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**COLOMBIA CHALLENGE: ELEMENTS OF OPERATIONAL ART AND THE
THREE WARS**

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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COLOMBIA CHALLENGE: ELEMENTS OF OPERATIONAL ART AND THE THREE WARS

Planners are always conservative and see all the difficulties, and more can usually be done than they are willing to admit. Franklin D. Roosevelt to General Marshall¹

Franklin D. Roosevelt had a keen understanding of how conventional planners think but his statement takes on a new significance when considering planning in terms of modern unconventional operations. In unconventional conflict, or what has come to be known as “military operations other than war, (MOOTW), planners must first understand the complex nature of the conflict before a successful plan can be developed. This is the first critical step in operational planning, for if the nature of the conflict is misinterpreted, faulty planning cascades and the consequences can be disastrous. Once the nature of the conflict is understood, then “more can usually be done” in terms of creating the right plan to achieve national and military objectives.

Situations like the current counter-drug operations in Colombia fall into the realm of MOOTW, which by its nature presents challenges to traditional operational planning. But Colombia is also dealing with an insurgency bent on overthrowing the government, and illegal paramilitaries operating against the insurgents. Can operational art in the traditional sense be applied to the situation in Colombia? This paper attempts to address this question, and look at the complex challenges facing the operational planner building a plan for Colombia.

The Colombian Problem

Colombia is one of the most troubled countries in the Western Hemisphere, so much so, that “colombianization” has become a metaphor for a failing state. There are three “wars” occurring in Colombia at the present.² The first is the insurgency against the government by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia--FARC) and the National Liberation Army (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional—ELN) who wish to overthrow the established government. The second involves illegal paramilitary organizations (multiple units under the umbrella of Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia—AUC) conducting operations against the insurgents. The third and most well publicized conflict is the war against the drug traffickers.³ To complicate an already complex situation, there is growing evidence that the FARC/ELN and the AUC are funded by and heavily involved in drug trafficking-related activities.⁴

Current United States policy with respect to Colombia is centered on counter drug operations and prohibits U.S. military personnel from becoming involved in the counterinsurgency effort. While this is current national policy, it is fundamentally flawed. Planning for counter drug operations while ignoring the influence of the guerilla and paramilitary organizations is analogous to attempting to drain the swamp with no consideration or plan for the alligators and poisonous snakes within. It is necessary to factor in the insurgents and paramilitaries when countering the drug traffickers. For the purpose of this paper, the current limited U.S. policy of counter drug operations only will

be put aside in the interest of attempting to apply operational art to the situation in Colombia in its entirety.

...No science can exist without some element of art...but art may still go further.

Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*⁵

The uniqueness of the Colombian situation does not mean that operational art cannot be applied, but due to the unconventional nature of Colombia's three wars, non-traditional analysis and interpretation is required. Therefore, the operational planner must take his art "further" as suggested by Clausewitz. This is further complicated by the fact that in MOOTW the strategic and operational levels of the situation are often divided by a thin, blurry line. This is true in some cases of MOOTW even to the tactical level, as incidents at the tactical and operational level can directly affect strategic level thinking. Planning for the unusual conflict in Colombia starts with the traditional aspects of operational art including factors time, force and space, followed by thorough development of critical factors as they relate to each of the participants.

Having completed a study of the traditional aspects of operational art, the planner then must exercise "artistic license" during analysis of the critical factors. Because the enemy in Colombia comes in three different varieties, planners must determine enemy critical strengths and weaknesses and centers of gravity for each faction. Planners must also consider how each element acts and reacts in relation to each other and with the Government of Colombia. Because the military is not the lead agency in most cases of MOOTW, the other elements and agencies of national power must be considered during

planning, to include inter-agency operability, jurisdiction, and command and control issues.

Factors Space, Time and Force

Factor Space. Factor space is significant in any military effort as it is the element in which all forces operate.⁶ Since the operational commander has little influence over space, as well as factor time, it is essential that the space in which operations will take place be thoroughly understood.⁷ Factor space includes all aspects of the physical environment including, but not limited to, terrain, weather, transportation systems, as well as rural and urban areas. Colombia contains vast and formidable space, as it is the fourth largest country in South America, and lies just a few hours away by air from most major cities in the southern United States. Just under three times the size of the state of Montana, it hosts varying physical geography from low coastal plains on the Caribbean and the Pacific to the rugged, high Andes Mountains. Forty percent of Colombia's land is permanent pasture, with one percent in crops and nearly fifty percent of all land in tropical forests and woodlands.⁸

The diverse geography of Colombia is considered by some to be a challenge to the notion of the country as a nation state. Colombia is geographically, historically and culturally diverse. The Andes divide the country into three distinct areas that are "characterized by startling regionalism."⁹ Because of this diverse geography the government is not represented in many of the large remote areas, and a distinct lack of infrastructure in the interior has marginalized the rural population. According to Cynthia

Watson, this lack of government presence along with regionalism means, "Colombia is far more a legal and geographical term than it is an integrated political reality."¹⁰ With this in mind, the planner must take into account cultural aspect of the geography and consider how best to factor this idea into any plan for operations.

The space for any type of operation in Colombia includes not only the geopolitical boundaries, but must also take into account neighboring countries of the Andean region.¹¹ Drug-traffickers routinely work across all of Colombia's borders. FARC elements also cross the borders with all neighboring countries, creating additional tension and instability in the region.¹² The actions of all three elements, the drug traffickers, guerrillas and paramilitaries, also account for the unintended consequence of over a million displaced persons or *desplazados*, in areas of conflict. These *desplazados* have become a source of tension and potential conflict both with neighboring states and within Colombia.¹³

To add an interesting twist to factor space, the government has ceded certain geographical areas within Colombia to the absolute control of the guerilla forces. In the south the FARC has been given authority over an area the size of Switzerland, and in the northeast, the ELN have authority over an area the size of Delaware. As a result, there are large regions of the country where drug traffickers and guerrillas operate with impunity.¹⁴

Colombia, as seen above, offers great challenges in considering factor space. Not only is the geography diverse and formidable but the geo-political aspects of FARC/ELN sanctuaries and cultural regionalism must be factored in to the planning also. The international dimension of the spillover of drug trafficking and guerilla activity into neighboring countries also presents a challenge to the operational planner.

Factor Time. This factor for planners is considered the most critical in the conduct of warfare, since lost space or terrain may always be recovered, but one can never recover lost time. Time considerations include the duration of war, timing of initiating hostilities and time required for planning, preparation, mobilization, deployment and engagement of the enemy. Other aspects of factor time include warning and reaction time, and timing and sequencing of operations.¹⁵ Factor time offers the greatest challenge to the operational planner in that the conflict in Colombia is unconventional, and therefore, not responsive to short-term solutions. Joint Doctrine for Foreign Internal Defense, states that planners must "Plan for the long term [and] evaluate short-range operations... with respect to the long term effect."¹⁶

The United States has been involved in counter drug operations in Colombia for over 10 years, and already has made a significant investment of time. Despite this, the U.S. public's appetite for short, decisive wars remains a challenge for the National Command Authorities as well as the operational commander. Therefore, the most demanding aspect of factor time is the *duration* of American involvement until some semblance of peace occurs in Colombia. According to Ernest Evans, one of the key lessons learned from previous U.S. operations in El Salvador was "if... the U.S. wants to have any significant impact on an internal conflict... it must be prepared to undertake a long term intervention."¹⁷ Plans must be considered for the long term and a solid foundation established that could be built upon by future planners.

Some aspects of factor time for the planner to consider in the case of Colombia include a training continuum for the Colombian military and law enforcement agencies. Professionalism takes time to become ingrained in any bureaucracy. Analysts at

Stratfor.com, a commercial intelligence agency, suggest, "Several years will pass... before the effects of the government's scheme to modernize the military produces a professional force capable of restoring order in Colombia."¹⁸ Time is also required for the eradication and subsequent alternative crop programs to become effective.

Further complicating the time factor is the ability of the government to respond soon enough to legitimate demands of the people, and to institute necessary reforms.

Additionally, in May 2002, the Colombians will hold scheduled four-year elections for a new president, adding pressure to factor time for a negotiated settlement under the current administration. Out of the operational realm but equally important to understand is how factor time plays with the judicial and law enforcement agencies that are also in desperate need of reform that the government of Colombia is trying to implement. Once again, it takes time to create real change for the better. Understanding these elements of factor time helps the operational commander and his staff take "the long view" of the situation and establish a planning system that will cover a long-term intervention while making allowances for political and military changes in the future.

Factor Force. This factor is the most complex in terms of dealing with the situation in Colombia. In the traditional sense factor force is concerned with the numbers and types of troops available, but also includes the logistical support available to and controlled by the operational commander. Intangibles such as leadership, training, concept of operations, motivation and morale must be also considered.¹⁹ A detailed study of the drug traffickers, guerillas and paramilitaries must be made to understand how each is equipped, led and how they operate.

The drug traffickers have significant advantage over conventional adversaries in Colombia. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of their "forces" are civilians and their work is centered on a "business" rather than military operations. This makes them for the most part, difficult to distinguish from the general population. Recently, however, they have developed closer ties with both guerrilla and paramilitary organizations in order to enhance their security and trafficking capabilities. Drug trafficking leadership is also extremely fluid and flexible. In the early 1990s, for example the Cali and Medellin cartels even with the drug lords removed, their business continued unabated.²⁰ Though the drug traffickers often resort to violence, they alone do not threaten the existence of the government. Combined with the guerilla and paramilitary organizations, however, they are a considerable threat to the government of Colombia.

The guerilla forces in Colombia are another story however. They are a serious threat to the current government and are growing in numbers. They are also well financed through their connection with the drug trade, which gives them financial independence when it comes to supporting their struggle, particularly in the area of arms purchases. There is also growing evidence that they are supplied with arms from the illegal international arms trade.²¹ As mentioned above, the drug traffickers, guerrillas and paramilitaries have become interconnected, compounding the planners' problem. The FARC and the ELN remain the largest threat to the government of Colombia. The FARC is believed to have nearly 15,000 active members and the ELN boasts approximately 5000 members. Together they exercise considerable influence over half of the nation's municipalities.²² Because of Colombian President Pastrana's efforts to encourage the guerillas to continue negotiations with the government, significant land areas were declared

demilitarized, and control passed to the FARC in the south and the ELN two northeastern provinces.²³

The other element of factor force in Colombia includes the paramilitaries, who number some 6000.²⁴ It is obvious that the operational planner must take into consideration the guerrilla and paramilitary forces when developing a course of action against the drug traffickers, and vice-versa. Though the U.S. is only providing training and indirect assistance to the Colombian military in its counter drug operations, there must be consideration of how best to deal with the FARC, ELN and paramilitaries when conducting such operations.

One can see that factors of space, time and force take on different hues when considered in the complex light of the situation in Colombia. The driving factor for U.S. operational commanders and planners for the time being is the limited scope of U.S. national policy with respect to Colombia. But having assessed the different factors with respect to the drug traffickers, guerrillas and paramilitaries takes the operational planner out of the vacuum of planning only for counter drug operations. There is now an acknowledgment of the alligators and snakes inhabiting the swamp, and this instinctively leads one to plan accordingly.

Critical Factors and Center of Gravity in the Colombian Wars

Once factors space, time and force are assessed, the operational planner must examine the critical factors and determine the center of gravity for the guerillas and paramilitaries. The concept of center of gravity is considered the most critical element of

warfare at the operational and strategic levels. It is derived from examining critical factors that include critical strengths and critical weaknesses that are both tangible and intangible. It is important to remember that critical strengths and weakness will change over time due to interaction of forces, and must be constantly reviewed.²⁵

The center of gravity will ultimately be the vital aspect of the enemy's strength, and according to Carl von Clausewitz it is "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends."²⁶ According to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 1, Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States, the center of gravity is further defined as "Those characteristics, capabilities or localities from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight."²⁷

The challenge facing the operational commander trying to determine centers of gravity involves correctly identifying the centers of gravity of three distinct organizations with different missions and means, but that are intricately connected. One must consider the each organization separately, then look for any overlapping critical strengths and weaknesses each may share. By doing this, the planner can exploit elements of one that will in turn affect the others. The idea is to reduce the capabilities of each organization while maximizing economy of friendly force. This concept is particularly tricky to apply to the intricate complexities of the Colombian circumstances, and requires the operational artist to exercise the greatest creativity and license to the situation.

The drug traffickers are a formidable opponent in any case, but especially so when trying to determine critical strengths and weaknesses. Strengths of the drug traffickers include, but are not limited to: 1) financial assets and capital, 2) abundance of raw materials, 3) simplicity of production process, 4) strict inventory control, 5) transportation

and logistics, 6) compartmentalized organization, 7) adaptability of organization, 8) international demand for the product, 9) profitability of the product, and 10) cash business—corruption potential, and, 11) leadership.²⁸

Of these strengths, some consider profitability to be the center of gravity for the drug trade. Drugs are a tremendous profit-generating product that thoroughly covers costs throughout the industry.²⁹ While profitability is most certainly a critical strength for the drug traffickers, one might also argue, the center of gravity is actually the international demand for the product. The greatest strength of any consumer industry is the demand for the product. Demand drives production, distribution, pricing and almost every aspect of the trade. Without great demand, there is no great profit. In terms of center of gravity for the drug trade, the fact remains that demand can win the war for the drug traffickers. Demand is an intangible and is not directly controlled by the drug traffickers. It represents, however, a singular aspect of their trade that comes “between us and our strategic objective, thus [possibly] causing our campaign to fail.”³⁰

Due to the tenacity and resilience of the drug traffickers, it is easy to believe they have no critical weaknesses, but they do. Their weaknesses are found in 1) their supply lines as the product must traverse thousands of miles, leaving ample opportunity for interdiction, 2) precursor chemicals required to process the raw materials is needed in large quantities and can be controlled, 3) crop cultivation is susceptible to detection and eradication.³¹ Other weaknesses include: 4) connection to guerrilla organizations and paramilitaries (while this could be considered a critical strength from the security angle, government operations against the guerrillas may endanger drug operations as well), and 5) international condemnation.

Having identified some critical strengths and weakness of the drug traffickers, those of the guerrillas must also be considered. For the FARC and ELN these include: 1) their reform platform has many legitimate complaints such as land reform and lack of basic infrastructure in rural areas, 2) guerrillas now have formal recognition by the government and are involved in direct peace negotiations, 3) both the FARC and the ELN maintain control over significant land area, 4) they are supported and financed to some degree by drug traffickers, 5) they are a well armed and organized military force, having defeated government troops in several confrontations.

Critical weaknesses inherent in the guerrilla organizations are: 1) the guerrillas do not enjoy full popular support, 2) their forces lack sophisticated mobility, 3) they are dependent upon foreign sources for weapons and supplies, 4) they are repeatedly implicated in civilian human rights violations, kidnapping, etc., and, 5) their connection to drug trafficking weakens their moral authority.

Many would argue the armed cadre of the guerrillas is the center of gravity, and a strong argument might be made to that effect. From the operational planner's perspective, if the military forces of the FARC and ELN are defeated or severely weakened, they can be forced to the negotiating table from a weakened position and be forced to accept the terms of the government of Colombia.

Since the nature of the conflict in Colombia is such that dividing line between the operational and strategic levels is thin, another center of gravity at the strategic level should be acknowledged. This strategic center of gravity for the guerrillas is those aspects of their reform platform that are legitimate, including agrarian reform and rural development.³² If these issues are honestly addressed by the Colombian government, the military force of the

FARC will no longer have a legitimate foundation. The same could be said of reasonable economic reforms demanded by the ELN.

If, however, the legitimate aspects of their reform programs are not addressed, there remains considerable reason for the guerrillas to rearm and continue their struggle against the government, assuming of course, popular support, and continued dissatisfaction with the government of Colombia. When one considers the fact the ELN has been in existence for nearly 40 years, and the FARC has even longer heritage, the possibility seems real that they would merely reconstitute.³³ It is ironic that with the legitimate aspects of reforms considered as the center of gravity, if the government implements such reforms, the guerrillas can be said to have won a political victory, without overthrowing the legitimate government. But successful reform implementation, while achieving needed change, would also remove the reason for their existence.

What of the critical strengths and weaknesses of the paramilitaries? Strengths include: 1) their effectiveness against the guerrillas, they fight the guerrillas on their own terms and have been more effective than the military in many cases, 2) they are filling a need as the weakness of legitimate government law enforcement and military forces result in their inability to protect the citizenry, 3) public support in some sectors, due to their effectiveness against guerrillas, 4) armed elements, 5) their command and control is decentralized, they operate autonomously both regionally and locally.³⁴

Weaknesses of the paramilitaries include: 1) they operate entirely outside of the law and therefore have no true legitimacy, 2) they are repeatedly implicated in human rights violations in actions against civilians and guerrillas, and, 3) their dependence on illegal weapons and munitions.

When attempting to determine the center of gravity of the paramilitaries, the planner is confronted again with the fine line distinguishing operational and strategic centers of gravity. On the operational level, the armed elements of the paramilitaries represent the center of gravity. At the strategic level the center of gravity is the inability of the government forces to protect the citizenry. One might ask, how a center of gravity, (a source of strength) be a result of weakness or inability of some other force? Using the Joint Publication 0-1, definition above, the paramilitaries derive "[their] freedom of action [and] will to fight" due to the ineffectiveness of the government forces against the guerrillas.³⁵ Should the government forces, both law enforcement and military, become effective against the guerrillas and demonstrate the ability to provide protection to rural and urban citizens alike, then the reason for the paramilitaries' existence is undermined. This can always be considered a critical strength for the paramilitaries, for as long as the government forces are incapable of protecting the citizenry, they will fill the void.

Conclusions

As noted above, the danger in outlining critical factors and identifying centers of gravity is picking the wrong ones. This is not usually done intentionally, but rather through a hurried approach or, as more often is the case, a basic misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict at hand. The state of affairs in Colombia, with three dangerous and destabilizing elements at work, represents a true, albeit, indirect threat to the security of the United States, but it far different from any situation the United States has encountered in previous years or conflicts. Analysis in such a situation requires a careful, but atypical

approach. It is essential that the operational planner and commander not be limited by doctrine, "the last war," cultural, service, or other philosophical distracters that will have them fall victim to a flawed methodology. The answers for the operational planner for operations in Colombia lie outside of the traditional "box" and are currently limited by U.S. national strategy and policy.

Long-term planning for Colombia at the operational level must also include close coordination with other elements of national power: diplomatic, informational and economic. Without unity of effort of all U.S. agencies, the Colombian government and a synthesis in strategy and policy, the problems in Colombia will only be compounded. There is an interagency cooperative at work currently in Colombia, but those elements must continue to find the most effective way to inter-operate. U.S. involvement in Colombia will not be a short nor sweet affair. With the American appetite for quick returns and its distaste for protracted wars, Colombia represents a tough challenge for U.S. planners. A basic understanding of the long view, however, and some positive, creative planning at all levels Colombia, the U.S. and Latin America stand a better chance in the long run. And as a result our security interests will be better served.

NOTES

¹ Robert D. Heinl, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, (Annapolis MD: United States Naval Institute, 1966), quoting Franklin D. Roosevelt, 239.

² Gabriel Marcella and Donald Schulz, *Colombia's Three Wars: U.S. Strategy at the Crossroads*, (Carlisle PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1999), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ "Stop The War on Colombia," *The Progressive*, (Madison, WI: September, 1999), 8-10.

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, 8th printing 1984), 148.

⁶ Milan Vego, *On Operational Art (4th Draft, NWC 1035C)*, (Newport, RI: Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, 1999), 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸ *The World Factbook 2000* in Central Intelligence Agency website, [database on line] (Washington, DC, CIA, 2000, accessed December 15 2000); available from <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/co.html>; Internet.

⁹ Cynthia Watson, "Civil-Military Relations in Colombia: A Workable Relationship Or A Case For Fundamental Reform?" *Third World Quarterly* 21, Issue 3 (June 2000): 530.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Marcella and Schulz, 19-21.

¹² Richard Downes, *Landpower and Ambiguous Warfare: The Challenge of Colombia in the 21st Century*, (Carlisle PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1999), 3-6.

¹³ Watson, 538.

¹⁴ "Colombia Creates Second Guerilla Sanctuary," in Stratfor.com, [database on line] (Houston TX: 2000, accessed 11 November, 2000); available from <http://www.stratfor.com/services/gui2000/042700.asp>; Internet.

¹⁵ Vego, 79-81.

¹⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Foreign Internal Defense (FID)*, Joint Pub 3-07.1, (Washington, D.C, 26 June 1996), p.III-9.

¹⁷ Ernest Evans, "El Salvador's Lessons For Future U.S. Interventions," *World Affairs*, (Summer, 1997): 46.

¹⁸ "Catapulting Toward Collapse," in Stratfor.com, (accessed 11 November, 2000); available from <http://www.stratfor.com/latinamerica/commentary/001202335.html>; Internet.

¹⁹ Vego, 87-88.

²⁰ William M. LeoGrande and Kenneth E. Sharpe. "Two Wars or One? Drugs, Guerrillas and Colombia's New Violence." *World Policy Journal* 17, Issue 3 (Fall 2000): 4-5.

²¹ "Colombia and the Russian Connection," *The Price of War, Part II*, in Stratfor.com, (accessed 11 November 2000); available from <http://www.stratfor.com/latinamerica/commentary/0009280053.html>; Internet.

²² Marcella and Schulz, 10.

²³ "Colombia Creates Second Guerrilla Sanctuary," in Stratfor.com.

²⁴ Marcella and Schulz, 10.

²⁵ Vego, 219.

²⁶ Clausewitz, 595-96.

²⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Pub 1 (Washington, D.C., 10 January 1996), III-8.

²⁸ Karl J. Gabrielsen, "Critical Factors Analysis Applied to the Drug War" (Joint Military Operations Paper, U.S. Naval War College, 1998), 6-9.

²⁹ Gabrielson, 6-9.

³⁰ Munger and Mendel, 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

³² Marcella and Schulz, 13.

³³ "The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia," in Stratfor.com, (accessed 11 November 2000); available from <http://www.stratfor.com/world/specialreports/special13.html>; Internet.

³⁴ "About Colombian Paramilitary Organizations" in Stratfor.com, (accessed 11 November 2000); available at <http://www.stratfor.com/hotspots/colombia/paramilitaryorgs.html>; Internet.

³⁵ Munger and Mendel, 52.

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