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COLOMBIA'S PARAMILITARIES:
CRIMINALS OR POLITICAL FORCE?

David Spencer

December 2001

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FOREWORD

This monograph supplements a special series stemming from a major conference entitled “Implementing Plan Colombia: Strategic and Operational Imperative.” The conference was cosponsored by the Dante B. Fascell North-South Center of the University of Miami and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. The intent was to explore the multiple dimensions of Colombia’s ongoing crisis and inform the public debate regarding the challenges faced by the statesmen, intellectuals, military strategists, and others who take on the responsibility to deal with that crisis.

Some of the monographs in the series have generated passions. This is another one that is likely to do that. Hopefully, it will also generate serious reflection about the tough choices Colombian, U.S., and other global leaders face. The author, David Spencer, points out, first, that the Colombian paramilitary “self-defense” forces represent some important sectors of society, and enjoy more popular support from Colombian society than the insurgents. Second, the paramilitaries have developed into a powerful irregular force that is proving itself capable of challenging Colombian guerrillas. Third, while they commit horrendous atrocities, they have been successful where the state has not. Therefore, the paramilitaries are seen by many as a viable solution to the conflict. Finally, he argues that until the segments of the society represented by the paramilitaries are—somehow—incorporated into the solution to the Colombian crisis, there will be no solution.

This is a timely report. The Strategic Studies Institute and the North-South Center are pleased to offer this monograph as a contribution to the international security debate on the situation in Colombia.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

DAVID SPENCER is a defense analyst who works on a variety of contracts, mostly dealing with Latin America and low intensity conflict. He also works part-time for the Center for Naval Analyses. He is an expert on Latin American insurgency and counterinsurgency strategy, operations, and tactics, and has been a regular lecturer at the Air Force Special Operations School since 1996. Mr. Spencer has lived over 13 years in six Latin American countries to include Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Venezuela. He is completing his Ph.D. dissertation on insurgent logistics in Latin America at George Washington University. He has published five books, two on strategy and tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN guerrillas, and numerous articles on different defense and military history subjects.

SUMMARY

This monograph provides a sobering discussion of some important facts regarding Colombia's paramilitary organizations. It points out that the paramilitary "self-defense" organizations pose a complex problem for the Colombian state in its search for a solution to current 40-plus-year-old internal war. First, the paramilitaries represent some important sectors of society and enjoy more popular support from the Colombian people than the insurgents. Second, the paramilitaries have developed into a powerful irregular military force that is proving itself capable of challenging the guerrillas. Third, while they commit horrendous atrocities, they have been successful where the state has not. Therefore, they are seen by many as a viable solution to the continuing conflict. The author concludes with an admonition; that is, the paramilitary issue must be addressed, and hard choices have to be made. Until the segments of the society represented by the paramilitaries are—somehow—incorporated into the solution to the Colombian crisis, there will be no solution.

COLOMBIA'S PARAMILITARIES¹: CRIMINALS OR POLITICAL FORCE?

Introduction.

The paramilitaries pose a complex problem for the Colombian state in its search for a solution to the current 40-plus-year-old guerrilla war. Popular portrayals of the movement attempt to characterize its members as heartless indiscriminate killers at the service of drug lords and renegade generals. While there is some truth to this portrait, the problem is much more complex. Unfortunately, throwing generals in jail, arresting drug traffickers, and killing paramilitary leaders will not rid Colombia of the phenomenon because this solution does not address the origins and dynamics of the problem.

The reality is that, despite their numerous atrocities, there will be no real peace settlement in Colombia without addressing the grievances of these so-called "self-defense" organizations. First, the paramilitaries represent some fairly important sectors of society and enjoy more popular support from Colombian society than the guerrillas. Second, the paramilitaries have developed into a powerful irregular force that is proving itself capable of challenging Colombia's guerrillas. Third, while they commit horrendous atrocities, they have been successful where the state has not. Therefore they are seen by some as a possible solution to the conflict.

This has made them a real third actor in the conflict. The polemical argument that the paramilitaries are a child of the armed forces and drug traffickers may at one time have had merit. However, now this argument is anachronistic, as over the last 10 years the paramilitaries have increasingly demonstrated their independence. While they are not antistate, they have the potential to develop into a political-military antistate movement that could eventually

pose a greater threat to Colombian democracy than the guerrillas, because of their greater popular support.

A Rational Explanation for the Existence of the Paramilitaries.

This monograph is not an apology for the paramilitaries. Their acts of murder are reprehensible and will only fuel the continuing cycle of violence, preventing Colombia from developing the strong democratic institutions it desperately needs to bring lasting peace to that nation. The purpose of this monograph is to try to develop some understanding of the dynamics of a movement that is little understood inside or outside Colombia. To understand the paramilitary phenomenon, the context in which their violence occurs needs to be explained.

The core of their intense violence is the pent-up anger and frustration of important sectors of the rural population at guerrillas who have terrorized the countryside for 30-plus years. This has been exacerbated by a state that has been unable to provide more than fleeting relief from insurgent violence. The atrocities of the paramilitaries are not acts of abnormal men, but rather the acts of normal men subjected to and victimized by unremitted violence, who see the disappearance of the guerrillas as the only sure solution to their plight. After 30 years of insurgent terror, the supporters of the paramilitaries have little faith in negotiations between the government and guerrillas, where they are not represented. With one or two important exceptions, the history of peace negotiations in Colombia has largely been one of disappointment. These agreements have never resulted in peace for rural areas. Even when guerrilla groups such as the M-19 and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) demobilized, other insurgent groups quickly filled the vacuum. The continual inability of the government to bring peace or provide adequate protection to the population in the rural areas has provoked people to take matters into their own hands and protect

themselves against the insurgents. The paramilitaries are the outcome of these efforts.

More Than Drug Traffickers and Army Thugs.

The guerrillas and human rights groups often describe the paramilitaries in terms of their connections and subordination to the armed forces and drug traffickers. While there is quite a bit of literature that indicates that high levels of collusion, cooperation, and support between paramilitary groups and military officers as well as drug trafficking organizations occurred, particularly in the paramilitaries formative period, these links have diminished over time. There are undoubtedly still important links to individuals in the armed forces (some at high levels) and drug traffickers. However, it is a serious oversimplification to view the paramilitaries as an irregular branch of the army, or as the armed wing of the narcotics traffickers. Polemical characterizations of this movement ignore the rapidly evolving dynamics of the group and its increasing presence as an autonomous force in the Colombian conflict. Calling the paramilitaries “narcos” or “military death squads” is as unconstructive as calling revolutionary movements “bandits” or “terrorists,” a common practice designed to deny insurgent organizations political legitimacy.

Whether or not official legitimacy is granted to the paramilitary movement, the fact remains that they have a real mass base, whose members and supporters view the movement as the best solution to a number of serious grievances that have not been and cannot be resolved under current parameters by the Colombian state. More importantly, this social base seems to be growing, not diminishing. The paramilitaries have taken the law into their own hands, and created highly sophisticated “vigilante justice” groups. So whether they are granted legitimacy or not is irrelevant. They are a real political and

military force and must be dealt with as such if Colombia ever hopes to attain peace.

Origins of Paramilitaries.

To understand the paramilitaries, it is useful to look at the context within which they developed. Colombia is a country with a history of terrible political violence extending back to 1948, and earlier. While the tide of battle has ebbed and flowed and the players have changed over the years, groups always have threatened the stability of the state through violence. Over the last 30 years, the destabilizing elements have largely been Marxist guerrilla groups. During the last decade, the level of that violence intensified largely because of the increasing role of drug trafficking in the conflict. Since the dismantling of the Medellín and Cali drug cartels by the Colombian government, the monopolies held by the mafias have been broken, and the benefits of the illicit trade have spread to a much wider group of traffickers. Among the beneficiaries have been the guerrilla organizations, primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), but also the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). While the exact level of their involvement in drug trafficking is still subject to debate, no doubt exists that the insurgent role in narcotics trafficking is a prominent one, no longer of a marginal or subsidiary nature. This important role is supported by increasing evidence of guerrilla involvement at all levels of the business. FARC involvement in drug trafficking began as a conscious strategic decision in 1982. Taxing drug traffickers was regarded as the best way to obtain resources to purchase arms and fund the revolution. Although over the next 10 years the FARC condemned drug trafficking and issued internal declarations that they needed to get out of the business, the evidence indicates that their involvement only deepened. The FARC became addicted to the money. Also, the population involved in the cultivation, harvesting, and processing of drug crops became prime recruiting ground for the guerrilla armies.

Through the drug trade, the guerrillas acquired enough resources to launch mobile warfare in 1996. They began overrunning smaller military installations and defeating army combat formations in open battle. The funds from narcotics are supplemented by additional means of raising revenue, such as kidnapping, extortion, protection rackets, and other "war taxes."

This is a predatory business with many victims, especially in rural areas where the state has little presence. For example, the federation of cattle ranchers (FEDEGAN) reported that in 1997 they suffered losses of \$750 million dollars, largely to guerrilla theft and extortion.² The consequences of resisting these extortive taxes is severe and includes kidnapping, death, and destruction of property. The usual victims of the guerrillas are not the very rich, who mostly avoid the rural areas but instead the more vulnerable small, independent farmers, ranchers, professionals, and merchants. For the past 30 years, these people have suffered greatly at the hands of the guerrilla groups. The last 10 years have been particularly severe as the latter have gained strength.

Not coincidentally, the paramilitary movement has seen its greatest development over this same decade. To understand the growth of the movement, it is useful to recount the history of its most notorious leader, Carlos Castaño, since his background is not atypical of the constituents of the paramilitary groups. Castaño grew up in rural Antioquia, the son of a small rancher, not far from Medellín. When he was 15, FARC guerrillas kidnapped his father. When the family was only able to pay part of the huge ransom, the rebels killed their captive. After this, the Castaño sons swore revenge. The four brothers went to the army and volunteered to act as guides against the insurgents. They enjoyed some initial success, but were frustrated when many of the guerrillas captured due to their efforts were released by the courts for lack of evidence. Furthermore, the army never consolidated control over rural areas, and when the soldiers withdrew, the rebels

returned and continued to terrorize the area and exact revenge against those suspected of helping the army.

Subsequently, the Castaño brothers decided to quit working with the army and create their own antiguerrilla group. In the beginning, they tried to confront the insurgents directly, but after suffering heavy losses during the first skirmishes, they realized that the rebels were better armed and had more resources and combat experience than they did. So the Castaños decided to make a tactical shift and fight the guerrillas with more irregular warfare methods than the latter used against the government. In other words, they would out-guerrilla the guerrillas. Instead of attacking the rebels' combat forces, they focused on the guerrilla infrastructure, including their noncombatant administrators, supply lines, communications, and those fighters who came into the towns for rest and relaxation. This method proved successful, and as the insurgents began to suffer losses, the self-defense movement grew rapidly as those who paid protection money to the guerrillas began to give money to the paramilitaries instead. Other victims who had suffered like the Castaños joined in significant numbers.

Because of the paramilitaries' successes, a number of individual Colombian army officers tolerated and encouraged them. This included the provision of intelligence and weapons, as well as putting them in touch with retired officers who provided training and technical assistance. Many retired officers and ex-soldiers also joined the various groups. This tolerance and encouragement occurred because of shared objectives and because the paramilitaries made the army's job of public security much easier. In addition, former guerrillas who had laid down their weapons during the various peace processes became an unlikely source of paramilitary recruitment. Insurgents who had refused to surrender their arms began an extermination campaign against those who had "come in from the cold." After numerous murders, the surviving

ex-guerrillas formed paramilitary groups to defend themselves against their former comrades.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the paramilitary phenomenon is that it did not develop as a monolithic group, which then spread in an organized fashion to other areas, but rather as the spontaneous idea of a number of people coming to the same conclusion around the same time, who formed their organizations independently of each other. During the mid- to late 1980s, the paramilitaries were largely separate "self-defense" groups, with the single common denominator of fighting the guerrillas. Some were essentially defensive in nature, either hired security for wealthy landowners, or citizen militias that were legal up to 1989. Others were more ambitious, their objective being to not only protect themselves from the insurgents, but also to take the war to guerrilla sanctuaries. Others still were hired killers of the drug traffickers, seeking revenge on guerrilla groups trying to make easy money by extorting the mafias. The strongest movements of the latter type developed in the Urabá region of Antioquia, the Eastern Grasslands south and east of Bogotá, and the Middle Magdalena region in lands just south of the Atlantic coast.

The Paramilitaries and the Medellín Cartel.

The paramilitaries gained notoriety when some of the groups in the Middle Magdalena were created or co-opted by the Medellín Cartel, particularly under Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha ("El Mejicano"). The mafiosos armed them, brought in Israeli and British mercenaries to train them, and used them to fight the cartel's competitors in Cali. They were also used against the guerrillas in order to avoid paying the high fees the FARC was demanding to protect drug processing laboratories. But the relationship began to wane in 1990, when Fidel Castaño discovered that Pablo Escobar was developing similar ties with the ELN and the FARC to fight the state. Escobar provided money and resources to the

ELN in exchange for acts of terrorism that advanced the interests of the traffickers. That same year Escobar imported weapons for the FARC in exchange for unspecified work. While Castaño had few qualms about drug trafficking (that was an American problem), he was not antistate. The conflict between Escobar and Fidel Castaño became open and bitter, resulting in a number of killings on both sides. Cartel support for the paramilitaries greatly diminished during this time, with most of the ties finally broken when Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha was killed in 1991.

The paramilitary units under the domination of the Medellín Cartel committed barbarous atrocities, killing peasants en masse for crimes of guilt by association. The selection of targets varied from group to group, and some were less discriminate than others. According to Castaño, such methods were "mistakes" and "errors." However, since similar acts are still being committed, claims to have corrected them must be taken with more than a few grains of salt.

Successes of the Paramilitaries: Areas Cleared of Guerrillas and Making Economic Progress.

Despite these "errors," the paramilitary movement was successful in its primary goal of fighting the guerrillas. The paramilitaries claim that they played an important role in forcing the guerrillas of the EPL to sue for peace and demobilize. The evidence supports this assertion. In addition, the paramilitaries eradicated guerrilla groups from much of the Gulf of Uraba area in Antioquia and enjoyed similar success in Córdoba and other parts of the country.

Also, evidence suggests that where the paramilitaries have cleaned out the guerrillas, they have sometimes restored a degree of economic prosperity. For example, a journalist visiting San Pedro, Urabá, one of the towns that was first "liberated" by the paramilitaries, noted that the town is now doing well economically. In addition, there is no

crime or “antisocial” behavior in San Pedro. The town is governed by a set of strict rules of conduct. While the cost of disobeying these norms is high, the cost for opposing the guerrillas in the areas they dominate has also been high, so the local population probably does not notice much difference. The difference for the locals is that, in the rebel zones, farms have been abandoned and business is down. An indicative statistic is property values. When the insurgents dominated the area, property was worth about \$35 per hectare. Today, under the domination of the paramilitaries, the same property is worth around \$670 per hectare. The guerrillas tear down public authority and are economic predators, while the paramilitaries restore a form of law and order and the economy. Because of this, those who remain in the zones dominated by the paramilitaries feel little sympathy for those who were killed or driven out.³

This difference is highly appealing to sectors of the rural zones affected by the guerrillas. Many people in these areas are willing to pay the social costs to obtain the benefits because the insurgents are already imposing a similar cost on local inhabitants. If a social cost is to be paid, and the choice is between economic prosperity and economic depredation, logic seems to lean toward the former.

As the paramilitary movement has been increasingly successful, it has received more monetary support and more appeals from new areas to form units in zones affected by the guerrillas. However, not all has been love and fraternity, as there have been recent complaints by rural towns that the paramilitary groups are making taxing demands on their resources as well. As time passes, it is being discovered that a switch between the paramilitaries and the guerrillas is not much more than the difference between one taskmaster and another, and the social group which reaps the benefits.

Still, as matters now stand, an increasing number of Colombians are looking to the paramilitaries as a solution to the war. Between 1993 and 1997, the number of such groups

jumped from roughly 273 to more than 400, with between 3,000 and 6,000 active combatants.⁴ According to year 2001 army intelligence estimates, the number has increased to 7,400. Castaño explained how new organizations are created in an interview with Bibiana Mercado of *El Tiempo*. Representatives of a region approach him to ask for help in forming a group. Castaño required the locals to recruit the requisite number of men and collect a predetermined budget. When these tasks were completed, he sent weapons and advisers to train the new group, and an already active unit to help them conduct their initial operations. After this training, they were expected to operate independently, but able to count on the support of the mother association when in need.⁵ Castaño made claims that even a paramilitary group was formed under his tutelage in Venezuela.⁶ He also claimed that a similar group was formed in Ecuador.⁷

Current Links to Drug Traffickers.

Until recently the paramilitaries emphatically denied links to drug traffickers. However, in a recent interview Castaño admitted that up to 70 percent of the money for the Auto defensas Unificados de Colombia (AUC) came from this illicit trade. Other contributors are businesses, cattlemen, and land owners. Money from narcotics activities for the paramilitaries is most evident in the Southern plains area, in Putumayo, and in Southern Bolivar. This is also where the greatest conflicts exist between the paramilitaries and the guerrilla groups. The problem is that there are few other accessible sources of wealth in Colombia capable of providing all of the logistics and material needed to compete with the guerrillas without resorting to drug money. Prominent emerald merchants such as Víctor Carranza have been accused of funding paramilitary groups, and the latter have fought the guerrillas for the control of gold mines, but neither of these activities is as lucrative, fungible, or readily accessible as drug trafficking.

However, because of the negative publicity and bad experience in the Middle Magdalena with Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, the paramilitaries in general seem to shy away from public association with the narco-traffickers.⁸ Occasionally, the connection will surface through ugly events. In October 1997, for example, a paramilitary unit ambushed a group of detectives investigating a drug trafficker from whom they received pay, killing 11 police and detectives. Castaño promptly expelled this group from the AUC.⁹ However, Castaño was not upset about the drug trafficking, he was upset at the killing of the policemen. While Castaño was leader of the AUC he espoused a strict policy of nonconfrontation with the state. Like just about every illicit organization, the paramilitaries profit from drug trafficking.

Even so, the guerrillas seem to be more heavily involved in drug trafficking. For example, in a 1998 interview between the author and members of the army's antidrug unit, the Special Army Commando (CEE), the officers could not recall having ever raided a drug laboratory belonging to anyone associated with the paramilitaries. On the other hand, they could show physical evidence of dozens of raids where the connection between the labs and the guerrillas was plainly evident: drug labs adjacent to guerrilla camps, drug labs surrounded by marked guerrilla minefields, firefights in the labs with guerrillas, documentation, photos, and so on. The point here is not to prove which is a bigger drug-trafficking organization. The point is that it does not make sense to accord political status and negotiate with the guerrillas, who have less popular support and traffic drugs, and claim that the same status cannot be extended to the paramilitaries because they traffic in drugs.

Why Does the Movement Grow? Methods and Tactics.

Why does this unsavory movement that commits human rights abuses and profits from drug trafficking continue to grow? The simple answer is because they are successful, and this attracts the support of people desperate for a solution to the war. As the paramilitary movement has gained strength and expanded throughout Colombia, several things have occurred. First, the level of warfare has increasingly moved from a sole reliance on selective elimination to include direct combat between equal forces. Starting in 1996, the paramilitaries began using units and columns capable of confronting guerrilla combat forces. These "shock brigades" are fully equipped with the weapons and equipment of regular military forces. Most importantly, the paramilitaries enjoy communications that allow them to coordinate actions between different units and regions. They are equipped with automatic weapons that are at least as good as those used by the guerrillas, and are steadily acquiring heavier weaponry. During fighting in the latter half of 1998 against the ELN in the San Lucas mountain range of southern Bolívar, there were reports of the paramilitaries employing heavy mortars, rockets, armed helicopters, and other heavy weapons against the guerrillas.¹⁰

In addition to "regular" units, the paramilitaries of the northwestern Antioquia region created a special operations force that is capable of carrying out raids and assaults. In April 1997, for instance, this special forces unit assaulted an ELN guerrilla base in Bolívar department, successfully rescuing a kidnapping victim.¹¹ The regular forces have carried out open warfare against the guerrillas, particularly in northwestern Colombia. This violence has resulted in a large stream of refugees from the zones in dispute, as well as spillover into neighboring Panama. Again, the paramilitaries have been successful in these battles.

Forming a National Front.

The increasing success of the paramilitaries caused them to take even more ambitious steps. First, they organized regional alliances to coordinate activities. The best known of these is the Self-Defense Organizations of Córdoba and Urabá, known by the acronym ACCU, but there are a number of others. In 1997, the leadership of the regional organizations met to form a national organization known as the AUC. The main purpose of this national front is to develop a coordinated strategy against the guerrillas. This includes sending men, weapons, and resources from one region to another to conduct operations in a specific territory. Each organization still maintains its autonomy and is responsible for its own finances and operations. Each organization contributes to a common fund controlled at the national level, which is kept as a reserve for times of crisis in case of a lack of weapons or ammunition.¹² In 1999 the paramilitaries began talking about a parallel national political front called the Alliance for the Unity of Colombia (AUC). It is clear that as this group has been marginalized and ignored; their response has not been complacency, but further organization and sophistication.

Mapiripán.

The significance of national coordination became evident in July and August 1997. On July 22, Colombian newspapers reported that some 30 civilians had been massacred in an armed excursion by the paramilitaries against the town of Mapiripán in the department of Meta on the Guaviare river.¹³ What the papers did not reveal is that Mapiripán was long a strategic stronghold and support base for the FARC. It was geographically important because it was the point from which the FARC exercised control over part of the Guaviare river, an important route for arms trafficking and the transportation of drugs.¹⁴

The attack on Mapiripán was a bold strike at the heart of FARC-controlled territory. The people killed were not

chosen randomly, but were deliberately targeted for their involvement with the FARC. The paramilitaries brought with them a specific list of targets. Among those killed were a man who collected a road-use tax for the guerrillas, a man who dispatched FARC-controlled drug flights, a man who was known as a longtime Communist Party militant, etc.¹⁵ This attack hurt the FARC deeply. Subsequently, the leader of its Southern Bloc, the notorious Jorge Suárez Briceño ("El Mono Jojoy"), personally ordered several hundred guerrillas to converge on Mapiripán.¹⁶ The paramilitaries flew in their own reinforcements from Antioquia and attacked the advancing insurgents. In a 6-day battle, they claimed to have killed 49 FARC guerrillas and captured 47 weapons, admitting the loss of 12 of their own men.¹⁷ The AUC agreement not only gave the paramilitaries the ability to attack the rebels' supporters, but also to strike their combat forces. Most significantly, the victory set a precedent. In Castaño's words: "There will be many more Mapiripáns."¹⁸ It was not long before similar attacks began to occur elsewhere.

It is useful to dissect the Mapiripán episode, because it proved to be the tactical model for virtually every subsequent paramilitary operation. Essentially, it can best be described as a two-tiered assault. The first tier consisted of attacking the guerrillas' masses and support base. Intelligence operations were conducted to identify the support and infrastructure elements of the rebels in the area the paramilitaries wanted to attack. The latter then made their incursion and, list in hand, detained and executed the persons identified. The impunity with which they were able to enter insurgent territory and carry out these executions indicates that there were significant numbers of people who were unhappy with the guerrillas' control of the region. This discontent facilitated the paramilitaries' penetration and their identification and elimination of rebel support elements.

The second tier of the attack involved giving battle to the guerrilla combat forces. This was accomplished in two ways.

First, the elimination of the insurgents' support, communications, resources, and logistics elements forced them to react to the incursion. If they wanted to maintain domination of the territory, the guerrillas had to expel the intruders and reestablish their networks. In such operations, they exposed themselves to the paramilitaries' use of the same kind of hit-and-run tactics used by the guerrillas against government troops: ambushes, raids, and booby traps.

Second, if the insurgents are sufficiently weakened by the incursion, the paramilitaries will conduct search and destroy operations of their own. This is done by using local guides, often ex-guerrillas, who know the trails and camps from which the guerrillas operate. Again, the ability of the paramilitaries to find these camps and trails indicates that there is a significant element of discontent among the guerrilla membership and population under rebel control that the paramilitaries are exploiting. The upshot has been heavy casualties for both sides. Overall, however, it appears that the paramilitaries have gained the greatest advantage, as the guerrillas have steadily lost territory to them.

The State's Reaction to the Paramilitaries.

The government has steadfastly refused to grant the paramilitaries recognition other than as a criminal element.¹⁹ Moreover, the latter's continual offensive actions after Mapiripán led to the formation of a special "search group" to bring their leaders to justice. The organization of this group was based on the model used to bring down the Medellín and Cali cartels.²⁰ Pastrana subsequently ordered the armed forces to join the police in the struggle against the paramilitaries. In 1998, approximately 450 paramilitaries were captured and 60 killed in various operations. Government operations at that time hurt the movement in their stronghold, Urabá, to such an extent that, according to Castaño, the FARC was able to make bold incursions into the region in an attempt to regain their lost

foothold.²¹ During the latter half of 1998, there were large-scale battles in Urabá between the FARC and both the army and the paramilitaries. The military suffered many casualties to the renewed guerrilla attacks. Where the government was effective against the paramilitaries, the latter have paid a heavy price in blood to prevent the power vacuum from being filled by the insurgents. In 1999, a similar level of activity against the paramilitaries took place.

In 2000-01, much more significant actions were taken against the paramilitaries. Much of this was due to a significant strengthening of the Colombian military and battlefield success against the insurgents. The government was strong enough that it could make headway against the paramilitaries without leaving itself vulnerable to the guerrillas. The army and marines conducted an antiparamilitary operation in the Cauca valley in which a column of 60 or so paramilitaries surrendered to the marines rather than be destroyed by nearby guerrillas. Later, the Attorney General's office conducted a raid in Cordoba, with the help of the military, against the finances of the AUC. The latter operation provoked a crisis within the AUC after which Carlos Castaño resigned as leader of the organization because he would not approve of AUC confrontation with the state. Despite what people think of him, Castaño was a moderating force within the AUC, and it is likely that the paramilitaries will start moving in a more radical and confrontational direction.

While the government has toyed with the idea of conversations with the paramilitaries, including some sort of political recognition, its position has recently hardened. In part, it is because of the military successes and increased strength of the military. The military is better able to fill the vacuum when paramilitary forces are removed. It is also because negotiations with the insurgents have gone badly. Why open negotiations with a new group that can prove equally fruitless? In addition, the Colombian government is also under tremendous pressure from two important

sources to avoid according even a modicum of political recognition to the paramilitaries. The first, obviously, is the guerrillas, who are adamantly opposed to any kind of political recognition or inclusion of the paramilitaries in the peace process. The guerrilla's contention is that the paramilitaries are a creation of the state. They contend that there is no reason to accord any special recognition or status to the child, when conversations are already taking place with the parent. The guerrillas have threatened several times to withdraw from the peace talks if the paramilitaries are given recognition. Instead, they insist that the state must undo what it has done and disband the paramilitaries. The reality is that the guerrillas are mortally afraid of the paramilitaries. They consider them, not the state, their most dangerous enemy, and in 2000-01, a majority of FARC operations were directed at recovering lost rural terrain from the paramilitaries.

The United States has also pressured Colombia to make a major effort to fight the paramilitaries. Here, there are two major concerns. The first is the desire to greatly reduce human rights violations, which is a precondition for U.S. assistance. Since human rights involves a government's treatment of its own people, the American position seems to assume that the Colombian government or military exercises some control over the activities of the paramilitaries. Second, the United States is concerned about the paramilitaries' connections to drug trafficking, the current major driver behind U.S. policy in Colombia, and the region.

Solutions?

The Colombian government is caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. The paramilitaries are clearly the most public violators of human rights. For example, a 1998 government study indicated that 70 percent of human rights abuses were committed by the paramilitaries, 25 percent by the guerrillas, and 5 percent

by the public forces. The paramilitaries go into towns, kill civilian supporters of the insurgents, force many others to become refugees, and destroy property. On the other hand, they have successfully cleared the rebels out of many areas, so they are also contributing to the government's counterinsurgency effort. However, this contribution gives the government, particularly the military, a black eye because of the human rights abuses. It is like chemotherapy. The treatment is as bad as the disease. The methods employed by the paramilitaries do not strengthen or support democratic institutions; rather, they foster authoritarianism.

Yet, because of the ineffectiveness of the Colombian government's attempts to protect the rural population from the guerrillas through democratic institutions, the paramilitaries are the natural response of a sector that feels the need for relief at any price. Of what value is democracy if it cannot protect its citizens? The paramilitaries are unsavory, but they are not simply the servants of drug traffickers, large landowners, and corrupt military officers. They have grown beyond this and have become a rural movement in their own right.

The Colombian government has largely chosen to fight the paramilitaries. This is required of a rule-of-law regime. The state has an obligation to punish the perpetrators of all atrocities and crimes. The real problem is that by only treating the paramilitaries as criminals, they provide no long-term justice for the population represented by the paramilitaries. Without addressing the political needs of this population, there will be no long-term solution to the war. The reality is that the paramilitaries represent an important group of the Colombian populace that has had no voice, a population greater than the supporters of the guerrillas, and, unless the legitimate rights of this sector are protected by the government, the problem will not disappear. It will not matter if the major paramilitary leaders are arrested and jailed. If the dynamics that led to the creation of the movement are not resolved, new groups

will be created. We only have to look at the history of Colombia's Marxist insurgents. Each group that disappeared was eventually replaced by a new group because, while individuals tired of war, the system remained broken. The paramilitaries feel they have found the cure for the disease, and many Colombians apparently agree because these groups continue to be formed at a brisk rate despite their unsavory nature. In reality, their methods are only very effective at suppressing the symptoms, giving an illusion of a cure, while they sow the seeds of the next, more virulent strain of the disease. With each evolution of this type, both by the guerrillas and paramilitaries, reaction, counterreaction, death, vengeance, and bloodshed are part of this sickness.

In short, the government desperately needs to find some way to incorporate people, who, because they have no other recourse, support the paramilitaries, into a strategic plan to pacify the country through legal, democratic means where the anger of these people can be used in a constructive manner. Perhaps the most effective alternative would be the creation of a parallel, legal, civilian defense militia, national guard, or constabulary under the control of the police or another civilian entity that could prevent abuses from occurring. The purpose would be to attract those elements of the paramilitaries' support base who would prefer to operate within the law, but feel they cannot since the state does not provide an effective alternative.

Such a strategy, if successful, might deny the guerrillas territory "liberated" by the paramilitaries; moreover, it would isolate the truly criminal elements in the latter. Then having started to address the systemic problem, the state can pursue the criminal elements and eliminate them without fear of perpetuity. Unfortunately, this kind of solution is not likely to be adopted in the short run. Because of the cycle mentioned earlier, Colombia has a legacy of rural civilian militias, official or otherwise, running amok. The 1,000-day war at the turn of the 20th century, *La Violencia* in the mid-20th century, and the current

paramilitaries are all part of this tradition. The problem is that none of these militias were ever created with sufficient controls in place to make them accountable. No matter, there is great aversion to creating yet another such organization because of the fear of what they might do. In 1998 Colombia dismantled several hundred of its very weak, highly regulated, officially sponsored neighborhood-watch type groups, known as Vigilance and Private Security Services (CONVIVIR). The ghosts of the past may be impossible in the current political climate to overcome.

This is not a good sign, as most successful counterinsurgency and pacification strategies to date have relied heavily on civil defense militias. These groups are important because they have denied territory, and consequently support, logistics, and communications, to the guerrillas. They have also freed the armed forces from security duties to conduct maneuver and combat operations. The incentive for militias is that they are empowered to defend their own homes and sources of economic sustenance. Unlike army units or patrols that move in and conduct operations on a short-term basis, civilian militias have a personal stake in the security of the local area. In neighboring Peru, civil defense militias have been recognized as contributing heavily to the demise of Sendero Luminoso. Most of rural Ayacucho is now safe for tourists, something that was unheard of only a few years ago.

Colombia made the militias that had been operating under army auspices illegal in 1989, and the result has been disastrous—namely, the uncontrolled proliferation of the paramilitaries. Essentially, the government cut off supply of a service when it was in high demand. Like all services in high demand, rather than ceasing to exist, it continued in a less controlled and more volatile form through the informal sector. Making the militias illegal did not uncreate them, it merely encouraged the creation of multiple groups outside the control of the state. The same thing happened in Peru, but the militias there never reached the levels of

sophistication or depravity attained in Colombia. This was largely due to their lack of access to resources. In contrast, in Colombia drug money escalated the war to a much higher level. In the end, however, the Peruvian military reluctantly incorporated the civilian militias and provided them with some leadership and weapons. It was not too long thereafter that guerrilla activity began to significantly decline.

In Colombia, the uncontrolled paramilitary groups quickly developed the most efficient and ruthless means of operation, and are now a serious threat to state stability. The original justification for eliminating the citizen militias was that they were hard to control and committed excesses. This cannot be disputed, but it is far easier to reform an incorporated force than to control an unincorporated one. The tortured history of the paramilitaries is an excellent example of the latter. The abuses committed outside the bounds of government control are probably much greater than those that would have occurred had the militias remained legal and under the direct supervision of the authorities. The real question about the formation of a new parallel force is whether the parent institution will exercise the necessary control. In the past, the Colombian army and police could probably not have been relied on to do this, but things seem to be different today, especially with the police, but with the army as well.

Regardless, this may not be a realistic solution for Colombia. It may already be too late to form a parallel militia. First, the 1991 constitution forbids such a force. Second, the legal problems of CONVIVIR indicate that the juridical battle for the creation of such an entity would be fierce and might not be resolved in time to do much good. Third, Colombia's recent experience with the paramilitaries has been so bad that there might be too much political resistance to such a measure. A second alternative, then, would be to deal with the paramilitaries as currently constituted. This is certainly the paramilitaries' preference. The leadership of the paramilitaries has called on the government to include the AUC in the peace talks,

indicating that there will be no peace in Colombia without the participation of his group. The government has been extremely loath to offer these elements the political status to participate in the negotiations. However, it has been forced to cede some ground. As the paramilitaries have gained strength, the government has made unpublicized contacts, and there is a certain consensus that at some point peace negotiations will be conducted with them, though separately from the talks with the guerrillas. Perhaps the real issue for the government is timing. The hope seems to have been that, once peace talks were on a firm footing with the insurgents, some kind of conversations could then take place with the paramilitaries. With the way things are going with the peace talks with the insurgents, this is unlikely.

Conclusions.

Hard choices have to be made. Regardless of the alternative chosen, if the segment of Colombian society represented by the paramilitaries is not incorporated into the solution, there will be no real solution. Unchecked, uncountered, unco-opted, and unrepresented, the paramilitary movement will continue to grow and become increasingly radicalized. This will occur with or without its current leaders, for the momentum is already established. In turn, that will further weaken the efforts of the state to bring law and order to Colombia.

The paramilitaries continually insist that they are not antistate, and that their only *raison d'etre* is to fight the guerrillas. They claim that once the insurgents are defeated, they will demobilize. However, this is now highly unlikely, even if the guerrillas are largely defeated. It is unlikely that the latter would demobilize simply because their objective had been accomplished. In the author's judgment, they would be loathe to lay down their weapons and cede complete control to a state that allowed the guerrillas to continue to exist, and failed to represent them (the paramilitaries) in the attempt to find a solution. The

fear is that under such a state new guerrilla groups would soon emerge. In such a scenario, the paramilitaries would continue to exist as a guarantee to prevent the emergence of new, powerful insurgent groups. They probably would not attempt to take power, but would impose their will on the state through the threat of violence.

If the Colombian government continues to treat the paramilitaries as mere criminal organizations without addressing their social, political, and economic foundations, it will face several problems. First, it will have to increasingly divide its resources, which are already stretched thin. Second, the paramilitaries, who are currently pro-state, will become antistate, and warfare will take place between their forces and those of the government. This will further weaken the latter's counterinsurgency efforts and create a three-way war. Colombia is already having trouble fighting the guerrillas, so the implications are not salutary.

The government needs to counter the criminal acts of the paramilitaries, just as it does those of the guerrillas. However, it needs to view the paramilitaries, like the guerrillas, as a political-military movement, not merely a criminal element. This does not imply granting the paramilitaries immunity or approving their acts of terror. Clearly, the government cannot tolerate certain types of behavior. Their atrocities threaten the very foundations of the democracy Colombia needs to build in order to bring long-term peace. The perpetrators of gross violations of human rights on all sides must be prosecuted, and elements of the military that are involved with the paramilitaries must be purged. But the government will not be successful if it does not address the fundamental issues of the paramilitaries' constituents. Colombia needs to find a way to incorporate and co-opt this constituency in order to channel its efforts and momentum into a productive, legal, and constructive program to bring peace to the nation.

ENDNOTES

1. The proper term here is *self-defense groups*, but the paramilitaries will be used throughout because it is commonly used.
2. "Ganaderos pierden \$750 mil millones por inseguridad," *El Tiempo*, December 12, 1997.
3. Jhon Jairo Torres Martínez, "El Máximo Santuario," *El País*, December 1, 1997.
4. "Paramilitaries de Paramilitaries?" *El Pais*, October 12, 1997.
5. Bibiana Mercado and Orlando Leon Restrepo, "Uraba: el fin de la Pesadilla," *El Tiempo*, September 28, 1997.
6. "Paramilitaries quieren controloar el Arauca y Casanare," *El País*, December 22, 1997.
7. "Habla Castaño," *Semana*, August 17, 1998.
8. Mercado and Restrepo.
9. "Paramilitaries de Paramilitaries?"
10. "Investigan posibles helicopteros 'paramilitaries,'" *El Tiempo*, November 12, 1998.
11. "Paramilitaries exhiben su propio Gaula," *El Tiempo*, April 23, 1997.
12. Mercado and Restrepo; also "Paramilitaries Atacan a Guerrilla," *El Pais*, April 23, 1997.
13. Freddy Canchon Naranjo, "Masacre en el Meta," *El Pais*, July 22, 1997.
14. "Paramilitaries: un año de Terror," *El Pais*, December 3, 1997.
15. Bibiana Mercado, "Cordoba y Uraba exportan paramilitares," *El Tiempo*, August 31, 1997.
16. "Ojo por Ojo," *Semana*, August 18-25, 1997.
17. Mercado and Restrepo.
18. *Ibid.*

19. "Gobierno rehusa reconocer paramilitares," *El Tiempo*, February 15, 1999.

20. "Se inicia cacería de paramilitaries," *El Pais*, December 3, 1997.

21. "Habla Castaño."

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