

## America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia

By Dr. Doug Stokes

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Dr. Doug Stokes gave a presentation at York University on his new book *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia*. Dr. Stokes was a CERLAC Visiting Scholar from the University of Wales Department of International Politics.



Throughout the Cold War Colombia was one of the largest recipients of US counter-insurgency (CI) military aid and training. CI was designed to orientate recipient militaries away from a posture of external defence from the threat posed by other states, to one of 'internal defence' against allegedly Soviet aligned guerrillas. In essence then, states in receipt of US CI military aid were told to police their own populations to make sure that 'subversion' did not grow. Interestingly, when we examine the very manuals used by US military trainers the definition of subversion provides interesting clues as to why so many civilians died at the hands of Latin American 'internal security states'.

For example, one manual used to train Colombia CI forces told them to ask: 'Are there any legal political organizations which may be a front for insurgent activities? Is the public education system

vulnerable to infiltration by insurgent agents? What is the influence of politics on teachers, textbooks, and students, conversely, what influence does the education system exercise on politics?'.<sup>1</sup> They then were told to ask what 'is the nature of the labor organizations; what relationship exists between these organizations, the government, and the insurgents?' In outlining targets for CI intelligence operations the manual identified a number of different occupational categories and generic social identities. These included 'merchants' and 'bar owners and bar girls' and 'Ordinary citizens who are typical members of organizations or associations which... play an important role in the local society'. In particular US-backed CI forces were to concentrate on '[l]eaders of Dissident groups (minorities, religious sects, labor unions, political factions) who may be able to identify insurgent personnel, their methods of operation, and local agencies the insurgents hope to exploit'. In an overt indication of the equation of labor movements with subversion the manual then went on to state that insurgent forces typically try to work with labour unions and union leaders so as to determine 'the principal causes of discontent

which can best be exploited to overthrow the established government [and] recruit loyal supporters'. The manual stated that organizations that stress 'immediate social, political, or economic reform may be an indication that the insurgents have gained a significant degree of control', and moved on to detail a series of what it terms 'Insurgent Activity Indicators':

*Refusal of peasants to pay rent, taxes, or loan payments or unusual difficulty in their collection. Increase in the number of entertainers with a political message. Discrediting the judicial system and police organizations. Characterization of the armed forces as the enemy of the people. Appearance of questionable doctrine in the educational system. Appearance of many new members in established organizations such as labor organizations. Increased unrest among labourers. Increased student activity against the government and its police, or against minority groups, foreigners and the like. An increased number of articles or advertisements in newspapers criticizing the government. Strikes or work stoppages called to protest government actions. Increase of petitions demanding government redress of grievances. Proliferation of slogans pinpointing specific grievances. Initiation of letterwriting campaigns to newspapers and government officials deploring undesirable conditions and blaming individuals in power.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> US Department of the Army, *Stability Operations-Intelligence*, FM 30-21, 1970, pp.73-78.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of the Army, *Stability Operations-Intelligence: Appendix E*, FM 30-21, 1970, pp.E1-E7.

US CI strategy was thus directly at odds with broad swathes of democratic activity and served to entrench and reproduce a particular kind of political stability in Colombia. Central to this security posture was the secret advocacy of state terrorism and the development of covert paramilitary networks. In 1962, General William Yarborough, the head of a US Army Special Warfare team that provided the initial blueprint for the reorientation of the Colombian military for CI, stated that:

*It is the considered opinion of the survey team that a concerted country team effort should be made now to select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training in resistance operations in case they are needed later. This should be done with a view toward development of a civil and military structure for exploitation in the event that the Colombian internal security system deteriorates further. This structure should be used to pressure toward reforms known to be needed, perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States ... The apparatus should be charged with clandestine execution of plans developed by the United States Government toward defined objectives in the political, economic and military fields. This would permit passing to the offensive in all fields of endeavor rather than depending on the Colombians to find their own solution.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> William Yarborough, Headquarters United States Army Special Warfare Center, *Subject: Visit to Colombia, South America, by a Team From Special Warfare Center, Fort Bragg. Supplement, Colombian Survey Report*. February 26, 1962. <http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/colombia/surveyteam26feb1962.htm>.

Today Colombia is the third largest recipient of US military aid and training, and had more of its security personnel trained by the US than any other country. This aid is allegedly for a war on drugs and terror against Colombia's indigenous guerrilla group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) who the US now calls 'narco-guerrillas'. However, this is a grossly disingenuous designation. The former Deputy Administrator with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), James Milford, has acknowledged that, while the FARC 'generate revenue by "taxing" local drug related activities' in those regions it controls, 'there is little to indicate the insurgent groups are trafficking in cocaine themselves, either by producing cocaine ... and selling it to Mexican syndicates, or by establishing their own distribution networks in the United States.'<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, he pointed out that Carlos Castano, who headed the paramilitary umbrella group, the AUC (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia), is a 'major cocaine trafficker in his own right' and has close links to the North Valley drug syndicate which is 'among the most powerful drug trafficking groups in Colombia'. Donnie Marshall, the former Administrator of the DEA, also confirmed that right-wing paramilitary groups 'raise funds through extortion, or by protecting laboratory operations in northern and central Colombia. The Carlos Castano organization

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<sup>4</sup> James Milford, *DEA Congressional testimony*. House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, July 16, 1997, <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/cngtrtst/ct970716.htm>.

and possibly other paramilitary groups appear to be directly involved in processing cocaine. At least one of these paramilitary groups appears to be involved in exporting cocaine from Colombia.'<sup>5</sup> Marshall concluded that 'at present, there is no corroborated information that the FARC is involved directly in the shipment of drugs from Colombia to international markets'.

Klaus Nyholm, the Director of the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), has pointed out that the 'guerrillas are something different than the traffickers, the local fronts are quite autonomous. But in some areas, they're not involved at all. And in others, they actively tell the farmers not to grow coca'.<sup>6</sup> In the rebels' former Demilitarised Zone, Nyholm stated, 'drug cultivation has not increased or decreased' once the 'FARC took control'. Indeed, Nyholm noted in 1999 that the FARC were cooperating with a \$6 million UN project to replace coca crops with new forms of legal alternative development.<sup>7</sup> And he recently went so far as to say that:

*the paramilitary relation with drug trafficking undoubtedly is much more intimate [than the FARC's].... Many of the paramilitary bands started as the drug traffickers' hired guns. They are more autonomous now, but have maintained their close relations with the drug traffickers. In some of the coastal towns it can, in fact, sometimes be hard to tell whether a man is a paramilitary chief, a big coca planter, a cocaine lab*

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<sup>5</sup>DEA Congressional Testimony. *Statement of Donnie R. Marshall*. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, February 28, 2001. <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/cngtrtst/ct022801.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *The Washington Post*. April 10, 2000.

<sup>7</sup>*Associated Press*. August 6, 1999.

owner, a rancher, or a local politician. He may be all five things at a time'.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the FARC are bit players in comparison to the paramilitary networks and the cocaine barons that these paramilitaries protect. So why, with the both the US and the UN anti-drug agencies consistently reporting over a number of years that the paramilitaries are far more heavily involved than the FARC in drug cultivation, refinement and transshipment to the US, has Plan Colombia emphasised the FARC's alleged links to international drug trafficking? The reason is quite simply that paramilitaries have long been central to the operation of US-backed Colombian counterinsurgency and state terror. Going all the way back to William Yarborough's call in 1962 for an integrated paramilitary network, the US has been instrumental in setting up and perpetuating covert paramilitary networks with intimate connections with the Colombian military. These paramilitaries carry out a 'dirty war' against 'subversion' and are responsible for the vast majority of human rights abuses committed in Colombia today. For example, in 2002 over 8000 political assassinations were committed in Colombia, with 80 percent of these murders committed by paramilitary groups. Three out of four trade union activists murdered worldwide are killed by the Colombian paramilitaries (almost 370 between 2001-2002),<sup>9</sup> whilst 2.7 million civilians have been

forcibly displaced from their homes. According to the UN, lecturers and teachers are 'among the workers most often affected by killings, threats and violence-related displacement'.<sup>10</sup> Paramilitary groups also regularly target human rights activists, indigenous leaders, and community activists.<sup>11</sup>

Why does the US support Colombian state terror? There are two main reasons: capital stability and oil. By attempting to destroy the FARC and Colombia's progressive civil society both the Colombian and US ruling class hope to create a stability for continued inward investment and resource extraction. General Peter Pace, the Commander in Chief of the US's Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) under the Clinton Administration, and thus responsible for implementing US security assistance programs throughout Latin America, argued that vital US national interests, which he defined as 'those of broad, over-riding importance to the survival, safety and vitality of our nation,' included the maintenance of stability and unhindered access to Latin American markets by US transnationals in the post-Cold War period. Noting that 'our trade within the Americas represents approximately 46 percent of all US exports, and we expect this percentage to increase in the future', Pace went on to explain that underlying the US military's role in Colombia was the need to maintain a 'continued stability required for access to markets...

which is critical to the continued economic expansion and prosperity of the United States'. US security assistance to the Colombian military was necessary because any 'loss of our Caribbean and Latin American markets would seriously damage the health of the US economy'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Marc Grossman, US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, underscored the crucial role that oil interests play in driving US intervention in Colombia, when he stated that the Colombian insurgents,

*represent a danger to the \$4.3 billion in direct U.S. investment in Colombia. They regularly attack U.S. interests, including the railway used by the Drummond Coal Mining facility and Occidental Petroleum's stake in the Caño Limón oil pipeline. Terrorist attacks on the Caño Limón pipeline also pose a threat to US energy security. Colombia supplied 3% of U.S. oil imports in 2001, and possesses substantial potential oil and natural gas reserves.*<sup>13</sup>

The Colombian state remains firmly wedded to the implementation of neo-liberal reforms, and the increasing militarization of social life under the pretext of a 'war on terror'. The reforms are pushing more of Colombia's people into poverty. In 1999, at the inception of Plan Colombia, the World Bank noted that 'more than half of Colombians

<sup>8</sup> Correspondence conducted by author with Klaus Nyholm, January 23, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, *Colombia: Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights*, 2003. <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991217688&Language=EN>.

<sup>10</sup> UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Report 2000*, February 8, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> State Department. *Human Rights Report 2000*. Colombia, February 26, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Pace, *Advance Questions for Lieutenant General Peter Pace*. Defense Reforms. United States Senate Committee on Armed Services. 2000. [http://www.senate.gov/~armed\\_services/statemnt/2000/000906pp.pdf](http://www.senate.gov/~armed_services/statemnt/2000/000906pp.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Marc Grossman, *Testimony of Ambassador Marc Grossman before the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Foreign Operations*. April 10, 2002. <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/02041001.htm>.

[were] living in poverty... the proportion of poor [has] returned to its 1988 level, after having declined by 20 percentage points between 1978 and 1995.’ The recession of the mid 1990s added to Colombia’s woes and contributed to ‘a rise in inequality, a decline in macroeconomic performance, and a doubling in unemployment’.<sup>14</sup> The picture is less bleak for Colombia’s elites. In 1990 the ratio of income between the poorest and richest 10 percent was 40:1. After a decade of economic restructuring this reached 80:1 in 2000.<sup>15</sup>

Under the current hard-line Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, Colombia is undergoing further IMF structural adjustment in the interests of transnational corporations. In the oil industry, for example, Uribe is lowering the royalties paid to Colombia by foreign oil companies and has effectively privatized the state-owned oil company, Ecopetrol. Uribe argued that this was necessary in order to make Colombia internationally ‘competitive’ and to prevent it becoming a net importer of oil. Meanwhile, Colombia’s oil regions are becoming fully militarized, with the paramilitaries effectively running a number of towns. This model of what Uribe euphemistically terms ‘Democratic Security’ is being rolled out across Colombia as an integral part of the

joint US-Colombia militarization program.<sup>16</sup>

In preventing this ongoing human tragedy, activists and academics must do everything they can to prevent US military aid to Colombia and to raise awareness of the awful consequences of this so-called ‘security assistance’. Those living in Canada can start by asking why their government sold helicopters to the US in 1999 that were then sent to Colombia to be used for ‘counter-drug’ missions. The Canadian department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade argued that the sale of these combat helicopters was necessary as the impact for not selling the helicopters would ‘be a loss of jobs for Canadians with no benefit to global peace and security’. However, we must ask whether the price of 40 second-hand combat helicopters is really worth the blood of the thousands murdered each year in Colombia’s brutal US-backed war?



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Email: [cerlac@yorku.ca](mailto:cerlac@yorku.ca)

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<sup>14</sup> Carlos Velez, *Colombia Poverty Report Volume 1*, The World Bank, March 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Mario Novelli, ‘Globalisations, Social Movement Unionism and New Internationalisms: The role of strategic learning in the transformation of the Municipal Workers Union of EMCALP’, forthcoming in *Globalization, Education, Societies*.

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<sup>16</sup> *Colombia Journal*, May 10, 2004; See also BBC Website, May 6, 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3683851.stm>