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**JOINT FORCES STAFF COLLEGE
JOINT ADVANCED WARFIGHTING SCHOOL**

**DRUG CARTELS AND GANGS IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA: A
VIEW THROUGH THE LENS OF COUNTERINSURGENCY**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning and Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College or the Department of Defense

This paper is entirely my own work except as documented in footnotes.

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ABSTRACT

For decades, the United States, and its partner Latin American nations, have fought to stop the flow of illicit drugs from South America to the streets of North America, yet the drugs continue to feed the addiction of the 5.8 million cocaine users in the United States today. The United States has confronted the problem at all levels—primarily demand reduction, source eradication, and interdiction. While addressing demand and supply are critical to ending the international drug trade, the transit zone countries of Mexico and Central America are caught in a crossfire of widespread violence, corruption, and weakened state security perpetuated by this multi-billion dollar drug industry. The situation in the region has regressed beyond criminal activity to a drug-fueled state of siege—a criminal insurgency, which has directly threatened the lawfulness and security of transit zone countries. This paper examines the drug war in Central America and Mexico, highlighting its similarities to other insurgencies, and offers ideas on how to apply counterinsurgency doctrine to influence the effort to deny secure transshipment points to drug cartels. In doing so, this paper highlights both the intellectual and physical linkages between the commonly accepted military history of insurgencies and the history of the fight against drug trafficking organizations. To that end the United States, Mexico, and Central America need to challenge drug trafficking organizations and gangs through a regional counterinsurgency strategy that denies impunity for drug cartels, and enables Central American and Mexican governments to reestablish the legitimacy of their governing and legal institutions and regain control over all of their territory for the long term.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2. BRIEF HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND DRUG TRAFFICKING: THE ROAD TO TODAY'S DILEMMA	9
Generations of Conflict and Drug Trafficking: a Training Ground for Criminals.....	11
Squeezing the Balloon: Central America and Mexico Become DTO's Preferred Route	18
CHAPTER 3. DRUG CARTELS, DRUG GANGS, AND INSURGENCIES.....	24
Defining Criminal Insurgency	25
Three Phases of Insurgency and the DTO Connection.....	26
Linking Drug Gangs and Insurgency	29
Mexican Drug Cartels: The Criminal-Insurgency Leadership.....	32
Lessons from Colombia's Insurgency	38
CHAPTER 4. DEFEATING THE DTOS: A UNIFIED COIN APPROACH	53
Aligning Drug Control Strategy with COIN Doctrine.....	55
The Merida Initiative: Unprecedented Cooperation in Need of a Full Commitment	64
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	68
Central America and Mexico's History Provides Key Roots of Today's Dilemma.....	69
DTO and Gang Links to Insurgency Provide a New Lens to View the Problem	69
Colombia's Insurgency Offers Applicable Lessons for Central America and Mexico	70
Drug Control Strategy and COIN Doctrine Need to be Leveraged.....	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY	73
VITA.....	81

FIGURES

1. General cocaine trafficking vectors and percent of total flow in 2009.....	22
2. Cocaine flow trend through MEX/CENTAM corridor as a percentage of total flow from 1999 - 2009.	23
3. Mexican Drug Cartels and their areas of influence	33
4. Mexican Cartel Related Killings 2006 - 2008	35
5. FARC, ELN and EUC Controlled areas in 1999	42
6. Impacts of Plan Colombia.....	427
7. Clear, Hold, and Build Model from Joint Pub 3-24.....	58

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

The global drug trade exacts a terrible toll on the American people, threatening their families, their finances, and their freedoms. The illicit drug trade also poses a serious threat to our national security due to its ability to destabilize and corrupt governments and to diminish public safety in regions vital to U.S. interests.

—National Drug Control Strategy, 2009¹

For decades, the United States, and its partner Latin American nations, have fought to stop the flow of illicit drugs from South America to the streets of North America, yet the drugs continue to feed the addiction of the 5.8 million cocaine users in the United States today.² The U.S. has confronted the problem at all levels, primarily demand reduction, source eradication, and interdiction. While addressing demand and supply are critical to ending the international drug trade, the transit zone countries of Mexico and Central America are caught in a crossfire of widespread violence, corruption, and weakened state security perpetuated by the multi-billion dollar drug industry. The situation in the region has regressed beyond criminal activity to a drug-fueled state of siege—a criminal insurgency, which has directly threatened the lawfulness and security of transit zone countries. The United States, Mexico, and Central America need to challenge drug trafficking organizations and gangs through a regional counterinsurgency strategy that denies impunity for drug cartels and enables Central American and Mexican

¹ Office of the President of the U.S., Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy* (January 2009): 23.

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2009*, 241; U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “World Fact Book Online,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html> (accessed 19 September, 2009).

governments to reestablish the legitimacy of their governing and legal institutions and regain control over all of their territory for the long term.

To better understand the genesis of this criminal insurgency, the history of drug trafficking in Central America and Mexico offers many lessons in how corruption, weak law enforcement, poor economies, and under-governed borders form an attractive environment for drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) shipping cocaine from South America to the U.S.. Since Spanish colonization in the early sixteenth century, Central America and Mexico have endured civil wars, political and social revolutions, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, all of which have shaped the geo-political landscapes seen today. The United States directly supported some of these conflicts, particularly during the Cold War era when anti-communism was significantly influencing U.S. foreign policy. The unintended consequences of U.S. support to the Nicaraguan Contrarevolucionarios (Contras) against the Communist backed Sandinistas as well as the El Salvadoran Military-led government counterinsurgency against leftist guerrillas arguably prolonged the conflicts in the name of preserving democracy. Equally unintended, the insurgents put their U.S. provided skills and training to use within the illicit drug trade as they struggled to make a living after the conflict ended. An ironic result—U.S. foreign policy objectives created thousands very well and armed soldiers left to fend for themselves.³ When the U.S. trained Central American soldiers finally reached home, they found economic growth at a standstill and the combatant reintegration programs unable to create an environment where they could make an honest living. As

³ Denise Spencer, “Demobilization and Reintegration in Central America,” February, 1997, under “Bon International Center for Conversion,” [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/PANA-7EDHDD/\\$file/bicc_sep1997.pdf?openelement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/PANA-7EDHDD/$file/bicc_sep1997.pdf?openelement) (accessed 11 November, 2009).

the reintegration programs failed due to politics and lack of funding, these U.S. trained and armed soldiers transferred their mature combat skills, discipline, and experience in small unit operations to drug trafficking operations. No longer trying to implement ideology, the former U.S. supported insurgents turned to drug trafficking to make money. Small unit operations quickly evolved into gangs. Their desire to change the government evaporated and they now work within the construct of drug cartels. Over the past three decades, this has created a severely destabilized region.

Today, political strife and near failing economies continue to punish Central America and keep it one of the poorest regions in the Western hemisphere. Systemic under-governed borders, weak judicial systems, and political corruption dissuade international trade relations, further stagnating economic growth potential.⁴ This environment continually provided an open door for crime and, especially, illicit trafficking as a necessary and practical alternative to legitimate income and trade. Because of favorable conditions for criminal activity, Central America and Mexico have been consistently vulnerable to drug trafficking for over 30 years, and continue to be subject to the influences of Colombian and Mexican drug cartels and Central American drug gangs. As U.S. counterdrug efforts placed increasing pressure on the DTOs in the Central Caribbean and Bahamian routes to Southeastern U.S. the DTOs rapidly adapted—shifting their routes to Central America and Mexico—the path of least resistance. The demise of the infamous Medellin and Cali Cartels of Colombia in the early 1990s further fostered this shift. Capitalizing on a preexisting relationship with

⁴John Craddock, General, U.S. Army, remarks at the Miami Herald Conference of the Americas “Global Competiveness: Security in Latin America and the Caribbean,” September 14, 2006, <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/files/3UI3I1169398593.pdf> (accessed 20 October, 2009).

Mexican Drug Cartels, DTOs established decentralized trafficking networks. The Mexican Cartels coordinated the shipment of cocaine from Colombian DTOs to the U.S.

Since 2006, ninety percent of the cocaine annually destined for the U.S. transited through Central America and Mexico.⁵ This disturbing fact demonstrates that the region remains an efficient and effective transshipping route of choice for DTOs, despite aggressive United States military and interagency involvement with participating Central American governments. Supported by the enormous profits of drug trafficking, DTOs exploit under-governed areas, corrupt government and law enforcement officials, effectively pressure local populations, and enjoy significant freedom of action. Moreover, DTOs accomplish all this despite record cocaine seizures and arrests of major drug trafficking kingpins. The strategy employed by DTOs resembles the developing phases of an insurgency—they do not seek to overthrow a government, but to intimidate and corrupt for financial gain with impunity. In Mexico, seven major drug cartels are so violent and overpowering that some experts describe their actions as “Criminal Insurgency.”⁶

Whether intentionally or not, these cartels successfully employ insurgent strategies to undermine local authority and secure areas in Central America and Mexico from which to transship cocaine bound for America. That these organizations permeate most of Central America and maintain a highly successful smuggling network despite the efforts of their governments and the U.S. to stop them indicates that while we are

⁵ Office of the President of the U.S., Office of National Drug Control Policy, “Transit Zone Interdiction Operations,” http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/international/factsht/transit_zone_interdic_op.html, (accessed September 8, 2009).

⁶ John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Plazas for Profit: Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/232-sullivan.pdf>, April 26, 2009 (accessed November 9, 2009).

achieving notable tactical victories (i.e. intercepting or disrupting their cocaine shipments), we are not winning the criminal insurgency at the higher operational or strategic level.

The newly appointed Drug Czar, Mr. Gil Kerlikowske, denounced use of the term “War on Drugs” in his first interview after confirmation as head of Office of the President of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). He stated, "Regardless of how you try to explain to people it's a 'war on drugs' or a 'war on a product,' people see a war as a war on them...we're not at war with people in this country."⁷ The term, born in the Nixon era, addressed domestic drug abuse prevention and treatment and enforcement efforts with later application in the transit and source zones. While the U.S. has never really fought a war on drugs, it has struggled against drug trafficking organizations that operate like insurgents, despite their criminal intent.

U.S. military and government agencies made exceptional tactical strides in regional engagement and counterdrug operations with Mexico and Central American countries. However, the overall endeavor has fallen short of meeting the strategic national goal of intercepting or disrupting 40% of known cocaine flow through the region.⁸ In a record year for cocaine disruptions in 2006, the combined U.S. and Central American counterdrug effort disrupted 156 metric tons of cocaine transiting through Central America and Mexico. Regrettably, a staggering 407 metric tons (or 73%) of

⁷R. Gil Kerlikowske, statement at the International Association of Chiefs of Police Annual Conference, 6 October 2009, Denver Colorado, http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/NEWS/speech09/100309_iacp.pdf (accessed September 27, 2009).

⁸ Office of the President of the U.S., Office of National Drug Control policy, *National Drug Control Strategy*, (January 2009): 29.

South American cocaine bound for the U.S. made its way to drug dealers in America.⁹ Today, the Central American / Mexican corridor remains the DTOs' preferred route with 90% of the known cocaine flow headed to the U.S. following this route. That the U.S. and partner nations have been unable to change this situation demonstrates that either U.S. engagement with Central America and Mexico, or the ability of regional governments to exert sovereignty within their borders, is failing to execute a sustainable effort to win the "Criminal Insurgency"¹⁰ in the region.

The U.S. learned in Colombia how insurgencies fueled by the drug trade erode national security and erode the rule of law. President Uribe's bold initiative to employ a counterinsurgency strategy to reestablish security and rule of law in previously ungoverned areas is a testimony that, with enough support and commitment, one can reverse the downward trend of violence and corruption. With a view of leveraging the similarities and lessons learned from Colombia's insurgency, an examination of the battle against the DTOs in Central America and Mexico yields appropriate counterinsurgency measures, which can underscore ideas on how to apply a tailored counterinsurgency doctrine to this problem.

From the 1970s through the early '90s, United States drug policy focused predominantly on law enforcement and interdiction efforts within the U.S. and within the transit zone. These took the form of multi-national, military, and interagency operations throughout the Eastern Pacific, Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico.¹¹ Despite

⁹ Office of the President of the U.S., Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Cocaine Smuggling in 2007*, December 2008, http://www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/publications/pdf/cocaine_smuggling07.pdf (accessed September 23, 2009).

¹⁰ John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "Plazas for Profit: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency," 1.

¹¹ Mary H. Cooper, "War on Drugs: is it time to focus efforts on education and prevention?," CQ

major interdictions and arrests, DTOs continue to operate nearly unabated throughout the region. The “War on Drugs,” perhaps more appropriately, a war with numerous, insular DTOs, is an effort aimed at preventing criminal insurgency. To that end, an examination of the problem through the lens of counterinsurgency provides a useful road map to view today’s dilemma and may offer new ways to implement drug control strategy.

United States drug policy and supporting programs focused on many aspects of the drug trafficking dilemma in Latin America over the past forty years. Beginning with the “War on Drugs” campaign of the Nixon and Reagan eras, the U.S. and partner Latin American nations strived to fix the dilemma. Most recently, the 2007 Merida Initiative in Mexico and Central America aimed at funding and equipping governments in counterdrug and related activities has made great strides towards gaining the upper hand. However, the U.S. operated in piecemeal fashion with decentralized oversight and coordination.¹² While these efforts are noble, they suffer from an inadequate/ insufficient level of resourcing to engage all areas at the same time effectively. The current state and past record of accomplishment suggest the need to better anchor and focus the counterdrug effort in order to best leverage the scarce resources available to combat the problem. Within an extensive list of U. S. funded programs in Central America and Mexico such as anti-gang activities, judicial assistance, municipality reform, education, trade agreements, anti-corruption, and youth education programs, one common thread

Researcher, volume 3, issue 11, (19 March, 1993)
<http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1993031900&type=hitlist&num=0>
(accessed October 9, 2009).

¹²Washington Office on Latin America, “The Merida Initiative and Citizen Security in Mexico and Central America,” (March 2008) http://www.wola.org/index.php?Itemid=2&id=668&option=com_content&task=viewp (accessed October 8, 2009).

ties all elements together: establishing and sustaining security and the rule of law.¹³

Without a viable principle of governance in which citizens, institutions, and the state are accountable to enforceable laws, the security and stability of the state is at risk and programs geared towards anti-crime or economic strength will likely be short lived and miss their mark.¹⁴

Finally, this assessment anchors on the point that the intended result is to strengthen the rule of law and increase the confidence of the population in fair governance. One overarching measure of success is to deny the freedom of action and security of drug cartels and illicit traffickers by putting them at risk of interdiction by law enforcement every step of the way. The intellectual and physical links between the commonly accepted military history of insurgencies and the history of the war on drugs, offer a new perspective with which to understand the character of the conflict. Moreover, by understanding and applying applicable elements of counterinsurgency strategy, the United States and its partner nations may improve their performance and effectiveness in the establishing widespread security and rule of law where its citizens are safe and secure, and drug trafficking organizations reduced to insignificant criminal actors.

¹³U.S. Agency for International Development, “USAID Promotes the Rule of Law in Latin America and Caribbean Democracies,” http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/rule/index.html (accessed October 8, 2009).

¹⁴ U.S. Army Stability Operations Manual, FM-3-07, Washington DC, (October 2008) 1-9.

CHAPTER 2

BRIEF HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND DRUG TRAFFICKING: THE ROAD TO TODAY'S DILEMMA

The counterdrug community estimates that between 545 and 707 metric tons of cocaine departed South America toward the United States in 2007, similar to the 2006 estimate. The eastern Pacific and western Caribbean routes to Mexico and Central America remained the primary channels for cocaine movement from South America toward the United States, accounting for 90 percent of the flow.

—Office of Narcotics Control Policy, *Cocaine Smuggling in 2007*¹

Important to a better understanding of the current state of violence, corruption and illicit activity in Central America is a fundamental knowledge of the cultural and revolutionary events that shaped socio-political terrain in the region. From as early as the days of the Mayan empire, violence and conflict marked the Mesoamerican landscape. The Mayans, a conquering nation in their own right, imposed their rule of law on the surrounding countryside through violence. Just as the surrounding nations tried to escape Mayan domination, the Mayans tried to escape the Europeans. What changed for Central America with the introduction of the Europeans was the different set of values imposed by the Spanish. What was not different was a history of using violence to compel the change. The most significant paradigm resulting from the Spanish colonial period was the separation of the minority elite from the majority of the impoverished population by a foreign nation. This trend of social inequity is evident through decades of conflict and revolutions where the politically excluded attempted to effect change

¹ Office of the President of the U.S., Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Cocaine Smuggling in 2007*, 1.

through violent means. Despite the eventual peaceful outcomes of the political conflicts in Central America through the decades, the disparity between the governing class and the people made way for a climate of inadequate governance, poverty, and rampant crime—the road to today’s dilemma.

The Aztecs, Mayas, and other indigenous civilizations of Central America and Mexico were forced into a tenuous coexistence under foreign control since the Spanish Conquest in the early 1500s. The follow-on Spanish colonial period, which lasted until 1821, laid the foundations of culture and economies, which still exist today in many respects. The legacy established during this period offer insights to the social fabric, which continues to engender a climate of conflict and crime in today’s Central America. First, the institution of an Encomienda system of land ownership, which granted Spanish Conquistadors and upper class immigrants control of land and the natives inhabiting it.² This system, designed to exert direct control of the mining economy, also led to forced labor of the natives in mining operations and subsequent social classing system that was by any measure, slavery. The exploitation of local peoples and resources along with Spanish imposition of their political rule, religion, and culture created a considerable, long-term separation of the native population from its governing foreigners. The result—a region dominated by the rich elite who ruled the majority of the population at will—keeping them socially and economically excluded, and suffering from poverty and discrimination.³ This separation of the indigenous people from their governing class had a significant impact on the cultural evolution of Central America and Mexico, which

² Britannica on line, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/186567/encomienda> (accessed October 15, 2009).

³ Net Industries, <http://science.jrank.org/pages/7571/Colonialism-Latin-America.html>, JRank (accessed October 8 2009).

contributed heavily to the long history of conflict that followed. Understanding the socio-political impacts of this early shaping of Central American culture sheds light on the region's cultural propensity for the conflicts and criminal propagation observed in recent decades.

Generations of Conflict and Drug Trafficking: a Training Ground for Criminals

Throughout the Cold War era, most of Central America and was struggling to define their true national identities as dictatorships and revolutions occupied much of the twentieth century. The United States did not focus on supporting the social and economic strength in the region, but did focus on preventing the spread of communism. The conflicts in Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980's stand out predominantly as examples of the U.S. policy to back anything anti-communist while it remained indifferent to, or at least ignorant of, the long-term effects of its foreign policy and actions in the Western Hemisphere.⁴

Perhaps the most serious unintended effect of U.S. support to the Contras in Nicaragua and the Military-led government of El Salvador was the generation of thousands of highly trained and well-armed soldiers. These soldiers formed the basis of the criminal elements we face today, as they had no legitimate trade once their respective conflicts ended. Demobilization and reintegration programs aimed at maintaining national security and assisting ex-combatants rejoining the workforce were inadequately funded, coordinated, and executed which, in-turn became major obstructions to the

⁴ Tod Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America*, (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 2008), 3-5.

success of the process.⁵ Numerous writings documenting post-conflict demobilizations indicate underreporting of weapons forfeitures and illegal sales of military arms to Central America, creating an environment that provided criminals with their tools of the trade. The result of the estimated 126,000 ex-combatants in Nicaragua and El Salvador who supposedly reintegrated to new lives was that the process abandoned many of them and so they turned to the drug trade for income, power, and relevance.⁶

In 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) successfully won an eight-year insurgency against the 43-year Somoza family dynasty, a reign long criticized for fraud, civil rights violations, and employment of the National Guard to repress opposition from the FSLN guerilla organization. The demise of this long-standing dynasty began after the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, leader of the Democratic Union of Liberation (ULDEL) and publisher of the liberal newspaper *La Prensa*. *La Prensa* published numerous editorials criticizing the regime for violating civil liberties and laborer rights, monopolizing economic enterprises, and price controls.⁷ Although never officially accused for ordering Chamorro's murder, evidence implicated Somoza's son and members of the National Guard.⁸ The murder escalated opposition to the government into a powerful 8-year insurgency with over 30,000 guerillas, culminating with the 1979 Sandinista takeover of the National Palace and subsequent exile of President Somoza.

⁵ Denise Spencer, "Demobilization and Reintegration in Central America," 24-46.

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Bekden H. Bell, *Nicaragua An Ally Under Siege*, (Washington, DC: Council on American Affairs, 2009) 54.

⁸ Encyclopedia of the Nations, "Nicaragua, The End of the Anastasio Somoza Debayle Era," <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Americas/Nicaragua-HISTORY.html> (accessed November 3, 2009).

The insurrection left 50,000 dead and over 150,000 Nicaraguans in exile.⁹ The optimistic Carter Administration set aside \$8.5 million in emergency relief dollars with an additional \$75 million requested from Congress for reconstruction after the Sandinistas took control.¹⁰ The reconstruction aid would never happen, though, as U.S. in-country observers reported the Sandinistas were moving towards communism by restricting private enterprise, violating human rights, and delaying elections.¹¹ After continued communist actions by the FSLN, the United States completely cut off all support and began funding the anti-Sandinista rebels. This controversial support of the Nicaraguan Contras, globally publicized during the Iran–Contra affair, revealed that the CIA, through sale of arms to Iran, was funding, equipping, and training the Contras’ counterinsurgency despite disapproval of the U.S. Congress. The Contras, approximately 23,000 strong at the height of the war,¹² used some of the controversial funding for drug trafficking operations aimed at increasing revenues for their cause. Some researchers assert that the United States was aware of the Contras’ involvement in drug trafficking and may even have intentionally ignored it. Whatever the case, it is possible the U.S. did not clearly understand the implications that the insurgents and drug trafficking of the 1980s would have later in the 1990s.¹³

President Reagan took a bold approach towards foreign policy in Central America

⁹ Library of Congress, “The Sandinista Revolution,” Encyclopedia of the Nations Country Studies, [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+ni0024\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+ni0024)) (accessed November 3, 2009).

¹⁰ Kimberly Ann Elliott, Gary Clyde Hufbauer, and Jeffrey J. Schott, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, Second edition, (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009), 175.

¹¹ Michael Freitag, “Sandinistas and Contras accused of rights abuses,” *New York Times online*, November 18, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/18/world/sandinistas-and-contras-accused-of-rights-abuses.html> (accessed November 2, 2009). 4.

¹² Spencer, 1.

¹³ George Washington University, “The Contras, Cocaine, and Covert Operations,” <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB2/nsaebb2.htm#1> (accessed November 3, 2009).

through the 1980s as communism and international crime reached the doorstep of the United States. Critical of the Carter administration's lack of action in the region, Reagan believed that U.S. supremacy in Central America needed reassertion to dissuade the Soviet Union from exerting its influence there. Carter approved only low level funding for non-lethal assistance to the military-led government. The problem the police encountered was that it was facing paramilitary forces—insurgent units applying rules of engagement (a military point of view) versus the police who were employing use of force (a law enforcement point of view).¹⁴ In response to the growing leftist guerilla insurgency led by the Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), President Reagan stepped up support of the El Salvadoran military in 1981, publically citing growing Communist support of the FMLN from Cuba and the Soviet Union.¹⁵ The failure of a major FMLN offensive in 1981 brought the possibility of settlement negotiations—a proposal rejected by the United States as it would allow the leftist FMLN a place in government. The U.S. then continued funding the government and training El Salvadorian troops. Despite this aid, the El Salvadorian military failed to suppress the FMLN and by the end of 1983, FMLN guerillas controlled many of the rural provinces of the country.¹⁶

Further escalating tensions in U.S. foreign relations with El Salvador were reports of severe human rights violations by both the FMLN and Salvadoran military “death

¹⁴ Global Security, Military, “El Salvador Civil War,” <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/elsalvador2.htm> (accessed November 6, 2009).

¹⁵ Walter Lefaber, “The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America,” *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 99 No. 1 (Spring 1984): 11.

¹⁶ Encyclopedia of the nations, “El Salvador-a Country Study,” <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-4315.html> (accessed November 3, 2009).

Squads,”¹⁷ which carried out political murders and terrorized populations.¹⁸ After ten years of bloody battles and 75,000 dead, both the military-led government and the FMLN came to the understanding that neither could continue to sustain the prolonged conflict, nor could either achieve a decisive victory. In the end, there was no significant revolution—the FMLN received only 20% participation in the government, which remained under military control.¹⁹

Following the war, the El Salvadoran government implemented a National Reconstruction Plan that, with assistance from the United Nations, sought to reintegrate the 45,000 excombatants into a peaceful society. Many were successful while some applied their military skills toward illicit activities. Though direct conflicts between the FMLN and government military were over, the post civil war El Salvador society throughout the nineties was anything, but peaceful. Almost immediately after the attempted demobilization of the warfighters, street crime, gang activity, and kidnapping for ransom rose dramatically.²⁰ Exacerbating the problem in the nineties, stricter U.S. Immigration laws allowed the deportation of Salvadoran criminals without divulging their criminal record—if the U.S. divulged the criminal record, the governments would not take them back. Thus, the U.S. exported this criminal ‘talent’ to the Salvadoran government as these gang members reunited with their former gang connections.²¹

¹⁷ Global Security, Military, “El Salvador Civil War,” <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/elsalvador2.htm> Salvadoran Death Squads definition (accessed November 9, 2009).

¹⁸ Michael Wilkerson, “Security and Democracy in El Salvador: An Undeniable Connection,” *Stanford Journal of International Relations*, Vol X no 1 (fall/winter 2008), 35.

¹⁹ Ibid., 35.

²⁰ Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, “Drug Intelligence Brief; El Salvador—Country Profile, (June 2001) http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/El_Salvador_Country_Brief_Drug_Situation_Report.pdf (accessed November 5, 2009).

²¹ U.S. Agency for International Development, Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs,

Today, criminal gangs totaling over 10,000 members persist throughout El Salvador with direct ties to many gangs in the U.S., particularly in Los Angeles. Salvadorans who fled to the U.S. during and after the civil war populate the two largest and most dangerous gangs in Los Angeles—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), and the 18th Street Gang.²²

The United States foreign policy for Central America during the Cold War era predominantly focused on stemming the spread of Communism, particularly in the Western Hemisphere. However well intended, President Ronald Reagan’s commitment to anti-communist forces was not without negative effects. The extended Nicaragua and Salvadoran conflicts created some of the highest rates of violent crime, rampant drug trafficking, and criminal gang activity in the world.²³ The impact these conflicts had on the socio-economic makeup of Central America and Mexico in the 1990s also coincides with the spike in drug trade and sustained exploitation of the region by DTOs. Falling per capita income, vast areas of ungoverned or under-governed land, and thousands of discontented ex-combatants from over a decade of conflicts combined to form the ideal environment for DTOs to operate with impunity.²⁴

While facilitating the end of the Cold War is certainly a significant legacy of President Reagan’s two terms in office, America’s growing appetite for cocaine and the associated reach of international drug trafficking to meet the demand hardly went

Office of Regional Sustainable Development, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment Annex 1: El Salvador Profile*, USAID, (April 2006), http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/els_profile.pdf (accessed December 4, 2009).

²² Wilkerson.

²³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *2007 World Drug Report*, June 2007, http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/wdr07/WDR_2007.pdf (accessed November 11, 2009).

²⁴ Kristen Avery, “Central America: A Region Coping with rising Violence,” *UN Chronicle Online Edition*, http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2007/webArticles/071907_central_america.htm Stats for post conflict era (accessed November 8, 2009).

unnoticed. In 1979, the number of self-reported cocaine users in the U.S. was more than double that in 1977, and this trend continued through the late nineties.²⁵ This insatiable demand for cocaine in the U.S. offered a substantial incentive for Colombian drug cartels to earn enormous profits from cocaine production and trafficking.

This multi-billion dollar enterprise soon gave rise to two of most successful and profitable drug trafficking organizations of the time—the Medellin and Cali Cartels of Colombia. The Medellin cartel’s infamous leader, Pablo Escobar, teamed with co-founder Carlos Lehder Rivas to run a highly successful cocaine trafficking operation to South Florida. At the time, traffickers in Mexico and Central America were producing and shipping predominantly heroin and marijuana. Through the early 1980’s, Mexican cartels engaged in cocaine trafficking as a distribution network, but did not ascend to the ranks of major players until the mid 1990’s. For the time being, the Colombian cartels preferred to exploit the Caribbean corridor as opposed to the Central American overland route, minimizing reliance on the Mexican and Central American middlemen while maximizing profits.²⁶ Lehder Rivas devised a plan to revolutionize cocaine trafficking modes and quantities while serving time in a U.S. prison for marijuana possession. He envisioned increasing the individual cocaine shipment size from several kilos to bulk shipments via aircraft and boats—termed “Go Fasts” by the counterdrug interagency community.²⁷ Multi-ton shipments also occurred via container ships from Colombia

²⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report May 28, 1982, “National Surveillance of Cocaine Use and Related Health Consequences,” <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00001101.htm> (accessed September 20, 2009). Office of the President of the U.S., Office of National Drug Control Policy, “Drug Use Trends October 2002,” <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/factsht/druguse/> (accessed September 20, 2009).

²⁶ Colleen W. Cook, “Mexico’s Drug Cartels,” *Congressional Research Report for Congress*, October 16, 2007, 4.

²⁷ Merrill Collett. *The Cocaine Connection: Drug Trafficking and Inter-American Relations* (New York:

directly to ports in the Southeastern U.S. This Central Caribbean route became so lucrative for the Colombian cartels that Lehder Rivas boldly purchased a 165-acre island in the Bahamas to run a clandestine airstrip for refueling cocaine-laden planes enroute from Colombia. At the height of Escobar's reign as drug lord of Colombia, Forbes Magazine listed him as the seventh wealthiest man in the world—worth more than \$3 billion and in control of 80% of the global cocaine market.²⁸ As with any business—especially an illegal one—when inevitably some significant aspect of the environment changes, the business must adapt or call it quits. As follows, in the case of the Colombian cartels, they adapted.

Squeezing the Balloon: Central America and Mexico Become DTO's Preferred

Route

The “Squeezing the balloon effect”²⁹ describes, in simplest terms, how the pressure of one action—in this case enforcement and interdiction operations to close a particular drug trafficking corridor—forces the DTOs to expand or redirect their routes and modes of operation elsewhere. The reality over the past three decades or more is that enough cocaine makes its way north to feed the U.S. appetite. Colombia, Central America, and Mexico today are a spotlight example of this effect as drug-related violence

Foreign Policy Association Press Inc, 1989) 15.

²⁸ Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001) 59; William R. Long, “Billionaire Drug Trafficker Rules Powerful Medellin Cartel Safe in Its Colombia Base,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1988, Los Angeles Times Online Collection, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-02-21/news/mn-44321_1_medellin-cartel (accessed 19 October 2009).

²⁹ Squeezing the balloon, also called the balloon effect, is a term used by the counterdrug community to describe how successful interdiction or eradication efforts will place pressure on drug traffickers forcing them to shift to alternate routes or areas for cultivation.

frequents the news and drugs flood across the border. In the 1970s and early 1980s, nearly all the cocaine consumed in the U.S. shipped to South Florida came via the aforementioned routes. That began to change when drug-related killings in South Florida rose to nearly one per day, compelling local officials to plead for help.³⁰

To thwart the growing cocaine trafficking threat and violent crime in the Southeast U.S., the Reagan administration redirected dollars and efforts towards enforcement and interdiction rather than the prevention and treatment strategy of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. He increased federal spending from \$1.5 billion in 1981 to nearly \$2.75 billion in 1985.³¹ Reagan also formed the South Florida Task Force, headed by Vice President George H.W. Bush, and comprised of agents from DEA, FBI, and the Treasury Department. Working in concert with the U.S. Coast Guard and other U.S. military services and law enforcement, the South Florida Task Force aimed at cracking down on the rampant drug smuggling and drug-related violent crime.³² To aid in the endeavor, the U.S. capitalized on its outstanding working relationship with the Commonwealth of the Bahamas and the Government of Turks and Caicos by supporting a Nassau-based counter drug task force named Operation Bahamas, Turks and Caicos (OPBAT). The task force, supported by the DEA, State Department, U.S. Army, and Coast Guard Aircraft combated the air and maritime cocaine trafficking through the 100,000 square miles of waters surrounding the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos.³³ The

³⁰ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, "DEA History Book, 1980-1985, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/history/1980-1985.html>, (accessed November 10, 2009).

³¹ Mary H. Cooper, "War on Drugs; is it time to focus efforts on education and prevention?" CQ Researcher Online, March 19, 1993, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresre1993031900&type=hitli>. (accessed December 7, 2009) .

³² DEA History Book 1980-1985.

³³ DEA History 1980-1985

nearest point of the Bahamas to the U.S. (Bimini) lies just 46 nautical miles East of Miami. By the late 1980's, both Medellin and Cali Cartels felt the pressure of this highly successful organization to such an extent that their smuggling profits dropped by over 50%, forcing them to overhaul their mode of operations and change trafficking routes completely.³⁴

While the Colombian cartels reassessed their multi-billion dollar trafficking operations, U.S. drug policy significantly increased its engagement in the drug problem at all levels. In 1986, President Reagan bolstered the fight against drug trafficking by increasing use of the U.S. military with technology, training, intelligence, and assets for detection and monitoring the smugglers. Reagan justified the need for military involvement when he declared transnational drug trafficking a threat to the U.S. national security:

The international drug trade threatens the national security of the United States by potentially destabilizing democratic allies. It is therefore the policy of the United States, in cooperation with other nations, to halt the production and flow of illicit narcotics, reduce the ability of insurgent and terrorist groups to use drug trafficking to support their activities, and strengthen the ability of individual governments to confront and defeat this threat.

—*National Security Decision Directive 221*, April 8, 1986³⁵

By 1986, Reagan designated the Department of Defense the lead in “detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs to the United States.”³⁶ To integrate the military’s enhanced role into existing interagency efforts, Reagan created

³⁴ Patrick L. Clawson, and Rensselaer W. Lee. *The Andean Cocaine Industry* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 41.

³⁵ Office of the President of the U.S., *Narcotics and National Security*, National Security Decision directive 221, Washington DC, April 8, 1986, 2.

³⁶ U.S. Southern Command, <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/news.php?storyId=1427> (accessed December 7, 2009).

Joint Task Force-Four, later named Joint Interagency Task Force East, where the U.S. military and several federal agencies coordinated, integrated, and synchronized efforts towards the common goal of thwarting the illicit drug trade in the source and transit zones.

In response to Escobar's violent reign in Colombia that included the murder of four presidential candidates and hundreds of police officers, and bombings, the Colombian National Police (CNP) cracked down heavily on the Medellin Cartel. In 1989 the CNP also arrested José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, the organization's second in command. The killing of Pablo Escobar by the CNP in December 1993 sealed the fate of the Medellin reign.³⁷ Within two years of the demise of the Medellin Cartel, Colombian authorities captured all the leaders of the Cali Cartel. This ended the nearly 20-year dominance of major cartel control of the cocaine trade. The newly emerging smaller organizations then adapted their operations to a decentralized network to remain out of the public eye and to ensure that an arrest or interdiction would not bring down their entire organization, as was the case with the Medellin and Cali Cartels.³⁸ These low profile organizations learned from their predecessors that the physical act of transshipping their illegal goods was the riskiest, most vulnerable component. Thus, they found themselves in greater need for cooperation with the developing Mexican organizations. While the Colombians focused on production, they relied on the Mexican organizations to coordinate shipment and distribution to the U.S. dealers.³⁹

³⁷Patrick Clawson and Rensselaer W. Lee, *The Andean Cocaine Industry* (Chicago: St. Martin's, 1998), 47.

³⁸ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, "DEA History Book, 1994-1998," <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/history/1994-1998.html> (accessed December 6, 2009).

³⁹ DEA History Book, 1994-1998

Through the 1990s, Mexican cartels rapidly advanced their involvement in the cocaine trade from mere couriers to running the entire distribution networks and controlling Mexican territories with connections in the United States.⁴⁰ By the mid 1990s, 60% of the cocaine from South America was transshipped to the U.S. through Mexico either directly from the source zone, or via Central America—a trend that began before the demise of the Medellin and Cali Cartels.⁴¹ By 2001, the flow through this corridor increased to 72%, reaching 90% by 2006. Figure 1 depicts the general cocaine trafficking routes and percent of total flow of cocaine in 2009. Figure 2 shows the increasing trend in cocaine flow through Central America and Mexico from 1999 to 2009.

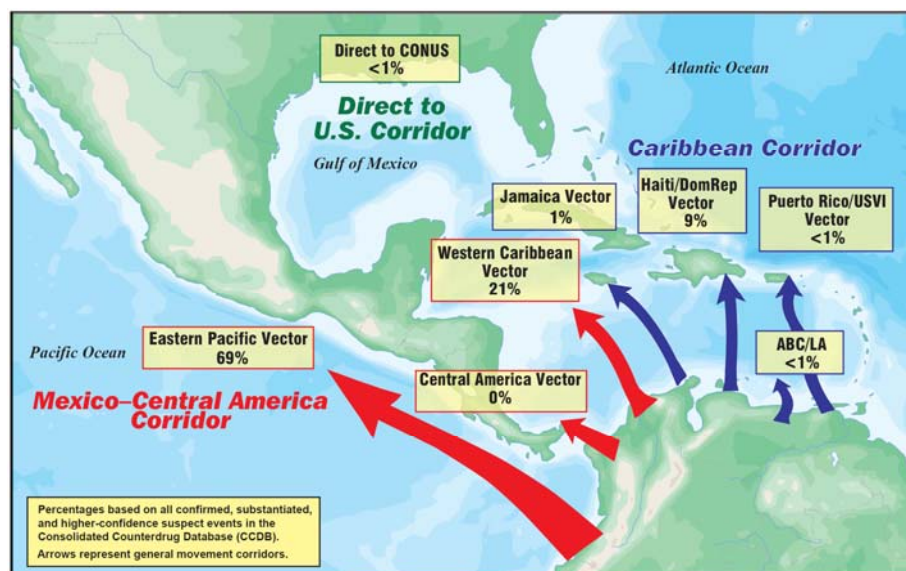


Figure 1. General cocaine trafficking vectors and percent of total flow in 2009.⁴²

⁴⁰ Thomas A. Constantine, Administrator, Drug Enforcement Administration, “International Drug Trafficking Organizations in Mexico,” statement of, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, August 8, 1995, <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct950808.htm> (accessed December 9, 2009).

⁴¹ Constantine.

⁴² U.S. Department of Justice, “National Drug threat assessment, 2009,” National Drug Intelligence Center, <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs31/31379/index.htm> (accessed September 8, 2009).

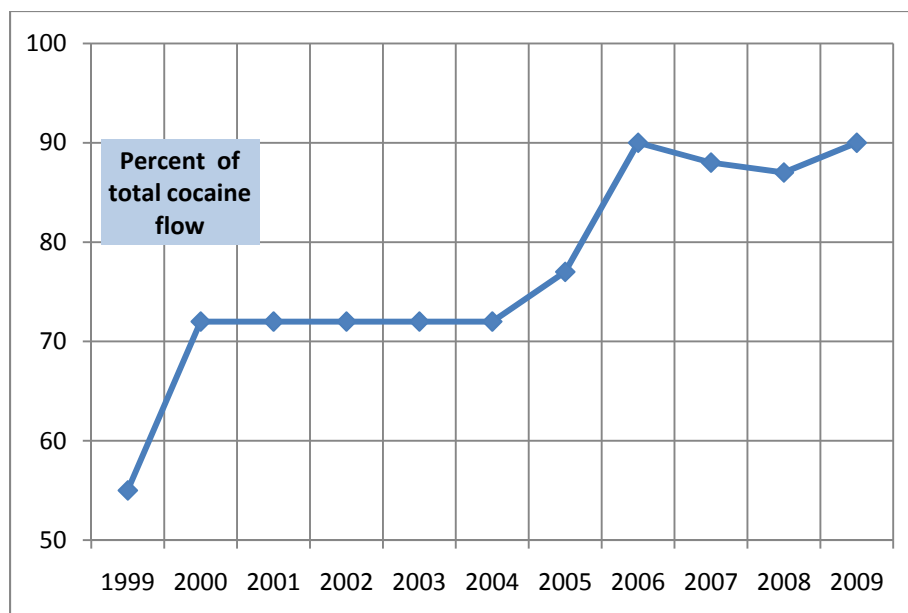


Figure 2. Cocaine flow trend through MEX/CENTAM corridor as a percentage of total flow from 1999 - 2009.⁴³

Undoubtedly, drug trafficking organizations have established Mexico and the countries of the Central American isthmus as their smuggling route of choice, and they are being highly successful. Interdiction efforts have averaged less than 30% of the total flow of cocaine destined to the U.S. over the past decade, a clear indication that the U.S. needs a new drug control strategy.

⁴³ Data derived from annual National Drug Intelligence Center's National Drug Threat Assessments 1999 – 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/index.htm#Top> (Accessed September 8, 2009).

CHAPTER 3

DRUG CARTELS, DRUG GANGS, AND INSURGENCIES

There often is a nexus between insurgency and crime, and this problem continues to grow in the twenty-first century. Crime is often necessary for insurgents to fund their operations, control the population, and erode counterinsurgent efforts. Some insurgents and criminals can form temporary coalitions when it is in their collective interests. Paradoxically, some criminals may oppose insurgencies that threaten criminal goals. The most powerful criminal organizations can also grow into insurgencies in their own right.

—Joint Pub 3-24, Counterinsurgency Operations, 5 October 2009¹

Joint Publication 3-24 acknowledges that powerful criminal organizations can become insurgencies. While only a few such organizations rise to the level of subversion and violence that threatens the very democracy of a nation, DTOs operating in Latin America certainly meet much of the criteria. Imperative to establishing the link between DTOs' and drug gangs' and insurgencies is the fundamental understanding of just what defines an insurgency—specifically, the elements of insurgent behavior that DTOs and drug gangs employ and their effects on governance and rule of law. Equally important to making the DTO-Insurgency correlation is the understanding that employment of counterinsurgency (COIN) methods can be effective even if the DTOs maintain only loose ties to ideological military insurgencies. Insurgencies, like conventional wars, are each unique to their geographic region, purpose, and culture. Each is born of its own desired ends and carried out by whatever means available and most effective against a given government to achieve the freedom of action it requires to sustain its existence.

¹ The Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-24, Counterinsurgency Operations* (October 5, 2009), A-1.

After establishing the parallels between today's DTOs and insurgencies, the connection to insurgencies of past becomes clear. One illustration is the merging of the drug trade and leftist guerrillas in Colombia less than two decades ago. The genesis of these insurgencies provides lessons on how the multi-billion dollar illicit trade, coupled with its reliance on political corruption and unrelenting grasp over the population, undermines the governments' legitimacy and credibility and separates it from the population psychologically and, in some cases, physically.

Defining Criminal Insurgency

Before delving into the problem of dealing with the DTOs and their drug gang helpers in Mexico and Central America using tools from the COIN doctrines, the term "insurgency" requires definition. Further, insurgency requires refinement in the context of the drug trade and the criminal organizations that run it. With a foundation on which to build the criminal, heretofore, criminal-insurgency nexus, the next step is a comparison of specific insurgent characteristics and actions of Mexican drug cartels and gangs throughout the region.

Joint Pub 3-24 defines insurgency as "the organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself."² Joint Pub 3-24 includes "subversion and violence" to its description, and acknowledges a distinction between overthrowing a government and forcing change. The complete overthrowing of a government would not necessarily be required. This verbiage implies that change, in a

² Joint Pub 3-24, I-1.

broad sense, can mean modifying behavior, and such as is the case when an insurgent group uses intimidation and corruption to force their will on a government and a population, or both, to secure freedom of action.

As French counterinsurgency theorist David Galula describes, “An insurgency is a protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order.”³ The removal of power from the existing order most accurately describes the intent of the DTOs in Central America and Mexico. The DTOs operating in that region do not seek to exert political will, but to neutralize the existing order for illegally obtained profit and freedom of movement. They create or capitalize on poor governance, diminished police forces, and ineffective judicial systems to establish bases and networks with relative freedom of movement. Joint Publication 3-24 touches on this principle of insurgency, describing a potential insurgency objective as “nullifying political control in an area.”⁴ A similar statement may describe the current situation in Mexico and much of the Central American region as drug cartels battle against police, government, and each other for control of provinces and townships.⁵

Three Phases of Insurgency and the DTO Connection

In Mao Tse Tung’s *On Guerrilla Warfare*, he describes this type of war—which includes insurgent warfare⁶—as progressing gradually through a series of three phases.

³ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare Theory and Practice*, (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger 1968), 4.

⁴ Joint Pub 3-24, Xi

⁵ John P. Sullivan, and Adam Elkus, “Plazas for profit,” *Small Wars Journal*, April, 2009, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/232-sullivan.pdf> (accessed December 23, 2009)

⁶ Joint Pub 3-24 refers to the operations against an insurgent military wing as counterinsurgency

The first phase consists of organization, consolidation, and preservation of regional bases in isolated areas of the region. In this phase, the insurgents operate with reasonable security either in remote terrain, physically separated from national authority, or by enlisting support for their cause from the local populace, or a combination of both. Similarly, DTOs and drug gangs establish their remote areas in which to operate with relative comfort from capture. In doing so, they also enlist or compel the assistance from whomever they can to ensure their freedom of movement. Although they are not necessarily using propaganda to persuade the local inhabitants to support their cause⁷ (trafficking drugs for profit), they are influencing the populace by instilling fear through violence, offering a piece of the profit in exchange for silence, or for getting locals to participate in the trafficking process as lookouts, mules, or by providing security or logistics.⁸

In the second phase, the insurgents, who are now organized, trained, and holding secure areas from which to stage, move towards “progressive expansion,” whereby they commence disruptive attacks against national police, political officials, military units and the like.⁹ The connection between DTOs and insurgents is most visible here as evidenced by the incessant violence in a drug war between the Mexican government and the drug cartels. In 2008, drug related violence killed more than 5,300 people including

operations, xi.

⁷ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, (Chicago: University of Illinois press, 1961), 20.

⁸ U.S. Agency for International Development, “Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment, Annex 3: Honduras Profile April 2006,”

http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/honduras_profile.pdf (accesses October 12, 2009).

⁹ Tse-Tung, 21

police, government officials, journalists, soldiers, and civilians.¹⁰ In Central America, high rates of violence are associated with the nearly 70,000 gang members throughout the region.

According to Mao, another objective in the initial part of this phase is the movement towards isolating the people from the government. In the case of the DTOs, who already have enlisted the allegiance of thousands of willing gang members, they can offer much more to the largely impoverished community than the government can. It is much more tempting to earn a year's salary by facilitating one shipment of cocaine for the DTOs than it is to labor for meager earnings in one of the poorest economic regions in the world.¹¹

The third phase of insurgency is the destruction of the enemy. This defines the period of an insurgent's development when it ascends to be a viable conventional force capable of engaging in open combat against a formal military.¹² Narco-insurgents will likely not attain this level or desire to do so—they merely need to own or neutralize the government to ensure their freedom of action and achieve impunity. A complete overthrow of the government is not necessary. Despite the DTOs not elevating to the third phase of an insurgency, the correlation between DTOs, drug gangs, and insurgents in phases one and two of insurgent warfare warrants further exploration.

¹⁰ Peter Katel, "Mexico's Drug War; Is the Violence Spilling into the U.S.?" *CQ Researcher* 18, no.43 (December 12, 2008): 1.

¹¹ The Heritage Foundation, "Ranking the Countries," <http://www.heritage.org/index/Ranking.aspx> (accessed 10 March, 2010).

¹² Tse-Tung, 22

Linking Drug Gangs and Insurgency

Gangs form the connection between crime and war. Traditionally viewed as criminal organizations having varying levels of technology and international ties, some gangs have evolved into organizations capable of destabilizing or neutralizing governance while escaping the rule of law. In Central America and Mexico where civil governance, national security institutions, and economic and social cultures have eroded, there exists an inviting environment for cultivating gangs.¹³ The root causes of gang activity in Central America bear a striking resemblance to the factors that foster insurgencies. Characterized by marginalized urban populations with minimal access to basic services, high levels of unemployment compounded by minimal educational opportunities, and weak judicial and law enforcement systems, conditions are ideal for criminal organizations to thrive. Further exacerbating the situation is easy access to weapons—over 90% of which were smuggled south from the U.S. between 2006 and 2008¹⁴—and a well established drug trafficking network of close to 30 years. Joint Counterinsurgency publication 3-24 lays out eight core grievances of a population, which either collectively or partially makes up the fuel for insurgencies.

In Central America and Mexico, several of these grievances apply: First, the sense of identity or socio-cultural character is in conflict with that of the host nation. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) identified a hierarchy with the gang organization, highly organized crime, and international narco bosses, down to

¹³ John Sullivan, “Future Conflict: Criminal Insurgencies, Gangs and Intelligence,” a paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA’s 50th annual Convention, New York, NY, Feb 15, 2009.

¹⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Combat Arms Trafficking to Mexico Face Planning and Coordination Challenges,” Report to Congressional requesters, GAO-09-709, June 2009, 15.

neighborhood gangs and youth at risk of joining such gangs. Identity exists at every level of the hierarchy, whether by a number (as in the MS-13 gang) or by burrough name, each group manifests its own identity and forms alliances with or allegiances to the next higher gang in the chain of command.¹⁵ Whatever level within a gang organization, identities do not align with that of the government, and the gangs strive to expand that difference through intimidation, murder, and corruption.¹⁶

Second is economy. According to a U.S. Agency for International Development gang assessment report, “Underemployment, and unemployment ranges from less than 20% in Guatemala, to about 25% in Mexico, to over 50% in the remaining countries.”¹⁷ Desperate poverty fosters public dissatisfaction with the government while youth see employment by DTOs as the only alternative to unemployment. The disparity between the ruling wealthy and the poor majority as an economic grievance fuels frustration with the government and invites insurgency.

Third, corruption of government, key institutions, or organizations is systemic and ongoing in Central America and Mexico. In Guatemala, a country consumed in gang cocaine trafficking and spillover of drug-related gang operations from Mexico, corruption is widespread. In a January 2010 statement by Guatemalan President Alvaro Colon, he blamed drug traffickers for the incessant corruption of his National Civilian Police (PNC). The reach of DTOs extended well into the PNC as the PNC’s Director, Assistant Director, and Operations Chief in 2009 were under investigation for their alleged involvement in facilitating the drug trade, including the disappearance of nearly 118 kilos

¹⁵ U.S. Agency for International Development, “Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment,” April 2006, 111

¹⁶ Ibid., 108

¹⁷ Ibid., 17

of cocaine and over \$300,000. There are numerous examples of such corruption throughout the region.¹⁸ This example highlights the levels of government that DTOs can reach and their ability to undermine rule of law. As in an insurgency, the DTOs work extremely hard to ensure protection of their interests. Due to the enormous profitability of the cocaine trade, they are able to buy their freedom of action and impunity.

Lastly, repression and essential Services—from Joint Publication 3-24, “discrimination and human rights violations lead to dissatisfaction in government, further reducing its legitimacy.”¹⁹ Here again, the impoverished see no promise for a legitimate income on the horizon and little to no assistance from their government. Additionally, when basic essential needs of a civil society (i.e. food, adequate law enforcement, public services, utilities, health care, schools transportation, and others), are interrupted or absent, the population will turn to whoever can successfully meet those needs.²⁰

Correlating gang membership to crime rates is more complex than simply high gang numbers equals high crime. Widespread unemployment, social disparity, and the drug trade are all contributing factors to the rise in gang membership over the past several years. To illustrate the magnitude of the problem, the Central American region, with an estimated 70,000 gang members, had nearly 80,000 homicides since 2006—an average rate of 33 per 100,000 people, which is 3 times the global average according to a United Nations Report.²¹

¹⁸ Latin American Herald Tribune, “Guatemalan President: Drug Traffickers Behind Police Corruption,” <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=341054&CategoryId=23558> (accessed January 8, 2010).

¹⁹ Joint Pub 3-24, II-17

²⁰ Joint Pub 3-24, II-17

²¹ United Nations, UN News Centre, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32651&Cr=crime&Cr1> (accessed December 12, 2009).

Mexican Drug Cartels: The Criminal-Insurgency Leadership

The escalating violence between the Mexican government and the vicious drug gangs throughout Mexico is a testimony to the character of insurgent-like warfare fought in the United States' backyard. Between 2006 and 2008, drug cartel-related killings rose from 1,500 to 5,630 a year. This violence included gruesome murders, which included kidnappings and the assassination of high-level government officials.²² The ever-increasing garishness of such violence is evident in the frightening pattern of DTOs' willingness to engage the Mexican military rather than surrender. On June 6, 2009, two Mexican soldiers and 16 drug cartel hit-men died in a fierce gun battle near Acapulco. The Mexican Army, sent to act on an anonymous tip, met with gunfire and grenades in a two-hour battle. Additional gunmen arrived with grenades to reinforce the cartel gunmen, but the Army killed them in the process.²³ This is one example of the many confrontations between DTOs and the military in recent years as the Mexican Government has stepped up efforts to shut down the cartels. This type of drug-related violence is so common that the city is locally known colloquially as *Narcopolco*.²⁴ It affirms the insurgent-like character of these violent drug organizations, illustrating they

²² Nick Allen, "Mexican Violence Spirals as 69 are Murdered in one Day," *Telegraph*, January 12, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/mexico/6976210/Mexican-violence-spirals-as-69-are-murdered-in-one-day.html> (accessed January 15, 2010)

²³ Samuel Goldsmith, "Two-hour gunfight leaves 16 cartel gunmen, 2 Mexican soldiers dead in bloody Acapulco hostage fight," *New York Daily News*, June 7, 2009, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/06/07/2009-06-07_twohour_gunfight_leaves_15_gunman_1_mexican_soldier_dead_in_bloody_a.html (accessed January 14, 2010).

²⁴ William Booth, "Acapulco Gun Battle Leaves 18 Dead," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/07/AR2009060701099.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

are not merely criminal thugs— they are extremely capable of engaging in the advanced, progressive expansion stages of phase II insurgent warfare.²⁵

The leadership of Central America and Mexico’s narco-insurgency is rooted in the seven Mexican drug cartels. Not unlike the characteristics of the numerous tribes and clans in Iraq and Afghanistan, the drug cartels, while criminally oriented rather than politically or religiously so, form allies and enemies with each other and with the government and police officials as they maneuver for domination over a geographic area. Though varying in sophistication and organization, a May 2009 Congressional Research Service Report identifies seven major criminal organizations that dominate drug trafficking in Mexico (Figure 3).

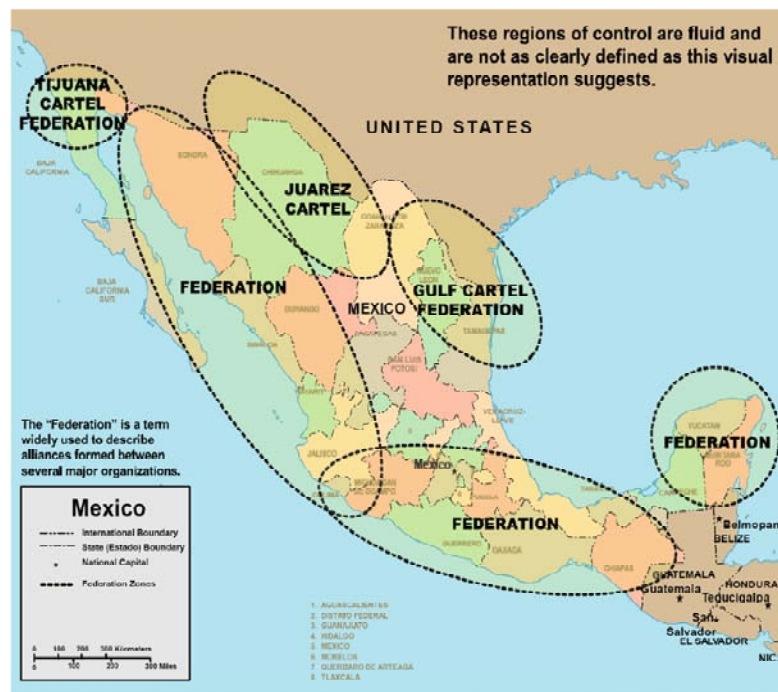


Figure 3. Mexican Drug Cartels and their areas of influence²⁶

²⁵ Tse-Tung, 21.

²⁶ Cook, 3.

The Mexican DTO's rapid expansion of violence targeted at rival cartels, law enforcement, military, and indiscriminately at civilians, enlarged the responsibilities of the Mexican military as the Calderon Administration desperately attempted to regain control of state security. Some experts argue that the Mexican government is becoming a "tool of the cartels"²⁷ and thus is a "failing state."²⁸ The U.S. Joint Forces Command indicated that Mexico could soon face "rapid and sudden collapse in the future because the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are under sustained assault by criminal gangs, and drug cartels."²⁹ While others may disagree, such as the U.S. director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair in his statement that "Mexico is in no danger of becoming a failed state,"³⁰ the rapidly escalating drug related attacks targeted at both rival DTOs and official and civilian targets, mirrors that of insurgents, and threatens the national security of Mexico.³¹

This deteriorating state of security in Mexico, ironically fueled by President Calderon's aggressive crackdown on the drug cartels, is most significantly visible in the escalating drug-related killings over the past few years—the statistics are alarming. Figure 4 shows the 275% increase from 2006 to 2008. Included in the death toll for 2008 were 522 Mexican military and law enforcement personnel.³² Even more alarming,

²⁷ George Friedman, "Mexico: On the Road to a Failed State?," STRATFOR Global Intelligence, May 13, 2008, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/mexico_road_failed_state?ip_auth_redirect=1 (accessed January 12, 2010).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ United States Joint Forces Command, *The Joint Operating Environment 2008*, 36.

³⁰ Homeland Security Newswire, "U.S. intelligence chief: Mexico not on brink of collapse," March 27, 2009, <http://homelandsecuritynewswire.com/us-intelligence-chief-mexico-not-brink-collapse?page=0,0> (accessed January 12, 2009).

³¹ Hal Brands, "Mexico's Narco-insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," *U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute*, May 2009, iii.

³² June S. Beittel, "Mexico's Drug-related violence," Congressional Research Service report for committees and members of Congress, May 27, 2009, 9.

nearly 1,000 drug-related homicides occurred in Mexico in the first two months of 2009—nearly 150% more than the same period in 2008.³³

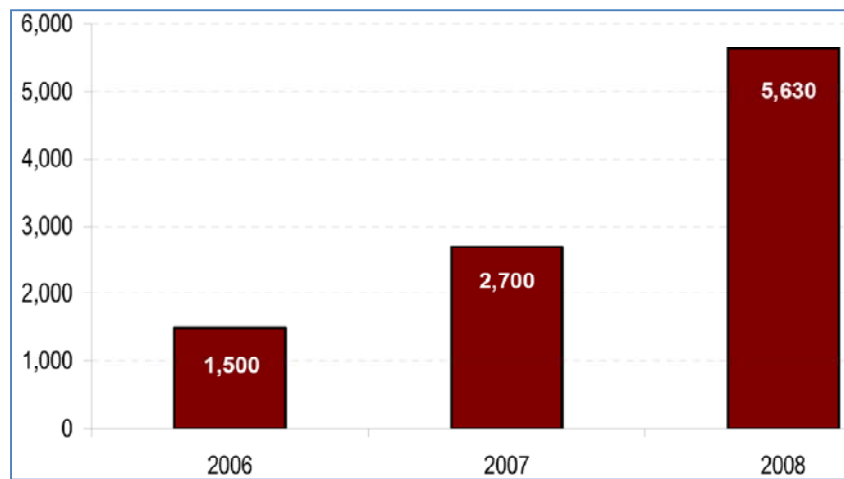


Figure 4. Mexican Cartel Related Killings 2006 - 2008³⁴

In 2010, the dismal trend in Mexico continued as the bloodiest day since Calderon's Presidency occurred on January 9 when 69 murders spanned nine municipalities within a 24-hour period. This gruesome milestone highlights the frustration of President Calderon in that his primary domestic task is the fight against the drug cartels.³⁵ The behavior of Drug Cartels and gangs under their employed throughout Mexico, which spill over into Central America and the United States, emulates classic insurgency in several ways—expansion of weapons caches and technology, rise in violent killings, intimidation, and fear tactics saturate the region. On February 27, 2008 an attack targeting the Mexico City's police chief failed when the bomb exploded prematurely, killing the bomb carrier. The attack signified that Mexico's drug cartels were possibly

³³ Beittel, 10.

³⁴ Beittel, 10.

³⁵ Martin Barillas, "Mexico: 24 Hours of Death," *Spero News*, January 11, 2010, <http://www.speroforum.com/a/25271/Mexico-24-hours-of-death> (accessed January 14, 2010).

initiating a bombing campaign against the government in reaction to an earlier army-led operation to stop them. Later in the year, a police sting operation yielded nine additional IEDs—some configured to detonate remotely using a cell phone.³⁶ While not identical to IEDs manufactured by terrorist groups, the employment of such tactics indicates increasing use of technology and varying weaponry to bully Mexican law enforcement and military. In an apparent course to intimidate police and undermine rule of law, lists with names of police officers to target grow increasingly more common while drug gangs are so brazen as to hang banners offering higher pay and better weaponry to law enforcement officials who defect to the Los Zetas Cartel.³⁷

Perhaps the most compelling example of violence against police officials and the levels of the organization to which the DTOs have reached occurred on May 8, 2008 when a hired killer gunned down the highest-ranking federal police officer, Police Commissioner Edgar Millan Gomez, in his apartment with eight bullets to his chest. Most shockingly, police purported that a disgruntled police officer was under the employ of a drug cartel in the Sinaloa region hired the gunman.³⁸ Additionally, assassinations of high-ranking officials like General Coordinator of Information at the National Center for Planning and Analysis to Combat Crime, Jose Nemesio Lugo Felix, in 2007 indicate little fear in the DTOs of whom they can reach.³⁹

³⁶ Ben Furman, "Border Drug Wars, Bombs and Terrorism," *Blackhawk Press*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.blackhawkpress.com/blog/2008/11/border-drug-wars-ieds-terrorism.html> (accessed 14 January 2010).

³⁷ STRATFOR, "Mexican Drug Cartels: Government Progress and Growing Violence," STRATFOR Global Intelligence, December 11, 2008, http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20081209_mexican_drug_cartels_government_progress_and_growing_violence (accessed 14 January, 2010).

³⁸ James, C, Mckinley, "Gunmen Kill Mexico's Chief of Police," *New York Times*, May 9, 2008.

³⁹ STRATFOR, "Mexican Drug Cartels: Government Progress and Growing Violence."

There are seven drug cartels and numerous associated drug gangs maneuvering for control in Mexico, some are recruiting former military and police to compliment their number. The Sinaloa Cartel formed a special unit *Los Pelones*, with recruited police officers and military deserters. Most notably, the Los Zetas, an organization linked to the Gulf Cartel, but emerging as an individual cartel in their own right, consist of 31 deserters from Mexico's Airborne Special Forces Groups. These elite counternarcotics units, that switched sides in 1997, employ the tactical skills, intelligence gathering, marksmanship, and rapid deployment tactics of a highly organized special military unit.⁴⁰ The effectiveness of these and other narco-soldiers, coupled with the lucrative nature of the drug trade has taken an enormous toll on the will of Mexico's military to stay committed to the fight. Since 2000, an astonishing 150,000 solders deserted the Mexican Army—offered up to \$3,000 per week by DTOs vice the meager \$1,100 monthly salary earned by the average soldier.⁴¹

Finally, in 2008, a new insurgent-like face of violence appeared when members of a drug organization threw a fragmentation grenade indiscriminately into a crowd of civilians at an Independence Day celebration in Morelia, Mexico. Moments later a second grenade exploded—the combined attack killing eight and wounding over one hundred others. This attack was the first of its kind directed at the general population—“a significant development in the country's drug war”⁴² according to a Strategic Forecasting (STRATFOR) report on Mexican drug cartels.

⁴⁰Brands, 8.

⁴¹ Manuel Roig-Franzia, “Mexican Drug Cartels Making Audacious Pitch for Recruits,” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2008.

⁴² STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug Cartels: Government Progress and Growing Violence.”

These are but a few of the numerous examples of the extreme violence and subversion that paint not only a bleak picture for Mexico, but underscore similarities to the tactics insurgents use to instill fear, erode national security and establish themselves as the regional power. The drug cartels, with their arsenal of weapons, highly trained and organized soldiers proved their resilience in the face of the pressure placed upon them by the Calderon presidency.

Lessons from Colombia's Insurgency

Deadly insurgencies, exacerbated by the drug trade, have shaped Colombia's history for over four decades. The merger of insurgent Leftist Guerrilla organizations with the cocaine cultivation and trafficking industry in the early 1980s significantly bolstered the financial and sociopolitical strength of the guerillas when they began profiting enormously from it. This association strengthened the insurgents' ability to wage their war, which in-turn, severely undermined the Colombian Government's counterinsurgency and coca eradication campaigns.⁴³ This combination of a well-armed, organized, and funded guerrilla army thrived on corruption of public officials, intimidation of business owners and local populations, kidnappings, and bombings whenever and wherever possible to impose their political will and secure freedom of action to conduct their illicit trade.⁴⁴ Upon examination of the history and behaviors of Colombia's insurgency, parallels to the criminal-insurgencies in Central America and Mexico quickly emerge. Distinct parallels addressed are (1) the exploitation of remote,

⁴³ Global Security, "Colombia-Insurgency" Global Security.org, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/colombia.htm> (accessed January 20, 2010).

⁴⁴ For a complete summary of the FARC's origins and history, see Forrest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colomb*, New York, 2006.

under-governed areas and recruitment of indigenous poor and (2) the enormous drug revenues that fuel the insurgencies' military strength, providing the advantage to recruit and corrupt. Additionally, there is a common thread of violence, targeting of high profile government and public officials, and armed challenge to police and military forces, which pervade the insurgencies. These parallels give credence to the premise that Central America and Mexico are on similar paths.

Woven throughout the accounts of the Colombian insurgency, lessons learned from the Government's efforts to gain the upper hand through the U.S. supported *Plan Colombia* present useful tools to help guide Central America and Mexico improve their probability of success in dealing with their respective criminal-insurgencies. Over the last decade, *Plan Colombia* made exceptional progress in reasserting control of contested territory and in the appropriate application of military and non-military assistance to restore the rule of law in previously ungoverned areas.⁴⁵ While much work remains for Colombia to defeat drug trafficking and insurgency, the undeniable gains of the Colombian government to break the 40-year insurgency bear exploration.

The Colombian Government faced two leftist insurgent groups and a right wing paramilitary organization since the 1930s.⁴⁶ While each offers insights to the genesis and nature of guerrilla warfare, one predominant group most closely parallels the criminal insurgencies in Central America and Mexico due to its nexus with the drug trade—the Leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Additional actors involved in

⁴⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance,” Report to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, GAO-09-71, October 2008, 4. Hereafter cited as GAO report, “Plan Colombia.”

⁴⁶ Angel Rebasca, and Peter Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2001), 1.

the drug trade include the National Liberation Front (ELN) and the largest of several paramilitary groups, the United Self Defense Force of Colombia (AUC). However, the FARC was more than a militant organization, and it was an imminent threat to the stability of the Colombian government.

The roots of the FARC trace back to a period of widespread, politically charged violence known as *La Violencia* (The Violence).⁴⁷ Marked by the assassination of liberal party leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948 and a later political victory by Conservative party leader Ospina Peres, *La Violencia* symbolized the escalation of a long-standing friction between Liberal and Conservative parties to armed conflict.⁴⁸ The contention was born of decades-old peasant struggles over working conditions at coffee plantations and land ownership, exacerbated by President Perez's repressive governance—firing liberal mayors and employing the army to control the previously directed liberal party operations by force.⁴⁹ Small opposition groups protested the conservative rule, eventually coalescing into armed self-defense groups by the mid 1950s. *La Violencia* claimed 300,000 lives and displaced more than 2 million people from their townships.⁵⁰ This period of violence officially ended after Liberals and Conservatives collaborated to restore democratic government—establishing the *National Front* under the leadership of President Alberto Leras Camargo in 1958.⁵¹ However, despite an improved economy and attempts to reform land ownership disparities, the continued exclusionary nature of

⁴⁷ Rebasca and Chalk, 23

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁹ Onwar, "The 'Violencia' in Colombia 1948-1958," <http://www.onwar.com/aced/data/cite/colombia1948b.htm> (accessed January 15, 2010).

⁵⁰ Forrest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, (New York, Verso, 2006), 38.

⁵¹ Onwar.

the political party in power and aggression towards peasants fostered the development of peasant organized self-defense groups.⁵²

Founded by Marxist Manuel Marulanda Velez in 1964, the FARC began as one of these self-defense organizations grounded in communist sentiment and support of the rural laborers and peasantry, which organized and armed in military fashion to preserve their cause and their existence.⁵³ Based initially in the remote, ungoverned areas of southern and eastern Colombia, the FARC employed classic Maoist phase one guerrilla warfare—“organization, consolidation, and preservation of regional base areas situated in isolated and difficult terrain.”⁵⁴ From these vast swaths of heavily forested, ungoverned sanctuaries, the FARC launched ambushes of military units and conducted kidnappings, bombings, and extortion to assert their political resolve while meeting their logistics needs. Nearing the height of the FARC’s power in 1999, Colombian President Andres Pastrana ceded a 42,000 square mile *Zona de Despeje* (translated as clear zone), to facilitate peace negotiations.⁵⁵ The officially acknowledged FARC safe heaven represents only a portion of the total area where the FARC maintained a presence. Figure 5 depicts the areas under FARC and FLN control in 1999— about half the territory of Colombia.

⁵² Onwar.

⁵³ Forrest Hylton, 57.

⁵⁴ Global Security, “Colombia – Insurgency.”; Mao Tse-Tung, 20.

⁵⁵ Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs; U.S. Policy Towards Colombia*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), 137

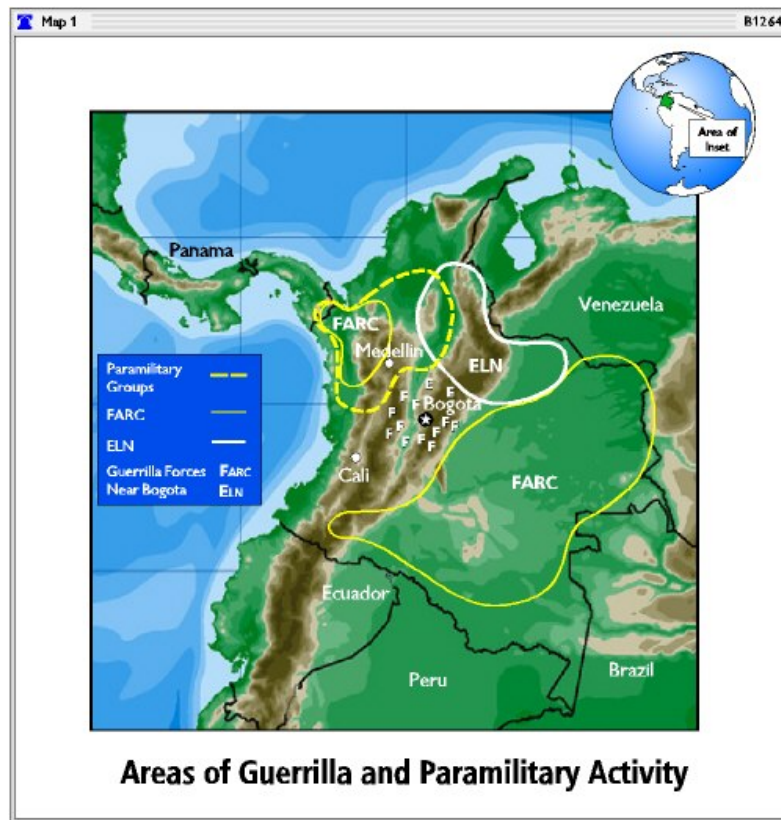


Figure 5. FARC, ELN and EUC Controlled areas in 1999⁵⁶

The tenuous peace settlement in Colombia achieved few, if any positive results—serving only to give the FARC freedom of action to train and build in strength for future battle unimpeded in the Southern Central Colombia clear zone. Negotiations were futile as the FARC launched 170 attacks in the month following a United Nations mediated cease-fire agreement. Talks abruptly ended in February 2002 after the FARC hijacked an airliner and took former Senator Jorge Eduardo Gechem Turbay hostage. President Pastrana reopened the war against the FARC by ordering attacks against the FARC occupied clear zone and the FARC answered in kind. In a televised address, President

⁵⁶ John Sweeny, “Tread Cautiously in Colombia’s Civil War,” *The Heritage Foundation*, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/1999/03/Tread-Cautiously-in-Colombias-Civil-War> (Accessed February 4, 2010).

Pestrana told his nation, "Now no one believes in their [the FARC] willingness to reach peace."⁵⁷ Stepping up its brutal guerrilla attacks in urban areas, car bombings, and destruction of infrastructure, and kidnapping a presidential candidate, the FARC solidified the need to merge counterdrug and counterinsurgency campaigns together. This drug-funded insurgency, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. of September 11, 2001, influenced the Bush Administration to acknowledge the nexus between counterinsurgency and counternarcotics, and to provide support for both.⁵⁸ From 2001 to 2008, the U.S. contributed \$5.1 billion to assist Colombia in defeating the FARC and the drug trade.

The election of Alvaro Uribe's to the Presidency in May, 2002 began a completely new approach to Colombia's posture towards the insurgency and to the paramilitaries. It came in the form of the *Democratic Security and Defense Policy*, which fundamentally redirected the state's position from negotiating with the FARC to directly challenging the insurgency directly, acknowledging its undeniable link to the narcotics trade and other criminal activity.⁵⁹ The new policy reprioritized the role of the Colombian armed forces, requiring implementation of a counterinsurgency campaign against the well-funded FARC. The goals of the policy, implemented through Plans *Colombia* and *Patriota*, highlight the principles of a successful counterinsurgency strategy.

⁵⁷ Juan Forerro, "Colombian Rebels Hijack Plane and Kidnap Senator," *New York Times*, February 21, 2002.

⁵⁸ Crandall, 138-139.

⁵⁹ Thomas A. Marks, "A model counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC.(Alvaro Uribe Velez, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)," *Military Review*, 87, no.2 (March 2007): 41, [http:// www.latinamericanstudies.org/colombia/Marks_Colombia.pdf](http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/colombia/Marks_Colombia.pdf) (accessed January 27, 2010).

The basic principle behind the strategy is to establish and reinstate the rule of law in Colombia and protect the population. The security strategy takes into account that this is not just a military matter. The policy's objective is to weaken illegal narco-terrorist groups through a variety of political, economic and military means and force a negotiated settlement that leads to a lasting and democratic peace. In order to ensure a State presence – that is, restoring law and order and regaining control over the entire Colombian territory,

—Goals of Colombian Democratic Security and Defense Strategy⁶⁰

One of *Plan Colombia*'s objectives for reversing the FARC's military, political, economic, and territorial power base included a comprehensive plan to reestablish a police presence in previously lawless areas. *Carabineros* squadrons, created to provide state presence in territories reclaimed by the military through its complimentary *Plan Patriota*, showed measurable gains.⁶¹ The campaign commenced in 2003, one year after the FARC's mortar attack on the Presidential Palace in Bogota during President Uribe's inauguration—killing 21 residents in a nearby neighborhood. From mid-2003 through 2004, an aggressive, and largely successful, military push with 17,000 soldiers reclaimed control of Bogota and drove the FARC into the countryside. This was a significant accomplishment in achieving sustainable security, as the FARC was unable to disrupt Uribe's reelection in 2007.⁶² As the military pushed the FARC farther from urban centers, the *Carabineros* filled the void. In 2002, 169 of the 1,099 municipalities in Colombia had no police presence, but by summer 2007, all municipalities had staffed police stations—a very remarkable achievement given the lack of presence a decade

⁶⁰ Embassy of Colombia, "The Uribe Administration's Democratic Security and Defense Policy," http://www.presidencia.gov.co/sne/visita_bush/documentos/security.pdf (accessed January 27, 2010).

⁶¹ GAO report, "Plan Colombia," 45.

⁶² Heather Walsh, "Colombian Guerrillas to Renew Attacks Before Election (Update 3)," *Bloomberg.com*, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&sid=a5pvbIsGO2Fw> (accessed January 27, 2010).

earlier. The *Carabineros* squadrons provide temporary presence until establishment of permanent police staffs. Though responsible for hundreds of miles of territory, the squadrons are holding their own. The U.S. State Department reported that all stations were operational in 2007, which is in contrast to earlier years when the FARC overran stations to gain back territory.⁶³

The FARC's exploitation of vast ungoverned areas mirrors that in much of Central America and Mexico. Perhaps the most prominent parallel for comparison here is the Petén region of northern Guatemala. In a hearing before the U.S. Congress Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Mark L. Schneider, Senior Vice President of International Crisis Group described the dilemma in the region.

Drug cartels have taken up residence in a broad swath of rural Guatemala that extends from the Mexican border to the Caribbean. Government, civil society and diplomats estimated that the cartels dominate 40% of the national territory—the Northern provinces bordering Mexico, down through Coban to the Lake Izabal area on the Caribbean coast, throughout the jungle and Petén, and along the Pacific coastal region. Hundreds of small landing strips, many on private property, dot the countryside throughout those areas and provide easy access to traffickers. Go-fast boats land along the Pacific coast and fishing boats along the Caribbean coast—undaunted by Guatemala's limited naval capacity. Traffickers control municipalities and local authorities by virtue of their coercive power and financial resources. In an increasing number of cases, we are told they are one and the same. These same well-financed and well-armed networks of traffickers also have penetrated into the high echelons of law enforcement institutions.

—Testimony by Mark L. Schneider, Senior Vice President, International Crisis Group⁶⁴

⁶³ GAO report, "Plan Colombia," 45.

⁶⁴ Mark L. Schneider, Senior Vice President, International Crisis Group, "Guatemala at a Crossroads," to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, June 9, 2009.

While FARC violence, murder, and kidnappings continue to some degree today, they are on a major downturn. The U.S. Southern Command's 2008 Posture Statement reports that, since 2003, "homicides decreased by 40%, kidnappings for ransom decreased by 76%, and terror attacks against civilians decreased by 61%—due in large part to the current Colombian Administration's strategy of establishing Security and governance throughout its sovereign territory."⁶⁵ In 1999, the FARC achieved nearly uncontested existence in approximately 55% percent of the country, and by 2000 numbered 15,000-20,000 soldiers in 70 fronts.⁶⁶ In 2009, the severely depleted FARC forces totaled about 9,000, less than half their number from the previous decade.⁶⁷ These and other promising statistics (Figure 6) show more than a glimmer of hope that Colombia is well on the road to defeating the FARC for good.

⁶⁵ Jim Stavridis, Admiral, U.S. Navy, "U.S. Southern Command 2008 Posture Statement," U.S. Southern Command, 15.

⁶⁶ Rabasa and Chalk, 27.

⁶⁷ Stephanie Hanson, "FARC, ELN: Colombia's Left-Wing Guerrillas" Council on Foreign relations, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9272/> (accessed January 20, 2010).

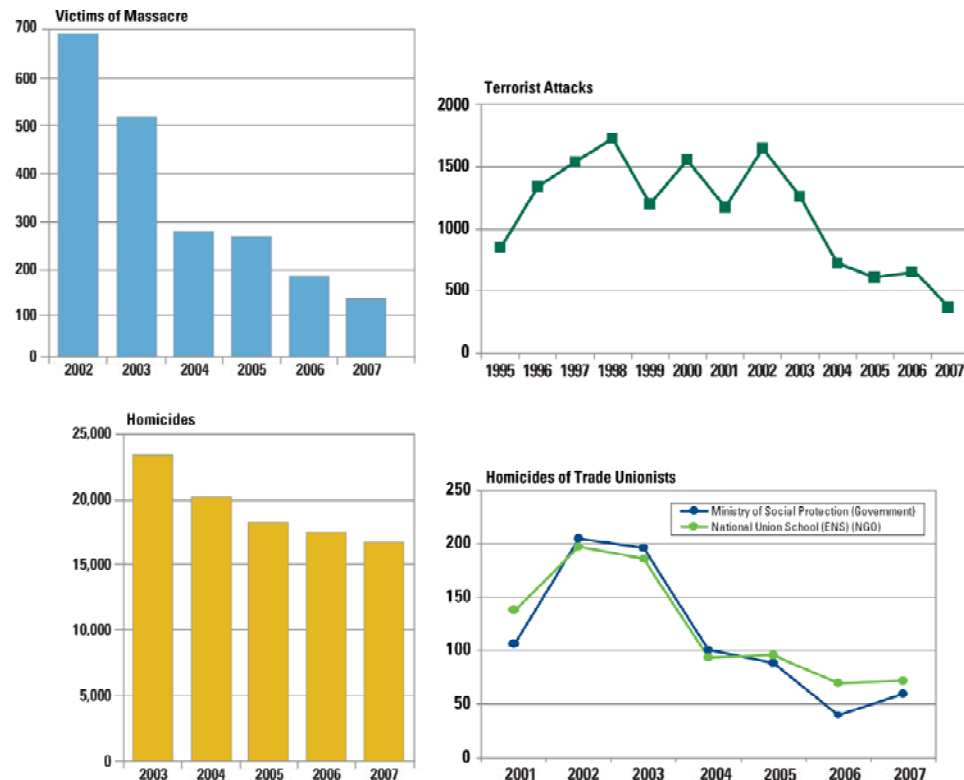


Figure 6. Impacts of Plan Colombia⁶⁸

The DTO – FARC merger, born of mutual convenience and dependence for survival, evolved into a well-organized, equipped, and trained force capable of directly challenging the legitimate government and its military arm. Through the late 1970s, the FARC maintained a loose connection with drug traffickers by providing protection and levying taxes on the sales of cultivated cocaine. However, this association exponentially changed by the early 1990s as the FARC leaders quickly realized the enormous profit potential of the cocaine trade.⁶⁹ The 2005 *Jane's Intelligence Review* reports, in detail, the income generated by the FARC's many illicit enterprises. In 2003, the FARC taxed,

⁶⁸ Office of the President of the U.S., Office of National Drug Control Policy, "National Drug Control Strategy Report 2008 Annual Report," 52.

⁶⁹ Rabasa and Chalk, 25

or directly oversaw 60% of the coca cultivation and processing in Colombia—earning \$612 million from trafficking alone and an additional \$10 million providing processing lab security and taxing growers. In 2008, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration listed the FARC as the most profitable drug organization in the world, responsible for 50% of the world’s cocaine.⁷⁰ The FARC’s illicit enterprises earned a staggering \$1.36 billion in 2003— generating 45% of its profits from cocaine trafficking alone, followed by extortion, and kidnapping at 41.3% and 6.7% respectively.⁷¹

While kidnappings, violence, murders, and extortion are on the decline, cocaine cultivation and trafficking levels have not diminished significantly despite the impressive results of the Colombian government in regaining control of their rural spaces. In reaction to intense pressure of Colombian police and military forces, the coca farmers moved their operations further into the remote areas of Colombia. Farmers dispersed cultivation from large fields in 12 departments of Colombia for numerous smaller plots spread over 24-35 departments to elude detection from aerial surveillance assets.⁷² This unfortunate reality is a testimony to the resilience and adaptability of drug trafficking organizations. However, the hard line approach of *Plan Colombia* is affecting both the FARC and the drug trafficking industry. Adding to diminished troops and safe havens,

⁷⁰ Erin Mulvey, “Associate of Colombian Narco-Terrorist Group Extradited to United States on Cocaine Importation Charges,” U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, News Release (April 22, 2008) <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/states/newsrel/nyc042208.html> (accessed January 20, 2010). U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, “United States Charges 50 Leaders Of Narco-Terrorist FARC In Colombia With Supplying More Than Half Of The World's Cocaine,” News Release (March 22, 2006), <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr032206a.html> (accessed January 20, 2010).

⁷¹ Jeremy McDermott, “Colombian report shows FARC is world's richest insurgent group,” *Jane’s Intelligence review*, Jane’s Intelligence Group, (September 1, 2005,) http://search.janes.com/Search/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2005/jir01322.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=farc%20is%20richest&backPath=http://search.janes.com/Search&Prod_Name=JIR& (accessed December, 2009).

⁷² Ibid.

profits from the drug trade declined from a minimum of \$320 per kilogram in 2003 to \$195 in 2005.⁷³ Continued pressure applied through President Alvaro Uribe's tough counterinsurgency approach show this optimistic trend towards diminishing the FARC to a mere criminal nuisance.

Fundamental to the sustainability of Colombia's security is an effective, legitimate democracy that is resistant to corruption, respects human rights, which *Plan Colombia* is delivering. Perhaps the most challenging components of *Plan Colombia* are its alternative development, assistance to internationally displaced persons, and demobilization and reintegration programs. The success and challenges of these programs have implications to their worth in combating the criminal insurgencies in Central America and Mexico.

A 2009 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) assessment of *Plan Colombia* noted that establishing security is the cornerstone of successful counterinsurgency/ counterdrug campaign.⁷⁴ This priority is outlined in Colombia's "Clear Hold Consolidate" tact from its 2003 Democratic Security and Defense Policy.⁷⁵ To that end, the accompanying social and economic programs were the most successful, if not exclusively, in regions of Colombia deemed secure, thus offering the highest chances of sustainability. Colombia's policy not to provide support where coca is actively cultivated, limits alternative crop programs to economically stable and secure corridors.⁷⁶ Alternative development is likely the heaviest challenge in Colombia despite thousands of farmers benefiting thus far—the incentive to grow coca is too great.

⁷³ GAO report, "Plan Colombia," 45.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1-2.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 48-50.

Nothing even comes close to the profitability of growing coca, which yields 4-12 times the price of any legal crop according to one USAID official.⁷⁷ However accurate the claim, others disagree that big money is the incentive of the growers. According to a United Nations Chronicle Online report, growers earn about 0.6% of the actual profit. The U.N. also claims that the growers prefer legitimate crop if assured its purchase and at a price that would sustain their needs. They prefer peace over profit, and without coca, there is peace.⁷⁸ Likely, the synergy between security and alternative development and employment programs will complement each other. The key element here is that, with regional security established and sustained as a first priority, follow on alternative development has a higher probability of success.

Colombia's intensive consolidation strategy for strengthening state authority and establishment of effective judicial systems and rule of law addressed the underlying challenges of bringing drug traffickers and terrorists to justice while ensuring human rights protection. With support from USAID and the U.S. Justice Department, Colombia made promising achievements in a variety of programs geared towards democracy and rule of law.

Beginning with a human rights worker protection program, USAID helped more than 4,500 workers with equipment such as bulletproof vests and radios, training, and funding for protection programs for public officials and journalists. Additionally, Colombia's Early Warning System, created by USAID, prevented over 200 potential

⁷⁷ Michael Deal, "Written testimony to the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, June 28, 2001," USAID http://www.usaid.gov/press/spe_test/testimony/2001/wty010628.html (accessed January 22, 2010).

⁷⁸ Guillermo García Miranda, "Combating Illicit Cultivations in Colombia; A Shared Global Responsibility," United Nations Chronicle Online, <http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2006/issue3/0306p48.htm> (accessed January 22, 2010).

massacres or forced displacements since 2001. As of late 2007, USAID succeeded in creating 45 justice sector institutions and trained over 2,000 mediators with over 7 million cases handled, which significantly relieved the overburdened court system. Further relieving the strained justice system, USAID trained 1,600 public defenders.⁷⁹

The U.S. Justice Department's contribution was to assist Colombia in its transition to a new criminal justice system similar to the public trial system in the U.S. The system improved resolution of criminal cases in a shorter time—trials that took an average of five years are now reduced to one in the new system. To achieve this, Justice Department trained over 40,000 judges, prosecutors, police investigators and forensic experts. Not only did trial times drop, but conviction rates rose from 60% to 80% with 48,000 convictions in the first two years. Furthermore, the Justice Department provided funding and training to a Human Rights Unit, tasked with investigating and prosecuting targeted attacks, kidnappings, and other human rights violations.⁸⁰

Though there are significant challenges in execution and sustainment of these programs, the most promising influence has been the public's apparent confidence in the rule of law. As of 2008, the new judicial system handled 7.8 million cases while providing timely and easy access to the judicial system. In his testimony before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Charles S. Shapiro, Acting Assistant Secretary for Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs noted, "This is a critical and perhaps unique moment for Colombia. The Colombian people's confidence

⁷⁹ GAO report, "Plan Colombia," 57-58.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 60.

is high. For the first time in over a generation, Colombians can envisage the possibility of real peace.”⁸¹

There is no doubt that Colombia’s strategy to thwart the largest and richest guerilla group in the western hemisphere has achieved stellar results—but significant challenges lie ahead. Most notably, the cost of sustaining the aforementioned programs is high, but necessary if the government is to prevail over such an entrenched, well-funded organization as the FARC.⁸² In a resource-constrained environment, it is imperative to resource those activities that will provide the highest return on investment. In Colombia, the Clear, Hold, Consolidate approach to countering its narco-insurgency offers lessons for Central America and Mexico. First, secure contested areas and safe heavens with combined military and national police strategy. Second, establish permanent presence of the law enforcement and judicial centers in or near previously contested areas. Third, build judicial capacity and rule of law programs that resist corruption and affect responsible, timely adjudication of the law. These three principles of counterinsurgency strategy applied in a systematic fashion as they were in Colombia, achieved the most promising results in decades. That the paradigm of the FARC in Colombia demonstrates parallels to the DTOs in Central America and Mexico suggests a similar approach, tailored to individual circumstances of each country, may achieve improved results in the region.

⁸¹ Charles S. Shapiro, Acting Assistant Secretary for Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, “U.S. Colombia Relations.” Washington, DC, April 24, 2007, 1.

⁸² GAO report, “Plan Colombia,” 2.

CHAPTER 4

DEFEATING THE DTOS: A UNIFIED COIN APPROACH

...where we must work together is to advance our common security. Today, too many people in the Americas live in fear. We must not tolerate violence and insecurity, no matter where it comes from. Children must be safe to play in the street, and families should never face the pain of a kidnapping. Policemen must be more powerful than kingpins, and judges must advance the rule of law. Illegal guns must not flow freely into criminal hands, and illegal drugs must not destroy lives and distort our economy.

—President Obama’s remarks at Summit of the Americas, 2009¹

Today there is unprecedented cooperation and coordination across the U.S. interagency and with the international community to foster security and stability in the Western Hemisphere. As a result, the U.S. and nations of the Western Hemisphere have struck several significant blows to drug trafficking organizations. For the first time since President Nixon declared the war on drugs, counterdrug efforts are having a positive impact on national security as well as the drug trade. Cocaine production in Colombia is less 50% of its capacity a decade ago.² Record disruptions and arrests of drug trafficking kingpins in Central America and Mexico have contributed to reduced availability and purity of cocaine in the U.S.³ However, the DTOs’ mounting violence, corruption, and exploitation of under and ungoverned regions in Central America and Mexico

¹ President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas Opening Ceremony,” Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, April 17, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-summit-americas-opening-ceremony> (accessed 10 November 2009).

² Cocaine cultivation peaked in Colombia at 163,300 hectares in 2000. UNODC’s 2008 estimate for Colombia was 81,000 hectares. While coca cultivation increased in other countries of South America, total cultivation was reduced by 25%; Colombia UNODC World Drug Report 2009, 64.

³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2009*, United Nations Publication, 70.

demonstrates their unrelenting resolve to sustain their livelihoods. History has shown that when merely eliminating a DTO's leadership, new leaders quickly emerge, or the organization fragments into numerous smaller groups. Additionally, DTOs expelled from an area will reemerge elsewhere or return to fill the vacuum left by police or military forces, or adjust their routes where there is less resistance—as described in the balloon affect in Chapter two. An examination of U.S. Drug Control Strategy for disruption of these networks shows that it contains counterinsurgency language such as enhancing security, rule of law, and judicial support, but has a long road ahead towards dismantling drug trafficking networks and organizations. However, drug control strategy and counterinsurgency doctrine, merged to prioritize existing whole of government energies on proven measures, may offer the highest probability of permanently denying the DTOs' ability to operate effectively.

U.S. drug control strategy acknowledges the drug trade as national security threat and a destabilizing force for neighboring governments, but faces significant challenges in both implementation and in utility. Until recently, drug control strategy placed the majority of efforts into law enforcement and interdiction operations to disrupt the drug supply chain. In Mexico, President Calderon took decisive actions against the drug cartels, spawning a stream of inter-cartel fighting, homicides, and confrontations with police and military. In support of President Calderon's bold new approach, the United States signed a multi-year bilateral security agreement, the *Merida Initiative*, to combat the increasingly violent drug trade in Mexico and the Southeastern United States.⁴ While the initiative marks a critical step in fighting the drug traffickers in the border regions of

⁴ U.S. Congress, House, *Merida Initiative to Combat Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime Authorization Act of 2008*, 110th Cong., 2nd sess. (May 22, 2008) 1.

the United States and Mexico, and in foreign relations between the two countries, more work needs to be done to leverage counterinsurgency strategy in the plan.

In that vein, the U.S. government's well intended, whole of government approach could benefit from viewing the problem in the region as being in various stages of criminal insurgency, or instability, depending on the country in question. The Merida Initiative, a State Department led program, is a good start, but critics claim it may be too little, or not aimed at the root cause of the problem.⁵ From a regional perspective, the critics may be right. The combined funding by U.S., Mexico and the governments of Central America signify a growing commitment by both the U.S. and its southern neighbors to combat the problem. However, it may not be enough or focused on the most relevant priorities. As the United States and Colombia learned with Plan Colombia, countering a criminal insurgency comes at a high cost, and is a long-term endeavor.

Aligning Drug Control Strategy with COIN Doctrine

The principle cause for insecurity and instability in Mexico and Central America is the incessant violence and corruption generated by the drug trade. The United States and the international community affirmed this truth in numerous venues and documents for decades. Most recently, the U.S. Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR), for 2010 indicated the U.S. will "work toward a secure and democratic Western Hemisphere by developing regional defense partnerships that address domestic and transnational threats such as narco terrorist organizations, illicit

⁵ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The violent Drug War in Mexico and Lessons from Colombia," Brookings Institute, Policy Paper no. 12, March 2009, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2009/03_mexico_drug_market_felbabbrown/03_mexico_drug_market_felbabbrown.pdf (accessed January 14, 2010), 19.

trafficking, and social unrest.”⁶ Internationally, in December 2008, the United Nations Security Council held a conference specifically to address the global drug trade as a “threat to international peace and security.”⁷ To tackle this international threat, the United States, along with its Mexican and Central American partners, is attacking the problem at every level. The 2009 U.S. Drug Control Strategy states:

The United States confronts these [drug] threats through a combination of law enforcement investigation, interdiction, diplomatic efforts, targeted economic sanctions, financial programs and investigations, and institutional development initiatives focused on disrupting all segments of the illicit drug market, from the fields and clandestine laboratories where drugs are produced, to the streets of our communities where they directly threaten our citizens.

—National Drug Control Strategy, 2009⁸

Specific programs, spread across a myriad of U.S. and internationally supported centers, address these broad areas such as anti-corruption, anti-gang, human rights, economic assistance, and capacity and institution building of judicial, law enforcement, and rule of law systems. The challenge is not whether these programs can achieve some positive results, but in the execution and synergy of this blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts to maximize the impact. These programs require aligned and unified planning across the whole of government with the common goal of containing the criminal insurgency, and addressing its root causes. The long history of conflict throughout Central America has shown that these root causes of poverty, social

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, (February 2010), 61-62

⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Security Council debates ‘devastating impact’ of drug trafficking,” <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2009/December/security-council-debates-devastating-impact-of-drug-trafficking.html> (accessed February 9, 2010).

⁸ *National Drug Control Strategy* (January 2009), 23.

exclusion, lack of education and employment alternatives were the genesis of today's gang problems there.

The U.S. government's holistic view of the problem is promising and lends itself well to a counterinsurgency approach. However, U.S. strategy misses some crucial opportunities and faces significant challenges. Specifically, it does not fully embrace the systematic methods of a population centric COIN strategy, which employs an in-depth assessment of the threat with an understanding of the criminal insurgents' goals, organization and methods.⁹ That DTOs and drug gangs in the Mexico and Central American region exist in different stages of insurgency ranging from subversion and civil disobedience, to semi-conventional armed conflict, requires a tailored effort. The enduring challenge streaming through nearly all programs is the prevalent corruption and violation of human rights that weakens rule of law and public trust in its government.

To address these types of criminal environments that saturate Central America and Mexico, the "Clear, Hold, Build"¹⁰ framework for counterinsurgency emphasizes security first (Clear), followed by protecting the population (Hold) until the establishment of civilian police presence. Finally, gaining support for the government (Build) by maintaining security and rule of law.¹¹ The framework's success centers on gaining and maintaining the support of the population. French counterinsurgency theorist, David Galula, holds that the first of five laws distinctive to counterinsurgency is "support of the population is as necessary for the counterinsurgent as it is for the insurgent."¹² Galula

⁹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, 14.

¹⁰ Joint Pub 3-24, X2

¹¹ Joint Pub 3-24, X-4 – X-7

¹² Galula, 74

asserts that the crux of the problem for the counterinsurgent is that a cleared area must keep the support of the population in order to build political cells and prevent the return of the guerrillas (criminal insurgents). Figure 7 depicts the Clear, Hold, Build Model, showing the general activities in each phase.

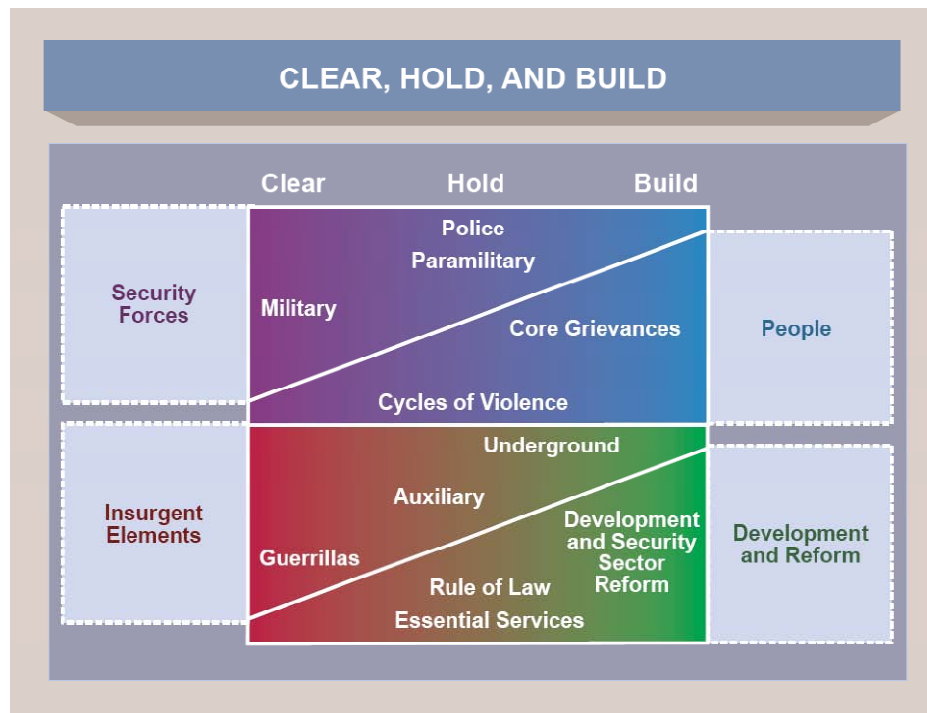


Figure 7. Clear, Hold, and Build Model from Joint Pub 3-24¹³

The importance of this process is no more evident than in the Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaign. General Stanley McChrystal, in his recent counterinsurgency guidance to the International Security Assistance Force, Kabul Afghanistan, reinforces this theory stating, “We will not win simply by killing insurgents. We will help the Afghan people by securing them, by protecting them from intimidation,

¹³ Joint Pub 3-24, X-3

violence, and abuse, and by operating in a way that respects their culture and religion.”¹⁴

The U.S. and, most importantly, its partner nations plagued with criminal insurgency, need to adopt this philosophy, enlightened by hard-learned lessons in Afghanistan, in their fight against drug cartels and gangs.

The objective of the *clear* phase is to gain control of key strategic centers beginning with locations where the crisis is the greatest, and systematically moving to the next center. When applied to drug cartels and gangs, this approach requires the ability to clear the cartels and gangs from an area and provide a stable secure city, establish permanent law enforcement presence, trained, and equipped to sustain peace after military forces depart. The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* also points out that, while establishing security is essential, it may not be a necessary precursor to other programs—that security, economic and political efforts could occur simultaneously.¹⁵ This may hold true in some areas of Central America, but for the most violent cities, political and economic institutions stand little chance without adequate security in place first. This emphasis on security, then institution building clearly stood out in Colombia as evidenced by the successes highlighted in the precious chapter.

For example, anti-gang initiatives and judicial reform, while critical to strengthening regional stability, are not likely to affect positive change in townships under cartel or gang control. The lure of the criminal lifestyle overrides the status quo in a country where 40% of the population lives in poverty and 18% in extreme poverty.¹⁶ In

¹⁴ Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force, Kabul Afghanistan, “ISAF Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance,” http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/NATO_ISAFCommanderCounterinsurgencyGuidance.pdf (accessed February 15, 2010),1.

¹⁵ *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, 23.

¹⁶ Brands, 19.

the town of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, the Gulf Cartel has nearly nullified the local government and is donating food, bicycles, clothing, and toys to residents, and throwing festivals—a difficult hold on the population to break.¹⁷ The Mexican townships of Guerrero and Michoacán, among others, are in similar states of cartel control.¹⁸ In El Salvador, with one of the highest homicide rates in the world, the impact of deadly gangs, like MS-13, inflicts many of the consequences associated with an insurgency.¹⁹ The rampant gangs are increasingly autonomous and organized, establishing their own drug smuggling corridors, destabilizing the democracy, deterring trade investment, committing extra-judicial violence, and displacing fearful citizens—described in detail in a 2006 USAID gang assessment.²⁰

In the *hold* phase of a counterinsurgency, the emphasis is on maintaining continuous security of the populace, while establishing or shoring up the judicial system.²¹ While police and military forces in areas such as the U.S. - Mexico border towns contend with fierce turf wars and confrontations with police and military, some regions of Central America simply lack the will or capacity of local governance and police to protect the population from intimidation, and coercion by gangs and DTOs. In these areas, emphasis on establishing legitimate police forces, breaking the cycle of violence, and bolstering the rule of law and essential services as illustrated in figure 7. Here, anti-corruption and human rights efforts receive the highest attention. Establishing and maintaining security entails both physical security and earned trust of the population.

¹⁷ Brands, 19-20.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, “El Salvador 2008 Crime & Safety Report,” Overseas Security Advisory Council, <http://www.osac.gov/Reports/report.cfm?contentID=79615> (accessed February 21, 2010).

¹⁹ *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment Annex 1: El Salvador Profile.*

²⁰ *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment Annex 1: El Salvador Profile.*

²¹ Joint Pub 3-24, X-6

According to Galula, maintaining an area clear of insurgents requires the support of the population and its submission to law and order. In that vein, it is critical that the population sees a law enforcement and judicial system that denies drug trafficker and gang impunity, while respecting human rights of the citizens. This premise is critical to both reestablishing respectful rule of law for the citizens and in diminishing the allure of criminal gangs and drug traffickers to the local youth.

The negative impact of failing to impose order with respect for human rights is playing out in Mexico as President Calderon is increasingly relying on the military to regain control of towns in crisis from drug trade related violence. Human rights violations have increased since the military became involved under Calderon's new strategy.²² Since 2006, the Mexican military has committed nearly 600 human rights violations including, extrajudicial executions, illegal detentions, torture, stealing from residents during drug related searches, according to a *Washington Post* report in July 2008.²³ Such treatment of the population severely diminishes public support for the military's efforts to rid their cities of criminal insurgents. In the city of Onjinaga, amidst public protests against the military's abuses in their town, Mayor Cesar Carrasco acknowledged his agreement with the military fighting a war against drug traffickers, but wished they would do so with respect for the rights of the citizens.²⁴ To gain the support of the population, the government must completely reverse such violations. To summarize the hold phase in the context of security for the population, Joint Pub 3-24 provides this message to counterinsurgent forces, "The importance of protecting the

²² Brands, 17

²³ Dan Keane, "Mexican Military Losing Drug War Support," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2008.

²⁴ Keane.

population, gaining people's support by assisting them, and using measured force when fighting insurgents, should be reinforced and understood.”²⁵

In the final build phase of the framework, joint doctrine addresses mainly physical rebuilding of damaged and or lost infrastructure and essential services after establishing and maintaining a security. While infrastructure and essential services are either lacking or nonexistent in many rural areas of Central America and Mexico, they are not the result of the criminal insurgency directly. They are residual effects of decades of conflict, corrupt regimes, and faltering economic opportunity—the root causes of the rise in drug trafficking through the region. To address these causes, the 2009 *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, fittingly applies. This groundbreaking publication, signed by the secretaries of State, Defense, and the Administrator of USAID in January 2009, is the first of its kind in over 50 years outside of the Department of Defense. Drafted with input from seven U.S. departments and two agencies, the guide anchors on the principle that, “Counterinsurgency is a blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously contain insurgency and address its root causes.”²⁶

With emphasis on a comprehensive, whole of government approach to COIN, this guide describes four components of strategy combined to enable a government to control its own environment in the long term.²⁷ The guide specifies that all government programs must organize around security, economic development, and information.²⁸ With security established in the crisis areas, the legitimacy of the government and rule of law can then advance. The counterinsurgency guide also expands on the factor of

²⁵ Joint Pub 3-24, X-6.

²⁶ *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1

security to include “Human security.”²⁹ It describes human security as a “complex metric, which can only be measured through the collation of individual perceptions across a community.”³⁰ Human security expands beyond physical security, encompassing factors such as “maintenance of laws, protection of human rights, freedom to conduct economic activity,” and a host of public services.³¹ It is in this process of “Security Sector Reform”³² as described in the counterinsurgency guide, where U.S. and international drug policy and associated initiatives, and programs mirror these factors.

Central America and Mexico have been challenged with low economic freedom and tenuous democracies for decades. International comparisons rate most of the region as “moderately free”³³ economically, with Honduras and Nicaragua in the “mostly unfree”³⁴ category. Factors measured in determining economic freedom include, business freedoms, various financial measures, property rights, freedom from corruption, and labor freedom.³⁵ In terms of democratic freedom, the *Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy, 2008* report describes Mexico and all of Central America as flawed democracies with the exception of Costa Rica, which is rated as a full democracy.³⁶ The democratic scores are based on electoral, functioning government, political participation and culture, and civil liberties.³⁷ The cumulative effects of these socially and economically repressed peoples, exacerbated by violent drug trade throughout the region,

²⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁰ Ibid., 22.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² Ibid., 22.

³³ The Heritage Foundation, “2010 Index of Economic Freedom,” <http://www.heritage.org/index/Ranking.aspx> (accessed February 20, 2010).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit, “The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy 2008,” <http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2010).

spotlight the underlying causes of today's criminal insurgency. By coordinating and synchronizing programs that enhance economic and democratic freedom, coupled with sustained regional human security, Mexico and Central America should experience increased international trade interest and internal economic opportunity—a viable alternative to engaging drug trade.

The Merida Initiative: Unprecedented Cooperation in Need of a Full Commitment

In October 2007, President George W. Bush and President Felipe Calderon announced the *Merida Initiative*, a three-year, \$1.4 billion security cooperation initiative to assist Mexico and Central America in combating drug trafficking, gangs, and organized crime.³⁸ This unprecedented initiative marks the first time Mexico has requested assistance from the United States to strengthen its law enforcement and judicial institutions.³⁹ Merida pledges to confront the trafficking drugs and other illicit goods across the U.S.–Mexico border with a host of equipment and support for administration of justice, fighting corruption, professionalization and institution building and promoting a culture of lawfulness. However, support for Central America is imbalanced, with only 50% of the total initial funding divided among its seven countries. The planned build up in military and civilian institutions supports some components of a counterinsurgency strategy, but lacks a full, long-term commitment. Additionally, the *Merida Initiative* does not consider COIN doctrine within the drug strategy framework, or synchronized across all participating U.S. agencies and host nations.

³⁸ *Merida Initiative to Combat Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime Authorization Act of 2008*

³⁹ Eric, L Olsen, “Six Key Issues in U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/news/docs/Olson%20Brief.pdf> (accessed February 24, 2010).

To be sure, the *Merida Initiative* provides much needed support in key areas that address both immediate security response efforts as well as some of the root causes of criminal insurgency specified in chapter three of this thesis. According to the U.S. State Department, Merida “complements broader efforts by Mexico, the Central American nations, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic to fight criminal organizations and drug trafficking.”⁴⁰ For Mexico, the majority of funding supports law enforcement and security in the form of equipment such as helicopters, surveillance, communications and radar equipment, and law enforcement training. The intent of this portion of support is to build law enforcement capacity and strengthen the military’s ability to assume a greater support role. Additional assistance to enhance the rule of law and strengthen civilian institutions includes a broad range of programs from human rights training, anti-corruption, and drug abuse prevention to anti-gang and alternative development programs.

All *Merida* assistance areas support a whole of government approach, but appear to lack coordination among the interagency and the region as a whole. A recent Congressional Research Service Report noted that the multitude of U.S. federal agencies engaged in assistance activities pose challenges in adhering to a coordinated effort. Each with its own mission priorities and missions, they tend to compete for leadership roles and budgets.⁴¹ Administered by the Department of State and USAID, execution of Merida program may be a significant challenge, with several Departments including the

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Merida Initiative: Myth vs Fact,” <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/fs/122395.htm> (accessed February 24, 2010).

⁴¹ Clare Ribando Seelke, and June S. Beittel, “Merida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues,” Congressional Research Service report for members and committees of Congress, June 1, 2009, 11.

Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of Justice having a role to play. Numerous federal agencies are also stakeholders that must demonstrate significant cooperation across the interagency as well as with supported partner nations.

In Central America, support is nominal when compared to the more than \$1.2 billion in support of Mexico. Most support for Central America mirrors that for Mexico, but funded at only \$405 million for the entire region.⁴² Granted, the criminal insurgency in Mexico has reached crisis proportions, but its neighbors to the south may soon feel its affects as Mexico's heavy pressure squeezes the balloon, forcing DTOs to shift their operations across unguarded borders. Evidence shows that this trend is already underway. In April 2009, a group of the notorious Mexican Los Zetas drug organization members ambushed Guatemalan police officers during a warehouse seizure of cocaine and an arsenal of weapons, including 500 rocket propelled grenades.⁴³ The attack is one of many carried out on Guatemalan soil, signifying a growing unintended effect of Mexico's counterdrug successes. In Guatemala, the police are far from capable of dealing with such highly trained, well-armed organizations as Los Zetas. Stephen Johnson, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs described Guatemala's situation as

...one of most vulnerable countries in Central America. It is in middle of a massive drug trafficking route from the Andes to North American markets. Besides that, its 36-year civil war, legacy of impunity, and attendant problems with human rights abuse imposed a decades-long moratorium on assisting its security forces that now struggle with outdated equipment and meager training. Guatemala's immediate neighbors cannot supply much aid—some have experienced similar political turmoil and all

⁴² *Merida Initiative to Combat Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime Authorization Act of 2008.*

⁴³ Juan Carlos Llorca, "Guatemalan drug czar, police chief arrested," *Miami Herald*, March 3, 2010.

have tiny economies compared to the scope of the problem. Now, violent drug cartels in Mexico are extending their reach southward, taking over territory once controlled by Colombian and local traffickers. Ill prepared for the challenge, Guatemala offers a path of very little resistance.

—Testimony of Stephen Johnson.⁴⁴

This illustration of the fragile Guatemalan state solidifies the premise that a truly regional approach to the criminal insurgency in Central America is essential for the collective success of *Merida Initiative* programs. Without immediate attention to building security and rule of law capacity in Central America, the *Merida Initiative* may further squeeze the balloon south where the cocaine trade is already well established. The *Merida Initiative* signifies an unprecedented commitment from the U.S. and Mexico as well as its southern neighbors in Central America. However, as learned in Colombia and in Afghanistan today, a counterinsurgency campaign requires the full commitment of the whole of U.S. government as well as all nations involved. If even one country in Central America remains vulnerable, it will soon be exploited as the DTOs have proven repeatedly over the last four decades.

⁴⁴ Stephen C. Johnson, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere Washington, D.C., June 9, 2009.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These principles guide our relations within our own Hemisphere, the frontline of defense of American national security. Our goal remains a hemisphere fully democratic, bound together by good will, security cooperation, and the opportunity for all our citizens to prosper.

—National Security Strategy, 2006.¹

The international drug trade is taking a horrible toll on the American people, destroying the lives of millions of U.S. citizens every year. The collateral affects the drug trade also reach beyond the U.S. borders to Latin America as drug trafficking organizations operate in thousands of square miles of trafficking routes, while severely undermining rule of law and destabilizing governments along the way. For decades, the United States and its international partner nations have fought to break this cycle at every level, from demand reduction, to interdiction in the transit zone, to production in South America. Despite these persistent efforts, drug trafficking organizations continue to be successful in the transit zone by exploiting under and ungoverned regions in Central America and Mexico where the long history of conflict has left thousands of poor and socially marginalized generations with little alternatives for employment and are lured by unmatched income from illicit trade. The U.S. and its southern neighbors can benefit from taking a fresh look at the long-standing dilemma by refocusing limited resources through a counterinsurgency strategy.

¹ Office of the President of the U.S., National Security Council, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, March 2006, 37.

Central America and Mexico's History Provides Key Roots of Today's Dilemma

A comprehensive understanding of the roots of today's drug trafficking dilemma is necessary for identifying effective ways to break the cycle illicit trafficking and the associated violence, corruption and subversion that accompanies it. Central America and Mexico's long history of revolutions, insurgencies and civil wars, left thousands of disenfranchised youth and ex soldiers with no viable employment opportunities, leading many turning to the drug trade. The exploitation of indigenous people, initially by the colonial social system, persisting through the decades, caused widespread economic hardship and discontent for the minority elite dominated governments. The need for education, health care and economic development of the poor majority received little priority. This history of impeded social, political, and economic growth, exacerbated through the Cold War focus on anti-communism efforts, created the perfect conditions for illicit trade to thrive. The demise of the infamous Medellin and Cali Cartels of Colombia, coupled with highly successful interdiction campaigns in the Central Caribbean, opened the door for Mexican Drug Cartels and drug gangs to assume a greater role in the drug trade. The U.S. and the governments of Central America and Mexico need to examine the genesis of these drug trafficking organizations and gangs in order to address the roots of the problem.

DTO and Gang Links to Insurgency Provide a New Lens to View the Problem

The roots of drug cartels and gangs in Central America and Mexico are not unlike the core conditions that contribute to insurgency development. Marginalized urban poor with minimal basic services, unemployed and lacking educational opportunities, coupled

with weak judicial and law enforcement systems, are a dangerous combination that can lead to insurgency. However, many analysts and political leaders became accustomed to thinking about the drug trade only as a criminal activity. While drug trafficking organizations are not combatants by definition, and do not seek to overthrow a government to assert their own political will, they do subvert government sovereignty through corruption of officials, indiscriminant violence, and intimidation to ensure freedom of action with impunity.² Regardless of their motive, DTOs employ the same strategy and tactics as insurgents, exacting the same destabilizing affects on government as insurgents. In misidentifying the character of DTOs and gangs, the U.S., Central America, and Mexico overlook critical opportunities to improve their collective efforts. The U.S. could better support its own efforts and those of its regional partners, in combating drug trafficking by viewing it through the lens of counterinsurgency and then applying the tools it offers towards a comprehensive COIN campaign against drug traffickers.

Colombia's Insurgency Offers Applicable Lessons for Central America and Mexico

The astonishing violence from Mexican Drug Cartels, spurred by intense pressure from Mexico's military and law enforcement, is on the verge of severely destabilizing the government and has become a threat to both Mexican and American national security. In Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, funded largely by the drug trade, nearly toppled the government. Plan Colombia, initially launched to fight drug trafficking and promote economic growth, expanded in scope to include

² Department of the Army, *Field Manual 27-10, The Law of Land Warfare*, July, 1956, 20.

counterinsurgency support after the nexus between the FARC and the drug trade blurred the lines between crime and insurgency. Faced with the challenges of vast ungoverned territory, human rights violations of the military, and lacking military and law enforcement capacity, President Uribe turned the tide with emphasis on security and building rule of law and judicial capacity. In counterinsurgency fashion, military and law enforcement forces regained thousands of square miles of FARC controlled territory and began to rebuild. Some analysts condemn *Plan Colombia*, noting little drop in the amount of cocaine cultivated and shipped to American addicts, but the undeniable increased in security, energized economy, and strengthened legal institutions is a testimony to the effectiveness of a systematic COIN effort can succeed. Colombia's strategy to retake control of their sovereign land and work to secure its people can realize similar success if applied in Central America and Mexico. However, it requires the full commitment of the host nations, the U.S. and international community at large to have any real chance for success. Plan Colombia, as in any counterinsurgency, is resource intensive and long-term.

Drug Control Strategy and COIN Doctrine Need to be Leveraged.

U.S. and international drug control policy and counterinsurgency doctrine clearly have similar goals for establishing and sustaining long-term stability in a destabilized region. In light of the two ongoing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is understandable that U.S. political leadership may shy from labeling the drug trafficking battle in Central America and Mexico an insurgency. Nevertheless, the approach to the problem is more important than its label. Identifying the problem as a criminal insurgency sets a new course for strategic planning by enabling use of COIN doctrine that

compliments and focuses the goals of drug control policy. Further, a view of the escalating battle from a counterinsurgency perspective highlights a grave misunderstanding of the cartels and gangs. They are highly organized, skilled fighters with enormous firepower and influence among those they live and operate. Counter-criminal insurgency strategy must account for this fact and apply applicable elements of the clear, hold, and build framework as each applies to specific countries and or towns.

Viewing drug trafficking organizations and gangs in Central America and Mexico as criminal insurgents is imperative to understanding how to deny them their freedom of action. Current enemy-centric attrition battles between drug traffickers and the military and police are at a stalemate leaving new organizations and leaders to emerge to replace the old in an endless cycle. Likewise, a purely population-centric program to reverse the cycle of drugs and violence through institution building and education cannot compete with the lure of a multi-billion dollar industry. National drug control strategies target the right problems, but to achieve success, the U.S. and international partners need to align resources with principles of counterinsurgency, prioritized, synergized, and coordinated by a unified authority to deny drug traffickers their lucrative trade and reestablish rule of law and human security in Central America and Mexico for the long-term.

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LCDR Deuel is a 1994 graduate of U.S. Coast Guard Officer Candidate School, Yorktown, VA. He is a permanent Cutterman with five afloat tours. Prior to attending Joint advanced Warfighting School, He was assigned as Executive Officer, U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BEAR (WMEC 901), homeported in Portsmouth, VA.

LCDR Deuel began his career in 1987 as a Seaman at Aids to Navigation Team Oregon inlet, NC. His subsequent enlisted tours included Cutter WHITE HOLLY (WLM 543), a 133' Buoy tender homeported in New Orleans, LA; Executive Petty Officer of Station Pensacola Florida. Upon Graduation from Officer Candidate School, he was assigned to USCG Headquarters Office of Safety and Environmental Health, Vessel Safety Branch; First Lieutenant and Law Enforcement Officer in Cutter HARRIET LANE (WMEC 903), a 270' Medium Endurance Cutter homeported in Portsmouth, VA; Executive Officer in Cutter DRUMMOND (WPB 1323), a 110' Patrol Boat homeported in Cape Canaveral, FL; Joint Counter Drug Planner Caribbean at Joint Interagency Task Force East (JIATF East) in Key West, FL; Commanding Officer in Cutter NANTUCKET (WPB 1316), homeported in Key West, FL; Supervisor, Atlantic Area, Defense Force East, Fifth Coast Guard District Command Center in Portsmouth, VA.

LCDR Deuel's counterdrug experience includes planning joint combined counterdrug operations and international engagement at JIATF East (now JIATF South) as well as several cutter deployments in support of JIATF South. While deployed, LCDR Deuel participated in three successful drug "busts" in the Caribbean Sea and Western Atlantic Ocean totaling more than 5,600 lbs of cocaine and 1,000 lbs of marijuana, the seizure of three drug trafficking vessels and \$250 thousand in illicit cash, and the arrest of 13 suspected narco traffickers.

LCDR Deuel holds an Associate in Science Degree in Marine Technology from the College of Oceaneering in Wilmington, California. In 2006, he earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Liberal Studies from Excelsior College in Albany New York.