

Plan Colombia: The Measure of Success

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# Plan Colombia:

## *The Measure of Success*

FORREST HYLTON

### Introduction: A Better War?

SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF THE Iraqi insurgencies in 2004, as in Central America in the 1980s, counterinsurgency has been the obsession of the US military and intelligence bureaucracies.<sup>1</sup> Within that admittedly limited framework, Colombia seems like a clear example of “success” in the twenty-first century, especially when measured against Iraq and Afghanistan. The following excerpt from a *Council on Foreign Relations* report is illustrative of the general tone:

The state is now present in many regions previously controlled by illegal armed groups, reestablishing elected governments, building and rebuilding public infrastructure, and affirming the rule of law [...]. These substantial improvements are due to concerted efforts by the Colombian government, with assistance from the United States through Plan Colombia. Colombia still has very serious security problems [...] but important progress has been made.<sup>2</sup>

In the words of *New Yorker* editor and journalist Robert Kaplan, “Colombia is what Iraq should eventually look like, in our best dreams. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has fought—and is winning—a counterinsurgency war even as he has liberalized the economy, strengthened institutions, and improved human rights. Nuri al Maliki and Hamid Karzai could learn from him.”<sup>3</sup> Kaplan has a ruthlessly selective definition of human rights: it does not include the largest number of internally displaced people in the world, according to the UN High Commission on Refugees, nor does it provide for trade unionists, more of whom have been murdered in Colombia

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in this century than the rest of the world combined.<sup>4</sup> Besides the police, the secret police, the armed forces, the executive, and local-regional governments run by narco-paramilitary mafias, it would be difficult to point to other Colombian institutions that have been strengthened. These issues, of course, like those about what constitutes success are consistently overlooked by those who champion counterinsurgency wars.

In order to upgrade Special Forces training, military hardware, intelligence, and high-tech communications so as to cut cocaine production in half, Presidents Clinton and Andrés Pastrana introduced Plan Colombia in 2000. Four-fifths of this \$1.3 billion aid package was designated for the military and police in hopes of breaking the stalemate that developed in the 1990s between the Colombian armed forces and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC).<sup>5</sup> Prior to September 11, 2001, the US government was reluctant to use counter-narcotics aid in nation-building counterinsurgency efforts. But Plan Colombia, intended to replicate cold war counterinsurgency successes in Peru, Guatemala, and El Salvador, where intelligence networks linked the civilian population to rural paramilitary forces in alliance with the police and armed forces, was extended for the duration of Alvaro Uribe's presidency from 2002-2010. It fit neatly into the war on terror framework for national security used by George W. Bush, as well as the counterinsurgency doctrine under President Obama.

This paper argues that we should consider two issues to make sense of how Plan Colombia has been billed as the measure of success in Washington, in spite of abundant evidence that it failed on its own terms. First, the consensus in Washington about the need to get counterinsurgency right in the Middle East and Central Asia, and second, changes in local conditions in Colombia, where the new Right, at once anti-FARC and anti-Chavez, has won three consecutive presidential elections outside the framework of the two-party diarchy that ruled Colombia for over 150 years.

Section Two sets out the basic outlines of Plan Colombia and charts the narrative of success associated with it. Section Three analyzes de-classified documents from the US State and Defense Departments from the 1960s in order to unearth the roots of current counterinsurgent ideas and practices regarding "clear, hold, and build," with particular emphasis on initiatives from the Alliance for Progress period. Section four examines how the "clear, hold, and build" sequence played out at the regional-local level under Plan Colombia, and surveys its results in terms of human rights, inequality, and the balance of political forces. The conclusion places Plan Colombia in a regional context, both in terms of advances for the Left after 1998 and advances for the Right in recent years, and offers some thoughts about why Colombia, in spite of its exceptionalism within Latin America, is held up as a model to be replicated in US foreign policy in Central Asia and the Middle East.

In contrast to the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, or the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, the FARC represent a small minority of frontier peasants far from the urban centers of power in one of the world's most durable parliamentary republics. No matter how much territory they have controlled on the frontier, their political support has always been minimal and their political representation non-existent in an overwhelmingly urbanized country. And unlike Iraq and Afghanistan, only Colombians do the fighting and dying in an apparently endless counterinsurgency war. No US troops have ever been killed there.

Perhaps most importantly, in contrast to the FMLN in El Salvador or the FSLN in Nicaragua, the FARC have never represented an alternative pole of Colombian nationalism: they could never claim to represent the nation against US imperial power and its client state. In fact the Colombian Left, in part because of the relative strength of the FARC compared to other organizations, never cohered into a national-popular bloc, whether armed or civilian. Rather, it was characterized by fractiousness and competition among and within leading organizations. When the government of Belisario Betancur negotiated peace with the FARC and other guerrilla groups in the mid-1980s, the political party that the FARC then formed together with the Colombian Communist Party, Unión Patriótica (UP), tended toward radical nationalism by bringing people from different regions, races, and classes together for a common project of non-violent social transformation. Yet the FARC doubled the number of its fronts during the peace process, which broke down in 1985; this helps explain why the paramilitary right murdered the UP's leadership and rank-and-file before the Soviet Union broke up.<sup>6</sup> These local conditions—no US occupation, a counterinsurgent client state, and an isolated and unpopular insurgency—do not exist elsewhere, and cannot be exported, since they are the peculiar products of Colombian history.

### **Cold War Genealogies: The Origins of Plan Colombia and Paramilitarism**

One ideological link between the idea of imperial success in Colombia, Iraq, and Afghanistan is provided by Lewis Sorley's 1999 book *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. After the Tet Offensive, General Creighton Abrams crafted the strategy of "clear, hold, and build" in South Vietnam to replace the discredited "search and destroy" paradigm implemented under his West Point classmate General Westmoreland. Though Abrams had been Westmoreland's deputy in 1967, Sorley's book credited Abrams with the waning of National Liberation Front (NLF) guerrilla offensives in the south by 1971.<sup>7</sup> Like US military leaders, leading policymakers in Washington read Sorley in 2005 and again during the surge in 2007, while in 2009, President Obama and Vice-President Biden

read Sorley as they contemplated strategy in Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> As with Vietnam, US leaders confused tactics with strategy. Certainly no one questioned the mission or reflected on why insurgencies had formed in the first place; had they done so, they would have had to come to terms with the political nature of the problems as well as their potential solutions.

During Abram's tenure as Westmoreland's deputy in 1967, "forbidden zones" beyond the reach of state authority became the chief targets of large-scale counter-insurgency campaigns. The Colombian insurgency was seen by the US military as the greatest threat to its power in the hemisphere after Castro's Cuba, thus, US military aid to Colombia was re-oriented toward counter-guerrilla training.<sup>9</sup> At the heart of the strategy was the organization of the local population into self-defense forces and intelligence networks designed to collaborate with the army and its new Special Forces units. Colombia and Vietnam were thus closely linked in terms of US foreign policy and counterinsurgency.<sup>10</sup>

Counterinsurgency and modern-day paramilitarism in Colombia do not date from Johnson's tenure, however, for the watershed came during the late Eisenhower and Kennedy years.<sup>11</sup> Following the Cuban Revolution in 1959, at a meeting with US Secretary of State Christian Herter, Colombian President Alberto Lleras Cargango stressed the urgency of reorienting US military aid away from conventional tactics. Herter convinced the leading critic of such an approach, Senator J. William Fulbright, of the need for "an Army equipped and trained to clear Colombia of guerrilla elements."<sup>12</sup>

The Colombian military had close ties to the US military going back to the early Cold War; in 1948 a US Army Intelligence report noted, "The Colombian Army and Air Force have adopted our doctrines almost en toto."<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the participation of Batallón Colombia in the Korean War, Colombia became the first Latin American country to sign a Military Assistance Program (MAP) with the United States based on the Rio Pact of 1947.<sup>14</sup> The MAP was seen as key to US-Colombian relations: "The attendance of Colombian military personnel at military schools in the US is one of the most effective means of keeping the Colombians 'on our side.' It is highly recommended that the quotas continue indefinitely."<sup>15</sup>

With US training and support, Batallón Colombia was at the forefront of bandit extermination campaigns under Rojas Pinilla in the mid-1950s. Yet even after the Army Ranger School was established with US aid and assistance in 1954 in order to teach "ranger techniques and counter-insurgency operations," Rojas Pinilla was

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under strict orders to use US military hardware—14 fighter jets and 7 B-26 bombers in 1954, for example—for hemispheric defense only.<sup>16</sup> US military and diplomatic correspondence in 1955-1956 was emphatic about that point. From the late 1940s through the late 1950s, in the eyes of the US Army, US-Colombian military cooperation meant that “US military doctrine, tactics, organization and equipment” had achieved widespread acceptance.<sup>17</sup>

Following the Cuban Revolution in 1959, however, Colombia helped pioneer the shift in US Latin American policy from hemispheric defense to internal security. As Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Mann wrote in October 1960, “The Colombian program—while unusually meritorious—should be only a step in what we hope to develop as a comprehensive response to some of the problems newly facing us in Latin America.”<sup>18</sup> President Eisenhower gave the State Department the green light to determine whether Colombia should receive a team of counter-guerrilla experts, and the Pentagon organized a CIA survey team that arrived in October 1959 and published its findings in early 1960.<sup>19</sup>

Though Greg Grandin has argued that Latin America has served as “Empire’s Workshop,” as reflected in biographies of CIA survey team personnel, Asia—specifically the Philippines and Indo-China—appears to have been the principal laboratory for counterinsurgency during the Cold War.<sup>20</sup> The survey team was led by Hans Tofte, a former British commando officer of Danish nationality who became a US Army specialist on guerrilla warfare in Asia, the Middle East and Europe.<sup>21</sup> Major Charles T.R. Bohannon was an Army officer “with impressive behind the lines experience in Orient where [he] fought alongside Philippine guerrillas and later participated actively against communist Huks.”<sup>22</sup> Col. Napoleon Valeriano was a “third-country national,” needed to lower the US profile.<sup>23</sup> Valeriano had served as Philippine President Magsaysay’s personal aide and was rated the most successful officer in counter-guerrilla warfare. In addition to being the police chief in Manila, he had operated in the Indo-China war.<sup>24</sup>

In 1960, Col. Edward Lansdale, a close friend of President Magsaysay who supervised hunter-killer squads against Huk guerrillas before moving on to Indo-China in 1954, wrote a secret memorandum criticizing the limitations of the US survey team’s strategy, organization, and results in Colombia. Lansdale remarked that Col. Napoleon Valeriano’s report to Lleras Camargo was utterly lacking in political direction, which Lansdale considered dangerous “in this area neighboring a place so vital to our own national security as the Canal Zone,” and recommended—albeit with certain reservations—the formation of hunter-killer squads: elite anti-guerrilla “Lancero” units, to be assigned to regular army units, under the direction of US advisers and third country nationals with experience in the Philippines and/or Indo-China. The

danger, as Lansdale saw it, was “that of the Communists gradually getting control of sufficient guerrilla organizations to permit an overthrow of democratic government by force of arms. Chinese tactics employed in Cuba emphasize the need to be alert to this danger in Latin America.”<sup>25</sup> The main point of Lansdale’s note to the Secretary of Defense, however, was that when “Colombia’s political objectives are established, *and determined to be in harmony with US policy*, then all US officials and organizations in Colombia should work as a team in helping the Colombians move toward these goals.”<sup>26</sup>

Those who followed Lansdale’s recommendations were also clear about the importance of politics and the need to address the causes of insurgency as well as its effects. In the eyes of counterinsurgents and reformers, the chief cause of insurgency was the inequitable land tenure system, and in April 1960, President Lleras Camargo began to implement the US Survey Team’s recommendations concerning agrarian reform. INCORA was established to improve infrastructure, irrigation, and technology, and with provide cheap credit to peasant farmers. Lleras Camargo visited Eisenhower in Washington later that April to request that the Colombian armed forces receive greater counter-guerrilla training and support, and in 1961, US military aid was re-oriented accordingly, with the first intelligence Military Training Team (MTT) arriving in Colombia in August. US Ambassador to Colombia Fulton Freeman reported to Secretary of State Herter that his source told him “flatly that no evidence existed of Castro connection or Cuban presence,” and correctly identified rural insurgencies as indigenous rather than foreign-controlled.<sup>27</sup> Yet the focus of US policy remained organizing centralized intelligence and communications networks—DAS replaced the now defunct SIC (Colombian Intelligence Service)—to coordinate with both the civilian population and with each other.

With the Overseas Internal Defense Policy, published in 1962, the US Department of Defense re-examined the Colombian case within a global counterinsurgent framework: the aim was “policy guidance for the employment of US resources to prevent or defeat subversive insurgency and assist in the development of balanced capabilities for total defense of free world societies against threat of internal attack.”<sup>28</sup> In February 1962, founder of the Green Berets and head of the US Army Special Warfare at Ft. Bragg, General William Yarborough, brought another Military Training Team to Colombia for a two-week tour. In his report to General Maxwell Taylor’s Special Group (Counter-Insurgency), Yarborough suggested that the United States oversee all aspects of counterinsurgency in Colombia, especially the formation of five Special Forces detachments to be attached to the four battalions fighting to pacify the countryside.<sup>29</sup> In the “Secret Supplement” to his report, Yarborough insisted that the United States train Colombian paramilitary hunter-killer squads (*localizadores*)

to “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.”<sup>30</sup> This is as precise a definition of paramilitary death squads as historians have encountered.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout this period, in contrast to the NLF in Vietnam, there was no left-wing insurgency in Colombia that could claim to represent an entire region of the fragmented country, much less the nation. Minister of War General

“ “ **If economic development and army presence were one face of the Janus-like Alliance for Progress and Plan Lazo, then A-Teams and hunter-killer squads (*localizadores*) were the other.**

Alberto Ruíz (who had trained at Ft. Benning before taking over the leadership of Batallón Colombia in Korea in 1952) implemented the basic outlines of Yarborough’s strategy under the direction of yet another US MTT, announcing Plan Lazo in July 1962.<sup>32</sup> Plan Lazo was aimed at winning “hearts and minds” of rural Colombians, with public works, principally roads and irrigation, public health initiatives, literacy drives, summer youth camps, and other civic action campaigns intended to help soldiers bring economic development and “internal security” to isolated, impoverished regions.

If economic development and army presence were one face of the Janus-like Alliance for Progress and Plan Lazo, then A-Teams and hunter-killer squads (*localizadores*) were the other. After 1962 they were supervised by members of the US Latin American Special Force stationed in Panamá. Teams of *localizadores* were composed of select groups of 25 officers, NCOs, and civilians, aimed at infiltrating enemy ranks as well as establishing networks of civilian informants.<sup>33</sup>

More sophisticated, centralized, and systematized intelligence gathering and processing was the key to counterinsurgent success. In late 1963, a US MTT comprised of army, navy, and air force officers looked to update Plan Lazo by developing a command-level plan for the Colombian armed forces, resulting in the Joint Armed Forces Counterinsurgency Plan (1964-66). In 1964, the United States helped the Colombian government create a Military Intelligence Battalion designed to “find, destroy, or eliminate communist and extremist activities through a network of clandestine agents.”<sup>34</sup>

In late May 1964, the Colombian government launched Operación Marquetalia in order to eliminate rural communist self-defense forces in southern Tolima. Instead, the government offensive forced sedentary peasant self-defense forces to become a mobile guerrilla on the eastern lowland frontier in Meta and Caquetá—which of-



ficially became the FARC in 1966.<sup>35</sup> Using plans drawn up by the US MTT in Bogotá, in Operacion Marquetalia, the Colombian armed forces under General Ru'z used their new UH helicopters, T-33 combat planes, seven army battalions, and three mobile intelligence groups of hunter-killer squads trained at the Lanceros School established in line with Lansdale's recommendation.<sup>36</sup> In line with the National Policy Plan on Colombia, in 1964 US diplomatic correspondence focused on eradicating communist guerrillas in the southern Andean region. Nothing less than the "prestige" and "credibility" of the Valencia government—keywords of the Kennedy administration—were said to be at stake.<sup>37</sup> In April, Bogotá telegraphed Washington to stress the communist threat: "Valencia emphasized in letter that communists [in] these areas are genuine and not crypto-communists. Also claimed they are oriented toward Cuba whence they receive direction and financing."<sup>38</sup> The sectarian differences on the Left between the Moscow-oriented FARC and what would soon become the Castroite National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Maoist People's Liberation Army (EPL) were blurred by a broad brush-stroke approach.<sup>40</sup> Though the Colombian armed forces occupied rebel territory, they did so only temporarily, and the guerrillas remained at large. When the armed forces left, things remained as before.

Eliminating communist guerrillas proved to be more difficult and costly than anticipated. A US Embassy report on the progress of the Colombian Internal Defense Plan highlighted the limited nature of Colombian counterinsurgent success: "It is uncertain whether the Army has succeeded in winning over the populace in this area, and it has not completely accomplished the objective of discouraging the inhabitants from assisting scattered bandits, both 'Tirofijo's' organization and other bandit groups in southern Tolima."<sup>41</sup> Kidnappings of landed elites and bombing attacks, allegedly carried out by two new guerrilla groups to the Left of the FARC, had spread to the cities.

Thus by 1966 the Colombian government had three insurgencies on its hands as opposed to one—the FARC, the ELN, and the EPL. Counter-insurgency helped breathe life into the forces it was meant to vanquish. It also gave birth to new bureaucracies dedicated to eradicating insurgency, as the size of the Colombian armed forces tripled between 1962 and 1968—the year in which the Colombian Congress passed Law 48, which made it legal for landlords to form private paramilitary forces in alliance with the police and armed forces.<sup>42</sup>

Yet the Alliance for Progress did not ameliorate the conditions considered propitious for the development of insurgency. A US Senate Foreign Relations Committee report found that it had brought neither growth nor equity: in spite of \$732 million disbursed between 1962-1967, economic growth was an anemic 1.2 percent annually and per capita income had changed little, having risen from \$276 to \$295 annually.<sup>43</sup>

Thanks to US funding, President Valencia avoided having to confront landlords with agrarian reform. Cattle ranching in Colombia, as measured by the volume of exports, grew by more than three thousand percent, but an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 landless families did not receive any US aid at all. The distribution of wealth and income, patterns of landholding, and the tax structure—all geared toward the well-being of the oligarchic and largely endogamous elite—were left as before, with “close to two-thirds of the population not participating in the economic and political decision-making process.”<sup>44</sup> In the late 1960s, no one tried to sell Colombia as a counterinsurgent success story, much less one to be replicated elsewhere.

### **Déjà vu All Over Again**

Fast-forward 30 years and the “forbidden zone” off limits to the state had expanded dramatically: the FARC controlled up to a third of national territory—including Sumapaz, immediately surrounding Bogotá—and boasted 18,000 troops dispersed in over 100 fronts in more than half of Colombia’s municipalities.<sup>45</sup> The Colombian government now required a Plan Lazo writ large, for in spite of its waning political legitimacy in the 1990s, the FARC fought the Colombian army to a standstill in the south, and became especially powerful in the Amazonian basin where most of the world’s coca leaf was grown following its eradication in Peru and Bolivia. Juiced up from profits obtained on the lower rungs of the cocaine commodity circuit, estimated at as much as \$900 million annually, and convinced by the political genocide of the democratic Left (UP) that armed struggle was the only viable path of resistance, the FARC attacked major Colombian military bases in the south in 1996-1997 using battalion-sized detachments.<sup>46</sup>

Yet because of their military power, the FARC made inroads in the official political arena, helping to elect Conservative Andrés Pastrana in 1998 on a peace platform in exchange for a de-militarized zone of 16,200 hectares. Together with the Colombian armed forces and their burgeoning paramilitary allies the FARC helped plunge the country into new depths of barbarism as peace negotiations got underway in 1999. They took kidnapping, extortion, and political murder to hitherto unimaginable levels, eroding what minimal political legitimacy they had once enjoyed in the cities, and clearing the path to power for the authoritarian right. The paramilitaries, meanwhile, solidified ties to official politics and the highest rungs of the cocaine commodity circuit, and carried out most of the country’s massacres; paramilitary massacres increased from 286 in 1997 to 407 in 1999.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of the narco-paramilitary presence in the clearing and holding stages of Plan Colombia cannot be overestimated, and this has been true in regions like the north where the insurgency has historically been weak or absent, as well as

the southern frontier regions the FARC once governed. During the clearing stage, which began under paramilitary direction some years before Plan Colombia, but accelerated sharply after Plan Colombia went into effect in 2000, the southern agrarian frontier towns and villages in which insurgents had previously operated

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**Under Plan Colombia, narco-paramilitary mafias assumed the role of, and overlapped with, the state in most frontier regions.**

were drained of people to a considerable degree. Elsewhere, far from the FARC heartlands, paramilitaries displaced record numbers in Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, as well as mestizo small farmers, in

the northeast and northwest.

The holding stage of Plan Colombia represented the largest land grab in Colombian history, as 5.5 million hectares of land were usurped or forcibly abandoned between 1999 and 2007.<sup>48</sup> While cattle ranching consumed 40 million hectares of land, only 4 million were devoted to agricultural uses.<sup>49</sup> Those areas in the north where the insurgency was weak that were not given over to cattle ranching have been designated for resource extraction, mega-projects, or mono-crop export agriculture like African Palm or corn for bio-fuels—in some cases with subsidies from USAID.<sup>50</sup>

Plan Colombia helped clear the land of its inhabitants, but did not build functioning government institutions. The challenge of building a state in areas where it had always been absent was formidable, and was in any event farmed out to regional narco-paramilitary mafias that pacified territories for foreign investors and firms by taking over local-regional governments. Under Plan Colombia, narco-paramilitary mafias assumed the role of, and overlapped with, the state in most frontier regions, guaranteeing Uribe's rightwing coalition at national level in 2002 and again in 2006. This got him elected not once but twice, and led to a warlord-imposed corruption without limits similar to Karzai's Afghanistan or al-Maliki's Iraq—except that Uribe was both genuinely popular and enjoyed high levels of political legitimacy through 2008.<sup>51</sup>

Showpiece towns like La Macarena, Caquetá—recipient of development aid from the United States during the Integrated Action phase of Plan Colombia—recalled nothing so much as Ramadi and Marjah. Since new doctors, nurses, teachers, administrators, engineers, and civil servants failed to materialize, state presence on the agrarian frontier was confined to the armed forces and police.<sup>52</sup> While the Colombian armed forces cleared insurgents out of town centers, the FARC continued to control the surrounding countryside and set up nightly checkpoints around the town. In 2009, mass graves were discovered behind the town's cemetery and adjacent

to the Omega Special Forces military base, with 449 unmarked graves, according to Representative Ivan Cepeda. La Macarena is just one of a series of common graves to have emerged in radius of Plans Colombia and Patriota.<sup>53</sup>

Advances in security—considerably lower homicide rates and dramatically lower levels of kidnapping—proved not only temporary and reversible, but were accompanied by an increase in inequality and concentration of land. In contrast to Bolivia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador, where significant redistribution took place, poverty and unemployment barely diminished in Colombia.<sup>54</sup> Between 2002 and 2010, 2.4 million people were displaced—accounting for nearly half of all those displaced since the 1980s—and an astonishing 21,000 soldiers, police, guerrillas, and paramilitaries died at war, while some 14,000 civilians were killed or disappeared between 2002 and 2008.<sup>55</sup> But the size of the police and armed forces nearly doubled, and the military budget tripled, with a cost to Colombians of \$40-\$50 billion between 2000 and 2010.<sup>56</sup> Concentrated in extractive industries, foreign investment surged. Though a cascade of evidence emerged after 2006 linking pro-Uribe politicians to regional narco-paramilitary mafias, by mid-2010 only two paramilitaries had been sentenced—subject to appeal—under the Justice and Peace Law regulating their demobilization. It is not clear how many mid-level commanders and foot soldiers actually demobilized, as remnants of AUC paramilitaries have regrouped.<sup>57</sup> Not surprisingly, given their proliferation, minimal headway was made against cocaine production (as measured by the UN in metric tons). No one forced off their land was able to get it back, and dozens who tried were assassinated.<sup>58</sup> In addition to the scandals concerning President Uribe's authorization of illegal wiretapping and surveillance networks, at least as early as 2005 the Colombian Army began to disappear several thousand civilians and dress them up as guerrillas to inflate the body count.<sup>59</sup>

The FARC leadership was effectively targeted, thanks to US technology and communications support, with "Operación Fénix"—the cross-border raid on Ecuadorian soil and the assassination of Raul Reyes, a senior FARC commander, in March 2008, which culminated in the killing of FARC military chieftain Jorge Briceño in September 2010. But FARC attacks rose in 2008-2009 compared to previous years, and in spite of its diminished numbers, the FARC has continued to control vast territory in the southeastern lowlands, earning an estimated \$500-\$600 million per year from the cocaine business.<sup>60</sup> They lack political legitimacy and are geographically isolated, and although their communications have been intercepted and their chain of command broken, there is no reason to expect them to disappear.<sup>61</sup>

On its own terms Plan Colombia mostly failed, but the importance of Plan Colombia does not lie in its cost, since Afghanistan currently receives \$7 billion in US aid per month.<sup>62</sup> Rather, Plan Colombia matters because of its ideological utility.

For those who insist that the United States must fight and win counterinsurgency wars around the globe, Plan Colombia provides the most plausible—and perhaps the only—example of the efficacy of the clear-hold-build sequence.

### **Conclusion: Once Again, Colombian Exceptionalism**

Given that the basic outlines of the strategy pursued in Plan Colombia were in place by the time General Abrams replaced General Westmoreland, the revival of counterinsurgent visions of “clear, hold, and build” in the twenty-first century is both striking and alarming. In Colombia, this is best explained by the fact that paramilitary modernization under Uribe appeared to break the deadlock between the FARC and the Colombian armed forces. Backed by the US, the ruling bloc of neoliberal entrepreneurial elites, narco-paramilitary merchant-landlords, and machine politicians—with broad support from the majority of working- and middle-class voters in cities and towns—fought to rollback the FARC’s political and military gains in the countryside. Perhaps more than anything else, Plan Colombia helped them succeed, but did not offer serious economic and social reform, since this was excluded from the outset. Hence, Plan Colombia was a repeat of Alliance for Progress on cocaine: Colombia now has the third-largest fleet of Blackhawk helicopters in the world, and tracks the FARC leadership in real-time with the aid of US Signals Intelligence Technology. But rural areas still lack schools, health clinics, decent roads, sewage systems, or housing.<sup>63</sup>

To explain the timing of Plan Colombia, we need to situate Colombia in its regional context, for its divergence from its neighbors stands out. The spectacular growth and organizational consolidation of the FARC took place just before insurrectionary popular movements and center-Left governments began to advance throughout South America. Precisely the sorts of demands for national sovereignty, democratic control of natural resource exploitation, redistribution of wealth, and limits on corporate power that surfaced after 1998 in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Venezuela were precluded by Plan Colombia.

Yet Colombia is now part of a nexus of right-wing politics, neoliberal economic policies, and organized crime that characterizes the current scene in Mexico as well as Honduras, Guatemala, and Panamá. The new right-wing axis includes Chile and Peru; though considerably less gangsterish than their northern neighbors in the wake of successful counterinsurgency campaigns, both countries have helped the United States stem the “pink tide” that swept Latin America during Plan Colombia’s lifetime. This is the context in which the United States negotiated seven military bases in Colombia in 2009, which are unprecedented in South American history, as US bases have always been confined to the Caribbean and Central America.<sup>64</sup>

This paper has argued that at an astonishing cost in human lives and livelihoods, counterinsurgency has worked in Colombia and will not anywhere else for several reasons. First, the FARC never represented more than a fraction of the peasantry—settlers on the southeastern agrarian frontier—much less the urban working class or fractions of the middle class. They never formed a viable pole of leftist nationalism, and were encircled by the new right under Uribe. Second, US soldiers never fought and died in Colombia, and the Colombian armed forces have grown enormously whenever the US government has focused on counterinsurgency, as in the 1960s and the 2000s.

There is a chance that counterinsurgency doctrine will be relegated to the backseat in Washington—at least for the time being—as a result of disastrous developments in Central Asia in 2009-2010.<sup>65</sup> “Search and destroy” may yet make a comeback.<sup>66</sup> What is most depressing, though, is that if historical precedent is any guide, new calls to get counterinsurgency right will arise in the future.<sup>67</sup> And regardless of empirical evidence, in lieu of a major shift in official thinking in Washington, Colombia may well continue to serve as a model of “success,” albeit one that remains elusive for would-be empire builders in Central Asia and the Middle East. ❶

### Notes

1. A version of this essay was presented at the Latin American Studies Association conference in Toronto in October 2010. The author would like to thank Marilyn Young and Charles Bergquist for their comments on a previous draft. David Elliot, “Parallel Wars? Can Lessons of Vietnam be Applied in Iraq?” in *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam: Or, How Not to Learn from the Past*, eds. Marilyn Young and Lloyd C. Gardner, (New York: New Press, 2007), 31; Marilyn Young, “Counterinsurgency, Now and Forever,” in *ibid.*, 227; Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2006), 87-120.
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  33. Ibid., Tab F, "US ARMIS Intelligence Effort in Colombia," 4; Annex A to Tab E, 5.
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