

# Insights

## from Colombia's "Prolonged War"

By CARLOS ALBERTO OSPINA OVALLE



Photos courtesy of Colombian Army

Top to bottom: scenes from counterterrorist operation; General Ospina is shown the route of the operation; Colombian soldiers on patrol

Colombia is the second oldest democracy in the Western Hemisphere after the United States, but political violence has plagued its history since independence. The causes lie in the unique geography, demographics, and history of the nation.

Since the end of World War II, Colombian violence has been dominated by insurgencies. Though the insurgents have used terror, that has only been one of the tactics employed in pursuit of their larger aims.

Colombia faced fairly small insurgencies before the 1980s. At that point, unable to mobilize popular support, the insurgents began funding their revolutions through criminal enterprises such as drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping. These activities proved lucrative beyond all expectations. As a consequence, the insurgents began to ignore popular mobilization

completely, relying increasingly on terror to force the people to obey their will.

The combination of these factors led one of the insurgent groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC), to develop a strategy to take power—with several distinct phases and a number of supporting tasks to be accomplished within each phase. The war grew worse year after year, despite increases in defense spending and growth of the public security forces. It

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was only after the military understood the insurgent strategy and designed its own strategy to defeat this plan that the war began to turn in the government's favor.

In the end, then, no matter what the enemy is called—*insurgent, terrorist,*

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General Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle is the Commander of the Colombian Military Forces.

General Ospina observes a FARC camp captured by Colombian troops



Colombian Army

narcotrafficker, or narcoterrorist—successful counterinsurgency depends on a thorough understanding of the enemy and his real intentions. The government’s response must be shaped by this understanding.

**Early Lessons Learned**

To counter insurgents, one must remember that they have doctrine. When captured, they have often been carrying the works of Mao Tse-Tung and Truong Chinh (the Vietnamese theorist of people’s war) translated into Spanish.

These insurgents were Colombians, fellow citizens, a point that should never be forgotten in internal war. After their capture, they were induced to discuss the process by which they became insurgents. Several points emerged:

- All internal wars have their deepest roots in grievances and aspirations that create a pool of individuals who can be recruited, after which the organization takes extraordinary measures to shape their worldview and keep them in the organization.

- Thus, *leaders* of a subversive group are the most dangerous members. Followers may be dangerous tactically, but leaders read, find ideology, and come up with “big picture” solutions to the ills of society. They will then commit any crime tactically to gain their strategic end.

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- Insurgents have organization, which helps them develop plans and approaches, much like the military. They have procedures and rules. They attend schools and strive to learn. They have a set of core beliefs, which one can combat once he understands them.

- Combating insurgent beliefs is not simply a military task; it is a struggle for legitimacy. If all members of a society accept that the government is just, none will allow

themselves to be won over by insurgents. So all elements of national power must be mobilized, and all parties must participate in the battle for the survival and prosperity of society.

**Colombia’s Internal War**

There have been three main illegal armed actors in Colombia in recent history. FARC emerged by the mid-1980s as the primary threat to the state. Marxist-Leninist in its ideology, funded by criminal activity, and manned by combatants recruited from the margins of society, it has followed people’s war doctrine for waging its struggle. The organization has a precise strategy for taking national power, which it follows to this day.

FARC’s rival, the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, or ELN), also developed a strategy and was ascendant in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it was never able to achieve the cohesion, power, and strength of FARC. Due to subsequent military losses and waning of political support, the power of ELN was much diminished.

On patrol with Colombian soldiers



Colombian Army

Finally, the vast areas of ungoverned territory in Colombia and the terror actions of FARC and ELN generated public mobilization against them in self-defense *autodefensas* (often called “paramilitaries” by the media, which is not the best translation). These groups gained power through an alliance with drug trafficking organizations that did not like being taxed by the guerrillas. By 1996, many of these organizations merged to form the United Autodefensas of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, or AUC). These combined forces grew quickly, became as strong as FARC, and perpetrated a dirty war against the insurgents, fighting terror with terror.

In addition to these three main threats were a number of minor groups and the drug traffickers. The resources and ambition of the Medellin and Cali cartels made them national threats because they fielded armies of their own, carried out acts of terror and violence, and had varying relationships with FARC, ELN, and AUC. The threat these groups posed eclipsed that of the three enemies mentioned above through much of the 1980s until the death of Pablo Escobar

and the arrest of the leadership of the Cali cartel in 1993.

Meanwhile, FARC had been steadily building its power. In 1996, things became critical as the organization transitioned from guerrilla war to mobile war—what the Vietnamese defined as *main force warfare*—while the Colombian army remained in a counter guerrilla posture. Mobile war employs large units to fight government forces but, unlike conventional war, does not seek to defend positions.

While the army had spread its forces to conduct saturation patrols to fight small bands, FARC now operated in large columns, complete with crew-served weapons and artillery (improvised gas tank mortars). Predictably, the result was a series of engagements in which FARC surrounded and annihilated isolated army units. It was only when the military recognized that FARC was employing mobile warfare techniques as practiced in Vietnam and El Salvador that measures were taken to stabilize the situation. Three important lessons emerged from these realizations:

- The Western concept of a continuum with “war” on one end and “other than war” on the other was irrelevant. The enemy did not conceptualize war that way. There was only war, with different combinations of the forms of struggle depending on the circumstances.

- Military forces had been so focused on the contingencies of the moment, especially the drug war and the actions of the *Movimiento de Abril 19* (M-19), that they failed to see the larger strategic picture. This left the military open to strategic surprise when main force units (guerrilla columns in battalion or larger strength) appeared, operating in combination with terror and guerrilla warfare, much as Western armies use combinations of regular operations and special operations.

- There was a disconnect between the political establishment and the military. The political establishment regarded the problem as solely one of violence: the insurgents were using violence, so the violence of the security forces had to be deployed against them. Moreover, the war was the problem of the military, not of the political establishment. There

was no concept of a multifaceted, integrated response by the state.

The learning curve was steep, and as the military was regaining its balance, it suffered a series of reverses, one of which can be compared to Custer's Last Stand at the Little Bighorn in circumstances and casualties. In March 1998, at El Billar in southern Caquetá, the FARC annihilated an elite army unit, the 52<sup>d</sup> Counter guerrilla Battalion of the army's 3<sup>d</sup> Mobile Brigade. By the time reinforcements could land on March 4, the battalion had been destroyed as an effective fighting force, with a loss of 107 of its 154 men.

### Regaining Strategic Initiative

Ironically, it was when Andres Pastrana assumed office that regaining strategic initiative began. The irony lay in the fact that President Pastrana was elected on a peace platform. Recognizing that the conflict was political, he opened peace negotiations with FARC and attempted similar discussions with ELN to end the violence. This included ceding a demilitarized zone (DMZ) twice the size of El Salvador to FARC in which the negotiations could take place free of conflict.

At FARC's insistence, however, there was no cease-fire outside the DMZ. While Pastrana took on the political responsibility of negotiating peace with FARC, he left the conduct of the war outside the zone to the military. The negotiations were critical because they demonstrated conclusively that FARC was not really interested in ending the violence, but rather in using the peace process to advance its revolutionary agenda. This bad faith on the part of the rebels opened the door for a more aggressive approach, which, in turn, helped the military to regain the strategic initiative.

The success of this effort was due both to new leadership and a new method. The chain of command that was set in place in December 1998 remained throughout the Pastrana administration: General Fernando Tapias as joint force commander and General Jorge Mora as army commander. General Tapias was able to interact with the political establishment and represent military interests

to the civilian leadership while General Mora was a good military leader, mobilizing the army to make the necessary internal reforms to regain the initiative.

In eastern and southern Colombia, IV Division faced FARC's strongest operational unit, called the Eastern Bloc, which had inflicted the worst defeats on the military, and it abutted the DMZ on two sides. FARC was using the DMZ to mass its main force units for new offensives.

Instead of negotiating peace, FARC launched five major offensives out of the DMZ, some even employing homemade but formidable armor. Assessing the success of IV Division against these attacks, the following factors are prominent:

- The division operated as a part of a reinvigorated and reorganized military. There was scarcely an element that was not reformed and improved, and the division worked closely with true professionals.
- The enemy's strengths and weaknesses were assessed correctly, but especially their strategy, operations, and tactics. That meant operations took place within a correct strategy.

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There was great pressure, especially from the American allies, to focus on narcotics as the center of gravity, but the real strategic center of gravity was *legitimacy*.

FARC had three operational centers of gravity: its units, territorial domination, and funding. The first is self-explanatory. The second resulted from the government's traditional neglect and abandonment of large rural swaths. The final one resulted from FARC's perversion of people's war. The organization had little popular support, so attacking its bases, mobility corridors, and units had the same impact as in major combat. Finally, FARC's domination of the narcotics industry was possible due to its control of large areas of rural space.

Thus, to elevate counternarcotics to the main strategic effort would have been a critical mistake—one that was never made. Despite this success story, however, neither the personnel nor the resources were available to provide security for the populace. A variety of techniques were used, such as offensives to clear out areas, then rotating units constantly in and out of the reclaimed locations, but these were poor substitutes for permanent, long-term presence. That had to wait for the next administration.

### An Integrated National Approach

When Colombia's next president, Alvaro Uribe, took office, the missing pieces fell into place. Strategically, a national plan, "Democratic Security," was formulated, which made security of the individual the foundation. This plan involved all components of the state and used the public forces, under Plan Patriot (*Plan Patriota*), as the security element for a democratic society. Legitimacy was a given, but the population needed to be mobilized, and that was the central element of what took place operationally. The people were involved in better governance and in "neighborhood watch," and a portion of the annual draft was ultimately allocated to local forces.

A revived economy provided funding for additional strike and specialized units as well as a substantial increase in manpower (*Plan Choque*). Volunteer manpower was greatly augmented and became a third of total army strength (which now exceeds 200,000). The changes were relentless and extensive.

During this period, the public forces worked closely with civilian authorities in a national approach to national problems. Contrary to the inaccurate and vindictive criticisms leveled against the armed forces in some quarters, Colombia's military did not violate its oath to serve democracy during the era of military rule in Latin America.

It is noteworthy that there has been only one poll in recent years that has not identified the military as the most respected institution in the country, and the single exception placed it second. That says a great deal about its relationship with the Colombian people. Still

the military has worked hard to improve its already good record on human rights and its respect for international humanitarian law. At times the criticisms from international organizations are truly astonishing. Colombian military personnel are subject to law in much the same way as their U.S. counterparts, and this is critical in the war against bandits.

### Shifting Ground

The military's goal during the Pastrana administration (1998–2002) was to regain the strategic initiative. It did so by attacking enemy strategy, operations, and tactics. The goal during the Uribe administration (2002–2006, with perhaps a second to follow) was to move to the strategic offensive by strengthening normal pacification activities throughout the country, using local forces and specialized units to reincorporate areas. In addition, the military employed joint task forces to attack FARC strategic base areas, as was done in Operations *Libertad 1* around Bogota and *Omega* in Caquetá, the latter designed to eliminate the “strategic rearguard” FARC used to launch its main forces.

The results so far are that FARC can no longer function in large units, so it must

engage in operations similar to what the United States faces in Iraq. Improvised explosive devices are the major cause of casualties. While these devices kill and mutilate, the focus on them is evidence of FARC strategic and operational weakness.

Both ELN and AUC have been addressed principally through negotiations. Demobilization has its own difficulties and critics, but it is preferable to combat operations. Even some FARC units have begun to surrender, although the organization has resisted this trend and is determined to use terror and guerrilla warfare in an effort to repeat the cycle of past years.

Yet the ground has shifted beneath FARC's feet. Minefields and murder can disrupt life in local areas, but the relentless maturation of the democratic state makes the rebels' defeat inevitable if things continue as they are going. Mobilization of the eyes and ears of the neighborhood watch, linked to local forces, area domination forces, and strike forces, all within a grid of specialized forces and the actions of a democratic state, guarantees that FARC combatants will eventually be found and invited to return to their place within the state.

FARC's massive resources from the drug trade and increasing reliance on external bases slow progress in our campaign because they allow an insurgency to engage in antipopular conduct, to include use of terror, and not suffer the same consequences that would result if a mass base was essential. Hence, light should not be sought at the end of the tunnel too soon. Instead, Colombian metrics will be similar to U.S. metrics in the war on terror—measures of the perception that citizens are secure, the economy prospers, and society allows the fulfillment of individual desires.

In Colombia, every indicator that can be measured is proceeding in a positive direction, from the decline in murder and kidnapping rates, to the growth of the economy and freedom of movement. These factors can be quantified, but there is no way to tell when a magic line is crossed where one less murder suddenly makes all the difference in the way Colombians see their country. What is known is that the citizens will show their feelings through the ballot. That is why the military defends and serves a democratic state, and that is as it should ever be. **JFQ**

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