



# A MODEL COUNTERINSURGENCY: *Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC*

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Little is heard of U.S. involvement in counterinsurgency (COIN) in Colombia. That which does appear is often inaccurate and ideologically skewed. Yet progress in America's "number three war" has been significant and appears all the more impressive given the increasing difficulties experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What is noteworthy is that the approach being used is "classic counterinsurgency." In this, there is considerable irony, because many of the significant aspects of the campaign were developed and implemented by American-educated leaders, assisted, both directly and indirectly, by Americans. That the Colombians have improved upon the original foundation makes examination of the case all the more compelling and urgent.

## Background to Conflict

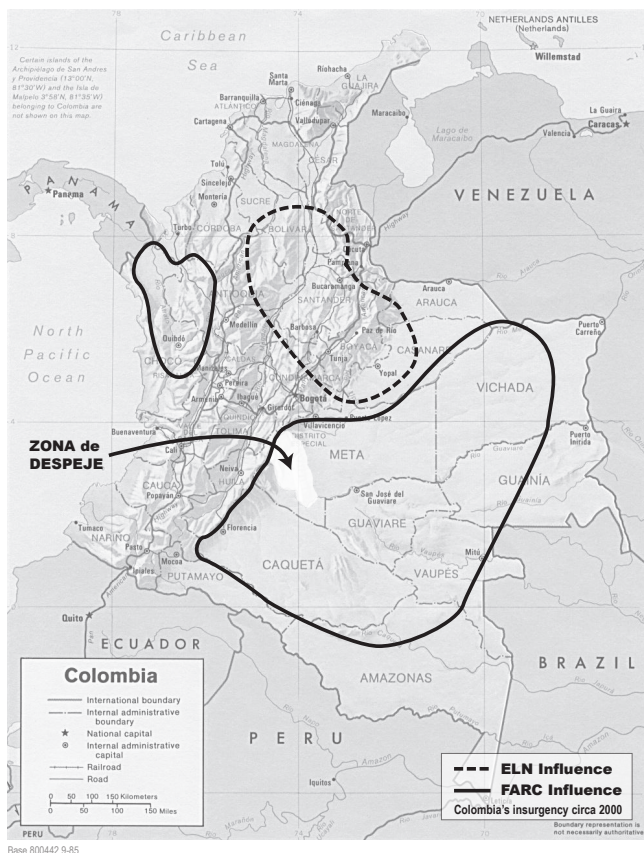
Upon taking office in August 2002, President Alvaro Uribe Velez of Colombia was faced with a difficult strategic situation that required a fresh approach. This was forthcoming in a new policy document, the *Democratic Security and Defense Policy*, which radically reoriented the state's posture from negotiating with to confronting its principal security challenge, an insurgency inextricably linked to the narcotics trade and other criminal activity.

Although multifaceted in its dimensions, the new policy effectively assigned the cutting-edge role to the Colombian armed forces, most prominently the dominant service, the army. It required the forces to pursue COIN aggressively against a well-funded, entrenched adversary within a complex international environment decidedly unsympathetic to internal war campaigns. Regardless, the armed forces performed in impressive fashion.

These same armed forces had already set the stage for the shift in policy by pursuing a reform movement that had enabled them to conduct more aggressive operations even as Uribe's predecessor, President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002), had unsuccessfully sought a negotiated settlement with the main insurgent group, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), and to a lesser extent with the distant second group, *Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional*, or ELN

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PHOTO: Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez extends holiday greetings to soldiers and police. (AFP)



## Situation Prior to Uribe's Election

Lack of government leadership during the Pastrana years had left security matters to the army (*Ejército Nacional*, or COLAR); navy, of which the marines were a part; and air force. The state, in other words, did not engage in counterinsurgency. This meant that although annual military plans included a basic civic action component, they were necessarily incomplete. That this did not prove disastrous stemmed from the nature of the major security threat, FARC (ELN was essentially a law and order concern).

Committed ideologically to Marxist-Leninism, FARC had increasingly drifted to a vaguely defined "Bolivarian" populism that had little appeal in Colombia. Polls consistently found the movement with minimal popular support or even sympathy. Its efforts at armed propaganda had fallen off to nothing after a mid-1980s high, and it was increasingly corrupted by reliance for funding upon criminal activity—drugs, kidnapping, and extortion (in that order, perhaps \$250 million total). Consequently, its approach to insurgency, modeled after "people's war" doctrine of the Vietnamese variant filtered through, in particular, the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) of El Salvador, had become a perversion of the original and had more in common with the *focismo* of Che Guevara than Maoist armed political action built upon mass

(National Liberation Army). Continued combat was necessary because neither FARC nor ELN altered their military posture during negotiations. To the contrary, FARC used Bogotá's provision of what was supposed to be demilitarized space, the *Zona de Despeje* (or *Area de Distension*), to facilitate an intensification of the conflict via main force warfare while it continued to conduct terror and guerrilla actions.

Thus, Colombia's COIN approach during the Pastrana years was not the result of deliberation and consultation within the government, but of an uneasy, unstated compromise, as Pastrana and his intimates negotiated with a duplicitous insurgent leadership on one hand, while on the other, they confronted the security force's growing unwillingness to accept the administration's increasingly discredited strategic calculus. When, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, Pastrana attempted to push through a second *Zona*, this one for the ELN, he faced a virtual popular revolt in the designated area. Cutting his losses prior to the first round of that year's presidential elections, Pastrana ordered the military in February 2002 to reoccupy the original *Zona*.



In this captured photo, a FARC sapper applies natural camouflage. FARC sappers have in the past been trained by Vietnamese, Cuban, and FMLN operators. They specialize in infiltration attacks.

courtesy of author

mobilization.

FARC's reliance upon the normal apparatus necessary to support armed campaigning—base areas and mobility corridors—resulted in a dual center of gravity vulnerable to Colombian military attack: the insurgent units themselves and their sources of sustenance. Allowing for the low numbers organized in a nationwide support base (frequently inspired by terror), the armed units basically comprised the movement.

FARC's vulnerabilities had been recognized by the new military leadership that emerged following Pastrana's inauguration. They had crafted their approach to neutralize FARC's strategy even as they instituted a far-reaching and comprehensive military reform process that affected everything from recruiting (a largely draftee COLAR became one-third volunteer, with key units essentially 100 percent "professionals"), to military schooling, to assignment policies, to structure, to operational art. The result was a reclaiming of the strategic initiative by the time of Uribe's advent.

Military reform was central to all that occurred during the Pastrana years. A combination of internal dislocation caused by the growing drug trade, U.S. efforts to "punish" Colombia during the Samper administration (1994-98) for inadequate "cooperation" in counter-narcotics (CN) efforts, and mediocre senior military leadership had all combined to cripple a sound military. Reform, primarily a COLAR project, touched upon virtually every aspect of the institution, but focused mainly on revitalizing the military education system, turning lessons learned into operational and organizational modifications, and developing sound NCO leadership to enhance small unit performance. Simultaneously, greater attention was paid to human rights instruction, information warfare, and joint and special operations.

The profound institutional and strategic shifts outlined above occurred as the United States, in the aftermath of 9-11, altered the approach of the Clinton years (1992-2000) and dropped the artificial barrier that had separated counter-narcotics (CN) from COIN. This was critical because, during the Clinton administrations, the war had been artificially divided in accordance with the demands of American domestic politics. Washington was compelled to focus upon CN to the virtual exclusion

		<b>U.S. Contribution</b> <b>\$ 1,318.6 Billion</b>	
<b>Support for Efforts in Southern Colombia</b>		<b>\$416.9 M</b>	
<b>Support for Interdiction (includes FOLs*)</b>		<b>\$378.1 M</b>	
<b>Support for Colombia National Police</b>		<b>\$115.6 M</b>	
<b>Alternative/Economic Development</b>		<b>\$106.0 M</b>	
<b>Human Rights/Judicial Reform</b>		<b>\$122.0 M</b>	
<b>Regional Support</b>		<b>\$180.0 M</b>	

**Table 1. U.S. Allocations for *Plan Colombia*.**

(\$ figures derived from Colombian military briefing)

of COIN. Only where COIN objectives could be subsumed within CN action was U.S. aid allowed to assist in the security campaign.

Consequently, the U.S. contribution to Plan Colombia, a multifaceted effort to identify Colombia's critical areas for action to facilitate national revitalization, was structured wholly to support CN (for projects and allocations, see Table 1 below). Its centerpiece was an American-funded, -equipped, and -trained CN brigade manned by COLAR personnel but dedicated entirely, for legal reasons contained in the implementing legislation, to support of eradication. The brigade was severely limited in its operational and geographic scope, even though it had several times the number of helicopters in the entire COLAR aviation inventory.

Of greater consequence than the lack of fully relevant support was the battlefield fragmentation and distortion—the disruption to unity of effort—that the U.S. strategy entailed. Committed to assistance in the only fashion politically viable, and in an America forced to focus upon the supply side of its own drug problem, U.S. officials, forces, and individuals tended to embrace the flawed logic that Colombia's problem was narcotics, with the security battle merely a by-product. Insurgent reality was stood on its head.

American urgings that Colombian armed action focus upon a narcotics center of gravity were rejected by the military's leaders (often in conflict with the Pastrana administration). As far as they were concerned, U.S. input during this period was appreciated, but tangential to the real issue, COIN.

Committed to area domination by regular (largely draftee) brigades and divisions, with strike forces organic to each of these units, COLAR would



	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
INC/ACI*	57	200.1	686.4	48	243.5	412	313	313
INC/ACI†	0.5	5.75	208	0	134	168	150	150
FMF	0	0.44	0.02	4.49	0	93	98.45	99.2
IMET	0.863	0.92	0.9	1.04	1.165	1.676	1.7	1.7
ATA	0	0	0	0	25	3.28	0.2	3.92
506	41.1	58	0	0	0	0	0	0
1004	11.78	35.89	68.71	150	84.9	136	110.2	110.2
1033	2.17	13.45	7.23	22.3	4	13.2	13.2	13.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>113.4</b>	<b>314.6</b>	<b>971.3</b>	<b>225.8</b>	<b>492.6</b>	<b>827.2</b>	<b>686.8</b>	<b>691.2</b>

Legend: ATA, Anti-Terrorism Assistance; FMF, Foreign Military Financing; IMET, International Military Education and Training; INC/ACI, Int'l Narcotic Control/Andean Counterdrug Initiative (\*funding for counter-drug arms transfers, training, services; †funding for counter-drug economic and social aid); 506, Emergency Drawdowns; 1004, CN from Defense Budget; 1003, Riverine CN from Defense Budget; Not included—ETA, Excess Defense Articles (\$10.1 million total); ESF, Economic Support Funds (\$7.0 million total). (figures in millions of dollars)

**Table 2. U.S. Assistance, 1997–2005.** (as briefed by the U.S. State Department)

deploy but limited additional forces to augment the CN brigade. The focus of the internal war, in its estimation, had to be the population, 95 to 96 percent of which lived *outside* the drug-producing zones of the *llanos*, or eastern savannah.

Ironically, even the eventual drop in the bar between CN and what came to be labeled CT (for counterterrorism) assistance, did not change this situation. Although U.S. funding was impressive in raw figures (see Table 2), it was still overwhelmingly committed to a CN campaign driven by its own internal measures (most prominently, hectares of narcotics fields eliminated).<sup>1</sup> Controversial due to its reliance upon aerial spraying, the eradication effort incorporated a variety of other components, from air and riverine interdiction to alternative development, but its actual impact upon insurgent operational capabilities proved difficult to measure.

Also clouding the picture were periodicals of record in the United States that tended to lump overall U.S. aid figures into “support for the Colombian military,” thus reviving a Vietnam-era stereotype of a hapless ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) held together by American money and “advisors.” Nothing could have been further from reality in Colombia. The bulk of U.S. funding to date has gone mainly to the CN effort (e.g., 85 percent of the 2005 figure above), with only incidental impact (from this source) upon the Colombian forces. The funding that has gone directly to the Colombian military has been important, especially as dispersed through the actions and programs

of the highly regarded military assistance mission, but during the Pastrana years, Colombia’s armed forces were quite on their own in both their operations and their reforms.

Colombia’s basic military framework for waging Counterinsurgency was created by the geographical assignment of the 5 COLAR divisions (18 brigades) and a joint task force, with a division-strength national reaction force.<sup>2</sup> Of its 145,000 troops, COLAR had some 20,000 in volunteer counter guerrilla units organic to its brigades and

divisions. Altogether, the volunteer units amounted to 47 counter guerrilla battalions (*batallones contraguerrillas*, or BCG) and 3 mobile brigades (*brigades moviles*, or BRIM) each comprised of 4 BCG, for a total of approximately 59 BCG (each with approximately 40 percent of the manning of a line battalion, but with additional machine guns



A local-forces platoon, part of the Home Guard that has been key to Colombia’s successful COIN approach, prepares for an inspection prior to a mission.

courtesy of author



General Fernando Tapias Stahelin, General Jorge Enrique Mora Rangel, and General Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle, the three architects of COLAR's dramatic reform.

and mortars).

The regular formations that comprised the rest of COLAR were overwhelmingly draftee. Domination of local areas was the lynchpin of the counterinsurgent effort, and a variety of imaginative solutions were tried to maintain state presence in affected areas. Essentially, the draftee regular units were used in area domination and local operations, the BCG and BRIM to strike at targets of opportunity. Specific missions that required specific skills, such as guarding critical infrastructure or operating in urban areas, were carried out by dedicated assets, as were special operations.

But in the absence of local forces, which had fallen afoul of constitutional court restrictions and thus were disbanded, it was difficult to consolidate gains. As areas were retaken, they could not be garrisoned with home guards. Instead, regular units rotated in and out, in a perpetual shell game designed to keep FARC off balance (to a lesser extent ELN; only FARC operated with main forces).

Further complicating the situation, a legal framework that did not respond to the needs of internal war meant that all action was carried out under the provisions of peacetime civilian law. The Pastrana administration passed no emergency or anti/counter-terrorist legislation of any sort. This sometimes placed soldiers in absurd situations, particularly since the police were not available to accompany operations, being preoccupied with their own efforts to survive. Half a dozen times, for instance, towns and their police garrisons found themselves attacked by FARC forces using homemade but nonetheless potent armor.

Faced with such an array of challenges, it was a credit to the power of the military reform movement and the improvements made by its leadership that the

strategic initiative had been regained by mid-2002. This occurred because the reform movement in the dominant service, COLAR, was driven by personalities who evinced an understanding of counterinsurgency and Colombia's unique circumstances. Thus they were able, despite the state's lack of strategic

involvement, to arrest the negative trends that had emerged with growing force as early as the Samper administration (1994-98).

Most importantly, the reform leadership defeated FARC's attempt to transition to main-force warfare (i.e., mobile or maneuver warfare, stage two in the people's war framework). Using the *Zona* as the staging ground for attacks by "strategic columns" comprised of multiple battalion-strength units, FARC found itself bested by the CG (Commanding General) IV Division, MG (Major General) Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle, who worked intimately with his superior, CG COLAR (*Comandante del Ejercito*), General Jorge Enrique Mora Rangel, and CG Joint Command (*Comando General de las Fuerzas Militares*), General Fernando Tapias Stahelin.<sup>3</sup>

This trio dominated operational planning throughout the Pastrana years, with Mora eventually taking Tapias' place (upon the latter's retirement). Ospina, after serving as CG IV Division, became COLAR Director of Operations, under Mora; then IG (Inspector General) Joint Command, under Tapias, who used the IG principally as a combat inspectorate; and, finally, CG COLAR (with full general rank) when Mora moved up upon Uribe's inauguration. When Mora himself retired in November 2003, Ospina became CG Joint Command.

What these officers shared was a correct understanding of Colombia's war and a well-developed approach to institutional transformation and strategy realized in operational art. Mora and Ospina were noted for their close working relationship and the general esteem they were held in throughout the armed forces. Both had proven themselves tactically time and again as

they advanced through the junior ranks, then operationally and strategically as more senior commanders.

Ospina was apparently the most combat-decorated officer in COLAR at the time he became its CG, in addition to being universally regarded as COLAR's "brain trust" with a deep knowledge of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Working together under Tapias, Mora and Ospina fashioned highly effective COLAR annual campaign plans that forced FARC onto the defensive. Their correct appreciation of the situation, though, could not be translated into a true national counterinsurgency until Uribe's election.

## Uribe's Democratic Security and Defense Policy

A third-party candidate who won an unprecedented first-round victory in May 2002, Uribe introduced a dynamic style to security affairs that prominently included producing, early in his administration and with U.S. encouragement, the aforementioned *Democratic Security and Defense Policy* (officially released in June 2003). Unlike the Plan Colombia of the Pastrana-Clinton years (written with U.S. input), which had been a virtual catalog of national ills with proposed solutions beyond Bogota's ability to operationalize or fund, the new policy was intended to be a course of action. As such, it was built upon a fairly basic syllogism:

A. Lack of personal security is at the root of Colombia's social, economic, and political ills.

B. This lack of personal security stems from the state's absence from large swaths of the national territory.

C. Therefore, all elements of national power need to

be directed toward ending this lack of national integration.

Addressing this assessment was the policy itself, its thrust stated directly: "Security is not regarded primarily as the security of the State, nor as the security of the citizen without the assistance of the State. Rather, it is the protection of the citizen and democracy by the State with the solidarity and co-operation of the whole of society. . . . This is, in short, a policy for the protection of the population." According to the policy, citizens and the stability of the country were threatened by an explosive

combination of "terrorism; the illegal drugs trade; illicit finance; traffic of arms, ammunition, and explosives; kidnapping and extortion; and homicide."<sup>4</sup> The hitherto intractable nature of Colombia's security conundrum stemmed from the interlocking nature of these threats.

It was this dynamic at which Uribe's plan was aimed. If one course of action stands out as central to the whole, it is "consolidating control of national territory," the indispensable element of any counterinsurgency. The plan details a "cycle of recovery" that evokes images of the approach used in successful counterinsurgencies in Thailand, the Philippines, and Peru, and it outlines precisely the strategic approach to be used:

O "The Government will gradually restore state presence and the authority of state institutions, starting in strategically important areas.

O "Once the Armed Forces and the National Police have reestablished control over an area, units comprising professional soldiers, *campesino* soldiers [i.e., local forces] and National Police *Carabineros* [police field force] will maintain security and protect the civilian population. This will enable state organizations and criminal investigation authorities to work in the area.

O "Once a basic level of security has been established, the State will embark upon a policy of territorial consolidation, re-establishing the normal operation of the justice system, strengthening local democracy, meeting the most urgent needs of the population, broadening state services and initiating medium to long term projects aimed at creating sustainable development."<sup>5</sup>

Necessarily, since Colombia's plan calls for nothing less than waging internal war against a hydra-headed threat, the security forces undertake the most prominent and difficult tasks. Although responsibilities are outlined for all state bodies, it is the security forces that are to provide the shield behind which restoration of legitimate government writ takes place.

Under the Ministry of Defense (*Ministerio de Defensa Nacional*, or MDN) the security forces prepared their own plans to implement the *Democratic Security and Defense Policy*.<sup>6</sup> Both the military's Joint Command and the police (*Policia Nacional*, or CNP) were subordinate to MDN and used as their guide the strategic document drawn



up by Defense Minister Marta Lucia Ramirez de Rincon and her staff after consideration of the Uribe policy. Their product was issued as a four-year vision applicable to the entire Uribe presidency. COLAR's objectives were, for all practical purposes, those of the Joint Command.

The central elements remained "protection of the population" and "elimination of the illegal drugs trade in Colombia," to be accomplished through the application of national will, resources, and power. As the premier element of national power in the internal war at hand, the military clarified its role further in a "general military strategy" issued by CG Joint Command, General Mora. This is still the key document regarding the application of military action to support the president's "democratic security" counterinsurgency approach.

## Implementing Uribe's Plan

With the framework established, implementation followed. In this, the military was far ahead of other state elements, since it had already gone through dramatic change during the Pastrana years. So far-reaching were the military reforms that, in many respects, the armed forces presented Uribe with a new tool upon his taking office. The key had been a continuity of exceptional leadership able to reorient, under difficult operational and material conditions, the military's warfighting posture.

Central to this reorientation was the inculcation in the officer corps of greater professional knowledge concerning not only the operational and tactical mechanics of internal war, but the strategic knowledge of insurgent approaches and aims. It was here that Mora's faith in Ospina's understanding of counterinsurgency paid off.

Ospina was adamant that seeing the insurgents as merely narcotics traffickers or criminals or terrorists obscured the deadly symbiosis that drove the conflict. Whatever it engaged in tactically, whether terror or the drug trade, FARC was a revolutionary movement that sought to implement people's war as its operational form, to include focusing upon the rural areas to surround the urban areas.

Hence, as concerned the security forces, the strategic and operational threat had remained relatively constant in nature, regardless of increasing insurgent (especially FARC) involvement in the drug trade and other criminal activity. The insurgents



**A soldier on patrol takes a moment to chat with a passerby. Although Colombia's forces face unrelenting attacks from international rights organizations, the military is one of the country's most popular institutions.**

courtesy of author

sought to dominate local areas, eliminating through terror those who persisted in their opposition. Guerrilla action targeted the police and smaller military units, with task-organized columns (*columnas*) appearing as main forces whenever a target invited. Other, nonviolent, elements of the FARC people's war approach—mass line, united front, political warfare, and international action—remained anemic to the point of irrelevance, leaving the "violence" line of operation the only real issue.

As noted previously, when Uribe took office, the military had already spent nearly four years developing an effective COIN approach specifically applicable to Colombia. The strategy recognized the need to dominate local areas by providing a security umbrella under which the normal functions of the state could be exercised. The operational vehicle for carrying out the effort was to place a "grid" over the target area, with specific forces carrying out specific missions, all coordinated in such manner as to stifle insurgent activity. The immediate problem was that there had not been enough units or enough funding.

Counterinsurgency is manpower and resource intensive. Uribe sought to provide both assets to a military leadership that was already out of the starting gate. Not only did he raise the military's general funding level, but, in a dramatic gesture of commitment, he also asked Congress to levy a one-time war tax for a substantial expansion of actual forces, primarily COLAR (which in mid-2004 reached a strength of some 202,000). The

tax brought in approximately \$670 million, which was allocated to *Plan de Choque 2002-2006* (Plan Shock), a phased scheme to substantially increase the specialized COLAR forces needed to make the grid viable.

Units of all types were integrated into the force structure according to plans predating Uribe, but hitherto unfunded: new BCG and BRIM were added, with every division getting its own organic BRIM (IV Division received two; COLAR-wide, there are now 12 BRIM, up from the previous three) and others going to the general reserve (if all formations are considered, there are now at least 78 BCG, up from the Pastrana total of 59); urban special forces (joining “rural” special forces, the traditional mode of operation); special transportation network protection units (*Plan Meteoro*, or Plan Meteor); high-mountain battalions specifically situated and equipped to block insurgent mobility corridors through hitherto inaccessible heights; strengthened infrastructure protection units (PEEV, from *Plan Energético y Vial*, or Energy and Road Plan); and local forces (*Soldados de mi Pueblo*, “Home Guards”) to provide security, particularly for rural urban centers.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time and from the same funding source, individual soldier effectiveness was to be improved by converting draftee slots to volunteers at the rate of 10,000 per year—an expensive undertaking, since it costs approximately ten times more to field a volunteer.

All components were related to each other. The standing up of local-forces platoons, for instance, although initially intended to enhance the population’s security, was soon found to produce a much greater information flow to the forces, which enabled more accurate and intense employment of regular and strike units. Greater activity in an area forced the insurgents to move, especially the leadership, presenting targets for the upgraded special operations capability. Loss of leaders led to surrenders, which psychological warfare units exploited with a variety of innovative programs, from rallies to radio broadcasts. Fewer insurgents meant greater freedom of movement, and special units secured the transportation arteries, just as they did the critical infrastructure. Business picked up; the economy improved; kidnappings and murders dropped substantially.

If there was one element in the grid that provided the missing link, it was the deployment of local forces. These were indispensable to establishing state presence in affected areas and neatly sidestepped legal objections (and fierce opposition from international human rights organizations) by utilizing a forgotten law, discovered still on the books, that allowed a portion of the national draft levy to opt for service in hometown defense units.

These 40-man units were constituted as regular platoons assigned to complement regular battalions stationed nearby. They were trained, armed, and equipped as regular soldiers; officered by regulars; and fielded systematically according to Plan de Choque funding. Soon, they were present in more than 600 locations selected according to the Joint Command campaign plan. Most were COLAR assets, although a number were run by the marines, mainly in a special “mini-divisional zone” assigned to the marines, south of navy headquarters in Cartagena on the Caribbean coast.

Local forces had all the more impact because the police, responding to the same need for government presence if security was to be guaranteed, systematically established a presence in every *municipio* (county) in the country. Those areas from which they had been driven, or that historically had been considered too dangerous for police presence, were manned by police field forces, the Carabineros, under regular CNP jurisdiction. The Carabineros functioned in units of the same size and type as the COLAR local forces, but they were more mobile and often better armed. Where necessary, they constructed fort-like police stations to project state presence. Backing them up was a highly trained reaction force.

Incorporation of police involvement into the grid highlighted a further development: the increasingly joint and interagency nature of Colombian operations. Although the military services had always answered to CG Joint Command, they had previously functioned together more as a matter of courtesy than command. This had not posed any insuperable problems, particularly given COLAR’s dominance, but it was not the ideal way to conduct counterinsurgency, where unity of command is crucial. It was especially the case that the CNP, under Pastrana, was not integrated at the national level in any of the counterinsurgency planning. This



ended under Uribe.

Within the military itself, a clear trend toward greater “jointness”—which had emerged under Tapias as CG Joint Command and matured under Mora (and Uribe)—blossomed under Ospina. Plans to implement “joint operational commands” in place of the exclusively COLAR divisional areas met with fierce resistance in parochial circles, but were being pushed through by late 2004.

This transformation alone would be enough to produce a measure of turmoil within the military. Even the existence of the integrated *Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta* (Joint Task Force), controlled by CG Joint Command and operating in FARC’s traditional base complexes in the east, generated disquiet in some circles—particularly as it became clear that it was a model of what is to come. If present plans are pushed through, the individual services will become more like “service providers” in the U.S. sense, while CG Joint Command will exercise operational control of joint forces that resemble U.S. combatant commands (e.g., Southern Command, which supports Colombia’s effort). Such a development will be entirely logical for waging counterinsurgency, but will represent a sea-change in the way Colombian services have historically functioned.

Such integration extended beyond the military. Other government agencies were directed to participate. The state’s involvement brought a new closeness to integrated efforts that hitherto had normally depended upon interpersonal relations in areas of operation. In particular, law enforcement and judicial authorities became an important part of operations. This provided government forces with enhanced flexibility, because the police and officials could engage in actions not legally devolved to the armed forces (e.g., the right to search).

Operationally, the guiding document was the Joint Command’s multi-year *Plan Patriota* (Plan Patriot), which prioritized areas of insurgent activity according to FARC’s dispositions and activities—and outlined sub-plans for the group’s neutralization. FARC’s demise was to be achieved via the tested technique of “holding” in “strategic maintenance areas,” where the situation was already considered in hand, while concentrating forces in “strategic operational areas” where insurgents still operated freely. The first such operational area



courtesy of author

**COLAR soldiers imitate a FARC *cortina*, a kind of human wave assault, during training. Realistic training courtesy of lessons learned has been one result of the army’s transformation.**

was Cundinamarca, the state surrounding Bogota, which throughout 2003 was systematically cleared of major insurgent presence. So complete was the effort that FARC assessments outlined a disaster of the first magnitude, even as the security forces “moved on” to the insurgent base complexes in the east, especially in the area of the former *Zona*.

“Moved on,” of course, has meant only a concentration of forces for the purpose of conducting the continuous operations, unlimited in time but directed at a particular space, that the Joint Command has termed *masa dispersa* (dispersed mass).<sup>8</sup> These are conducted under tight operational security. Once Cundinamarca was cleared, *Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta* assumed priority of effort and systematically combed the “strategic rearguard,” as FARC termed its decades-old base complexes, restoring government presence and popular freedom of movement and livelihood. A particular chore was to deal with the numerous and widespread unmarked minefields FARC had emplaced.

## Challenge of Assessing COIN Progress

Uribe was able to deliver the state commitment, strategic framework, and enhanced resources that propelled take-off. While he provided the dynamic leadership, the Defense Ministry’s job was to offer further guidance but, in particular, to engage in matters of policy that allowed the military forces to exist and operate. A confusion of roles—a desire to lead the military rather than manage it—led to

the replacement of Defense Minister Ramirez in November 2003. Ramirez had clashed repeatedly with the military leadership. CG Joint Command Jorge Mora also stepped down.

The Minister and CG were replaced, respectively, by Jorge Alberto Uribe Echauarria and Carlos Ospina. Moving into the CG COLAR position was the COLAR Director of Operations, MG Martin Orlando Carreño Sandoval. Mora had planned to step down in December, in any case, so the transition was smooth. Minister Uribe adopted a more careful style than his predecessor, and there were no significant changes in the 2004 planning and policy guidance. The military was left to lead the implementation of the counterinsurgency. In this, however, Carreño did not inspire the support necessary to keep his position more than a year. He was replaced in November 2004 by the Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta commander, MG Reinaldo Castellanos Trujillo. Subsequently, Minister Uribe himself, weary of criticism in congress, stepped down and was replaced by Camilo Ospina Bernal. Castellanos, however, was himself replaced only a year later by MG Mario Montoya.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, in the second Uribe administration, both Carlos Ospina and Minister Ospina stepped down, and Ospina's deputy, LTG Freddy Padilla, became CG Joint Forces. Juan Manuel Santos became Minister of Defense.

Such personnel upheaval notwithstanding, military support for the *Democratic Security and Defense Policy* proceeded in near textbook fashion. Politically, the danger was that Colombia would become distracted, as it was by the debate that surfaced about Uribe's then still low-key effort to be allowed to run for a second term, which required constitutional amendment. To oppose a second term for Uribe all but demanded that his first-term record be attacked. The attacks, however, did not involve direct assault on the security forces; rather, they argued that too much effort was being placed upon security, that "social matters" were just as important. The precise point of Uribe's approach, however, was that the second was not possible without the first.

Nevertheless, what emerged was a FARC response that sought to strike at the counterinsurgents' *will* to persevere. If Colombia's operational implementation of its plan had been successful

just where the United States had stumbled in Iraq and Afghanistan—the Colombians successively dominating areas and restoring government writ—this did not prevent critics at home and abroad from attacking Bogota's approach. Their criticism allowed FARC to appear much stronger than it was. Insurgent tactical assaults were given strategic consequence with spin. This spin came not from FARC, but from the president's political enemies and from the media's often dubious reporting. The result was that FARC's minor tactics, inconsequential in and of themselves, stood a chance of generating strategic reversal for the state.

It could be argued that this is the very stuff of insurgency, where every action is intended to have a political consequence. True as far as it goes, the observation misses the point that, in today's international environment, what insurgents and terrorists do is in one sense irrelevant: few citizens accept their proffered agendas. But their actions provide ammunition for political attacks occasioned by the normal infighting inherent to democratic politics. Rather than targeting their intended mass base, the insurgents try to cut corners by attacking the will of their enemies. This is what happened in Colombia.

As it was, Uribe was able to adroitly fend off the attacks even while successfully overseeing and completing an arduous process of constitutional amendment and reelection that culminated in an unprecedented second term in office (beginning August 2006) after another first-round victory in the presidential vote. Uribe's win ensured that operational implementation of his strategic framework would continue. This was significant because the approach, as discussed above, was both correct and sustainable, thereby satisfying two of the three requirements of successful counterinsurgency.

What the political controversy highlighted was a little understood element in successful counterinsurgency. With a correct and sustainable approach in place, the counterinsurgent "plays for the breaks," those shifts in the internal or external situation that work against the insurgent and favor the state. Such play normally requires an extended period of time and leads to a "protracted war." This long time-frame makes it difficult for democracies to sustain counterinsurgency campaigns, particularly in the present world environment where there is

little agreement upon strategic ends and means, much less operational and tactical concerns. Yet it does not in any way obviate the reality that there is no other option.

How then was the state to think about the tremendous progress it had made in Uribe's first term? What future steps would allow Colombia not only to assess sustainability but to continue its success?

What drives any assessment is the nature of the situation on the ground *as it can be measured*. Efforts to judge COIN progress in Colombia have produced a variety of statistics. These have been used to support both proponents of *Democratic Security's* efficacy and opponents who question, if not the approach as a whole, certain of its emphases and components.

Statistics, in other words, are a double-edged sword:

O First, there is the *political* reality: efforts to arrive at metrics for assessing the progress of an approach, although absolutely necessary, take on meaning only as they are interpreted by an audience. All parties to the present Colombian political debate, for example, agree that by any metric utilized (e.g., a decline in kidnapping and murder), there has been demonstrable (even stunning) progress towards normalcy. Yet there is little agreement as to what normalcy, as an end-state, should actually look like.

O Second, there is the *empirical* reality that the causes behind insurgency cannot be statistically explained. Hence, to measure COIN progress by gauging how much the country has moved toward a notional state of normalcy is like looking at annual percentage increases in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) without actually being able to measure the GDP itself. "Progress," then, ends up being a state of popular mind, a belief by the populace (and its leaders) that the situation is improving.

In the matter of statistics, a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators has given rise in Colombia to the judgment that progress is being made. This does not mean, however, that merely advocating "more of the same" is the prescription for further action so much as "staying the course."

*Democratic Security* has been built upon acceptance by the political authorities of the Uribe administration position that the Gordian knot in Colombia's security impasse is FARC. Only FARC

continues to seek state power while simultaneously demonstrating the capacity to negate state armed capacity. ELN, the "other" insurgent group, is a nuisance, while the vigilante AUC (*Autodefensas Unida Colombia*, or United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia), the so-called paramilitaries, have historically been a consequence of lack of state presence. As the state has expanded its control, the AUC has been willing to strike demobilization deals. ELN has likewise indicated a desire to open a peace process. In contrast, negotiations with FARC have not proved successful, so only armed action by the state remains. The desired goal is reincorporation of FARC into the political process, but it is recognized that incentive must be created by armed action.

Compelling FARC to undertake a course of action necessarily involves neutralizing its ability to remain viable. Thus, the intent of the government's counterinsurgency grid is to attack FARC's ability to recruit, sustain itself, move, and initiate actions. Domination of populated areas such as Cundinamarca prepared the way for the present operations against FARC's "strategic rearguard" in the former *Zona* and other southern areas. These operations continue to this day due to the sheer size of the counter-state FARC constructed over four decades. The forces committed to these and



courtesy of author

Greatly debilitated, FARC (and ELN) now rely on terror. Soldiers guard the site of a bombing in La Union, Antioquia Department. Insurgents had bombed the houses of 11 families who had rallied against them.



other priority efforts have *not* been robbed from established counterinsurgency areas (effectively, the army's divisional zones), but deployed from new assets. Their actions are sustainable virtually indefinitely.

That the government's operations have made life more difficult for FARC is unquestionable. But just how difficult is the query that cannot be answered definitively. The least reliable way to judge results is to match FARC casualties with the organization's order of battle. The top figure of some 17,000 combatants (reached during the Pastrana administration) is now put at below 13,000, with most counts claiming that AUC combatants at the time of their demobilization actually outnumbered their FARC rivals (ELN was perhaps a fifth the size of FARC). It is not that these numbers are necessarily wrong; rather, it is unlikely that they mean much given the realities of an insurgent movement operating with a minimal but adequate support base and funding generated outside any popular base.

During the Mora and Ospina tenures, the need to count insurgent casualties was not driven by the Colombian military, which made a concerted effort to stay away from the "Vietnam body-count trap." Instead, the political authorities (many of whom have business backgrounds) and the press felt it necessary to give the public the numerical equivalent of sound bites that elevated quantitative measures to heights the military itself didn't subscribe to. The military's approach was clear if one inspected its internal documents. These gave pride of place not to body count, but to measures of FARC's initiative and armed capacity (such as the ability to initiate major attacks).

Not only do the military's metrics contrast sharply with the indicators favored by the political authorities and the press, but they also serve to highlight the abuse of statistics that became a routine part of the present political debate surrounding President Uribe's desire to earn a second term. Critics of Uribe and the *Democratic Security* approach regularly claimed to possess data showing an explosion of FARC incidents and initiative, but their position was not backed by realities on the ground. What must ultimately drive any assessment is the *nature* of the incidents being counted. The military knows this and has

incorporated such an approach into its own analysis. *Nature* can involve anything from size to context.

An insurgent group such as FARC, forced from mobile warfare back to guerrilla and terror actions, of necessity needs to up the ante. This FARC attempted to do by cultivating an association with the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), which sent some two dozen training teams into FARC areas before the pipeline was effectively shut down in 2001. FARC efforts to utilize a variety of PIRA terror techniques rarely or never seen in Colombia, ranging from the precise placement of bombs to inflict maximum structural damage, to the use of secondary explosions to wreak havoc upon crews responding to incidents, were all designed to inflict maximum casualties—and generate maximum terror. That they failed to do so left FARC with the one option it has now pursued: pinprick attacks that can produce tactical heat but lack strategic fire.

In only one way can FARC's tactical actions have strategic or even operational significance: if they can be parlayed into political consequence.



*Democratic Security* covers all bases: comic books, cartoon shows, a website, school appearances, and other psyop products have been deployed to win over Colombia's newest generation.

Strategic, operational, and even tactical techniques for using violent action to effect political gain are a central element of the people's war approach used by FARC. They are recognized as such in FARC doctrine, and they were critical to the FMLN effort in El Salvador that was so important to FARC's doctrinal evolution. A key issue is whether FARC is attempting to use its tactical efforts to exploit rifts in the Colombian political spectrum. Captured documents and information gleaned from prisoner interrogations demonstrate that FARC is well aware that by inflicting casualties and appearing to be "alive" despite all that the security forces have done, it can provoke political problems of sufficient magnitude to damage or even end *Democratic Security*.

It is ironic that the strategic progress of *Democratic Security* is unlikely to negate completely FARC's tactical ability to initiate guerrilla and terror actions. But the group's "successes" in these low-level actions really count for little. For instance, there have been many mine casualties among the security forces, but that has little to do with anything save FARC's extensive use of the internationally banned weapons. Mines do not hold towns and villages, and they do not create sympathy for the insurgents; they are indiscriminate defensive weapons. Most COLAR casualties from mines, in fact, have been suffered as the army pushes ever deeper into insurgent base areas and dismantles the FARC counter-state.

Eliminating the "strategic rear guard" is crucial. There is a common misconception that "guerrillas" are self-sustaining, obtaining all they need either by generating it or capturing it from the government. In reality, insurgents can rarely if ever obtain crucial components of their war effort, notably arms and ammunition, from within the battlespace and thus must pursue outside acquisition. FARC indeed gets most of its weapons and ammunition from abroad. Even food, as demonstrated by massive caches uncovered in the strategic rearguard throughout 2004 and 2005, is stockpiled and pushed forward to combatants. Eliminating the base areas and their stockpiles therefore eliminates FARC's ability to mass and forces it to engage in terror and guerrilla warfare, which can be much more easily managed by the enhanced capabilities and presence of the state.

Faced with this profound threat to its viability as an insurgent movement, FARC must respond. As a consequence, there should be no doubt that "violence" in Colombia will continue indefinitely. Yet the state should continue to do precisely what it is already doing: meeting the insurgency in a "correct" and "sustainable" manner. The Uribe approach is certainly correct in the way it conceptualizes the problem and seeks to respond to it. The approach is also sustainable, in its present form, because it demands no unacceptable investments of human or material resources—or of will. It will face adjustments if the U.S. contribution ends, but it is unlikely this will happen for some time.

What has not registered fully on the Colombian political class is that a correct and sustainable approach is always put in place in order to "play for the breaks." There is no formula for how long the process will take. In the Philippines, OPLAN *Lambat Betag* (Net Trap) took approximately six years to produce dramatic results; in Thailand, Prime Minister (PM) Order No. 66/23, "The Policy for the Fight to Defeat the Communists," required roughly half that after its implementation.

Still, if the spectacularly successful Peruvian approach against *Sendero Luminoso* took just somewhere in between the length of these two campaigns, normalcy in Ulster was achieved only through a grueling 25-year effort. And Ulster was but the size of the small American state of Connecticut, with just half its population. Colombia is the size of California, Nevada, Utah, and Idaho, with a population of 42 million. Hence patience must be as much a part of the equation as a desire to create precisely the correct mix of techniques that will produce demonstrable results.

## Lessons Learned

Formal announcements in the first quarter of the new Uribe administration seemed to portend a necessary shift in emphasis in *Democratic Security* implementation, from strike to consolidation. Yet the announcements occurred even as a string of distressing events shook public confidence in the administration. Particularly disturbing were several highly publicized episodes of institutional corruption apparently driven by the need to produce quantifiable results in response to political demands,

as well as evidence of political links between prominent backers of Uribe and the outlawed AUC. Nevertheless, the unease and its attendant debate served the useful purpose of highlighting two issues that emerge time and again in the assessment of any counterinsurgency:

*O Leadership matters.* Uribe has proven to be the right man at the right time, as have figures in other places and times—one thinks of Magsaysay in the Philippines or Templer in Malaya. Four and a half years, which is all that Uribe has had so far, is not enough time to see through a counterinsurgency. Uribe is keenly aware that his success in winning a second term has brought with it the responsibility not merely to do more of the same, but to recalibrate success in such manner as to deliver “victory.” Defining victory in a counterinsurgency, as indicated above, is tricky, but clearly the metrics any political actor uses to measure his standing will be the benchmarks. Overall, Uribe has offered a model of skillful, dynamic leadership.

It is the armed forces that have been the key element, because they provide the security upon which all else that has happened depends. Can they continue to function in the manner of the past eight years? Have the myriad reforms been institutionalized? The answer would seem to be affirmative on both counts. It might especially be noted that institutionalization is as much a function of individuals as structure and procedures. Colombia’s military reformers have been followed by others who, in their career particulars, look much like Mora and Ospina.

Despite the optimistic assessment above, we should not underestimate the extent of the challenge facing the military, mainly COLAR, as a result of its expansion and increased operational tempo. COLAR was previously a draftee force of “in and out” enlisted ranks led by a professional officer corps. It now is one-third volunteer. These individuals expect to make the military a career. A host of issues, from family welfare to promotion requirements to NCO rank, must be codified and then allowed to mature.

Adding to the challenge is the continuous nature of the small-unit operations conducted to keep FARC on the run. Everything from block-leave procedures to family counseling

(e.g., to cope with a rising level of turmoil within families in a force that historically has had relatively few disciplinary problems) has had to be instituted. Topping all this is the ever-present threat of corruption in an environment saturated with the easy money of the narcotics trade.

In the field, the strategic initiative has seen some tactical setbacks. This was predictable. The insurgents, after all, also have a learning curve. As FARC has been forced to break up into small units, the security forces have done likewise. This has created opportunities for FARC to surprise isolated or tactically sloppy government units with rapid, medium-sized concentrations that then disperse. The technique is not new, but recent actions have seen FARC grappling for a middle ground between “large” and “small” concentrations, so that it can attack platoon- or squad-size positions without exposing itself too much. Such measures, though seeking tactical initiative, are strategically and operationally defensive—and an indication of just how successful the government has been. Before the military reforms kicked in, in the Samper/early Pastrana years, FARC fielded large columns that would attack even reinforced companies.

Beginning in February 2005, FARC units, responding to instructions from the organization’s secretariat, began an effort to inflict maximum casualties. Their intent, obviously, was to exploit the pressure for “no bad news” placed upon the military by the political structure. They sought to spook at least a proportion of the Colombian “chattering classes” into viewing the normal give-and-take of tactical action as a sign of larger strategic defect. Although they could have a strategic impact by manipulating perception and spurring on the debate about “sustainability,” in reality, FARC’s small, hard-to-prevent tactical successes have meant nothing to the strategic situation.

The current favorable strategic situation,





courtesy of author

NCOs conduct hand-to-hand training at a professional school. Improved NCO professionalism is another sign of army reform.

some have argued, could be undone in a flash by follow-on personalities. Is this likely? No, for all of the reasons discussed above. In particular, both the reforms and the demands of internal war have accelerated change in military (particularly COLAR) leadership. Warfighters who would be as comfortable in the U.S. system as their own have begun to dominate promotion boards, with “service in the field” as the salient factor in selection. This is a critical element, since the military is the shield for all else that occurs in the counterinsurgency.

As combat-tested officers have begun to dominate the services, the question emerges as to what sort of men they are (there are no female general officers in Colombia). In terms of the institution they have made, the results disprove the constant drumbeat about lax standards and abuses that outsiders, especially international human rights organizations, often make. To the contrary, the military, under its reform-minded leadership, has consistently emerged in Colombian polls as one of the most respected institution in the country, with favorable numbers reaching near the 80th percentile.

In sum, the reforms have endeavored to demand more from officers professionally, particularly as regards the mechanics and theory of warfighting. This has resulted in greater knowledge at the strategic and operational levels of war as well as increased tactical expertise.

Put together, military popularity and effectiveness have undoubtedly contributed to President Uribe’s own consistently high rating with the public. It

remains to be seen how recent scandals will affect his position, but the damage is unlikely to be long-lived or deep.

For his part, Uribe has dealt with the military in an increasingly sophisticated and collegial manner. He especially grew to respect the professional judgment of Carlos Ospina, when Ospina was CG Joint Command. This allowed Ospina to exercise a degree of influence and to be heeded when he counseled caution at appropriate times. It remains to be seen, in the post-Ospina command environment, if Uribe will be so dominant as to upset the civil-military balance necessary for the armed political campaign that is counterinsurgency.

O *The strategic approach is critical.* The strategic approach, with its operational (lines of action and campaigns) implementation, must be the foremost concern of leadership in a counterinsurgency. To this end, Uribe was fortunate to have officers of the caliber of Mora and Ospina. If Mora saw COLAR through its early transformation, Ospina not only finished the job, but implemented the central operations of Plan Patriota. He had to do this even as resources remained constrained and demands rose for greater emphasis upon other national priorities.

It is not enough, say critics, to regain control of the population; areas seized and held must be consolidated. The military is keenly aware of the point at issue—and has U.S.-supported programs designed to address this dimension of the conflict. The real questions revolve around resource allocation and timing. Here, Uribe has stood his ground, remaining true to the spirit of his strategy: security is the necessary basis for all that follows. Now, in his second term, he has indicated that he intends to exploit counterinsurgency gains and put additional emphasis upon consolidation.

It is precisely the substantial progress made in restoring a semblance of “normal life” that has allowed internal debate over other issues to surface, to include discussion of trends in civil-military relations. The latter is often overlooked in judging the effectiveness of military leaders, but here, too, Colombia has been well served. Ospina, in particular, sought to implement a very “American” vision of the military’s subordinate relationship to civil authority.

However, as with the emphasis upon combat as the key determinant for promotion, so the reinforcement of civilian authority as the final word in matters of moment has not sat well with some military elements. It is President Uribe's understanding that healthy civil-military relations depend upon an invisible line not being crossed—by either side—that has tempered any military discontent and made operations function as smoothly as they have under various defense ministers. The military has maintained firmly its right to determine operational and tactical particulars, and President Uribe seems to have acquiesced.

That COLAR continues to transition from its “German” heritage (transmitted historically through Chilean vectors) to an “American” model has been stated directly in command briefings to officers. (The air force has long looked to America for inspiration, the navy to the British.) Yet this has not led to an uncritical adoption of either U.S. forms or procedures. American difficulties in Iraq, stemming at least in part from the intervention of civilian leadership in military operational efforts, have been a poignant reminder that a balance must be struck between obedience to civilian authority and institutional independence. In Colombia, what this balance should be has been left deliberately indeterminate.

## Challenges to Come

In the larger sense, Uribe's national policy has always stood upon three legs, not merely security but also fiscal health and social development. Fiscal health is necessary for all else to proceed and has given no grounds for complaint. Social development remains at the heart of all illegal actors' ability to recruit manpower. It, too, has been addressed by progress in the other two sides of the triangle. That one would wish for greater emphasis or speed is a judgment call that imprudently ignores demonstrable progress.

Although the *Democratic Security* approach might not require major adjustments, there are strategic areas that bear close monitoring, especially by Washington in this, a critical theater of the battle against global insurgency:

O *The battle is not over.* U.S. support, both

materiel and personnel, will play an important role for the foreseeable future. It must be maintained. Unfortunately, a tendency has emerged in U.S. circles that seeks to interpret realities on the ground in terms that speak to the artificial deadlines created by funding legislation. This is extraordinarily dangerous, particularly the notion that the war is won and it is time to talk of winding down U.S. aid and converting Colombian forces to other uses (such as United Nations peacekeeping).

O *The U.S. Government needs to grasp the true nature of Colombia's struggle.* In some U.S. political and media circles, the conflict is still labeled counter-narcotics, *or* counter-terrorism, *or* counterinsurgency, *or* something else. It is all of these things and must be approached in a unified manner. This is precisely what the Colombians have been fighting to achieve, and they have made dramatic strides, although these have come at considerable political and personal cost for key players such as President Uribe, former Minister Uribe, and former CG Joint Command Ospina.

O *The drive towards unity of effort must extend to the U.S. side.* Greater effort is necessary to raise the level of awareness in Washington that what happens in Colombia underpins our Latin American position. This is not a new domino theory so

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## NOTES

much as a recognition that, in the present strategic environment, Latin America is the forgotten theater, Southern Command the forgotten command, and Colombia our forgotten but closest, most reliable ally. At a time when the forces of the radical left are again on the march throughout the hemisphere, to include advocating a severely restricted fight against drugs, Colombia's interests coincide with those of the United States. More than that, Colombia remains a stable democratic state committed to reform and the market economy. Its contrast with an increasingly unstable and strategically dangerous Venezuela could not be greater.

O *Operationally, recognition of the points above should lead to an enhanced relationship between U.S. and Colombian forces and the two countries' strategic cultures.* Military cooperation