

# Plan Colombia and the revolution in military affairs: the demise of the FARC

JIM ROCHLIN

**Abstract.** This article examines the impact of the utilisation of the RMA on the part of the Colombian and US governments *vis-à-vis* the Farc. The central argument is that the RMA as applied in Colombia relies on newfangled and sometimes clever conceptions of force that have weakened the relative power of the Farc, but which fail to address the root causes of insurgency in the country that centre on profound economic inequity and violent political exclusion. Over 75 per cent of the \$6 billion so far divulged through Plan Colombia has been devoted to military and police assistance, with the rest going to institutional programmes and to a lesser extent to social programmes. Although the insurgents are indeed weaker, as a result both of the RMA as well as misguided policies on the part of the guerrillas themselves, they are by no means ‘broken’. Violent conflict in the country will likely persist into the foreseeable future.

**Dr Jim Rochlin** is Professor of Political Science, and Director of Latin American Studies, at the University of British Columbia – Okanagan. He is the author of numerous articles and four books on Latin American politics, the most recent of which is *Social Forces and the Revolution in Military Affairs: the Cases of Mexico and Colombia* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Colombian politics captured global headlines in 2008 with the release by Latin America’s most powerful insurgents of some celebrity hostages, and with the death of the rebels’ second-in-command during a controversial bombing incident in neighbouring Ecuador. Colombia has been a country at war almost since Independence in the 1820s, except for a brief respite in armed conflict between 1902 and the 1940s. An interesting new wrinkle in the imbroglio appeared about a decade ago. At the dawn of the new millennium the US implemented a multi-billion military programme in Colombia that transformed the country into what next-door-neighbour Hugo Chávez has deemed to be, in his signature inflammatory language, ‘the Israel of Latin America’.<sup>1</sup> Plan Colombia (PC) is a manifestation of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). It was sparked by US fears surrounding the empowering acquisition in 1998 of a Switzerland-sized piece of territory, the Zona de Distensión, by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

This article examines the impact of the utilisation of the RMA on the part of the Colombian and US governments *vis-à-vis* the Farc. The central argument is

<sup>1</sup> Chávez made the comment on his weekly radio program, *Aló Presidente* (2 March 2008).

that the RMA as applied in Colombia relies on newfangled and sometimes clever conceptions of force that have weakened the relative power of the Farc, but which fail to address the root causes of insurgency in the country that centre on profound economic inequity and violent political exclusion. Over 75 per cent of the \$6 billion so far divulged through Plan Colombia has been devoted to military and police assistance, with the rest going to institutional programmes and to a lesser extent to social programmes.<sup>2</sup> Although the insurgents are indeed weaker, as a result both of the RMA as well as misguided policies on the part of the guerrillas themselves, they are by no means 'broken'. Violent conflict in the country will likely persist into the foreseeable future.

Colombian politics are particularly complicated and nuanced. In order to discuss of the effects of the RMA on the Farc, some important historical and conceptual background is in order. We shall begin with a brief discussion of the legacy of political fragmentation and violence in the country, and will then turn to a summary of prior US interests and intervention in Colombia. That will provide the context for a subsequent discussion of the RMA, whereby its various components will be evaluated *vis-à-vis* the Farc. Those elements include the privatisation of war, asymmetry, surveillance/intelligence, the discourse on terror, and finally, crime and war. A concluding discussion will evaluate the impact of the RMA on the Farc and its capacity for further military action.

### **The legacy of fragmentation and violence**

Colombia's history of almost incessant violence and its pronounced political fragmentation have served as the backdrop for the country's assorted power plays. It is noteworthy that Colombia is the only country in the world to host the academic discipline of 'Violentology'. Historians have pointed to the virtually interminable warfare between the indigenous populations of what is now Colombia during the pre-conquest period.<sup>3</sup> As was the case throughout Latin America, most of the indigenous population succumbed to disease once the Spanish arrived, rendering them as easy prey during the Conquest. After the initial carnage associated with the Spanish invasion, colonial rule generally minimised violence in what today is Colombia. Following independence, almost constant civil war between the Liberals and Conservatives led to the death of 35,000 Colombians during 1820–1879, a figure that would equate proportionately to about 5–10 million deaths during the last 50 years of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In 2007–2008, for example, 76 per cent of Plan Colombia's budget was devoted to the military and police. See *World Politics Review* (15 Feb 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of Colombia's historical violence see, Malcolm Deas and Fernando Gaitán Daza, *Dos ensayos especulativos sobre la violencia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1985), and Paul Orquist, *Violence, Conflict and Politics in Colombia* (New York: Academic Press, 1980). Even cannibalism was apparent in the region of present day Cali and northward. See Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> See, John Coatsworth, 'Colombia: Roots of Violence in Colombia', *Revista: Harvard Report on the Americas*, 2:3 (Spring 2003), p. 8.

The culmination of violent feuds and civil wars between the Liberals and Conservatives during much of the 1800s was the renowned War of 1000 Days from 1899 to 1902, which marked the largest civil war in Latin America during the nineteenth century. Somewhere between 80,000 and 200,000 Colombians lost their lives during that imbroglio. That exhausting ordeal appeared to deflate the country's propensity toward violence until another horrific round of carnage slowly simmered and then boiled over with La Violencia during the period 1948–1958. At least 200,000 Colombians lost their lives in that final contest between the Liberals and Conservatives.

With La Violencia behind it, Colombia during the 1960s continued to witness the highest rate of violent deaths in the world. The country has remained near the top of that list into the new millennium. Although this remarkable level of violence has not altered significantly, there have been some important contextual shifts over the last few decades. One of these has been the acceleration of the war economy.<sup>5</sup> Propelled principally by the drug trade, and to a lesser extent by other crimes, continuous violence and warfare have been associated with the protection of immense economic bounties for belligerent forces.<sup>6</sup> Perpetually high levels of violence, the criminalisation of war, and the shifting spatialisation of armed conflict, together with the lack of popular support for belligerents, have contributed to flashes of terror in Colombia since the 1980s.

Fragmentation has been a hallmark of Colombian politics, though there is debate as to its causes. Among the key factors are the historical absence of a shared identity, the post-independence contours of the country's notoriously feuding parties, substantial geographical obstacles, assorted economic elements and epistemological themes. It is the synergy among these factors that have promoted Colombia's volatile cocktail of centrifugal forces. To begin, it was noted that what is now Colombia was populated by warring indigenous tribes during the pre-colonial period, in contrast, for example, to the centralising effects of Mexico's two Indian empires – the Aztecs and Mayans. Colombians, then, could not look back to a period of shared identity, as Mexicans have done, that could help offset the historic dispersion of power in the country.

In terms of party feuds, Colombia's Liberals represented agro-export and mercantile interests, while the Conservatives comprised the local agrarian and landed elite. Conservatives predominated in former colonial centres, while Liberals represented the upstarts from the peripheral regions that grew in economic significance during the post-colonial period. Neither party proved capable of achieving economic or political hegemony. The fact that neither party was able to defeat the other decisively was one of the factors that contributed to both fragmentation and endless violence. Rather than working to create a centralised state, the Liberals and Conservatives behaved as competing and exclusive governments, hoping in vain that the next civil war would provide them with a conclusive victory over the other. Nine civil wars marred Colombia's history from 1830 to 1902.

<sup>5</sup> See Nazih Richani, *The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia* (Albany: SUNY, 2002), and Eduardo Pizaro Leóngomez, *Una democracia asediada – balance y perspectivas del conflicto armado en Colombia* (Bogotá: Norma, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> See also, Nazih Richani, 'Caudillos and the Crisis of the Colombian State: fragmented sovereignty, the war system and the privatization of counterinsurgency in Colombia', *Third World Quarterly*, 28:2 (2007), pp. 403–17.

Geographical barriers underpinned political fragmentation. Three ranges of the steep Andean Mountains presented huge obstacles for travel. This retarded the construction of roads and railways that could otherwise have assisted in connecting and uniting the country. Riverine travel was highly hazardous. During much of the 19th century and into the first part of the 20th century, to arrive in Bogotá from the Caribbean, for example, one would have to embark on a trek of up to two months along the sometimes perilous Magdalena River, marked in parts by water too shallow for smooth sailing and in other areas by treacherous rapids. Insect-borne disease was rife on this sweltering journey. Once disembarking at the port near Honda, one had to climb more than 8,000 feet of the sheer Andean Mountains to reach Bogotá. Such geographical obstacles encouraged Colombia's towns to be largely self-sufficient, with little trade between regions. Within the predicament of necessary self-sufficiency, each town often produced the same things, further reducing prospects for trade.<sup>7</sup> Rather than uniting into a modern nation-state, Colombia's rival towns remained dispersed and isolated.

Epistemological factors also contributed to Colombia's notorious fragmentation. Spanish colonialism introduced a pre-modern Western system of thought. This meant, among other features, non-secular politics, political space conceived in terms of rival city-states, and feudal economic relations as manifested through the *encomienda* system (colonial sharecropping). During the Bolivarian era, for example, even classical works that laid the foundation for Modernity were unwelcome in Colombia, with Bentham's *Principals of Universal Legislation* banned as a university text in 1826 and afterward. Further, Bolívar himself strongly embraced pre-modern ideas, as evidenced by his endorsement of a fusion between the church and state – a notion perpetuated by Colombia's Conservative Party in its strong alliance with the Catholic Church during the post-Bolivarian period. It was not until well into the 20th century that Modern ideas began to appear in Colombia with any semblance of vitality, such as the notion of secular politics and the importance of an industrialised economy. As Gabriel García Márquez observed, 'On April 9, 1948, the twentieth century began in Colombia', following the assassination of the populist Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and the stark realisation of Colombia's place within the globalised class conflict of the Cold War.<sup>8</sup> But many Modern ideas never took root, including the notion of political balance and equilibrium, linear progress, and especially the concept of a nation state complete with a Leviathan and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Colombia's geographical barriers and its relative isolation from the world economy that centred in the North meant that ideas associated with Modernity were not transmitted in any significant way to the country. That is, global economic contact helped to promote Modern ideas. Flashes of such contact appeared during the late 1800s and beyond. For example, the *Escuela Nacional de Minas* (National University of Metallurgy) opened in Medellín in 1880, incorporating Modern scientific ideas as foreign companies expressed interest in Colombian mines.<sup>9</sup> The booming coffee economy, and mounting US investments in

<sup>7</sup> See, Safford and Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land*, pp. 10, 161, and David Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 2, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 303.

<sup>9</sup> See Alberto Mayor Mora, *Ética, Trabajo y Productividad en Antioquia* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1984), p. 447.

the petroleum and extractive sectors beginning in the 1920s, also catalysed Colombia's global contact and exposure to Modern ideas. The coffee economy, in particular, provided investment capital that promoted the industrial sector, which in turn underpinned urbanisation – two key features of Modernity.<sup>10</sup> But the pace was sluggish. The industrial sector accounted for 8.9 per cent of Colombia's Gross National Product in 1930, rising to 16.5 per cent in 1945. All of this contributed to an odd patchwork of pre-Modern and Modern ideas, with neither system of thought predominating.

The amplified fragmentation of Colombian politics has resulted in some noteworthy effects. First, violence has been rife in the absence of a centralised state with a monopoly on the use of force – or a Leviathan in the words of Hobbes. Pécaut has referred to this as phenomenon as 'the banality of violence' in Colombia.<sup>11</sup> Second, in the absence of a strong and centralised state, security historically has been privatised and dispersed. Examples include the private armies of *encomiendas* that were used to settle local accounts and that were also employed in inter-party warfare, the development of peasant and community defence organisations, the proliferation of forces hired to protect a wide assortment of economic enterprises, the private forces of criminal syndicates, as well as a slew of other manifestations. Third, in the context of a state that has been historically weak, illegitimate, or even completely absent in many regions, economic enterprise has often operated totally outside government structures – a phenomenon that would count as contraband trade in a strong and functional nation state.

### Historical context: the Farc, the US and the prelude to Plan Colombia

The Farc can be analysed in four phases: from its inception in the 1960s until about 1980; from about 1980 to 1990; from 1990 to the formation of Plan Colombia in 2000; and the debilitation of the rebels since that time. According to its own literature, the Farc sprouted from an early fusion in 1950 between Liberal guerrillas and Communist 'self-defense' units.<sup>12</sup> In 1964, Jacobo Arenas of Colombia's Communist Party joined with 'resistance' forces, which included former Liberal guerrilla Manuel Marulanda (born Pedro Antonio Marín). This formidable duo, which combined the strategic wit of Marulanda with the ideological command of Arenas, proved to be a crucial foundation of the Farc. The group existed in form by 1964, but did not officially assume its name until 1966. In terms of support base, the Farc represented peasant farmers in the tradition of 'Colombian agrarian struggles' that dated back to the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> As with other Latin American revolutionary groups of the time, land redistribution and a more equitable division of wealth were at the centre of its revolutionary objectives. Farc guerrillas

<sup>10</sup> See Cecilia Herrera, 'City as a Modernizing Paradigm', *Pedagogica Historia*, 49:1 (2003), pp. 65–9.

<sup>11</sup> See Daniel Pécaut, 'From the banality of violence to real terror: the case of Colombia', in Kees Koonings and Kirk Kruijt (eds), *Societies of Fear* (London: Zed, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), 'Nuestra Historia' (2004), {<http://www.farc-ep.org/aniversario/especial40aniv/texteron/html>} accessed on 2 May 2007.

<sup>13</sup> FARC, 'Las FARC-EP: 30 años de luchas por la paz, democracia y soberanía' (May 1994), {<http://www.analitica.com/biblioteca/farc/30.asp>} accessed on 7 May 2007.

concentrated in the departments of Huila, Cauca, Valle and Tolima.<sup>14</sup> From its inception in 1964, the nascent Farc was met with ferocious US rebuttals.<sup>15</sup>

Until its recent crisis, perhaps the Farc's lowest ebb came within a few years of its formation. As the target of the US' Plan Laso and related Colombian military initiatives, the Farc lost 70 per cent of its armaments and a significant portion of its soldiers between 1966 and 1968.<sup>16</sup> To cope with that predicament, the Farc embraced at its third conference in 1968 a strategy to transform into a 'mobile and very clandestine guerrilla' group and refashioned itself over the next decade. By 1978, at the time of its sixth conference, Farc membership had swelled to 1,000 soldiers, and the rebels had extended their influence to both the countryside as well as urban areas. In the countryside, the Farc had been pushed by the Colombian military into the interior jungles of Guaviara, Caquetá and Putumayo. These were precisely the regions that would serve in the 1980s and beyond as the propitious economic base of coca growth and the narcotrafficking industry.

The Farc entered a new era of growth in the 1980s, when it experienced a major surge in power that was underpinned in part by the economic enrichment derived from participation in narcotrafficking and other crimes.<sup>17</sup> It was also bolstered by the tenure of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua from 1979 to 1989, which provided a glimmer of moral support and hope for revolutionaries throughout Latin America. The Farc's seventh conference in 1982 marked an official turning point for the increasingly empowered rebels. The Farc, in its own words, had now transformed into an 'offensive movement', with designs for a greater presence throughout the country and in major urban areas such as Bogotá.<sup>18</sup> Its soon-to-be-reached goals included the establishment of 48 fronts, the achievement of greater strategic adaptability, and the development of a more sophisticated means of communication to benefit economic, ideological and military objectives.<sup>19</sup> During this period, then, the Farc underwent a major transformation from a small, beleaguered, Cuban-styled guerrilla movement on the run, to a major belligerent force bankrolled by transnational crime. It was during this epoch that the Farc first used the nomenclature *Bolivariana*, harkening back to the ideas of Simón Bolívar. There was a particular focus on his nationalist dreams of forming a sweeping Latin American movement capable of resisting the influence of Northern powers.

In 1984, the Farc embarked on a major programme of political development with the creation of its political unit, the Unión Patriótica (UP). This occurred in the midst of what turned out to be failed peace negotiations with President Belisario Betancur. The UP scored well during its electoral debut in 1986, winning 14 congressional seats and numerous positions in departments and at municipal levels. It obtained about 350,000 votes in the presidential contest. This trend

<sup>14</sup> FARC, 'Historia de las Conferencias' (May 2004), {<http://farc-ep.org/aniversario/especial40/text04.html>} accessed on 5 January 2007.

<sup>15</sup> FARC, '40 años de la lucha por la paz' (May 2004), {<http://www.farc-ep.org/aniversario/especial40/aniv/text10.html>}, accessed on 10 January 2008.

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

<sup>17</sup> For a broader discussion of the Farc's transformation from a traditional guerrilla group to involvement in crime. See James Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America: Peru, Colombia and Mexico* (New York: Lynne Rienner, 2003), ch. 4.

<sup>18</sup> FARC, 'Historia de las Conferencias'.

<sup>19</sup> FARC, '30 años de las FARC-EP, Texto Completo del Discurso Pronunciado por Comandante en Jefe de las FARC-EP Manuel Marulanda Vélez (27 May 1994), {[http://six.swix.ch/farcep/Nuestra\\_historia/30\\_anos\\_manuel.thm](http://six.swix.ch/farcep/Nuestra_historia/30_anos_manuel.thm)}, accessed on 19 February 2007.

toward increasing popularity, especially in the countryside, continued into the early 1990s. Tragically, this electoral success translated into a major rupture for the country when about 3,000 to 4,000 members and supporters of the UP were assassinated by paramilitary forces between 1986 and 1992. The Farc interpreted this gruesome phenomenon to mean that the state was complicit in the assassinations through its failure to protect UP members, and also due to the impunity it afforded to paramilitary assassins.<sup>20</sup>

In tandem with the devastating experience of the UP, in 1990 President Gaviria launched a vigorous military attack against the Farc at Casa Verde, killing the group's ideological cofounder, Jacobo Arenas. For the rebels, then, there appeared to be no space for them in 'legitimate' or peaceful politics. The significance of this turning point cannot be underestimated, because it prompted to Farc to do whatever it took to transform into a major military machine designed either to topple the state or to form a parallel government in a territory it controlled militarily.<sup>21</sup> While half-hearted peace talks took place in 1992, the context was not ripe for any meaningful success. During the Farc's eighth conference in 1993, the rebels planned a major offensive to be launched in the last half of the decade and increased its number of fronts by 15.<sup>22</sup>

Let us step back for a moment and consider the interests of the US in Colombia during this period. With the withering of the Soviet Union and its allied leftist forces in Central America, President George Bush, Sr., devised the Andean Drug War in 1989. Leaning heavily on interdiction and eradication, rather than attempting to reduce US consumption, Washington militarised the Andes during this period. In fact, by 1992, the Andean region was receiving more US military assistance than any other region in Latin America. The US provided \$104 million in military assistance to Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru in the fiscal year 1991, and \$147 million in 1992. By the early 1990s, Colombia took the mantle from El Salvador as the largest recipient of US military assistance in Latin America.<sup>23</sup>

Washington's perception of Colombia as a strategic problem altered with the inauguration of the Clinton administration in 1993.<sup>24</sup> Although Colombian drug production escalated, the US under Clinton largely ignored Colombia and the rest of Latin America except for its preoccupation with Mexico during the negotiation and implementation of the 1994 Nafta agreement. After the details for this watershed trade pact had been negotiated, the US and Mexican governments shifted into panic mode with the surprise appearance on Nafta's birthday of the Zapatista guerrilla movement and the \$50 billion (US) peso crisis of 1994–1995.

<sup>20</sup> FARC, Manuel Marulanda Vélez, 'Texto completo del discurso pronunciado' (27 May 1994).

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent discussion of internal developments within the Farc during the 1990s especially, see, Aurora Moreno Torres, 'Transformaciones Internas de las Farc a Partir de los Cambios Políticos por los que Atraviesa el Estado Colombiano', *Papel Político*, 11:2 (July 2006) (Bogotá), pp. 595–635.

<sup>22</sup> FARC, 'Nuestra Historia; Alfredo Rangel, "El Repliegue de las FARC: Derrota o Estrategía?" Fundación Seguridad y Democracia' (2004), p. 13, {[www.seguridadydemocracia.org](http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org)}, accessed on 19 February 2007.

<sup>23</sup> See James Rochlin, *Discovering the Americas: the Evolution of Canadian Foreign Policy Towards Latin America* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), pp. 211–2.

<sup>24</sup> For a broader discussion of Colombian politics in the 1990s, see, Mark Peceny and Michael Durnan, 'The Farc's Best Friend: US Antidrug Policies and the Depening of Colombia's Civil War in the 1990s', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48:2 (Summer 2006), pp. 95–116; and Jennifer Holmes, Sheila Amin Gutiérrez de Piñeres and Kevin Curtin, 'A Subnational Study of Insurgency: FARC Violence in the 1990s', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30 (2007), pp. 249–65.

Thus, Washington largely ignored Colombia during the period 1992–1998. This was a result not only of foreign policy brushfires elsewhere, but also of Washington’s repugnance toward the Colombian government’s apparent complicity with narcotrafficking, epitomised during that period by the surfacing of audio-cassettes that appeared to link President Samper (1994–1998) to leading Colombian drug kingpins.<sup>25</sup>

While the US looked away from Colombia until about 1998, a major strategic shift in the country took shape a few years earlier. A crucial first salvo of the Farc’s new offensive occurred in 1996, when the rebels overtook humiliated Colombian military forces, including those stationed at bases in Las Delcias, La Carpa and de Patascoy.<sup>26</sup> The group’s zenith of power came in 1998, when the strategically inept government of Pastrana ceded to the Farc a ‘cease fire’ zone, or *Zona de Distensión*. The provision of this parcel was designed to placate the Farc and to establish the basis for re-establishing negotiations. Instead, and predictably, it empowered the rebels, who now wished to preside permanently over a swelling territorial enclave.

By the late 1990s, the Farc had mobilised an estimated 17,000 troops spread over 60 fronts.<sup>27</sup> It secured political support from *cocaleros* (coca growers), destitute peasants, and student radicals scattered among the country’s universities.<sup>28</sup> In an attempt to distance itself from what some viewed as outdated Cold War communism, the Farc increasingly began using ‘Bolivarian’ rhetoric throughout the 1990s, essentially rhyming ideologically with dimensions of President Hugo Chávez’s revolutionary platform in neighbouring Venezuela. In addition to local and regional support, the Farc had some limited success at courting European NGOs and even European governments, and hosted in its jungle *zona* the chair of the New York Stock Exchange.

This set the stage for Plan Colombia and the subsequent relative debilitation of the Farc. The first obvious problem for the US was a strategically preposterous decision by the fumbling Pastrana government to cede to the Farc, by then the world’s largest and most powerful leftist guerrilla movement, a piece of territory about the size of Switzerland. Ostensibly, the parcel was to be used as a cease-fire negotiating region for peace talks with the government. This extraordinary development prompted Washington to bother to take a hard look at Colombia. The Clinton administration was rightfully alarmed by what it saw. Not only had the Farc grown enormously in terms of military and now territorial power, a process fed by its relation to narcotrafficking and other crimes such as kidnapping and extortion, but other Colombian insurgents had ballooned as well. The

<sup>25</sup> For a broader discussion of this, see, Russell Crandall, ‘Explicit Narcotization: US Policy Toward Colombia During the Presidential Administration of Ernesto Samper’, paper presented to the Latin American Studies Association, Washington DC (6 September 2001).

<sup>26</sup> For a good discussion of the strategic situation between the Farc and the Colombian government during the 1990s, see, Alfredo Rangel Suarez, *Colombia: Guerra en el Fin de Siglo* (Bogotá: TM Editores, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Mauricio Romero, ‘Élites regionales, identidades, y paramilitares en sel Sinú’, in Ricardo Peñarada and Javier Guerrero (eds), *De las Armas a la Política* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1999), pp. 175–218.

<sup>28</sup> See Guri Borch and Kirsti Stuvoy, ‘Practices of Self-Legitimation in Armed Groups: Money and Mystique of the Farc in Colombia’, *Distinktion*, 17 (2008), pp 97–120.

leftist Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) had multiplied significantly, but perhaps the biggest growth was in the case of the right-wing paramilitaries, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC).

### The Revolution in Military Affairs

Prior to a consideration of the Farc and Plan Colombia, let us briefly sketch the conceptual backdrop to the current Revolution in Military Affairs.<sup>29</sup> Historically, some RMAs rested on the appearance of a primary but sweeping change, often a technological one, which further spawned transformations in the conduct of warfare.<sup>30</sup> One example is the Infantry Revolution, which occurred during the Hundred Years' War. Perhaps its most important causal factor was the development of the longbow arrow, which rendered the cavalry vulnerable through its ability to pierce armour. Another example was the Revolution of the Sail and Shot, which, as one observer noted, had transformed the warship 'from a floating garrison of soldiers to an artillery platform'.<sup>31</sup>

An important reference point for the purpose at hand is the RMA that began with the Napoleonic Wars, the remnants of which stretched into the twentieth century. Particularly noteworthy is the breadth of radical change that transpired during this epoch. The development of industrial capitalism and the birth of the modern nation-state, complete with patriotism and a national army, marked truly fundamental shifts in social organisation and political space. Broad technological and industrial developments affected weaponry, exemplified by the reduction of the weight of cannons by 50 per cent. Some observers point to an analytical parallel between the proliferations in France of the printing press – such that periodical publications skyrocketed from 42 in May 1789 to 250 by the end of that year – and the appearance during the current RMA of the Internet and its role in the vast dissemination of knowledge.<sup>32</sup> Overall, crucial shifts in knowledge structures associated with modernity were fully apparent by the late 19th century – in terms of positivism and binary thought, as well as various notions of progress, human nature, linear development, and so on. These underpinned the RMA of the era.

There are a number of milestones associated with the current RMA. The concept's fuzzy outlines first appeared in the Soviet Union during the 1960s and

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent historical discussion of the RMA, see, Andrew Latham, *Understanding the RMA: Braudelian Insights into the Transformation of Warfare* (Geneva: Programme for Strategic Studies and International Security Studies, 1999); Azar Gat, *The Origin of Military Thought from Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jeremy Black, 'War and Strategy in the 21st Century', *Orbis*, 46:1 (Winter 2002), pp. 137–44; Thomas Adams, 'The Real Military Revolution', *Parameters*, 31:3 (Autumn 2000), pp. 54–65; Chris Demchak, 'Technology's Knowledge Burden, the RMA and the IDF: Organizing the Hypertext Organization for Future "Wars of Disruption"', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 24:2 (2001), pp. 77–147; and Thomas Quedensley, 'The Commercial Satellite Multispectral Imagery Threat', *American Intelligence Journal*, 21:2 (Spring 2002), pp. 33–36.

<sup>30</sup> For a broad conceptual discussion of the RMA, see James Rochlin, *Social Forces and the Revolution in Military Affairs*, (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> See Andrew Krepinevich, 'Calvary to Computer: the Patterns of Military Revolutions', *The National Interest*, 37 (Autumn 1994), p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Michael Dartness, 'Insurgency Online', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 10:3 (Winter 1999), p. 129.

1970s, with Moscow's preoccupation regarding the consequences of the development of precision nuclear weapons. Ironically, the RMA did not take clear shape until the fall of the Soviet Union and the dimming of the global contest between capitalism and socialism. Shortly afterward, the 1991 Gulf War represented an RMA watershed due to its reliance on satellite reconnaissance, near-real-time surveillance, and lethal precision weapons. In the Americas, Mexico's post-1994 Zapatista struggle featured the advent of information warfare with a twist, as it was mastered by a small, indigenous rebel group rather than by a superpower. And in Colombia, backward guerrilla groups transformed into mega-military machines through lucrative adventures in transnational crime. Despite all that and more, doubts about the existence of an RMA lingered right up to the beginning of the new millennium. These all but dissipated, however, with *Al-Qaeda's* infamous attack on the US homeland in 2001, and with the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan, which made use of real-time satellite images that allowed the US to direct the war from the MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida.

The Napoleonic RMA is conceptually similar to the current RMA. This is because both cases exemplify a broad shift in strategic affairs that has moved in step with a sweeping social revolution. Just as the Napoleonic RMA appeared within the wider rubric of modernity, the current RMA rides the crest of post-modern security and strategy. It cannot be reduced to a single causal variable, but is the synergetic product of a number of key developments. That is, the context for the present RMA includes such features as transnational capitalism and globalisation, the dispersion of information and weapons, the appearance of new political spaces (trade blocs and other spaces based on ethnicity, for example), the advent of identity politics that transcends traditional patriotism, ecocide, and epistemological considerations. Within the context of a broader social revolution, the current RMA signifies a shift both in the array of actors and in the type of conflict apparent in strategic affairs. The new RMA can be exploited by a vast array of players – including transnational criminal syndicates, NGOs, labour unions, newfangled insurgents, autonomous communities, in addition to more traditional entities such as the state and international organisations. Further, the nature of conflict has transformed to include a focus on phenomenon such as asymmetric warfare, privatised war, epistemic fissures between combatants, and the blurring of war and crime.

The concept of the RMA necessarily has as its centrepiece the notion of rupture. On the one hand, it is important not to exaggerate the extent of change or to minimise the elements of continuity. On the other hand, it would be highly perilous not to appreciate the strategic implications of the winds of change when they actually do appear. The concept of discontinuity is featured in various perspectives to global politics. It is prominent in classical Realist and Marxist approaches, but most recently had been associated with post-modernism. This is especially so in light of Michel Foucault's seminal work *The Order of Things*, in which he examined 'change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge'.<sup>33</sup> Despite the huge gap between post-modernism and Marxism, one quickly notices that Foucault points to the same ruptures as does Karl Marx. The prominent distinction between the two is that Foucault emphasises the epistemological

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. 387.

elements of rupture, while Marx emphasises shifts in relations of production and class within the historical materialist framework. Long before Foucault and Marx, classical Realists celebrated the notion of rupture in relation to epistemology. Thucydides, some 2,400 hundred years ago, sought to tell the story of war and politics with objective facts as well as with reference to sequence and spatial location, in vast distinction from predecessors such as Homer, who told the same story in terms of epic poems that emphasises subjectivity, analogy, divination and so on.<sup>34</sup>

Overall, the RMA is one facet of a systemic change that entails an epistemological jump. The present shift is reflected, for example, in the appearance of social forces motivated by new social 'truths', in novel conceptions of political time and space, in conflicts linked to different systems of knowledge, in emerging types of social organisation such as the cell and the network, in unfolding manifestations of political identity, in newfangled conceptions of enemy and threat, and so on. The strategic realm or system should be considered in the context of dynamic interactions among a network of other social systems – economic, cultural, organisational, political, technological, scientific, etc.<sup>35</sup>

## Plan Colombia and the Revolution in Military Affairs

### *Privatised war*

The increasing prevalence of privatised warfare, at least until the global economic breakdown of 2009, has been a reflection of wider economic and social forces. Since the 1980s there has been a growing trend toward the privatisation of many components of the social sector. These include privatised education and health care, privatisation of cooperative or communal land and of government corporations, the practice of 'contracting out' work from government institutions, and so on. In Latin America, such changes have often represented prescriptions contained in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) restructuring packages.

One crucial aspect of the privatisation of war is the proliferation of 'neo-mercenaries' or 'private contractors', and this is particularly important in the Colombian case. The term 'mercenary' is fraught with connotation. In terms of ordinary usage, mercenaries are usually described as private soldiers who freelance 'their labor and skills to a party in a foreign conflict'.<sup>36</sup> They may also be described as 'individuals or organizations who sell their military skills outside their country of origin and as an entrepreneur rather than as a member of a recognized national military force'.<sup>37</sup> Falling under that definition, for example, are large corporations such as Military Professional Resources Incorporation (MPRI), located just outside

<sup>34</sup> See: Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996); and Homer, *Iliad* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Lothar Ibugger, 'The Revolution in Military Affairs', NATO Parliamentary Assembly Paper (November 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Charles Dokubo, 'An Army for Rent, Private Military Corporations', *Civil Wars*, 3:2 (Summer 2000), p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Adams, 'The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict', *Parameters*, 29:2, p. 104.

of Washington DC. MPRI provides a wide array of services, such as tactical, operational, and strategic advice for the structuring, training, equipping, and employment of armed forces. It also provides services related to strategic planning, force development, research, intelligence, and electronic warfare.<sup>38</sup> Another variant is more specialised corporations, for example, ones that focus on surveillance or air-based activities.<sup>39</sup> Beyond these variations is one crucial distinction regarding whether the corporation provides offensive or defensive services. ‘Private military companies’ engage in mostly offensive operations and ‘private security companies’ provide mostly defensive services – although the line between offensive and defensive can be blurry.

The pace of neo-mercenary activity, or the use of contract workers, accelerated sharply during the 1990s, beginning with the Gulf War. This is due to three broad factors. The first concerns a drop in the US armed forces, precipitated by budget cuts following the fall of the Soviets. Between 1989 and 2001, the US government cut uniformed military personnel by 38 per cent, and the Department of Defense trimmed civilian employees by 44 per cent. This second factor has been an ideological preference for privatisation that rhymes with other features of globalisation. Finally, as in the Colombia case, the use of contractors is meant to attract less public attention to US policy than if US military forces were used instead.

Plan Colombia was unveiled by Colombian authorities in 1999 and approved by the US Congress in July 2000. At the outset, it envisaged \$7.5 billion in aid to Colombia by 2006, although only about \$4.7 billion was actually allotted during that period. At least 75 per cent of this has turned out to be military or police aid. The rest has been devoted to institutional programmes, especially in the judicial sector, and to a lesser extent to social programmes. Let us proceed to explore the various dimensions of PC as it relates to the RMA, beginning with the privatisation of warfare.

The major US private military corporation, MPRI, was awarded \$4.3 million by the American government to provide advice as to how to structure warfare in Colombia. MPRI officials were located inside the base of the Colombia Armed Forces High Command along with US defence personnel.<sup>40</sup> This contract was awarded during the year that PC had been formally announced, prior to its enactment in 2000. So it is highly likely that MPRI was hired by the US government to provide guidance regarding the formulation of PC. Thus, not only has PC relied heavily on private corporations, but the Plan itself was most probably devised based on counsel from a major private military corporation. In 2000, MPRI was awarded a \$6 million contract to provide training and advice to the Colombian military as part of PC. MPRI employees involved in that project included former members of the US military and the CIA. The corporation has at least 16 employees working on the Colombian project prior to the enactment of the training programme.<sup>41</sup>

Existing private military and security corporations were joined by a barrage of newcomers associated with PC, and this became increasingly apparent by 2002 to

<sup>38</sup> See MPRI’s web page, available at: {[www.mpri.com](http://www.mpri.com)}, under ‘capabilities’.

<sup>39</sup> An example is the company AirScan.

<sup>40</sup> The Center for Public Integrity, ‘Colombia’, {[www.stratfor.com/hotspot\\_Colombia/presence.htm](http://www.stratfor.com/hotspot_Colombia/presence.htm)}.

<sup>41</sup> *El Tiempo* (9 December 2000).

2003. Lockheed Martin provided radar systems associated with PC, and Sikorsky Aircraft as well as Bell Helicopter Textron supplied fighter helicopters. By 2003, the US private military corporation Dyncorp was estimated to have at least 44 permanent staff and 65 rotating employees in Colombia who flew US helicopters and planes for their mission. Others involved in PC by 2003 included Arinc, which provided training, equipment and intelligence associated with the fumigation of coca crops; TRW, which supplied radar systems; Matcom, which provided logistical coordination services for US and Colombian military personnel; Air Park Sales, which offered equipment for riverine battle; Integrated Aero Systems, which provided aircraft and communication devices, and California Microwave Systems, which supplied fumigation pilots.<sup>42</sup> The US Department of State indicated that by 2003 private contractors from at least 16 US companies were present in Colombia.<sup>43</sup> By the end of that year, President Uribe urged the estimated 170,000 employees of private security and military corporations to provide intelligence to the Colombian government.<sup>44</sup>

There has been a lack of transparency associated with this wave of privatisation. For example, a particularly murky issue concerns the maximum number of contractors permitted in Colombia at any one time. When PC commenced, the official limit of US contractors was set at 400, and this was expanded to 600 in 2004. But these limits only referred to US citizens, and there was no limit on the use of contractors from other countries. Thus, there could have been thousands of private military employees working in Colombia at any point during the PC era. There also have been questions regarding the full range of services offered by private military and security corporations. Part of this has to do with the secrecy that shrouds them. One NGO, for example, reported in 2004 that none of its requests regarding questions associated with the use of US contractors in Colombia submitted under the US Freedom of Information Act have been fulfilled.<sup>45</sup>

There are a number of debates surrounding the use of contractors, private security companies, and private military corporations. One of these concerns the question of accountability. Who is responsible when problems arise – individual contractors, the private company for which they work, and/or the US government and military? Who decides who is accountable? Who punishes those found accountable? Also important is the issue surrounding the safety of contractors. Beyond the three American contractors who were kidnapped by the Farc in February 2003 and released in 2008, at least 11 contractors were killed by the middle of 2004, including fumigation pilots who lost their lives in air crashes that were likely caused by rebel attacks. For its part, the FARC in 2004 disdainfully observed the strong growth of private defence industries in Colombia, portraying them as ‘criminal businesses’ designed to protect the interests of the wealthy and of TNCs. The rebels viewed this as another form of ‘paramilitarization’.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *El Tiempo* (18 June 2003); and *New York Times* (12 September 2003).

<sup>43</sup> US Department of State, ‘Report on Certain Counternarcotics Activities in Colombia’ (April 2003), {[www.ciponline.org/Colombia/13141401.htm](http://www.ciponline.org/Colombia/13141401.htm)}.

<sup>44</sup> J. McDermott, ‘Uribe Gains the Upper Hand in Colombia’s Guerrilla Warfare’, *Janes Intelligence Review* (1 December 2003), {[www.janes.com](http://www.janes.com)}.

<sup>45</sup> Center for Public Integrity, ‘Colombia’, {[www.store.publicintegrity.org/reports.aspx?aid=262?sid=100](http://www.store.publicintegrity.org/reports.aspx?aid=262?sid=100)}.

<sup>46</sup> FARC, FARC-EP, ‘Empresas criminales avaladas por Seguridad Democratica’ (11 November 2004), {[www.farcep.org/novedades/coyuntura/paramilitarismo/noviembre\\_11\\_2004.php](http://www.farcep.org/novedades/coyuntura/paramilitarismo/noviembre_11_2004.php)}.

Despite the serious problems associated with the use of contractors, there are several factors that propel their extensive use. They serve a number of objectives for the US government. They are hired on a limited, contractual basis, and so Washington is not committed to a four-year term as it would be with official military personnel. Further, contractors do not get the benefits enjoyed by the military, in terms of the provision of education, pension plans, and the like, once their tenure is terminated. Also, some consider that contractors are more efficient, as they can be specially selected to perform particular duties. For example, racial background, language ability, and other factors can render certain contractors less obvious, and therefore less vulnerable, in the battlefield. Private military corporations such as MPRI and Dyncorp possess databases that permit them to deliver tailor-made private military personnel. Also, the use of contractors may render US involvement in places like Colombia less important to the US media and to the American public than if official military members are used. Thus, in a war against the Farc, privatised forces are highly useful due to their lack of transparency, their capacity to be tailor-made for particular situations, and for their versatility in performing both defensive operations such as the protection of foreign-owned extractive industries as well as classic offensive duties. Finally, the privatisation of warfare has fit into a larger ideological agenda during the neo-liberal period that supported privatisation across the board – in education, health, welfare, pension funds, and so on.

### *Asymmetry*

Although history is peppered with David and Goliath stories, there is no question that a greater degree of asymmetric warfare represents one factor that helps define the present era. While warfare between nation-states of relatively equal power remains a distinct possibility, asymmetric combat has been on the ascendant since the 1990s. Colombia's assortment of guerrilla groups demonstrate that transnational crime can provide generous support for a plethora of winning tactics associated with asymmetric warfare. Asymmetry suggests distinctions based on organisation, state versus non-state belligerents, and so on. The concept implies differences between the types of contestants, and does not necessarily refer to power differentials. It is also helpful to consider asymmetry in relation to struggles faced by components of civil society in relation to a whole host of threats – especially in cases where there exists a blurred distinction between war and politics.

The Colombian army has been restructured by the Americans to deal with asymmetric aspects of warfare. The challenge was how to refashion the Colombian military to fight a highly successful, well-funded and dispersed guerrilla group. Colombian forces needed to be quicker, more mobile, equipped with better intelligence, more capable of fighting in difficult terrain such as high mountains and also rivers, and able to fight at all times including night-time.<sup>47</sup> The result of this restructuring was expressed most clearly in Colombia's Plan Patriota, which

<sup>47</sup> US Department of State, 'Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2005' (2004), {[www.state.gov/m/rm/rls/cbi](http://www.state.gov/m/rm/rls/cbi)}, accessed on 27 December 2007.

deployed approximately 17,000 troops to debilitate the Farc. The first phase occurred during June to December 2003, and was concentrated in the capital of Bogotá and in the department of Cundinamarca. The second and more difficult segment, which began in February 2004 and continued through 2006, focused on the Farc's heartland of Caquetá, Meta and Guaviare. A third stage was to be launched in Antioquia by the end of 2005, but was delayed due to complications associated with the Farc's temporary resurgence during that time. In December 2006, after a series of devastating attacks by the Farc that demonstrated the group's resilient military capacity, President Uribe declared an end to Plan Patriota and announced Plan Victoria – similar in style to Plan Patriota but designed to defeat the Farc, according to the President.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, both of campaigns occurred under the wider rubric of Plan Colombia, and involved assistance from the US Southern Command, the US Department of State and the US Department of Defense.

The US has provided a wide assortment of training and materiel to support the Colombian military in its various endeavours. This includes fighter aircraft such as the C-26 and the AC-47, in addition to many others used in coca crop spraying, such as the OV-10, the T-65 and the AT-802. Also included in the package were specialised helicopters such as the Huey II and UH-60 Blackhawks.<sup>49</sup> The US also supplied interdiction boats for riverine combat. This is key, since the illicit arms and drugs on which the FARC have depended are often transported through Colombia's extremely lively river routes. Importantly, PC supplied significant logistics and communications equipment to Colombian forces, while the US operated an elaborate real-time satellite surveillance system from which it provided intelligence to Colombians. Other assistance included aerial and ground radar systems and infra-red devices, in addition to night-vision goggles.<sup>50</sup> In terms of operational restructuring, the US assistance from PC offered equipment and training for the formation of Colombia's first rapid-action brigade, the Fuerza Despliegue Rápida (FUDRA), three high-mountain battalions, and an assortment of crews specialising in riverine battle. The Colombian government claimed that by February 2006 Plan Patriota had resulted in the killing or severe injury of 2,518 guerrillas.<sup>51</sup>

Plan Patriota was designed to address asymmetry by permitting the Colombian army to be more informed, more mobile, quicker, and generally more able to fight on almost any terrain at any time. But perhaps the most important weapon on the side of the US and Colombian governments to cope with asymmetric battle against the Farc has been the proliferation of the paramilitaries. Clearly, the paramilitaries have shared strategic objectives with the US and Colombian militaries to the extent they have wished to eliminate the guerrilla Left. The Autodefensas Unidas de

<sup>48</sup> *El Tiempo* (10 December 2006).

<sup>49</sup> US Department of State, 'A Report to Congress on US Policy towards Colombia and Other Related Issues' (3 February 2003), {[www.state.gov/p/what/rls/rpt/17140.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/what/rls/rpt/17140.htm)}, accessed on 3 July 2008; and US Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Drug Control: Aviation Program Safety Concerns in Colombia are Being Addressed, but State's Planning and Budgeting Process Can be Improved* (Washington DC: GAO, July 2004), p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> See República de Colombia, Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 'Descripción del apoyo de Estados Unidos al Plan Colombia', pamphlet (2001); and US Department of State, 'Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2005', op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> *El Tiempo* (5 February 2006).

Colombia (AUC) has been able to fight the FARC and the ELN on equal footing – it simply pits a left-wing guerrilla force against a ferocious right-wing guerrilla army. The paramilitaries have a record of fighting ‘dirty’ and are not bound to the international criticisms and sanctions that could be directed against state armies if they behaved in a similar way.

The accentuated paramilitarisation of Colombia is at minimum a striking coincidence that is highly supportive of key objectives of PC, such as the capacity to engage effectively in asymmetric warfare.<sup>52</sup> For example, there have been noteworthy operations whereby the Colombian military has moved into certain zones or cities and pushed out the FARC or ELN, with the area subsequently falling under the control of paramilitary forces. This has occurred since 2002 in Medellín, Colombia’s second most important city, and since 2000 in Barrancabermeja, the oil capital of the country. In fact, one of the most remarkable strategic developments during 2004–2008 has been the advancement of paramilitary control of key urban areas, a shift that has been starkly obvious to numerous observers. Further, since 2007, there has been a snowballing scandal regarding links between the Uribe government – including politicians, military leaders and top officials in intelligence offices – and the paramilitaries. It was revealed in March 2007 that the CIA had evidence linking Colombia’s army chief and close ally to President Uribe, General Mario Montoya, to a paramilitary group involved in assuming control over parts of Medellín following the aforementioned 2002 military assault of guerrillas in that city. The CIA document suggests that the paramilitaries, the Colombian police, and the army jointly planned the 2002 operation in Medellín.<sup>53</sup> Further, recently declassified US intelligence documents demonstrate that the US government was aware since 1994 of a *nexus* between Colombian security forces, paramilitary groups and narcotrafficking.<sup>54</sup>

Overall, the focus in Plan Colombian on asymmetric warfare has played an important role in weakening the relative power of the Farc. The transformation of the Colombian military from an immobile, vulnerable and predictable force into a rapid, all-terrain military machine has limited the Farc’s mobility, communication, and offensive capacity. The tandem escalation of the paramilitarisation of Colombia is perhaps the hilt of the US and Colombian governments’ strategy to cope with asymmetric warfare, since it permits a level and symmetric playing field that pits left-wing guerrillas against right-wing guerrillas linked to government forces.

### Surveillance and intelligence

The notions of intelligence and spying have a solid foundation in strategic classics, such as Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, in which observed that only the best and brightest should be bestowed with the crucial task of spying.<sup>55</sup> Further, Jeremy Bentham’s

<sup>52</sup> For an excellent discussion of the paramilitaries, see Nazih Richani, ‘Caudillos’, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> See *Los Angeles Times* (25 March 2007).

<sup>54</sup> See National Security Archives, George Washington University, ‘Body Count Mentalities’ (7 January 2009), {[www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB266/index.htm](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB266/index.htm)}.

<sup>55</sup> See Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, ch. 13.

*Panopticon* signaled a new instrument of power over the human mind and body – the use of surveillance.<sup>56</sup> In this section, we shall address the successes and limits of ultra-surveillance and the real-time transmission of information as reflected in Plan Colombia, and will also explore the utility of human intelligence.

In 1999, a year after the Farc received its Switzerland-sized *Zona de Distensión* that had been meant to promote dialogue with the government; real-time aerial surveillance began to be used extensively in the Colombian conflict. This intensified under Plan Colombia and involved the use of Plataforma aircraft that come equipped with heat sensors capable of detecting human activity even at night. PC's debut in 2000 also included \$31 million from the US Department of Defense for aerial antinarcotics intelligence, land radar systems, command and control systems for radar, and translations of intelligence analyses; \$17.4 million from the US Department of State for aerial antinarcotics intelligence, logistical support, and communications between operatives; and \$5 million divulged to the Colombian National Police for better communication between the police and armed forces and for improved logistical support. Night-vision equipment have also been included in the PC package, because it is estimated that about 80 per cent of key Farc operations have occurred at night.<sup>57</sup>

PC has also included radar sites located in strategic regions, especially in the south of Colombia, which has been the heartland of the Farc's support. Among these are three ground-based radar systems in the Amazon basin near Leticia, a base at Marandúa, Vicharda, and two others at San José Guaviare and Tres Esquinas. A couple of other radar sties located in Colombia, which are part of the US Air Force Caribbean Basin Radar Network, also have been utilised for PC, including bases at Riohacha and the island of San Andrés (located off the coast of Nicaragua). Besides the ground-based systems, the US provided forward-looking infra-red radar systems for Colombian aircraft.<sup>58</sup>

Under ideal conditions, satellite surveillance can spot human activity on the ground at a resolution of between one and nine metres. But this does not mean it can see everything of strategic significance, all the time. For example, dense cloud and fog limit such surveillance, as does thick jungle foliage. Given the prevalence of both clouds and jungle in Colombia, the impact of this limit should not be underestimated. Under such circumstances, guerrillas are naturally drawn to cloudy areas and to leafy jungle terrain. Further, even under good conditions, satellite surveillance cannot necessarily distinguish guerrillas from other people, except for telltale signs. Prior to such surveillance, the Farc was able to travel in large units sometimes numbering over 100 troops. But groupings of that sizes have rendered them conspicuous to satellite surveillance, forcing them to travel in less obvious bands of 25 or so. Moreover, while aerial surveillance can detect human movement in wide open spaces and in parts of the countryside, it cannot peer into buildings. Thus, there has been a propensity for guerrillas to move more extensively into clandestine urban terrain, with universities evolving into favourite targets.

<sup>56</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* (London: Verso, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> This is according to Colombian army general Enrique Mora, as quoted in *El Tiempo* (6 November 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Center for International Policy, 'US Support for Plan Colombia' (2 September 2003), {[www.ciponline.org/facts/coaid.htm](http://www.ciponline.org/facts/coaid.htm)}, accessed on 13 October 2003.

Beyond the high-tech wizardry of aerial and other electronic surveillance, it is important to emphasise that human intelligence is at least as important in the Colombian case. In fact, it is the mixture of high-tech and human surveillance that is key. There are a number of dimensions of human intelligence associated with PC. One of these is elite spying units, which have mixed US and Colombian personnel. Further, an intriguing component of President Uribe's extensive reliance on human intelligence is Plan Meteoro, whereby certain highway travellers have been equipped with panic buttons and other communications devices linked to satellites. This entailed the transmission of information regarding guerrilla activity on the country's highways, which have been notoriously perilous due to rebel control of large swaths of Colombian territory. The purpose was to render the roads safer for public and commercial use, especially during holidays. It was essentially designed to permit freer movement of people and goods and, at least in temporary instances, to reclaim space and transit ways for the Colombian population at large.

More troublesome is a novel intelligence system implemented during President Uribe's tenure involving the creation of what he claimed was 1.5 million informants throughout the country who could phone a toll-free number to report suspicious guerrilla activity. Uribe's plan was brilliant to the extent that it attempted to harness accurate local gossip and to transform it into priceless strategic intelligence. But much of this information appears to have been inaccurate. For example, approximately 3,600 people were arrested based on such information during July 2003 to July 2004, but 80 per cent of them were released after lengthy detentions. Further, the claimed amount of 1.5 million informants is likely exaggerated due to a lack of logistical capacity to deal with that much information. Moreover, suspicions have been raised that many such informants may have been members of paramilitary organisations, and have divulged information to suit their strategic interests such as control over lucrative territory.

A key strategic goal within the context of the RMA is to break the opponent's system of command, control and communications. While that broad goal has not been achieved in relation to Plan Colombia, there is no question that the Farc's mobility and communication system have been weakened by PC. Indicative of this was the surrender in May 2008 of Farc Comandante 'Karina', Eldaneyis Mosquera, who was the group's most senior female leader and director of Frente 47. At a news conference after her surrender, she indicated that she had been starving and had not been in communication with the group's high command for years. 'The decision [to surrender] was made because of the pressure of the army in the area', she said.<sup>59</sup> Given Frente 47's pivotal position within the organisation, presiding over key operations in Antioquia and elsewhere, the group's apparent isolation that was underscored by 'Karina' presumably was a result of the weakening communication system of the Farc in the wake of PC. Beyond that incident, the bombing in Ecuador during March 2008 of the Farc's second-in-command, Raul Reyes, was exemplary of the government's increasing power of surveillance since the implementation of Plan Colombia. Overall, this facet of the RMA as manifested in Plan Colombia has strategically weakened the Farc.

<sup>59</sup> See AFP, 'Top Woman Rebel Surrenders in Colombia' (19 May 2008); see also *El Espectador* (18 May 2008).

*Discourse on terror*

Terror is the amplification of fear for larger audiences, with the terrorist act itself serving as a public spectacle designed to disseminate a political message throughout society. There exists great variation among terrorists, and recently one notes the distinction between holy terror, featuring suicide bombers, versus Western remote-control terror, wherein the person detonating the bomb wishes to continue pursuing worldly delights. It is the second variety we find in Colombia. The definition of terror cited above concentrates on the act of terror – the exaggerated use of fear to achieve a political goal – rather than on the actor. By contrast, governments typically prefer to define the term in a manner that erases any consideration of state responsibility for such acts. Hence there is a propensity for governmental figures to define terror as a violent tactic of non-state insurgents acting within the context of asymmetric warfare.

Beyond the issue of terrorist acts and actors, the discourse on terror can represent an important instrument of power. Clearly, the Bush administration discovered the relevance of this to Plan Colombia. Almost overnight, Colombia's assortment of subversive groups – especially the Farc – shifted from their casting as a 'guerrilla group' engaged in a 'civil conflict', as was the case in the 1990s through 2001, to global 'terrorists' likened to more than 30 other such groups on a newly composed list of US enemies. The first hint of this came with comments in October 2001 by James Mack, US deputy assistant secretary of state for international law enforcement affairs, who pointed to a 'nexus between terrorism and organized crime' in addition to noting that 'many of the skills and types of equipment needed to attack organize crime are applicable to combating terrorism.'<sup>60</sup> The clearest statement in this regard were made by President Bush himself in April 2002 during a meeting in Washington with Colombian President Andrés Pastrana. Bush praised Pastrana for fighting 'terrorism in his country', and underscored a fundamental change in US policy toward Colombia, when he commented that he and Pastrana 'had a good discussion about a variety of issues about how to change the focus of our strategy from counter-narcotics to counter-terrorism'.<sup>61</sup>

The discourse on terror has meant far more than merely a change in nomenclature. It permitted the US to be more transparent with regard to the enemies it defined in Colombia, and to present a more overt strategy for dealing with them. Prior to 9/11, PC was largely portrayed as an anti-narcotics campaign. Close observers realised that it was far more than that, as it principally attempted to eradicate coca crops in the south of Colombia, from which the Farc benefited, and also included a refashioning of the military that was clearly aimed at the guerrillas. But since 9/11, and with the Farc recast as terrorists, the US became far more open about its attempts to confront them militarily. This transparency permitted Washington to intensify PC's focus on anti-guerrilla activity, for example, by utilising part of this programme to facilitated Colombia's own Plan

<sup>60</sup> See GlobalSecurity.org, 'Plan Colombia' (8 November 2004), {[www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/colombia.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/colombia.htm)}, accessed 2 January 2008.

<sup>61</sup> US Department of State, 'President Bush, President Pastrana Discuss Trade, Terrorism', George Bush, President, 'Remarks with President of Colombia at the White House' (18 April 2002), {[www.state.gov/p/what/rls/rm/9542.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/what/rls/rm/9542.htm)}, accessed on 18 March 2007.

Patriota, the aforementioned plan to utilise asymmetric warfare in order to confront the Farc. In terms of operationalising the 'War on Terror' in Colombia, the first step occurred between October 2002 and January 2003, with the arrival of a US counter-insurgency team in Colombia. It provided training to some 4,000 Colombian troops and also presented ten helicopters and other materiel to the Colombian army in efforts to fight the Farc.<sup>62</sup> An important and related goal was to train the Colombian army within the space of a few years, in order to facilitate a relatively quick retraction of American forces. Between 1999 and 2004, some 32,458 Colombians received US military/police training, and by 2003 Colombia was the recipient of more US training than any other country.<sup>63</sup> Since official US anti-terrorism aid as implemented in Colombia during 2002, Colombia's Urban Antiterrorism Special Forces have been fortified. Moreover, Washington has provided training for Colombians through the US Counter-Terrorism Fellowship Program, for which Colombia received a grant of \$300,000 in fiscal year 2005.<sup>64</sup> The 'anti-terror' discourse also has provided the US with justification to use part of PC to militarise Colombian petroleum installations in an attempt to secure oil for US consumption.

Thus, the 'War on Terror' discourse represents an attempt to diminish the ideological and political power of the Farc both nationally and globally. Acts of terror likely perpetrated by the Farc, such as the placement of a car bomb on a busy Bogotá corner in late January 2009,<sup>65</sup> give weight to that discourse. Beyond its effect on the political stature of the Farc, the discourse of the War on Terror has served as the ideological justification for the provision of anti-terrorist military equipment and training that has challenged the rebels' military capacity and access to funding.

### *Crime and war*

A definitive feature of the current RMA is the blurring of crime and war, and nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Colombia. Front and centre is the issue of narcotrafficking,<sup>66</sup> which, along with other crime, has financed the country's two left-wing guerrillas and especially the right-wing paramilitaries apparently aligned with the state. In essence this represents the illicit privatisation of war. Though the AUC paramilitaries have admitted receiving about 70 per cent of their funding

<sup>62</sup> See GlobalSecurity.org, 'Colombia', {[www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/colombia.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/colombia.htm)}, accessed 16 August 2007.

<sup>63</sup> For figures on raining, see US Department of State, 'Foreign Military Training: Joint Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 2003–2004' (June 2004), {[www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rrpt/fmtrpt/2004/34221.thm](http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rrpt/fmtrpt/2004/34221.thm)}, accessed 3 October 2007. The figure provided includes an estimate of 4,258 soldiers in 2004.

<sup>64</sup> US Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management, 'Counterterrorism Fellowship Program' (2005), {[www.disam.sca.mil/itm/Programs/CTF?@CTF\\_Program.htm](http://www.disam.sca.mil/itm/Programs/CTF?@CTF_Program.htm)}, accessed on 23 August 2006; and US Department of State, 'Foreign Military Training: Joint Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 2003–2004'.

<sup>65</sup> See *El Tiempo* (28–30 January, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> For a more general view of narcotrafficking with regard to insurgency, see, Svante Cornel, 'Narcotics and Armed Conflict: Interaction and Implications', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30 (2007), pp. 207–27.

from narcotrafficking,<sup>67</sup> the Farc have made no such claims. While only the illicit groups themselves know exactly how much they are profiting from the trade, *James Intelligence Review* estimated, for example, that the Farc received about \$300 million from the drug trade in 2004.<sup>68</sup> While failing to mention the exact sum derived from the drug trade, in 2008 a high-placed member of the Farc's International Commission, Rodrigo Granda, indicated that 'Our organization has implemented the collection of a tax on coca paste buyers who have to enter the area where these crops are grown and we operate. This payment is collected as a way of controlling the abuses committed against the peasant growers.'<sup>69</sup>

Granda indicated that the rebels' reliance on narco-funding is 'tiny' within the larger context of the Farc's operation, and that more significant is that the Farc 'has diversified its financing through all kinds of investments: in high finance at home and abroad, in agricultural production, cattle raising, mining, transport, construction, and many other productive investments.'<sup>70</sup> The Farc also has said it has attempted to work on the behalf of coca growers threatened by fumigation.<sup>71</sup> It is worth underscoring that the rebels dominate key areas of coca and poppy growth, such as Caquetá, Meta, Putumayo and Guaviare. Such extensive cultivation in that area would not have occurred 'without the decided support of the Farc'.<sup>72</sup> What is clear is that the Colombia is the source of about 80 per cent of the world's cocaine and about half the heroin on US streets. While it is impossible to pin a precise monetary figure to the Farc's role in the trade, its clear control over areas of cultivation, its political representation of coca growers,<sup>73</sup> together with its admission of involvement in this illicit and highly profitable industry, all suggest the rebels' significant participation in narcotrafficking. Recent attempts to diminish coca crop growth through high controversial aerial fumigation have failed, as evidenced by overall crop growth of 27 per cent in 2007.<sup>74</sup> Former Colombian President César Gaviria, who is also co-chair of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, said in March 2009 that 'we consider the war on drugs a failure because the objectives have never been achieved.'<sup>75</sup> While it appears to be the case that cocaine production has indeed increased, the war on drugs has been useful in the fight against the Farc in that, along with the discourse on terror, it has provided an ideological justification for the militarisation of the country that is aimed at diminishing the power of the rebels.

Overall, the guerrilla groups and paramilitaries that feed off crime have benefited materially. But this has come at a price. The Farc's leftist credentials are

<sup>67</sup> Former paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño made this admission during a television interview in Colombia, which was also covered by the print media such as *El Tiempo* (2 March 2000).

<sup>68</sup> *Janes Intelligence Review* (1 July 2004).

<sup>69</sup> 'The Guerrilla in Colombia: An interview with Rodrigo Granda, member of the Farc-EP International Commission', Interview conducted by Jean Batou, *Monthly Review* (March 2008), p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20 and 19 respectively.

<sup>71</sup> Farc, 'A la comunidad internacional' (April 1998 – no specific date) and 'Carta pública al pueblo' (April 1998 – no specific date). See {[www.farc-ep.org](http://www.farc-ep.org)}.

<sup>72</sup> See Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 362–3.

<sup>73</sup> For a broader discussion of recruit characteristics among Colombian insurgent groups, see Mauricio Florez-Morris, 'Joining Guerrilla Groups in Colombia: Individual Motivations and Processes for Entering a Violent Organization', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30 (2007), pp. 615–34.

<sup>74</sup> *El Tiempo* (29 June 2008).

<sup>75</sup> As quoted in the *Guardian* (9 March 2009).

debilitated by the group's dependence on both legal and illicit transnational capitalism. How can a rebel group that claims to be Marxist justify engagement in globalised capitalist crime? Further, the gloating claims by Farc member Granda regarding its diversified transnational investments, noted above, seem more in line with what one would expect from a wealthy capitalist than from a professed leftist revolutionary. Similarly, the Farc's role in kidnapping seems far more in keeping with activities associated with criminal gangs than with a revolutionary organisation attempting to make a broad moral appeal. Farc member Granda justified the group's role in hundreds of kidnappings in the following way:

What we are doing is responding to a war imposed on us from the highest echelons of power in Colombia [. . .] This war was forced on us by Colombia's rich, so they are the ones that have to finance the war they unleashed. That's why the FARC-EP holds people for whom a monetary payment is collected, which is really a tax.<sup>76</sup>

Such contradictions – and the 'double-speak' substitution of words like 'tax' for active participation in narcotrafficking, kidnapping and extortion – presumably have not diminished support for the Farc among its peasant support base such as coca growers.<sup>77</sup> But it has tarnished the Farc's image for Colombians who support a democratically elected and non-criminal left in the form of the country's increasingly popular Polo Party, and for global social forces that support the legal and radical democratic left as epitomised by Venezuela's Chávez, Bolivia's Morales, Ecuador's Correa, and Argentina's Fernández de Kirchner. All this is to suggest that power is not purely linked to military might. Mexico's Zapatista guerrilla force, for example, enjoyed political power in the country, especially during the period 1994–2000, as a result of its ideological power and related links to global social movements that supported the rebels in numerous ways.<sup>78</sup> For the Farc to increase or even sustain its power as a national force, it requires social support, not only on the part of urban Colombians, but on the part of international social movements, NGOs, foreign governments, and so on. The Farc's relation to crime, like its apparent links to terror, represents an ideological black eye that can obstruct the cultivation of such support. This point shall be revisited in the concluding section.

### *From drugs to oil*

The manifestation of the RMA with regard to Plan Colombia was driven first by an attempt to cripple leftist guerrillas through their reliance on the narcotrafficking industry in precisely in geographical regions under their control, and then shifted to a concern with Colombian oil, especially after the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent skyrocketing of oil prices and concern over limited supply. In 2001, for

<sup>76</sup> 'The Guerrilla in Colombia: An Interview with Rodrigo Granda', op. cit.

<sup>77</sup> For a broader discussion of the use of language in the Colombian conflict, see, Eduardo Posada-Carbó, 'Language and Politics: On the Colombian Establishment', *Latin American Research Review*, 42:2 (June 2007), pp. 111–35; and Stacey Hunt, 'Languages of Stateness', *Latin American Research Review*, 42:2 (June 2007), pp. 88–121.

<sup>78</sup> See, James Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America: Peru, Colombia and Mexico* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), ch. Four.

example, the Bush Administration's National Energy Policy highlighted that Colombia 'is becoming an important supplier of oil to the US', not only against the backdrop of the Middle Eastern crisis, but also as a result of Venezuela's leftist approach to the industry.<sup>79</sup> Colombia has been ranked as the 10th largest supplier to oil to the US during various points of the new millennium, and it is worth emphasising that about 80 per cent of the country's territory remains to be explored for petroleum reserves. The country's oil company, Ecopetrol, suggests a potential of 47 billion barrels of oil yet to be located. Despite its security problems, Colombia recently has become a magnate for interest by transnational oil companies, especially against the backdrop of the nationalist policies of Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, where total taxation in oil-rich Orinoco Basis is about 85 per cent. In Colombia, the total 'government take' is an astonishingly low 5 to 25 per cent.<sup>80</sup> Critics charge that Colombia does not sufficiently benefit from the production of this non-renewable resource, and that the economic and military policies of the Uribe government in cooperation with the US serve to benefit chiefly transnational corporations.<sup>81</sup>

Given the increasing importance of Colombian oil for the US, Plan Colombia has been oriented in this direction. The threats to Colombian oil are clear enough. Occidental Petroleum's Caño Limón pipeline was bombed over 1,000 times between 1990 and 2003, 178 of which occurred in 2001, leading to \$500 million in losses during that year alone. Explosions of the Oxy pipeline have declined to a trickle since the implementation in 2002 of US-led security measures. In that year, PC allotted \$99 million to protect the Caño Limón pipeline, one of five in Colombia, in an operation involving scores of Green Berets tasked with training Colombians to protect the pipeline in the future. Similar amounts followed in subsequent years, and there were only 20 bombings of the pipeline in 2005, and sporadic bombings in 2006. By 2007, the US deemed Colombian forces sufficiently capable of defending the country's pipelines. Moreover, executives from Colombia's oil company, Ecopetrol, are content with the increased protection provided by recently trained Colombian forces.<sup>82</sup> Thus, manifestations of the RMA with respect to protecting Colombia's energy industry have limited the capacity of the Farc and other insurgents to target these strategic sites.

### The RMA and the 2008 Farc Crisis

The Farc is far from destroyed and likely possesses the military capacity to continue its armed struggle indefinitely.<sup>83</sup> But Plan Colombia clearly has weakened

<sup>79</sup> As quoted in National Hydrocarbon Agency, Government of Colombia, 'Colombian Oil and Gas Investment Conference' (May 2005), {[www.gematours.com/hidrocarburos/en/paper/htm](http://www.gematours.com/hidrocarburos/en/paper/htm)}, accessed 12 September 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Interview by author, José Rafael Unda, Director, Gestión Social, Ecopetrol, Bogotá (4 June 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Interview by author, Jorge Vasquez, member of the Junta Directiva, Unión Sindical Obrera (USO), Cartagena (21 November 2007).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> This view is a common one, and was expressed by Dr Marc Chernick, a Professor at the Centre for Latin American Studies, Georgetown University, during an interview with *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio (3 July 2008).

the rebel group through its use of key components of the RMA, such as asymmetric warfare, the use of ultra surveillance and intelligence, its reliance on privatised warfare, and so on. Serious blows to the Farc became obvious throughout 2008. The March 1st attack by Colombian/US forces of a Farc base in Ecuador killed the group's second in command, Raúl Reyes, and 24 others. It relied heavily on PC's capacity for ultra-surveillance and heightened intelligence. It was perhaps the hilt thus far of the government's strategic offensive against the rebels, one that demonstrated important new wrinkles. The Colombian/US offensive against the Farc was now thrust into a neighbouring territory. Ecuador represented an easy target for such an attack given the negligible capacity for the country's military forces to hit back.<sup>84</sup> It would be hard to imagine such a manoeuvre, for example, in the militarily formidable Venezuela. Overall, Reyes' death and the more aggressive tone of the Colombian/US forces signalled a debilitation of the Farc's relative power. This was compounded by the death on 26 March 2008 from natural causes of the group's ultimate leader, Manuel Marulanda (born Pedro Marín). Also that month, the youngest member of the Farc's Secretariat, Ivan Rios, was murdered by one of his own bodyguards in exchange for a monetary reward from the government – yet another manifestation of the privatisation of warfare. 'Karina' surrendered in May of that year, as observed above.

The next major dent to the Farc's national and global prestige came in July 2008, when Colombian forces with assistance from the US rescued from rebel captivity former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, kidnapped in 2002, and 14 other hostages including three American contractors. Given that these were hostages were prized trophies for the Farc, ones it hoped it could use as pawns to trade for leading guerrilla commandos in captivity, this represented a significant blow indeed to the rebels. Subsequent news reports were filled with related rumours, perhaps the most notable of which was that the US had paid \$20 million for the release of the hostages.<sup>85</sup> At any rate, a growing chorus of global forces now demanded that the rebels end its archaic and brutal tactics such as kidnapping. Fidel Castro argued that there is no justification for the Farc to retain an estimated 700 kidnapping victims.<sup>86</sup> Hugo Chávez went further, asserting that guerrilla armies are 'out of place' in a Latin America where the Left should and has relied on the ballot box,<sup>87</sup> a view echoed by Ecuador's Rafael Correa and by Bolivia's Evo Morales.<sup>88</sup> What is especially important here is that such criticisms have emanated from Latin America's 'hard left', signalling the group's declining prestige and support regionally and globally.

A particularly worrisome possibility for the Farc is that it 'has serious problems of command and control', as suggested by Colombia's Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos.<sup>89</sup> As we observed, a central strategic objective of the current RMA is to cripple the enemy's command and control in order to defeat them. But in the

<sup>84</sup> Interview by author with Juan Patricio Navarro, Vice Ministro, Plan Ecuador, Government of Ecuador, Quito (6 March 2008).

<sup>85</sup> See *Telesur* (4 July 2008).

<sup>86</sup> As quoted in *Telesur* (4 July 2008).

<sup>87</sup> As quoted in the *Independent* (10 June 2008).

<sup>88</sup> As reported in *Telesur* (13 June 2008).

<sup>89</sup> As quoted in *Caracol* (4 July 2008).

case of the Farc, even if its command and control have been debilitated, the group is so dispersed and so militarily potent that it has the capacity to exert punishing military force for years to come. For example, in the period immediately following the government's raid in Ecuador that killed Reyes and others, the Farc responded with several military attacks on pipelines primarily in Putumayo – they had attacked pipelines 27 times in the period January to May 2008, compared to 53 times for all of 2007.<sup>90</sup> In the context of recent doubts about its power, the Farc promised in July 2008 to forge ahead with plans for armed struggle.<sup>91</sup> By August 2008, the group's new leader, Alfonso Cano, pledged to spend about \$5 to \$6 million (US) to reinvigorate the group's communication system and arms supply, and hinted it might consider forming a 'legitimate' political party.<sup>92</sup> A new strategy emerged during early 2009, whereby the Farc agreed to release hostages while apparently committing acts of public terror at the same time to demonstrate that such benevolent acts should not be equated with military incapacity. A case in point was a bombing attributed by Colombian authorities to the Farc of a Blockbuster video store in a crowded area of Bogotá that killed two and injured 20 just prior to the group's release in early 2009 of six hostages including the former governor of Meta, Alan Jara.

It is also important to emphasise that the Uribe government has worked diligently to churn out propaganda aimed at making the Farc look weaker than it is.<sup>93</sup> The government has clearly attempted to amplify its own gains and to exaggerate losses for the Farc. Perhaps the most vivid and disturbing example of this is the recent 'False Positive' scandal. It meant the resignation of 30 military officers in the autumn of 2008 due to the army's apparent murder of at least 1,400 of innocent young people – many under 18 years of age – in order to make false claims that these cadavers were Farc soldiers.<sup>94</sup> Thus, public government assessments of the Farc require the utmost scrutiny. Beyond this, the 'False Positive' horror signals another crucial aspect of the Colombian war: all competing belligerent forces in Colombia, including the state, have committed horrific human rights abuses, and it is hard to count any of them as the 'good guys'.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

The classic strategic literature is as relevant as ever, and paradoxically underpins the major features of the RMA. The notion of epistemic rupture is as old as

<sup>90</sup> Interview by author with José Rafael Unda, Director, Gestion Social, Ecopetrol, Bogotá (4 June 2008).

<sup>91</sup> *El Tiempo* (21 July 2008).

<sup>92</sup> As quoted in *El Spectador* (27 September 2008).

<sup>93</sup> One manifestation of this are what some call the 'magic laptops' which the Colombian government claims to have captured after its bombing of Raul Reyes in Ecuador. See, for example, Daniel Denvir, 'Colombia's Magic Laptops', *Nacla Report on the Americas* (November/December 2008), pp. 4–8.

<sup>94</sup> See *Caracol news* (6 March 2009), and *New York Times* (30 October 2008).

<sup>95</sup> Beyond the abuses of the Farc and the state, the paramilitaries may have committed more human rights abuses than either. For a particular manifestation of this, see Ulrich Oslender, 'Violence in development: the logic of forced displacement on Colombia's Pacific coast', *Development in Practice*, 17:6 (November 2007), pp. 752–64.

Thucydides' break with Homer.<sup>96</sup> Strategic space and time received strong conceptual treatment by Sun Tzu and others.<sup>97</sup> Asymmetric conflict underpinned the story of David and Goliath. Intelligence/surveillance has been treated in the positive and the negative by Bentham and Clausewitz.<sup>98</sup> The politics of fear, along with honour and interest, was among the triad of the most formidable political motivators underscored by Thucydides, and Napoleon observed the crucial place of terror within warfare.<sup>99</sup> What is revolutionary about the RMA, then, are the fresh manifestations of classic themes and the synergetic effect of their simultaneous application. The RMA is all about change and continuity. We have observed that features of the RMA have significantly weakened the military power of the Farc in relation to the Colombian and US military forces.

Ultimately, the particular manifestation of the RMA through Plan Colombia is severely weakened, and perhaps doomed to failure, due to its apparent blind spot regarding a crucial lesson of the strategic classics – the importance of winning hearts and minds and therefore cultivating social consent. Force alone is insufficient to generate the social consent that is the basis for political stability and which underpins the most profound form of power. Gramsci noted the power of hegemony as being primarily consensual with a coercive apparatus in the background. Thucydides observed that Athens lost its war with Sparta in part due to Athens' failure to generate consent in the colonies that it had exploited. And both Sun Tzu I and II have as the centrepiece of their works the concept of 'the Way' which denotes 'winning the hearts of the people'.<sup>100</sup> While Colombians appreciate the hazy outline of a Leviathan that has begun to take shape with Plan Colombia's nascent provision of illusive political order, profound social inequity will likely stall efforts at entrenched political stability in the near-term. Colombia's gini coefficient of 0.57 in 2005 is the second worst in Latin America after Brazil – and Latin America is the most inequitable region on the planet. That is, while the RMA and PC may debilitate the Farc militarily, they have done nothing to eliminate the root causes for the existence of leftist rebels in the first place, which is the profound economic disparity in the country combined with violent political exclusion.

<sup>96</sup> There are numerous places in Thucydides' text where this occurs. For example, early in Book One he observes 'the exaggeration which a poet would feel himself licenses to employ [...]', *A History of the Peloponnesian War*, p 9.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), where he notes 'The condition of military force is that its essential factor is speed', p.93. Chapter Ten is devoted to terrain.

<sup>98</sup> See, Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* (London: Verso, 1995); and Carl von Clausewitz *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), especially ch. 6.

<sup>99</sup> See, Napoleon, *How to Make War* (New York: Ediciones La Calevera, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> See, Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), pp. 275–6; Thucydides (ed.), *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 163–4; Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* and Sun Tzu II, *The Lost Art of War*.