

US Military Intervention against the FARC Insurgency and Plan Colombia: Misrepresentation of the Colombian Conflict

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A week and a half ago news emerged from Havana that the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Colombian government had reached a framework for a final [peace agreement](#) to be signed within six months. This was hailed as a breakthrough in the half-century-old conflict and an opportunity to bring peace to the people of Colombia. But by adopting the government's narrative, mainstream media have failed to recognize the primary cause of the violence and the inevitability that it will continue in the future.

The decades-long policy of the Colombian government has been a national security strategy of counterinsurgency, developed in the late 1950s under the sponsorship of the US military. The goal of the US government was to maintain a business-friendly political system that would implement economic policies amenable to multinational corporations and foreign capital. Resistance to such policies was deemed subversion, and people who sympathized with such resistance were branded as internal enemies to be eliminated or neutralized by military means.

The narrative of the national security doctrine holds that if the insurgent threat is eliminated, then peace will be restored. The implicit assumption is that the FARC rebels have always been the side standing in the way of peace. According to this interpretation, when the FARC initiated their military operations the state was acting for the benefit of the nation as a whole by organizing a counter response.

But this narrative is historically inaccurate. The Colombian conflict is not a battle of society at large against a group of guerillas, but a battle of a small group of elites controlling the state apparatus against the majority of the population.

“As in many other Latin American countries, we can find the seeds of present-day social inequality and strife in the concentration of Colombia’s land and resources under the control of a tiny minority, matched by the progressive dispossession of the majority of people, which originated with colonialism in the sixteenth century,” explains Jasmin Hristov in her book [Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia](#). [1]

After the FARC developed as the armed wing of the Communist Party in Colombia, the counterinsurgency doctrine – developed by the US military and codified in manuals distributed as early as the 1960s – taught the US’s Colombian counterparts to view any advocacy for social justice or democratic reform as a form of Communist insurgency. In addition to armed rebels, clergy, academics, labor leaders, human rights workers, and other members of civil society became potential insurgent targets.

To further extend their reach into Colombian society, the government legally authorized paramilitarism in 1965 with Plan Lazlo to form “civilian defense forces” armed and incorporated into the Colombian military system. [2] These forces serve the government’s goal of preserving the status quo by carrying out their dirty work through the use of death squads, assassinations, torture, intimidation and disappearances while providing cover and the appearance of distance from the state itself.

The Colombian conflict cannot be understood without recognizing the true nature of the actors involved and the interests they represent. “The paramilitary has never been, and is even less so now, a third actor (the state and the guerillas being the other two), as portrayed in mainstream security discourses,” writes Hristov. [3]

Writing in the [New York Times](#) after the peace agreement was announced, Ernesto Londoño declared the “three-way fight among guerilla factions, government forces and right-wing paramilitary bands that often acted as proxies for the state had killed more than 220,000 people and displaced an estimated 5.7 million.”

Dan Kovalik, Professor of International Human Rights at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, disputes the notion that paramilitaries merely occasionally serve as proxies: “It is impossible to talk about the paramilitaries as separate from the Colombian state, for the Colombian state helped create the paramilitaries, and human rights groups have concluded year after year that the state has provided them with weapons, logistical support and has carried out joint operations with them, Even federal courts confronted with this questions under the Alien Tort Claims Act have concluded that the paramilitaries are sufficiently integrated with the state that their misdeeds constitute state action.”

Aside from inaccurately describing the fighting, Londoño’s statement uses statistics about the cumulative violence without describing who holds responsibility for the deaths and displacements. Later in his editorial, Londoño implicitly blames the FARC for the majority of the violence: “Dozens of victims traveled to Havana to speak about abuses they endured at the hands of the guerilla leaders. Some implicated government forces in brutal acts... The special war tribunals the government intends to start adjudicating crimes will be dismissed as kangaroo courts by those who would have favored a military defeat of the FARC.”

If one accepts the national security narrative that most violence by the government amounts to collateral damage as a result of reaction to insurgent aggression, then guerillas would be responsible for the majority of deaths and injuries. But this is hardly the case.

Kovalik notes that “human rights groups have consistently concluded that the Colombian state and its paramilitary allies commit the lion’s share of the human rights violations in that country – in the worst years, at least 80% of the abuses can be attributed to these forces.”

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Londoño also credits US policy with providing the impetus to achieving peace: “Washington’s forceful intervention in the war, an intervention that began in the late 1990s, enabled the Colombian government to weaken the FARC and ultimately set the stage for peace negotiations.”

Washington’s counterinsurgency policy is seen not only as an instrument for peace, but as the primary factor enabling its achievement. This is stunning historical revisionism that

portrays the instigator and sponsor of massive violence that has lasted decades as an honest broker for ending this violence.

In reality, Washington's intervention began 40 years earlier than Londoño claims, and it created the war that has raged ever since. By any objective measure, US policy in Colombia has been an abject failure. Under US direction, funding and training, the Colombian state has had one of the [worst human rights records](#) in the hemisphere. Many human rights organizations attest to this, and have demanded an end to US military aid to Colombia.

"Year after year US policy has ignored the evidence and the cries of the United Nations, Colombian and international non-governmental organizations and the people of Colombia. Plan Colombia is a failure in every respect and human rights in Colombia will not improve until there is a fundamental shift in US foreign policy," writes [Amnesty International USA](#).

A [Human Rights Watch report](#) declared that: "all international security assistance should be conditioned on explicit actions by the Colombian Government to sever links, at all levels, between the Colombian military and paramilitary groups. Abuses directly attributed to members of the Colombian military have decreased in recent years, but over the same period the number and scale of abuses attributed to paramilitary groups operating with the military's acquiescence or open support have skyrocketed."

Bogotá professor and historian [Renán Vega Cantor](#), in a study of U.S. involvement in Colombia, writes that: "State terrorism that has been perpetual in Colombia since the end of the 1940s feeds off the military support and financing of the United States, as much as the interests of the dominant Creole classes, to preserve their wealth and power and deny the fulfillment of elemental economic and social reforms that are redistributive."

What the New York Times and the mainstream media miss in their analysis is that the current neoliberal Colombian sociopolitical system necessitates the continuance of violence to accommodate capital.

"The guerilla was not the cause of the Colombian conflict but rather one of its symptoms, and simultaneously became a contributing factor in the sense that its very existence has provided the ideological substance for the pretext and justification behind state-sanctioned violence and militarization, Thus unfortunately the presence of the guerilla has been used by the powerful to legitimate the onslaught on social forces that challenge the power of the dominant classes," writes Hristov in her latest book, [Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism: Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond](#). [4]

Hristov says that in order for the government to meet FARC's demands, they would have to invest in social programs at the expense of the military-security apparatus currently in place. But since these systems serve the neoliberal economic restructuring that funnels land and resources from the masses to the tiny elite minority, it would be naive to assume this will happen.

"Even in a post-FARC era the state would always have a pretext, such as BACRIM [criminal bands with roots in nominally disarmed paramilitary groups] or the existence of other guerilla groups, to maintain its high level of militarization," Hristov writes. [5]

The portrayal of the Colombian conflict in the New York Times and other mainstream media replicates state propaganda, in the form of the national security doctrine, while failing to

account for the inherent violence of the economic system in Colombia that has driven the perpetual militarism and coercion in the country.

While any agreement offering the prospect of decreased bloodshed is encouraging, the fact that the Colombian state continues to abide by the Washington Consensus and its neoliberal socioeconomic model sadly signifies that the country is inevitably headed for continued violence, dispossession, and suffering by the vast majority of the population.

When the Colombian government and the western media recognize that Washington intervention exacerbates the violence, rather than helps minimize it, then possibly Colombia can begin to extricate itself and pursue a course that will enable the Colombian people to achieve lasting peace and social justice.

Matt Peppe writes about politics, U.S. foreign policy and Latin America on his [blog](#). You can follow him on [twitter](#).

References

[1] Hristov, Jasmin. *Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia*. Ohio University Press; 1 edition, 2009. Kindle edition.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Hristov, Jasmin. *Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism: Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond*. London: Pluto Press, 2014. (pg. 153)

[5] Hristov, 2014 (pg. 157)

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