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### Lessons from Colombia's 50-Year Civil War

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October 2024

*Author's note: Nicolas Bell is a Gannon student I have had the pleasure of teaching for the past three years. He grew up in Colombia at the tail end of the civil war and has witnessed the peace process first-hand briefly mentioned [here](#) and [here](#). This article is excerpted from his senior thesis, "Armed Conflict in Colombia: the origins and consequences of paramilitarism and the guerrillas."*

#### Why Colombia Now

Increasingly over the past decade, there have been growing sentiments that America is heading towards some sort of civil conflict.<sup>[i]</sup> With this in mind, it may be crucial to learn painful lessons from the long conflict in Colombia that spanned two modern centuries.<sup>[ii]</sup>

"Critical Bibliography on La Violencia in Colombia" accurately describes the possible blunders that a scholar documenting Colombia's period of violence may commit, failing to comprehend the conflict in the socio-political sense.<sup>[iii]</sup> Within the western hemisphere, Colombia has been affected by the longest conflict, which began in 1964 and has led to millions of displaced people and left hundreds of thousands dead. Such conflicts are often rooted in deep ideological divisions, with accompanying corruption and the rise of crime organizations. Colombia has also been greatly influenced economically by the United States throughout the Cold War and Drug War. Although the United States and Colombia differ in many respects, this conflict has lessons to teach about political polarization and the possible reasons for civil war. Additionally, the conflict has something to say

about the role of the rural-urban divide and its involvement in the perpetuation of conflict.

Another reason why it may be prudent to study the conflict is that it saw not only left-wing “guerillas” but also right-wing paramilitaries. In the United States, the Second Amendment allows for the possibility of armed groups to exist, which in situations of civil unrest could push the nation toward civil unrest. Considering the record number of weapons in the hands of citizens, it could prime the U.S. to face similar conditions in an era of perceived extreme polarization.

Internationally, the world has and will continue to see armed groups like guerillas and paramilitaries play a role in conflicts. From Serbian militias in the 1990s to the Russian Wagner Group, discussed previously [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), there is a certain overlap as to the reasons individuals find themselves in groups like this. It may also be important to understand how contemporary criminal groups operate. The conflict in Colombia also shows the wide-reaching consequences of war, including environmental catastrophe, vigilante justice, and forced migrations.

### **Historical Context**

The Republic of Colombia was still a burgeoning nation by the turn of the 20th century, as one of the few states in South America that did not undergo a revolution during the Great Depression. <sup>[iv]</sup> However, a sizable portion of the population was illiterate, lived in rural areas and was broadly kept on the margins of national life. Conflict in Colombia was often tainted by the two-party system and is still indivisible with Colombian political life. As noted by historian David Bushnell, “Though superficially taken as evidence of the country's political stability, it was a handy way of keeping old grudges alive and passing them on from father to son to grandson.”<sup>[v]</sup>

This dynamic was an echo of the Thousand Days War, fought in the 19th century between liberals and conservatives, which undeniably set the tone for armed conflict. Hereditary hatred has been experienced by many civilizations, ethnic, racial, political, and religious groups, tribes, and other sects as multi-generational trauma, which along with tribalism cause a deep disconnect between two groups. The us vs. them mentality has thus been well documented in the field of civil war studies.

Foreign powers, especially the United States, also greatly influenced political divisions in Colombia. During the presidency Enrique Olaya Herrera in the 1930s, ministerial appointments were not made until U.S. officials in Colombia asked leaders of the United Fruit Company for their blessing.<sup>[vi]</sup> The potential capital that expansion of U.S. investment might entail, and how enticing it was for an

industrializing, largely agrarian economy like Colombia's during an economic slowdown was certainly a factor, but personal motivation also cannot be ruled out.

Herrera's successor was Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo, who is often compared to his contemporary, then-American U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, mainly because both presidents led immense legislative change, faced initiatives, facing complex issues, and placing labor and inequality to the forefront of national concern. In particular, Lopez Pumarejo faced not only the giants of the fruit industry, but also deep agrarian discontent. In this sense, unrest decreased after the first agrarian reform was passed, and the number of labor unions doubled during his presidency.<sup>[vii]</sup>

During Lopez Pumarejo's second term, the seeds of violence were sown. In July 1944, an aborted coup attempt took place, during which the president was briefly taken prisoner. The movement was easily suppressed, but it was considered a crossing of the Rubicon that would continue to permeate Colombia's society.<sup>[viii]</sup>

## La Violencia



On April 9, 1948, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a Colombian lawyer and Liberal Party leader or *caudillo*, was assassinated, beginning what would be known as La Violencia.

This statement by a Gaitán supporter reflected the deep sense of loss over Gaitán's death and his dream.<sup>[ix]</sup> "Gaitán was a hope, his

death cut short that aspiration that one longs for today."<sup>[x]</sup> Now this was not a dream because it necessarily meant that Gaitan would have been a perfect leader, but more so that he was not the worse option.

Even on his liberal side, elites had always presumed to speak for the masses but kept themselves distant from them, thus the liberals and conservatives that held power had more in common with each other (even politically) than they did with the people they claimed to serve. This may be a parallel to U.S. politics today causing cynicism among voters. For example, even as Democratic presidential nominee Hilary Clinton and Republican nominee Donald Trump campaigned as diametric opposites in 2016, the Clintons and Trumps had socialized together at swanky New York events, with the Clintons even attending Donald and Melania Trump's 2005 wedding.<sup>[xi]</sup>

Conversely, Gaitan represented something different, an alternative to the very well-defined oligarchy that had been ruling Colombia for years. In the eyes of most, he was truly a man of the people. His assassination also serves as a case study for how influential individual political actors are in Colombian political life. The fighting was so fierce, even in the cities, which was unusual for Colombian conflict, that the capital, Bogotá, was partly destroyed in the riots.

Gaitan's followers and much of Bogotá's population at the time believed that the conservative government killed Gaitan. On the other side, most conservatives believed that Gaitan was part of some international leftist conspiracy.<sup>[xii]</sup> This is all to say that this pathological thinking (perhaps reasonable after a national tragedy) can create hostile feelings about the "other side" and further primed the population to face conflict. One can only imagine in the wake of the ensuing catastrophe what stories and gossip about the event reached the disconnected towns around Colombia, undoubtedly transmitted with political slants and degenerating into conspiracy theories. Again, this feels familiar to varied reactions to recent assassination attempts against former President Trump.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

### **'Guerrillas' and 'Paracos'**

In the past, cities were not often as affected by conflict, which only exacerbated the political class divide that was fueled by the lack of infrastructure and relative unwillingness of officials to interact with rural voters. But in La Violencia, as conflict broke out in the cities, it was common for liberal and conservative peasants to kill each other. Of course, politics were not always the sole motivation. In many cases, land theft, expulsions, and other forced acquisition of property were shielded by this political pretext. The government's abandonment of the hinterland was aided by Colombia's mountainous and dense jungle geographic terrains, incubators of tribalism, that allowed armed groups to flourish.<sup>[xiv]</sup>

Guerrillas have always existed in some form or another in Colombia. The term itself means "small war," and originated in Spain, where it referred to Spanish resistance to Napoleonic rule. In stark contrast, the modern Colombian guerrillas were mainly born in the 1950s into conditions of vast land ownership by a few individuals and widespread rural violence. These groups were able to play to disaffected rural people through communist ideology and its promises of a more equal society.

The fact that 70%<sup>[xv]</sup> of the population at that time lived outside of cities and towns, accompanied by the lack of land reform, helps explain why many saw joining these groups as their best or only option. That armed conflict through paramilitarism, guerrillas, or banditry was a constant gave many rural dwellers cause to join similar structures to those that perpetrated violence against them. For those who

grew up and joined these groups, membership brought a semblance of structure and belonging.



*Return to normality in the llanos*[xvi]

A stark example is the story of Teofilo Rojas, also known as “Chispas,” a bandit and “liberal guerrilla” known for his role in the deaths of hundreds. He tells the story of living peacefully with his parents and working with them on a nearby farm until he was 13 in 1949. “I remember as if it were now, the uniformed people started to arrive. ... I was very afraid and hurt by everything they did. I decided to get away from those bad people, to see if I could avoid finally dying at their hands.”<sup>[xvii]</sup> Thus, Chispas was born in violence and turned to violence himself. Rojas’ story illustrates how the bloodshed was self-perpetuating, and why Colombia demonstrates an entire history marked by near constant conflict.

General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla inherited the presidency in 1953 under a strange transfer of power, in which two candidates refused the position. This devolved into a military dictatorship, but a mild one for the era. Rojas Pinilla aimed to end the violence by offering amnesty to liberal guerrillas and many groups disarmed. This case shows an example of the value of reconciliation and reintegration to heal the national divide. Historian David Bushnell noted, “Liberal guerrilla fighters, who would never have trusted an offer of amnesty from a Conservative Party official were prepared to give Rojas Pinilla the benefit of the doubt.”<sup>[xviii]</sup> Despite the offer, as nearly all of the high-level government officials were conservatives, former guerillas were not permitted to participate in the political process. There



was also no real land restitution for farmers, which may have been the root cause of the conflict itself.

During the early years of the Cold War, the conflict in Colombia morphed mainly through politically aligned armed groups, as the liberal and conservative struggle left its mark on the division in the nation. La Violencia had clearly shaken the political elite as both sides agreed to share power as part of an institutional two-party system known as the National Front. This added an air of redundancy to the political process, as the presidents would alternate between liberal and conservative over the course of four terms.

Eleven years after the 1953 peace, a guerrilla group led by Manuel Marulanda along with 50 families created a series of settlements in the Marquetalia known as “free republics.” The government would eventually capture Marquetalia in 1964, with the guerrilla Marulanda slipping away. However, this was the birth of the contemporary guerrilla group known as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC.<sup>[xix]</sup>

The Cold War solidified the existing liberal-conservative divides in many countries as the U.S. began defining some left-wing groups as communist and working to undermine them fearing the spread of Soviet proxies into its sphere of influence. The contemporary government-sanctioned paramilitary originated with Law 48 of 1968, which legalized paramilitaries to crack down on guerrillas in accordance with the U.S. counterinsurgency national strategy with American advisers proposing that the U.S. “select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training in resistance operations in case they are needed later.” Led by U.S. Army Lt. Gen. William P. Yarborough, the team further recommended that this structure “be used to perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage, and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States.”<sup>[xx]</sup>

This process of integrating civilian structures with the national military were now codified in response to not only the precedent of communist defense groups but also foreign pressure. Law 48 also stipulated the arming of these groups, with the government providing their weapons. To a certain degree, guerrillas and paramilitaries are mirror images with the great exception of state support, or at least inaction, that paramilitaries enjoy and those named guerrillas do not. The reasons for a Colombian to join either a paramilitary or a guerrilla group may very well be the same, as noted in Chispas’ story, to these are added the use of “blood debts” and political crusades by both sides to make things even more messy.

### **The metamorphosis of war**

By the 1970s, wealthy landowners supported by a newly emerging elite class of drug traffickers began to put Law 48 into practice. They essentially bought huge swathes of land that were acquired cheaply because violence in the countryside caused rural people to flee. They were enabled by their enormous purchasing power and well-known intimidation tactics that would synthesize into the Cold War-Narco strategies of suppression of journalists and political actors, essentially anyone who got in their way.

As described by InSight Crime, “They soon joined forces with local elites to fund what were called “self-defense” forces, which were supposedly set up to fight the guerillas, but which often targeted social “undesirables”: unionists and other groups perceived to be a threat to elite interests. These groups were further precursors to the FARC.”<sup>[xxi]</sup>

By the 1980s, it was clear that the drug trade had infiltrated politics. FARC and other guerrillas also profited from racketeering or placing a “security tax” on drug-related activities. Thus, it was evident that these groups would take a more active role in the trade. This was also when both groups became more criminal in their tactics and perspectives. One example was kidnapping members of the traditional elite for ransom as a lucrative source of income. But the largest enterprise was the drug trade. In response to FARC’s growing participation and frequent kidnapping, a series of pamphlets was dropped in the city of Cali on Dec. 2, 1981. In 400 words, a group known as MAS, or Muerte a Secuestradores, in English, “Death to Kidnappers” was formed by some industrialists and agrarians, but mostly members of the Medellín Cartel.<sup>[xxii]</sup>

It is important to note that this had been a tool of war since colonial times and the creation of MAS was not the origin but a continuation of targeting political families who increasingly overlapped with Narcos. As Bushnell noted, “Kidnapping, a not uncommon crime in Colombia, was practiced by professional bands as well as by leftists seeking to make a political statement or to replenish their treasuries.”<sup>[xxiii]</sup> For instance, the abductions carried out by M-19 (an urban guerrilla group) in the 1970s and 1980s aimed to destabilize and exert pressure on the government. Similarly, the kidnappings perpetrated by drug-trafficking groups in the late 1980s and early 1990s sought to leverage negotiations for their surrender and halt the extradition process.

In 1985 the government of President Belisario Betancourt attempted a peace process with FARC. As a part of the agreement, the Patriotic Union would be formed. Also called UP, this political party would serve as not only political representation for historically marginalized groups like natives and leftists, but also as a vehicle for the FARC’s disarmament and transition into politics. As this came at a time of cynicism, many Colombians were unprepared to welcome back what they saw as a danger to the democratic process. Regardless of opinions on

specifics, this attempt at peace had something that Pinilla's process did not have, which was political representation. It differed, however, in that the guerrillas did not disarm. This infuriated some Colombians as the maintenance of weapons and social reintegration were mutually exclusive factors causing many to fear a return to La Violencia if armed political parties continued to exist.

Colombia's National Center of Historic Memory has documented that 4,153 victims of the Patriotic Union were killed, disappeared, or kidnapped between May 1984 and December 2002. Among these, 3,122 were victims of selective assassination, 544 were victims of forced disappearance, 478 were victims of assassinations in massacres, four were kidnapped, and three were victims of other forms of violence. These killings also went beyond the urban-rural divide, which shows its unprecedented nature not only because an entire political party was murdered *en masse*, but also because the targeting occurred in rural and urban areas in equal parts,<sup>[xxiv]</sup> something not seen since Gaitan's assassination in 1948.

This led to the FARC and other aligned groups taking up arms again, believing that the state had violated the conditions of the peace. The violation was done by both parties, and the expectation that peace was going to be established while guerrillas were still armed was untenable, which was applied to the still-lasting peace process of 2016, which did include disarmament and demobilization of militia groups.<sup>[xxv]</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Today, Colombia is finally seeing hope after the long civil war. For the paramilitaries part, 30,000 were disarmed and reintegrated beginning in 2003.<sup>[xxvi]</sup> The trend since the grim assassinations of the UP is the disarmament of most if not all vestiges of La Violencia. The participation of such groups in active war ultimately perpetuated conflict by the nature of individual actions, including sexual crimes, extra judicial assassinations, terrorist level attacks, and systematic and near total suppression of political parties. It is undeniable that both sides violated Colombians' human rights throughout.

But there is something grimmer about the government's role in the perpetuation of these paramilitaries, whose only real distinction from the guerrillas was their legal status. Both were extremist in nature with 94,754 deaths attributed to the paramilitaries, 35,683 to the guerrillas, and 9,804 to active state agents,<sup>[xxvii]</sup> and the great majority of victims were civilians.





*President Santos and FARC leader Timochenko sign a peace agreement in 2016.<sup>[xxviii]</sup>*

It is prudent to recount the multi-faceted nature of the conflict and summarize its reasons, lessons, and the role of justice. For one, the issue of land ownership and distribution must not be underestimated, as it continues to be perhaps the oldest problem facing Colombia. These groups enacted their versions of justice, taking land from opposing sides for supposed political goals, but both groups greatly profited from the continuation of the drug industry. Having originated in an era of vast land accumulation by very few individuals who often did not even work the land, it is understandable why Colombian farmers grew distrustful of the government. Groups like the liberal guerrillas, FARC and on the opposite side, the conservative paramilitaries, MAS and its successor, the far-right paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) all stem from the unresolved issue of land.

The other facet of this conflict, and most others as well, is political participation and dissent. Colombian history has not been kind to any sort of dissent, whether liberals under a conservative hegemony, vice versa, or in the case of the UP, it is evident that when one group holds power, there is little to no restraint on the other side. It seems like the revolving door of politics was also a vehicle for opposing groups to commit reprisals against the other.

Another component of contemporary conflict this revealed is the drug trade, which funded both paramilitaries and guerrillas. It further exacerbated the element of fear in the populace and ultimately made war more profitable, more so than ever before in Colombia. The purchasing power of Narcos like Pablo Escobar

was comparable to that of small nations. Violent actors were able to find all the funding needed for war in this industry. The mark that drug trafficking and its related culture made on the Colombian populace is significant, as it served as a ladder of social mobility, however immoral. It also took place in a society where little multi-generational wealth accumulation was possible, especially during La Violencia. Thus, selling one's morals was an avenue for riches.

The final component of the conflict is the recurring absence of the Colombian state. The abandonment of communities created the perfect environment for armed groups to not only flourish but also to form parallel power structures, with extrajudicial killings as a way to establish a rule of intimidation and suppression over a populace. During La Violencia the state structure was weaker, and power hinged on uneasy coalitions, so there was no political incentive to engage with the peasantry, thus the image of the distant elite was created in the minds of the people, further providing "justification" for reprisal and even armed revolt against the government.

In an era of easy communication across geographic distance, one would hope that this issue could be resolved today, but the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation through these networks has created information niches just as deep and dividing as mountains or jungles.

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