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**COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA:  
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMY  
TRANSFORMATION FROM 1998 TO 2010**

by

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December 2014

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**COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA: AN ASSESSMENT  
OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMY TRANSFORMATION FROM 1998 TO 2010**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis offers an account of how the Colombian Army recovered from a series of humiliating defeats inflicted upon it by illegal armed groups led by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the 1990s. It explains how a combination of internally generated, bottom-up and top-down organizational innovations, U.S. security assistance, and dynamic management from President Alvaro Uribe and a civilianized Ministry of Defense was able to restore Colombian Army morale, and to restructure and reorganize the military into an offensive force able to gain battlefield dominance and restore government authority over a greater part of the national territory.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFEUR	Urban Antiterrorist Group
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (Colombian Illegal Self-defense Group)
BRIM	Army Mobile Brigade
CEMIL	Military Educational Center
CITEC	Army Center of Technical Intelligence
CN	counternarcotics
COIN	counterinsurgency
COLAF	Colombian Armed Forces
COLAR	Colombian Army
COLMIL	Colombian Military
CUNOE	Colombian Army Special Operations Command
DSDP	Democratic Security and Defense Policy
EPL	Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
FUCAD	Army Decisive Action Force
FUDRA	Army Rapid Reaction Force
HVT	high-value target
JEDOC	Colombian Directorate of Military Training
M-19	Movimiento 19 de Abril (19th of April Movement, Colombian insurgent organization)
MOD	Ministry of Defense
MOE	Measures of Effectiveness
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NMO	new method of operating
NP	National Police
NSAV	National Strategy against the Violence
PPW	protracted popular war
USSOCSOUTH	United States Special Operations Command South

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

To my soldiers.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis intends to analyze the institutional transformation process carried out by the Colombian Army (COLAR) from 1998 to 2010. It will seek to answer the following questions: Why was the counterinsurgency (COIN) approach a success in Colombia? What were the key elements of the COLAR's transformation process post-1998 that made the national "small foot-print" COIN a successful model? To answer these questions, this thesis will analyze the political framework in which the Colombian military (COLMIL) operated, the leadership changes that made the COLMIL receptive to institutional change, and more specifically the operational, doctrinal, and technological adjustments that contributed to this success. While this thesis must consider innovation in the context of jointness, its particular focus will be on the COLAR.

Despite the fact that Colombia's democracy is one of the oldest and most stable in Latin America, the country nevertheless has experienced several waves of violence in which non-state actors have challenged the government's legitimacy, stability, and national security.<sup>1</sup>

Among these illegal non-state actors, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) remains as the largest and most stubborn left-wing insurgency. The FARC was established in 1964 as a peasant-based guerrilla group influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology. It has a hierarchical structure, and aims to overthrow the government through insurrection and armed struggle.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1980s, however, the FARC shifted its strategy toward the so-called "combination of all forms of struggle," a variant of the Maoist protracted revolutionary war, together with an increasing involvement in illegal

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J Art and Louise Richardson, *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 221.

<sup>2</sup> Eduardo Pizarro Léongomez, *Las Farc (1949–2011): De Guerrilla Campesina a Máquina de Guerra* [The FARC (1949–2011): From peasant guerrilla to war machine] (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2011), 220–221.

activities such as kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking.<sup>3</sup> Having a vast amount of resources mainly from the drug trade, the FARC strengthened its military apparatus, and between 1996 and 1998 launched a successful strategic offensive that achieved several military victories against the COLAR. This created what many saw as a national security crisis that required the systematic reorganization of the Colombian armed forces.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in that year U.S. intelligence feared that Colombia might fall into the category of a failed state.<sup>5</sup>

From 1998, U.S. security assistance helped the COLAR to accomplish a unique and profound process of institutional adaptation, revision, transformation, and innovation that produced a new COIN approach.<sup>6</sup> This institutional transformation allowed the COLAR to contain the crisis, weaken the FARC, and recover the strategic initiative in a battle for control over the national territory.<sup>7</sup> In the process, the COLAR has maintained an innovative attitude, required because of the FARC's high level of adaptability in response to the changes and innovations made by the army. By containing the FARC's strategic offensive which, in 1998, seemed on the cusp of success, the COLAR has gained a reputation as one of the most effective counterinsurgency forces in the world, and as an exportable model for "small footprint" COIN that has suddenly come into fashion in the wake of the failure of the expeditionary COIN in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Pizarro Léongomez, *Las Farc (1949–2011)*, 232–233.

<sup>5</sup> David E. Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery: Security and Governance 1982–2010* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2011), 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Roman D. Ortiz and Nicolas Urrutia, "A Long Road to Victory: Developing Counterinsurgency Strategy in Colombia," in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives Vol. 3*, ed. James J. F. Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 323.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Schulte, "What Do We Do If We Are Never Going to Do This Again? Western Counterinsurgency Choices after Iraq and Afghanistan," in *The New Counter-insurgency Era in Critical Perspective*, ed. Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and M. L. R. Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 340–365.

## B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Counterinsurgency has become a growth industry, especially since 2006 with the publication of FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*. The successful “surge” in Anbar Province, Iraq, led by General David Petraeus recalled earlier 20th century COIN triumphs chronicled by scholars and practitioners, who have sought to determine how Western conventional armies have adapted to combat insurgent groups who seek to destabilize or overthrow an established government through a combination of armed struggle and political action.<sup>9</sup>

From 2006, operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were guided by emblematic case of studies of COIN triumphs and defeats past in Malaya, Kenya, Algeria, Vietnam, and elsewhere. These events were mined to concoct influential theories of counterinsurgency that aimed to help and guide those troops involved in COIN operations.<sup>10</sup> John Nagl argues in his then influential work that COIN success requires winning the “hearts and minds” of the population and “protecting” them from the insurgents.<sup>11</sup> However, much of this scholarship that underpinned “large footprint” expeditionary COIN has been challenged by more recent scholarship undertaken as success in Iraq and Afghanistan increasingly proved elusive.<sup>12</sup> A further “military efficiency” school has argued that, to be successful, military leaders must promote a culture of innovation within the armed forces that permits an appropriate adaptation to an evolving security environment, based on a thorough understanding of the insurgency, its weaknesses and centers of gravity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of the Army. *Counterinsurgency FM 3–24* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006), 3–9.

<sup>11</sup> John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xii.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 322; Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 10–11; Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013), 1–5.

<sup>13</sup> An example of this school is Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, James Russell, eds., *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Celeste Ward, David Jones, M.L.R. Smith, eds., *The New Counter-insurgency Era in Critical Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

As Colombia has apparently become the poster child for a new school of “small footprint” COIN, it is important to understand the reasons for Colombia’s success in context. Prompted by President Alvaro Uribe and with the assistance of the United States, a new generation of COLMIL leaders has concentrated their efforts on setting priorities and carrying out urgent actions based on a profound assessment of the strategic environment to achieve effectiveness in a relatively short period of time. Therefore, despite several setbacks, the COLAR was able to identify the shortcomings within its organization and accelerate its adaptation to recover the strategic initiative.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the COLAR achieved strategic victories over the FARC, diminishing its military capabilities to the extent that it no longer posed a threat for the stability of the country. As a consequence, the improved security environment laid the foundation for a renewal of government legitimacy amidst an increasingly prosperous economy.

Finally, before policymakers attempt to export the “Colombian model” to other countries threatened by insurgencies, they must understand that Colombia’s success story occurred in a specific context that included political will to see the effort through, U.S. security assistance which was invaluable in restructuring and reorienting the COLAR, dynamic military leadership capable of innovation in operations and doctrine, into which appropriate technologies were integrated.

### **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Insurgent warfare is considered the most common form of armed conflict through the history of societies, as Bard E. O’Neill states, “It would be difficult and perhaps impossible to find many volumes on political history that do not mention rebellions, revolutions, uprisings, and the like.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it was not until the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th when counterinsurgency became a formal field of study.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Carlos Ospina Ovalle, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza* [The years in which Colombia recovered hope] (Medellin, Colombia: Editorial Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, 2014), 203.

<sup>15</sup> Bard E. O’Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s US, 1990), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, eds., *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 13.

The primary COIN doctrine had its origins in 1890 with the so-called “small wars school.”<sup>17</sup> At that time, two colonial officers, the British Colonel Charles Callwell along with the Marshal of France Hubert Lyautey, introduced the concept of “small wars” in order to increase the importance of what they recognized as a new form of warfare conducted within the colonies. Callwell and Lyautey argued that colonial campaigns demanded the same or more attention than conventional wars due to their complex operational environment,<sup>18</sup> in which military leaders have to deal with wild or semi-civilized enemies using non-conventional or “irregular” tactics.<sup>19</sup> Then in 1896, Callwell published his seminal work entitled *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, which aimed to guide colonial powers to address the hostilities in those foreign lands. According to Douglas Porch, this book

laid out the contours of modern COIN as a distinct category of warfare ... whose success depended on speed and maneuver rather than mass and firepower, which would assure the psychological domination over a fanaticized but inferior enemy, and cause his biddable supporters to skulk away. He also concedes that the process will likely be inhumane, possibly criminal, certainly beyond the legal boundaries permitted by conventional warfare against a white opponent. As a consequence, the occupation will be delegitimized both in the eyes of the occupied and the sponsoring Homeland. Now that’s a formula for victory!<sup>20</sup>

Five decades later, the end of the Second World War unleashed an anti-colonial sentiment inside the emerging states that resulted in several insurrectional wars;<sup>21</sup> though, the three most influential, in terms of counterinsurgency doctrine were the cases of Malaya, Algeria, and Vietnam. Similarly, prominent practitioners such as Colonel David Galula, Sir Robert Thompson, and Sir Frank Kitson founded modern

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<sup>17</sup> Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>20</sup> Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> O’Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 2.

counterinsurgency theory by reflecting all their experiences in their masterworks directed to help expeditionary troops facing insurgencies.<sup>22</sup>

The case of Malaya, between 1948 and 1960, became an emblematic case within the modern COIN history. British forces faced and defeated the Malayan independence forces by implementing a different COIN strategy known as the battle for “hearts and minds.” This innovative COIN approach encompassed military, economic, and social measures aimed to meet the basic needs of the local population in order to gain their trust, and by doing so, isolate the rebels from their supporters. The British had realized that the population was the center of gravity on the expeditionary counterinsurgency warfare, like Galula did in Algeria; even the British understood that political objectives rather than the military methods would be the best way to face insurgencies.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Colonel David Galula, after having served in Algeria for more than seven years, published in 1963 *Pacification of Algeria: 1956–1958*. In his book, Galula argues that despite the vast number of years involved in expeditionary COIN warfare, the French Army in Algeria lacked a counterinsurgency doctrine.<sup>24</sup> The solutions to strategic problems must start from the premise: population control is the goal of both the insurgents and the counterinsurgents. Therefore, in order to gain such control, Galula brought about the basic principles of COIN:

(1) The objective is the population. (2) The support of the population is not spontaneous; it must be acquired and organized. It is obtained, essentially, through the efforts of the minority that actively favors the counterinsurgent. (3) This minority will emerge, and will be followed by the majority, only if the counterinsurgent is recognized as the ultimate victor. (4) The counterinsurgent, unlike the insurgent, needs much to achieve little, and he therefore must concentrate his efforts on one area at a time. (5) In time, the issue of war and peace becomes the central one in any insurgency, making the relative merit and popularity of the contending causes a matter of secondary moment.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Marston and Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ward Gventer, Jones, and Smith, *The New Counter-insurgency Era*, 14–15.

<sup>24</sup> David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), 176.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 246–247.



Later on, in 1964, Galula published his seminal work entitled *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, in which he reinforces the importance of isolating the insurgents from the population in COIN warfare.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Galula claims that political affairs within a COIN campaign play a most decisive role in dealing with the local communities rather than with a military intervention. He states, “‘A revolutionary war is 20 percent military action and 80 percent political’ is a formula that reflects the truth.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the failure of the United States in Vietnam, between 1965 and 1973, was the result of a combination of factors such as a lack of strategic understanding of the operational environment, the ineffectiveness of its counterinsurgency doctrine, and the inability of the American military to adapt itself from conventional warfare to asymmetric war.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, organizational learning caught the attention of several scholars and practitioners, who have focused their research on fostering an innovative culture within military institutions. John Nagl, in his book *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, published in 2002, studies the learning processes of the British Army in Malaya and the U.S. military in Vietnam.

Nagl reflects on the lessons learned from these campaigns and recognizes the importance of promoting an innovative culture and organizational learning, as well as a revisionist stance toward an appropriate COIN doctrine that allows military institutions to confront and defeat any threat posed by insurgencies.<sup>29</sup> Nagl acknowledges that although military forces have a strong culture to resist changes, there are certain conditions such as critical circumstances—at the tactical or strategic level—or internal crisis which endorse military organizations to overcome such resistance and embrace a learning culture.<sup>30</sup> Nagl emphasizes that the first step to a learning culture is recognizing the weaknesses and incompetence of achieving goals in counterinsurgency warfare. Also, the author notes

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<sup>26</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 17–18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Marston and Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, 135–136.

<sup>29</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 6–9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

that these deficiencies are best known by the troops who are directly facing insurgencies in the field—a bottom-up approach.<sup>31</sup>

James Russell, in his book *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa, Iraq, 2005–2007*, presents a similar approach. The author uses empirical evidence from U.S. military experiences in Iraq, and defies the classical assumption that military innovation is more likely to happen in peacetime environments. Instead, diverting from this trend, Russell supports the argument that organization learning, military innovation, and transformation are more conducive to happen in wartime. Military organizations should assume a culture of learning amid the dynamics of the conflict in order to enhance their performance fighting insurgents on the field. To make his point, Russell defines military innovation as “the development of new organizational capacities on the field of battle that did not exist when the unit arrived.”<sup>32</sup>

The experiences of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and especially the “surge” in Iraq proved how conventional armies—guided by lessons learned from emblematic case studies of COIN triumphs and defeats past in Malaya, Algeria, and Vietnam—have learned to adapt themselves to combat emerging insurgencies effectively. In the early months of 2006, Lieutenant General David Petraeus wrote an article entitled “Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq.” In this article, Petraeus claims that the American forces still have much to learn in counterinsurgency warfare, but also the general acknowledges substantial progress made by the U.S. military to boost organizational learning within the institution. In his article, Petraeus encourages soldiers at all levels in the chain of command to develop an innovative spirit. Finally, Petraeus summarizes 14 observations of lessons that have allowed the U.S. military to enhance its performance in Iraq:

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<sup>31</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 192.

<sup>32</sup> James A. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa, Iraq, 2005–2007* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2011), 205.

1. 'Do not try to do too much with your own hands.'
2. Act quickly, because every Army of liberation has a half- life.
3. Money is ammunition.
4. Increasing the number of stakeholders is critical to success.
5. Analyze 'costs and benefits' before each operation.
6. Intelligence is the key to success.
7. Everyone must do nation building.
8. Help build institutions, not just units.
9. Cultural awareness is a force multiplier.
10. Success in a counterinsurgency requires more than just military operations.
11. Ultimate success depends on local leaders.
12. Remember the strategic corporals and strategic lieutenants.
13. There is no substitute for flexible, adaptable leaders.
14. A leader's most important task is to set the right tone.<sup>33</sup>

In the same year, 2006, the field manual FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* was published. This manual, prepared by Army General David Petraeus, Marine Corps General James Mattis, and Professor Conrad Crane, includes all the operational concepts embedded within a counterinsurgency warfare system, as well as depicts the characteristics of insurgencies in order to comprehend, counter, and defeat them in the field. Therefore, the FM-24 became a useful and accessible guide for practitioners dealing with the complexity of COIN warfare, and it laid the foundations for the U.S. COIN campaign "surge" in Iraq in 2007.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> David H. Petraeus and U. S. Army, "Observations from Soldiering in Iraq," *Military Review* 86, no. 1 (January/February 2006), 2–3.

<sup>34</sup> Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 17–18.

However, beyond a list of counterinsurgency tactics, this manual highlights the innovative character that any army must have to face in these difficult wars, along with an active capacity of adaptation to counter the threat posed by insurgents. The manual states, “The key to effective COIN design and execution remains the ability to adjust better and faster than the insurgents.”<sup>35</sup>

Finally, this literature review has reflected that the foremost authors, books, articles, and doctrines in COIN warfare in history had relied mostly on Western “big footprint” COIN. This array of emblematic case studies—in which powerful states deployed colonial, expeditionary, or interventionist forces overseas in places such as Malaya, Algeria, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq—has laid out the way to conduct troops in COIN warfare.

Nonetheless, as Paul Schulte discusses in his work “‘What Do We Do if We Are Never Going to Do this Again?’ Western Counterinsurgency Choices after Iraq & Afghanistan” that this Western “big footprint” COIN approach has begun to be questioned.<sup>36</sup> Its interventionist forces have not been able to defeat insurgencies abroad.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, these Western operations have caused unintended consequences—the use of drones to carry out targeted killing operations. As a result, those insurgency groups have found new motivation to continue the armed conflict, based on an increasing number of grievances.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, the author gives more relevance to the “small footprint” approach. Schulte claims that a “light foot-print approach will determine much about the future of the more stressed countries of the developing world.”<sup>39</sup> This final approach depicts the scope of this thesis that will look at Colombia’s success developing its own COIN doctrine.

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<sup>35</sup> United States, FM 3–24 *Counterinsurgency*, 5–31.

<sup>36</sup> Schulte, “‘What Do We Do If We Are Never Going to Do This Again?’” 341.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 344–346.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

#### D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This thesis hypothesizes that Colombia's "small foot-print" COIN model was a success because after the COLAR crisis suffered between 1996 and 1998, an unprecedented combination of factors—such as political will, outside aid in the form of U.S. security assistance, the promotion of leaders capable of realizing institutional transformation, and the application of technology and doctrine within a coherent, logical operational design adapted to the strategic environment—created the right conditions that allowed the COLAR to regain the initiative and diminish the menace posed by the FARC.

To begin with, the Colombian government, after the national security crisis, prioritized the security and defense policy in order to recover its legitimacy and stability, hardly deteriorated by the rampant offensive launched by the FARC. This prioritization brought together the efforts of the executive office and the military institution to stabilize and control the situation and, in doing so, bridged the distant civil-military relations previously marked by distrust and isolationism under the legacy of the so-called Lleras doctrine, implemented in 1958 by President Alberto Lleras Camargo in an attempt to keep the military from taking power. This doctrine drew a hard line between the political establishment and the military, preventing the military from interfering in any public policy. However, the government conceded absolute autonomy to military leaders to handle both internal and external security affairs,<sup>40</sup> ignoring the classic principles of COIN, which demand integrated and coordinated efforts with an active political leadership,<sup>41</sup> and leaving the COIN campaign in the hands of the COLAR.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, after having reestablished the fractured civil-military relations, Colombia received significant technical, technological, and financial U.S. security assistance (\$1.3 billion through Plan Colombia),<sup>43</sup> which was instrumental in

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<sup>40</sup> Ortiz and Urrutia, "A Long Road to Victory," 315.

<sup>41</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), 11.

<sup>43</sup> Robert D. Ramsey III, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque: The Colombian Security Force Experience, 1998–2008* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 2009), 55–57.

strengthening the COLAR capabilities.<sup>44</sup> Along with this outside aid, capable and dynamic military leaders assessed the strategic environment, enabling a profound institutional transformation. This encompassed innovation in operations and doctrine, changing the old COLAR operational design characterized by a defensive and static attitude toward a more offensive and mobile stance, supported by the incorporation of new technologies represented in more aerial and ground mobility, aerial fire support, night vision capabilities, and enhanced technical intelligence and communications systems. All of these factors combined paved the road for the success of the Colombian COIN model.

## **E. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis uses Colombia as a single case study, relying mainly on secondary sources and personal experience to evaluate the following: the Colombian Army transformation and how the COLAR enhanced its COIN performance following significant defeats suffered between 1996 and 1998; how the COLAR sought to contain the crisis between 1998 and 2002 while the government of President Andres Pastrana laid the foundation for security assistance from the United States; how the accession to the Presidency of Alvaro Uribe in 2002 allowed the defense effort to go offensive; looking at factors such as the civilianization of the Colombian Ministry of Defense (MOD), the creation of a national democratic security and defense policy that would provide a political framework to focus the military effort; and how under a dynamic new leadership, the COLAR altered its organizational structure, operational procedures, and doctrine and underwent a technological upgrade between 2002 and 2010, and the impact on Colombia's security. Finally, this thesis will present the conclusions.

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<sup>44</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 55–57.

## **F. THESIS OUTLINE**

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter has set up the theoretical framework based on the scholarly literature on civil-military relations in Colombia, U.S. security assistance, institutional learning and military innovation in wartime, technological innovation, and guiding principles for a successful COIN. The second chapter assesses the factors that caused the COLAR military crisis between 1996 and 1998. The third chapter evaluates the COLAR adaptation and initial transformation process between 1998 and 2002. The fourth chapter examines the transformation process under the National Democratic Security and Defense Policy between 2002 and 2010. Finally, the fifth chapter draws the conclusions.

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## II. ASSESSING THE CAUSES OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMY MILITARY CRISIS, 1996–1998

Military institutions have a marked tendency to resist change. However, when crises occur at the strategic or tactical level, pressure from within or from outside the institution to change clears the way for new learning practices. Either the armed forces are defeated, or they embrace a process that identifies weaknesses and allows them to adapt to the new conflict environment. This emerging learning culture allows military forces to enhance organizational structure, adopt new operational procedures, adapt doctrine, and acquire technological capabilities to evolve better, more effective, responses.<sup>45</sup>

Between 1996 and 1998, the COLAR suffered repeated, humiliating setbacks at the hands of the FARC. During this time, the FARC reached the apogee of its success, scoring major military victories and seizing the strategic initiative in the war against the Government of Colombia (GOC). FARC success was driven in part by the vast resources it had accumulated from drug trafficking that allowed this insurgency group to develop a robust military apparatus. FARC's offensive campaign triggered a national security emergency that caught the COLAR off guard.

The inadequate response of the COLAR can be attributed to several factors that include an absence of effective political and military leadership, controversial civil military relations, and a lack of international security assistance for the Colombian Armed Forces, beyond a counternarcotics program that benefited only the National Police, which in Colombia is under the MOD. Moreover, the COLAR lacked an effective COIN doctrine. Its equipment was out of date and inadequate to meet the FARC surge. Its conscript soldiers were poorly trained and lacked motivation. Furthermore, the COLAR's military culture was strongly risk averse, which ceded the initiative to the enemy. Only in 1998, in the midst of a military and political crisis, was the COLAR able

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<sup>45</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 8; Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War*, 205.

to identify these weaknesses and begin a learning process that, with international assistance, allowed them successfully to adapt to the FARC challenge.

**A. UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF COLOMBIA’S INTERNAL CONFLICT AS A PRELUDE TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY EMERGENCY IN 1996–1998**

Colombia (Figure 1) has had a long democratic tradition, being considered one of the oldest democracies in Latin America. Nevertheless, since the second half of the 19th century Colombia had witnessed recurrent waves of violence that claimed significant numbers of victims.<sup>46</sup> The total numbers of victims have been difficult to measure due to lack of reliable data, especially before the second half of the 20th century. However, the National Center of Historical Memory has officially documented 220,000 people killed, 25,000 disappeared, and 4,744,046 displaced, as a consequence of the internal conflict between 1958 and 2012.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Waldmann, “Colombia and the FARC: Failed Attempts to Stop Violence and Terrorism in a Weak State,” in *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past*, ed. Robert J Art and Louise Richardson (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 221–222.

<sup>47</sup> Gmh, *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de Guerra y Dignidad* [Enough is enough! Colombia: memories of war and dignity] (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2013), 31–33.

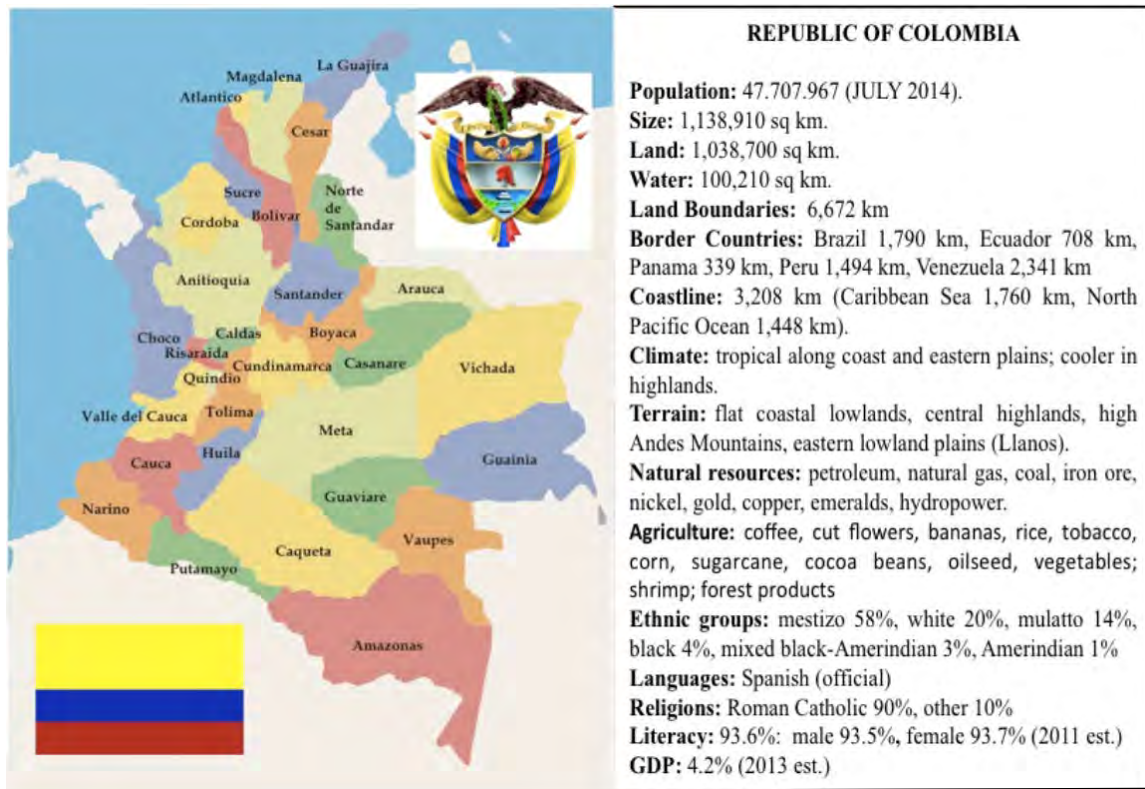


Figure 1. Overview of Colombia.<sup>48</sup>

The first wave of violence occurred between 1850 and 1902 as a consequence of ideological and political differences between Colombia's two predominant parties—the Liberals and Conservatives. These political parties were both led mainly by members of Colombia's upper class, who incited their followers to embrace violence as a means to settle their disputes, defend their political and economic interests, and thus maintain control of national politics.<sup>49</sup> This period witnessed seven civil wars ending with the War of the Thousand Days (1899–1902) in which an estimated 100,000 people died.<sup>50</sup>

Beginning in 1946, Colombia witnessed the bloodiest wave of violence in its history, known as *La Violencia*, which escalated with the assassination of the Liberal leader or *caudillo* Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, on April 9, 1948. The conflict degenerated into a

<sup>48</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Gmh, *¡Basta ya! Colombia*, 112.

<sup>50</sup> Waldmann, "Colombia and the FARC," 223.

criminal crusade conducted either by the so-called “Pajaros” (conservatives) or liberal guerrillas, both of whom committed atrocities across the country, in rural and urban areas, amid an atmosphere of fear, hatred, and desire for revenge.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, the inability of the incumbent conservative government headed by Laureano Gomez to restore order, accompanied by a concerted decision made by the elites from both traditional parties intended to stop violence, paved the road for a military regime that lasted five years. In the initial four years, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla took over the presidency and carried out two strategies to overcome the catastrophe. First, he offered an amnesty that achieved the demobilization of the majority of armed actors and decreased the levels of violence. However, communist-oriented guerrillas, known as “dirty Liberals,” refused to lay down their weapons and instead set up “movimientos de autodefensa” (self-defense movements) in the countryside, mainly in the departments of Cundinamarca, Tolima, and Cauca. Second, the COLAR, under General Pinilla, launched a harsh military offensive aimed at recovering those communist settlements, which affected the peasant-civilian population who considered guerrillas to be their protectors, triggering hatred against the government.

Finally, in the last year of the military regime, a military junta assumed power, which gave a breathing space for the two political parties to reach an agreement to alternate the presidency. This agreement was subject to a plebiscite with a 90 percent approval.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, by 1958 when the agreement was sealed, an estimated 250,000 people had perished.<sup>53</sup>

This pact between Liberals and Conservatives laid the foundation for the National Front (1958–1974), which consisted of a bipartisan power-sharing agreement to alternate the presidency every four years. Nevertheless, this exclusionary pact denied the participation of any other parties in the national political arena. Nor did it address deep-seated social issues like land reform, which particularly influenced the agenda of left-

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Pecaut, *Las FARC: Una Guerrilla sin Fin o sin Fines?* [The FARC a guerrilla without purpose?] (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2008), 29–31.

<sup>52</sup> Pecaut, *Las FARC*, 31–33.

<sup>53</sup> Gmh, *¡Basta ya! Colombia*, 112.

wing “Liberal” insurgents like those who eventually coalesced into the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). As a consequence, what might be called a third wave of violence kicked off as new groups emerged with communist ideologies inspired in part by the success of the Cuban Revolution, such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), and Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19). Though never large, these groups launched an armed struggle whose goal was to overthrow the government.<sup>54</sup>

The end of the National Front in 1974 was accompanied by the rise of illicit drug trafficking, which became the cause of a fourth wave of violence.<sup>55</sup> This illegal economy had its beginnings with the popularity of marijuana. By 1978, Colombian traffickers controlled the distribution of marijuana in the United States.<sup>56</sup> Yet, in the early 1980s the marijuana business declined due to an eradication program carried out by the Colombian government together with several interdiction operations conducted by U.S. forces. Therefore, Colombia’s two main drug cartels, those of Medellín and Cali, shifted to cocaine. Initially, they imported the coca leaf from Peru and Ecuador. But due to the success of U.S. anti-drug regional policy in the 1990s against coca production in Peru, and coca cultivation in Bolivia, the drug industry shifted its operation to Colombia (the balloon effect), where it became prosperous, in both the cultivation and production (Figure 2 and Figure 3).<sup>57</sup>

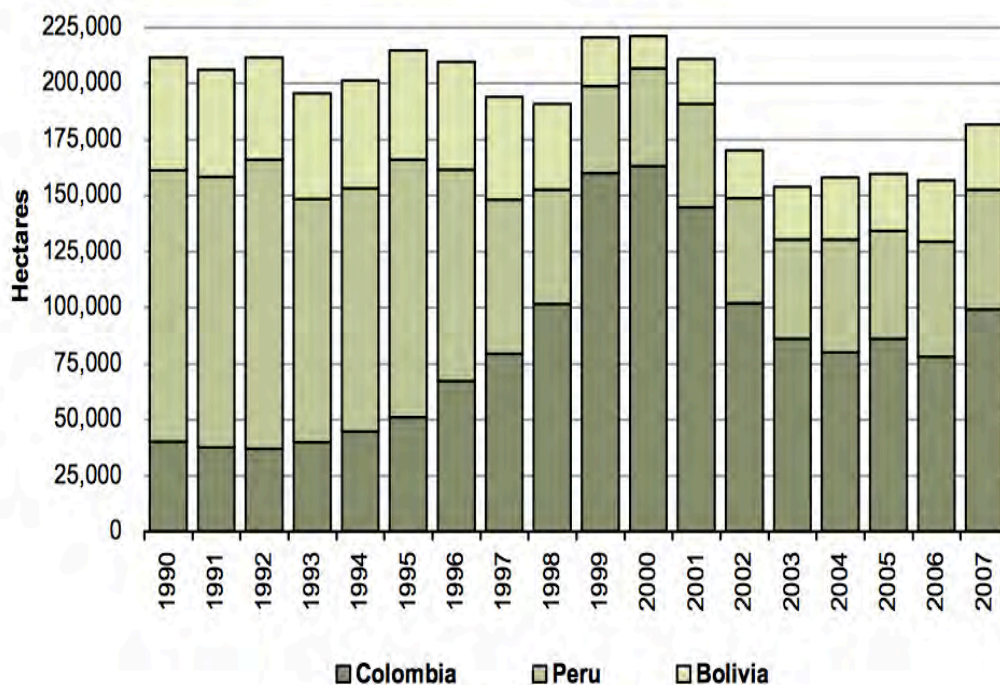
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<sup>54</sup> Waldmann, “Colombia and the FARC,” 223–224.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 224–225.

<sup>56</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War On Drugs* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 71.

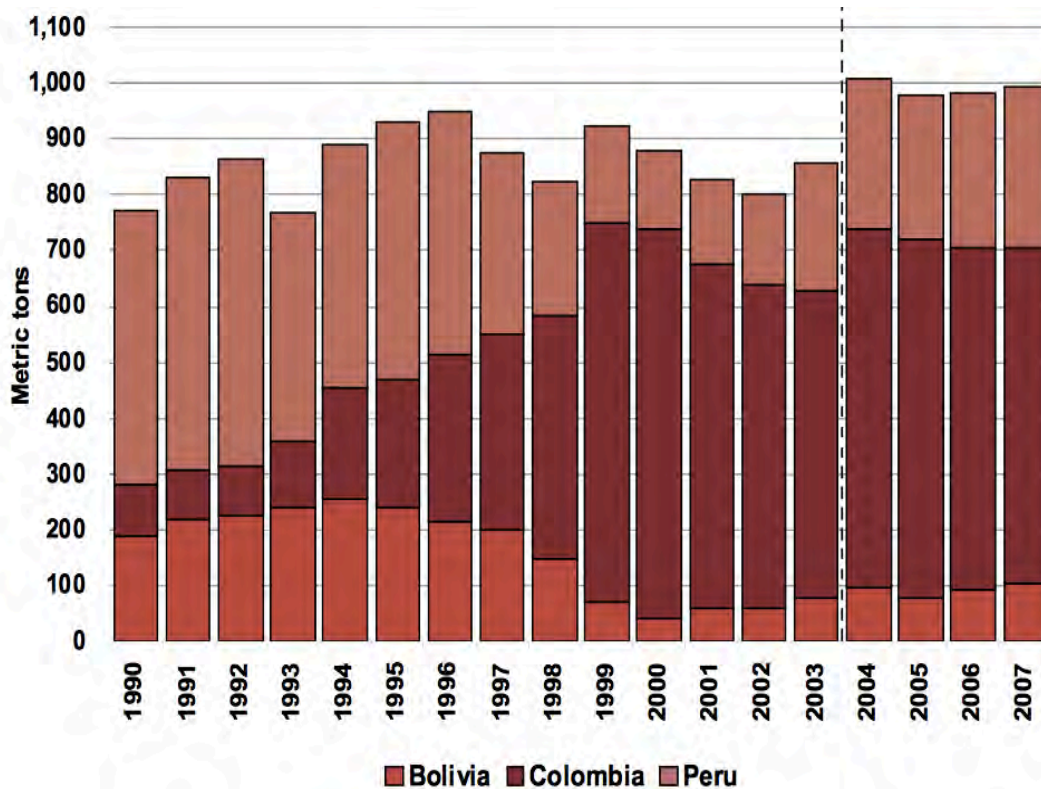
<sup>57</sup> Mark Peceny and Michael Durnan, “The FARC’s Best Friend: U.S. Antidrug Policies and the Deepening of Colombia’s Civil War in the 1990s,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 48, no. 2 (2006), 100–101; Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, 72.



	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Change on 2006
Bolivia	45,800	38,000	21,800	14,600	19,900	21,600	23,600	27,700	25,400	27,500	28,900	+5%
Peru	68,800	51,000	38,700	43,400	46,200	46,700	44,200	50,300	48,200	51,400	53,700	+4%
Colombia	79,400	101,800	160,100	163,300	144,800	102,000	86,000	80,000	86,000	78,000	99,000	+27%
Total	194,000	190,800	220,600	221,300	210,900	170,300	153,800	158,000	159,600	156,900	181,600	+16%

Figure 2. Coca cultivation in the Andean Region (hectares), 1990–2007.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Coca Cultivation in the Andean Region: A Survey of Bolivia, Colombia, and Perú* (United Nations Publications, 2010), 13.



	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Change on 2006
Bolivia	200	150	70	43	60	60	79	98	80	94	104	+11%
Colombia	350	435	680	695	617	580	550	640	640	610	600	-2%
Peru	325	240	175	141	150	160	230	270	260	280	290	+4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>875</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>925</b>	<b>879</b>	<b>827</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>859</b>	<b>1,008</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>994</b>	<b>+1%</b>

Figure 3. Global potential cocaine production (metric tons), 1990–2007.<sup>59</sup>

This new phenomenon changed the dynamics of violence in Colombia, because since the 1980s, insurgent groups and the emerging illegal self-defense groups engaged in drug trafficking in order to increase their resources and strengthen their military capabilities. This involvement of non-state actors in the drug trade was done either indirectly by collecting taxes from cartels in exchange for protection or by controlling

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

directly the coca crops, as well as production and distribution of cocaine.<sup>60</sup> Their activity was facilitated by U.S. drug policy, which targeted the cartels specifically, and opened the market for illegally armed groups.<sup>61</sup> The drawback, for these illegal actors was that they had to control areas with large coca crops, so that eventually approximately 50 percent of Colombia's territory fell under their sway, pushing Colombia to the brink of becoming a failed state. But, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Colombian government attempted to demobilize insurgent groups via negotiation, and four guerrilla groups (the M19, EPL, ERT, and Quintin Lame) entered into a peace process and abandoned the armed struggle.<sup>62</sup>

However, the ELN, the emerging Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) or Illegal Self-defense Group, and the FARC remained active across the country, threatening Colombia's stability. Moreover, by the late 1990s, the FARC exponentially augmented its numbers and military capabilities primarily due to arms purchased by profits from the drug trade. The FARC also changed its *modus operandi* by shifting from guerrilla warfare to mobile warfare—in line with its strategic plan to seize power—and launched a nationwide offensive against the security forces in which the COLAR suffered continuous setbacks as never before in its entire history.

## **B. FARC: FROM DEFENSIVE GUERRILLA WARFARE TO OFFENSIVE MOBILE WARFARE**

In 1996, the FARC reached the zenith of its insurgent career and scored significant military victories against the COLAR,<sup>63</sup> proving a qualitative jump from “defensive” guerrilla warfare to a successful offensive mobile warfare by which this rebel group seized the strategic initiative, threatening Colombian government legitimacy and

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<sup>60</sup> Oliver Villar and Drew Cottle, *Cocaine, Death Squads, and the War on Terror: U.S. Imperialism and Class Struggle in Colombia* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 29–31.

<sup>61</sup> Peceny and Durnan, “The FARC's Best Friend,” 101–104.

<sup>62</sup> Waldmann, “Colombia and the FARC,” 229.

<sup>63</sup> Carlos Ospina, *A la Cima Sobre los Hombros del Diablo* [To the top over the devils's shoulders] (Madrid, Spain: Editorial Academica Española, 2012), 114.



triggering a national security crisis.<sup>64</sup> This shift in FARC's *modus operandi* was possible due to a gradual, but ongoing, political, economic, and military adaptation that had developed since its foundation in the 1960s. It was not until the 1990s when, backed by the drug trade, the insurgency increased exponentially in both lethality and territorial expansion.<sup>65</sup>

The “foundational myth” of the FARC goes back to the era of the National Front in 1964,<sup>66</sup> when the Colombian government, committed to recovering control over the agrarian self-defense communist settlements, or so-called independent republics, launched a large-scale military operation against Marquetalia, where a small group of rebels led by Manuel Marulanda Velez (also known as Tirofijo) initially repelled the attack, but due to the marked superiority of the Colombian Armed Forces, decided to flee with their families to neighboring self-defense zones. But, Operation Marquetalia was not only a success for the government; it also became a symbol of “resistance” that laid the foundation for what would later be known as the FARC.<sup>67</sup>

Following Marquetalia in 1965, communist guerrilla leaders gathered in Riochiquito, a rural area located in the department of Cauca, and held the First Guerrilla Conference, where they founded the so-called Southern Front, along with military, political, and organizational plans oriented to ensure the survival of the new organization.<sup>68</sup> The following year, the Second Guerrilla Conference took place in el Duda (Department of Meta). The group, with about 350 insurgents, adopted its present name, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which was almost certainly inspired by the Cuban guerrillas of Fidel Castro, “the Revolutionary Armed Forces.” This Conference also established the FARC's general staff, appointing Manuel Marulanda

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<sup>64</sup> Andres Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra: La Agenda Pendiente de la Reforma Militar* [Armed forces for war: The military agenda to reform] (Bogotá, Colombia: Fundación Seguridad & Democracia, 2003), 19–21.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Pizarro Léongomez, *Las FARC (1949–2011)*, 179.

<sup>67</sup> Pecaut, *Las FARC*, 34–36.

<sup>68</sup> Pizarro Léongomez, *Las FARC (1949–2011)*, 187.

Velez (Tirofijo) as the top leader, as well as the implementation of its internal statutes, regulations, and, most importantly, a protracted military plan designed to seize national power.<sup>69</sup>

In its subsequent two decades, the FARC adopted a defensive crouch intended to preserve its structures without decisive growth or popular support. Meanwhile, the guerrilla organization engaged in extortion and kidnapping as its primary means of funding. However, in 1982 from May 4 to 14, the FARC core members (the Secretariat) carried out the Seventh Conference in Cubarral, department of Meta, which was instrumental in making the leap from guerrilla to mobile warfare, ending its defensive stance, and outlining an offensive vision called the “strategic plan” that aimed to seize power.<sup>70</sup> This plan was meant to be realized over the succeeding eight years through three sequential phases: first, an initial nationwide offensive aimed at the Colombian Armed Forces (COLAF) to destabilize the government; a second phase, aimed to establish a revolutionary regime; and finally, the third phase intended to consolidate the revolution, known as defense of the revolution.<sup>71</sup>

To achieve the “strategic plan,” the FARC ambitiously projected the creation of a “revolutionary army” with 48 fronts and 28,000 insurgents intended to increase its capabilities and engage the COLAF in major operations (battalion-size assaults).<sup>72</sup> Likewise, at this seventh conference, the FARC added the acronym “EP,” which stands for People’s Army (Ejército del pueblo) and contextualizes what henceforth would be its new strategic concept. The FARC-EP adopted Mao Tse-tung’s doctrine of popular protracted war (PPW), with the variations successfully tested in Vietnam by Vo Nguyen Giap,<sup>73</sup> which encompasses three phases as Mao Tse-tung explains in his book *On Guerilla Warfare*:

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<sup>69</sup> Pizarro Léongomez, *Las FARC (1949–2011)*, 187.

<sup>70</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Roman Ortiz, “La Guerrilla Mutante,” [The mutant guerrilla] in *En la Encrucijada: Colombia en el Siglo XXI*, ed. Francisco Leal Buitrago (Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Norma, 2006), 330.

<sup>73</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 21.

Phase I (organization, consolidation, and preservation) and Phase II (progressive expansion) comes Phase III: decision, or destruction of the enemy. It is during this period that a significant percentage of the active ... guerilla force completes its transformation into an orthodox establishment capable of engaging the enemy in conventional battle.<sup>74</sup>

In line with the PPW, the FARC introduced a “new method of operating” (NMO), which consisted of the capacity to concentrate about 1,000 insurgents from different fronts in order to launch battalion-size attacks against isolated COLAF posts,<sup>75</sup> and the use of an innovative and enhanced weaponry—gas cylinders loaded with explosives as artisanal artillery, 60 and 81mm mortars, grenade launchers, machine guns, and rifles—night vision, and communications systems. This NMO marked decisively the shift in strategy from guerilla warfare to mobile warfare.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, the Secretariado approved and adopted drug trafficking as the primary source to fund its “strategic plan.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the vast revenues from drug trade either by taxation or direct control allowed the FARC-EP to strengthen its military apparatus and increase exponentially the number of militants (Figure 4). According to Garry Leech, in the 1990s, the FARC was receiving \$900 million annually,<sup>78</sup> and 32 of a total of 61 fronts were linked to drug trade.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the effects of this strategic and operational reorientation, backed by the rampant illegal income, led the FARC-EP to reach the cusp of its insurgent campaign by putting into practice the NMO, as evidenced in the period between 1996 and 1998, when several consecutive attacks against the COLAR proved its effectiveness.<sup>80</sup> These attacks caught the COLAR off guard. Because the COLAR did not realize that the FARC-EP had shifted its strategy, it was caught off guard and suffered the worst setbacks in its history. These setbacks sparked an

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<sup>74</sup> Mao Tse-tung. *On Guerrilla Warfare* (San Bernardino, CA: Praeger, 1961), 21–22.

<sup>75</sup> Ortiz, “La Guerrilla Mutante,” 330.

<sup>76</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 20–21.

<sup>77</sup> Ospina, *A la Cima Sobre los Hombros del Diablo*, 230.

<sup>78</sup> Garry M. Leech, *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency* (Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 67.

<sup>79</sup> Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and its Implications for Regional Stability* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2001), 33.

<sup>80</sup> Ortiz, “La Guerrilla Mutante,” 330–331.

institutional crisis, caused the COLAR to lose its strategic initiative, and triggered a national security emergency.<sup>81</sup>

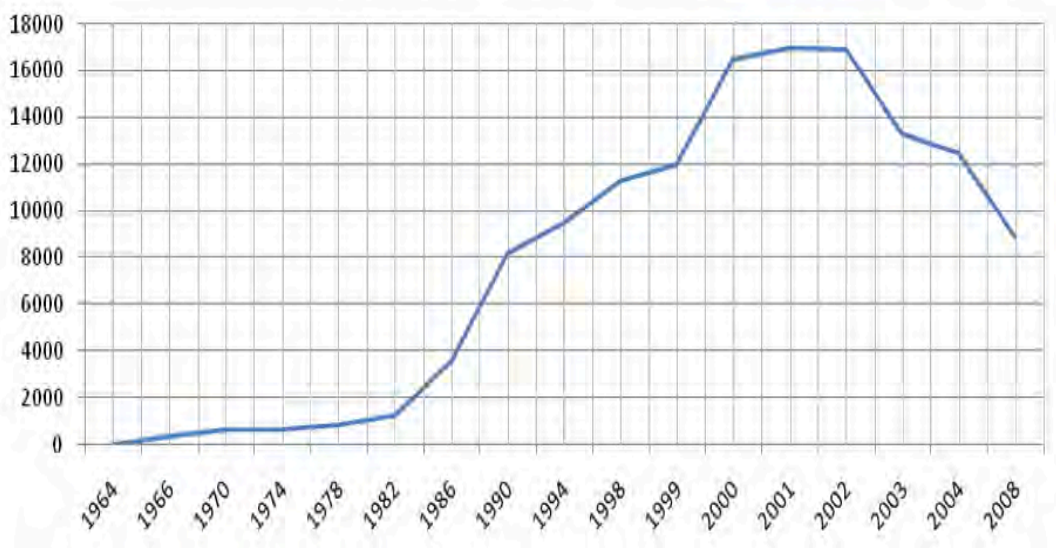


Figure 4. Estimated of FARC members, 1964–2008.

### C. LOSING THE INITIATIVE: THE COLAR SETBACKS, 1996–1998

The FARC between 1996 and 1998—after having implemented its NMO and with an enhanced military capabilities backed by the vast amount of resources from its active involvement in drug trafficking—achieved its major military victories against the COLAR. Thus, Continuous battalion-size ambushes caused the worse humiliated setbacks and triggered the worse institutional crisis in the history of the COLAR.

**Puerres, Nariño:** On April 14, 1996, the FARC successfully launched its NMO. Approximately 340 insurgents belonging to 29th, 32nd, and 48th fronts of the Southern Bloc ambushed a company of 49 troops from a cavalry battalion. The company had been traveling in six vehicles on the day after it had finished its deployment to a military post located in southern Colombia. In this attack 31 soldiers were killed, and 16 were wounded.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 21.

<sup>82</sup> Jose Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia* [Military history of the Colombian army] (Bogotá, Colombia: Centro de Estudios Históricos del Ejército, 2007), 333.

**Las Delicias, Putumayo:** On August 30, 1996, the FARC's Southern Bloc concentrated 890 insurgents from the 14th, 15th, 32nd, 48th, and 49th fronts and surprise-attacked an isolated infantry company post consisting of three conscript platoons located on the banks of the Caquetá River. After 17 hours of outnumbered confrontation characterized by the massive use of mortar grenades and explosives, the base capitulated. As a result, 27 soldiers were killed, 10 were wounded, and 61 were kidnapped.<sup>83</sup>

**La Carpa, Guaviare:** On September 6, 1996, 520 guerrillas from the 7th and 44th fronts of the Eastern Bloc and the mobile column Juan José Rondón—the FARC's special operations unit—assaulted a counter-guerrilla company of a mobile brigade (BRIM), one the elite units of the COLAR that consisted of two platoons of professional soldiers. With this attack, the FARC proved the effectiveness and tactical superiority of its NMO. This action left 24 soldiers killed and two wounded.<sup>84</sup>

**San Juanito, Meta:** On February 2, 1997, the Eastern Bloc's 31st, 51st, and 53rd fronts mobilized around 350 insurgents to repulse an initial attack launched by one BRIM counter-guerrilla company. Once again, the FARC displayed a manifest superiority against an elite COLAR unit, killing 15 soldiers, and leaving 12 wounded.<sup>85</sup>

**Patascoy, Nariño:** On December 21, 1997, the Southern Bloc with over 200 insurgents attacked a COLAR communications relay station occupied by a conscript infantry platoon with 32 troops located in Patascoy, a remote high mountain location with difficult access and severe weather conditions.<sup>86</sup> The base surrendered after 30 minutes. Eleven soldiers were killed, two were wounded, and 18 were kidnapped.<sup>87</sup>

**El Billar, Caqueta:** On March 3, 1998, in the vicinity of El Billar creek in Caquetá, the COLAR suffered the worst setback for a battalion-size unit since the FARC began the implementation of the NMO.<sup>88</sup> A newly created counter-guerrilla battalion,

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<sup>83</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 27–31.

<sup>84</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 333.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 333–334.

<sup>86</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 28.

<sup>87</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 334.

<sup>88</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 22–23.

with three companies numbering 157 troops belonging to an elite BRIM, entered into the kill zone of ambush prepared by 750 heavily armed guerillas of the Southern Bloc's 14th and 15th fronts and the mobile column, Teófilo Forero.<sup>89</sup> After resisting for 72 hours, the COLAR battalion proved unable to contain the tactically superior FARC offensive. Adverse weather conditions also impeded air support.<sup>90</sup> This attack left 62 soldiers killed, 5 wounded, and 43 kidnapped.<sup>91</sup>

**Miraflores, Guarviare:** On August 3, 1998, the FARC's Eastern Bloc with a force of 610 insurgents from the 1st, 7th, and 44th fronts and the mobile column Juan José Rondón, attacked the country's most important anti-narcotics base, which housed 80 policemen, in Miraflores, a small village in the department of Guaviare. Due to its importance, this base operated with the support of an infantry company, with 165 conscript troops distributed into three platoons. Despite the large number of the armed forces, the FARC, by applying the doctrine of the NMO, defeated the national authorities and killed 13 soldiers, wounded 18, and kidnapped 73. The attack also killed three policemen, wounded eight, and kidnapped 56.<sup>92</sup>

**La Uribe, Meta:** One day after the fall of Miraflores, the FARC's 26th, 27th, 40th, and 43rd fronts, which were composed of around 620 insurgents, took by assault a COLAR base in la Uribe in the department of Meta, with 168 conscripts of an infantry company and 165 professional soldiers belonging to a counter-guerrilla battalion. While all the attention and reinforcements were focused on the disaster in Miraflores, the FARC killed 29 soldiers, wounded 38, and kidnapped seven.<sup>93</sup>

All these successful and consecutive attacks between 1996 and 1998, showed how the FARC reached the zenith of its success and was close to achieving the objectives outlined in its strategic plan, aimed at seizing power. Consequently, the FARC expanded its domain and presence throughout the country, "controlling" more than 60 percent of

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<sup>89</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 334.

<sup>90</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 29.

<sup>91</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 334.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 334–335.

the territory by the end of the 1990s.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, this offensive campaign created a national security crisis. Indeed, in the late 1990s, U.S. intelligence feared that Colombia might fall into the category of a failed state.<sup>95</sup>

Meanwhile, on the other hand, the COLAR suffered the worst defeats in its entire history during this period, and the nightmare seemed to be endless. The COLAR lost its credibility and the confidence of the public amid this military crisis and was unable to regain the initiative. Additionally, a strategic and tactical misperception reigned within the institution, accompanied by an atmosphere of defeat and demoralization.

#### **D. COLAR EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL SHORTCOMINGS**

Beyond the offensive launched by the FARC, other internal and external factors intervened to unleash the crisis.

##### **1. Contentious Civil-Military Relations and Lack of Political Leadership**

The COLAR crisis occurred during the administration of Ernesto Samper Pizano (1994–1998). Samper’s presidency was characterized by scandals, controversies, international discredit,<sup>96</sup> and a tense relationship between the executive and military leaders.<sup>97</sup> This civil-military tension combined with Colombia’s international isolation to hamper the development of a strategy to contain the threat posed by the FARC.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the Colombian case ignored the classical principles of the COIN doctrine, which demands integrated governmental efforts with an active political leadership. As David Galula argues, “A revolutionary war is 20 percent military action and 80 percent political is a formula that reflects the truth.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Pizarro Léongomez, *Las Farc (1949-2011)*, 232–233.

<sup>95</sup> Spencer, *Colombia’s Road to Recovery*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 35–37.

<sup>97</sup> Alejandro Vargas Velásquez, *Las Fuerzas Armadas en el Conflicto Colombiano: Antecedentes y Perspectivas* [The armed forces in the Colombian conflict: History and perspectives] (Bogotá: Intermedio, 2002), 213–214.

<sup>98</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 11.

<sup>99</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 63.

Civil-military relations in Colombia had been marked by distrust and distance between the military and the executive branch. This was in part the legacy of the so-called *Lleras* doctrine implemented in 1958 at the beginning of the National Front by President Alberto Lleras Camargo in an attempt to keep the military from taking power. To explain this doctrine, Roman Ortiz summarizes the public speech in which president Lleras depicted the scope of it: “Therein, he defined two independent spheres of government: civilians were to become the sole decision-makers in matters of general policy, with no military interference, and in return the military was granted broad autonomy in the conduct of external defense and internal security policy.”<sup>100</sup> The *Lleras* doctrine regarding civil-military relations prevailed in the subsequent governments. Nevertheless, in 1991, President Cesar Gaviria Trujillo, for the first time in history, designated a civilian as the Minister of National Defense.<sup>101</sup> This nomination ended the *Lleras* doctrine, bridged the distant relations between the military and political establishment, and paved the road for a sort of COIN campaign known as the National Strategy Against the Violence (NSAV), with integrated and coordinated governmental efforts.<sup>102</sup>

However, in 1994, when President Samper took office, a significant incident harmed the relations between the military and its constitutional commander in chief. The so-called narco-scandal or process 8000—the number assigned to the case by the national attorney general in 1995—revealed that the Cali cartel had contributed to Samper’s presidential campaign.<sup>103</sup> This scandal unleashed a political crisis and affected the legitimacy of the country, both at the national and international level. At the national level, public opinion demanded the resignation of President Samper, who continued in office backed by a compliant congress controlled by his political party.<sup>104</sup> This incident profoundly undermined the morale and commitment of the troops at all levels in the chain

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<sup>100</sup> Ortiz and Urrutia, “A Long Road to Victory,” 315.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 320–321.

<sup>103</sup> William Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil-military Relations in Colombia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 74–77.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*



of command, because military leaders found themselves in a position of obeying a government, if not exactly illegitimate, then certainly tainted by a scandal that threw its mandate into question.<sup>105</sup> Hence, some high-ranking officers resigned, claiming that they could not recognize an illegitimate commander in chief. Relations between the president and the military leadership, already tense,<sup>106</sup> became more so when Samper announced that he intended to demilitarize a portion of territory in the south, following FARC demands that he do so as a condition for peace negotiations.

This came at a time when the FARC was about to launch their new offensive with the goal of seizing power.<sup>107</sup> Appalled, military commanders publicly insisted that the president's initiative was not only detrimental for the national security, but also that it was unconstitutional.<sup>108</sup> This breakdown in civil-military relations rekindled the spirit of the *Lleras* doctrine, leaving the counterinsurgency campaign in the hands of the COLAR. In the words of Thomas Marks, "Colombia's essential counterinsurgency problem thus lies in the fact that the country is not engaged in fighting its own internal war. The business has been left to the military."<sup>109</sup>

Furthermore, the U.S. government, concerned about rampant corruption, human rights violations, and eroding popular support for the Samper's administration imposed stringent limits on assistance to the anti-narcotics campaign. In 1996 and 1997, Colombia failed to fulfill Washington's standards and was decertified.<sup>110</sup> As a consequence, Colombia's internal security situation became even more dire.<sup>111</sup>

## **2. COLAR Lack of International Security Assistance**

In the 1990s, Colombia remained one of the largest recipients of U.S. counter-drug assistance. However, this partnership was carefully restricted to counter narcotics

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<sup>105</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 36–37.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil-military Relations in Colombia*, 75–76.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 11.

<sup>110</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 21–22.

<sup>111</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 37.

cooperation. Eager not to repeat its previous experiences in Vietnam or El Salvador, Washington adopted a hands-off attitude to Colombia's internal conflict.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, the United States, in agreement with Bogotá, dealt exclusively with the National Police (NP), which Washington saw as the cornerstone in the "war on drugs." Even during the two years of decertification, the United States continued to direct resources to the NP to continue the anti-narcotics program.<sup>113</sup> Washington turned a deaf ear to COLAR insistence that there was a direct relationship between the insurgency and drug trafficking. The COLAR did not receive either financial or technical assistance from the United States,<sup>114</sup> which would have been valuable to enhance its military capabilities. As a consequence, the COLMIL's capabilities notably diminished in the late 1990s, and it was less able to respond adequately to the FARC offensive.

### 3. COLAR Internal Shortcomings

The ineffective response of the COLAR to the pounding it was receiving at the hands of the FARC revealed structural weaknesses within the institution, leading it to the brink of defeat between 1996 and 1998. To begin with, the COLAR—used to dealing for more than three decades with "bandoleros" with limited offensive capabilities and conducting hit-and-run attacks—underestimated the capacity of the FARC to make a qualitative leap to mobile warfare (NMO).<sup>115</sup> The inability to anticipate and prevent all these massive attacks denoted failures in army intelligence, which was unable to detect and decipher at the strategic level the FARC's new *modus operandi*.<sup>116</sup> Thus, in the wake of this lack of strategic clarity, the responsibility for these debacles was laid at the feet the units directly involved, assuming shortcomings in its tactical procedures,<sup>117</sup> and ignoring other major causes.

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<sup>112</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 19.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–22.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 32.

<sup>116</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 53–55.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

The lack of a comprehensive COIN doctrine appropriate to contain the FARC's new style of mobile warfare could be put down in part to a long history of COLAR policing of small units of communist guerrillas scattered across the countryside since the era of *La Violencia*, and not posing a threat to the major urban areas. It also sprang from fractured civil-military relations in which the political class downplayed the armed conflict and considered that such an insignificant threat could be handled by the military itself. The disturbances were in underpopulated areas remote from the major cities, in places where there were few votes to be garnered in any case. Therefore, there was little public pressure placed on the politicians to resolve the conflict.<sup>118</sup>

A strategic, long-term, COIN-focused plan that coordinated or integrated governmental efforts had never existed. Instead, the executive left the military to their own devices in accordance with the Lleras doctrine.<sup>119</sup> The only substantial attempt to design a major COIN strategy had been fostered by the chief of the Army, General Alberto Ruiz Novoa, in the 1960s. This was the so-called Plan Lazo, which had integrated social programs into military operations in keeping with COIN thinking at the time. Ruiz Novoa's operational approach was sabotaged by conservative President Guillermo Leon Valencia, after the military chief insisted that the government spend more on social and economic programs to help Colombia's poor and hence remove the causes of insurgency.<sup>120</sup> Later in the 1990s, with the arrival of a civilian who had no expertise in military affairs to the MOD, a sort of national COIN plan, known as the NSAV, was established. However, this plan failed to project a long-term COIN campaign against the FARC, carry out major military operations, or consolidate critical areas.<sup>121</sup>

Consequently, without a strategic nationwide COIN plan, and with a reduced budget, the COLAR depended on an operational directive that was renewed every year, but with a purely tactical scope rather than a strategic one.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the COLAR's

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<sup>118</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 55–58.

<sup>119</sup> Ortiz and Urrutia, "A Long Road To Victory," 311–315.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>122</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 59–60.

tactical operating procedures were dominated in the last three decades by the previously successful tendency to use small units with professional soldiers to locate and destroy the cells of the FARC.

However, the number of professional soldiers engaged in COIN operations was small, so that the bulk of operations had to be carried out predominantly by inexperienced, ill-equipped, and inadequately trained conscripts—of a total of 145,000 troops that the COLAR had in 1998, only 30,000 were professional soldiers, of which only 20,000 participated in COIN operations assigned to the Mobile Brigades.<sup>123</sup> This mass of partially trained conscripts and the small professional units were unprepared to meet the FARC surge. In addition, the COLAR's overextended deployment with isolated units scattered throughout the country, combined with the obsolescence of the weaponry and the lack of effective communication systems, night vision capabilities, and ground and air transportation, contributed to the worst crisis in COLAR history.<sup>124</sup>

Finally, the harsh setbacks and an atmosphere of demoralization and defeat amongst the troops<sup>125</sup> served to reinforce a strong risk-averse culture that had prevailed in the COLAR. Additionally, arrogance, a reluctance to admit mistakes, and the absence of self-criticism influenced COLAR leaders, who did not consider the urgent need to bring about organizational, tactical, strategic, and ideological changes. Instead, they were more concerned about maintaining a falsely positive image for the sake of public opinion and COLAR morale.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 10.

<sup>124</sup> Armando Borrero Mancilla, "Los Militares: Los Dolores de la Crisis" [The military: The pains of the crisis], in *En la Encrucijada: Colombia en el Siglo XXI*, ed. Francisco Leal Buitrago (Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Norma, 2006), 131–132.

<sup>125</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 32.

<sup>126</sup> Francisco Leal Buitrago, "Políticas de Seguridad: de Improvisación en Improvisación" [Security policies: Improvisation on improvisation], in *En la Encrucijada: Colombia en el Siglo XXI*, ed. Francisco Leal Buitrago (Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Norma, 2006), 523.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The COLAR crisis unleashed between 1996 and 1998, which witnessed the worse defeats in the COLAR's history, exposed the presence of several factors, which had been affecting not only the institution but also national security itself. Since its early days of political violence from the 1940s to the 1990s, fighting was continuous, but confined to relatively small-scale skirmishes on the fringes of the country. However, Colombia's conflict escalated from the late 1980s when the FARC-EP engaged in drug trafficking to augment their numbers, resources, and weaponry, and hence could begin to think in more ambitious operational and strategic terms. It also happened in the case of FARC, which, by the late 1990s had reached the zenith of its success and, after having shifted from guerrilla warfare to mobile warfare, conducted an offensive that aimed to overthrow the government. This offensive proved to be successful, and the FARC scored several military victories against the COLAR. By doing so, the FARC seized the strategic initiative.

This chapter has shown how the lack of a political commitment toward national security, along with poor civil-military relations, prevented a comprehensive and coordinated national-level COIN campaign to overcome the internal armed conflict. Similarly, scandals and corruption discredited the Colombian government under Samper in the eyes of the international community, and especially of the United States, which cut financial assistance, leaving the country isolated and largely without resources. Finally, the sum of all these factors affected the COLAR, which was caught by surprise and unprepared to contain the threat, being immersed in a strong risk-averse culture resistant to change and allergic to self-criticism. These factors combined to create the military debacle of 1998.

Nevertheless, in 1998, in the midst of this military and political crisis, the COLAR engaged in a new learning process that allowed the institution to identify its weaknesses and, with international assistance, began successfully to adapt to the FARC challenge.

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### **III. COLAR ADAPTATION AND RESTRUCTURING PROCESS BETWEEN 1998 AND 2002**

Between 1998 and 2002, the COLAR embraced an adaptation and restructuring process aimed at regaining the operational initiative under the critical circumstances, at the tactical and strategic levels, caused by the continuous setbacks suffered at the hands of the FARC. This unprecedented learning process began inside the institution and was characterized by a reflective acceptance and recognition of the failures within the institution. Consequently, the COLAR conducted a bottom-up assessment which resulted in valuable recommendations made by subordinates who directly faced the crisis in the field, allowing the COLAR to initiate the process of correcting institutional weaknesses, and fostering technological, organizational, and doctrinal changes.

These innovative changes were fostered by a revamped military leadership with a strong commitment toward the institution, ample experience in commanding elite units engaged in counterinsurgency warfare, and a profound understanding of the dynamics of the Colombian conflict. Thus, the COLAR leadership was a key factor in the victories to come. Similarly, these changes were implemented with the consent and support of President Andres Pastrana Arango, who took office in 1998. Although President Pastrana's priority was the peace negotiation process with the FARC, he left the design of a comprehensive COIN campaign largely to the military.<sup>127</sup> However, President Pastrana did play a decisive role in restoring international assistance that allowed the COLAR to improve its equipment, doctrine, and procedures. Nevertheless, during this period, Washington wanted to avoid any involvement in the military campaign and so directed American aid exclusively toward anti-narcotics operations.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Thomas A Marks, "Regaining the Initiative," in *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, ed. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 211.

<sup>128</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 48.

## A. PLAN COLOMBIA AND THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE

In 1998, the ascension of Andres Pastrana to the presidency paved the way for a new active partnership between Washington and the Colombian government. This enhanced relationship left behind the stigma of U.S. decertification and the international isolation that Bogotá had suffered under the controversial Samper administration.<sup>129</sup> Hence, during Pastrana's tenure, U.S. assistance gradually increased.

Beginning in 1999, the Colombian Armed Forces received counternarcotics training carried out by members of the 7th Special Forces group belonging to the United States Southern Command.<sup>130</sup> Later on, the United States approved a US\$375 million package intended to create, train, and equip the first COLAR counternarcotic battalion.<sup>131</sup> Aid was subject to the conditions contained in the "Leahy Amendment" that banned any assistance to COLAR units involved in human rights abuses, through a process commonly known as *vetting*.<sup>132</sup> Finally, representatives of the U.S. State Department encouraged the Colombian government to articulate a comprehensive plan as an official prerequisite for the U.S. Congress in order to increase the aid.<sup>133</sup>

Therefore, in 1999 the Colombian government presented to Washington a six-year initiative called "Plan Colombia," intended to strengthen the legitimacy and security of the country.<sup>134</sup> According to Robert Ramsey, "With Plan Colombia, Pastrana tried to build a peace effort on three components: peace talks with the guerrillas; strengthened security forces; and international assistance in funding economic, political, social, and military programs."<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, this counterdrug-oriented plan sought to impede the

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<sup>129</sup> Peter DeShazo, Johanna Mendelson Forman, and Phillip McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability in a Failing State: Lessons From Colombia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2009), 16.

<sup>130</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 47–48.

<sup>131</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 16.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 56

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.



vast amount of resources that fueled the illegally armed groups responsible for the instability and security crisis affecting Colombia. Similarly, Plan Colombia envisioned a 50 percent reduction in Colombia's total drug production.

Consequently, to meet this ambitious goal, the government requested \$7.5 billion to fund the plan, of which \$4 billion would be supported financially through the national budget and \$3.5 billion would be solicited from the international community.<sup>136</sup> Thus, the American government initially appropriated a package of \$1.3 billion.<sup>137</sup> Seventy percent of this aid went directly to the national police and the COLMIL in order to intensify counternarcotics operations, prioritizing the departments of Caquetá and Putumayo in the southern part of the country, where coca crops prevail.<sup>138</sup>

In effect, the COLAR founded two more counternarcotics battalions that would constitute the new counternarcotics Brigade (CN brigade) with its own aerial capacity. A total of 79 helicopters (33 UH-1N, 30 UH-II, and 16 UH-60) were assigned to the COLAR aviation brigade, but these aircraft were used exclusively to support counternarcotics operations conducted by the CN brigade under the rigorous supervision of American officials.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, this resource restriction, along with micromanagement by the U.S. government in controlling Plan Colombia assets and directing CN brigade operations, created discontent within the army.<sup>140</sup>

Plan Colombia helped to diminish the finances of illegal armed groups linked to the drug trade, enhanced the security conditions of marginalized areas in the southern part of the country, and began the modernization of the COLAR with its focus on the CN brigade. It also met the requirements requested by the Colombian government. Nevertheless, beyond the fact that helicopters could be used exceptionally to evacuate wounded soldiers who did not belong to the CN brigade, Plan Colombia remained a counternarcotics plan that avoided any engagement in COIN warfare, which was the

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<sup>136</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 15.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>138</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 56–57.

<sup>139</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 149.

<sup>140</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 17.

COLAR's main concern.<sup>141</sup> COLAR leadership decried the fact that they were unable to use either the aerial support or the highly trained and equipped CN brigade units to carry out critical operations aimed at attacking identifiable FARC targets.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, in response to this limitation, the COLAR leadership continued to adapt and restructure within the constraints of the defense budget and with the consent of the executive, in an attempt to regain the strategic initiative.<sup>143</sup>

## **B. KEY ROLE OF THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS**

After the COLAR setbacks at the hands of the FARC provoked an institutional crisis, in 1998 the COLAR initiated an internally driven adaptation and restructuring program. This program was headed by charismatic military leaders who assumed the challenge, fostered an offensive and winning mindset among the troops,<sup>144</sup> and embraced a culture of innovation based on a thoughtful assessment of the operational environment.<sup>145</sup> Thus, the new military leadership appointed by President Pastrana overcame the persistent tendency within the military institution of resistance to change<sup>146</sup> and initiated this difficult but unprecedented restructuring process.<sup>147</sup>

Therefore, this dynamic group of military leaders was critical in propelling an institutional transformation to recover the initiative at the tactical and operational levels. General Fernando Tapias Stahelin, commanding General of the Joint Command, built a team that included General Jorge Enrique Mora Rangel, commanding General of the COLAR, and General Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle commanding General of the IV COLAR division (who would later become the COLAR Director of Operations).<sup>148</sup> This

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<sup>141</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 17.

<sup>142</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recuperó la Esperanza*, 150.

<sup>143</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 62.

<sup>144</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 29–30.

<sup>145</sup> Marks, "Regaining the Initiative," 214–215.

<sup>146</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 8.

<sup>147</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 11–12.

<sup>148</sup> Marks, "Regaining the Initiative," 215.

proficient and cohesive group managed in a relatively short period of time to contain the FARC's offensive (transitioning to mobile warfare) and blunt its strategic plan, as Marks points out:

Faced with such an array of challenges, it was a credit to the power of the military reform movement and the improvements made by its leadership in strategy, operational art, and tactics that the strategic initiative had been regained by mid-2002. This occurred because the reform movement in the dominant service, COLAR, was driven by personalities ... who, beyond their military knowledge, evinced an understanding of both counterinsurgency and Colombia's unique circumstances. Thus, they were able, despite the lack of strategic involvement by the state, to arrest the negative trends that had emerged with growing force even during the Samper administration.<sup>149</sup>

Similarly, beyond the COIN expertise, these generals accentuated the importance of recognizing the weaknesses that had undermined COLAR combat performance. In order to identify such deficiencies, General Tapias and General Mora established an inner COLAR committee to identify, diagnose, and present solutions to overcome the crisis.<sup>150</sup> In order to carry out this revision, the committee interviewed troops in the field most directly involved in counterinsurgency warfare, a bottoms-up approach as Nagl has suggested is most efficient.<sup>151</sup>

As a result of the consultation, the subordinates freely expressed their concerns to the committee, which thereupon identified the most critical areas for improvement. First of all, the troops demanded an effective Army intelligence—both human and technical—equipped with advanced technology. Also, they claimed that the COLAR intelligence should have better channels of communication and coordination with other intelligence agencies to share relevant information intended either to anticipate enemy intentions or launch military operations. Second, soldiers requested more intense and relevant military training that reflected the reality of the COIN warfare that they faced. Third, the interviewees suggested increasing air and ground tactical mobility and the creation of

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>150</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 93–94.

<sup>151</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 192.

more mobile brigades, considered elite and successful units. Finally, under this bottom-up methodology, the committee found it imperative to restructure the system of personnel management within the army.<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, General Mora—who received the assessment from the committee and clearly recognized the ongoing shortcomings—held a meeting with all COLAR leaders.<sup>153</sup> The leaders swore to have their units combat-ready within the next three months.<sup>154</sup> Nevertheless, the real transformation of the COLAR began with a motivational and morale-boosting—hearts and minds—campaign aimed at recovering the self-confidence of the combatants and eliminating the risk-averse culture that still remained since the setbacks. Commanders at all levels expressed their strong commitment by appealing to the military values and principles that would recoup the COLAR’s dignity and legitimacy.<sup>155</sup> Thus, with the unconditional political support from Minister of Defense Rodrigo Lloreda and the consent of President Pastrana, the COLAR entered into restructuring processes that “have transformed the army into a more formidable fighting force.”<sup>156</sup>

Despite the fact that president Pastrana backed the COLAR’s restructuring process, he prioritized the peace negotiations with the FARC as promised during the presidential campaign. This negotiation required him to make several concessions to the FARC, the most contentious of which was the decision to surrender 42,000 square kilometers to FARC control, also known as a demilitarized zone or *zona de despeje* (Figure 5).<sup>157</sup> The problem with this arrangement was that the political strategy was decoupled from the military campaign, a reversion of sorts to the *Lleras* doctrine post-

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<sup>152</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 97–98.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>154</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 12.

<sup>155</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 102.

<sup>156</sup> Gabriel Marcella, *The United States and Colombia: The Journey From Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 43–44.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

1958, where the military and the politicians respected their separate spheres, a very un-Clausewitzian arrangement.<sup>158</sup>

This civil-military tension was evidenced by two issues during Pastrana's term in office. The first was the public discontent of military leaders over Pastrana's concession to the FARC of the demilitarized zone for an indefinite period of time.<sup>159</sup> The COLAR leadership insisted correctly that the FARC was abusing this concession to strengthen its military capabilities, increase its funds from drug trade, and conduct attacks from the "demilitarized zone" on national strategic targets.<sup>160</sup> The second point of contention occurred when President Pastrana, at U.S. insistence, fired three generals suspected of having links with paramilitary groups. This action created tensions between the Minister of Defense and the military leadership.<sup>161</sup>

As a result of this crisis, in 1999, the Minister together with 18 generals, resigned in support of their ousted colleagues, triggering an institutional leadership crisis. To overcome this crisis, President Pastrana called a crucial meeting in which he agreed to allow the participation of the military in the decisions regarding the peace process.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Ortiz and Urrutia, "A Long Road To Victory," 325.

<sup>159</sup> Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil-military Relations in Colombia*, 128–129

<sup>160</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 45.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>162</sup> Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil-military Relations in Colombia*, 128–129.

### C. INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

However, despite civil-military tensions and the absence of a unified national strategic COIN plan, the COLAR leadership led an institutional transformation in three areas: technological, organizational, and doctrinal-operational.



Figure 5. El Caguan Demilitarized Zone.

## 1. Technological Innovation

To respond to the threat posed by the FARC and based on identified operational deficiencies, the COLAR sought to enhance vital assets that would positively impact operational efficiency, such as air and ground mobility, night-vision operational capabilities, high technology for technical intelligence, and a modern command and control communications system.<sup>163</sup> To begin with, the COLAR in 1998 had a limited number of helicopters—a total of 7 UH-60 and 10 MI-17—within its newly created aviation brigade.<sup>164</sup> This reduced fleet was increased with the arrival of 79 helicopters provided by the United States through Plan Colombia that, however, could not be used in combat operations. To increase troop mobility and develop the capability to launch air assaults anywhere inside the country, which was fundamental to containing the massive attacks that the FARC was perpetrating in compliance with its NMO, the COLAR purchased 14 UH-60 and 6 MI-17 helicopters paid for by national funds.<sup>165</sup>

Similarly, the COLAR improved night-vision capabilities through the acquisition of the latest equipment, combined with a doctrinal adjustment and an arduous training process. These night-vision capabilities led the COLAR to exploit a tactical advantage over insurgent organizations and, thus, conduct successful night operations.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, the COLAR emphasized the importance of expanding the capacity of technical intelligence during this period to support the process of collecting information within the cycle of intelligence.<sup>167</sup> Therefore, the COLAR supplied the Army Center of Technical Intelligence with modern and high technology such as GPS trackers used to identify enemy targets and two signals intelligence platform aircraft (SuperKing) capable of intercepting communications, conducting air surveillance, and operating as an air radiogoniometry station.<sup>168</sup> This enhanced technical intelligence, along with work carried

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<sup>163</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 48.

<sup>164</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 13.

<sup>165</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 115–117.

<sup>166</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 54.

<sup>167</sup> Douglas Porch and Jorge Delgado, “‘Masters of Today’: Military Intelligence and Counterinsurgency in Colombia, 1990–2009,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 21, no. 2 (June 2010), 277.

<sup>168</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 55.

out by human intelligence analysts, paved the way for improved intelligence, which was able to decipher the encrypted communications among the FARC leaders,<sup>169</sup> understand the complex dynamics of the operational environment,<sup>170</sup> locate FARC targets, and anticipate its intentions to attack COLAR units in the field.<sup>171</sup>

Finally, the COLAR acquired a modern and secure communications system, which included new satellite communications equipment and a national-coverage communications network. This system also integrated the communications network of the COLAR with the Colombian Air Force and the Colombian Navy. Therefore, the forces could interact with each other and coordinate mutual support while conducting joint operations. Moreover, with this communications technology, the COLAR implemented functional command, control, and communications centers aimed at ensuring the flow of operational information as a mechanism to improve the tactical and strategic decision-making process.<sup>172</sup>

Consequently, the arrival of these up-to-date assets—helicopters, night-vision devices, technical intelligence equipment, and the communication system—was instrumental to optimize the COLAR’s response to the threat. However, to reach its optimal success, this technological innovation also demanded organizational and doctrinal changes.<sup>173</sup>

## **2. Organizational Reforms**

Under the command of General Mora, the COLAR undertook organizational reforms with particular emphasis on its personnel and training systems and the creation of specialized units to respond effectively to the FARC threat.<sup>174</sup> The key reform in these areas was known as Plan 10,000, which consisted of replacing 10,000 conscript soldiers

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<sup>169</sup> Porch, and Delgado, ““Masters of Today,”” 282–283.

<sup>170</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 56.

<sup>171</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 379.

<sup>172</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 56–58.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 59–60.



(*soldados bachilleres* who by law were not allowed in combat) with professional soldiers for three consecutive years beginning in 1999.<sup>175</sup>

Initially, these professional soldiers were assigned to elite units conducting COIN operations,<sup>176</sup> in the more hostile areas of the country.<sup>177</sup> Additionally, the COLAR's military academies developed accelerated programs along with the normal promotions to commissioning, to supplement the deficit of cadres within the units. In three years, a total 899 officers and 3,440 NCOs graduated under this accelerated program.<sup>178</sup> Likewise, this combat force growth plan was accompanied by legal reforms intended to strengthen morale. These reforms included incentives for promotion within the ranks at all levels, an improvement in the standards of selection and recruitment, a new regime to reinforce discipline, as well as a statute to legalize the career structure<sup>179</sup> of the professional soldiers.<sup>180</sup>

Furthermore, the COLAR restructured its general staff, transforming its traditional and highly administrative organization into a more functional and task-organized military establishment, with four directorates led by high-ranking officers: personnel, logistics, training, and operations. These directorates centralized and regulated the COLAR procedures, giving foremost importance to operations and training.<sup>181</sup> In the case of the directorate of operations, the COLAR established a comprehensive structure that combined operations, intelligence, and psychological operations. This structure constituted one of the cornerstones in recovering the tactical and strategic initiative.<sup>182</sup> The other key reform took place under the directorate of training (JEDOC), which was responsible for assessing operational deficiencies and developing training programs

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<sup>175</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 71.

<sup>176</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 62

<sup>177</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 112.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>179</sup> Before the professional soldiers, there was a figure known as volunteer soldiers, who had no legal working relationship with the state (an informal contract without benefits).

<sup>180</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 379.

<sup>181</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 14.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

aimed at improving the COLAR capabilities. Also, the JEDOC assumed the task of integrating these innovative capabilities with the doctrine and the upgraded technologies under the new organizational design in support of the COLAR goals that required the creation of new specialized units.<sup>183</sup>

To begin with, the COLAR via JEDOC reorganized all the army schools into two different training organizations.<sup>184</sup> The first organization, known as army educational center (CEMIL), was located in Bogotá. It encompassed all the traditional army schools—infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineering, logistics, intelligence, and communications—which offered academic courses for promotion to middle-level ranks to both officers and non-commissioned officers, as well as specialized courses within all the army branches, mostly conventional-warfare oriented.<sup>185</sup>

The second and innovative training organization, called the national training center (CENAE), with headquarters in Fort Tolemaida, concentrated on the traditional army combat schools—Lancers, Special Forces, and Airborne—which were focused on sharpening the COLAR's combat skills by developing COIN-specific training programs.<sup>186</sup> In addition, the CENAE founded the School for Professional Soldiers (ESPRO)<sup>187</sup> and the Army Tactical Retraining Center (CERTE).

These two new combat training centers sought to increase the combat proficiency of the professional soldiers throughout the country, either by imparting a standardized combat training program in its facilities or by organizing mobile training committees with a nationwide scope.<sup>188</sup> Similarly, the JEDOC fostered a mandatory human rights program, to be taught in all courses conducted by each and every one of the army

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<sup>183</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 107–108.

<sup>184</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 62.

<sup>185</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 107.

<sup>186</sup> Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 14.

<sup>187</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 108.

<sup>188</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 62.

schools, as a vehicle to strengthen the COLAR's legitimacy and reduce the allegations of human rights violations—which, in 2002, had been reduced by 88 percent.<sup>189</sup>

Finally, the COLAR with a new offensive attitude, along with a committed, motivated, equipped, and skilled fighting force, created and customized new units for mobile warfare and within the framework of its strategic plan. Subsequently, under these optimal circumstances, the COLAR combined the existent three elite mobile brigades in 1999 and the Special Forces brigade to create the rapid reaction force (FUDRA). Supported by the aviation brigade, the FUDRA acquired high mobility capabilities. Under the direct orders of the COLAR commander, the FUDRA was able to deploy its lethal force anywhere in the country, and came to be considered as the decisive force that crushed the FARC offensive and the symbol of the successful COLAR restructuring process.<sup>190</sup>

In addition, the COLAR founded four additional mobile brigades to reinforce COIN operations, one regiment of Special Forces dedicated to conducting urban counterterrorism operations (AFEUR), ten new battalions known as *Plan Especial, Energetic y Vial* (PEEV), which were responsible for securing the strategic assets of the country such as roads, oil pipelines, natural resources, and electrical infrastructure, and last, a High Mountain Battalion (HMB) intended to block the corridor of mobility employed by the FARC to move troops and supplies from its base area toward the capital, Bogotá.<sup>191</sup>

Likewise, after the decision of the Pastrana administration—demanded by Washington—to dismantle the 20th Army Intelligence Brigade, which was accused of human rights abuses and blamed for its inability to respond to the National Security Emergency, the COLAR founded the CIME (Army Central of Military Intelligence), CECIM (Army Central of Military Counterintelligence Agency), and CITEC (Army Central of Military Technical Intelligence). These three new intelligence organizations

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<sup>189</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 383.

<sup>190</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 60.

<sup>191</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 71.

developed outstanding capabilities that allowed the COLAR to inflict significant blows against the FARC.<sup>192</sup>

### **3. Doctrinal Innovation**

The adaptation and restructuring process involved a profound revision and adaptation of the old doctrine, which had mainly focused on conventional warfare and administrative duties. Therefore, the JEDOC revised and updated the overall COLAR doctrine to introduce innovative concepts, operational procedures, and training programs that would meet the goals set by the COLAR leadership aimed at creating an offensive mindset among the troops and developing a highly professional combat force able to fight in a counterinsurgency environment.<sup>193</sup>

Consequently, the JEDOC introduced an array of new manuals that satisfied the COLAR requests and served as a combat force multiplier by standardizing the COLAR training as well as integrating the newly created organization with the recently acquired technologies. The JEDOC published the COLAR COIN field manual, the general staff manual, the manual for the employment of the counter guerillas battalion, a manual of leadership, an air assault manual, one for the employment of airborne units in COIN warfare, and the military cartography manual.<sup>194</sup>

### **D. CONCLUSION**

Despite the fact that the adaptation and restructuring process carried out by the COLAR between 1998 and 2002 proved to be successful in containing the threat posed by the FARC and regaining the strategic initiative, no national comprehensive COIN strategy existed during this period due to a civil-military divide that was a holdover from the old Lleras doctrine. This political disengagement defied the principles of classical COIN theory, not to mention Clausewitz's "war is politics by other means," which requires a joint effort between the political and military establishment. Nevertheless,

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<sup>192</sup> Porch, and Delgado, "Masters of Today," 281.

<sup>193</sup> Villamizar, *Fuerzas Militares para la Guerra*, 67–69

<sup>194</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 381–382.

President Pastrana's initially supportive attitude towards the COLAR restructuring process, together with his effort of outreach to Washington, ended Colombia's international isolation begun under the Samper administration—and paved the way to augment and modernize the COLAR capacities, through Plan Colombia and its financial and training assistance. Yet, although Plan Colombia was exclusively dedicated to counternarcotics operations, and the CN brigade could not participate in operations against insurgencies, its results nevertheless indirectly helped the COLAR COIN campaign by affecting the finances of the FARC.

Finally, this period showed how, under a renewed and committed military leadership, the COLAR transformed a military culture resistant to change and embraced a participative—bottom-up approach—learning culture, which resulted in an enhanced technological, organizational, and doctrinal transformation that allowed the COLAR to respond efficiently to the crisis. Even by 2002, the COLAR received a notable score in the national polls with a 79 percent of approval rating from the public, as evidence of its improved performance and enhanced legitimacy in the eyes of the Colombian public.

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#### **IV. THE COLAR TRANSFORMATION PROCESS UNDER THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICY, 2002–2010**

By 2002, the COLAR had undergone a successful adaptation and restructuring process fostered from inside the institution by innovative military leaders, who developed an appropriate COIN approach to contain the menace posed by illegal armed groups. The COLAR now adopted an offensive posture designed to regain the strategic initiative. However, despite the COLAR's preparation, this process was launched in the face of a number of adverse factors that limited its initial success, to include the political disengagement of the executive, the lack of a national strategic plan, and constraints on financial assistance placed by Washington, focused solely on counternarcotics operations.

Yet, 2002–2010 was to become a milestone in Colombian history because, for the first time, the political factors favorable to a successful COIN campaign converged with an effective COLAR transformation. From the arrival in office of the new president, Álvaro Uribe, in August 2002, the Colombian government displayed a decisive commitment toward security and development which allowed for the implementation of a coherent and comprehensive national strategic plan aimed at recovering territorial control and countering the threats to the state and its population. This plan was backed by a significant increase in the security budget, combined with a new U.S. policy that shifted its focus from CN to counterterrorism. Under these circumstances, and following the strategic guidelines issued by the COLMIL chief of staff, the COLAR embraced a new transformation process that over time resulted in tangible success.

##### **A. POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO A COHERENT, COMPREHENSIVE, AND SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLAN**

An era unprecedented in Colombia in terms of civil-military relations and in the process of military transformation leading to military success was inaugurated in 2002.<sup>195</sup> Following a landslide victory in the polls, Uribe prioritized security and legitimacy in the

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<sup>195</sup> Ortiz and Urrutia, "A Long Road to Victory," 325.

midst of a national atmosphere of public demoralization and discontent over the inability of the GOC to deal with illegal armed groups, including both the AUC and the guerrillas, in particular, the FARC. Pastrana's failed attempts to negotiate with the FARC had merely served to showcase his weakness and naiveté in the face of the FARC's bad faith.<sup>196</sup>

Thus, once in office, President Uribe—well-known for his meticulous management style and charismatic, energetic, and demanding leadership<sup>197</sup>—conducted an assessment of the national security environment to catalogue and prioritize national threats. From this evaluation, Uribe pinpointed the threats posed by illegal armed groups that included terrorism, the illegal drug trade, illicit finances, the trafficking of arms, ammunition, and explosives, kidnapping and extortion, and homicide. As a result of this evaluation, Uribe laid out his security policy and instructed the Minister of Defense to articulate a comprehensive plan aimed at recovering the control of the territory (Figure 6), stabilizing the country, promoting the rule of law, and protecting the population.<sup>198</sup>

Additionally, President Uribe determined that the forthcoming security plan should be developed on the basis of three foundational premises, as Marks points out:

(1) A lack of personal security is at the roots of Colombia's social, economic, and political ills. (2) This lack of personal security stems from the absence of the state in large swaths of the national territory. (3) All elements of national power need to be directed towards ending this situation and integrating the nation."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 10–11.

<sup>197</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 120.

<sup>198</sup> Thomas A. Marks, "Colombian Military Support for 'Democratic Security'" *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17, no. 2 (June 2006), 203–204; and Miguel Mauricio Ortega Clavijo, *Acciones y Reacciones Estratégicas: Adaptaciones de las FARC a las Innovaciones Operacionales de las Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia Durante la Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática* [Strategic actions and reactions: Adaptations of the FARC to the operational innovations of the armed forces of Colombia under the democratic security and defense policy] (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2011), 76–77.

<sup>199</sup> Marks, "Colombian Military Support for 'Democratic Security,'" 203.



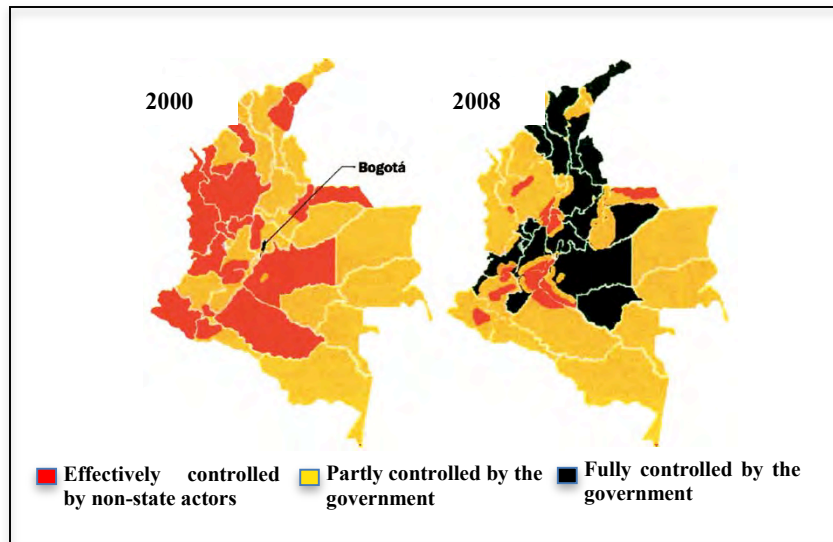


Figure 6. Colombia before and after the National Democratic Security and Defense Policy (DSDP).<sup>200</sup>

Furthermore, five days after his investiture—which was marked in dramatic fashion by indiscriminate mortar attacks launched by the FARC against the presidential palace, which killed 17 civilians<sup>201</sup>—President Uribe invoked the provision contained within Article 213 of the national constitution to declare a state of “internal commotion.” This constitutional mechanism eligible to be invoked when the stability of the country is judged to be at risk, grants special powers to the executive for a period of 90 days renewable for two more periods subject to congressional approval, to promulgate security measures without the requirement of a legislative vote for each measure.<sup>202</sup>

Uribe also adopted two other measures, beginning in August 2002 with a new “estate tax,” in which citizens and companies with more than \$60,000 in assets should pay a 1.2 percent one-time only tax. This allowed the government to collect \$800 million, which was allocated to the MOD to fund the security initiative and enlarge the armed

<sup>200</sup> Max Boot and Richard Bennet, “The Colombian Miracle.” *The Weekly Standard* 15, no. 13 (2009): 29. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/232979064?accountid=12702>.

<sup>201</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 18.

<sup>202</sup> “The Americas: State of Commotion; Colombia’s Conflicts,” *The Economist* 364, no. 8286 (August 17, 2002), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/224036260?accountid=12702>.

forces in what was known as *Plan Choque*.<sup>203</sup> The second measure was implemented one month later, when President Uribe declared the past demilitarized zone and the departments of Arauca, south of Bolivar, and Sucre as “Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones.” This concept allowed military authorities to increase control over the territory and the local population, suspending regular judiciary procedures, and leaving the military to operate without civilian oversight.<sup>204</sup> Such measures modeled on classic COIN case studies of imperial warfare as the British in Malaya or Kenya, led to excesses by the military that risked the alienation of the local population.<sup>205</sup> On November 25, 2013, the Colombian constitutional court declared this measure unconstitutional because it threatened the constitutional order and jeopardized the rights of citizens.<sup>206</sup> Henceforth, the military was forced to operate with judicial and congressional oversight, and tailor their tactics within the constraints of the rule of law. This helped to legitimize the government strategy in the eyes of the population, and stood in stark contrast to the actions of the illegal armed groups, whose behavior was arbitrary, frequently brutal, and always unlawful.

In June 2003, the MOD unveiled its *National Democratic Security and Defense Policy* (DSDP). This long-term policy embodied all of President Uribe’s initiatives and so became a guideline for all governmental institutions to follow<sup>207</sup> as they developed and coordinated effective strategies to defeat the enemies of the state.<sup>208</sup> Hence, the DSDP encompassed five strategic objectives: consolidation of state control throughout Colombia; protection of the population; elimination of illegal drugs trade; maintenance of a deterrent capability; and transparent and efficient management of resources. This was a tall order, and in some instances the strategic objectives—most notably extending state

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<sup>203</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 96.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Douglas Porch, “The Hunt for Martín Caballero,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (April 2012), 249.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 18–19.

<sup>208</sup> Colombian Ministry of National Defense, *Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática* [Democratic security and defense policy] (Bogotá: Ministry of National Defense, 2003), 12.

control throughout Colombia and the elimination of the drug trade—far exceeded the Colombian state’s ability to achieve them. Nevertheless, these strategic objectives were to be realized through six courses of action: coordination of state action; the strengthening of state institutions; the consolidation and control of national territory; the protection of Colombians’ rights and the nation’s infrastructure; cooperation to enhance citizen security; and communication of the state policy and action.<sup>209</sup>

Simultaneously, President Uribe fashioned a new and unique governmental agency called the Coordination Center for Integrated Actions (CCAI). This agency was designed to synchronize all institutions in compliance with the directions issued by the DSDP in order to attend to urgent community needs in conflict-affected areas. The CCAI basically instituted social programs to consolidate marginalized areas once security forces had established minimum-security conditions.<sup>210</sup> Unfortunately, the CCAI was under resourced so that its impact fell short of its aspirations. Indeed, one of the problems that have persisted in the realization of the DSDP in some less accessible areas is that, although the COLMIL has proved able to clear and hold, the Colombian state has too often fallen short in building a successful government and social infrastructure in the wake of military success. But the notion that security was no longer the business of the Colombian armed forces alone was, for the home of the Lleras Doctrine of civilian disengagement from security issues, groundbreaking. For the first time, Colombia—with a now largely civilianized MOD—had a comprehensive, coherent, and proportional national strategic plan.<sup>211</sup> The implementation of the DSDP initially would be anchored in the modernization and restructuring of the security forces, especially the COLAR, begun during the Pastrana administration.<sup>212</sup> These reforms had initiated the process of

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<sup>209</sup> Marks, “Colombian Military Support for ‘Democratic Security,’” 204.

<sup>210</sup> Carlos Ospina, *La Estrategia en Colombia: Variaciones del Centro de Gravedad* [Strategy in Colombia: Changes in the center of gravity] (Washington, DC: Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, 2014), 25–26.

<sup>211</sup> Marks, “Colombian Military Support for ‘Democratic Security,’” 204.

<sup>212</sup> Ortega Clavijo, *Acciones y Reacciones Estratégicas*, 76–77.

transforming of the COLAR into a more effective and skillful fighting force that allowed the Uribe administration to achieve its goals within in a shorter time.<sup>213</sup>

### **1. Military Strategy and Leadership**

To the military leadership, the arrival of President Uribe marked the end of a long history of civilian disengagement in military affairs and the starting point for what would be a comprehensive approach to conduct Colombia's COIN campaign.<sup>214</sup> President Uribe decided to maintain the continuity of the military leadership and appointed General Jorge Enrique Mora as the commanding General of the Joint Command in recognition of his outstanding work in transforming the COLAR and stabilizing the situation during the national security crisis under Pastrana.

Similarly, General Carlos Ospina, who had been instrumental in redesigning the COLAR's operational doctrine, was designated as its commanding general.<sup>215</sup> This dynamic duo of generals and their staffs accepted the long awaited challenge and immediately after having received the instructions from the government through the MDN, undertook the implementation of the DSDP. Guided by General Mora, who structured an overall military strategy (Figure 7) aligned with the GOC's strategic objectives,<sup>216</sup> the plan for military engagement encompassed three phases: readiness (recruitment, equipment, and training), the offensive phase, and the consolidation phase.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 23.

<sup>214</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 287–288.

<sup>215</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 10.

<sup>216</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 287–288.

<sup>217</sup> Jorge Enrique Mora Rangel, "El Plan Patriota: Base del Plan de Consolidación" [The patriot plan: The basis for the consolidation plan], *Revista Fuerzas Armadas* 76, no. 205 (April 2008), 21.

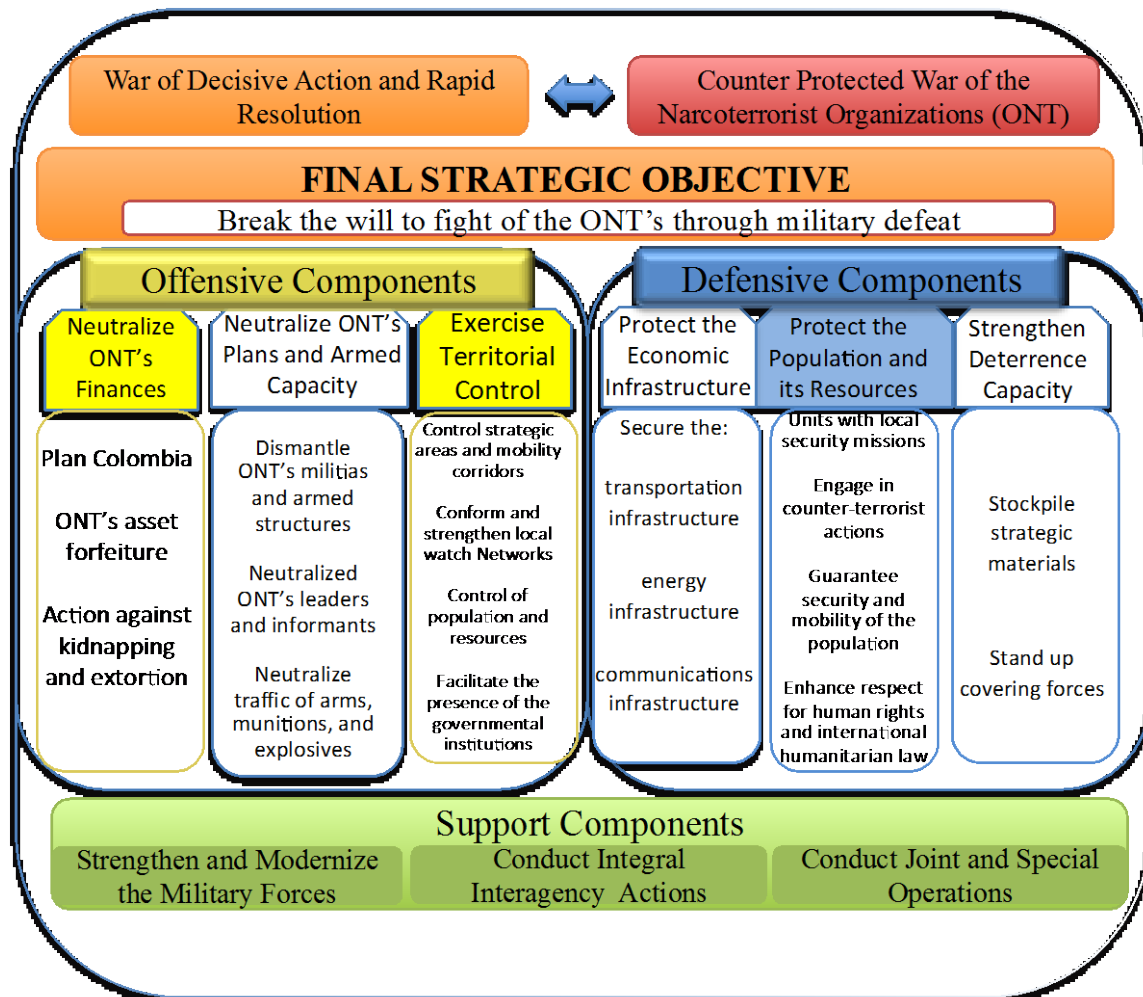


Figure 7. Colombia military strategy under DSDP.<sup>218</sup>

This new general military strategy—later known by the public as *Plan Patriota* (Patriot Plan)<sup>219</sup>—which coupled offensive and defensive components, had three operational goals: control of the national territory and protection of the population; sustained offensive military operations in areas where the enemy had a strong presence; and, finally, an emphasis on special operations to rescue kidnapped soldiers and civilians and neutralize high-value targets (HVTs).<sup>220</sup> However, the initial stance within this new strategic vision paid special attention to developing leadership skills at all levels of the

<sup>218</sup> Mora Rangel, “El Plan Patriota: Base del Plan de Consolidacion,” 20.

<sup>219</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 355.

<sup>220</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 40.

chain of command, who not only should be military leaders but also civilian leaders at the local, regional, and national levels.<sup>221</sup>

This campaign for “hearts and minds” sought to convert every member of the COLAR into a committed leader able to face the operational challenges ahead, as well as gain the admiration and respect of their subordinates and of Colombian society.<sup>222</sup> It was General Mora himself who promoted this leadership campaign. He believed that among all COIN classic principles, the morale and motivation of the troops offered the most important multiplier for legitimacy and success within the COLMIL.<sup>223</sup> That is to say that the COLAR leaders believed that success began with a motivated fighting force, committed to the country, with ethical behavior and respect for the constitution, human rights, and the rule of law.<sup>224</sup> Unfortunately, this goal was not always realized, and in 2008, the COLAR was exposed to a scandal regarding human rights abuses that threatened to undermine its institutional credibility and legitimacy.<sup>225</sup> This scandal, known as *los falsos positivos*, involved active members of the COLAR, who committed extrajudicial assassinations of innocent civilians who were then reported as guerrilla operatives killed in combat.<sup>226</sup> Nonetheless, the government and the COLAR leaders firmly rejected these illegitimate actions and embraced a number of reforms aimed at preventing such atrocities in the future.<sup>227</sup>

## **B. U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE: CHANGING THE POLICY FROM COUNTERNARCOTIC TO COUNTERTERRORISM**

During the Pastrana administration, U.S. assistance through Plan Colombia had been instrumental in building security capabilities to fight the scourge of drug trafficking

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<sup>221</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 288.

<sup>222</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 288.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>225</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 42.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 28.

within the country.<sup>228</sup> Besides, the newly-created COLAR CN brigade had proven its effectiveness in conducting counter narcotics operations due to its modern equipment, its specialized training, and its autonomous air capability fully financed by the U.S. government.<sup>229</sup>

Nevertheless, this counternarcotics focus created tensions inside the COLAR leadership because of the restriction imposed by Washington that prevented any involvement of the CN brigade in COIN operations. Thus, this restrictive U.S. policy conflicted with Colombian vital interests,<sup>230</sup> as David Spencer asserts: “Colombia had a broad internal security problem, while the United States was interested only in combating drug trafficking from Colombia to the United States.”<sup>231</sup> Although the 9/11 terrorist attacks undoubtedly changed the interests of the U.S. government, under the framework of the War on Terror, Washington began recognizing the intrinsic link between the drug trade and illegal armed groups. The FARC, the ELN, and the AUC were now placed on Washington’s list of terrorist groups.<sup>232</sup> Yet, while the anti-narcotics program remained as a priority,<sup>233</sup> this adjustment of U.S. policy permitted the use of its assets in Colombia’s COIN efforts.<sup>234</sup>

In accordance with this new perspective, President George W. Bush signed the NSPD-18 Supporting Democracy in Colombia in 2003 in order to align U.S. assistance with the strategic goals established by President Uribe in the DSDP, and thus, combine efforts, optimize resources, and shape a more coherent long-term strategy aimed at tackling the roots of the conflict. Furthermore, the partnership operated under a more consensual and balanced interaction between the two governments.<sup>235</sup> In these circumstances, Colombia assumed the leading role in addressing its own COIN campaign

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>229</sup> Marks, “Colombian Military Support for ‘Democratic Security,’” 200.

<sup>230</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 46.

<sup>231</sup> Spencer, *Colombia’s Road to Recovery*, 13.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Marks, “Colombian Military Support for ‘Democratic Security,’” 201.

<sup>234</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 98.

<sup>235</sup> Marcella, *The United States and Colombia: The Journey From Ambiguity to Clarity*, 59–60.

backed by a broader U.S. involvement (Table 1), highly committed to improving the security capabilities required to meet the strategic goals contained in the DSDP, but permanently subject to the U.S. vetting mechanism that demanded emphasis on human rights.<sup>236</sup>

This renovated and synergetic alliance encompassed pivotal areas of improvement such as protection of vital infrastructure—especially the Caño Limon-Coveñas pipeline that transports oil from Arauca to the Caribbean coast, where U.S. oil corporations had economic interests<sup>237</sup>—intelligence sharing, aerial capabilities, special operations,<sup>238</sup> training, reorganization, and up-to-date technological equipment.<sup>239</sup>

Actually, the COLAR received the first U.S. assistance package to equip and train the 18th Brigade—located in Arauca and in charge of the most critical section of the Caño Limon-Coveñas pipeline—in order to expand its capabilities and secure this strategic economic asset which was highly prone to terrorist (ELN) attacks.<sup>240</sup> Likewise, with the consent of U.S. officials, the COLAR recovered operational control over the CN Brigade. Therefore, the COLAR was able to deploy this skilled combat force to conduct COIN operations, along with U.S. permission to use the helicopters assigned by Plan Colombia in COIN missions, which formerly were limited only to CN tasks.<sup>241</sup> Finally, the non-CN oriented U.S. assistance through the U.S. Special Operations Command South (USSOCSOUTH) allowed the COLAR to create, equip, and train the Commandos Battalion, which would lead the fight against HVTs.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 13–14.

<sup>237</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 47–48; Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 100.

<sup>238</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 13–14, 33.

<sup>239</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 47–48; Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 100.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*; Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 98–100.

<sup>241</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 98–99.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.



Table 1. U.S. assistance to Colombia, 2003–2008.<sup>243</sup>

Dollars in millions	FY 03	FY 04	FY 05	FY 06	FY 07	FY 08 (Est.)	TOTAL
<b>Promote Social and Economic Justice</b>	\$125.7	\$126.4	\$124.7	\$130.4	\$139.8	\$194.4	\$841.4
Alternate Development	\$60.2	\$59.8	\$70.7	\$72	\$68.2	\$119.7	\$450.6
Internally Displaced Persons	\$41.5	\$42.6	\$32	\$30.7	\$31.1	\$35.3	\$213.2
Demobilization/Reintegration				\$8.9	\$15.7	\$18.3	\$42.9
Democracy and Human Rights	\$24	\$24	\$22	\$18.8	\$24.8	\$21.1	\$134.7
<b>Promote Rule of Law-Judicial Reform and Capacity Building</b>	\$27	\$9	\$7.3	\$10.5	\$7.8	\$39.4	\$101
<b>CNP</b>	\$164.5	\$172.2	\$190.9	\$204.5	\$217.7	\$155	\$1104.8
Eradication	\$63.7	\$44.2	\$82.5	\$81.7	\$82	\$66.5	\$420.6
Air Service	\$62.3	\$71.2	\$70	\$70.5	\$69	\$52.5	\$395.5
Interdiction	\$21	\$41	\$16.9	\$16.5	\$16.5	\$16.5	\$128.4
Police Presence—Conflict Zones	\$15.5	\$13.8	\$20.1	\$19.4	\$18.7		\$87.5
Other	\$2	\$2	\$1.4	\$16.4	\$31.5	\$19.5	\$72.8
<b>COLMIL Counterdrug</b>	\$203.3	\$268.1	\$249.9	\$213.4	\$222.4	\$182.2	\$1339.3
Air Interdiction	\$8	\$7.1		\$4.6	\$18.8	\$10	\$48.5
Coastal/River Interdiction		\$26.2	\$11.8	\$19.1	\$19.2	\$13	\$89.3
Counterdrug Funding	\$195.3	\$234.8	\$238.1	\$189.7	\$184.4	\$159.2	\$1201.5
<b>Colombian Army</b>	\$240.1	\$177.3	\$144.9	\$169.4	\$151.3	\$86.1	\$969.1
Aviation	\$140.8	\$155.2	\$127.5	\$143.2	\$129.6	\$69.7	\$766
Ground Forces	\$6.3	\$18.1	\$13.4	\$22.2	\$17.7	\$16.4	\$94.1
Infrastructure Security	\$93	\$4	\$4	\$4	\$4		\$109
<b>TOTAL</b>	\$760.6	\$753	\$717.7	\$728.2	\$739	\$657.1	\$4355.6

### C. COLAR INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

To the COLAR, the ideal conditions to conduct an effective COIN campaign were in place, and all the gaps identified by military leaders in the preceding transformation process during President Pastrana’s administration were repaired. In addition, President Uribe brought important intangibles to the battle such as political will, a comprehensive national COIN strategic plan (the DSDP), the allocation to the MOD of a substantial budget (Plan Choque), the continuity of the military leaders who had spearheaded the

<sup>243</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 134.

previous reforms,<sup>244</sup> and an enhanced and coherent program of U.S. security assistance.<sup>245</sup>

Accordingly, the COLAR—which had overcome the barrier of resistance to change and evolved into an organizational learning culture—faced the challenge of carrying out optimal adjustments in order to meet the strategic goals established in the DSDP and implement the guidelines contained in the military strategy issued by the COLMIL chief of staff.<sup>246</sup> Therefore, considering all the circumstances mentioned previously, the COLAR underwent a new transformation process with emphasis on continuing the professionalization of the troops, conducting sustained operations, conducting a nationwide campaign to educate troops in human rights, developing specialized units either to control the territory and protect the strategic assets of the country or to conduct special operations against the HVTs, and upgrading the equipment.<sup>247</sup>

### **1. Technological Innovation**

During the past restructuring process, the COLAR expanded and upgraded the tactical and strategic military assets, such as air and ground mobility, night-vision capabilities, technical intelligence, and communications systems.<sup>248</sup> Therefore, in this second stage, and by assessing the lessons learned, the COLAR acknowledged the importance of the technological factor in increasing both the effectiveness and morale of the troops.<sup>249</sup> In fact, the combination of air mobility, night operations, and technical intelligence constituted the recipe for operational success.<sup>250</sup> Undoubtedly, the COLAR aviation brigade—which, by 2002, had a total of 116 helicopters—had become a central component in this troika. It allowed the COLAR to conduct effective air assaults against

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<sup>244</sup> Mora Rangel, “El Plan Patriota: Base del Plan de Consolidación,” 18–21.

<sup>245</sup> Spencer, *Colombia’s Road to Recovery*, 13–14.

<sup>246</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 354–355.

<sup>247</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 128.

<sup>248</sup> Ortega, *Acciones y Reacciones Estratégicas*, 97.

<sup>249</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 63.

<sup>250</sup> Spencer, *Colombia’s Road to Recovery*, 8.

strategic targets, to transport troops, and evacuate wounded soldiers from the battlefield, which reduced the wounded to killed ratio and went a long way toward ending the risk-averse culture that had infected the COLAR in the 1990s.<sup>251</sup>

Therefore, the COLAR, backed by the financial resources allocated via *Plan Choque*, and in compliance with the guidelines contained in the innovative military strategy, brought about the acquisition plan that sought to continue upgrading the existent technological equipment but with more emphasis in ground and air mobility. Then, having accomplished that, securing the road infrastructure had become one of the priorities of President Uribe; the COLAR acquired a ground fleet of armored trucks (Reo M35), light tactical trucks (Abir), commercial extreme trucks (Kodiak), and motorbikes (V-Strom) to equip the so-called *Plan Meteoro*, which consisted of COLAR high mobility motorized companies designed to protect major roads within the country.<sup>252</sup>

Furthermore, between 2002 and 2010, the COLAR bought 12 UH-60 and 4 MI-17 helicopters in order to reinforce the rotary wing fleet and provide support to military operations. As a consequence, by 2010, the COLAR Aviation Brigade counted 132 helicopters, the second largest helicopter fleet in Latin America and, most importantly, was able to project combat power across the entire country.<sup>253</sup>

## 2. Organizational Reforms

In response to the demands emanating from the COLMIL chief of staff, which were outlined in the overall military strategy, the COLAR planners emphasized the development of two lines of action. The first increased the number of troops, both professional and conscript soldiers, while the second sought to strengthen and fashion new and specialized units capable of both offensive and defensive actions that would meet the DSDP's strategic goals.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 63.

<sup>252</sup> Ortega, *Acciones y Reacciones Estratégicas*, 97.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 97–98.

<sup>254</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recupero la Esperanza*, 295–298.

Regarding the first line of action, the COLAR between 2002 and 2006 grew from 160,600 to 200,560 troops, of which 40 percent were professional soldiers, 48 percent conscripts, and 22 percent *soldados campesinos*—that is, locally recruited “peasant soldiers” allowed to accomplish their military obligation by serving in their home region.<sup>255</sup> The incorporation of *soldados campesinos*, also known as *Soldados de mi Pueblo* in the COLAR, was an initiative conceived by President Uribe himself. Its benefits were at least three: first, it resolved the problem of insecurity in the provincial towns, and freed up regular units for offensive action; second, it allowed for better intelligence collection and more effective operations by soldiers who knew their region.<sup>256</sup> Third, it also served as a counter-mobilization, the government conscripting the youths before they could be inducted into the illegally armed groups. Peter DeShazo, Johanna Forman, and Phillip McLean better explain the concept:

These home guards were draftees organized in special platoons of 40 men and based largely in rural towns—some 600 locations across the country—officially as part of the local army battalions stationed in each area. The Soldados de mi Pueblo received the training and equipment of regular soldiers but were allowed to serve close to their homes, largely as a force to hold down territory, disrupt insurgent strategic corridors, show a modest state presence, and free up other troops for combat operations.<sup>257</sup>

Simultaneously, with a more efficient and functional structure and an enhanced offensive fighting force as a result of these reforms, the COLAR undertook the second line of action by increasing and creating specialized units, which were proven to be effective in regaining the strategic initiative.<sup>258</sup> Therefore, COLAR reformers—guided by the three premises established within the general strategic objectives of territorial control, sustained operations in enemy-dominated areas, and special operations against

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<sup>255</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 124.

<sup>256</sup> Ospina, *Los Años en que Colombia Recuperó la Esperanza*, 303–304.

<sup>257</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 20–21.

<sup>258</sup> Marks, “Colombian Military Support for ‘Democratic Security,’” 208–209; Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 359.

HVTs<sup>259</sup>—began the process of converting the COLAR into a COIN organization capable of effectively countering the threats.<sup>260</sup>

Thus, while they were a static and not especially militarily proficient force, *los Soldados de mi Pueblo* were instrumental in controlling municipalities nationwide. These 483 platoons belonging to regular battalions played an important role in protecting the local population—which were their own friends and relatives, who provided information about the enemy—and supported the mission of the national police.<sup>261</sup> In addition, to secure the road infrastructure, the COLAR created a total of nine *Plan Meteoro* companies, which reduced the incidence of roadblocks, truck hijackings, and kidnappings by illegal armed groups, which had made highway travel hazardous and driven up insurance rates for commercial trucking at the turn of the 21st century by 89 percent.<sup>262</sup>

Furthermore, under the premise of conducting sustained offensive operations and blocking the strategic corridors of the non-state actors (mainly FARC), the COLAR augmented the number of mobile brigades to ten. These BRIMs, integrated with combat-proficient professional soldiers, were assigned to all army divisions in order to reinforce its fighting force. Moreover, based on the success of the FUDRA, the COLAR founded the Decisive Action Force (FUCAD), which consisted three BRIMs and a component of Special Forces with high air mobility capabilities. Additionally, the COLAR established six more High Mountain Battalions in the heart of the FARC's strategic corridors, blocking its mobility and supply lines, and founded 11 urban antiterrorist groups, or AFEUR, to contend with the urban militias of this insurgency.<sup>263</sup> This array of specialized units conducting sustained operations pushed the FARC out of its traditional areas of influence, making this insurgency more vulnerable and forcing them into a

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<sup>259</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 354–355.

<sup>260</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 20.

<sup>261</sup> Marks, “Colombian Military Support for ‘Democratic Security,’” 210; Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 359.

<sup>262</sup> Ortega, *Acciones y Reacciones Estratégicas*, 96.

<sup>263</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 124–125.

strategic retreat across the borders into Venezuela and Ecuador, and into the more remote areas of the country.<sup>264</sup>

Among all this transformative activity, the development of Special Forces and intelligence capabilities to attack HVTs was perhaps the most effective. Notably, the COLAR, working together with the USSOCSOUTH, created the two most elite units in COLAR's history: the Commandos battalion and the Lancero group, both of which fall under the COLAR special operations command (CUNOE). These two highly trained and equipped units conducted successful operations that neutralized members of the FARC secretariat, such as the FARC deputy leader Raul Reyes in 2008.<sup>265</sup>

These successes were made possible by enhanced strategic intelligence capabilities in the form of HUMINT, SIGINT, and technical intelligence developed by the COLAR.<sup>266</sup> With U.S. assistance, the COLAR reinforced the CITEC with two more SIGINT units: *Unidad de Inteligencia de Señales* and *Unidad de Inteligencia de Alta Movilidad*.<sup>267</sup> This enhanced capability allowed COLAR intelligence in 2008 to conduct a spectacular deception operation known as Operación Jaque, in which 15 high-profile hostages who had been kidnapped by the FARC, including three American military contractors and a former candidate for the presidency, were rescued.<sup>268</sup>

### **3. Doctrinal Innovation**

The COLAR, through the directorate of training (JEDOC), continued the revision and application of doctrine, paying special attention to integrating the role of the newly created units with the operational concept issued in line with the general strategy, which emphasized joint operations. Therefore, the JEDOC disseminated a series of directives that set up the guidelines to conduct joint operations. These directives, in essence, sought to promote a mindset of “working together,” combining the COLAR's new capabilities

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<sup>264</sup> Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 35.

<sup>265</sup> Ramsey, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque*, 102–103; Spencer, *Colombia's Road to Recovery*, 38–40.

<sup>266</sup> Porch and Delgado, “Masters of Today,” 281–281.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

with the security forces of the state (including the national police), and, by doing so, synchronizing the efforts in the planning or execution stages in order to create a synergy that would maximize the effectiveness of operations against the illegal armed groups.<sup>269</sup>

#### **D. THE SUCCESS OF THE DSDP, 2002–2010**

The implementation of the DSDP produced valuable and unprecedented results in diminishing the threat posed by non-state actors and contributed to improving the legitimacy, stability, and development of the country. By 2008, Colombian Armed Forces (COLAF) had recovered control of over 90 percent of the national territory (Figure 6), completely thwarted the FARC's strategic plan, and significantly affected the structure of illegal armed groups. For instance, under the Pastrana administration (1998–2002), the COLAF neutralized a total of 9,765 members of illegal armed organizations,<sup>270</sup> while in the first term of president Uribe (2002–2006), the COLAF neutralized 31,717 and in Uribe's second term (2006–2010), 14,228.<sup>271</sup> Likewise, in 2005 Uribe demobilized 32,000 members of the AUC;<sup>272</sup> between 2003 and 2010 in Colombia, the number of kidnappings plummeted from 2,123 to 282; extortion decreased from 2,267 to 1,352 incidents; terrorist attacks decreased from 1,258 to 471, homicides from 23,523 to 15,459.<sup>273</sup> Finally, the national economy skyrocketed (Figure 8) thanks largely to the enhanced security conditions.

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<sup>269</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 355.

<sup>270</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia Militar del Ejército de Colombia*, 368; neutralized included members of illegal armed groups killed in combat and captured.

<sup>271</sup> Colombian Ministry of National Defense. *Logros de la Política Integral de Seguridad y Defensa para la Prosperidad* [Achievements of the comprehensive security and defence policy for prosperity] (Bogotá, Colombia: Ministry of National Defense, 2013), 60–61.

<sup>272</sup> DeShazo, Forman, and McLean, *Countering Threats to Security and Stability*, 36.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–37.

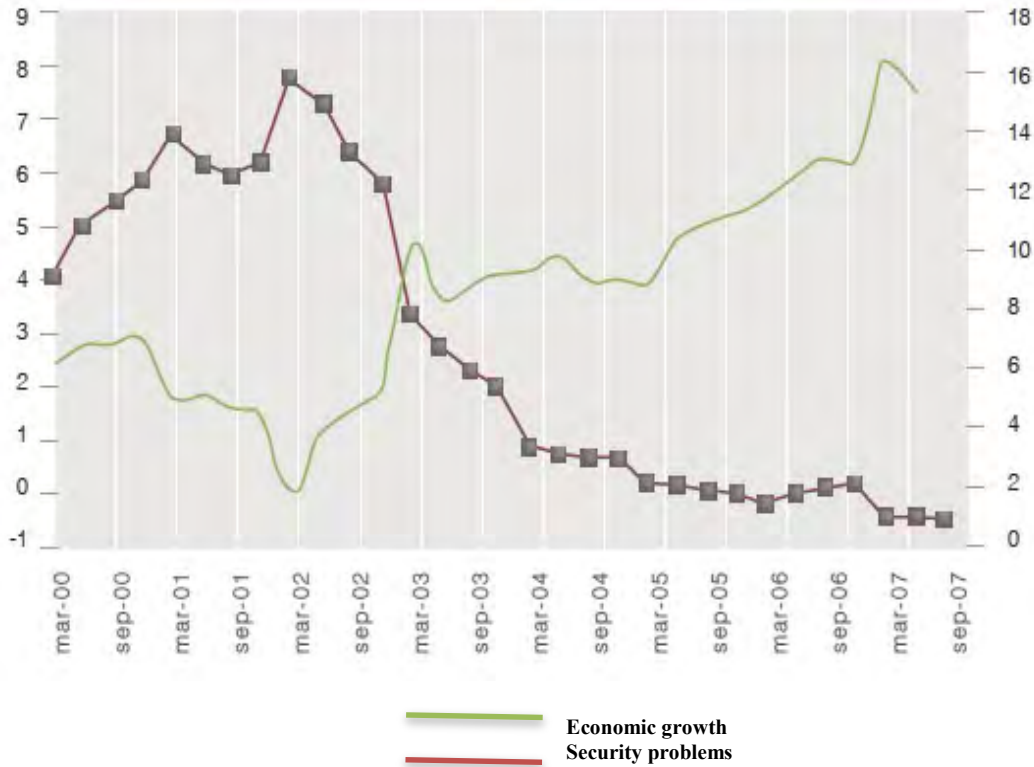


Figure 8. Colombia security problems vs. economic growth.<sup>274</sup>

## E. CONCLUSION

The COLAR transformation experience between 2002 and 2010 illustrates the application of the classic principles of COIN theory, amid a unique period in Colombia’s history in which relevant factors came together, fostering a politico-military synergy, along with a coherent partnership with international allies (the United States) that allowed the articulation of a comprehensive COIN plan, which was accurately implemented by the COLAR and brought security, legitimacy, and stability to the state. Thus, the combination of the political will of President Uribe, a dynamic military leadership, a decisive U.S. military security assistance, and the innovation carried out by the COLAR—being transformed into a capable fighting force supported by updated technologies—constituted a successful COIN model that truly neutralized one of the most difficult enemies: the insurgents.

<sup>274</sup> Luis Carlos Villegas, “Seguridad en Colombia: Clave Para el Desarrollo” [Security in Colombia: Key to development], *Revista Fuerzas Armadas* 76, no. 205 (April 2008), 38.



However, this COIN success was marred by the unfortunate episode of the *falsos positivos*. The human rights abuses committed by active members of the COLAR revealed the dilemma that an aggressive, offensive spirit vital to COIN success nevertheless needs to be contained within the parameters of human rights. This requires a leadership that, despite pressures for operational success, nevertheless keeps an eye on the political goal, which is to increase the legitimacy of the state, and not up the kill ratios of the military as a Measure of Effectiveness (MOE). This assumption emphasizes the lesson that COIN campaigns especially require civilian and judicial oversight lest measures of tactical success, which focus on institutional (e.g., military) efficiency, too often preempt and undermine the strategic goals of legitimacy, good governance, and respect for human rights. War, after all, is politics.

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## V. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has intended to assess the COLAR's transformation process between 1998 and 2010 in order to identify the key factors that intervened to fashion an unprecedented "small foot-print" COIN model. The fact that this proved to be successful allowed the COLAR to overcome the institutional crisis, stabilize security conditions in the country, and regain the strategic initiative following the national security emergency created by illegal armed groups led by the FARC from 1996 to 1998.

By analyzing factors such as the political environment under President Uribe's mandate (2002–2010) in which this transformation process operated, the role of the COLAR leadership; the influence of international, principally U.S., security assistance; and technological, organizational, and doctrinal adaptations by the COLAR, this thesis concludes that Colombian COIN success can be attributed to the proper combination of all these factors. This approach has encompassed a coherent and logical operational design, along with a thorough understanding of the strategic environment that resulted in an appropriate response, which diminished the insurgent threat, improved security conditions, and brought economic growth and development to the country in a relatively short period of time.

Moreover, the COLAR COIN experience—following the slow decline in military performance between 1996 and 1998, in the midst of a discredited national government immersed in corruption scandals and totally disengaged from security affairs—displayed how military institutions are more likely to embrace a transformative and innovative attitude when the right combination of circumstances coalesces. The nadir for the COLAR came in 1998, when the institutional leadership recognized the need for change. Under these adverse circumstances, the COLAR military leaders fostered a critical mindset open to the recognition of inner weaknesses, and successfully surmounted a military culture of routine and resistance to change, to foster permanent institutional learning practices. This allowed improved adaptability to evolving conflict environments to anticipate the enemy's plans and neutralize its offensive capabilities.

Furthermore, while the reforms assumed an unstoppable momentum during President Uribe's mandate, this thesis argues that their origins lay with the previous Pastrana administration—despite the strained civil-military of that period due principally to the controversy unleashed by the peace negotiations with the FARC. Pastrana reestablished U.S. security assistance through Plan Colombia, which before had been limited to CN operations. Plan Colombia was instrumental in enhancing COLAR capabilities by providing financial resources, tactical equipment, sophisticated military technology, and training.

Furthermore, between 1998 and 2002 the COLAR initiated a process of professionalization of the rank and file, the creation of specialized combat units such as mobile brigades and the FUDRA made effective by enhanced air and ground mobility, and the development of night operations, along with an actionable intelligence and adjustments in doctrine.

Additionally, this thesis demonstrates how these factors converged between 2002 and 2010, allowing the COLAR to consummate its transformation process with exceptional and unique results in Colombia's history of COIN warfare. To begin with, President Uribe's leadership was influential in designing and implementing a national COIN plan that incorporated all the governmental institutions in order to fulfill the strategic goals contained in his Democratic Security and Defense Policy. Similarly, the COLAR leaders developed a coherent military strategy, which was supported by the U.S. security assistance that was no longer limited to CN operations by the revised U.S. War on Terror approach. This allowed the COLAR to apply fundamental COIN principles successfully, such as effective territorial control, sustained offensive military operations, and special forces operations, guided by better strategic intelligence in order to neutralize HVTs. Finally, the COLAR underwent an institutional transformation that effectively responded to the COIN exigencies, characterized by pioneering initiatives such as *Soldados de mi Pueblo*.

Although the illegal armed groups are still active and not completely defeated, they no longer have the capacity either to destabilize the country or launch an offensive that would lead Colombia again to the brink of being a failed state. Although a success

without precedent in Colombia, the Colombian case in a way also demonstrates the limits of military power and underscores Clausewitz's dictum that "war is politics." Furthermore, Colombia's model is not transferable as many COIN proponents believe. Like every COIN campaign, Colombia's "small foot-print" COIN model proved successful within its unique context. That is to say that before policymakers endeavor to export the Colombia model to other countries, they should fashion the overall Colombia COIN approach to the very threats that each country faces. Nevertheless, like the "large footprint" expeditionary COIN practiced by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, this "small footprint" COIN model must pay special attention to legitimacy, and "legitimacy" begins with respect for human rights. Without legitimacy, the counterinsurgents risk losing public support, which constitutes a vital factor in the "small footprint" model. Colombia's COIN success has not been without blemish. Scandals like the *falsos positivos* can occur when special measures are applied without adequate institutional oversight. This could affect the outcomes of a COIN campaign, discredit the counterinsurgent, and the government he represents. Thus, while this thesis focuses on assessing the factors that make the COLAR transformation a successful model in COIN warfare, further research should integrate the "small footprint" lessons learned into large expeditionary armies dealing with insurgents across the globe and to improve the performance of such forces in terms of legitimacy. For, in the end, the COLAR was fighting in its own country, in a cultural, linguistic, sociological and political environment that it thoroughly understood. "Clash of Civilization" encounters are a different case indeed.

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