

Learning to Kill by Proxy: Colombian Paramilitaries and the Legacy of Central American Death Squads, Contras, and Civil Patrols

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Introduction

In the 1980s, wars raged in Central America. In Nicaragua, the United States waged a proxy war against the Sandinista government with the U.S.-backed Contras (see Brody, 1985). Salvadoran and Guatemalan death squads, begun by the United States in the early 1960s, brutally attacked all protest against these Central American states, both peaceable and insurrectionary.¹ Although the history of paramilitaries in Colombia is often traced to the 1997 unification of paramilitary groups under the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or United Self-Defense of Colombia) or to the “private” armies of large landowners, drug traffickers, and other elites of the 1980s, paramilitarism in Colombia is neither new nor haphazard.

This article traces the founding of Colombian paramilitaries to the Cold War era when the United States helped the Colombian and Central American governments establish proxy paramilitary forces in its fight against “international Communism.” I then summarize the devastating effects this paramilitarism had on Colombian and Central American society during the 1960s to the late 20th century. I begin with an ethnographic description of paramilitarism in the Uraba-Choco region of Colombia and then provide a testimonial account from a young, Colombian paramilitary in 2001. A concluding section provides an update on the impact of paramilitarism on human rights in contemporary Colombia, and on the implications for peace in the region.

The Colombian State and Its Proxy Forces

In the Uraba area of Colombia, the paramilitaries control the northern part of Uraba, Antioquia, and Cordoba; the paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño dominates this area.² Paramilitaries in Uraba and elsewhere support local economic powers and move freely from north to south in their areas of control

(except for mountainous areas dominated by the guerrillas). At its multiple margins, the state becomes legible as its relationship with paramilitary forces is revealed through army maneuvers and paramilitary checkpoints. Indeed, in Apartado, army street patrols guard the restaurants and bars where off-duty paramilitaries eat, drink, and dance. In July 2001, while traveling on public transportation with human rights workers from Apartado to the beach town of Necocli, our bus was stopped or waved through five times at paramilitary checkpoints as army vehicles moved up and down the highway. Army platoons also patrolled the highway at the periphery of each town less than a kilometer from each paramilitary checkpoint. The infrastructure of Colombian army patrols, troop maneuvers, and security checkpoints lend protection to the paramilitaries and allow them safe freedom of movement and action. This relationship between the Colombian army and the paramilitaries, which is mutually beneficial on a strategic level, unveils a power arrangement that is intended to remain hidden, that is, proxy paramilitaries of the state operating in the anonymity of the margins of the state. Thus, what initially appears to be simply a privatization of state violence is revealed in practice as state violence by proxy.

Displacement in the Uraba area can be traced to the regional consolidation of the paramilitaries between 1994 and 1995.³ Indeed, the largest barrio in Apartado is Barrio Obrero, which was founded by civilians displaced between 1995 and 1997 by paramilitaries. Today, Barrio Obrero is controlled by paramilitaries and *sicarios* (thugs for hire).⁴ In this way, marginalized communities on the urban peripheries also become the margins of the state and sites of contention where the state reconstitutes sovereignty through violence and surveillance; and, as is the case in other areas,⁵ it does so using proxy paramilitary forces.

The paramilitaries have used displacement as their central military tactic in rural areas. On the urban peripheries, paramilitaries most often use threats, disappearances, and assassinations in their exercise of state power. Although agents of the state may assert little to no control within these communities, the ranks of the paramilitaries are comprised of poor young men who were recruited into the paramilitaries shortly after completing military service in the Colombian army. Thus, the Colombian army trains these young men before they join the paramilitaries. Moreover, in broad daylight on the streets of Apartado, I witnessed an older man in plain clothes giving orders to a group of soldiers. I also witnessed an army official in uniform giving orders to a group of young men who, as they say in Apartado, “*tenían pinta de paramilitares*” (literally, had the paint or mask of paramilitaries, referring to the carriage, style, and dress of the paramilitaries).

In Uraba today, the paramilitaries control municipalities through an alliance with, or representation of, local economic power interests. They act in ways consistent with racketeers or mob bosses, charging for protection and operating like Pinkertons with *carte blanche*.⁶ Guerrillas dominate the mountains, while the paramilitaries control the rivers and municipalities. The guerrillas are around the rivers and the paramilitaries are around the

mountains. The Colombian army is present at checkpoints on the rivers, in helicopters flying overhead, and on ground maneuvers around (and often through) rural communities.⁷ The civilians are everywhere in between the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the army.

In a 2001 interview, “Julian,” a young paramilitary who had just returned from combat explained to me:

I had no opportunities until one day a friend of mine said, “Come on, let’s go join them.” As soon as we got there, they gave us camouflage uniforms, rifles, new guns, and other equipment. Those who had no army training went into training. We had been in the army so we went right into operations, which means we went to the mountain to fight the enemy. Who is the enemy? In vulgar terms, the guerrilla. We are enemies,⁸ we are in conflict. We are also on the margin of the law.

We were taken by helicopter and we began to look for the guerrilla. We started looking in every way among the campesinos (peasants). The campesinos help the guerrilla, so sometimes we have to grab them. Grab them means to kill them. We would ask them if they had seen the guerrilla. First, they say, “no.” But then they see that we are going to grab them and torture them, so they say, “yes.” And then we have to kill them. They have to respect us because we wear the symbol that says A-U-C: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia. When we kill a campesino, it is because there are really few displaced people. What there are [among the displaced] are a lot of guerrilla infiltrators who are very astute and intelligent. When the people know we are coming, they flee; they abandon their communities. We think they do this because they are working with the enemy and they are afraid we will do something to them when we catch them.⁹

The key to paramilitary success in gaining control of the region was to violently attack river communities. Residents were killed and over 45,000 people were ultimately displaced. One survivor who fled his community in 1997 recalled, “helicopters were bombing and paramilitaries were firing machine guns. To go to the river to cut bananas was to risk one’s life. They burned our village and we lost all our rice. When the army would come, they would say, ‘Don’t be afraid of us, have fear of those who come after,’ meaning the paramilitaries” (see Sanford, 2003a).

This survivor testimony is further supported by Julian’s explanation of paramilitary actions:

We have two kinds of helicopters that back up our platoon. They arrive with help and this gives us a lot of support. There is a small helicopter that we call the cricket and large one we call the papaya. Sometimes innocent civilians die because there are some zones that

have a lot of guerrilla. Where we work, we are the police because for the people there, it is normal to work with the guerrilla. There may be only 12 police and 1,500 guerrilla in the zone. So, when we arrive, if someone tells us that these people are guerrilla collaborators, then we have to eliminate them.

Once, some *campesinos* told some others when we got to their community. We didn't want the guerrilla to know that we were there, so we had to kill them with machetes, chop them up piece by piece, and bury them. When the autodefensas (AUC) kill a campesino that lives in a village, it is because we have been given information that this person is guerrilla and that is why we have to eliminate him. But we always say, "*nada debe, nada teme*" (one who owes nothing, fears nothing).

We don't kill anyone without authorization.... Sometimes it was painful for me when we got to a town and the civilians would be praying, because I have my family. But they give you an order and you have to carry it out; there is nothing else you can do. I am a patroller and surely, when a commander tells a patroller "kill this civilian," I really cannot ask him why. No, I simply have to do what he tells me to do. And if a higher up *patron*¹⁰ asks me, "And you, why did you kill this civilian?" Then, I just tell him, "Because my commander ordered me." Then, he can work it out with my commander. So, I just have to follow orders. Because one goes there to kill or one is killed, right?

The AUC has a lot of people because we are everywhere in Colombia. There are people from outside who are not Colombian; I imagine this is because the AUC is just so big. Human rights are a problem because we can't grab 30 people and kill them all at once because that would be a massacre. We are being squeezed by human rights. Now we can't massacre everyone; we have to kill them one by one, one by one.¹¹ This is a war that Carlos Castaño announced and it is not over. This is a civil war. This is a war without end. If you make a mistake, you pay with your life. I do not wish this work on anyone.

Proxy Forces in the Cold War Era

Though Carlos Castaño has played a key role in the development of the paramilitaries, Colombian paramilitarism dates back to the beginning of U.S. Cold War policies. At the close of a March 19, 1963, meeting of Central American heads of state, President Kennedy declared, "Communism is the chief obstacle to economic development in the Central American region."¹²

For Central America, the 1960s was an era that included an expanded continuation of counterinsurgency and intelligence training for military officers at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (Sanford, 2003b). As the U.S. organized death squads in El Salvador and, despite increasingly violent attacks by the Salvadoran army and its death squads against the democratic opposition in the 1960s, the Left did not take up weapons until the 1970s when all other avenues of protest appeared closed (Ucles, 1990: 14–15). In the case of Guatemala, although the FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes — Rebel Armed Forces) was founded by disaffected Guatemalan army officers in 1963 (see Figueroa Ibarra, 1991), documents of the School of the Americas date the U.S./Guatemalan army training relationship back to 1947.¹³ Additionally, immediately following the 1963 Declaration of San Jose, meetings of Central American ministers of the interior (who have jurisdiction over police and internal intelligence) were organized and led by the U.S. State Department with assistance from the CIA, AID (U.S. Agency for International Development), the customs bureau, the immigration service, and the justice department.

These meetings were “designed to develop ways of dealing with subversion,” according to William Bowdler, who represented the State Department at the gatherings (see footnote 1). They led to the development of paramilitary organizations throughout Central America, including the Mano Blanca (White Hand) death squads in El Salvador and the Mano (Hand) in Guatemala. The extreme terror waged against civil society in Guatemala in the 1960s resulted in the deaths of thousands of peasants and distinguished Guatemala as the first country in which the term “disappeared” was used to describe the political condition of being kidnapped by government paramilitary forces, tortured to death, and buried in a clandestine grave. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica participated in U.S.-coordinated meetings of interior ministers and other domestic security agencies (Nairn, 1984).

In February 1962, representatives from the U.S. Army Special Warfare School of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, met with Colombian army and police officials.¹⁴ Seven months later, the Colombian army published a Spanish translation of the U.S. Army’s Manual FM-31-15 entitled “Operaciones contra las Fuerzas Irregulares” (Operations Against Irregular Forces) (Giraldo, 2002). Thus, as in El Salvador, the U.S.-backed organization of paramilitary forces in Colombia preceded the establishment of insurgent organizations. Indeed, the Colombian guerrilla group, ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional — National Liberation Army), carried out its first operation in 1965 and the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) was not founded until the following year in 1966 (Human Rights Watch, 1996: 1). Nonetheless, civilian forces organized under the direction of the army in 1962 were identified as having a key role in counterinsurgency:

A concerted country team effort should be made now to select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training in resistance operations in case they are needed later. This should be done with a view toward development of a civil and military structure for exploitation in the event the Colombian internal security system deteriorates further. This structure should be used to pressure toward reforms known to be needed, perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions, and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage, and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States” (in McClintock, 1992: 222).

Within three years, these sentiments were expressed as a new organizational form of national defense and institutionalized into Colombian law by Decree 3398 on December 24, 1965. Indeed, Article 25 of Decree 3398 states: “All Colombians, men and women, who are not called to obligatory military service, can be utilized by the government in activities and works that contribute to the reestablishment of normality.” Article 33 empowered the Minister of National Defense to provide weapons to civilians (Americas Watch, 1990: 11–18). The decree that publicly formalized paramilitaries as an arm of the state became Law 48 in 1968, thereby legislatively putting the paramilitaries and the civilian population under the control of the Ministry of National Defense, while obfuscating the demarcation between paramilitaries and the army. As Human Rights Watch (1996: 3) points out, “although few civil patrols were ever formally created by the president, the military frequently cited Law 48 as the legal foundation for their support for all paramilitaries.”

Central American Proxy Forces of the 1980s

In the 1980s, Central American states experienced unprecedented military buildups. By 1987, the *New York Times* was reporting that Central American civilian government leaders and diplomats were increasingly worried about the inevitability of military coups as national armies were strengthened. The \$212 million of covert U.S. military aid to Central American states in 1986 was more than 15 times the \$14.2 million received in 1981. One direct result of this aid in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras was that security forces more than doubled in this period (LeMoyne, 1987: 1). This strengthening of military institutions had dire consequences for all other sectors of Central American societies.

In February 1981, Ronald Reagan’s secretary of state briefed congressional leadership on “Communist Intervention in El Salvador.” This State Department White Paper sought to establish the credibility of the administration’s new foreign policy emphasis on “drawing the line” against “Communist aggression” in El Salvador (LeoGrande, 1981: 27). With a territory of 21,000 square kilometers, El Salvador is the smallest mainland

country in the hemisphere. The country's population density then (as today) ranked second in the Americas and it was one of the most densely populated countries in the world.¹⁵ The Reagan administration decided to "draw the line" in a country where 37.7% of the land was owned by little more than one-half of one percent of the people and 91% of the people held only 21.9% of the land. Worse still, the top 10% of landowners held 78% of the arable land and the lowest 10% owned less than one-half of one percent of arable land. This wildly inequitable distribution of land in a largely agrarian economy led the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to conclude: "the uneven distribution of the land and the emphasis on exportation of agricultural products are factors influencing the poverty in which a large part of the population lives." Moreover, three of every five Salvadoran children are affected by some degree of malnutrition, deaths during the first year of life account for 25% of total deaths, 73% of rural populations lacks access to drinking water, 60% of urban populations lacks connection with a sewage system, and there are just 17 hospital beds for every 10,000 inhabitants of the country.¹⁶ With these conditions, it was not surprising that democratic and insurgent opposition organizations grew rapidly in El Salvador.

When the Reagan administration "drew the line" in El Salvador, it reversed former President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy of engagement based on international human rights *vis-à-vis* the 1979 Sandinista victory that overthrew the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship.¹⁷ Until the Sandinista revolution, the four most northern nations of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua) were ruled by brutal dictatorships. The Carter administration struggled over how to reconcile its human rights policy with its desire to prevent other leftist victories in Central America. The Reagan administration, however, drew on Cold War rhetoric previously used by President Eisenhower to justify the U.S.-backed overthrow of democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 (see Gleijeses, 1991; Sanford, 2003b) and by President Kennedy in the Declaration of San Jose in 1963. Moreover, through new policies to strengthen armies instead of human rights, the Reagan administration revitalized regional cooperation among the remaining military regimes in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.¹⁸

U.S. policy fomented closer ties among military leaders who shared a common interest in preventing further leftist victories in Central America. As early as 1981, during a Salvadoran guerrilla offensive, Honduran and Guatemalan troops joined the Salvadoran army in joint maneuvers along the border, "ostensibly to prevent the fighting from spilling over across the frontiers." The real objective was for Central American armies to join together as "an anvil against which the Salvadoran military hoped to pound the guerrillas" (LeoGrande, 1981: 40). The Guatemalan army had also come to the aid of the Salvadoran army in 1932 and 1972, when the army slaughtered civilians. Thus, the Guatemalan government was consistent when it spoke openly of the need to halt the "communist tide." As early as 1981, LeoGrande (1981: 40) noted that U.S. intelligence reports revealed the Guatemalan and Honduran governments were assisting "in the creation of paramilitary groups

within their territories, groups composed of former Nicaraguan National Guardsmen and anti-Castro Cubans whose objective is to wage war against communism on a regional scale.”

The White Paper as a “political document” justified Reagan administration efforts to recast the Salvadoran insurgency in East-West terms, i.e., as a product of Cuban and Soviet subversion, rather than a legitimate response to the limited domestic social and political avenues under a repressive dictatorship. On January 28, 1981, Secretary of State Alexander Haig removed human rights from the U.S. foreign policy equation when the administration pledged to refocus U.S. policy on the battle against “international terrorism.” That pledge was followed on February 18, 1981, by a state department announcement that “U.S. aid to El Salvador would no longer be contingent upon either reforms or human rights” (in LeoGrande, 1981: 44). LeoGrande notes that, “by declaring El Salvador to be a test of will with international communism, the Reagan administration is wagering U.S. prestige and credibility on the survival of one of the weakest, most brutal, and least popular governments in the hemisphere” (p. 45).

Between Reagan’s 1981 declaration of “drawing the line” and the signing of the United Nations-brokered peace accords in 1992, 80,000 Salvadorans were killed, 8,000 more were “disappeared and more than one million of El Salvador’s five million citizens were displaced by the U.S.-backed war (Silber, 2000: 28). Working in tandem, the Salvadoran army and its death squads, security forces, military escorts, and civil defense units were found to be responsible for 95% of human rights violations.¹⁹ In the 1980s, the work of the Salvadoran death squads was embedded in ORDEN (Organización Democrática Nacional — National Democratic Organization), “a paramilitary network of more than 100,000 members set up by the armed forces explicitly for counterinsurgency in the 1960s.”²⁰ ORDEN was organized along the lines of the Greek National Defense Corps, which was established by the United States in 1947. Central to this Greek paramilitary model is the “interpenetration and close control of the system by the regular army,” as well as a recruitment procedure that “employed a system of vetting personnel according to their political proclivities and keeping costs down: remuneration came in the form of patronage jobs and surplus commodities” (McClintock, 1992: 15).

As the war raged in El Salvador into February 1985, President Reagan, now in his second term, made Nicaragua the cornerstone of the “Reagan Doctrine.” At a press conference, he vowed to bring down the Sandinista government “in the sense of its present structure” by forcing the Sandinistas to “cry uncle.” Rather than marking the beginning of U.S. operations to end Sandinista rule, Reagan’s statement simply moved the U.S. covert war into the realm of popular media. Less than six weeks after his inauguration, Reagan signed an intelligence finding that provided \$19.5 million to the CIA, and authorized the recruitment of some 500 Nicaraguans. These recruits, mostly former National Guardsmen from the Somoza dictatorship, were organized into a counterrevolutionary paramilitary force. Officially called the Frente

Democrático Nacional (FDN, or National Democratic Front), President Reagan referred to this new paramilitary force as “Freedom Fighters,” and they became popularly known as the *Contras*, reflecting their counterrevolutionary ideology. Officially, the objectives of this new force were to “interdict arms and obstruct the Cuban military support structure in Managua” (Roberts, 1990: 78). By November 1981, however, CIA Director William Casey had met with Argentine Chief of Staff General Leopoldo Galtieri to develop strategies for the *Contras*. Thus, veteran military trainers from Argentina’s Dirty War brought their experience and expertise to the arming and training of the *Contras*. That month, a national security directive outlined the long-term plan for the *Contras* and for the role of the U.S., which was to “support the opposition front through intelligence and engage in paramilitary and political operations in Nicaragua and elsewhere. Work primarily through non-Americans to achieve the foregoing, but in some circumstances CIA might (possibly using U.S. personnel) take unilateral paramilitary action” (Cockburn, 1987: 6). The 1981 presidential authorization of \$19.5 million for covert CIA operations against the Sandinista government surpassed the total overt military aid to Central American governments (\$14.2 million) for that year. By 1990, total congressionally approved funds to the *Contras* surpassed \$321 million and U.S.-solicited third-party donations exceeded \$54 million (Sobel, 1995: 289; 290). Along with the funding came a CIA *Contra* training manual entitled *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare* that provided *Contras* with strategies on the “most effective use of assassinations, preferably in the form of public executions, to impress Nicaraguan villagers” (Cockburn, 1987: 7).

Colombian cocaine formed a part of the CIA funding network for the *Contras*. The Iran-Contra Scandal focused on at least six illegal arms sales to Iran via Israel between 1985 and 1986 to raise funds for the *Contras*,²¹ but the Colombian cocaine connection always lurked below the surface. In his testimony before the Iran-Contra Committee, Oliver North denied charges that he had “condoned drug trafficking to generate funds for the *Contras*” (in Cockburn, 1987: 153). However, Ramón Milian Rodríguez, who laundered as much as \$200 million each month through his Panama-based operation and was invited to Reagan’s inauguration after arranging \$180,000 in campaign contributions from his clients, directly challenged North’s assertions when was subpoenaed to testify before the investigative committee.

In July 1987, under oath before the Senate Foreign Relation Subcommittee on Terrorism and Narcotics, Milian Rodríguez testified that he had laundered \$10 million from the Colombian cocaine cartel (the source of the \$180,000 contribution to Reagan’s campaign) that went to the “freedom fighters” at the request of a “CIA veteran and key figure in the White House *Contra* supply network.” The money was moved through an established network of couriers through Miami, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras. This \$10 million transfer to the *Contras* was a gesture of “goodwill,” in keeping with the “conservative politics” of the cartel (*Ibid.*: 152–155). Such contributions formed a part of a CIA-*Contra* “guns-for-drugs” program, which included

brazenly running drugs through Homestead Air Force Base in Florida. Though Oliver North's testimony was televised, Milian Rodríguez was brought to the committee behind closed doors. Leslie Cockburn writes, "the senators had decided that his information was too explosive to be shared with the American people" (*Ibid.*: 154). Scott (2003) has documented other instances in which drugs have been used to support U.S.-backed paramilitary efforts in faraway places.

While death squads reigned in El Salvador, the Contras terrorized Nicaraguan villages, and Oliver North sought to cover his tracks before the Senate Committee, the Guatemalan army was carrying out its own counterinsurgency campaign. Beginning with selective assassinations of rural and urban leaders in the late 1970s, army violence escalated to massacres of entire Maya villages in the early 1980s. Known as the army's "scorched-earth campaign," these massacres ultimately razed 626 Maya villages and left over 200,000 people dead or disappeared (CEH, 1999). Most massacres took place between 1980 and 1982, but they were preceded by selective assassinations and many rural Maya continued to live in an ambience of violence after the 1985 elections and into the 1990s, even up to December 1996 signing of the Peace Accords (Arias, 1990; Carmack, 1988; Falla, 1992; Manz, 1988; Sanford, 2003; Warren, 1993). The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) identified 83% of the victims as Maya and attributed blame for 93% of the human rights violations to the Guatemalan army (CEH, 1999). Significantly, the CEH concluded that the army had carried out genocidal acts against rural Maya with the intention of destroying in whole, or in part, the Maya culture. A critical component of the army's genocide was the incorporation of Maya civilians into army-controlled civil patrols (see Sanford, 2003b).

In a July 1981 *Wall Street Journal* interview of an unnamed U.S. intelligence operative who had worked in Brazil and Colombia, Everett G. Martin (1981: 5) reported that "the Carter Administration's policy of turning its back on a country that violates the human rights of its citizens during the fight against guerrillas 'is a coward's way out.'" Martin also detailed the indoctrination of Salvadoran troops at a special training school. An unnamed Green Beret colonel explained the counterinsurgency techniques: "There aren't any such things as special forces camps or free-fire zones in irregular warfare. We are supposed to train the local forces to play guerrilla with hunter battalions that are moving all the time.... You make them realize their situation is hopeless and then you offer them amnesty." Guatemalan army officials and troops learned these techniques at the School of the Americas.²² The U.S. intelligence operative who had worked in Colombia was familiar with these practices because they formed a central strategy in Fort Bragg counterinsurgency training (Scott, 2003: 77).

Former soldiers involved in the pursuit of civilians in flight call such operations "deer hunting" (*cazando el venado*). Multiple platoons encircle a large area, supported by helicopter strafing and aerial bombardment. Soldiers fire into forested areas of the mountains on all but one side of the circle,

forcing civilians to flee in the direction apparently lacking gunfire. Once civilians reach these areas, soldiers open fire on them. The Salvadoran army used similar tactics against civilian populations (see Sanford, 2003b; Bourgois, 1982: 14–30).

As the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union ended, George Bush Senior's administration shifted its overt Central America policy from the military to the politico-electoral theatre. On April 25, 1990, the Sandinistas peacefully handed over the reins of the government to Violeta Chamorro, whose opposition party had won the election with much political and financial support from the U.S. The Salvadoran army and guerrilla negotiated peace accords in 1992 and the Guatemalan government and URNG (Unión Revolucionario Nacional Guatemalteca — Guatemala National Revolutionary Union) signed peace accords in 1996.

Colombian Paramilitaries in the Late 20th Century

On December 3, 1981, while Guatemalan army massacres of rural Maya escalated to genocide and the Reagan administration was “drawing the line in El Salvador,” pamphlets announcing the establishment of a new paramilitary organization, MAS (*Muerte a Secuestradores*, Death to Kidnappers), were dropped from a helicopter on the Colombian city of Cali. More than 220 drug traffickers organized MAS, ostensibly in revenge for the M-19 guerrilla kidnapping of Martha Nieves Ochoa, a sister of Medellín drug cartel members (Human Rights Watch, 1996: 5). In 1982, the MAS paramilitary model of terror was adopted in a civil-military partnership between the town mayor of Puerto Boyacá, Captain Oscar de Jesús Echandía, and the nearby Bárbula Battalion. After convening a meeting of local people, including Liberal and Conservative Party members, they decided their objective went beyond protecting citizens from the guerrilla. They outlined a strategy to *limpiar* (cleanse) the area of “subversives.” Money was collected from ranchers and businessmen for the purchase of weapons, uniforms, and other supplies. The military provided tactical support, thereby giving this new paramilitary group army authorization, as well as active encouragement to track down and kill “subversives.” They, too, named their group MAS. Similar to death squad activities elsewhere in Central America, their cleansing of subversion quickly expanded to the elimination of all opposition to MAS, including a Puerto Boyacá town councilman, a Liberal Party political activist, and a doctor. Within two years, joint maneuvers between MAS and the Colombian army were underway and peasants were denouncing frequent incidents of summary executions and the destruction of peasant farms by army troops with MAS members (*Ibid.*: 6).

MAS then began to receive support from the Bomboná Battalion in Puerto Berrío. In 1981, Fidel and Carlos Castaño were trained by Bomboná officers and served as guides for these joint operations. A few years later, the Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Córdoba and Urabá (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá, ACCU) were formed by the Castaño brothers. In 1984, the U.S. government reattributed MAS, major drug traffickers, and shipments that

had been linked to the Cali Cartel to the Medellín cartel as the U.S. pursued prosecution of Pablo Escobar and his friends. This dismantling of the Medellín cartel “abetted and protected the ongoing continuity of interest linking anti-FARC terrorists, the Cali Cartel, and the CIA” (Scott, 2003: 87).

By the end of the 1980s, Fidel Castaño, also known as “Rambo,” was an important drug trafficker and one of the top paramilitary leaders in the country (Human Rights Watch, 1996: 6). In 2001, Castaño admitted, “the AUC has publicly recognized that in areas where the economy is coca, we finance ourselves with it” (Wilson, 2001: 3).

In the middle to late 1980s, at least eight other paramilitary groups using the name MAS popped up in the departments of Santander, Putumayo, Meta, Cundinamarca, Córdoba, Caquetá, Boyacá, and Antioquia. All are sites of tremendous paramilitary violence today. By 1986, according to Luis Antonio Meneses Báez, a former paramilitary leader, a regional meeting of paramilitary leaders was organized by the “Charry Solano” Intelligence Battalion to create a united front. In 1987, a second meeting was held to develop “laws, norms, and structures for the organization.” When these joint rules of operation were forged, the paramilitaries had 22 groups in 17 departments that were “all connected by radio and linked to the army by a designated liaison” (Human Rights Watch, 1996: 8). This highly coordinated paramilitary force was devastating for Colombian society. In 1988 alone, a Colombian human rights group, the Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP — Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular), reported 108 massacres — the worst level of violence in the decade. Not surprisingly, army collusion with paramilitary groups and collaboration between various paramilitary groups made this extreme level of widespread violence possible (*Ibid.*: 9). The founding and uniting of paramilitary groups had grave consequences for human rights. In the 1970s, 1,053 political killings were recorded; in the 1980s, some 12,859 political killings were recorded (*Ibid.*: 10).

In April 1989, President Virgilio Barco made public statements against the paramilitaries and identified them as “terrorist organizations.” “In reality, the majority of their victims are men, women, and even children, who have not taken up arms against institutions. They are peaceful Colombians,” stated Barco (*Ibid.*: 9). Despite a constitutional prohibition, by the 1990s, ties between the Colombian army and paramilitaries had strengthened. In 1997, paramilitaries consolidated at the national level as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, or United Self-Defense of Colombia) under the leadership of Carlos Castaño. In the year 2000, Human Rights Watch (2002a: 2) linked “half of Colombia’s eighteen brigade-level units to paramilitary activity,” pointed out that “these units operate in all of Colombia’s five divisions,” and concluded that “military support for paramilitary activity remains national in scope and includes areas where units receiving or scheduled to receive U.S. military aid operate.” By 2001, AUC paramilitaries had grown by more than 560% based on Carlos Castaño’s claims that the AUC had 11,200 members (Human Rights Watch, 2001). In a 2000 television interview, Castaño revealed that cocaine profits from Catumbo in North Santander covered the costs of

close to 80% of his forces (Richani, 2000: 16–22). Plan Colombia’s aerial spraying of coca fields targets FARC areas, yet in 2001 the Colombian government estimated that paramilitaries controlled 40% of the drug trade and the FARC just 2.5%.²³

Human Rights in Colombia

Colombia is similar to other countries that have experienced or are experiencing gross and systematic violations of human rights. As human rights violations increase, so too does the impunity of the perpetrators. Historically speaking, the current human rights crisis and internal armed conflict in Colombia raise several questions: What is a high level of violence? How do we measure increases and decreases in human rights violations?

Political Killings

In 1980, when 100 political killings took place in Colombia, political deaths began to be tabulated annually. By 1985, political killings had increased tenfold to 1,000. In 1988, the count quadrupled to 4,200 — or to 42 times the figure for 1980. Ten years later (1998 to 1999), an average of 12 people were victims of political killings each day — or 4,380 each year. In 2002, the annual figure was over 4,000 killed. Of the 11 people killed each day, a woman was killed every two days and a child was killed every 10 days. That is approximately 182 women and 36 children — double the number of men, women, and children killed in 1980.²⁴

Year	Political Killings Each Day (average)	Annual Total of Political Killings ²⁵
1980	One every three days	100
1985	2.7	1,000
1988	11.5	4,200
1998–99	12.0	4,380
2000	9.6	3,500
2001	11.0	4,000
2002	11.0	4,000

Instead of looking at the number of victims, we can also understand the meaning of this steady increase in political killings by examining the perpetrators. For the 1980 to 1990 period, responsibility for 20 to 30% of political killings has been placed on the guerrilla insurgents (ELN and FARC). In the 1980s, the army was responsible for 70 to 80% of political killings. By 1990, paramilitaries were deemed responsible for some 20% of such killings, while 50% were attributed to the army. Today, the guerrillas are held responsible for 20% of political killings, and the paramilitaries for the remaining 80%.²⁶ Thus, guerrilla violations of human rights have remained constant since 1990, but the paramilitaries have taken over the “dirty work” of the army. This strategic shift in the pattern of political killings permits the Colombian military to delegate the commission of atrocities to the paramilitaries, providing a façade of respect for human rights.

Who Is Killed?

In 2000, most of the 14 daily political killings were civilians in noncombat situations. Four (30%) were guerrillas, soldiers, and civilians killed in combat, while 10 (70%) were civilians killed in the street, their houses, or at their place of work in cities and towns.²⁷ Today as well, most victims of political killings are unarmed civilians in noncombat situations. Those most often targeted are community activists — people who work for NGOs, churches, and unions, as well as people who work for human rights, development, education, health, labor rights, and other issues involving social change.²⁸

Beyond the selected political targets, the paramilitaries' "Operación Limpieza" ("Operation Social Cleansing") program harkens back to the founding of MAS. Operación Limpieza involves the gross and systematic violation of human rights because paramilitaries target delinquents, street youth, prostitutes, drug users, gays, petty thieves, and anyone else who might negatively affect businesses. These human rights violations are part of the distorted parallel "justice system" that paramilitaries impose in the name of "law and order."

Paramilitaries have established Operación Limpieza in urban areas under their control. It is safe to leave items in one's car in Apartado, for example, because if someone were to be seen stealing, he or she would be shot. Beyond the targets listed above, social cleansing also goes after NGO leaders and members, as well as other poor individuals who are killed if they try to organize a union or protest injustice.²⁹ These actions are carried out in the name of "citizen security," which depoliticizes structures of state terror by placing them outside the framework of international human rights and humanitarian law.³⁰ Indeed, as Julian, the young paramilitary, commented to me in our 2001 interview,

I am on leave right now, but if a patron here comes to me and says, "Let's go do a little work, we have to go grab someone," I go do it because I am part of the organization. We go grab him. Sometimes we give him another opportunity, sometimes we have to kill him. We also do surveillance for people. There are people with businesses and we do security for them. They pay us to do security. Sometimes in a week, we have to kill five people. Maybe on one day, we kill two. If the police and the prosecutor aren't doing much, we kill more. It all depends on what we are ordered to do; we have to follow orders.³¹

Social cleansing must be discussed in terms of human rights violations and the victims of it need to be included in inventories that quantify the victims of political assassinations. These killings constitute political means and have political ends: they create and sustain terror among those who most need to organize to defend their rights. At the same time, social cleansing provides a level of assurance to the middle and upper classes, who may feel protected from crime and view the victims of social cleansing as less than human and

living on the margins of society. Even an international human rights worker commented to me, “it’s nice to be able to leave the doors unlocked and the windows open when I am not home — it’s a benefit of the paras.”³²

At the level of theory, we need an idiom to distinguish political killings from common crime. They are systematic because they target specific populations. Victims of social cleansing must be quantified as human rights violations. Otherwise, a commentator may raise that each year the 5,000 political killings are outnumbered by the 25,000 to 30,000 “nonpolitical” assassinations. This simplification of a complicated political situation allows for the conclusion that Colombia is simply a “violent” country and Colombians are “by nature” violent people, or that they have a “culture of violence.” I have heard such comments inside and outside Colombia (see Poole, 1994). Beyond the obvious racism and ethnocentrism, this type of conclusion is especially problematic because it negates the political character of the conflict and implies that there can be no political solution because the problem lies with a people and culture that are violent by “nature.”

Although there were some 4,000 political killings in 2002, this does not represent the total number of killings, much less the total violence. Regardless of how it is measured, the total is significantly higher. Recently, there have been 25,000 to 30,000 homicides each year. These numbers are often used to justify the paramilitaries’ parallel system of justice as a project to “get tough on crime.” This is simply wrongheaded. The excessively high homicide rate represents a generalized lack of citizen safety and protection of rights on the part of the state. There is no commitment to the protection of life and not all lives are seen as equal.

Conclusion

Although it is easy to blame the quotidian violence in Colombia on a drug war and a “violent” culture, archival, field, and testimonial research in the war zone shifts the focus to more than 50 years of paramilitarism that was facilitated by the conflation of interests between the U.S. and Colombian governments and their elites. Viewed in a regional context that includes Central America, violence has been a means and end for elites who, over time, have justified their control and use of violence with reference to a “war against international communism,” a “war against Cuba-inspired revolutionary insurgency,” and a “war against international drug trafficking and terrorism.” Indeed, those with power have never viewed all lives as equal. U.S. proxy wars in Colombia and Central America have imbued the cultural, political, economic, and legal structures with violence, impunity, and inequality. These are structural problems with structural solutions. In Colombia, as in Central America, the rule of law can be established only when human rights violators are brought to justice and the state defends instead of violates the rights of its citizens.

NOTES

1. Nairn's (1984: 21) analysis of the U.S. role in developing paramilitary organizations throughout Central America is confirmed by the following declassified CIA and U.S. State Department documents: United States Embassy in Guatemala Memoranda to the Secretary of State on September 15, 1962, March 13, 1963, and January 23, 1964. See also Memorandum of the Special Group, September 25, 1963; Telegram from U.S. Embassy in Guatemala to the State Department, January 5, 1966; Public Safety Division U.S. AID/Guatemala, "Operational Rescue of Terrorist Kidnapping and Guatemala Police Activity to Counter," December 1965; CIA Memoranda dated March and April 1966. All declassified documents cited in this article are now available from the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C.

2. Although Castaño officially resigned as the leader of the paramilitaries in 2001, many believe this action indicated his interest in entering into legal politics. Moreover, he is still viewed as representing the unified voice or leadership of the paramilitaries when he speaks.

3. See Comisión Andina de Juristas Seccional Colombiana, *Uraba*; Beltrán, *Uraba*; and Clara Inés García, *Uraba — región, actores y conflicto, 1960–1990* (Bogotá: CEREC, 1996).

4. While traveling through Barrio Obrero with UNHCR colleagues in a U.N.-marked vehicle, we were invited to leave by local *sicarios* who are understood to represent the paramilitaries.

5. Field research in Colombia indicated that this is the case in marginalized barrios of Apartado, Bogotá, and Barrancabermeja. Testimonies from Colombian refugees in Ecuador confirm these practices in Medellín, Cali, Baranquilla, Nariño, and Putumayo, among others.

6. A hotel owner from a coastal town told me about meetings with the paramilitary leader at the top of the mountain to negotiate worker performance and to pay the monthly protection fee or tax to the paramilitaries.

7. In addition to army checkpoints along the river, I witnessed helicopters flying low over Peace Communities in Uraba-Choco and troop maneuvers in Apartado, Río Sucio, Turbo, and along the highway to Necolí.

8. In the interview, he said "somos enemies" instead of "somos enemigos." He had never studied English. He picked up this term in the AUC.

9. Paramilitary interview with author, August 7, 2001, Apartado, Colombia. Paramilitary agreed to a taped interview on condition of anonymity.

10. He says, *un patrón mas alto*. A *patrón* can be a landlord, master, boss, or chief. It is interesting that he does not say higher-ranking commander.

11. At a spring 2001 Kellogg Institute Forum, former U.S. ambassador to Colombia, Curtis Kamman, also spoke of human rights as a hindrance to U.S. policy in Colombia.

12. See Nairn (1984: 21). This meeting culminated in the Declaration of San Jose.

13. Department of Defense, School of the Americas Academic Records 1947–1991, School of the Americas Yearly Lists of Guatemalan military officers trained there, released under Freedom of Information Act.

14. In 1956, the U.S. Army Psychological Warfare Center at Fort Bragg was renamed the U.S. Army Special Warfare School. In 1969, it became the U.S. Army Institute for Military Assistance. In 1983, it was renamed the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. See the U.S. ASOC Special Operations Forces information at www.soc.mil/sofinfo/histy.shtml.

15. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States, the population density in 1978 was 210 people per square kilometer, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador," Chapter XI, Economic and Social Rights, November 17, 1978, at www.cidh.oas.org/countryrep/ElSalvador78eng/chap.11.htm. In 1981, population density had risen to 224 people per square kilometer and in 2001, it was 309 people per

square kilometer. See World Bank, World Development Indicators, 1981, at devdata.worldbank.org/dataonline/SMResult.asp.

16. See Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, at www.cidh.oas.org/countryrep/ElSalvador78eng/chap.11.htm: 1–2.

17. LeoGrande (1981: 28) points out that the Carter administration “argued that right-wing dictatorships...make bad security risks...[and] human rights were never allowed to overshadow immediate national security concerns.”

18. See Gabriela Torres, Richard Grossman, Aldo Lauria Santiago, and Joan Kruckewitt in this volume.

19. See United States Institute of Peace, “Truth Commissions: Reports: El Salvador. IV. Cases and Patterns of Violence.” At www.U.S.ip.org/tc/doc/reports/el_salvador.

20. See McClintock (1992: 417) and Lauria Santiago in that volume.

21. For more on Iran-Contra, see Sobel (1995).

22. Department of Defense, School of the Americas Academic Records 1947–1991, School of the Americas Yearly Lists of Guatemalan military officers trained there, released under Freedom of Information Act. U.S. Marines receive this training. See Department of Defense, United States Marine Corps (MCI), July 15, 1997, Operations Against Guerrilla Units, 1–23: “Your objective is to KILL GUERRILLAS, NOT to hold terrain” (emphasis in original).

23. See Scott (2003: 75). For more on Plan Colombia, see John Dugas, in Scott. See also Crandall (2002).

24. Statistics are drawn from reports of the Comisión Colombiana de Juristas and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

25. See Amnesty International, 2000, 2001, 2002, *Annual Report* (New York: Amnesty International). See also Human Rights Watch, online report at www.hrw.org/campaigns/colombia/action/factsheet/htm#political.

26. See Human Rights Watch (2000b: 2).

27. Interview with Gustavo Gallon, Colombian Commission of Jurists, Bogotá, Colombia, October 16, 2000.

28. Demobilized former guerrillas (M-19 members demobilized following a peace agreement in the early 1990s) are a favorite target of the paramilitaries even if they are not involved in a community organization. Of the 6,000 M-19 combatants who were legally demobilized, more than 600 have been assassinated; the actual count is probably higher, but it is currently impossible to know because the extreme violence in rural communities inhibits data collection.

29. An example of this parallel system took place in spring 2001 near Apartado. A local mayor called a community meeting with local leaders who were organizing for the rights of banana plantation workers. He offered to facilitate communication between the plantation and the workers by setting up a meeting with these local leaders. The mayor passed around a sign-up sheet for a meeting scheduled for the following week. All but one person who signed the list was killed within a week. As the individual who recounted this story on condition of anonymity pointed out, “now the victims sign their names to the death lists.” Author interview August 6, 2001.

30. This type of social cleansing is not limited to Colombia. Such actions take place in Rio de Janeiro (tied to police), Guatemala City (tied to death squads), Lima (tied to intelligence forces), and other places around the world in the name of “citizen security.”

31. Paramilitary interview with author, August 7, 2001, Apartado, Colombia. Paramilitary agreed to a taped interview on condition of anonymity.

32. Interview with author on condition of anonymity, July 5, 2001.

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