manpower and the government was expanding its forces. The loss of staging grounds near Bogota undermined the FARC's ability to conduct terrorist and information operations in the capital, while the loss of the southern base area impeded FARC operations in the South and produced demoralization among fighters forced to sit idly in dense jungle. The FARC leader Manuel Marulanda lamented that it would take four years for the FARC to recover from the damage it had sustained in Plan Patriota.[85]

For the third line of operation, namely special operations, Uribe enjoyed a heightened U.S. interest in Colombian special operations, another consequence of the 9/11 attacks. The United States was more willing than ever before to provide U.S. special operations personnel for capacity building

purposes, and to provide material resources for Colombian SOF. But U.S. military advisors were not on the same page as Uribe when it came to how SOF fit into the larger picture. In the early days of the Uribe administration, U.S. military advisors wanted to concentrate USSOF on the training of a few elite Colombian units in high-value targeting. Through precision strikes on the FARC leadership, they believed, the elite Colombian units could reduce the FARC to the level of low banditry. These Americans considered fixing the whole national army to be out of reach.[86] Uribe, on the other hand, wished to pursue a large counterinsurgency strategy that required hundreds of thousands of competent security forces. Nevertheless, Uribe was willing to accept additional U.S. assistance for special operations forces, which he would incorporate into his overall strategy as best he could.

In 2002, the U.S. Government decided to fund a Colombian Commando Battalion as a means of attacking leaders and infrastructure. Modeled after elite reconnaissance units in El Salvador and Vietnam, the Commando Battalion was to send out small reconnaissance teams that called in air strikes on enemy camps. Personnel from the U.S. 7th SFG(A) and U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command (NAVSPECWARCOM) provided training in advanced small-unit tactics, night operations, special reconnaissance, airmobile operations, and operational planning, and helped establish a training company.[87]

2003 witnessed the creation of the Lancero Battalion, which was intended for use in high-value targeting and hostage rescue. Similar in composition to a U.S. Ranger battalion, the Lancero Battalion received training from the 7th SFG(A) as well. The Commando Battalion and the Lancero Battalion were attached to the *Comando de Operaciones Especiales-Ejercito* (Army Special Operations Command, or COESE), which received training in intelligence analysis from the 7th SFG(A). These units became the top direct action forces. At this time, the Search Bloc was revamped and responsibility for supporting it was assumed by British special operations forces.

The U.S. Embassy Intelligence Fusion Center, which brought together intelligence from multiple U.S. agencies provided information to these units.[88] The fusion center worked better than most fusion centers because it did not suffer from mutual suspicions about the reliability of other agencies and fears of losing credit for intelligence work, owing to the fact that most of the contributing agencies belonged to the DOD. Because they fell within the same chain of command, a single DOD leader could require multiple agencies share with one another.[89]

Despite the rapid expansion of Colombian SOF under Uribe, however, the training of Colombian SOF was only a small part of the 7th SFG(A)'s efforts at this time. During its 2003 rotation, the 3rd Battalion of the 7th Group had two companies in Colombia simultaneously, yet only 15 American Special Forces soldiers were training Colombian SOF, at the Tolemaida Training Center. The remainder were working with the regular army. Twenty-five members of the 3rd Battalion were engaged in training the Counternarcotics Brigade at Larandia. Seventy taught basic military skills to 18th Brigade, a regular infantry unit that was responsible for pipeline security.[90]

In 2004, the 7th Group's training activities were expanded to include additional units beyond traditional SOF, in line with Uribe's vision of a broad-based counterinsurgency. Among the Colombian forces to receive training were infrastructure security units, *carabineros*, *Junglas*, and the 5th mobile infantry brigade. In addition, the 7th Group began working with new naval and air force special operations components, which were incorporated into a new joint special operations command, the *Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (CCOPE).[91] 7th SFG(A) personnel facilitated interagency training involving Colombian police and special operations elements, which was useful not only in improving interoperability but also in alleviating longstanding distrust between the police and the military.

USSOF facilitated the deployment of Colombian law enforcement personnel with Colombian special operations units in the field, which proved exceptionally valuable. Colombian law dictated that only law enforcement personnel could arrest insurgents and conduct sensitive site exploitation, which in the past had often compelled the military to wait for many hours if not days for law enforcement organizations to arrive. Some military units simply left an area after an operation rather than wait for the police to show up. When members of law enforcement organizations accompanied military units, they could collect information and detain individuals immediately, yielding more intelligence, more admissible evidence, and more prosecutions of suspected insurgents. In addition, the presence of police on the scene prevented lawyers from accusing the military of tampering with "crime scenes."

The U.S. Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School provided new personnel management techniques to Colombian forces. They introduced the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and other psychological testing to the Colombian Special Forces Brigade as a means of screening personnel and assigning them to tasks best suited to their skills.

These methods ensured that highly innovative individuals entered the special operations forces, albeit at the expense of the regular forces, contributing to subsequent problems of resistance to change within the army.

During the Uribe era, USSOF continued their efforts to bolster Colombia's NCO corps. U.S. advisors from the 7th SFG(A), AFSOC, and NAVSPECWARCOM explained to their Colombian counterparts the value of a professional non-commissioned officers corps, pointing towards their own experiences. Because Colombian noncoms were reluctant to take over if an officer was wounded or killed, the Americans made them practice scenarios in which the officer was removed and the noncoms had to take over.[92]

As Colombian forces matured, the U.S. trainers focused increasingly often on advanced skills. The Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODAs) taught complex operational planning, secure communications, intelligence, and combat engineering. U.S. Army Special Forces Civil Military Support Elements (CMSE) and Military Information Support Teams (MIST) trained Colombians to conduct programs aimed at alleviating discontent in villages where coca eradication had occurred or was scheduled to occur.[93]

Nevertheless, the 7th Group continued to provide extensive instruction on basic military skills. It also put heavy emphasis on respect for human rights. American officers administered human rights training to the Colombians, which was often more effective than assigning the task to Colombian civilian experts. Colombian soldiers generally held the U.S. military in high esteem whereas they often lacked respect for civilians from their own government, the product of longstanding civil-military discord in Colombia. The American officers also had the advantage of emphasizing pragmatic utility rather than high-minded ideals. "Third world military men were more likely to listen to American officers who briefed them about human rights as a tool of counterinsurgency than to civilians who talked abstractly about universal principles of justice," remarked author Robert Kaplan, following a visit to Colombian training sites in 2003.[94]

Selling international human rights standards to Colombian soldiers was a daunting task for anyone, given widespread disillusionment with the scrutiny and accusations they received from human rights organizations, foreign governments, and their own government, and the lack of comparable scrutiny of the enemy. "These soldiers know that the FARC and other groups will rape their sisters, torture their fathers, and the international community will do nothing," one American Special Forces trainer explained. "They see

how people are kidnapped daily and held in awful conditions for years. But if any of these guys now taking notes were to accidentally shoot a guerrilla, without first trying to apprehend him peaceably, by Colombian law he would be liable for prosecution."[95]

Another widespread complaint during the Uribe era, leveled by both Colombian and American military officers, was the official U.S. Government policy forbidding American advisors from participating in combat operations. The inability to accompany Colombians during operations kept the advisors from developing a complete understanding of the operating environment and from seeing whether the Colombians were making good use of American advice in the field. "We're only using 20 percent of our capabilities under the current rules of engagement," said one Special Forces officer.[96]

The ban on advisor participation in operations also undermined the credibility of the advisors with their Colombian counterparts. A senior MILGP officer remarked, "Because we are not in the field, the Colombians think that they know better than us."[97] The fact that Americans stayed in safety while the Colombians went into battle also hindered the development of a sense of shared sacrifice, further constraining advisory influence.

The U.S. Embassy steadfastly rejected recommendations to lift the ban on American accompaniment of combat operations, on the grounds that the loss of a few American lives would destroy support in the U.S. Congress for aid to Colombia.[98] The embassy put additional restrictions on advisors that the military viewed as needlessly risk averse and detrimental to mission accomplishment. When U.S. advisors went out with the Colombians for training purposes, they were supposed to let the Colombians do the shooting if they encountered the enemy. In practice, the Americans did not always heed this rule. "I'm coming home alive," said one American in explaining why he used his weapon.[99]

The newly formed Colombian SOF battalions ramped up their operations against the FARC leadership in 2003. With the assistance of U.S. intelligence resources, they scored some early successes against FARC leaders in Colombia. A number of police units and, in one case, military special operations forces, crossed into other countries on direct-action missions in cooperation with the law enforcement organizations of those countries, capturing high-level FARC leaders Simon Trinidad in Ecuador and Rodrigo Granda in Venezuela.[100]

The losses of senior leaders compelled the FARC to reappraise its practices for protecting its leaders. Suspecting that the government was intercepting its communications and recruiting spies within the ranks of the FARC, the FARC leadership reduced its radio and cell phone communications and instead relied on couriers. FARC leaders isolated themselves from subordinates to minimize the possibility of exposure to moles. For a time, these countermeasures reduced the number of high-value leaders whom the Colombian SOF could locate, though they also impeded FARC command and control.[101]

The FARC also developed effective countermeasures to Colombian SOF's new hostage-rescue capabilities. FARC guards received orders to kill hostages if rescue forces came near, and the FARC leadership made these orders known to the outside world in order to discourage rescue attempts. Colombian SOF pressed ahead with hostage-rescue operations anyway, but learned to their dismay that the FARC's threats were real and their precautions effective. In May 2004, the FARC murdered eight hostages, including a former minister of defense and department governor, when they detected commandos approaching.[102]

In 2004, the activities of the 7th SFG(A) peaked, and then swiftly plummeted as the result of diversion of 7th Group manpower to Afghanistan and Iraq. The number of Special Forces ODAs providing training to the Colombian military and police fell to seven by the end of 2004, and to three during 2005. Thus, SOF trainers could no longer work with a broad range of Colombian forces. After the number of teams was reduced to three, one of the three teams worked with special operations units, the second trained the *Junglas* and *Carabineros*, and the third worked with tactical trainers of the regular army.[103] The decision to send 7th Group forces to Iraq and Afghanistan also meant that Latin America began receiving U.S. special operators who did not have strong proficiency in Spanish or know the region well.[104]

The downsizing of the USSOF presence in Colombia also necessitated greater reliance on U.S. military personnel outside of SOF for training and other core activities. Slots in the force cap that had hitherto been occupied by SOF personnel were filled with regulars, some of whom did not speak Spanish well or possess deep understanding of the region. The MILGP assumed a larger role in advising the Colombian military on logistics and operational planning from the strategic level down to the brigade level. By 2007,

according to a U.S. official in Colombia, USSOF accounted for "perhaps 20 percent of the effort in Colombia."[105]

The diminished size of SOF in Colombia weakened the bureaucratic clout of the SOF command element, which led to increased friction with the MILGP. The special operations forces reported to the Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH) commander, who was headquartered in Florida, not to the MILGP commander, but they were under the tactical control of the MILGP for force protection and therefore the MILGP commander could determine the location of the Special Forces ODAs. This arrangement came as a surprise to special operators accustomed to working in other geographical combatant commands, where no such authority existed. SOF elements in Colombia complained that the MILGP commander's force protection requirements restricted their movements.[106]

The MILGP saw itself as focused on security cooperation, long-term institution building, and self-sustainability, which it believed that USSOF were not accomplishing because of their focus on building small elite units that remained reliant on the United States. One MILGP lieutenant colonel asserted, "We don't want to create capacities that only the US can support, so that when we go away we leave nothing behind, no institutional knowledge is created."[107] Members of the MILGP criticized SOF for the short duration of their deployments, their lack of understanding of the operational environment, and their tendency to transplant solutions from Iraq and Afghanistan.[108]

Plan Colombia was scheduled to expire in 2005. By then, Uribe's vigorous and skillful prosecution of the war had convinced the Bush administration and U.S. Congress that Colombia deserved a renewed American commitment. As the expiration date approached, the Congress authorized a three-year extension, entitled the "Plan Colombia Consolidation Phase." U.S. aid actually increased slightly, from $718 million in 2005 to $728 million in 2006 and $739 million in 2007.[109] The new aid package included $218 million per year for police counternarcotics and $222 million for military counternarcotics, as well as $151 million for the Colombian army's counterinsurgency capabilities. Another $140 million was earmarked to "Promote Social and Economic Justice," of which about half went to "alternative development."[110]

In his second term, Uribe was to show as much vigor as in his first. He directed the Colombian armed forces to push into the FARC's base areas. He formed a Decisive Action Force of four mobile brigades, which hunted

the FARC forces along the Atlantic coast. To damage and discombobulate the FARC near the border with Ecuador, he created the Second Pacific Joint Command.

During the second term, the Colombian government acquired Embraer Super Tucanos that were outfitted with precision-guided bombs, making it much easier to eliminate FARC leaders. Previously, the ground forces had been the main effort in high-value-target operations; now the smart bombs were the main effort and the ground forces were the supporting effort. The primary mission of the special forces became securing the target zone immediately after the dropping of the smart bombs. During this period, the ground elements of Colombian SOF also gained greater air mobility, which enabled them to operate more easily in remote sections of the country and to participate in cross-border attacks against high-value targets.[111]

In 2008, the Colombian government used its improved intelligence capabilities to locate most of the remaining high-profile hostages held by the FARC, including three U.S. contractors captured in 2003 and former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. It then freed those hostages in a remarkable operation that manifested the extraordinary advances of Colombia's elite intelligence and operational units. A Colombian task force, comprised of military intelligence and special operations forces, deceived the captors into thinking that a group of task force members belonged to a sympathetic nongovernmental organization. Arriving in disguise at a meeting with the captors, this group rescued all 15 hostages without firing a shot.[112]

By the middle of 2008, the FARC had been reduced in number to 9,000, less than half its peak strength.[113] The attrition was the result of both combat and desertions. During Uribe's tenure, a whopping 22,000 guerrillas quit the FARC and ELN and obtained legal status through a government rehabilitation program.[114]

The most telling evidence of the military's counterinsurgency successes in this period came from the insurgents themselves. In November 2007, FARC secretariat member Ivan Marquez wrote to his boss, FARC Commander Manuel Marulanda, of a Colombian army operation: "The operation doesn't let up. The number of troops is enormous. Sometimes we eat once a day." When FARC 47th Front Commander Nelly Avila Moreno, aka Karina, defected to the government in May 2008, she said, "Everywhere we went, the army was there. We couldn't sleep in one place for more than one night."[115]

At the start of the Uribe administration, the FARC leadership had characterized its reversion to guerrilla warfare as a temporary measure. But the ensuing setbacks stifled plans to resume conventional warfare. In 2008, it released a document that described guerrilla warfare as a strategic phase of long duration.[116]

All told, the Uribe government convinced 31,000 members of paramilitary organizations to demobilize. This demobilization helped reduce wanton violence and other human rights violations that engendered support for the insurgents. To prevent the FARC and ELN from filling the security vacuum in areas of northeastern Colombia where right-wing paramilitary forces had been demobilized, Uribe dispatched Joint Task Force Nudo del Paramillo to secure those areas.[117]

Drastic improvements in Colombia's judicial system, the result of large-scale U.S. training and the exertions of Uribe and his executive team, contributed to a major reduction in violence, by incarcerating insurgents, drug traffickers, paramilitaries, and common criminals. Thanks to these improvements, the conviction rate for the accused rose from 3 percent to 60 percent.[118] The time required to resolve a criminal case fell from five years to one year.[119]

By the end of his second term, Uribe had achieved extraordinary progress in security, primarily on account of his effectiveness in countering the insurgents, who were the largest source of insecurity. During Uribe's presidency, assassinations of mayors fell by 67 percent, councilmen by 87 percent, and journalists by 90 percent. Kidnapping fell from 2,882 per year to 213, while homicides fell from a rate of 70 per 100,000 inhabitants to 35 per 100,000 inhabitants. Narcotics production also suffered because of the weakening of the insurgents, as well as the government's eradication efforts and the implementation of alternative crop programs in newly secured areas. The hectares under cultivation fell by 58 percent, from 162,510 to 68,025, and annual cocaine production fell from 550 tons to 410 tons. The wholesale price of cocaine increased 85 percent because of declining supply.[120]

Uribe was able to bring the insurgents to their knees because he succeeded in making improvements across the military and police beyond the elite forces. Such broad improvements were required to hold territory after it had been cleared by the elite mobile units. A group of experts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, led by former deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs Peter DeShazo, explained that, "the vastly improved professionalism and capability of the Colombian

armed forces and police" had led to "impressive gains in extending legitimate statue authority to more areas of the country, reducing levels of violence and human rights abuses, countering the influence of the insurgents and paramilitaries, and promoting the rule of law."[121]

Despite the heightened emphasis on broad capabilities, the elite units did continue to improve in quality during the Uribe administration. By 2010, U.S. advisors considered Colombian Special Forces to be as well trained and equipped as USSOF, and more capable overall than many first-world SOF. In addition, their interoperability with USSOF was considered excellent.[122] Colombian military special operations forces and the *Junglas* began exporting security expertise and conducting training exchanges in over 20 countries, predominantly in Latin America but also in Afghanistan and several African countries.[123]

5. The Santos Era

Juan Manuel Santos ran for President in 2010 as the candidate of Social Party of National Unity, a party he had helped form in 2005 by merging pro-Uribe political factions. Santos had served as Minister of Defense under Uribe from 2006 to 2009, which together with the popularity of the Uribe government made him an exceedingly attractive candidate. On the day of the final vote, Santos won the presidency by an unprecedented margin, garnering 69 percent of the vote.[124]

The Santos administration was widely expected to continue along the same path as its predecessor. But differences soon emerged. The Santos administration, like many presidential administrations, leveled criticisms of its predecessor in charting its course for the future. Uribe, for his part, publicly rebuked Santos for insufficient commitment to prosecution of the war.

One point of contention was the degree of emphasis on offensive military operations. The Santos administration increased pressure on the military and police to capture or kill insurgents, especially insurgent leaders. The military leadership offered commanders large rewards for eliminating insurgent leaders, such as trips to the United States and certainty of promotion. To justify this policy, administration leaders contended that news of insurgent losses would sustain public morale. Critics alleged that the administration was more concerned with generating news that bolstered its own image.

During the first years of the Santos presidency, the Colombian security forces inflicted significant losses on the FARC, including the FARC leadership. The Colombian press featured regular stories on FARC defeats. Yet the FARC's total strength did not decline, holding steady at approximately 9,000 fighters. With the war seemingly stalemated, some Colombian and American officials cited the pressure for statistical results as a leading cause of the government's inability to vanquish the FARC.

While proponents of that argument often understated the importance of other factors, they were correct in attributing a number of serious problems to the high-level emphasis on "body count." The carrot and stick approach employed to encourage neutralization of insurgents caused commanders to focus on completing the mission themselves, which discouraged collaboration and exacerbated rivalries among the security forces. The intelligence

agencies became increasingly reluctant to share information with the elite operational forces for fear of losing the credit for their work. Because of the lack of information sharing, the operational forces bolstered their own intelligence capabilities, while organizations that were concentrated primarily on intelligence sought to increase their operational capabilities.

This bureaucratic parochialism was especially harmful because of the high number of bureaucracies involved. The elite forces fell under a variety of commanders who were not obligated to collaborate with one another. In 2008, then Vice Minister of Defense Juan Carlos Pinzon had concluded that the ministry of defense should have a service-level SOF command in order to consolidate forces and streamline operations. This organizational redesign had its origins in conversations between Pinzon and foreign SOF personnel at the International SOF Week conference in Tampa. In order to create the new SOF command, Pinzon sought assistance from USSOUTHCOM and USSOCOM, which in turn assigned the mission to SOCSOUTH. U.S. officers from SOCSOUTH established working groups with members of the Colombian General Staff to organize the new special operations command, which came into existence in June 2009 under the name *Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales* (Joint Special Operations Command, or CCOES).

This new command encompassed an air component and the *Comando Unificado de Operaciones Especiales* (Special Operations Unified Command, or CUNOE), which itself was comprised of the Army's *Lancero* and Commando Battalions, the 1st Marine Infantry Special Forces Battalion, and the Urban Counter-Terrorism Special Forces Group.

The Colombian Army, however, successfully resisted the consolidation of Army SOF under CCOES. It retained control of elite units like the Special Operations Brigade and the *Comando Especial-Ejercito* (Army Special Command, or CEE).[125] The inability of CCOES to gain authority over those units encouraged the creation of new CCOES units, the *Batallónes de Operaciones Especiales* (Special Operations Battalions, or BAOPE). Although most of these units were under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defense, the ministerial leadership did not require collaboration among them.

Although the military services were ostensibly joint, in practice they regularly opposed cooperation with one another, especially in terms of high-value targeting. The Army, the Navy, and the Marines each maintained their own direct-action forces. Colombian military and police forces seldom assisted each other in combating the insurgents except when their leaders had

longstanding personal relationships or when police were put under the authority of military units, as was done at times as a means of facilitating rapid exploitation of information found in the possession of the enemy.

Figure 4. Lieutenant Colonel Contreras, commander of the 1st Marine Special Forces Battalion conducts his final backbrief during the mission planning of a High Value Target operation as Major General Lasprilla, commander of the Joint Special Operations Command, looks down at the map. To the right of Major General Lasprilla is Colonel Florez, commander of the Special Operations Unified Command. Photo used by permission of Colonel Florez.

Official Colombian government policy granted the elite battalions of the CCOES responsibility for the top 31 FARC high-value individuals.[126] The Special Forces Brigade received responsibility for the next tier of targets. Other elite forces were ordered to target individuals further down the list. But numerous intelligence organizations and security forces, including the regular infantry units, sought to capture or kill individuals assigned to other units when they received pertinent information, rather than passing the information to the units designated as responsible for those individuals.

The demands of higher headquarters to neutralize insurgents encouraged regular Army units to spend most of their time scouring the jungles for insurgents. Most often they lacked information specifying the location of the insurgents and instead patrolled areas that seemed most advantageous to the insurgents. Their prolonged involvement in jungle operations kept them away from the populous areas, which made it easier for the FARC to access the population.

Another reason why commanders preferred to operate in the jungles rather than in populous areas was the fear of causing civilian casualties. When military troops pursued the FARC in an area populated by civilians, they might inadvertently kill an innocent civilian in the crossfire, which could lead to criminal prosecution of the commander by civil authorities.

Commanders knew that peers had been compelled to pay for their own legal representation under such circumstance, and that when convicted had received lengthy jail terms.

The government's ability to secure the population was also constrained by the allocation of a large fraction of Colombia's ground and air forces to infrastructure security. By staging numerous small attacks on infrastructure targets, the FARC compelled the government to tie its forces down guarding pipelines and mines that were located far from the populace. Additional government forces have been required to support the resupply of these distant forces.

While the Santos administration did not show as much concern as its predecessor for population security, it did attempt to improve the use of nonmilitary instruments of power in strengthening the authority of the state in rural areas. Convinced that Uribe had militarized counterinsurgency to an excessive degree, Santos sought to put civilians in charge of solidifying governmental authority in recently secured areas. To this end, he established an Office of Consolidation to implement a National Consolidation Plan, as part of what he termed the Colombian Strategic Defense Initiative. Targeting 100 of the country's 1,120 municipalities for consolidation, the National Consolidation Plan sought to integrate the efforts of civilian and military agencies.

The U.S. embassy divided its support for the National Consolidation Plan by region. In northern Colombia, which was relatively secure, USAID had the lead within the U.S. country team, providing funding for economic development, basic infrastructure, local governance, and land reform. In central Colombia, where the FARC were most thickly distributed and the Colombian military most densely concentrated, the U.S. military had the lead supporting role. In southern Colombia, where coca cultivation was most prevalent, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs of the U.S. Department of State had the lead.

In 2011, the Colombian Army formed the *Escuela de Misiones Internacionales Acciòn Integral* to provide instruction in civil affairs, psychological operations, and related specializations such as demobilization and humanitarian assistance. USSOF experts from Fort Bragg helped develop the curriculum, based on U.S. civil affairs and psychological operations doctrine. It was neither joint nor was it designated part of Colombian special operations, but USSOF CMSE and MIST personnel served as advisors, as did U.S.

contractors. The U.S. personnel focused on training and advising the school's Colombian instructors.

As in earlier times, the government's inability to destroy the FARC has been the result not only of the shortcomings of the Colombian government, but also of the countermeasures taken by the FARC to preserve itself. The FARC has continued to keep many of its leaders in Venezuela, Ecuador, and other countries where the Colombian government cannot catch them owing to lack of resources or objections from the United States or other countries. It has restricted its military operations to small, hit-and-run attacks in order to minimize its vulnerability to the government's firepower. Demonstrating considerable ingenuity and resourcefulness, the FARC has devised effective countermeasures to new intelligence and operational techniques employed by the Colombian government.

The FARC's resilience in the face of continued attrition caused Colombians and Americans to question the existing strategy. In 2012, with considerable encouragement from the United States, the Colombian government established a strategic review committee, the *Comite de Revision Estrategica e Innovación* (CRE-I), headed by Brigadier General Albert Jose Mejia, who at the time was the commander of the 4th Brigade. General Mejia and two Colombian graduates of the U.S. Army's School of Military Studies led the writing of a new strategy called *Espada de Honor* (Sword of Honor). Faulting the Colombian military for an overemphasis on high value targets, the authors advocated "population-centric" counterinsurgency as a means of defeating the entire insurgent network. The strategy reconfigured Colombian forces into nine new brigade-level joint task forces, supplementing the existing three joint task forces, and gave each one responsibility for a high-priority area. It sent ten new *Accion Integral* teams to joint task force headquarters, with civil affairs as their primary mission and psychological operations and infrastructure construction as secondary missions. The authors contended that this strategy would yield more intelligence on the FARC than a purely enemy-centric approach by virtue of its continuous coverage of the population and thus would result in more damage to the FARC. They set a goal of cutting the FARC's strength in half by 2014.

Although unfurled with much fanfare, Sword of Honor was afflicted from the beginning by inconsistent implementation. Substantial elements of the Colombian military did not adhere to the principles of the Sword of Honor strategy, and higher authorities took no action to compel their compliance.

Within the military, a number of officers believed that the strategy underestimated the importance of offensive military operations and the extent of ongoing population security efforts, an argument with some merit. Much of the military did not embrace *Accion Integral* and did not work together with the teams in pursuing a common strategy. The political leadership maintained pressure on military commanders to capture and kill insurgents, encouraging a continued focus on targeting high value individuals and patrolling the jungles. The goal of cutting the FARC in half by 2014 was invoked misleadingly in justification of continued preoccupation with offensive military operations.

In another indication of waning interest in population security, the Ministry of Defense phased out the *soldados campesinos*, which had played a large role in population-centric counterinsurgency in the past. Responsibility for local security was left to the regular infantry battalions, the *carabineros*, and local police. The *carabineros* were stretched thin, with a total strength of just 6,000. They continued to bear much of the brunt of the enemy attacks, suffering several hundred killed per year, because they often occupied small and isolated outposts. Local police maintained a presence in all the municipalities, but in certain areas the FARC retained the capability to influence and intimidate the police and the population.

Local security was also compromised in some areas by the *bandas criminales emergentes* (BACRIM), criminal gangs composed of individuals who had quit the paramilitaries or the FARC and were reaping large profits from the drug industry. Although much of the BACRIM leadership was decimated by governmental operations, the BACRIM still retained an estimated strength of 10,000. Too strong to be handled by the police alone, the BACRIM required the ongoing attention of the Colombian military.[127]

Colombia's civilian ministries remained reluctant to send their personnel into dangerous areas in support of the new strategy. "We have had to drag the civilian agencies into the operational area to obtain their participation," said a Colombian officer on the staff of Joint Task Force Omega, the task force that has enjoyed the most participation from the civil agencies.[128] Schools and health clinics built by the military sat empty because of the inability of civilian organizations to send sufficient staff. Although locals were recruited to fill some of the staff positions, low educational levels made exclusive reliance on local staff impossible in some areas. Government-sponsored construction projects employed local manpower, but those projects have decreased

in number as USAID funding has declined, for the central governmental ministries have not been able or willing to organize the same type of work on their own.

The ebbing of USSOF presence in the U.S. Central Command's (USCENTCOM) area of operations as the result of the drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan made more SOF available for deployment to Latin America. In early 2013, the 7th Group presence in Colombia increased to four and a half operational detachments. One full team was working with the *Junglas* and *carabineros*, and another was assigned to the *Comandos de Operaciones Especiales* (Police Special Operations Commandos). Some Colombian and American officials had advocated termination of 7th Group assistance to police units on the grounds that military forces should not train police forces, but the Santos government and the U.S. embassy agreed to let the training continue. Full ODA teams were assigned to the Special Forces Brigade and Joint Task Force Omega. Half of a team was engaged in training the CCOES units.

Figure 5. Members of the *Comandos de Operaciones Especiales* demonstrate their skills and procedures for counterterrorism operations and fighting organized crime. Photo used by permission of Newscom.

Three four-man civil affairs teams provided civil affairs training to regular Colombian army units at the brigade and division levels, while two three-man MISTs provided psychological operations training at the same levels with Colombian units. SOCSOUTH intelligence specialists conducted training with Colombian intelligence personnel, including training on the use of Analyst Notebook, a widely used application that facilitates interoperability with other intelligence services. In addition, some Group personnel served in operational support teams, which went with Colombian forces to secure forward operating bases for a few weeks at a time to provide support in advanced skills and mission planning. The force dispositions were derived from site visits in May 2013.

The demands for 7th SFG(A) manpower in other theaters nonetheless continued to impede 7th Group activities in Colombia and other Latin American countries. Most of the detachments assigned to Colombia in the spring of 2013 had spent more time in Afghanistan than in the USSOUTHCOM AOR in the past five years. Many of their junior personnel were serving in Latin America for the first time, leaving units with few experts on regional cultures and politics. Repeated deployments outside of Latin America had caused language skills to atrophy, requiring remedial language education prior to deployment to Colombia. Most team members were able to reach a 1/1 level of Spanish language proficiency, which was required for deployment to the USSOUTHCOM AOR, but few had higher levels of proficiency.

The multiple Afghanistan deployments left 7th Group deployments to the USSOUTHCOM area shorter in duration than in the past. Several years earlier, deployments had been reduced from six months to three months in order to facilitate more and longer deployments to Afghanistan, and in 2013 they remained at three-to-four months in order to allow units to spend more time in Afghanistan in the future. Teams that were spending three months in Colombia in 2013 had spent nine months in Afghanistan the previous year. Most team members observed that three months afforded too little time for understanding the operating environment and building relationships with Colombian personnel.

During a visit to Colombia in the spring of 2013, the authors were informed that support to Colombian planning of military operations was impeded by shortages of experienced personnel. The 7th Group planners working with Colombians at the brigade and division level were usually captains or NCOs with little experience planning at such a high level. In earlier times, during the Uribe era, the United States had provided better support at the brigade level with Planning Assistance Training Teams because those teams were led by majors.

Although the Colombian army and police continued to make advances in respect for human rights during the Santos era, Leahy vetting has remained a major hindrance to the development of security forces in some areas of the country. In northern Colombia, near the Venezuelan border, Leahy vetting prevented the support of security forces at a time of increasing FARC strength. Exasperated Colombian and American officers noted that some of

the blacklisted units committed violations under the leadership of people who are long since gone.

Today, Colombia is far more secure and stable than it was 15 years ago. The cities are now nearly free of terrorism, and insurgents are largely absent from most rural municipalities. The Colombian government is much more capable of handling threats to its internal security than in the past. But, as many Colombian and U.S. officials note, Colombia still needs American help, and the United States still stands to gain much from providing that help. The FARC continues to pose a threat to the nation's security, requiring the maintenance of large security forces. The political situation is still sufficiently fragile that the FARC and other far-left groups could win electoral victories in the future, and gain by political means what they were unable to obtain militarily. Drug production continues at high levels, fueling instability in Central America and Mexico and imposing heavy costs in the United States. Therefore, it would be mistaken to conclude that the successes achieved to date warrant the discontinuation of U.S. assistance.

6. Lessons Learned

Since the onset of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Americans seeking lessons from the past have most often looked to the irregular conflicts in Vietnam and Malaya. As the United States contemplates additional engagements today, Afghanistan and Iraq are becoming new wellsprings of lessons learned. So is Colombia, on account of the remarkable improvements in security since the late 1990s. Colombia's dramatic gains serve as a beacon of hope for other countries that today are besieged by the violence and blight of insurgency and drug trafficking. They demonstrate that nations can, with internal political will and persistent American support, overcome seemingly intractable obstacles.

The history of persistent U.S. engagement in Colombia provides lessons beyond those gleaned from Afghanistan and Iraq, and bears greater similarity in many respects to the contemporary operating environment than either Afghanistan or Iraq. American assistance to Colombia has been marked by sharp constraints on the number of U.S. advisors and major restrictions on the nature of U.S. advice and support, both of which will be features of most future foreign engagements. USSOF involvement in Colombia has consisted almost entirely of capacity building rather than direct action, as it will be in most other countries going forward.

This chapter identifies key lessons of persistent engagement in Colombia that may apply for future overseas engagements involving USSOF and the U.S. Government more generally. It recognizes the importance of a multiplicity of actors in the country, in order to avoid the pitfall of ascribing inordinate influence to any one group. The ensuing chapter provides explicit recommendations based on these lessons.

Plan Colombia and the accompanying U.S. aid contributed to the dramatic turnaround in Colombian performance that began in 1998, but U.S. assistance was not the decisive factor. What mattered most was the arrival of better Colombian political and military leadership in 1998. As in most organizations, the transformation of organizational culture depended upon the presence of champions at the top ranks, who preached the new culture and rewarded officers who adhered to it. Had Andres Pastrana and Alvaro Uribe been poor leaders like Ernesto Samper, they would not have taken

critical political actions, and would not have empowered military leaders who wanted to reform the military. Additional American aid then would not have been nearly as effective. Thus, the Colombian experience supports the view that the quality of partner-nation leadership has enormous influence over the efficiency and effectiveness of U.S. aid. As a corollary, it shows that increasing material aid and advisors is most valuable at a time of improving partner-nation leadership.

While the immediate causes of the Colombian government's successes were primarily the result of Colombian leadership rather than American largesse, America's persistent presence and support constituted a strong underlying cause. The Colombian political and military leaders who turned the war around in the late 1990s and 2000s began receiving American training, education, and support in the 1970s or 1980s. Long-term engagement was required in order to influence a generation of leaders from their formative years through their rise to positions of senior leadership.

Numerous Colombian units received continuous assistance from USSOF for years at a time. When U.S. policymakers decertified Colombia for aid in 1996 and restricted training to short Joint Combined Exchange Training deployments, the impact of training declined sharply. Fortunately, persistent training returned in 1998, owing to the recognition of Washington policymakers that Colombia needed U.S. help to reverse a precipitous deterioration in security. "Our assistance has been effective because it has been year round," remarked one U.S. military officer with several decades of experience in Colombia. "Providing six weeks of training and then going home is not enough."[129]

The disruption of the 7th Group's rotational schedule caused by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq highlighted some of the most important features of SOF persistent presence. The loss of language skills, cultural expertise, and relationship building opportunities that resulted from the disruption showed what a difference those assets made. In a world where the SOF operator has to rely heavily on influencing foreign counterparts, the inability to converse without an interpreter and the inability to work with the same officers on repeated deployments caused a serious decline in effectiveness. The reduction in deployments from six months to three months left units with insufficient time in country to develop situational awareness.

The 7th Group's deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan did have some beneficial effects for U.S. engagement in Colombia, for SOF operators acquired

new skills during those deployments. With much of USSOCOM's efforts concentrated in Iraq and Afghanistan, those countries served as incubators for cutting edge tactics, techniques, and procedures, such as advanced sensitive site exploitation and the fusion of intelligence and operations. Troops returning from the war taught those skills in Colombia during subsequent deployments. The very fact that USSOF had recently served in Iraq or Afghanistan, moreover, increased the eagerness of Colombian forces to learn from them.

The ability of the Pastrana administration to install better generals and the ability of those generals to install better company-grade and field-grade officers were dependent on long-term U.S. capacity building efforts. Replacing commanders is effective only when there exists a reservoir of good replacements, and in the case of senior commanders the reservoir must contain individuals with multiple decades of experience. Persistent SOF presence in Colombia, together with the training and education of Colombian officers in the United States, helped cultivate the generation of general officers that Pastrana empowered from 1998 onward, along with those who came after them.

The scope and duration of SOF engagement in Colombia also enabled the United States to exert great influence over the content and structure of Colombia's military educational and training institutions. American experts helped set up these institutions, and they infused the curricula with American doctrinal and cultural principles. American advisors worked full-time at some of these institutions, providing instruction to Colombian instructors or directly to students.

The United States helped establish training institutions for Colombian non-commissioned officers, particularly those in elite units. The emphasis placed on NCOs has led to greater empowerment of NCOs in the Colombian forces with which U.S. personnel have worked. In other parts of the armed forces, where the United States has not been active in pushing NCO development, officers generally have not delegated significant authority to NCOs.[130] USSOF further contributed to the advancement of Colombia's military and police leadership by concentrating training on highly talented officers. This practice helped develop individuals who under other circumstances would not have risen through the ranks because of a lack of political or personal connections. Of the Colombian officers who received 7th Group training and mentoring while serving in elite units, a sizable number subsequently moved into other parts of the military and police, spreading the influence of

USSOF assistance across the security forces. Some of the top officers in the Colombian security forces today worked extensively with USSOF earlier in their careers, including General Alejandro Navas, the Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces; General Tito Saul Pinilla, Commander of the Air Force; General Sergio Mantilla, Commander of the Army; Brigadier General Albert José Mejia, Commander of the Aviation and Air Assault Division; Major General Juan Pablo Rodriguez, Commander of CCOES; and Colonel (P) Jorge Vargas, the director of Police Intelligence.

Should the Colombian military decide to make SOF a separate branch of the armed forces as is currently under consideration, this cross pollination will diminish. But even under the present arrangement, Colombian officers with experience in elite units have constituted only a small fraction of the commanders of regular units. Few of the division, brigade, or battalion commanders in the divisions assigned to territorial security have experience in Colombian SOF or other elite units. Many of them have, however, attended extended programs of training or education in the United States. In addition, some of them have received training or education from Colombian SOF officers or institutions that bear the imprint of U.S. advice and support. Nevertheless, given that the infantry units are essential for success in counterinsurgency, they would benefit from additional exposure to U.S. training and education within Colombia.

The subject matter of the U.S. training and education administered to Colombian forces has varied widely. Some of it has been more valuable than others, suggesting that considerable care be taken in shaping future training and education strategies. A substantial amount of the training that SOF has provided to the Colombian armed forces consisted of basic marksmanship and other basic skills. Such training persisted into the 21st century, which to many seasoned Colombian and American officers, constituted an inefficient use of 7th Group resources since the Colombians had plenty of their own instructors who could conduct such training and were in need of more advanced training.

When asked which types of USSOF training have been of greatest value to Colombia's ground forces, Colombian military officers most often mentioned intelligence, planning, reconnaissance, communications, close-quarters combat, heavy weapons, and combat medicine. Many officers from elite units emphasized the value of training in the use of sophisticated equipment, along with the provision of the equipment itself, in combating a sophisticated

enemy.[131] Colombian personnel also noted that air force special operations training enabled Colombian airmen to take over critical skilled jobs that had previously been filled by expensive expatriate contractors.

Because of 7th Group training, Colombian forces have incorporated many of the lessons that USSOF learned in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. Some units have integrated intelligence and operations, permitting more rapid and thorough exploitation of information. They have also emulated American intelligence fusion practices, although to a more limited extent given the scarcity of cooperation across organizational boundaries.

USSOF have transferred newfound unclassified sensitive-site exploitation (SSE) skills that it acquired in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have concentrated the training on Colombian police units, who by law are responsible for investigating sites after combat no matter which security forces participated in the fighting. These skills have enabled the police to collect information that would have been missed in years past and to undertake fruitful operations on the basis of that information. They have also improved the police's capability to collect evidence that can stand up in a court of law.

Colombian commanders wanted some high end capabilities, such as high-altitude parachuting, which were not needed in the operating environment. These capabilities were "glamorous," as they required sophisticated equipment and high-end skills, which explained the interest in acquiring them. The United States had to be firm in resisting requests for this type of support, for resources were scarce and providing one type of support meant reducing or eliminating another type of support.

Through training, education, and support, the Americans imparted a wide range of cultural attributes that were beneficial to partner-nation security and governance. "The most important thing that Colombia gained from U.S. military assistance was the transfer of culture," said General (Retired) Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle. "The Americans served as our role models. We watched their behavior, their discipline, their humility, and their commitment to their country, and tried to emulate them."[132]

J. M. Eastman, a Vice Minister in the Colombian government, has cited some of the most important aspects of U.S. culture transmitted by American personnel, both civil and military. The United States "brings a rigor of training, focus, organization that we Colombians lacked," Eastman observed. "It has speeded up what may have been a much slower process. U.S. assistance brings decisiveness, and helps us to make decisions."[133]

The Colombians embraced American planning methods, which are much more detailed and systematic than prior Colombian planning methods. They have adopted the U.S. Army's Military Decision Making Process and other military planning processes, although most Colombian officers have said that these processes have been modified based on the peculiarities of Colombia's situation. With their emphasis on using information to drive logically towards a conclusion, these processes have made the Colombians more rigorous in their thinking and decision-making.

The education of Colombian officers at American military institutions contributed to the development of more rigorous operational and strategic thinking in the Colombian armed forces. Year-long courses promoted the absorption of American ways of analysis and problem solving. General Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle, who served as army commander and then commander of all the armed forces, credits his time at the U.S. Army Infantry School and U.S. National War College as the inspiration for several of his most important initiatives. His study of the U.S. Marine Combined Action Program of the Vietnam War, for example, influenced his implementation of the *soldados campesinos* program. His attendance of a course on joint warfare at the National War College helped guide reforms that increased interoperability among Colombia's armed forces.[134]

U.S. assistance also promoted independent and creative thinking within the Colombian security forces. Ironically, the absorption of U.S. open-mindedness led to greater scrutiny of U.S. doctrine and advice and a willingness to generate new ideas that did not conform to U.S. conventional wisdom. The Colombian military leadership discerned a flaw in much of the U.S. thinking on counterinsurgency—the overwhelming preoccupation with guerrillas. When military forces dispersed to contend with guerrillas in accordance with the U.S. conventional wisdom, they rendered themselves more vulnerable to devastating attack by conventionally organized forces, as they lacked mass and centralized command and control. As the insurgents had learned from Mao Zedong, conventional warfare was essential to the ultimate defeat of the government forces and the conquest of its cities. To thwart the FARC's conventional operations, the Colombian military had to develop the ability to mass forces and firepower rapidly and in overwhelming strength.

The U.S. emphasis on human rights in training and education altered cultural attitudes towards human rights. U.S. special operations soldiers provided much of this training and education, over a period of several decades.

As warriors and as representatives of the world's greatest military power, they enjoyed the respect of Colombian officers and helped alter a military culture that had traditionally demonstrated less concern than U.S. military culture for issues of human rights. Better treatment of the population by the Colombian security forces led the citizenry to cooperate more willingly with the government and to lose interest in supporting the insurgents.

The withholding of aid to Colombian forces because of human rights violations was much less effective than training and education in promoting human rights. This practice, stipulated by the Leahy Laws, prevented U.S. forces from training and educating the units that most needed training and education. The conditioning of aid on human rights records undermined the Colombian security forces during the perilous years of 1996 to 1998, contributing to a succession of major defeats that put the country's survival in jeopardy.

The Leahy Laws also impaired relations between American and Colombian personnel. From the start, the Colombians considered Leahy vetting to be a gross insult by foreigners who understood little about actual conditions on the ground. When human rights violations, real and reported, fell sharply in the early 2000s, the Colombians deemed it evidence enough that they had reached the point of self-sufficiency on human rights, and were disgusted by the insistence of the Americans that the Leahy vetting procedures were still required.[135] Many Colombian and U.S. military personnel reported that Leahy vetting blacklisted Colombian units based on unverified accusations of human rights violations, some of them planted by the FARC to neutralize effective Colombian units.

American cultural attitudes towards corruption have had some effect on the leadership of the Colombian government. Corruption levels have declined in recent decades, but have not fallen to those of the world's most advanced countries. In 2012, Colombia ranked 94th out of 174 nations on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.[136]

As the Colombian government gained in tactical proficiency and developed a large cadre of qualified tactical trainers, its most important needs for foreign training shifted to higher organizational levels and strategic subjects. Unfortunately, USSOF were not well prepared to accommodate those needs. ODAs were highly suited to advising companies and battalions, but their members were too inexperienced to mentor commanders at the brigade level or above. U.S. doctrine called for an ODA to train a partner-nation battalion,

for training battalions is critical for modestly capable partner forces. Partner forces that have attained high proficiency at the battalion level, however, need different types of support.

The history of U.S. involvement in Colombia also illustrated key challenges in confronting an insurgency fueled by drug profits, a characteristic shared by some of other insurgencies. During the 1990s, the United States drew a distinction between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency and sought to limit its aid to the latter, based on the view that narcotics were critical to the United States whereas insurgency was critical only to the Colombian government. This differentiation was fundamentally flawed because it disregarded the intertwining of the drug traffickers and insurgents. By attempting to prevent the use of U.S. aid for counterinsurgency, the Clinton administration inhibited the countering of both drug trafficking and insurgency, such that by the late 1990s the insurgency reached proportions that threatened the viability of the state, necessitating subsequent large-scale U.S. contributions to counterinsurgency.

Washington's preoccupation with counternarcotics, along with traditional American aversion to military involvement in domestic affairs, caused the United States to concentrate its aid on Colombia's police during the 1990s. Yet even with extensive U.S. aid, the Colombian police were not strong enough to contend with the FARC and ELN insurgents. When the insurgents possessed automatic weapons and operated in battalion strength as they were doing by the late 1990s, practicality demanded discarding inhibitions against domestic use of military forces. The Pastrana and Uribe administrations recognized the necessity of involving the military in both counternarcotics and counterinsurgency, and of integrating the police into the military's counterinsurgency campaigns. Eventually, after the 9/11 attacks, the United States recognized these truths as well and ramped up support to Colombia's military forces.

USSOF facilitated collaboration between the Colombian police and military, including Colombian SOF. By serving as an impartial and respected interlocutor, American special operators overcame longstanding antagonisms between the police and the military, a particularly valuable achievement in a country where the law compelled the military to rely on the police for key tasks like detentions and sensitive site exploitation. The antagonisms remain strong in much of the police and military, which demonstrates that U.S. assistance has served only as a temporary bridge rather than a permanent

fix but at the same time indicates that continued U.S. assistance would be helpful in this regard.

USSOF personnel also assumed important advisory roles in governance and development. Since the 1990s, SOF civil affairs teams have worked in areas of Colombia that USAID and other civilian U.S. agencies avoided because of security conditions, leaving them as the vanguard of governance and development in many of the areas most important to the counterinsurgency. They have served as the eyes and ears for civilian agencies that intended to move in as security conditions improved. By the time the civilian agencies were ready to enter an area, the civil affairs personnel had identified the key government officials and established relationships with them, which expedited civilian agency activities.

In Colombia, as in many other countries, the roles and missions of U.S. civil affairs units have been a matter of considerable debate. A large amount of civil affairs resources have been dedicated to quick-impact projects such as construction and medcaps. While such projects have had some short-term value, they have not made major contributions to long-term capacity building, and hence their utility is questionable at best. The employment of civil affairs personnel as trainers and advisors to the Colombian government has been more fruitful. They have helped Colombian military units plan and implement governance and development initiatives in concert with security operations. They have provided training and advising to local civil administrators as well, but only as an adjunct to their main mission of supporting the Colombian armed forces.[137]

Colombian officers have cited education of local youths as the most critical aspect of development, as far as defeating the FARC and other hostile groups is concerned. Schools and libraries are altering the worldview of a new generation of rural Colombians, which has made them more interested in liberal democracy and less sympathetic to the insurgents. This generation, now in its twenties, has demonstrated a willingness to support the government that was lacking in preceding generations. In theory, rural education belongs to the Ministry of Education and not the Ministry of Defense, but the Ministry of Education is often absent from dangerous areas, leaving the task to civil affair units and nongovernmental organizations.

Plan Colombia demonstrated the inadequacy of some conventional approaches to development and governance, with large implications for SOF and the broader U.S. Government community. U.S. civilian agencies

attempted to halt coca production by funding development and governance initiatives that encouraged cultivation of other crops. But when the Colombian government attempted to implement these programs in areas where the insurgents maintained an armed presence, insurgent fighters used their weapons to drive governmental personnel away and prevent the farmers from abandoning coca. Convincing people to switch crops worked only after the government had improved security to such an extent that civil administrators could move freely and farmers did not fear insurgent reprisals.

For a time, some American leaders wanted to focus U.S. and Colombian SOF resources exclusively on high-value targeting, in the belief that broader assistance to Colombian forces for area security was overly ambitious and would spread resources too thinly. Debilitating the insurgent leadership would bring the insurgency to manageable levels, they maintained. USSOF training of elite forces and U.S. spending on airlift for elite forces did in fact enhance the government's capability to conduct offensive operations against insurgent forces and high-value targets. The elite forces, both military and police, captured and killed substantial numbers of insurgents, year after year.

The concentration of effort on elite forces, however, also had a number of adverse consequences. U.S. support for a plethora of elite organizations dedicated to high-value targeting led at times to an excessive reliance on high-value targeting, and to the neglect of units assigned to area security. The proliferation of elite forces also resulted in a diffusion of resources and intelligence and duplication of effort. The expanded need for manpower to man these units necessitated a reduction in quality standards.

The high-value targeting operations conducted by the elite units did not bring the insurgents to their knees. "You can't win this war simply by killing high-value targets," said one U.S. military officer who has spent many years working with the elite Colombian units assigned to high-value targeting. "We've been killing FARC leaders for decades, and yet we still haven't defeated the FARC."[138]

Some theorists have cited the strategic ineffectiveness of high-value targeting as proof that the insurgent leadership is not the insurgent "center of gravity," and have argued instead that the insurgent networks or the people are the true center of gravity. The real problem with high-value targeting, however, was the inability of the Colombian government to eliminate a sufficient quantity of insurgent leaders. Although insurgent leaders have been captured or killed in considerable numbers, the insurgents possess a large

enough pool of human capital to replace their losses without serious degradation in leadership quality. If the government were able to remove all of the insurgent leadership from the battlefield in one day, the FARC would indeed collapse. It has a relatively hierarchical organizational structure, and as in any organization only a select number of its members are well-suited to positions of leadership. But the Colombian government's limitations, effective insurgent countermeasures, and the ability of the insurgents to obtain support from civilian communities have prevented the elimination of leaders at rates exceeding the enemy's replacement capacity.[139]

President Alvaro Uribe agreed to the bolstering of elite units focused on high-value targeting, but he wanted to spread resources more broadly across his security forces in order to conduct a robust counterinsurgency aimed at securing most of the population. While offensive operations are an essential element in counterinsurgency, Uribe saw that they needed to be balanced with population security. If few forces were left in the populous areas, the insurgents could infiltrate into those areas to influence the population and obtain resources from them. Frustrating that insurgent tactic required the development of tens of thousands of *soldados campesinos*, *carabineros*, and light infantrymen.

The MILGP agreed with Uribe, as did an increasing number of members of the SOF community. For several years in the early 2000s, the 7th SFG(A) worked with Colombian forces beyond the traditional elite forces. It had to discontinue most of that work, however, with the sharp decrease in USSOF presence in Colombia as the 7th Group was rotated into the USCENTCOM area of operations.[140] While that downsizing removed some of the support for broad-based improvements, it also gave the MILGP a larger role in security assistance, which ensured that American assistance would continue to be spread broadly across the Colombian forces. Uribe proved to be correct on the feasibility and value of a full-blown counterinsurgency.

Although the combination of effective direct action and population security operations has caused great harm to the insurgents, it has been unable to destroy the insurgents. The government does not presently have enough forces to secure the population entirely, permitting the FARC to continue obtaining sustenance from the population. The FARC also retains one of the most effective countermeasures in the insurgency tool kit, the use of foreign sanctuaries. So long as the FARC can use adjacent territory to rest, recuperate, and resupply, its leadership will be able to continue operations of some sort inside Colombia.

7. Recommendations for Future Engagement

The importance of local conditions and the diversity of conditions from one conflict to the next necessitate great caution in prescribing general recommendations derived from a single case. Nevertheless, our familiarity with a broad range of conflicts has convinced us that some valid general recommendations can be derived from the Colombian experience. Enumerating these recommendations is valuable not only in itself, but also as a counterpoint to existing recommendations based on Colombia, for some of those recommendations are, in our view, inadequate or incomplete.

1. Allocate assistance based on the quality of partner-nation political and military leadership.

Partner-nation political and military leaders who are competent and dedicated most often make good use of American training, education, and support. Leaders lacking those attributes usually squander American assistance. Therefore, the United States stands to receive a much higher return on its investments if it concentrates assistance on countries, organizations, and units with good leaders. Strategic considerations at times require that the United States assist nations with weak leadership, and indeed weak leadership is usually a major reason why nations need outside help in the first place, but even in these cases the United States can and should take into consideration the inefficiency of working with weak leaders in deciding how best to distribute scarce resources across countries and within countries.

2. Maintain a persistent SOF presence in countries of strategic importance because effective capacity building requires decades of training, education, and support.

Building partner-nation capacity demands inculcating not only skills, but also cultural norms, for culture is vital to organizational effectiveness. The generation that holds political and military power in a country is sufficiently advanced in years to be set in its ways culturally, so dramatic improvements in partner-nation capacity usually require the acculturation of a new

generation of leaders. As the Colombian experience demonstrated, this acculturation process requires decades of persistent exposure of a younger generation to U.S. training, education, and support.

3. Do not rely on short-term metrics as the principal tools for assessing capacity building activities, because they do not accurately gauge the impact of those activities.

Most of the statistics on capacity building that are readily available are measures of performance, such as the number of individuals trained or the number of hours spent by advisors with their counterparts, which tell little about the quality or effectiveness of the engagement. Investment in generational development does not bear obvious results in the short term, yet in the long run it yields the greatest returns. Even those long-term returns cannot be quantified with any precision; no set of statistics can demonstrate convincingly the transformation of Colombia's armed forces, but the improvements are nevertheless very real to any observer. For the same reason, quantitative monitoring is not a very useful management tool when seeking to ensure that U.S. assistance is effective. The only way for the United States to ensure effective capacity building is to field leaders who are committed to the mission, cognizant of partner-nation requirements, and capable of supervising their subordinates.

4. Concentrate U.S. Government financial and human resources on partner-nation training and educational institutions.

Training and educational institutions in partner nations develop the human capital that is essential to capacity building. Partner-nation leaders are often concentrated at these institutions for extended periods, providing ideal opportunities for the United States to confer skills and attitudes. These institutions also produce many of the partner-nation individuals who will themselves provide training elsewhere, so opportunities to "train the trainer" abound.

5. Identify promising partner-nation leaders early in their careers and help prepare them for higher positions of leadership.

In many governments and military organizations, leadership positions have traditionally been awarded based on family connections or political

considerations, rather than on ability, much to the detriment of institutional quality. By cultivating young Colombians and mentoring Colombian institutions, USSOF have been able to help highly capable Colombians rise to senior leadership positions. National political leaders are the chief arbiters of senior appointments, but the United States can ensure that those political leaders have a strong pool of candidates from which to choose.

6. Concentrate SOF personnel on providing advanced skills rather than basic skills.

Using SOF to provide training in basic marksmanship and other rudimentary skills is generally an inefficient use of U.S. Government resources. Partner nations that have received extensive U.S. training in the past should be capable of providing instruction in basic skills themselves. For nations that require basic skills, whether for their special operations forces or general-purpose forces, U.S. conventional forces offer a better alternative, since they are large in number and the U.S. Government has not spent as much time or money on their advanced skills. The formation of the U.S. Army's regionally aligned brigades should make more conventional forces available for this type of training.

7. Employ contractors to meet immediate aviation needs while training partner personnel in aviation functions.

Aircraft can be highly valuable in counterinsurgency, counternarcotics, and nearly all other types of security missions. In countries with large expanses of territory or formidable terrain obstacles, fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft slash the time required to move troops over long distances from days to hours, drastically improving offensive and defensive capabilities. Aircraft can also bring heavy firepower and precision munitions to bear on areas that cannot be reached by artillery fire. The operation and maintenance of aircraft demands a large set of high-end skills, many of which are in short supply in partner nations, and developing those skills takes many years. Where waiting for years is not a viable option, immediate needs can be met by employing expatriate contractors to perform aviation tasks, while AFSOC or other U.S. Government elements pursue the training mission.

8. Maintain preparedness for an insurgent shift from guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare.

Mao Zedong and other prominent insurgency theorists have stressed the need for insurgents to conduct conventional warfare in the latter stages of conflict. Only conventional military forces are strong enough to seize the major population centers of most nations. Much American counterinsurgency doctrine, however, concentrates on counter-guerrilla warfare, which can lead partner nations to make insufficient preparations for escalation to positional war. In general, partner nations need to develop capabilities for meeting both guerrilla and conventional threats.

9. Provide training and education that emphasize respect for human rights, in a manner that does not demean the partner nation.

The international reputation and moral authority of the U.S. military gives it credibility with partner nation forces on the subject of human rights. Partner-nation units that have received extensive exposure to U.S. human rights training and education have generally committed fewer abuses than other units. U.S. personnel must take care, however, to avoid appearing "holier than thou," as partner-nation personnel are less likely to heed the advice of individuals whom they perceive as belittling their unit, institution, or nation. Emphasizing examples of human rights violators in the United States or countries besides the partner nation is a good way of minimizing offenses to partner-nation personnel.

10. Provide assistance to partner-nation units with past records of human rights violations if they are no longer led by human rights violators.

The withholding of aid to units because of past human rights violations has not been an effective means of improving human rights practices. In light of the U.S. successes in promoting human rights among partner-nation forces, the provision of assistance is the best remedy. While providing aid to units currently led by war criminals is likely to be unproductive as well as morally repugnant, many units that have been blacklisted through Leahy vetting possess leaders untainted by the crimes of the past and are deserving of support. This issue goes beyond the authorities of SOF leadership, as the

substance and interpretation of the Leahy Laws would need to be altered. The DOD does not have the authority to change the vetting policy or how it is implemented, but it does have the ability to make known the implications of the policy to members of Congress, who do possess that authority.

11. Work at higher levels in the partner-nation organizational structures as partner-nation capacity improves.

In countries where USSOF do not have a long history of engagement, providing assistance to small units and junior officers is a highly useful means of developing a core group of leaders. Working at higher levels in such organizations may be politically impossible. As the U.S. assistance matures, USSOF will likely receive opportunities to provide assistance at the battalion level and above. SOF should seek to shift the weight of its assistance to higher levels in order to provide critical skills and influence leaders at higher levels. ODA leaders do not have sufficient experience and status to serve as mentors to partner nation leaders at higher levels, but they can train staffs at higher echelons, and can serve as a conduit for the provision of U.S. embassy assets.

12. Assign active duty or retired U.S. officers of O-4 rank or above to serve as advisors to partner-nation officers.

Most of the SOF officers assigned as advisors to partner-nation forces are company grade officers, and hence their experiences are limited to the tactical level. Field grade officers are needed to provide advice on command and staff activities at the battalion level and above. A more limited number of retired general officers would be valuable as mentors to partner-nation generals, which would not only provide needed advice but also enhance American influence. Any senior advisors would need to be screened carefully based on experience, knowledge, and personality, and they ought to be deployed for at least six months.

13. Employ SOF to help facilitate coordination between the military, law enforcement, and administrative organizations of partner nations.

In most countries, the military, police, and civil agencies do not work well together, on account of indifference, rivalry, or animosity among one another. Because USSOF often work with each of these parties and are respected as

impartial arbiters, they can serve as facilitators of coordination and, ideally, collaborative planning and operations. To perform this function, they need full awareness of the U.S. country team strategy, which has not always been the case, either in Colombia or in many other countries.

14. Prepare SOF to train, educate, and support foreign military forces for internal defense operations.

While the U.S. military has not participated in large-scale internal security operations since the late nineteenth century, the military forces of many less well developed countries must do so because civil security organizations are incapable of handling severe threats to the state. USSOF and other elements of the U.S. Government should therefore support military forces for internal defense. They should do so even in countries where the national government is not yet in peril of falling, in order to be prepared for drastic deteriorations in security of the sort that befell Colombia in the late 1990s. SOF training and education should devote more time to the culture and politics of partner nations in order to maximize the value that SOF provide to partner nation forces, in foreign internal defense and other fields.

15. Prepare SOF to train, educate, and support foreign police forces, particularly police forces with paramilitary capabilities.

The U.S. Department of State and Department of Justice seldom have enough personnel deployed overseas to undertake large-scale police training. SOF can help fill police training shortfalls with training in paramilitary skills and select law enforcement skills that have been honed in Afghanistan and Iraq, such as sensitive site exploitation and high-value targeting. Such assistance is especially valuable in countries where the partner-nation military is prohibited from performing key internal defense tasks, as was true in Colombia.

16. Employ SOF to help partner nations develop large civil affairs capabilities.

In countries with formidable internal security problems, civilian governmental agencies are often unwilling or unable to conduct activities in insecure areas. In such circumstances, only the military can perform governance and development tasks. At present, few military organizations outside of NATO possess robust civil affairs capabilities, and therefore they need external

assistance to execute governance and development effectively. U.S. civil affairs can do much to help partner nation military organizations build their civil affairs capabilities, particularly if junior U.S. officers are supported by more senior officers with the experience and status to influence senior partner-nation officers.

17. Focus USSOF civil affairs on long-term capacity building in governance and select components of development, rather than on quick-impact projects.

USSOF civil affairs personnel have been effective in building partner-nation capacity by providing prolonged training and education to foreign civil affairs units. Most valuable have been training and education in the areas that are most pertinent to counterinsurgency—local governance and local education. By contrast, quick-impact projects such as construction or medcaps have generally done little to build partner-nation capacity, and have rarely generated enough popular enthusiasm to ensure long-term commitment to the government.

18. When combating narcoinsurgency and other forms of insurgency, secure the population prior to the implementation of governance, development, and other non-military programs.

Some counterinsurgency theorists have contended that security should be achieved simply by implementing governance and development, on the premise that insurgent violence is the result of political, social, or economic grievances. But this theory has consistently failed in practice, in Colombia and elsewhere, because insurgent leaders have employed violence systematically against governance and development initiatives in areas that the counterinsurgents do not dominate militarily. Therefore, security forces must establish a modicum of security prior to the initiation of governance and development.

19. Employ a combination of precision offensive operations and population-security operations when combating strong insurgencies.

The FARC has withstood surgical direct-action operations when unaccompanied by population security operations, as has been true in numerous other countries. Where insurgents are capable of mobilizing civilians in their

support, they can be defeated only through a combination of precision strikes and population security operations. Securing the population on a sustained basis is essential to depriving the insurgents of the people's assistance and implementing governance and security programs that mobilize the people against the insurgents.

20. Employ USSOF to train, educate, and support security forces beyond the elite forces, particularly in countries confronted by insurgency.

Because population security is critical to overall success in most counter-insurgencies and because it is labor-intensive, large numbers of effective conventional forces are needed. USSOF are usually too small in number to train conventional units in large quantities, but they can train the trainers of those conventional forces, as the 7th SFG(A) did for a time in the early 2000s. They can be especially valuable in providing advanced skills training to the conventional forces. In addition, USSOF can be employed effectively in providing training to support units, particularly in civil-military operations and military information support operations. This recommendation may not apply in countries at low risk for insurgency, since their needs and U.S. interests may call for a narrower set of security forces.

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