Winning the Psywar In Colombia

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The international press has spent the last decade – and longer – criticizing U.S. efforts to make positive progress in their war on the Colombian drug trade. It surprises no one then, that magazines and newspapers around the globe are swollen with articles attacking Plan Colombia, the latest step in our nation’s effort to promote stability and security in our southern neighbor. Calling it a “Plan de Muerte” – a Plan of Death – press members have leveled accusations of alleged GOC support of vigilante groups, indiscriminate spraying of herbicides near populated areas, and U.S. support for a military with an atrocious record of human rights abuses. If these accusations are true, then we as a nation must seriously consider how much support we should rightfully provide to the hemisphere’s primary supplier of illicit drugs. But before we succumb to Dante’s advice and “abandon all hope”, a serious question begs an answer: Is the United States committing a vast portion of its foreign aid to a corrupt government, or has the world at large been effectively deceived by one of the most effective psychological warfare campaigns in history?

Some military theorists argue that in the information age, war will be less lethal because information-savvy forces will be able to paralyze their opponents without physical conflict. Although at first glance it seems inappropriate to assert this could possibly be the case in Colombia, a study of the results of the FARC’s campaign against the Colombian government suggest otherwise. With minimal use of armed force, the FARC have secured their own internationally recognized homeland, “Farclandina”, eliminated a significant portion of their opposition’s leadership, and inflamed public opinion in both the United States and Colombia against U.S. involvement there. Through the use of its Public Affairs arm, the FARC are winning what we might call the “Battle of the Story”. That is, the side that constructs the most convincing story, truthful or not, will enjoy the considerable benefit of positive public support for their operations. Regardless of what you call it, the FARC are clearly winning this fight. Especially over the past decade, the FARC have managed to win both political and economic support by controlling the story presented to the public.

As a side note, in many of these examples, the FARC will be equally guilty of the crimes they level against their opponents, although this fact often seems lost on the majority of the public – a tribute to the power of information.

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu recommends that rather than attacking the enemy’s forces in the field, a military is better served by attacking his strategy. Psychological warfare can be a powerful weapon to this end, and the FARC have made the leadership of the Colombian military a principal strategic target. The FARC has, over the course of the last several years, focused on attacking the human rights record of the Colombian military. Their most successful tactic recently has been to accuse Colombian military leaders of supporting the paramilitaries (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC) in their attacks.
against suspected guerrillas and guerrilla sympathizers. While placing the Colombian military's leadership on the defensive, they simultaneously demand justice from the government, thus playing their adversaries against each other. The FARC risks nothing, while weakening the already strained relationship between the Colombian government and military.

This tactic has been extremely successful in removing a number of general officers and other high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Defense, while painfully drawing out the vetting process and stifling U.S. efforts to train and equip the Colombian military.

In the midst of this turmoil, the FARC continues to use its "revolutionary army" to violate human rights across the country, including kidnappings, murders, car bombings, and narco-trafficking, often on the backs of child-soldiers they regularly press into service.

The average non-Colombian would be hard pressed to guess how many FARC attacks took place during the year 2000 (approximately 100) or how many police and military were captured and killed (approximately 330 captured, over 300 killed). However, every time the paramilitary forces commit an execution, the guerrilla publicity machine fires out a series of scathing reports about the attack and accuses the military of supporting the operation. This tactic continues to be successful despite President Pastrana's efforts to prosecute paramilitary militias, and especially any of their Colombian military supporters.

The propaganda campaign against the spraying of coca plantations forms another pillar in the FARC's psychological campaign against the GOC and its Northern allies. Knowing that 60% of their income derives from the narcotics trade, the FARC holds an obvious stake in the U.S./Colombian coca-spraying program. The FARC has stirred opposition against spraying among the rural farmers since the program's inception. They have convinced the campesinos that the spraying would not only permanently cripple the productivity of their fields and poison their families, but that the crop substitution programs will not pay them well enough to survive. This campaign has netted the FARC strong support in rural Colombia, especially since any farmers that oppose the FARC, refuse to grow coca, or indicate interest in crop substitution join the ranks of the "desaparecidos," and someone that will grow coca takes over the

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4 Personal communication with Col Higgins, USA, MILGP/CC, Bogota, Colombia (4 April, 2001).


farm. The FARC have even persuaded the NGOs that visit the DMZ that the government is spraying legitimate crops, and that the rashes on the peasant children are from the chemicals deployed by crop-dusters rather than from indigenous plants and insects. In more recent fallout from this campaign, the governors of four of the southern Colombian States toured Washington to criticize the spraying campaign. Again, while attacking their adversary on one front, the FARC perpetuate hypocrisy on another. FARC leaders condemn the spraying campaign with myth and rumor, crying out on behalf of the peasants and the environment, while at the same time using more concentrated versions of the same chemical sprayed from the aircraft to control the weeds in their coca plantations. Experts estimate the FARC puts six times the amount of herbicide into the ground over the course of a crop than the government does. Still, the guerrillas, along with environmentalist NGOs accuse the government of polluting the environment. In the meantime, no one seems to have noticed that the rivers in Colombia's rainforests are dead or dying from the dumping of precursor chemicals like gasoline and hydrochloric acid (used in the production of coca-paste) by the FARC. Indeed, you are more likely to find members of the international community who believe the FARC accusations that the United States is spraying Colombia with anthrax and other biological and chemical agents than environmentalists raging against the FARC's almost single-handed destruction of the rain forests in Colombia. In light of these examples, it is easy to see that the Colombian leadership has been so outclassed in this information war. How could they possibly be so badly beaten by such a hypocritical opponent? And more importantly, how do we turn the tide in this battle before it's too late? The key will be the implementation of an information strategy that puts the Colombian government and military on the offensive rather than the defensive.

To this end, the United States has contracted with the Rendon Group to help the Colombian government overcome their slow start in the Psywar against the FARC with a potent PR strategy. The Rendon Group has been providing public relations consulting to various groups since the Gulf War. They are working to implement a public affairs strategy with the Colombian military that will allow them to fight with at least equal footing against the FARC in the psychological warfare arena. The Group's first task involved the difficult task of forging a joint public relations team from amongst the military services. Inter-service rivalry has been a divisive factor within the Colombian Ministry of Defense for some time. Competition for scarce assets has kept joint efforts to a minimum in the past. The joint PA team represents another step taken by the MINDEF to promote cohesion between the Army, Navy and Air Force. It's successful formation has resulted in coordinated press releases by the services, reduced the amount of negative press the military receives, and will provide the cornerstone of a

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9 Personal Interview with Robert Hinkle, 5 April, 2001.
successful image improvement campaign. With the services finally working together on what story to provide to the public, the Rendon Group is now focusing on teaching them when to provide it, how to tell it, who to tell it to, and how often to repeat it. For example, if the FARC complains of the spraying of children with pesticides, the Colombian military cannot (as it has done in the past) wait up to 3 days to counter the accusations of the guerrillas. The military must provide a convincing counter-argument on the same day. Even better, if the story is released later in the day, the pro-Colombian story can run in the press over a two day period, expanding the amount of air time the story receives. And the story can’t be a simple categorical denial of the guerrillas’ assertions. The public needs to be told that the incident either didn’t happen, has been exaggerated, or comes from a completely incredible source. Credible medical references to the government’s story should be offered to the public, along with an appropriate sprinkling of other details that make a story believable to the public. The Rendon Group will also be encouraging the COLMIL to get their “stories” out to the press before the FARC issues press releases on the same topics. The second story will almost always be perceived as being reactive to the first story, making the teller look defensive and less credible. The Rendon Group will also be encouraging the MINDEF to control press access to key military officials. Currently, the press can roam the CAN (Colombian Pentagon) almost at will, ambushing generals with questions they are not prepared to answer, and making the military leadership look rather incompetent. Although this is certainly not the case, the resulting image is the only one the public sees, and the FARC does nothing to discourage it. By scheduling regular press conferences and preparing the leadership involved with the appropriate facts beforehand, the military could take major steps forward in improving their public image. Certainly, the Rendon Group consultants in Bogotá have their work cut out for them, but the battle is only beginning.

Even as we speak, key issues are stewing in the public mind, and the MINDEF needs to do its part to make sure the public sees the “right” side of the story. These situations include the prisoner exchange talks and the continued extensions of the FARC’s DMZ. On a broader scale, the entire peace process strategy needs to be more clearly communicated to the public – and with a favorable light on the government’s image.

Successfully spinning these stories may be the first real obstacle the new Public Affairs team faces. From a grand strategic perspective, however, the problem must be dealt with cooperatively by all the major pieces of the national government. If the military and political leadership can get their story to the press in a coordinated fashion along the guidelines established by the Rendon Group consultants, perhaps the tide of the psychological war in Colombia can be changed after all.

\[10\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[11\text{ Ibid.}\]