



INFO MEMO

AUG 13 1963

EF-6514

1-037011359/ISA

220

USDP KARLSRUHE

FROM: Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs
(Mr. Peter W. Rodman, 695-4351)

You may find the attached article useful for your trip to Colombia. It is one of the more insightful pieces I have seen on why the FARC is losing and Uribe is winning.

- The author is Joaquin Villalobos, the former top commander of the FMLN communist guerrillas in El Salvador. As they say, "it takes one to know one".
- Villalobos is now working on a PhD at Oxford, and is a consultant to the Colombian Army.

Villalobos explains why the FARC's descent into drug-trafficking and terrorism allowed Uribe to "create political unity and a combative morale in society".

- Indeed, polls show that less than 1% of Colombians support the FARC. By contrast President Uribe's approval rating has been steady at 70%, while the Colombian military has an 83% approval rating.
- The loss of legitimacy means the FARC cannot adapt, and is mired in losing "strategies of convenience."
- Casualties, desertions and the loss of mobility are fatal under these conditions.

UNCLASSIFIED

U13804 / 03

COLOMBIA

Why the FARC Is Losing

By Joaquin Villalobos

Joaquin Villalobos is perhaps the man who knows the most about the insurgent struggle in Latin America. He knows war from the inside out, since as Commander of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), he designed the military strategy that permitted this guerrilla organization to seize the capital of El Salvador and to press for a negotiated solution. He also led the negotiations with the government that transformed El Salvador. Today, he is a prestigious analyst at Oxford University who gives conferences on conflict resolution and security throughout the world.

Weeks before the War in Iraq, publications worldwide gave space to in-depth articles that portended a military and humanitarian catastrophe that never occurred. In Colombia, when the demilitarized zone was abolished, there was talk of "all-out war" and of many other things that also did not happen. Perhaps, for Colombians, the chaos of terrorism and their sharp critical spirit made it difficult for them to see that they have been winning the war against the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] for some time.

Despite the intensity of the violence in Colombia, the FARC's military and political efficiency and development are a far cry from that of other Latin American guerrillas. The FARC have existed for 40 years, but it was not until less than 10 years ago that they seriously challenged the State and less than five years ago that the state decided to confront them seriously. The FARC are old, but the conflict is actually new. Although the Colombian State does not have a very good record, recent governments, pressured by external and internal factors, have made strides in winning legitimacy. They are accepting mistakes, fighting against impunity, and learning how to use force within a legal framework. In the history of Latin America, the Colombian State is the one that has achieved the most national and international legitimacy in its struggle against the insurgency, and the FARC is the most illegitimate guerrilla organization the region has known.

After the offensive power this group demonstrated between 1995 and 1998 with attacks on military facilities, such as Las Delicias, Patascoy, and Puerres, the FARC suffered severe military debilitation. The Colombian Armed Forces gained response capability, and guerrilla operations diminished drastically. Now, the FARC cause few military deaths, take few prisoners, are not requisitioning arms, and are no longer capable of taking positions. They suffer constant defeats, have numerous desertions, and their kidnappings are on the decline.

The guerrilla lost the strategic initiative when it was not able to respond to the Army's air domain or mobility. In addition, however, it has not managed to substitute large operations for efficient, sustained combat by numerous small units that might do significant military damage to the State.

In El Salvador, as a result of a similar situation, the guerrilla maintained the strategic initiative and expanded its domain and territorial presence, fighting daily with small units that conducted dozens of ambushes and raids, while commando forces attacked large garrisons in nighttime operations that caused hundreds of casualties.

The change from one modality to another in El Salvador took several months. In Colombia, the FARC have not been able to regain the initiative in five years. They have not been able to deploy their strength in a disciplined manner, because that requires a level of political skill that FARC commanders have not attained.

It is evident that they are successful at ambushes or sabotage operations, but that activity is meager if one considers the supposed number of guerrilla fighters and the number of available targets in Colombia. The FARC's military activity is sporadic, geographically disorganized, and qualitatively poor. Furthermore, drug trafficking makes it impossible for them to follow a truly strategic plan. Their men are more dedicated to seeking money than to military fighting.

The FARC, drawing on Central America's experience, changed strategies in the early 1990s. This turnabout and resources from coca permitted them to operate more offensively, but obliged them to commit to a conception of war that requires great political skill and must be won or lost. This assumes a more dynamic notion of time and a morale based on an idea of victory and of a short-term ending. The FARC, who felt strong at one time, abandoned their old strategy of survival and became vulnerable again. If they fight, they suffer defeats, and if they do not fight, their men desert, as has already been occurring.

If it is true that they have fallen back during the current government, then in four years, they will have fewer men, less territory, lower morale, and greater disadvantages. It is for that reason that the FARC, unable to respond to the army's reorganization, forced to maintain an image of victory and of strength, and in need of recovering the initiative, incorporated outright terrorism into their plans.

The dangers of terrorism

Some have confused the FARC's terrorism with urban warfare, and believe that this is a strategic risk that can change the correlation of forces and bog down the conflict. Nevertheless, in a war without religious, ethnic, or nationalist motivations dividing the people, terrorism is suicide. There are no ideas that justify terrorism, but ideological or political motivations or social differences are the ones that justify it the least. There is no hatred in Colombia that permits such extreme lack of regard for innocent civilian victims, regardless of sex or age. A homogeneous society closes the space and turns terrorism around. That is why terrorism has not been common among Latin American guerrilla organizations as it continues to be in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

With the exception of the shining path of Peru, and now of the FARC on quite a larger scale, the rest of Latin America's guerrilla groups did not resort to terrorism, although they could be accused of causing collateral damage and violating human rights. They never considered massive and indiscriminate killing of civilians, even if they had been millionaires. Nevertheless, in the El Nogal club incident alone, the FARC killed 36 civilians, wounded 160, and could have killed more than 500. From the 26 July movement of Cuba, in which no kidnappings occurred, to the arrival of sub-commander Marcos of Mexico, who speaks of "armed non-violence," Latin American guerrillas always sought to emulate Robin Hood more than Osama Bin Ladin.

As long as terrorism exists, it will cause chaos in Colombia but will never give the strategic advantage to the FARC. Terrorism is provoking the dismantling of the guerrilla organization's urban apparatus and has permitted the government to create political unity and a combative morale in society. Support from the authorities will tend to increase due to the need to protect collective security and to fight a foreign power that threatens everyone. Rejection of the FARC is what has generated 80 percent of support for the Army and more than 70 percent for President Alvaro Uribe.

The idea of a large guerrilla offensive, as occurred in the capital of El Salvador in 1989, is not possible, plainly and simply because the FARC do not have sufficient political control of the territory on the outskirts of the cities. They do not have a highly active political and military front in the cities, nor have they demonstrated the ability to simultaneously coordinate their forces, and they do not have a large-scale war plan. The guerrilla offensive in El Salvador entailed bringing 7,000 fighters in secret to urban targets and an idea of leading a maneuver with forces that acted simultaneously. The approach was possible because there were dozens of collaborators in networks built by political activists from the guerrilla organization. If the FARC were to attempt to penetrate

Colombian cities on their own strength, they would surely suffer a strategic defeat.

The FARC have replaced combative morale with money, and politics with drugs, and this is self-destructive. Excess money in a guerrilla organization creates an unfavorable balance in the relationship between risks and benefits, because it leads to the avoidance of risks and to replacing moral benefits with material ones, thereby invalidating the spirit of sacrifice. That explains the FARC's terrorism and their repeated and widespread use of gas cylinders, despite the fact that they kill only civilians. This is not economy of strength, but a reduction of risk to their men at the cost of increased risk to civilians. Convenience permeates the entire chain of command, from strategies to operations, discouraging any sense of heroism. "Human bombs," whether deceived or forced into driving automobiles loaded with dynamite, are indicators of this phenomenon.

There is no reason for the FARC to be concerned about doing any serious political work if they have to attend to the most important coca production in the world. Matters that are so basic to a guerrilla force, such as armed propaganda, are absent in Colombia. The FARC's propaganda comes out of Europe via the Internet. The guerrilla organization's morale is weakening rapidly and, to the extent that government forces strike and increase the risks, the FARC are losing men not through fighting, but through desertion.

One cannot discount that they could still carry out important military operations. Nevertheless, victory in war is measured in captured armaments, prisoners, desertions, directly counted casualties, an increase in forces, the number of offensive and defensive operations, support of the people, and terrain conquered. Those indicators clearly show that the FARC are being defeated, when only 15 months ago, they had ample territory, international recognition, a winning image, and political militancy. From there, they moved from the sublime to the ridiculous.

How might the war end?

The only thing that could change the correlation of forces in Colombia is if the FARC received direct support from a neighboring government, which would mean covert logistics operations on a grand scale and a nearby rearguard. This would not put the government at risk, given the guerrilla group's weakness, but would increase its capacity to do damage. For now, it is a well-dressed guerrilla organization with a lot of money, but armed only with rifles and homemade explosives. Its logistics can only come from the black market, which does not guarantee

a regular supply. Some believe that the possession of anti-aircraft missiles could give them the advantage, but that implies solving the difficulty of obtaining them in sufficient number, bringing them into Colombia with adequate care, training personnel to use them, and determining their tactical use. Assuming all the above were surmounted, if the use of the missiles were not sustained and effective, their effect would be temporary. And anti-aircraft missiles do not permit gaining ground on an army that is increasing its infantry.

In conclusion, the FARC cannot change the military correlation, or overcome their political incapacity, or emerge from international isolation. There is a growing tendency of European and Latin American governments to declare the FARC terrorists. That includes the leftist governments of Lula in Brazil, Gutierrez in Ecuador, and Lagos in Chile. This is a consequence of the fact that terrorism and drug trafficking have turned the FARC into a global threat.

It is possible they could cease to be a military threat in the medium term, but they could survive longer as a violent criminal force linked to drug trafficking. Taking into account that a guerrilla force is, in essence, an apparatus that needs to control territory and people, the component most likely to strategically weaken the FARC would be if the state took permanent control of the territory. That is why peasant soldiers and informer networks are the guerrilla's main concern. FARC commanders can deal with temporary raids by the army, but an organization of forces of a territorial nature leave them without a population and mere existence in empty territory is harmless.

In the short and medium term, it is foreseeable that the offensive strikes by government forces will be more and more frequent beginning with the intelligence that territorial control provides and the advantage of possessing mobile forces. This, along with the propaganda war, will increase the number of desertions. The guerrillas will be increasingly obliged to react politically, militarily, and psychologically to what the government does, as is already occurring.

Under that condition of the state's strategic advantage, there will certainly be mistakes and even tragedies, such as the assassination of kidnap victims, and perhaps there will never be a final military battle, but rather a diluted victory without political recognition. In Colombia, the elections and engaging in criticism take priority over the war. At the moment when the FARC are defeated, maybe no one will applaud the government. The war could survive after the convenient death of the electoral battle, because that is how democracy is. None of this contradicts the possibility of negotiation, since that is always a result of force. They are complementary rather than alternative

paths with different languages. It does not matter if the parties are called terrorists and oppressors one day and rebels and government the next.

In El Salvador, negotiation was possible after the guerrillas fought for 12 days in the capital, when, in desperation, the Army killed six Jesuit priests and the guerrillas' anti-aircraft missiles began taking down fighter-bombers and helicopters continuously. It was then that the Salvadoran government accepted the United Nations' intervention, which the guerrillas had been demanding, and it was then that negotiations were conducted, an agreement reached, and a constitutional reform approved that forever separated the Salvadoran Army from politics, after reducing it and purging it of its entire high command.

There is an inverted symmetry in the two cases. In El Salvador, it was the guerrillas who requested the participation of the United Nations, the return of the refugees, the humanitarian agreement. The guerrillas were the ones who made all the proposals for negotiation. That is exactly what the Colombian government wants and the guerrillas are rejecting. The FARC, by not taking advantage of the opportunity to negotiate with the previous government, left the state no other path than to force a negotiation by means of the full use of military, police, political, juridical, and international forces, which would deepen the isolation and debilitation of the guerrillas. That negotiation will perhaps be fragmented, gradual, and local, depending on how long it takes the guerrilla command to understand that they have no alternative.

The FARC justify their actions as a struggle for the poorest of the poor; however, they have generated an overwhelming movement of public opinion towards a demand for security, displacing the debate on a social agenda. Thus, they have become a reactionary group that is fundamentally damaging the leftist political forces, which want the needs of the poorest to be a priority in Colombian politics. Paradoxically, the FARC's defeat would signify an advantage for the left.

When a FARC cache of \$14 million was found, the main problem was not the soldiers who kept the money, but rather the confirmation of the profound moral decay of the FARC resulting from drug trafficking. The possession of exorbitant amounts of money contrasts with the need to kill many civilians to bring about one military casualty. They refuse to free soldiers and police officers, which are poor people; they kidnap children, force innocent people to become human bombs, and believe that the massive and indiscriminate killing of human beings is an act of war.

There is no doubt that the Colombian guerrillas' biggest mistake has not been political or military, in which case they might have been saved. Their big error was breaking with their own ethics, getting involved in drug trafficking, and allowing money to lead them to lose the war, their ideology, their heads and their hearts.

* SEMANA requested this article from Joaquin Villalobos and it is part of a more extensive text to be published soon by the magazine, quorum, under the title, "the FARC are losing the war, their ideology, their heads and their hearts."