

Former Members' Perspectives are Key to Impacting the FARC

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Former Members' Perspectives are Key to Impacting the FARC

Abstract

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP or FARC) is one of the world's longest surviving insurgency groups. They have worked endlessly to topple the Colombian Government since 1964. [1] The group began like many anti-government socialist groups did at the time, in the shadow of Fidel Castro's Cuba. The FARC's story however, is different from most insurgent groups due to their longevity and ability to survive. Their flexibility has allowed them to remain active and adapt to environmental changes. Since Colombia remains a major world producer of cocaine, with the FARC being the leading producer, this group's eradication is a major responsibility of the world community.

Interviews conducted in Bogota July 7-17, 2012 revealed evidence that the FARC operates much like a secular cult. The structure of its internal operations, and how members relate to each other and to leadership are similar to traits in religious cults. Examining these traits may shed light on how to better strategize military and civil forces fighting not only the physical attributes, but also the psychological ones to resist the FARC and similar groups.

[1] This date is debated among scholars as the FARC claims inception in 1964, the date of Operation MARQUETALIA, although they did not organize themselves as the FARC until 1966 during the Second Guerilla Conference.

Introduction

Colombia is a country that has been marred by violence for the better part of the last sixty years. There are many reasons the violence has permeated, but at the root, government corruption and oppression of the populace in the early part of the twentieth century was the cause. Patrician landowners did not allow the lower classes to rise in what can arguably be called an enslavement of the lower class. Distrust, and in some cases, hatred of the Colombian Government was fueled by failed national policies and brutal military atrocities like the 1928 Colombian Army massacre of striking banana workers.¹ Furthermore, lower class disenchantment was intensified by an increasingly disproportionate allocation of the country's natural resource ownership by the ruling elite. Even after the first modern agrarian and labor reform in 1936, disparity was still rampant throughout the country.² Available statistics from 1960 indicate that the ruling elites, only 1.7 percent of the population, owned 55 percent of the arable land. In contrast, 62.5 percent of the country's peasant farmers subsisted on less than one percent of the national territory suitable for agriculture.³ The peak of this disparity came in the period from 1946-1953 simply known as *la violencia* (the violence).

La violencia began with heavy-handed tactics by the newly elected conservative government in 1946 against liberals.⁴ Quickly, the violence developed into mounting casualties at the hands of government forces. Reported statistics from the *la violencia* period show that the brutality grew from 22,210 deaths in 1948, when the government began keeping track, to a height of 25,125 in 1951.⁵ Therefore, according to available data, approximately 41 percent of all deaths in the nation in 1951 were due to *la violencia*.⁶ The attention from *la violencia* spurred famous Argentine physician and revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara to visit the nation in 1952. He later wrote in a letter to his mother "there is more repression of individual freedom [in Colombia] than in any other country we've been to."⁷

Responding to the violence waged by the government, the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) began a "contradictory balancing act with regard to its relations to the armed peasants and to the Soviet Union."⁸ For instance, the PCC openly denounced violence while "covertly supporting the self-defense groups in the countryside."⁹ Unfortunately, May 27, 1964 was the day that changed Colombia forever. On this day, the U.S.-backed counter-communist operation in the Colombian town of Marquetalia known simply as Operation MARQUETALIA was launched.¹⁰ The purpose of Operation MARQUETALIA was to support the U.S. Latin American Security Operation (known as Plan LASO) and undertake "paramilitary, sabotage and or terrorist activities against known communist proponents."¹¹ The plan was to encircle the town utilizing 16,000 Colombian troops supported by U.S. supplied B-26 bombers targeting forty-eight armed peasants.¹² Unfortunately, the plan was a complete failure and all 48 peasants escaped. These men two years later established themselves during the Second Guerilla Conference officially as the FARC.¹³

¹ Leech, Gary, *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency* (New York: Zed Books, 2011), 7.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Roldán, Mary, *Blood and Fire: la violencia in Antioquia, Colombia 1946-1953* (New York, NY: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

⁶ Unfortunately due to a lack of data, it is impossible to discern other violent deaths from those the government claims are from *La Violencia*.

⁷ Leech, Gary, *The FARC*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ Roldán, *Blood and Fire*, 7.

¹⁰ Leech, Gary, *The FARC*, 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

The Rise of the FARC

Although the FARC somberly recalls Operation MARQUETALIA, their actions in the years since have shunned the population they are attempting to sway. FARC activity since their inception includes but is not limited to kidnapping, hostage-taking, narco-trafficking, assassinations, car-bombings, and the development of a military able to strike the Colombian security forces. Showing little regard for civilian casualties, FARC targets include areas frequented by civilians such as shopping centers and malls.¹⁴ Their strength grew and by 1997 the FARC defeated the Colombian Army in several battalion-sized battles, marking the first time “a modern Latin American army was successfully beaten by such irregular formations in the field.”¹⁵ In fact, the group grew so powerful that by 1998 the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed “if nothing changed, FARC could take over the country in five years.”¹⁶

However for Colombia the DIA assessment did not materialize in part due to the installation of a new government under President Alvaro Uribe in 2002. Uribe’s administration changed tactics allowing amnesty for those who wanted to leave, and created police forces in all 1,099 municipalities.¹⁷ These actions not only stopped the growth of the FARC, they also began to reverse the FARC’s strength. By 2009 Uribe’s successes were clear, homicides were down 40 percent, kidnappings 83 percent, and terrorist attacks 76 percent.¹⁸ However, while Colombia is no longer under threat of becoming a failed state, the FARC is far from benign. In fact, more soldiers and police were killed in 2009 and 2010 than during the height of the strife in 2002.¹⁹ Bearing this in mind, the importance of the problem cannot be understated since the FARC is targeting law enforcement elements in the nation. This is especially true since the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) assesses that the group maintains approximately 8,000 fighters, and the FARC still recruits.²⁰



Some in the Colombian population see the FARC as strength against oppression. This photo shows the entrance to the Colombian National Pedagogical University in Bogota with FARC graffiti. Note the Colombian flag symbolically incarcerated inside the U.S. flag.

(Photo taken by the Author, July 12th, 2012)

¹⁴ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Colombia: Crime in Bogotá and Cali, activities of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army in those cities, government actions to combat the activities of these groups, and protection offered to victims.* (New York, NY: UN Human Rights Watch, 1999), available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a7040aac.html>.

¹⁵ Marcella, Gabriel, *Democratic Governance and the Rule of Law – Lessons from Colombia* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009), 16.

¹⁶ Priest, Dana, *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America’s Military* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 211.

¹⁷ Marcella, *Democratic Governance*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹ Leech, *The FARC*, 13.

²⁰ National Counter Terrorism Center, *Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia*. NCTC Counterterrorism Calendar 2013, available at: <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/farc.html>.

The Cult of the FARC

While the FARC is a major problem for all levels of Colombian society, their contribution as a major world player in the production and distribution of cocaine highlights their status as a worldwide affliction. However, the principle problem in how to eradicate or negotiate with the group appears to be a lack of understanding about what the FARC is and how it operates. Interviews of former FARC members in Bogota between July 7 and 17, 2012 revealed evidence that the FARC operates as a secular cult with many of the same traits as religious cults. In current academic circles this concept is completely absent. Understanding the complete dynamics of the group and how it operates can shed light on not only on to fight the group, but also how to rehabilitate those who have been involved. This is especially important since the group has been romanticized in popular culture (see photo) as a perceived strength against all oppression.

Data was obtained from interviewed former members of the FARC, demilitarized between 8 and 10 years ago. Some of those interviewed currently help the state work with newly demilitarized FARC members; others work for charities helping demilitarized members. Due to their work with newly separated FARC members, all those interviewed maintain familiarity with the group's current operations. None of those interviewed knew each other, as all worked for the FARC in separate regions of the country. There was no noticed pattern of ethnic background as some were from purely European ethnicity, while others were of indigenous ethnicity or of Afro-Caribbean origins. The common trait, however, was their birth into poverty in regions of the country that rarely see state presence (police, army, courts, state sponsored clinics, etc.). Those former FARC members, now aiding the Colombian Government, were freed under the policies of former President Uribe's campaign to demilitarize terror group members early in his presidency.

Bias

Published in the *Journal of Strategic Security* for the first time are interviews with former FARC members. The interviews of the FARC members were sponsored by the Colombian Government as part of the data collection for a Henley-Putnam University Doctorate of Strategic Security dissertation. The interviews were author-led, conducted utilizing Grounded Theory allowing the participants to guide the discussion, which resulted in the materialization that the FARC had cult-like traits in their day-to-day operations. Since the Colombian Government arranged the interviews, there was a concern these testimonies may have contained some level of bias. However, there were no Colombian 'minders' present for the interviews and the testimonies were at times quite disparaging of the Colombian Army or Police operations. Some of those interviewed no longer have government contact and work for a halfway house charity aiding those leaving the movement. Therefore, the government likely held no influence on them or their testimony. Their negative comments on illicit government activity would not prove favorable to the Colombian Government if published; furthering the assessment there was little bias from the Colombian Government in the interviews. As to the men themselves, their motivation for allowing the interviews came from wanting to let the world know what was happening and what the true FARC is. They saw themselves as victims and wanted to have their stories heard.

Cultic Traits

It is imperative to use universally accepted terminology when examining a group and assigning a trait to them. However, according to Dr. Michael D. Langone, Executive Director of the International Cultic Studies Association "there is no academically accepted definition of a cult."²¹ Therefore for practical purposes, the term 'cult' used here derives its definition from Dr. Walter Martin, a religious scholar and one of the world's most respected scholars on religious cults, as well as secular cultic scholar, Dr. Margret Thaler Singer, a clinical psychologist specializing in cults and former Adjunct Professor of Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley.

21 Langone, Michael, Telephone Interview, January 3, 2013.

Dr. Martin's research indicates that cults are characterized by a "closed mindedness" and a group that is "not interested in a rational cognitive evaluation of the facts."²² The group has a "genuine antagonism on the personal level since the cultist almost always identifies his dislike of the Christian message" because "the clergy of Christendom are obviously the villains...and their theology is to be regarded as untrustworthy."²³ Furthermore, "almost all systems of authority in cult organizations indoctrinate their disciples to believe anyone who opposes their beliefs cannot be motivated by anything other than satanic force or blind prejudice or ignorance."²⁴ Further still, Dr. Martin notes "cults consider that they have freed their adherents from religious exploitation."²⁵ In his experience, Dr. Martin notes that cults "manifest a type of institutional dogmatism and pronounced intolerance for any position but their own" and they maintain a "factor of isolation."²⁶

Although Dr. Martin's research focuses on the traits of a religious cult, his definition has application to non-religious, secular cults like the FARC. Taking religion out of the equation, Dr. Martin's definition applied to the FARC could be characterized as follows:

- An educated group, characterized by close-mindedness to outside ideas
- Not interested in rational evolution of facts; their truth is absolute truth
- Anyone who disagrees with their message has blind prejudice or is ignorant
- A group that maintains a factor of isolation towards non-members
- A group that freed the member from exploitation

In fact, with the exception of the dislike of the Christian message, Dr. Martin's findings are echoed by secular cultic scholar and psychologist, Dr. Margret Thaler Singer. Dr. Singer noted all cults shared many similarities. For example, cult leaders were determined, domineering and charismatic.²⁷ They maintain a double set of morals, as they are to show complete honesty to leadership at the same time as deceiving non-believers.²⁸ Cults appear innovative and exclusive; they claim to change the playing field, offering the only solution to life's problems.²⁹ Dr. Singer continues by noting that "cults tend to be totalistic, or all encompassing, in controlling their members' behavior and also idealistically totalistic, exhibiting zealotry and extremism in their worldview."³⁰ Furthermore, cults require members to undergo a complete metamorphosis from their previous life to become a part of the group, in what some may call a loss of individuality.³¹ Amazingly, each of these points fits perfectly with current FARC internal workings. Using responses from the interviews, they can clearly be seen.

To begin, the FARC is run by charismatic leadership, which according to those interviewed, lure people into the group under false pretenses. Promises of pay, wealth, and a better life are never fulfilled, yet lure new members or parents to allow their children to join. A general lack of supplies also means promises of three hot meals and new uniforms go unfulfilled.

Although one of the enticements for these people is the promise of a complete education, this is only slightly fulfilled. FARC members constantly read and educate themselves with socialist concepts required by the FARC to ensure their members become well-educated persons. However, this education is skewed because while the FARC teaches traditional academic principles, these principles are also used by the group to buttress FARC concepts. For example, one of the interviewees - 'William' quoted from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and Clausewitz's *On War*. He also quoted the economic theory

²² Martin, Walter, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship Publishers, 1977), 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25, 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁷ Singer, Margret, *Cults in our Midst: The Continuing Fight against their Hidden Menace* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2003), 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*

of John Maynard Keynes. The FARC taught these concepts to him using incomplete data and texts to understand how the non-socialist world was wrong. Keynes' theories were used to show capitalism and how it was flawed, again using FARC rationale.

This education also sheds light on one of the cornerstones of FARC operations; propaganda. FARC members are required to study socialist and FARC propaganda. It was part of what all the interviewees called brainwashing or mind-control. This follows the totalistic requirement of the group towards its members mentioned by Dr. Singer.³² This is also an example of the "close mindedness" within the group noted by Dr. Martin's research.³³

While the interviewed ex-members all spoke about the propaganda and the non-torturous mind-control the FARC performed, it became evident that this followed Dr. Martin's second point; *cults are groups not interested in rational evolution of facts*. The FARC obligated members to read propaganda for at least two hours daily. The purpose of this was for the information to become second nature. It was one indirect way for leadership to control the group. True or not, propaganda became what was spoken, heard and read, and reinforced the concepts in this isolated society. Any concepts outside of FARC accepted theories were considered irrational, false and could not be uttered. While it can be argued this occurrence is similar in some cultures, it is foreign in Colombia's democracy that relishes increased and varied information. It is therefore an example of how the FARC culturally changes the person.

The concept that non-FARC theories should not even be spoken follows Dr. Martin's cult principles, as his research noted that within cults anyone who disagrees with the message has blind prejudice or is ignorant. The mind-control/propaganda ensures the member will absorb the FARC principles but also ensures any disagreement is kept to oneself. Keeping ones' dissenting ideas closely held actually follows two cult traits, close-mindedness, as well as, maintaining a factor of isolation.

The loss of individuality is both an element of the isolation FARC members' experience, as well as, the close-mindedness the FARC requires. Isolation is requisite for the FARC's survival. This is done to keep agents of the government from infiltrating their ranks. This is also performed to insulate the group and its' members from the outside world -- a requirement for mind-control and making members accept that the FARC's way is the only way.

The close-mindedness of the FARC is further evident in the fact that, as noted by those interviewed, FARC truth is the only truth. While FARC members are not allowed or even encouraged to explore opposing views. In the end, there cannot be any strength to opposing arguments. Furthermore, a requirement to join the FARC is a loss of individuality that also follows the FARC requirement to completely commit to the group, a concept noted by Dr. Singer's research. Loss of individuality includes use of an entirely new name and loss of contact with all family, friends and acquaintances. Essentially, the FARC attempts to erase all traces of the member's former life. One former member, known in the group as "Nicholas" stated that after he entered the group he could no longer use the word "I."³⁴ He had to respond to any personal question with "we." For instance, he stated, "if a member asked me if I needed more food I would have to respond 'yes, we would.'"³⁵

Both the close mindedness and "mind-control" of members of these groups fall into what Dr. Singer calls "thought-reform."³⁶ Examples of persons who have used thought-reform in the past include Chinese Communist Party Leader Mao Tse-tung (or Mao Zedong) who developed it as "thought struggle" in 1929 as his model to re-educate Chinese citizens.³⁷ The FARC's use of thought reform to mold the new members into what they want, a willing supplicant, achieves the ultimate goal of control over the person.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Interview with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 12, 2012.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Singer, *Cults in our Midst*, 52.

³⁷ Ibid., 53.

As Dr. Singer notes, “the usual outcome of thought-reform is that the person or group gains almost limitless control over the subjects for varying periods of time.”³⁸

Dr. Martin identified Christianity as a threat to cults. This also appears true when examining the cult of the FARC, as they target men and women of the cloth. Since at least 2005, one of the FARC’s formal missions has been to kill clergy. Colombian government intelligence reports from September 2005 indicated the FARC leader Jorge Briceño (real name: Víctor Julio Suárez Rojas — aka Mono Jojoy) ordered his men to kill priests. The assessment, which came from an allegedly taped speech of Briceño speaking to his troops, also indicated the FARC’s rationale to kill was because “all of these clerics are agents of the enemy or propagators of a doctrine that numbs people’s minds and makes them enemies of the guerrillas.”³⁹ This statement was followed by the order to “kill all the clerics, without saying it was us,” attempting to maintain the campaign’s covertness.⁴⁰ This directly follows Dr. Martin’s observation that through the eyes of a cult, “the clergy of Christendom are obviously the villains and are the object of ‘pure hatred.’”⁴¹

Although this speech was unsubstantiated when it came to light in September 2005, examining the available data of murdered priests indicates the credibility of the speech. For instance, numbers from 1998 through 2001 indicate twelve priests and nuns were killed in Colombia.⁴² However, between 2000 and 2005, the number rose to thirty priests and two bishops.⁴³ While continual data of murdered clerics remains elusive, between Jan 1 and September 13, 2011, six priests were murdered in Colombia highlighting the continued threat to Colombian clergy.⁴⁴ This continuous murder trend in-turn caused the Catholic Church to pull back from regions where the poor were oppressed by the FARC according to government sources.⁴⁵

The reason the FARC targets religious leaders may be found in the fact that religion in this part of the world offers hope. Hope is a powerful motivator. As was discovered by social psychologist and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Eric Hoffer “the unemployed are more likely to follow the peddlers of hope than the handers-out of relief.”⁴⁶ Although Hoffer was referring to the rise of the Nazi regime and how ordinary people can turn a blind eye to morality and decency, his observations are applicable to the FARC. The hope that religion can extend in FARC-controlled territory is a threat to the FARC. After all, these clerics “numb people’s minds and make them enemies of the guerrillas.”⁴⁷

At this point it is important to make a distinction. While many socialist groups recoil from organized religion, they do not target the religion as an enemy. This is why although anti-religious, the Soviet Union did not murder clergy. It is also important to understand the Colombian brand of socialism and how religion and in particular Roman Catholicism created an atmosphere which allowed the establishment and growth of the FARC. In the 1960s there was a movement in the Catholic Church of Latin America inspired by what would eventually be called “Liberation Theology.” This theology began prior to and

³⁸ Ibid., 52.

³⁹ United Press International (UPI), “Kill priests, FARC leader says.” September 6, 2005, available at: http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2005/09/06/Kill-priests-FARC-leader-says/UPI-92011126036102/.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 30.

⁴² McDermott, Jeremy, “Priests face death in Colombia.” *Catholic Herald* .co.uk, May 4, 2001, available at: <http://archive.catholic Herald.co.uk/article/4th-may-2001/4/priests-face-death-in-colombia>.

⁴³ Catholic News Agency, “Number of Priests killed in Colombia rising.” available at: http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/number_of_priests_killed_in_colombia_rising/.

⁴⁴ Deacon John, “Colombia: Another Priest Murdered.” available at: <http://deaconjohnspace.wordpress.com/2011/09/13/colombia-another-priest-has-been-murdered/>.

⁴⁵ High ranking Colombian Ministry of Defense source interview, information provided on condition of anonymity

⁴⁶ Hoffer, Eric, *The True Believer; Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Books, 1951), 15.

⁴⁷ United Press International, “Kill priests,” September 6, 2005.

directly after the Cuban Revolution. Influenced by Marxist ideology, some thought the Church needed to do more for the poor. Specifically during this time:

“... the church became more aware of its mission in the service of the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast. In this preferential option, which must not be understood as exclusive, the true spirit of the gospel shines forth. Jesus Christ declared the poor blessed (Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20), and he himself wished to be poor for us (2 Cor.8:9).”⁴⁸

However, Liberation Theology's similarity to Marxism has led some to state it is “Marxism masked as Christianity.” The theology's founder, Peruvian Priest Father Gustavo Gutierrez remains a respected theologian, and is currently the John Cardinal O'Hara Professor of Theology at Notre Dame University.⁴⁹ As his words highlight above, the motivation and intent of the movement focuses on the poor and oppressed yet it has taken on another meaning; the liberation of these people from their oppressive governments.

At the time of the FARC's emergence, many Roman Catholic priests in Latin America were interested in Liberation Theology which in turn spurred their interest in the insurgent groups. Some even became influential members of these groups. One was Father Camilo Torres (Restrepo). Father Torres was a well-known sociologist, university professor and a proponent of Liberation Theology.⁵⁰ He stated, “the duty of every Catholic is to be a revolutionary” and “the Catholic who is not a revolutionary is living in mortal sin.”⁵¹ He has been called a “decisive figure in the dynamics of ecclesial movements [and] protest of Central and South America [during] the mid-twentieth century.”⁵² This is why Colombian priests initially did not believe the Colombian intelligence report highlighting their targeting when it first became public. At the time, Fr. Fabian Marulanda, the Secretary-General of Colombia's Catholic Bishops Conference, said the intelligence report “should be analyzed because it's not understood why that group would go after those who are trying to reach them to discuss peace.”⁵³

The fear the FARC applied to the clergy is in many ways similar to the fear they instill in their own members. Like many religious cults, the FARC controls their members through fear using it as a mind-control method to ensure all members adhere to the FARC message. Since, as Dr. Martin noted of all cults, “anyone who disagrees with their message has blind prejudice or is ignorant,” the FARC uses fear to ensure everyone adheres to their message. This can be seen in the interviews.⁵⁴ All the interviewed members indicated they feared both internal and external forces to the group. Internal threats were the members themselves who routinely betrayed one another. ‘Uberney’ stated fear of death and witnessing death was a constant occurrence in the FARC. He personally was always fearful he could be killed or betrayed receiving a harsh punishment. “One could not have friends in the FARC because everyone was the enemy,” and he feared an acquaintance may turn him in for some small infraction.⁵⁵ He recounted how he was tied to a tree for forty days for dropping a 3 kg bag of sugar on the ground (member was a FARC cook). Uberney routinely saw FARC members murdered by the group for small infractions. He stressed that “fear permeated the group” in his interview.⁵⁶ It appears through these interviews that FARC

⁴⁸ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *A Theology of Liberation: 15th Anniversary Edition*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxv.

⁴⁹ Notre Dame University website, *People: Gustavo Gutierrez, O.P.* (2012), available at: <http://theology.nd.edu/people/faculty/gustavo-gutierrez-o-p/>.

⁵⁰ Brittain, James, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia* (New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2010), 275.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Sanchez-Lopera, Alejandro, *GENEALOGÍAS DE LA COLOMBIANIDAD: Formaciones discursivas y tecnologías de gobierno en los siglos XIX y XX, Capítulo IV, Camilo Torres Restrepo: la posibilidad de una moral insurgente* (Bogota, Colombia: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2008, translated by the author), 135.

⁵³ United Press International, “Kill priests,” September 6, 2005.

⁵⁴ Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 25.

⁵⁵ Interview with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 10, 2012.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

members believed leaders felt fear was strength. It was a tool to unite the members of the group, make them more flexible to change and in-turn better able to rebuff the Colombian security forces' activities.

External threats were obvious ones like the Colombian Army, Police or other Security Forces who would "shoot on sight" as the members were led to believe. However, other less obvious threats also were feared such as the previously mentioned clergy, as well as every-day citizens in cities and large towns. These citizens were feared because the group believed their loyalty was to Colombian security forces. "Thomas" mentioned he went to bed fearing death and awoke fearing death. It is interesting that Thomas' statement "returning to the FARC is worse than death or a Colombian prison" supports Dr. Singer's observation about persons leaving cults.⁵⁷ She mentions these persons are denounced and vilified, "entered on a roster of enemies and non-people... Horrendous lies are told about them... The pariah image takes on enormous proportions and ... it seems a fate worse than death."⁵⁸

The FARC is able to implement fear as an element of mind-control due to its members' worldly inexperience. They continued warnings that Colombian State Forces would "shoot any FARC member on-sight" made all the interviewed members believe they were in an "us versus them" situation whenever the two would encounter one another.⁵⁹ This is easy for members to believe since Colombian military forces are rarely seen in FARC controlled areas. Therefore their lack of experience with government forces makes it easy to trust what they are told. In fact, during his interview, William noted 80 percent of the FARC is still recruited from rural areas where the state cannot patrol due to the rugged terrain.⁶⁰ Therefore, since FARC members never speak to or see a state presence, it is easy to believe the rhetoric that Colombian Police or Army are evil entities bent on killing the freedom fighters.

The concept of fear of the state and its elements was a continual theme in all of the interviews. As José Luis, a former deputy commander of a front (the FARC equivalent of a Colombian Army Battalion) of 300 men found, his position of authority did not make him immune to the same treatment. He was sentenced to death for an infraction and escaped from FARC-controlled territory while being pursued by the very men and women he previously led as they shot at him. "By the grace of God I was not shot badly as I escaped," he stated.⁶¹ As he made his way from the FARC territory, he encountered a small group of army soldiers in small town bordering the territory. After he surrendered to the soldiers, he was surprised they only placed handcuffs on him and took him to a military base. Although the Base Commander was not present when José Luis arrived at the base, a Captain greeted him with a cell phone to speak with the Base Commander. To José Luis' surprise, he was congratulated on his escape and welcomed to freedom. José Luis became emotional when he recounted the Colonel's words to him "welcome home my brother, the nightmare is over."⁶²

Sadly, the FARC's use of fear starts early. José Luis stated he would run parcels to different houses in his village, and in-turn was paid by the FARC in candy as an eight year old. By the time he was nine he had been recruited. His recruitment is a violation of international humanitarian law that "prohibits combatants from recruiting children under the age of fifteen or allowing them to take part in hostilities."⁶³ José Luis was lured into the group with candy. As he explained "I knew who they were and they asked me to run errands for them; it made me feel important."⁶⁴ Therefore, by the time he was nine, he asked how he could become a part of the group and was initiated. The lessons of fear began early. As soon as he was inducted into the FARC, he learned to become cold and calculating. These lessons were

⁵⁷ Interview with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 12, 2012.

⁵⁸ Singer, *Cults in our Midst*, 273.

⁵⁹ Interviews with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 9-10, 12, 2012

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, July 12, 2012.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, July 10, 2012.

⁶² *Ibid.*, July 10, 2012.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch, *You'll learn not to cry: Child Combatants in Colombia* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch International, 2003).

⁶⁴ Interview with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 10, 2012.

stressful and the need to alleviate that stress could lead to breaking cardinal rules: "Alcohol use is not tolerated and can get one killed because it can take the edge off of your fear..."⁶⁵

The fear manifests itself in many different ways. Since the FARC turns young children into fighters and makes them carry out the same duties as the adult members, they must toe the mark or become examples to others.⁶⁶ If a child deserts the FARC it can earn them a death sentence; sometimes carried out by other children.⁶⁷

The FARC also uses fear of the government to demonstrate to the member that they are freed from exploitation by the state and state forces. William noted an example of state blunders that strengthen and solidify the idea the state exploits persons in these remote areas. Recounting a story he was told by a local peasant in his hometown, not affiliated with the FARC (in-fact someone who does not like the FARC according to William), the man was interviewed by army forces traversing through his region. He was questioned about what he knew of FARC positions, safe locations and other valuable intelligence. The man knew little of the group, only that they had been nearby, but "since the FARC moves camps every 15-20 days" the man did not know where they went. The army soldier then became agitated. He told the farmer he did not believe him, and that the army believed the man was covering for the FARC. He then said he was going to take the man's three chickens because he thought the chickens were going to be used as food for the FARC. To a FARC member, the army's stealing of the man's chickens was a direct correlation to extreme exploitation, since these chickens were in reality their sole source of meat.

The FARC champions the idea that the state is exploiting the populace. This furthers another of their concepts, that the FARC must remain isolated. This is for several reasons. Primarily, it is for security. Since the state is in an open war with the group, isolation is the only means available to ensure stability and security for the group's separate units. This isolation means never contacting family members again. In fact, as Uberney noted some times the only way parents know their sons or daughters have become a part of the guerilla forces is by announcements from the state on television (if they are fortunate enough to have access to a television), or through announcements made in the newspapers or on the radio.

As Dr. Singer noted, cults often direct the timeframe for sleeping, bathing, and eating.⁶⁸ This methodical scheduling is also something the FARC performs. William noted there was a FARC schedule that was followed every day. There were no deviations from the schedule, and every day the group would arise at 4:00am and begin their day. A set schedule ensured if anyone deviated from the mission the anomaly would immediately be seen.

All these factors, mind-control, forced murder of members, lack of individuality, a culture of fear, the rigorous daily schedule, etc., demonstrate the cult of the FARC. They are indeed a cult, a societal cancer that is destroying the nation and causing instability in Colombia. However, the cultish examples here, and the Colombian Government's lack of acknowledgement of a Cult of the FARC may shed light on why the Colombian government's prosecution of this war has stymied for so long. A major part of the problem for the government is that it believes it is fighting only an insurgency. They have to understand that cults are fought differently than pure insurgencies.

Nevertheless, there are some in academia who believe that the FARC's action defines them not only as a secular cult, but also as a totalist group. However, the current available data on the group does not support this hypothesis. As noted by recognized cult expert Dr. Michael Langone "while there is overlap between the two definitions, it is possible to be a totalist group and not a cult and vice versa."⁶⁹ To examine the hypothesis, one must observe the traits examined by the man who first coined the term, Dr. Robert Jay Lifton, M.D. Dr. Lifton identified several traits specific to totalist groups:

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch, *You'll learn not to cry*, 21.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Legal Standards Page.

⁶⁸ Singer, *Cults in our Midst*, 10.

⁶⁹ Langone, Michael, Telephone Interview, Jan 3, 2013.

- “Milieu Control” or “the control of all communication within a given environment.”⁷⁰ This creates isolation from a greater society.
- “Mystical manipulation or planned spontaneity” which is the manipulation of events so as to appear spontaneous or possible through the group’s special powers or insight.
- “A demand for purity and a cult of confession.”⁷¹ In these groups “purification is a continuing process, often institutionalized in the cult of confession, which enforces conformity through guilt and shame evoked by mutual criticism and self-criticism in small groups.”⁷²
- “Sacred science” is used to rationalize specific traits of the cult typically including “a claim to special scientific knowledge of human behavior and psychology.”⁷³
- “Loading of the language” Stated another way, “A simplified, cliché-ridden language can exert enormous psychological force, reducing every issue in a complicated life to a single set of slogans that are said to embody the truth as a totality.”⁷⁴
- “The principle of doctrine over person” or “Those who have not seen the light and embraced the truth are wedded to evil, tainted, and therefore in some sense, usually metaphorical, lack the right to exist.”⁷⁵

While the FARC does limit the communication of its’ members with outsiders, and the group’s use of slogans and songs is well known, there is currently no evidence to suggest they engage in mystical manipulation, demand for purity, the concept of sacred science, or the principle of doctrine over the person. In fact, since the FARC allegedly aims to equalize all citizens’ social status, all citizens have the same ability to fight for the cause and thus are not lost, as they have not been exposed to the truth. While it is possible the group in the future can morph into a totalist group, as of yet the FARC does not fit the criteria.

Concluding Thoughts

Much like U.S. operations in Vietnam, Colombia for the most part has won many battles against the FARC but it has not yet won the war. This may be due to the fact that Colombia is pursuing a largely military campaign against this foe, vice a psychological one. While the Colombian military does engage in psychological operations, they are largely to aid the military effort. Therefore, a major psychological effort separate but in conjunction with the military effort is required to fully coax the FARC into submission.

The focus of these operations should be on the FARC weaknesses. Although not usually expressed, there are cracks in the FARC operations that the Colombian Government can fully exploit. These include the inconsistency between leadership and the rank and file, and the personal feelings of the persons in the group. Exploiting these cracks as part of a greater psychological campaign against the FARC’s modus operandi can substantially weaken this foe and force them into submission. These psychological operations should include both a method to influence FARC members to desert, a vehicle to help them transition to civilian life, and a way to highlight to remaining members that deserters have earned substantial gains by leaving the group vice losing their life as FARC leaders have wrongly stated. How these actions are accomplished will be the decisions of the Colombian military.

Furthermore, all of those interviewed indicated they did not know or see the state or elements of its authority, highlighting a major problem...a power vacuum. These former members never witnessed any state presence...“not a policeman, not a soldier,...no one.”⁷⁶ The FARC simply appeared and took control. In fact, Uberney stated in these areas “the FARC were both the heroes and the villains...they were feared because they were known killers, and forced the farmers to grow coca for them, but respected and

⁷⁰ Lifton, Robert, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*. (University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 420.

⁷¹ Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 422-423.

⁷² Lifton, Robert, “Cult Formation.” *Cultic Studies Journal*, 1991, 8: 1 (1991): 1-6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*; Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 427.

⁷⁴ Lifton, “Cult Formation,” 1-6; Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 429.

⁷⁵ Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 430; Lifton, “Cult Formation,” 1-16.

⁷⁶ Interview with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 9-10, 12, 2012.

admired because they were the authority.”⁷⁷ William echoed this idea stating that the FARC “performed all matters of public service, from stopping violence between domestic partners to resolving disputes between neighbors...they were the law.”⁷⁸

Therefore, the state needs to appear in these areas for the populace to understand that the state is something to be respected, not something to be feared. The FARC have waged an information operations campaign in areas they control. Their propaganda states the Government of Colombia is repressive, does not care about the peasants, and is corrupt. These efforts have, at best, cast doubt in the mind of the peasants in these areas, and at worse have turned the minds of these people against the state. However, small efforts to provide these severely impoverished peasants with aid will go a long way to dispel these FARC untruths. Small gestures such as providing gravel to build makeshift roads, or corrugated tin to build roofs will show the state as an entity that cares about its citizenry. However, to accomplish these efforts, the government needs to project presence. Simply constructing a police outpost is not enough. The state needs to help those in need and indeed exert its authority. Creating law and order, but also championing the people to the state and taking steps to enrich their lives will rob the FARC of its powerbase. In short, the state needs to give strength to those who are intimidated by the FARC.

The members of the Colombian Government to power-project or ‘colonize’ these areas need to be useful and resourceful. They need to become specialists in these areas, and should be trained on how to help the locals. Any Colombian representative sent in this area is an ambassador with a huge responsibility.

In the end, the Colombian Government has made huge strides stabilizing the nation since 1998, the time the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned of Colombia’s possible failure as a state. Colombian Government activities have shown not only the incredible resiliency of a nation and a people who have suffered much, but also the strength to persevere through the time of the cartels. While the cartels are all but gone, the FARC remains a destabilizing force not only for Colombia, but also for the other Andean nations that border Colombia. However, strong partnerships such as the U.S.-Colombia Trade agreement signed in 2012 will continue to help this beacon of democracy persevere.

Ultimately, Colombia’s triumph over the FARC is not only a victory for democracy, but a victory for decency and the international community in the worldwide law enforcement effort combatting illegal drugs. Since Colombia’s cocaine trafficking is almost exclusively run by the FARC, their eradication will change the dynamics of worldwide cocaine movement and distribution. The impact of the eradication of both the FARC and by association, its’ worldwide distribution network, will have lasting reverberations throughout the world. While there will likely be another nation or group of bandits who take up the cocaine vacuum after the FARC is eradicated, the group’s demise will have a positive, lasting impact on worldwide law enforcement and contribute to security far beyond Colombia’s borders.

⁷⁷ Interview with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 10, 2012.

⁷⁸ Interview with the author, Bogota, Colombia, July 12, 2012.