

COLOMBIAN

Military Culture

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The FIU-USSOUTHCOM Academic Partnership Military Culture Series

Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (FIU-JGI) and FIU's Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (FIU-LACC), in collaboration with the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), formed the FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership. The partnership entails FIU providing research-based knowledge to further USSOUTHCOM's understanding of the political, strategic, and cultural dimensions that shape military behavior in Latin America and the Caribbean. This goal is accomplished by employing a military culture approach. This initial phase of military culture consisted of a yearlong research program that focused on developing a standard analytical framework to identify and assess the military culture of three countries. FIU facilitated professional presentations of two countries (Cuba and Venezuela) and conducted field research for one country (Honduras).

The overarching purpose of the project is two-fold: to generate a rich and dynamic base of knowledge pertaining to political, social, and strategic factors that influence military behavior; and to contribute to USSOUTHCOM's Socio-Cultural Analysis (SCD) Program. Utilizing the notion of military culture, USSOUTHCOM has commissioned FIU-JGI to conduct country-studies in order to explain how Latin American militaries will behave in the context of U.S. military engagement.

The FIU research team defines military culture as "the internal and external factors — historical, cultural, social, political, economic — that shape the dominant values, attitudes, and behaviors of the military institution, that inform how the military views itself and its place and society, and that shape how the military may interact with other institutions, entities, and governments." FIU identifies and expounds upon the cultural factors that inform the rationale behind the perceptions and behavior of select militaries by analyzing historical evolution, sources of identity and pride, and societal roles.

To meet the stated goals, FIU's JGI and LACC hosted academic workshops in Miami and brought subject matter experts together from throughout the U.S., Latin America and the Caribbean, to explore and discuss militaries in Latin America and the Caribbean. When possible, FIU-JGI researchers conduct field research in select countries to examine these factors through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys. At the conclusion of each workshop and research trip, FIU publishes a findings report, which is presented at USSOUTHCOM.

The views expressed in *Colombian Military Culture* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Government, Florida International University, or any other affiliated institutions. This report was funded by the United States Southern Command.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO MILITARY PROFESSIONALIZATION	9
An Independent Nation, An Under-Resourced Military	10
Political Renewal and Military Reform.....	12
The Thousand Days' War	13
After the War: Military Reform and International Military Missions	14
CONFLICT WITH PERU: DEFENSE AS A NATIONAL PURPOSE	17
THE KOREAN WAR: BATALLÓN COLOMBIA AND THE STRENGTHENING OF U.S. MILITARY COOPERATION	19
COLOMBIAN TURNS INWARD: COUNTERINSURGENCY AND PUBLIC ORDER.....	20
SOURCES OF IDENTITY AND PRIDE: THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY'S EXCEPTIONALISM AS AN APOLITICAL FORCE	23
THE COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES AND SOCIETY	26
The Institutional Perspective	27
The Societal Perspective.....	32
Public Opinion of the Colombian Armed Forces	34
CONCLUSION.....	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	40
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	48

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report studies the history, culture, identity, and civil-military relations of the Colombian Armed Forces (Fuerzas Militares de Colombia), comprised of the National Army (Ejército Nacional de Colombia); the Navy (Armada de la República de Colombia), including the Marine Corps (Infantería de Marina); and the Air Force (Fuerza Aérea Colombiana). Although the Colombian National Police (Policía Nacional de Colombia) falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense (Ministerio de Defensa) and constitutes a national Public Force (Fuerza Pública) per the country's constitution, the police remain outside the scope of this report because it is a civilian institution. The report contains three sections that seek to:

1. Trace the historical evolution of the Colombian Armed Forces, highlighting the roots of their professionalization and major doctrinal developments;
2. Identify the Colombian military's principal sources of identity and their effect on institutional behavior;
3. Assess the military's role in society, from the perspective of both the armed forces leadership and the citizenry, as expressed in public opinion polling.

The Colombian Armed Forces emerged out of the early nineteenth century wars of independence from Spain but did not benefit from a concerted effort at national-level organization and professionalization until the late nineteenth century.

- The volunteer national guard and nascent naval force, which emerged during the independence period, were short-lived thanks to tensions among political elites, who feared that a strong military was a threat to political power. As Gran Colombia—a short-lived republic that encompassed modern-day Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama—dissolved, a newly independent Colombia found itself beholden to the influence of regional elites, who preferred regionally based militias to a strong national military force.
- The persistence of partisan conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties, which manifested in at least eight civil wars and countless local uprisings during the late nineteenth century, prevented political elites from investing in a large national military force, which could have emerged as an unwelcome arbiter of political power.
- During the Regeneration period in the 1880s, President Rafael Núñez (1880-1882, 1884-1886, 1887-1888, 1892-1894) reversed the federal political system introduced by the Liberal Party in 1863 and centralized political power in the form of a unitary, protectionist state. To consolidate power in the hands of the national executive, the Constitution of 1886 established a permanent, apolitical, and centralized army with its own promotion system and disciplinary code.
- The partisan civil war known as the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902) left the country in ruins and facilitated the secession of Panama, embarrassing Colombia internationally and

exposing the country's vulnerability to external threats. Following the war, President Rafael Reyes (1904-1909) led an effort to professionalize the armed forces through revamped training and educational opportunities. Successive governments contracted international military missions from France, Chile, and Switzerland to advise on the Colombian military's professionalization.

- The Colombia-Peru War (1932-1933) exposed Colombia's vulnerability to incursions from outside the country, leading to a surge in nationalism that promoted the formalization and professionalization of the country's navy and nascent air force.
- The Korean War marked a turning point for the Colombian Armed Forces, which participated in the United Nations-led multilateral force. The experience exposed a new generation of Colombian military professionals to warfighting, but this time they participated alongside the world's most advanced militaries, including the U.S. Armed Forces. The Korean War strengthened the military-to-military relationship between Colombia and the United States, spurring doctrinal reforms in Colombia and strengthening the anti-communist fervor of the war's Colombian veterans.
- A decade of partisan conflict known as *La Violencia* sparked the formal entry of the Colombian military into the political realm, as General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957) staged a *coup d'état* against President Laureano Gómez (1950-1951; exerted control via puppet successor until 1953) to bring order by establishing martial law and enacting social reforms. The dictatorship lasted until 1957, when the Liberal and Conservative parties agreed to a power-sharing arrangement known as the National Front (*Frente Nacional*). The military accepted a political transition and ceded power to the political establishment on the condition that the military retain significant autonomy over its internal affairs and defense policy.
- Inspired by the Cuban Revolution in 1959, communist and Marxist insurgencies broke out in the Colombian countryside during the 1960s. The persistence of armed revolutionary activity in Colombia for the rest of the century ensured that the Colombian Armed Forces' posture and doctrine remained focused on counterinsurgency. However, the Colombian government's preference to deploy the police—not the military—against the rising threat posed by drug traffickers in the 1980s kept military budgets relatively low, affecting morale and professionalism.
- The confluence of U.S. security assistance provided under Plan Colombia (2000-2011) and the Democratic Security (*Seguridad Democrática*) strategy introduced by President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) contributed to the Colombian military's most propitious victories against illegal armed groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*—FARC) and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*—ELN), permitting the Colombian government to regain the initiative in the country's long-running internal armed conflict. The robust offensive waged by the Colombian military weakened insurgent groups and eventually led to a peace process with the FARC (2012-2016). Despite the successful negotiation, the

Colombian government's commitment to implementing the accords has been inconsistent as of 2020, leading to the splintering of some FARC dissidents from the peace process to form new armed groups.

The identity and culture of the modern Colombian Armed Forces took root in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly following Colombia's participation in the Korean War. The institution's identity became inseparable from the set of missions the armed forces performed during this period: counterinsurgency, counternarcotics, and counterterrorism.

- Compared to other regional militaries, the Colombian military has been less likely to intervene in politics. Except for the 1953 *coup d'état* that saw General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla declare martial law to put an end to partisan violence, the Colombian Armed Forces remained at the fringes of Colombian politics in exchange for considerable institutional autonomy. Instances of direct intervention in politics remain historically scarce.
- The Colombian military's leadership has long exemplified obedience to the constitution and has embraced an identity as the guarantor of the constitutional order and the country's general stability.
- The persistence of internal armed conflict in Colombia focused the military's attention internally. In addition to espousing an anti-communist identity, the Colombian Armed Forces see themselves as global experts on waging counterinsurgency, combating organized crime, and dismantling terrorist networks.
- In addition to a historical mistrust of the police forces, the disproportionate size and geographic dispersion of the army in relation to the other services has rendered it the principal protagonist of Colombia's most high-profile operations. This has resulted in institutional rivalries—over budgetary appropriations and operational responsibilities. Nevertheless, the other services have in recent decades assumed prominent roles in confronting Colombia's internal threats while also demonstrating their technical proficiency in international arenas, to include the interdiction of illicit narcotics on the high seas. The advent of joint commands in the twenty-first century underscores a growing focus on inter-service interoperability.
- Elite families tend not to serve in the Colombian Armed Forces. However, military service provides opportunity for social mobility for Colombia's lower classes, particularly among the officer corps.

The Colombian Armed Forces' relations with society have been defined by the military's permanent deployment within Colombia's borders to resolve threats to law and order.

- The 1991 Constitution reaffirmed the existing structure and roles of the Colombian Armed Forces. However, additional democratizing reforms followed, including the installment of Colombia's first civilian defense minister and modifications to the military justice system aimed at curbing impunity for abuses.

- The successful implementation of President Uribe’s Democratic Security strategy improved the image of the military both domestically and internationally, despite widespread allegations of human rights abuses. Aided by the U.S. government through Plan Colombia, the Colombian military delivered crippling blows to the FARC, ELN, United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*—AUC), and criminal bands (*bandas criminales*—BACRIM), resulting in improving security indicators in much of the country.
- The Colombian military has become an agent of nation-building in the Colombian “frontier.” For some parts of the country, the only permanent fixture of the central state has been the presence of the armed forces, which formalized their role in consolidating democratic governance through Integral Action (*Acción Integral*) programming.
- The Colombian Armed Forces supported President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) as he successfully negotiated and began implementing a hard-won peace accord with the FARC. In the initial stages of the FARC’s disarmament, the Colombian military remarkably became the guarantors of security for their former adversaries. Meanwhile, the Colombian military’s high command took cues from the peace process to define the armed forces’ utility in a post-conflict environment. In addition to national defense and public security, new roles included disaster relief, international cooperation, environmental protection, and socioeconomic development.
- Public confidence in the Colombian Armed Forces increased during the first decade of the twenty-first century and is high across socioeconomic, racial, and gender categories. The military remains one of the most esteemed institutions in the entire country, typically polling just behind religious institutions. However, various corruption allegations and abuses, including the false positives (*falsos positivos*) scandal, shook the Colombian citizenry’s trust in the institution. In 2020, public approval of the military dipped below 50 percent for the first time in two decades.

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO MILITARY PROFESSIONALIZATION

The fighting force that would become the Colombian Armed Forces emerged during the Wars of Independence from Spain. On July 23, 1810, just three days after declaring self-government, the Supreme Assembly of Santa Fé created a volunteer national guard (*Batallón “Voluntarios de Guardias Nacionales”*) to defend against Spanish reprisals, secure independence, and form a new state. However, the national guard developed in an ad hoc fashion, resulting in a divided structure. It also faced supplies shortages and was wholly unprepared to address the security and defense challenges facing a new, independent nation. Even in spaces no longer contested by the Spanish, emerging political elites faced an onslaught of local rebellions. The armed groups in those years were defined by extreme dispersion of command among different strongmen whose loyalties were often more regional than national, and the success of the independence struggle had more to do with Spain’s weakness than with the national guard’s military prowess. Indeed, the forces that ousted Spanish rule were characterized by low levels of “military knowledge” and retrograde equipment—an inauspicious beginning for a national military.¹

During the struggle for independence, there were attempts to consolidate troops as a unified military force, but those initiatives were short-lived. In Cartagena, José María García de Toledo spearheaded the establishment of the General Command of the Navy in 1810. In 1814, in the city of Rionegro, Antioquia, a military academy was founded with Colonel Francisco José de Caldas as its first director. In 1822, General Francisco de Paula Santander created a naval school in Cartagena to mount a defense of Colombia’s littoral and riverine areas. July 24, 1823 became the official date of the creation of the Colombian Navy, after the nascent force managed a pivotal maritime victory against the Spanish forces at the Battle of Maracaibo Lake, today located in Zulia state in Venezuela.²

The creation of a proper national army was delayed in the immediate aftermath of independence of Gran Colombia—a political entity organized in 1821, encompassing modern-day Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador—because of frequent civil wars during the nineteenth century.³ Tensions between key figures of the independence, like Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander, reflected deep societal divisions over how to organize political power in the new nation, including debates over centralism and federalism, presidential term limits, and the notion of

¹ Clément Thibaud, *Repúblicas en armas: Los ejércitos bolivarianos en la guerra de independencia en Colombia y Venezuela* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta e Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos, 2003), Chapter 1.

² Carlos Ospina Cubillos, “La Armada Colombiana: su formación y desarrollo”, *Historia y Arqueología Marítima*, <http://www.histarmar.com.ar/InfHistorica-5/ArmadaColombia-Formacion.htm>.

³ Various civil wars took place during the struggle for independence (1810-1824), with nine general wars (1839-1841, 1851, 1854, 1859-1862, 1876-1877, 1884-1885, 1895, 1899-1902), plus numerous regional and local conflicts. See: Alvaro Tirado Mejía, *Aspectos sociales de las guerras civiles en Colombia*, (Medellín: Colección Autores Antioqueños, 1996).

separation of powers.⁴ Military commanders in Venezuela and Ecuador such as José Antonio Páez and Juan José Flores also distrusted the growing power of Santander among elite circles in Bogotá. Santander's eventual exile from Colombia over accusations of treason exacerbated regional tensions, setting the stage for the disintegration of Gran Colombia.

An Independent Nation, An Under-Resourced Military

The death of Bolívar in 1830 and the dissolution of Gran Colombia in 1831 permitted the return of Santander to political life, and he was elected president of the Republic of New Granada (modern-day Colombia and Panama) in 1832. The political leadership of the new republic distrusted the military forces that were previously led by Venezuelans and, thus, reduced the size and influence of the army in the political life of the country.⁵ Santander's core idea remains central to Colombian political beliefs: "Arms have given you independence, but only laws will give you freedom."⁶ In Colombia, the Liberal and Conservative parties that emerged in the 1840s consolidated their central role in the country's power struggle and, by doing so, angled to exert increasing control over regional elites and their locally based security forces.⁷ The Constitution of 1832 authorized the creation of a limited national armed force, whose members had to be born in Nueva Granada. Per the constitution, however, the congress possessed the authority to determine force size, and given the prerogatives of local elites in Bogotá, the legislature opted for a small national army for decades to come.

During his first presidential term, President Tomás Cipriano Mosquera (1845-1849, 1861-1864, 1866-1867) eliminated the navy, which he deemed a luxury that a cash-strapped country like Colombia could not afford. Despite significant coastal territory, Cipriano Mosquera and his allies privileged a view that concentrated political, economic, and cultural power in the mountainous Andean region. Accordingly, he founded a military school in Bogotá in 1847 under the direction of Colonel Agustín Codazzi, a famous Italo-Venezuelan cartographer.⁸ This reorganization defined the Colombian military's orientation for decades to come: the country's security forces would be more concerned with security issues in the interior of the country and less focused on the defense and development of the border regions.

The professionalization and organization of the military forces remained a critical issue among

⁴ Ramiro de la Espiella, *Las ideas políticas de Bolívar* (Bogotá: Publicaciones Cultural, 1999).

⁵ David Bushnell, *Colombia: una nación a pesar de sí misma: de los tiempos precolombinos a nuestros días*, 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2004), pp. 121-126.

⁶ The authors translated all Spanish-language quotes in this report to English.

⁷ Bushnell, *Colombia: una nación*, p. 168. Álvaro Tirado Mejía, *El Estado y la política en el siglo XIX*, 4th ed. (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 2001), Chapters 3 and 7. Tirado Mejía claims, "Venezuela was the main theatre of operations, so it was logical that the bulk of the officers came from there; therefore, the conflict that confronted the Bolivarian project with the landowners and merchants was sometimes presented as opposition of Grenadines [Colombians], "lanudos" against Venezuelans, or *Caraqueños*."

⁸ Ricardo Esquivel Triana, "Influencia liberal estadounidense en el Ejército colombiano, 1880-1904," *Revista Científica General José María Córdova*, Vol. 15 (20), July-December 2017, p. 229.

Colombia's different political factions.⁹ Law 3 of 1854 afforded citizens the right to keep and bear arms, permitting wealthy regional leaders to sustain their own militias. Meanwhile, the central army remained small, divided between the professional cadre and members of the economic and political ruling class that were high ranking officers from the independence period. Despite the army's small size, soldiers were often sent to suppress regional militias, as disagreements among political elites often erupted into armed skirmishes.¹⁰ During the second half of the nineteenth century, Colombia represented what some analysts refer to as an "armed democracy," and as individuals raised private armies to protect land holdings and administer order, the regular army suffered from a lack of investment and waning public confidence in its ability to provide security throughout the national territory.¹¹

The private armies poached much of the country's best military minds, further undermining the army's professionalization. Frustration from within the ranks of the army even precipitated a *coup d'état* in April 1854, in which General Jose María Melo, with the support of the professional military wing, sought to remove President José María Obando (1853-1854) of the Liberal Party. The insurrection was put down by four regional armies with 14,000 soldiers, significantly outnumbering the coup plotters.¹² As a consequence, the subsequent government of Manuel María Mallarino reduced the army to 588 men. By September 1854, after the creation of regional militias in the Panama province, the army was left with just 373 members.¹³

Another civil war took place from 1859 to 1862, the result of a dispute during the consolidation of the country's new federal system. The 1858 constitution of *Confederación Granadina* afforded the responsibility of external defense to the central government, but in practice the president was only allowed to have a military force of up to 1,000 men, which paled in comparison to the regional forces. The Conservative government that had dominated during the 1850s, however, gave way to a sustained period of Liberal rule, and in 1863, another constitution formalized this dichotomy between the central government and the regions with the establishment of a truly federal system. The new political regime permitted the regions to have their own constitutions and their own armies, most of which were stronger and better prepared than the federal Colombian Guard (*Guardia Colombiana*). Given the creeping militarization outside of the major cities, local rebellions continued to occur, with more than forty armed conflicts taking place through 1885.¹⁴

⁹ Between 1848 and 1890, other military academies and schools were founded, but none lasted more than a few years, in part because political conflict resulted in reduced budgets for the armed forces.

¹⁰ The causes of the conflicts were diverse but were part of the Liberal and Conservative power struggle. For example, in 1851, the primary *casus belli* was the end of slavery; in 1854, the presidential electoral results; in 1860, dissatisfaction with the conservative politics; and in 1876, the education system and the role of the Catholic Church.

¹¹ Juan Carlos Jurado, "Guerra y nación: La guerra civil colombiana de 1851," *HiSTOReLo. Revista de Historia Regional y Local*, Vol. 7 (14), 2015, pp. 99-140.

¹² Tirado Mejía, *El Estado y la política*, pp. 80-86.

¹³ Tirado Mejía, *El estado y la política*, p.82.

¹⁴ Miguel Borja, "La historiografía de la guerra en Colombia durante el siglo XIX," *Análisis Político* 28, no. 85 (2015): pp. 173-188.

Political Renewal and Military Reform

Against this backdrop of conflict, Conservative Party leaders and some Liberals promoted the Regeneration, a movement devoted to reversing the federalist changes of the 1863 Constitution. Adherents of the movement found a charismatic advocate in Rafael Núñez, who was elected president in 1880. Núñez had two priorities: recentralizing Colombia's political system and allowing the Catholic Church to regain its political prominence. He was elected for a second term in 1884 in the face of strong regional Liberal opposition, which resulted in a decisive civil war in 1885. The National Army's victory over the Liberal militias gave Núñez an opportunity to forge ahead with his political project, and he immediately called for a new constitution premised on a stronger central state authority.¹⁵

Reforms to the military were among the principal accomplishments of the 1886 Constitution. To complement the centralization of political authority in Bogotá, the constitution called for the organization of a permanent army to build peace through deterrence and to enforce the power of the central state. As a result, the National Army was established (Art. 166), with its own rules for promotions and with the objective of defending national independence and national institutions. The armed forces were considered apolitical, obedient to "legitimate authorities" (Art. 168), but their disciplinary system was ruled by their own military criminal code (Art. 170). The government also centralized the authority to manufacture weapons and authorize the possession of armament and ammunition (Art. 48). Collectively, these governing directives sought to establish a monopoly of force in the hands of the national executive. The Regeneration process went one step further in 1891, when it also created the first centralized national police force as a civilian body charged with administering public order that still exists today.

Having a proper military school was a priority at this stage in the state-building process, but the financial constraints that resulted from decades of civil strife delayed the establishment of permanent, formal training pipelines. Between 1880 and 1884, the School of Civil and Military Engineering was in operation, and from 1889 to 1891, it reopened as the Military School.¹⁶ In 1891, with the help of U.S. Army Colonel Henry R. Lemly, who served as the school's director, the government developed a curriculum focused on strengthening the army's artillery branch but for financial reasons closed it once again in December 1892.¹⁷ Other fleeting attempts at establishing a training school occurred in the decade that followed. However, it was not until 1907 that the school finally reopened with a new and lasting mandate to build a professional officer corps.

¹⁵ Frederic Martínez, *El Nacionalismo cosmopolita: La referencia europea en la construcción nacional en Colombia, 1845-1900* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 2001), pp. 431-433.

¹⁶ Esquivel Triana, "La Escuela Militar de 1880 a 1907: difícil transición," *Revista científica "General José María Córdova,"* Sección Historia. Vol. 9 (9), June 2011.

¹⁷ Esquivel Triana, "La Escuela Militar," p. 332.

The Thousand Days' War

The last of Colombia's major civil wars, the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902), further incentivized military professionalization. The war was the longest armed confrontation in the history of the country up to that point and left an unprecedented number of victims in its wake. It also had a deleterious effect on the country's economy, stifling opportunities for Colombia to boost trade with rapidly growing economies in the Americas and Europe. Initiated by Liberal oppositionists who were frustrated by the gains of the Regeneration movement, National Army and police forces faced insurrectionist armed groups in Liberal strongholds, which after a major defeat in 1900 resorted to guerrilla tactics against the standing army.¹⁸

The conflict enabled the government to levy direct taxes to finance the war effort, the first sustained contribution from the citizenry in support of a standing army. Recruitment was also strengthened, and the National Army increased its size to more than 9,000 soldiers. However, the profile of the average soldier varied considerably. Some soldiers had previous experience from other civil wars, but many of the rank and file were conscripted from the lower classes. Some reported to professional officers who graduated from the military school, whereas others were commanded by civilians appointed as colonels and generals—a class of “reinforcements” known as the “political generals.”¹⁹

Facing an existential threat itself, the national government prioritized the preparation and readiness of the armed forces. During the conflict, the government even signed the agreement for the construction of the Panama Canal and authorized a U.S. military presence in the Panama Department to control the spread of the internal conflict.²⁰ The Conservative government ended the conflict in 1902, but the devastation of war impoverished large swathes of the country and ruined the productive sectors. The existing alienation and increased disaffection of the Panama region inspired secessionist agitation in Colombia's northwest frontier. Frustrated by Bogotá's unwillingness to advance on canal negotiations with the United States, Panamanian separatists, many of whom were Liberals who rejected the repression of the Conservative government and were supported by the U.S. government, declared independence and granted the United States exclusive rights to lease and develop what became known as the Panama Canal Zone. Much weakened after the Thousand Days' War, the army was in no position to suppress the Panamanian rebellion—or to confront U.S. forces onboard the USS *Nashville*, which had been sent by President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) to block any Colombian military response. On November 3,

¹⁸ Charles Bergquist, "Una comparación entre la guerra de los mil días y la crisis contemporánea", in *Memorias de un país en guerra: lo mil días 1899-1902*, Gonzalo Sánchez y Mario Aguilera, Ed. (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2001), p. 388; Fernán González, "De la guerra regular de los 'Generales-caballeros' a la guerra popular de los guerrilleros," in *Memorias de un país en guerra: lo mil días 1899-1902*, pp. 107-109.

¹⁹ Thomas Fisher, "De la guerra de los mil días a la perdida de Panamá," *Memorias de un país en guerra: lo mil días 1899-1902*, p. 79.

²⁰ Bushnell, *Colombia: una nación*, p. 209. The peace treaty between the government and the rebels was signed on November 21, 1902, aboard the US Navy ship USS *Wisconsin*.

1903, self-determination prevailed, resulting in the establishment of the independent Republic of Panama.

After the War: Military Reform and International Military Missions

Following a half century of partisan war, Rafael Reyes assumed the presidency in 1904 with a mandate to reduce political polarization. Given the longstanding ties between Conservative leadership and the National Army, military reform became a central task in this effort. Reyes used his credibility as a veteran to propose the professionalization of the armed forces. The process started with the demobilization of a large part of the forces that fought in the Thousand Days' War to a mere 5,000 men. The national government then oversaw the collection of weaponry and ammunition from civilians in an attempt to secure the state's monopoly on force.²¹

The second part of Reyes' strategy was to create an effective system of conscription and to strengthen the training and education system. One of the biggest challenges of the professionalization effort was increasing the participation of Liberal Party members in the military. Though potentially contrary to the concept of an apolitical military, Reyes sought to promote the recruitment of young men from Liberal families to balance political affiliations among the troops, taking into account that the political loyalties were a strong part of social identity in Colombia during this period.²² Previously, a military career was not seen as prestigious. To boost recruitment, Reyes instituted a legal reform in 1906 to offer better salaries and promotion opportunities for military officers and troops. The previous *lazo* system (the involuntary recruitment of *campesinos* in some areas for an undetermined period of time) resulted in an army composed largely of illiterate people who lacked educational and professional advancement opportunities.²³ Moreover, partisan competition affected existing recruitment strategies, and the party in power typically allowed overrepresentation of people from specific regions and political affiliations to secure the loyalty of the troops, while not coincidentally also gaining an electoral advantage.

Reyes considered international military missions the best way to promote the professionalization of the armed forces. Thus, he commissioned some of the world's most advanced militaries to instruct Colombian officers in war-making and on the use of new military technology, while revamping the country's military education system. The army was sorely lacking in hierarchy, autonomy, centralization, discipline, and *esprit de corps*. Heeding the advice of foreign advisers, the Colombian government invested in improved training facilities, troop accommodations, and a

²¹ Adolfo León Atehortúa, *Construcción del Ejército Nacional en Colombia, 1907-1930* (Bogotá: La Carreta Editores, 2009), p. 21.

²² Bushnell, *Colombia: una nación*, p. 218.

²³ Rueda Vargas summarizes the major debates of the army in the first decades of the twentieth century. In his work, there are repeated references to the system and the need for a separation of the army from the political confrontation, compulsory military service (without socioeconomic exclusions), and the importance of restricting suffrage for the military. See: Tomás Rueda Vargas, *El Ejército Nacional* (Bogotá: Ed. Atenea, 1944).

new academic curriculum for aspiring officers.²⁴

Previously, France had worked with the Conservative government on military equipment sales and limited institution-building.²⁵ The French mission, led by Captain Emile Drouhard, arrived in 1897 with the aim of reorganizing the army, but in part because of the outbreak of war in 1899, the mission was short lived. Moreover, the relationship between Drouhard and his Colombian counterparts was plagued by animosity, undermining France's credibility among Colombia's officer class. The French government sponsored a similar mission for the police force from 1891 to 1898, which proved less acrimonious and more successful.²⁶ However, many Latin American countries during this period opted for German military missions, and Chile, recognized for its early professionalization and operational success in the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), became a point of reference regionally for having adopted the Prussian model of military organization and training. Thus, countries such as Ecuador and Colombia, which contracted Chilean military missions, became indirect beneficiaries of German training. The Chilean missions were a plausible alternative to additional European missions, as Chile offered more favorable rates, the negotiation and times of response were shorter, and a shared language facilitated communication.²⁷

Chilean advisers helped Colombia reopen the Military School in Bogotá in 1907. The revamped officer training facility enforced new requirements for enrollment, including the completion of primary education. As opposed to previous recruitment strategies, this stipulation actively excluded the poorest social classes from the officer corps.²⁸ Likewise, the Naval School in Cartagena was reestablished in 1907. Yet given budget constraints, it closed once again in 1909, and its equipment was sold to commercial agencies. The Colombian Navy was forced wait until 1935 to reopen the school, which it was able to justify following the need for a robust naval force during the Colombia-Peru War (1932-1933).

Despite Reyes' effort to incorporate members of the Liberal Party in his cabinet, political conflict did not cease. His more inclusive approach galvanized opposition within his own party, and to avoid further polarization, Reyes furtively departed the country in July 1909, leaving the interim presidency in the hands of Vice President Jorge Holguín Mallarino. Military professionalization thus faced an obstacle, as leaders from the Chilean mission pointed out: "The provisional government did not think but to accumulate soldiers to win in the next elections or to ignore its

²⁴ Vicente Barreto, "La presencia militarista" in Virgilio Beltrán, *El Papel Político y Social De Las Fuerzas Armadas En América Latina*, ed. Virgilio Rafael Beltrán (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1970), p. 194.

²⁵ Thomas Fisher, "De la guerra de los mil días a la pérdida de Panamá," in *Memorias de un país en guerra: lo mil días 1899-1902*, p. 88.

²⁶ Frederic Martinez, "Las desiluciones del orden público: los comienzos de la Policía Nacional en Colombia, 1891-1898," in *In Search of a New Order: Essays on the Politics and Society of Nineteenth Century Latin America*, ed. Eduardo Posada Carbó (London: University of London Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998), pp. 153-178.

²⁷ Carlos Camacho Arango, *El conflicto de Leticia (1932-1933) y los ejércitos de Perú y Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2016), p.121.

²⁸ Adolfo León Atehortua, and Humberto Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1994). p. 64.

verdict. Under the protection of a permanent state of exception, numerous bodies were created whose objective was to counterbalance those that had been formed according to the new national [bipartisan] spirit.”²⁹

The contract with the Chilean military mission was renewed in 1909, but it met resistance from some generals who served in the Thousand Days’ War and a faction of the Conservative Party, which was concerned that the army was becoming exceedingly Liberal. They also worried that the professional admission and promotion criteria were becoming a risk to their own institutional prerogatives and partisan interests. They viewed professional military men as less docile, and the institution’s leadership feared being pushed out by younger officers who benefitted from superior training.³⁰

In 1909, the Superior War College (*Escuela Superior de Guerra*) opened its doors to provide education to some of these high-ranking officers. In 1912, the third Chilean mission proposed a reorganization of the army, with the idea of concentrating troops near the eastern and southern border in preparation for potential territorial disputes with neighboring countries. Despite the strides made during the Chilean missions, a recurrent observation from mission leaders was the difficulty in isolating the military from politics due to the government’s interference with the promotion system, which undermined the institution’s overall professionalization.³¹

In 1916, the Colombian Congress passed a law to send a military commission to Europe in hopes of expanding Colombia’s military aviation aptitude.³² In the wake of World War I, aviation was quickly becoming an essential capability for the defense sector. President Marco Fidel Suárez (1918-1921) created a Colombian military aviation division in 1919 and hired a French military mission to help organize the new force and oversee the founding of a military aviation school in 1920 in Flandes, Tolima. However, equipment was scarce, and the training was risky and difficult. When the French mission left in April 1922, the school remained open only intermittently in subsequent years.³³ Notwithstanding these challenges, military aviation found an ally in the private sector. SCADTA (*Sociedad Colombo-Alemana de Transportes Aéreos*), a civilian airline founded in Barranquilla in 1919, advised the Colombian government on the purchase of airplanes, helped build first military airstrips in the country at Port Boy, Caquetá and Palanquero, Cundinamarca, and successfully encouraged the relocation of the military aviation school to Cali, where it remains to this day.³⁴

²⁹ “Message from Francisco Díaz and Pedro Chapín, to the Chief of the Army Command,” September 27, 1909, Archivo Nacional de la Administración Central, Fondo Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Volume 1249.

³⁰ León Atehortua and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*, p. 81.

³¹ León Atehortua and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*, p. 64.

³² Fuerza Aérea Colombiana, “Aviación Militar,” <https://www.fac.mil.co/iii-aviacion-militar>.

³³ José Ignacio Forero, *Historia de la aviación de Colombia* (Bogotá, Aedita, 1964), pp. 76-106.

³⁴ Carlos Camacho Arango, *El conflicto de Leticia*, p. 190.

In 1924, the government hired a Swiss mission, which ushered in a new geographic distribution of the armed forces. Two additional army divisions (Medellín and Bucaramanga) relieved the logistical burden shouldered by the three existing army divisions (Bogotá, Barranquilla, and Cali), thereby increasing the military's defensive posture in border regions and reducing the size of the territories each division was expected to cover.³⁵

Military professionalization was a long process in Colombia, lasting nearly the entirety of the country's first century of existence. The armed forces' involvement in recurrent partisan conflict undermined the country's defense and security needs. However, with the help of foreign military missions, military professionalization became a reality by the 1930s and represented a guarantee in the protection of national sovereignty, stability, and internal governance.³⁶

CONFLICT WITH PERU: DEFENSE AS A NATIONAL PURPOSE

Colombia has had comparatively few armed conflicts with its neighbors. As a result, external defense has not been a priority for the armed forces.³⁷ Historically, limited territorial incursions from militaries in Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Nicaragua roused the national spirit from time to time, but seldom did Bogotá elites consider these skirmishes an existential threat.³⁸ Colombia also faced military pressure from extra-regional powers for economic reasons, including France, Great Britain, Italy, and Germany, and the United States was a protagonist in the independence of Panama in 1903.³⁹ Generally, though, Colombia was surrounded by relatively weak neighbors who had few incentives for invasion.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the armed forces deployed mostly domestically to administer public order.⁴¹ The country's political class had "never considered external war as a means to fulfill the political objectives of the country, relying instead on international law and arbitration."⁴²

³⁵ Camacho Arango, *El conflicto de Leticia*, pp. 173-177.

³⁶ León Atehortua, and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*, p. 21.

³⁷ César Torres del Río notes, "Defense remained but a motto in the Constitution and a contradiction with the practice, mission, and functions of the army." See: César Torres del Río, *Fuerzas Armadas y Seguridad Nacional* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2000), p. 17.

³⁸ Colombia and Nicaragua have competing historical claims to the San Andres archipelago in the Caribbean Sea, a matter which the International Court of Justice attempted to resolve in 2012 by awarding territorial sovereignty over the islands to Colombia and establishing the maritime limits between the two countries. Colombia has appealed that decision, disagreeing with the maritime boundaries. Likewise, Colombia and Venezuela long disputed their international border in the Guajira peninsula and the maritime boundary in the Gulf of Venezuela.

³⁹ Esquivel Triana, *Neutralidad y orden. Política exterior y militar en Colombia, 1886-1918* (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Javeriana, 2010), p. 79.

⁴⁰ Malcom Deas, *Las fuerzas del orden y once ensayos de historia de Colombia y las Américas*, 1st edition (Bogotá: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2017), pp. 26-27.

⁴¹ For example, the navy focused on the country's main river, the Magdalena, and its main concern was the public order (Decreto 1131 de 1930, *Flotilla Fluvial de Guerra del río Magdalena*). Border rivers such as the Amazon and Putumayo had ships for transportation of goods, not military ones. Carlos Ospina Cubillos, "La Armada Colombiana."

⁴² Esquivel Triana, "Influencia liberal estadounidense," p. 232. Quote from Ministry of Foreign Relations, 1957.

The armed forces' size and territorial presence grew considerably following the Colombia-Peru War (1932-1933), which marked a turning point in the configuration and ethos of the military.⁴³ Border tensions with Peru were frequent, especially given competition over productive land and the exploitation of natural resources.⁴⁴ Diplomacy prevailed for a time, and a border treaty was signed in 1922 and ratified in 1928, ceding the *trapecio amazónico* and Leticia to Colombia in 1930. However, in September 1932, a band of Peruvian armed civilians and soldiers descended upon Leticia, and the Colombian Armed Forces, caught off guard, did not have the means to respond rapidly to the invasion.⁴⁵ Colombian reinforcements arrived in December, but they were forced to travel through Brazil via commercial ships because they had no way to reach Leticia from Colombia's interior by land. The conflict was widely publicized in Colombia and became a national embarrassment.

A surge of nationalism took hold in Colombia, temporarily easing partisan tensions, and both political parties agreed to give priority to external security, resulting in a rapid expansion of the military's size and budget. The government also streamlined the acquisitions process for new naval and air force platforms. Peru held a distinct military advantage at the beginning of the conflict, but the Colombian government rallied its resources effectively by 1933.

The Colombian Air Force joined forces with civilian pilots from SCADTA, and all services benefitted from new equipment, including new ships for the navy. The war also spurred the opening of the Naval School for officers and the founding of a technical school for enlisted sailors. Meanwhile, the Colombian government pursued a diplomatic strategy via the League of Nations, and by May 1933, an armistice was reached, once again affording Colombia control over Leticia. After the armistice, the Conservative Party decried the process, calling it a "coward's agreement," and the domestic political narrative fractured once again.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the war effort spurred the second major military reform in Colombian history, reshaping the army, and finally establishing the navy and air force as enduring elements of Colombia's fighting force.

In the years that followed, Colombia sought to improve its regional security by increasing ties to the United States. Indeed, the United States opened the U.S. Naval Mission office in Bogotá, as the privileged geographical position of the country was essential to the defense of sea-lanes flowing into the Panama Canal.⁴⁷ World War II facilitated deeper ties between the two countries,

⁴³ By 1922 the army had fewer than 250 officers and 1,500 soldiers. Within a decade, the number of troops increased sharply to 6,000. But, "the ratio of soldiers to civilians in the total population was three quarters of one to one thousand (3/4:1,000), making it proportionately the smallest army in the New World." See: León Helguera, "The Changing Role of the Military in Colombia," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 3, no. 3 (1961), p. 353. Cristopher Abel, *Política iglesia y partidos en Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1987), p. 232.

⁴⁴ Alberto Donadio, *La guerra con el Perú* (Medellin, Hombre Nuevo Editores, 2002).

⁴⁵ Bushnell, *Colombia: una nación*, p. 252.

⁴⁶ Jorge Orlando Melo, *Historia mínima de Colombia* (Madrid: Turner Publicaciones, 2017), p. 200.

⁴⁷ Bradley L. Coleman, *Colombia and the United States: The Making of an Inter-American Alliance* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2008).

and Colombia participated in limited antisubmarine operations in the Caribbean theater. Throughout this period, the Colombian military expanded, and by 1949, the armed forces increased to approximately 20,000 members.⁴⁸ The enlargement of the Colombian military in this period was partly in response to an increase in political violence domestically, but thanks to Colombia's improving relations with the United States, Colombian authorities understood the importance of the armed forces in projecting power abroad—and eagerly sought to take on a larger international role for the country's military.

THE KOREAN WAR: BATALLÓN COLOMBIA AND THE STRENGTHENING OF U.S. MILITARY COOPERATION

A multilateral coalition took part in the conflict between North Korea and South Korea from 1950 to 1953. The United Nations (UN) force was composed of military units principally from industrialized countries but also small UN members like Colombia. A fear of global communist expansion was prevalent among Colombian elites, especially given the growing unrest in the Colombian countryside, and the Colombian government sought to attract international attention and establish close military ties with the United States by joining the Korean campaign.⁴⁹ In September 1950, newly elected President Laureano Gómez sent the frigate *Almirante Padilla* to join the coalition forces and shortly after mobilized an infantry battalion for ground operations.⁵⁰ With only 1,080 troops, the *Batallón Colombia* was small in comparison to other countries' participation, but the Colombians earned a reputation for bravery and efficacy.

Colombia's sole frigate performed coastal blockade patrols with coalition partners such as Canada and the United Kingdom. President Gómez was such an enthusiastic supporter of the navy's efforts that he oversaw the purchase of an additional frigate from the United States, renamed the *Capitán Tono*, which participated in shore bombardment, minesweeping, and close-air support missions on a rotating basis until October 1955.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the Colombian Army battalion saw combat shortly after arrival, confronting Chinese and Korean soldiers on the battlefield. When the last soldiers had left in October 1954, 131 Colombians had perished in combat.⁵²

When they returned to Colombia, the Korean War veterans formed the nucleus of a new elite officer class. Inspired by what they experienced abroad, these officers, including famed heroes like

⁴⁸ Francisco Leal Buitrago, "Política e intervención militar en Colombia", *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, Vol. 32, 3 (May-June 1970), pp. 491-538.

⁴⁹ León Atehortúa, "Colombia en la guerra de Corea," *Folios*, No. 27 (2), 2008, pp. 63-76.

⁵⁰ Coleman, "The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950-1954," *The Journal of Military History* 69 (January 2005), pp. 1141-42. The *Almirante Padilla* transited to Korea via San Diego, where it faced a massive refitting for armament and fire control systems. Likewise, the battalion did not arrive in Korea until June 1951, following a period of training with U.S. Army advisers in Colombia.

⁵¹ Charles H. Briscoe, "Across the Pacific to War: The Colombian Navy in Korea, 1951-1955," *Veritas* 2, no. 4 (2006), https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_across_pacific_page_1.html.

⁵² Juan David Meléndez Camargo, "Colombia and its Participation in the Korean War: A Reflection, 64 Years After the Beginning of the Conflict," *Historia y Memoria* 10, January-June 2015, pp. 199-239.

Alberto Ruiz Nova and Álvaro Valencia Tovar, encouraged the Colombian government to finance additional military reforms based on the lessons learned in Korea.⁵³ Being the only Latin American country with direct military participation in the Korean conflict, Colombia's solidarity boosted the country's prestige on the global stage.⁵⁴ Colombia's prominence helped strengthen economic and military cooperation with the United States, which proved auspicious to Colombian authorities as they faced increasing troubles at home with the outbreak of revolutionary guerrilla violence in the early 1960s.⁵⁵

Participation in the Korean War further permitted the Colombian military to upgrade some of its equipment to meet U.S. standards, which laid the groundwork for future military cooperation and ensured a new market for U.S. defense articles and training.⁵⁶ The members of the Colombian battalion also shared their knowledge in military schools, which led to the revamping of the armed forces' doctrine. According to Valencia Tovar, the lessons of Korea ushered in the "third military reform of the twentieth century," including the perfection of battlefield tactics, technical proficiency, the introduction of intelligence and counterintelligence operations, and logistics and readiness.⁵⁷ The Naval School in particular benefited from the international experience. The navy acquired new units, sent their commissioned and non-commissioned officers to train abroad, and deepened their training relationship with the U.S. Navy.⁵⁸

COLOMBIAN TURNS INWARD: COUNTERINSURGENCY AND PUBLIC ORDER

The persistence of internal threats, as well as their connection with external security concerns, facilitated a notable increase in the Colombian military's size and capabilities as the Cold War progressed. The outbreak of the FARC and ELN insurgencies in the 1960s put pressure on the country's elites, who supported the military's pacification of the countryside and encouraged deeper military ties with the United States. The U.S. government endeavored to make Colombia a "showcase for capitalist development and modernization" under President John F. Kennedy's (1961-1963) Alliance for Progress, and Colombia received more military funding than any other Latin American country in the 1960s.⁵⁹ Under a U.S.-sponsored program known as Plan Lazo, the Colombian Army sponsored economic and social development projects in an attempt to win the

⁵³ Deas, *Las fuerzas del orden*, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Bushnell, *Colombia: una nación*, p. 288.

⁵⁵ Orlando Melo, *Historia mínima de Colombia*, p. 219.

⁵⁶ León Atehortúa "La presencia de Estados Unidos en la formación de los militares colombianos a mediados del siglo XX," *Colombia Revista Historia y Espacio*, Vol. 36, 2011, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Álvaro Valencia Tovar and Jairo Sandoval Franky, *Colombia en la Guerra de Corea: la historia secreta* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2001), p. 312.

⁵⁸ Luís Alberto Ordóñez Rubio, *Historia, fundamentos y alcances del modelo formativo de las escuelas militares en Colombia caso de estudio: Escuela Naval "Almirante Padilla,"* (Bogotá, doctoral thesis, Universidad Santo Tomás, 2015), p. 46.

⁵⁹ Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs: U.S. Policy Toward Colombia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p. 24.

hearts and minds of citizens in the countryside. In 1964, the Ministry of Defense issued a counterinsurgency plan, formalizing the military's counterguerrilla posture for decades to come.⁶⁰

Beginning in the 1980s, worsening internal security conditions due to Colombia's increasing involvement in cocaine trafficking provided new incentives for the strengthening of the police and armed forces, which the U.S. government co-opted to help fight its own war on drugs.⁶¹ Although the United States initially preferred working with law enforcement to target cartel activity, the military's presence in rural areas rendered it a natural partner to combat coca cultivation and cocaine traffickers. The armed forces' increasing involvement in counternarcotics operations necessitated a gradual increase in size and appropriations to boost mobility through transport, intelligence, and communications investments, but capacity-wise, the Colombian Armed Forces remained weak in relation to the magnitude of security challenges.

For decades, the Colombian military had faced mixed threats that had kept their doctrine focused on public order and counterinsurgency missions, while still retaining some conventional warfare capabilities. However, the proliferation and geographic expansion of long-standing guerrilla insurgencies, drug cartels, and the AUC paramilitary group tested the armed forces, particularly by the end of the 1990s. As illegal groups vied for political influence and control over lucrative drug routes to finance their armed activities, violence increased rapidly with record numbers of victims of kidnapping, forced displacement, landmines, infrastructure destruction, and massacres.⁶² Although the Colombian Armed Forces was numerically at its highest force size in history, the Colombian government had languished in its responsibility to train and equip soldiers for this battlefield reality. From 1996 to 1998, the military endured humiliating defeats, and the FARC and ELN managed to force into submission and captivity hundreds of Colombian service members.

The confluence of the insurgent and illicit narcotics threats forced yet another military reorganization and reform. This time, instead of maintaining the public order from a more defensive posture, the armed forces sought to deliver security to the citizenry through an offensive approach against non-state criminal actors.⁶³ When President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) took office in 1998, he sought to quell FARC violence by negotiating peace with the insurgent group, even ceding to the guerrilla army a demilitarized zone, or *zona de despeje*. He also sought to revitalize Colombia's security forces through massive investments from public, private, and

⁶⁰ Leal Buitrago, "Defensa y seguridad nacional en Colombia, 1958-1993." In: *Orden mundial y seguridad: nuevos desafíos para Colombia y América Latina* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo S.A., 1994), p. 148.

⁶¹ Andrés Dávila, "Dime con quién andas: las relaciones entre los civiles y militares en la Colombia de los años 90," in *Control civil y Fuerzas Armadas: en las nuevas democracias latinoamericanas*, ed. Ruth Diamint (Argentina: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1999), pp. 368-369.

⁶² Observatorio de la Consejería Presidencial para los Derechos Humanos, *Atlas del Impacto Regional del Conflicto Armado en Colombia*, 2014.

⁶³ Eduardo Pizarro, *De la guerra a la paz: las fuerzas militares entre 1996 y 2018* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2019), p. 151.

international financiers. His ambitions were encouraged by U.S. President Bill Clinton (1993-2001), who facing his own crisis of moral authority in the United States sought to appear tough on drugs to his Republican critics in the U.S. Congress.⁶⁴ Known as Plan Colombia, Pastrana's strategy received bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress, which sought to outsource the accomplishment of U.S. counternarcotics goals in the Andes to an emboldened Colombian military and approved \$1.3 billion in foreign assistance in 2000.

Plan Colombia, which amounted to more than US\$10 billion in security and development assistance over more than a decade, prioritized improving communications, aerial mobility, intelligence, joint operations, and the professional training of the military's rank and file.⁶⁵ The U.S. government authorized the deployment of some 400 military advisers and another 400 to 800 civilian contractors to administer the assistance.⁶⁶ The influx of foreign funds encouraged the Colombian government, as well, to boost the military's budget and size, and following the election of Álvaro Uribe in 2002, the new president imposed a Democratic Security Tax to underwrite the armed forces' more aggressive and increasingly successful strategy against the FARC and ELN.

Under Uribe's leadership, the Colombian military pushed the guerrilla groups out of urban areas and deep into the countryside and border regions. Insurgent deaths and defections surged during the first decade of the 2000s, and from the late 1990s to 2016, the FARC's rank and file dropped from some 20,000 fighters to fewer than 7,000.⁶⁷ A raid on a FARC camp in 2008 resulted in the death of Raúl Reyes, one of the members of the organization's secretariat, but also highlighted the creeping internationalization of the Colombian armed conflict, as the Colombian military had violated Ecuadorian sovereignty to conduct the assault. This heightened regional tensions, as the leftist governments in Venezuela and Ecuador took advantage of the incident to freeze diplomatic relations with Colombia and militarize their borders temporarily.

The process of modernization and professionalization of the military forces continued well into the 2010s, and with the introduction of joint commands, interoperability among the services improved organizational efficiency and operational effectiveness. A peace deal with the FARC in

⁶⁴ See: Winifred Tate. *Drugs, Thugs, and Diplomats: U.S. Policymaking in Colombia* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015). Hannah Stone, *Corruption and Plan Colombia: The Missing Link* (London: Transparency International, 2019).

⁶⁵ Leal Buitrago, *La Seguridad Nacional a la deriva: del Frente Nacional a la posguerra fría* (Bogotá: Editorial Alfaomega, 2002) pp. 166-167.

⁶⁶ Between 2000 and 2016, 71 percent of U.S. assistance to Colombia benefitted the military and police, whereas economic and development assistance amounted to a mere 29 percent of U.S. support. Plan Colombia was a security strategy that prioritized Colombia's struggling security institutions. See: "Fifteenth Anniversary of Plan Colombia: Learning from its Successes and Failures," Washington Office on Latin America website, February 1, 2016, https://www.wola.org/files/1602_plancol/#:~:text=15th%20Anniversary%20of%20Plan,potential%20to%20intensify%20the%20conflict. Jonathan D. Rosen, *The Losing War: Plan Colombia and Beyond* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2015).

⁶⁷ Nick Miroff, "The Staggering Toll of Colombia's War with FARC Rebels, Explained in Numbers," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/24/the-staggering-toll-of-colombias-war-with-farc-rebels-explained-in-numbers/>.

2016 served as another catalyst for change. Although major security challenges like the ELN and FARC dissidents remained in 2020, the military faced personnel reductions in anticipation of a post-conflict period. In 2008, the military's size reached 273,000 members, which was reduced by nearly 35,000 uniformed personnel a decade later.⁶⁸ As defense planners perceived a shift in security needs, the number of baccalaureate soldiers, high school graduates enrolled in mandatory service for a year, was reduced, while the size of the Colombian National Police increased by 34 percent in the same decade, reaching 175,000 members.⁶⁹ As of 2020, the number of Colombian military personnel was 293,000 troops, 35,000 of whom were in reserve status.⁷⁰ Although tensions between the police and the military rose over funding shifts from 2016 to 2019, the resurgence of insecurity in Colombia's rural areas in 2020 created additional incentives to maintain a robust military force, which continued to benefit from the highest overall budget among all armed forces in Latin America.

SOURCES OF IDENTITY AND PRIDE: THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY'S EXCEPTIONALISM AS AN APOLITICAL FORCE

In Colombia, the Liberal and Conservative parties were the central actors of the state. Military leaders historically remained “behind the scenes” in terms of influencing politics, especially by comparison to their regional counterparts (Chile, Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador). In fact, the Colombian military plays a unique role in the political system due to its alienation from political power, including the denial of suffrage to service members, which has made it less able and likely to intervene with the political system.

A history of partisan conflict resulted in high levels of politicization in the military in its early history, but in contrast with the regional norm, direct intervention proved scarce given the weakness and unpreparedness of the force.⁷¹ The corporative bargaining power of the military was relatively low in comparison to civilian institutions, and in modern times, the apolitical, nonpartisan nature of the armed forces has been a core tenet of the institution's identity—and a major contribution to the country's constitutional stability. In this vein, the Colombian Army prides itself on having not carried out a single unilateral (i.e., without the consent of the political parties) *coup d'état* during the twentieth century, and this exceptionality is a core element of the military's institutional identity.

⁶⁸ The army has long been the largest service, representing 84 percent of the total force.

⁶⁹ Contraloría General de la República, “Pie de fuerza militar y capacidades de las fuerzas militares en la disminución del conflicto y la construcción de la paz 2008 – 2017,” *Boletín Macro Sectorial*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.contraloria.gov.co/documents/463406/1185469/Bolet%C3%ADn+Macrosectorial+No.+015+%28pdf%29/16bf91f6-5966-4194-b7de-1b03e21f8d83?version=1.1>.

⁷⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Chapter Eight: Latin America and the Caribbean,” in *The Military Balance*, Vol. 120, 2020, p. 412.

⁷¹ Daniel Premo, “The Politics of Civilian Rule in Colombia,” in *From Military to Civilian Rule*, ed. Constantine Danopoulos (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), p. 118.

Notwithstanding their political weakness, the Colombian Armed Forces have held a prominent and highly public position among state institutions, especially given their consistent employment in the provision of internal security.⁷² During the first decades of the twentieth century, successive presidents deployed the army to help control social movements, reinforcing for decades the institution's anticommunist bent.

In the 1920s, the growing popularity of Colombia's emergent Socialist Party represented a threat to the traditional parties, and Liberal and Conservative presidents alike utilized the military and police to suppress radical political factions. The so-called "banana massacre," referenced in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is one such instance of labor repression that served as a rallying cry for leftist political and social movements.⁷³ By the 1950s, the role of the Colombian military as an anti-communist force was formalized in a declaration made by the armed forces' high command, stating that "foreign or domestic communism should know that in the Armed Forces it has its most powerful and tenacious enemy."⁷⁴ This notion is still prevalent among service members whose careers have been devoted to dismantling subversive organizations. Likewise, the resurgence of conservative ideological rhetoric in the 2010s that centered on the dangers of "Castro-Chavismo" (i.e., socialism as practiced in Cuba and Venezuela) found adherents among the Colombian Armed Forces, many of whom grew frustrated with the neighboring government in Venezuela after the election of President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) over its financial, logistical, and ideological ties with Colombian insurgents.

Although the operational and ideological disposition of the Colombian military was historically similar to that of many other South American forces during the Cold War, the main distinction has been the length of the Colombian military's involvement in the maintenance of public order and the impact of sicj unconventional military activities on the institutional identity. Whereas most of Latin America's internal armed conflicts concluded in the 1980s and 1990s, the persistence of illegal armed groups in Colombia even following the Cold War reinforced the military's counterinsurgency approach, resulting in a territorially dispersed army that was engaged in constant surveillance. Alain Rouquié notes that this feature of the Colombian military further constrained its ability to intervene directly in politics. He states:

⁷² The military's participation in internal security and public order tasks is not a phenomenon exclusive to Colombia. In many countries, the military has taken on the task of maintaining public order, placing emphasis on the control of the various insurgent forces. See: Louis W. Goodman, "Military Roles: Past and Present," in *Civil-Military Relations and Democracy*, ed. Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 35.

⁷³ Eduardo Posada Carbó, "Fiction as History: The *Bananeras* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 30 (2), May 1998, pp. 395-414.

⁷⁴ Words of General Gustavo Berrío Muñoz in "Diana: Revista del Comisariato del Ejército", June 1954, cited in Saúl Rodríguez, *La influencia de los Estados Unidos en el Ejército colombiano* (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, 2006), p. 42.

An army exposed to anti-guerrilla operations and made up of small detachments is not a force apt for *coup d'états*, even if not for a lack of power, above all at the local level....The army still finds itself in the center of power, but militarism, under its conventional form of usurpation, has not even once erupted in the entire history of contemporary Colombia.⁷⁵

The only modern experience of military rule in Colombia occurred from 1953 to 1957, but it by no means represented the end of the traditional party system. On the contrary, it was a reflection of the party dynamics of the time and their incapacity to deal with the increasing levels of violence and disorder around the country during a period known as *La Violencia*. General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's intervention to remove Conservative President Laureano Gómez was supported by influential sectors of the Conservative Party and had the approval of Liberal Party leadership. As Jonathan Hartlyn describes, Rojas Pinilla's "coup" was a constitutionalist defense against a president who had "moved towards imposing a new Falangist-corporatist constitution in the country that would strengthen vastly his powers."⁷⁶ Political dissatisfaction combined with discontent in the military, which claimed that it did not have adequate resources to fulfill its tasks, came to a head in June 1953 when President Gómez asked General Rojas Pinilla to resign, at which point the military finally agreed to the removal of Gómez.

The military's role in governance during this period accelerated a process of depoliticization of the security forces, as the political parties ceded control to the military to quell partisan violence. The police had become highly politicized and incited and perpetrated partisan violence in the countryside, so some of the initial reforms granted the then-Ministry of War administrative and operational jurisdiction over the National Police force to reduce the institution's manipulation by the parties.⁷⁷

However, when Rojas Pinilla decided to launch his own "third political force," the *Movimiento de Acción Nacional*, he lost support within the military and in the parties, which forced him to cede power to a junta and then eventually to civilian party leadership.⁸ The Liberal and Conservative leaders then agreed on a system of alternating power and a fixed quota for government positions in a system known as the National Front, which lasted until the 1970s.

As the military's role in governance came to an end, President Alberto Lleras Camargo (1945-1946, 1958-1962) immortalized the nature of civil-military relations in Colombia in a speech on May 9, 1958. In it, the president assured that the government would respect the military, maintaining the reforms implemented during the National Front and sustaining the military's resources and responsibilities for the control of public order. Nonetheless, the military would be

⁷⁵ Alain Rouquie, *El estado militar en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores Argentinas, 1982). pp. 232-233.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Hartlyn, "Military Governments and the Transition to Civilian Rule: The Colombian Experience of 1957-1958," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 26 (2), 1984, pp. 245-248.

⁷⁷ Presidencia de la República, Decree 1814, July 10, 1953. Diario oficial, año xc. N. 28248. July 16, 1953, p. 2.

subordinated to civilian control and its soldiers separated from the political realm. He firmly proclaimed, “Politics undermines the morale and discipline of the armed forces.”⁷⁸

The institutional values and principles published by the Ministry of Defense reinforce the notion of the armed forces as non-political actors, subordinated to the national interest, whose purpose is to guarantee the security and the defense of national sovereignty. The Colombian Armed Forces embrace traditional military values such as institutional loyalty, military honor, military pride, respect for hierarchy, and integrity.⁷⁹ The maintenance of the constitutional order is of supreme importance to the Colombian Armed Forces, and in relation to the internal armed conflict, Colombian military officers tend to view themselves and their institution as being on the right side of the law.⁸⁰ More recently, the military has publicly expressed its commitment to protecting human rights and upholding International Humanitarian Law in the conduct of its domestic security operations. In parallel to the signing of the FARC peace accord, the Colombian Army emblazoned a new principle on its uniforms and promotional materials: “faith in the cause” (*fé en la causa*), which the institution’s leaders describe as an inner drive to achieve victory in an ethically resolute manner.⁸¹

THE COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES AND SOCIETY

For much of Colombia’s modern history, the armed forces remained at the sidelines of Colombian politics and doggedly protected their institutional autonomy. Nevertheless, given the magnitude of Colombia’s security and governance challenges, the military assumed an outsized role among Colombian institutions and remains one of the principal agents of state authority in much of the national territory. It also registers as one of the country’s most esteemed institutions, a reality that is as much a function of its historical respect for constitutionality as it is of the military’s frequent contact with the Colombian citizenry. In recent decades, the military’s improved operational performance and professionalism resulted in increased popularity. Following crippling battlefield defeats against the FARC in the 1990s, public trust in the armed forces recovered and remained high nationwide thanks to a newfound offensive posture against the country’s illegal armed groups starting during the Uribe administration. Nevertheless, various scandals from within the army’s

⁷⁸ Alberto Lleras Camargo, Presidential Speech at the Teatro Patria, quoted in Jesús Alberto Suárez Pineda, *Biografía de las palabras castrenses: investigaciones filológicas sobre cultura militar* (Bogotá, Escuela Militar de Cadetes, 2014).

⁷⁹ “Principios y valores,” Ejército Nacional website, https://www.ejercito.mil.co/conozcanos/principios_valores/principios. “Fuerza Aérea Colombiana, Principios, Valores y Virtudes,” Fuerza Aérea Colombiana website, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://d2r891s1uje5rg.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/principios_y_valores_fac.pdf. “Misión, visión, mega, valores, principios y funciones,” Policía Nacional website, <https://www.policia.gov.co/mision-vision-mega-principios-valores-funciones>.

⁸⁰ “Principios y valores de la institucion,” Armada Nacional website, <https://haztemarino.armada.mil.co/principios-y-valores-de-la-institucion>.

⁸¹ “Principios y Valores,” Ejército Nacional website, https://www.ejercito.mil.co/conozcanos/principios_valores/principios/fe_causa.

ranks led to a crisis in confidence in the institution starting in 2019, which remained unresolved as of 2020.

The Institutional Perspective

Per Article 217 of the Colombian Constitution of 1991, the Colombian Armed Forces have a responsibility for the defense of the sovereignty, independence, and integrity of the national territory *and* the constitutional order.⁸² Given the general absence of external threats in the modern history of the country, the Colombian military has focused principally on its authority as a **defender of Colombia's democracy** from domestic threats, including insurgents and drug trafficking organizations.⁸³

The 1991 Constitution, an effort to deepen democratic governance and put an end to the violence of the 1980s, led to major reforms that increased the military's accountability. The Minister of Defense, previously a uniformed general, became a civilian appointee, and a professional civilian bureaucracy complements the military staff at the headquarters level. Other reforms included the creation of a national human rights ombudsman and special investigative units in the judicial branch to oversee the administrative and operational activities of the military and police. The increased subordination of the armed forces to civilian control helped improve the image of the institution internationally, as most of Latin America experienced a wave of democratization throughout the 1990s. Whereas the U.S. government had long remained cautious of deeper engagement with the military due to a poor record of human rights violations, the Bill Clinton administration authorized Plan Colombia assistance in 2000 with the backing of both houses of the U.S. Congress. From this point forward, the Colombian military became the number three recipient of U.S. military aid in the world and the **United States' premier security partner** in Latin America.

The Colombian Armed Forces also became more deeply enmeshed in **counternarcotics roles** over time. Whereas the top recipients of U.S. security assistance in the 1980s were the Colombian National Police, the Colombian military's responsibility in this arena expanded as the country's insurgent and paramilitary groups increased their involvement in the lucrative drug trade. Although the U.S. government initially prohibited the use of U.S.-funded intelligence and much military hardware for the purposes of the Colombian military's counterinsurgency campaign, the expanded authorities granted to the U.S. presidency after the September 11, 2001 attacks permitted the use of U.S. resources to target terrorist finances, including the drug trade. The Colombian military had long considered the country's guerrilla groups terrorist organizations, but it was not until U.S. President George W. Bush (2001-2009) declared the Global War on Terrorism that the Colombian

⁸² Constitution of the Republic of Colombia, 1991.

⁸³ Holly K. Sonneland and Celeste Castillejo, "Explainer: The Colombia-Venezuela Border Conflict" Americas Society/Council of the Americas website, September 2015, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-colombia-venezuela-border-conflict>. The Colombian military has occasionally militarized Colombia's long and porous border with Venezuela to target trafficking activity, resulting in limited conflict with elements of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Nacionales Bolivarianas*—FANB) of Venezuela.

military became a **frontline proxy in the counterterror fight**. Starting in 2002, the United States increased its cooperation with the Colombian military with the expressed purpose of targeting “narcoterrorist” groups such as the FARC, ELN, and AUC.⁸⁴

In addition to their constitutionally prescribed roles and mission sets shaped by Colombia’s myriad security threats, the Colombian Armed Forces have also become the de facto **agents of nation-building in the Colombian frontier**. Following the violent decade of the 1990s, which saw the territorial expansion of illegal armed groups, political rhetoric in Bogotá focused on the lack of state presence in regions “forgotten” by the Colombian state.⁸⁵ In recent decades, the preferred remedy for this abandon has been the establishment or recovery of territorial control by the Colombian Armed Forces.⁸⁶ The Colombian military has referred to regions where insurgents, mafias, and criminals operate with relative impunity as “red zones,” “consolidation zones,” and, most recently, “future zones.” In these territories, the armed forces participate in the administration of a wide array of state services, serving as the principal interface between the state and the citizenry. The military has also assumed duties to protect critical energy and economic infrastructure in these outlying areas, especially along the Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline, which has long been a frequent target of insurgent attacks.

From 2007 to 2010, the Colombian military supported a political strategy of “consolidation” through a social welfare campaign that sought to restore government authority in areas long bereft of the presence of the Colombian state.⁸⁷ A pilot engagement in the Macarena municipality starting in 2007 demonstrated that the military’s “hearts and minds” campaign and a surge in government investments helped reduce coca cultivation, prevented acts of violence or terrorism by the FARC, and rendered Colombian communities a vital source of intelligence concerning insurgent activities. Thus, the Uribe administration formalized this strategy in highly conflictive areas across the country as the Integral Action program, and in cooperation with the other ministries and agencies of the central government, the military became more deeply involved in social and economic development work, including rural infrastructure construction, health brigades, and the provision

⁸⁴ Dario E. Teicher, *The Decisive Phase of Colombia’s War on Narco-Terrorism*, US Air Force Counterproliferation Center Future Warfare Series No. 28, 2005, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Apr/11/2002115494/-1/-1/0/28THEDECISIVE.PDF>.

⁸⁵ Juan Gossain, “Los departamentos más pobres de Colombia y los que más progresan,” *El Tiempo*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/departamentos-mas-pobres-de-colombia-y-los-que-mas-progresan-2018-307094>; “El Pacífico olvidado,” *El Espectador*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/editorial/el-pacifico-olvidado-articulo-730285/>; Armando Benedetti “El Tarra es un territorio olvidado por el estado en el que confluyen ahora fuerzas del narcotráfico”, *Noticias Santander*, July 31, 2018, <https://notisantander.com/el-tarra-es-un-territorio-olvidado-por-el-estado-en-el-que-confluyen-ahora-fuerzas-del-narcotrafico-armando-benedetti/>.

⁸⁶ Ricardo Andrés Bernal Mendiola and Luis Antonio Martín Moreno, “El Control Territorial para Colombia: un Abordaje Sistémico,” in *El Control Territorial en el Siglo XXI: Fundamentos Teóricos*, Ed. Luis Antonio Martín Moreno (Bogotá: Ejército, 2017), pp. 333-369.

⁸⁷ Manuel Guillermo Silva Urbano, *La Acción Integral como una estrategia efectiva hacia la consolidación de la seguridad y la defensa nacional*, Thesis, Universidad Militar Nueva Granada, 2014. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0797/5bda6286b0b97e377096a1f4eb84680fe70c.pdf>, pp. 6-8.

of educational resources to vulnerable youth.

The Colombian Armed Forces also took advantage of their contact with new communities to gather information about insurgent and drug trafficking organizations, while coordinating information operations campaigns to bolster support for government initiatives. Military intelligence units also masterfully encouraged defections from the ranks of illegal armed groups during this period. Indeed, the Colombian military's growing use of information warfare, to include intelligence operations, reflected an attempt to be more surgical in its approach to neutralizing threats—and an effort to reduce civilian casualties in the conduct of operations. Most famously, the Colombian military orchestrated in 2008 a feat of military deception when it rescued a former Colombian presidential candidate, three U.S. citizens, and 11 Colombian servicemembers from FARC captivity after having infiltrated the guerrilla group's communications network. Operation Check (*Operación Jaque*) relied on sophisticated human and signals intelligence to deliver one of the most devastating blows to the FARC in the history of the organization—all without firing a single shot.⁸⁸

As the Colombian Armed Forces demonstrated improved proficiency on the battlefield, they became a **point of reference globally** for successful counternarcotics, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism operations. Interoperability with the United States nearly led to a treaty that would have enabled the U.S. Department of Defense to lease Colombian military bases to stage regional counternarcotics operations starting in 2009, but the agreement was rejected by the Colombian Constitutional Court on procedural grounds.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the 2012 U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation (USCAP) ushered in a deeper, more outward-looking partnership.⁹⁰ Through this initiative, the United States leveraged Colombia's expertise in combating transnational organized crime by pairing Colombian military, police, and judicial authorities with their counterparts in other priority regions, including Afghanistan, West Africa, and Central America.⁹¹ In addition to bolstering Colombia's reputation as a comeback nation, the USCAP afforded Colombia further opportunities to promote its own defense industry and military technology in new markets.⁹²

⁸⁸ The Colombian military, nonetheless, misused the symbol of the Red Cross in the conduct of the operation, violating the First Geneva Convention. Charles H. Briscoe and Daniel J. Kulich, "Operación Jaque: The Ultimate Deception," *Veritas*, Vol. 14 (3), 2018, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v14n3_op_jaque_page_1.html.

⁸⁹ "Colombian Agreement Over U.S. Military Bases 'Unconstitutional,'" *The Guardian*, August 18, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/18/colombia-us-bases-unconstitutional>.

⁹⁰ See: Arlene Tickner, "Colombia, the United States, and Security Cooperation by Proxy," Washington Office on Latin America website, March 18, 2014, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/colombia-the-united-states-and-security-cooperation-by-proxy/>.

⁹¹ "Joint Press Release on the United States-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation," U.S. Department of State website, April 15, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/04/187928.htm>.

⁹² Jan Eijking, "When the Technical is Political: Colombia's Export of Security Expertise," *The Oxford University Politics Blog*, December 2, 2019, <https://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/when-the-technical-is-political-colombias-export-of-security-expertise/>. Peter DeShazo, Tanya Primiani, and Phillip McLean, *Back From the Brink: Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999-2007*, Center for Strategic and International Studies website, November 27, 2007, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/back-brink>.

Colombia's engagement abroad, however, is not limited to South-South cooperation. In 2018, Colombia became the first and only "global partner" to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Latin America, a recognition that includes an official certification of Colombia's national arms exports. Colombia's partner status with NATO has led to the development of common approaches to counterterrorism, maritime security, narcotics interdiction, and gender-sensitive security reforms.⁹³ Although this designation does not necessarily obligate Colombia to participate in NATO operations, partnership with the Alliance positions Colombia alongside countries like Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand, boosting the country's international image and opportunities for global security cooperation.

Finally, despite disagreement among the rank and file of the armed forces, the Colombian military assumed an active role as **participants in the FARC peace process**. Following the signing of the peace accords in 2016, the military reversed a decades-long pursuit of the insurgent group and quickly became the principal protectors of their former adversaries. As more than 7,000 FARC combatants left their strongholds and transitioned to 26 disarmament and demobilization zones across the country, the military provided logistical support and security guarantees as a demonstration of support for the peace process—and did so without a single incident of violence or abuse.⁹⁴ The military and police continued to maintain security measures around designated communities of demobilized FARC members as of 2020. Yet outbreaks of violence against former FARC combatants in coca-growing strongholds underscored the insufficiency of the military as a security provider to some areas—and demonstrated just how elusive territorial control remained in some parts of the country.⁹⁵

The armed forces also distinguished themselves from their regional counterparts during similar peace processes when they actively participated in the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Co-existence, and No Repetition.⁹⁶ Carlos Ospina, a lawyer and retired army major, was elected to the commission in 2017 to represent the military's institutional perspective. He emphasized that many military members see themselves not only as agents of the conflict but also as victims of it. In October 2018, the armed forces submitted to the commission a 50-volume report of more than 18,300 pages documenting the FARC's violations of international humanitarian law, followed a year later by another submission that detailed 19 cases of violations committed against military

⁹³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Relations with Colombia," December 6, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_143936.htm#:~:text=Colombia%20is%20the%20Alliance's%20only,which%20NATO%20is%20developing%20relations.

⁹⁴ Juanita Vélez, "Lo que significa la concentración de las Farc," *La Silla Vacía*, February 21, 2017, <https://lasillavacia.com/historia/lo-que-significa-la-concentracion-de-las-farc-59834>.

⁹⁵ Sara Lopera, "En Ituango los excombatientes se van, pero la guerra queda," *La Silla Vacía*, July 15, 2020, <https://lasillavacia.com/ituango-los-excombatientes-se-van-guerra-queda-77566>.

⁹⁶ "The Truth Commission and the Colombian Armed Forces," *Rodeemos el Diálogo*, July 2020, <https://uk.rodeemoseldialogo.org/2020/07/the-truth-commission-and-the-colombian-armed-forces/>.

personnel and their families.⁹⁷

Other military members have recognized their role as victimizers in the country's armed conflict, and the Ministry of Defense created in 2017 a commission to recommend cases of military and police officers to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (*Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz*—JEP), a transitional justice tribunal created by the 2016 accords to adjudicate human rights abuses and crimes committed in the context of the conflict.⁹⁸ Although in theory the military and police are to be held accountable to the same standard as applied to FARC ex-combatants, early empirical analysis of the JEP's decisions suggests preferential treatment for state security forces.⁹⁹

President Iván Duque (2018-2022), who campaigned against the FARC peace process, ordered a rotation in military leadership upon taking office in 2018—one that critics interpreted as a waning support among the military's high command for the terms of peace.¹⁰⁰ The new Commander of the Colombian Army, for instance, faced scrutiny for his previous service as the executive officer of a brigade responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial murders.¹⁰¹ Upon taking charge of the army, the general issued written and verbal orders to troops to double the number of criminals and insurgents they kill or capture in battle, even if it meant higher civilian casualties.¹⁰² Incentivizing “body counts” in this way previously led to some of the military's worst abuses in the course of the armed conflict, including the false positives scandal.

In an effort to improve the institution's image and define its relevance following the FARC's disarmament, the Colombian Armed Forces incorporated **new post-conflict missions** to their doctrine. In 2013, the army created the Strategic Committee for the Design of the Army of the Future (*Comité Estratégico de Diseño del Ejército del Futuro*—CEDEF) to align the institution's

⁹⁷ “Comisión de la Verdad recibe informe Génesis por parte de las Fuerzas Militares,” *Comisión de la Verdad*, October 11, 2018, <https://comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/comision-de-la-verdad-recibe-informe-genesis-por-parte-de-las-fuerzas-militares>. “Es necesario que la sociedad reconozca que los militares también fuimos víctimas,” *Comisión de la Verdad*, November 7, 2019, <https://comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/es-necesario-que-la-sociedad-reconozca-que-los-militares-tambien-fuimos-victimas>.

⁹⁸ Comando General de las Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia, “Ejército Nacional y la Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz,” June 27, 2019, <https://www.cgfm.mil.co/es/blog/ejercito-nacional-y-la-jurisdiccion-especial-para-la-paz>.

⁹⁹ Camila Andrea Santamaría Chavarro, Diana Isabel Güiza Gómez, and Rodrigo Uprimny Yepes, “Colombia's *Fuerza Pública* (Security Forces) in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace: Special Treatment or Preferential Treatment?” in *Jus Post Bellum: Restraint, Stabilization and Peace*, Ed. Patrick Mileham (Leiden: Brill and Nijhoff, 2019), pp. 252-280.

¹⁰⁰ President Santos' unpopularity at the end of his term in office paved the way for Duque's electoral victory. Duque campaigned against the FARC peace accord and promised to modify the terms of transitional justice, which many Colombians perceived as too lenient on the FARC. As of 2020, the transitional justice tribunal continued to operate independently, but Duque's public criticism of the institution persisted.

¹⁰¹ “El País de España también cuestiona al general Martínez,” *El Tiempo*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/europa/articulo-de-el-pais-vincula-a-general-nicacio-martinez-con-falsos-positivos-371266>.

¹⁰² Nicholas Casey, “Colombian Army's New Kill Orders Send Chills Down Ranks,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/18/world/americas/colombian-army-killings.html>.

acquisitions, training, and budgets with the needs of the Colombian citizenry.¹⁰³ In addition to traditional missions such as national defense, public security, and support to civilian authorities and the police, the military's leadership identified disaster relief, international cooperation, environmental protection, and socioeconomic development as focal areas for the Colombian Armed Forces of the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁴ These missions also advance the doctrinal concept of multidimensional security, which extends beyond traditional notions of national security and highlights the military's role in addressing the root causes of conflict and violence. In this vein, the Ministry of Defense envisions the military as a collaborator with civilian institutions to improve the government's overall provision of security to the Colombian people.

The Societal Perspective

In part due to the Ministry of Defense's savvy public communications strategy, Colombian society has largely embraced the military's image of itself, acquiescing to the institution's assumption of new roles and prerogatives in recent decades.¹⁰⁵ The population views the military as more professional and better trained than the police, which helps explain why the military has been called routinely to perform the work of their law enforcement counterparts. Colombians tend to be highly patriotic, and like in many countries of Latin America, the armed forces are a fabled and real source of national pride.¹⁰⁶ The country celebrates public holidays that honor military battles, and the country's eleven-verse national anthem, which is played (at least partly) on public radio every day at six o'clock in the morning and evening, glorifies the country's independence and military heroes.

Support for the military surged after 2002, when the military reversed a tide of embarrassment that saw Colombia's guerrilla groups take hostage hundreds of soldiers in battlefield defeats. The Uribe government's prioritization of tackling FARC and ELN fronts near major population centers dislodged the illegal armed groups from militarily and logistically strategic corridors and permitted the military to establish a more permanent presence on Colombia's major motorways. The rapid expansion of military checkpoints throughout the country during Uribe's first term further reinforced the notion that the Colombian people were safe in the hands of their armed forces, and it became customary for soldiers to signal to motorists a reassuring thumbs up as citizens passed through these checkpoints. From the perspective of most Colombians, the armed forces were the

¹⁰³ Andrés Ciro Gómez and Magdalena Correa Henao, "Transformación estructural del Ejército colombiano. Construcción de escenarios futuros," *Revista Científica General José María Córdova* Vol. 12 (13), 2014, pp. 19-88.

¹⁰⁴ Armando Borrero, "La Fuerza Pública en el posconflicto: ¿cuáles serán sus misiones?" *Razón Pública*, May 8, 2017, <https://razonpublica.com/la-fuerza-publica-en-el-posconflicto-cuales-seran-sus-misiones/>.

¹⁰⁵ Given the limited reach of state institutions, mainstream media, and civil society organizations to dangerous and outlying areas of Colombia, the Colombian military has been able to define its own narrative in many conflict zones, and the media's overreliance on official data has reinforced the predominance of the military's version of events.

See: Garry Leech, "Distorted perceptions of Colombia's conflict," Relief Web website, June 2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/distorted-perceptions-colombias-conflict>.

¹⁰⁶ "The Colombian National Anthem and Colombian Patriotism," See Colombia website, February 7, 2014, <https://seecolombia.travel/blog/2014/02/the-colombian-national-anthem-and-colombian-patriotism/>.

only thing standing between them and the scourge of drug and guerrilla violence.

The Colombian public's faith in the armed forces, however, was shaken in 2008 when accusations surfaced implicating dozens of officers and soldiers in the murder of innocent civilians whose corpses were presented as insurgents killed in combat.¹⁰⁷ What is worse, the senior leadership of the Ministry of Defense, including the former Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces General Mario Montoya, incentivized such abuses by rewarding units with increased pay, time off, and even promotions for increasing body counts of enemy combatants.¹⁰⁸ Such rewards prompted unscrupulous field commanders to falsely identify murdered civilians as insurgents or delinquents, which military leaders then tallied to boost the numerical accomplishments of the institution. False positives, as these extrajudicial murders were classified, became the subject of more than 3,000 investigations by the Colombian Attorney General's Office.¹⁰⁹ As of 2020, no senior military leaders faced charges for false positives, while more than 1,700 junior members of the military have been convicted.¹¹⁰

Despite human rights violations committed by the armed forces, negotiations pertaining to the role of the military in society were deliberately left off the table in the Havana peace negotiations with the FARC, sending a clear message to the insurgents and to international parties to the peace process that Colombians respect the military's institutionality and perceive it as an agent of a democratic state. However, despite an internal effort to reform the armed forces to accommodate "post-conflict" security needs, the military faced uncommon public scrutiny and increasing calls for reform from outside the institution after 2016. Under the terms of the peace accord, the armed forces were charged with establishing a territorial presence in areas of the country depopulated by FARC combatants. However, security forces provided only "a token presence in former war zones," leading to a surge in criminality and violence.¹¹¹ A series of high-profile corruption and abuse incidents further jeopardized the military's standing in society. Following the media's discovery of illegal surveillance operations and the rape of an indigenous minor by soldiers in early 2020, former President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) went as far as to accuse the military of deep-seated discipline problems and of "institutionally training soldiers" to commit abuses.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Simon Romero, "Colombian Army is Accused of Killing Poor Civilians and Labeling Them Insurgents," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/29/world/americas/29iht-colombia.4.17352270.html>.

¹⁰⁸ John Lindsay-Poland, *Plan Colombia: U.S. Ally Atrocities and Community Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 157.

¹⁰⁹ José Felipe Sarmiento, "Cuantos son los casos de falsos positivos," *Colombia Check*, April 16, 2019, <https://colombiacheck.com/investigaciones/explicador-cuantos-son-los-casos-de-falsos-positivos>.

¹¹⁰ "Por falsos positivos van 1700 condenas," *El Tiempo*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/investigacion/falsos-positivos-suma-1-740-condenas-496312>.

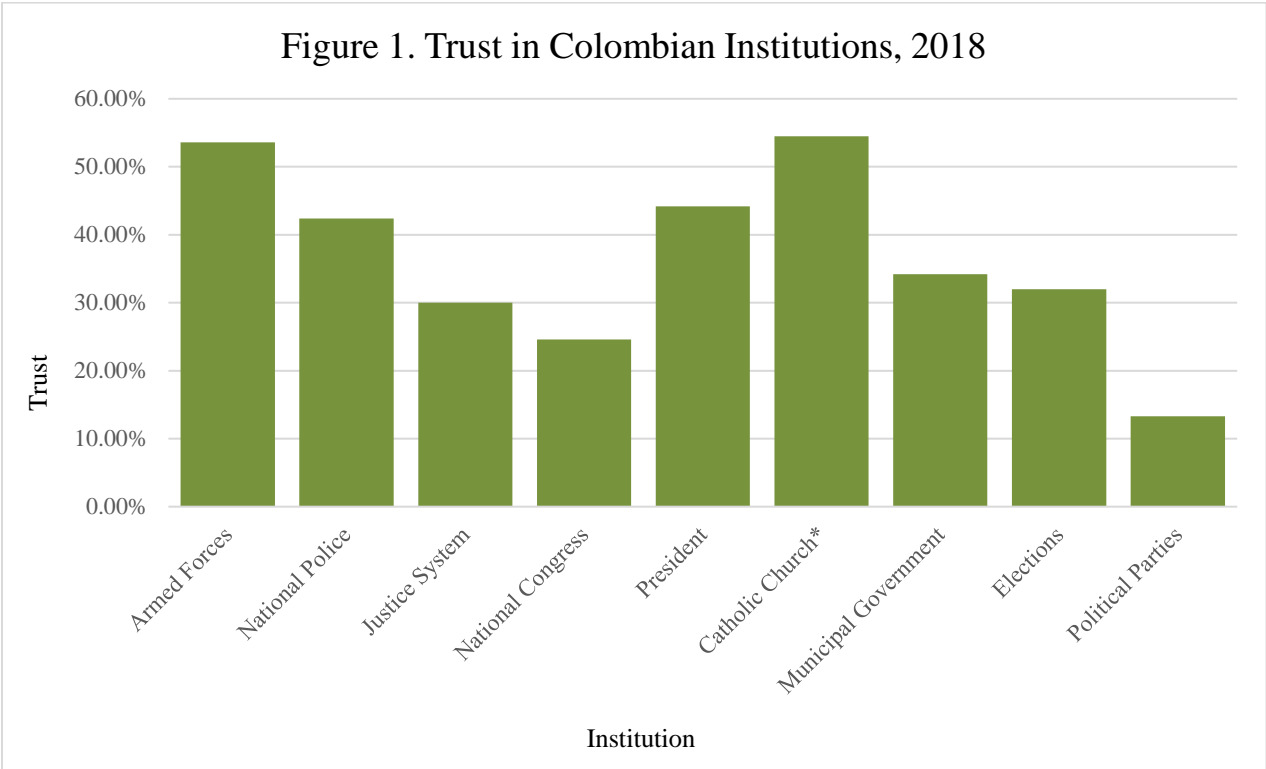
¹¹¹ John Otis, "Colombia's FARC Rebels Laid Down Their Weapons, But A Growing Number Are Being Killed," *National Public Radio*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/06/802764177/colombias-farc-rebels-laid-down-their-weapons-but-a-growing-number-are-being-kil>.

¹¹² "Cruce de cartas entre Samper y comandante del Ejército por abusos sexuales." *El Espectador*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/cruce-de-cartas-entre-samper-y-comandante-del-ejercito-por-abusos-sexuales/>; Juan Forero et al. "¿Por qué nos vigilan? Preguntas públicas al gobierno del presidente Iván Duque y al

Such remarks from a former commander in chief signal a surprising crisis of confidence in the military—and one equally reflected in public attitudes toward the military at the close of 2020.

Public Opinion of the Colombian Armed Forces

Notwithstanding this more recent shift in public attitudes, the Colombian Armed Forces enjoyed widespread popular approval in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the armed forces tended to poll just behind churches and religious organizations as the most popular institution in the country. Although the military faced a wave of popular disapproval and even embarrassment in the 1990s due to battlefield defeats against the FARC, Plan Colombia and the military’s offensive after the collapse of FARC peace talks in 2002 reassured Colombians that the armed forces were prepared to root out insurgents from their traditional strongholds. Impressive operational results in 2003 and 2004 convinced the Colombian public that their faith was well placed. And the armed forces’ reluctance to opine on political matters has helped sustain an air of independence, boosting their popularity even while other governmental institutions remained deeply unpopular (see Figure 1).

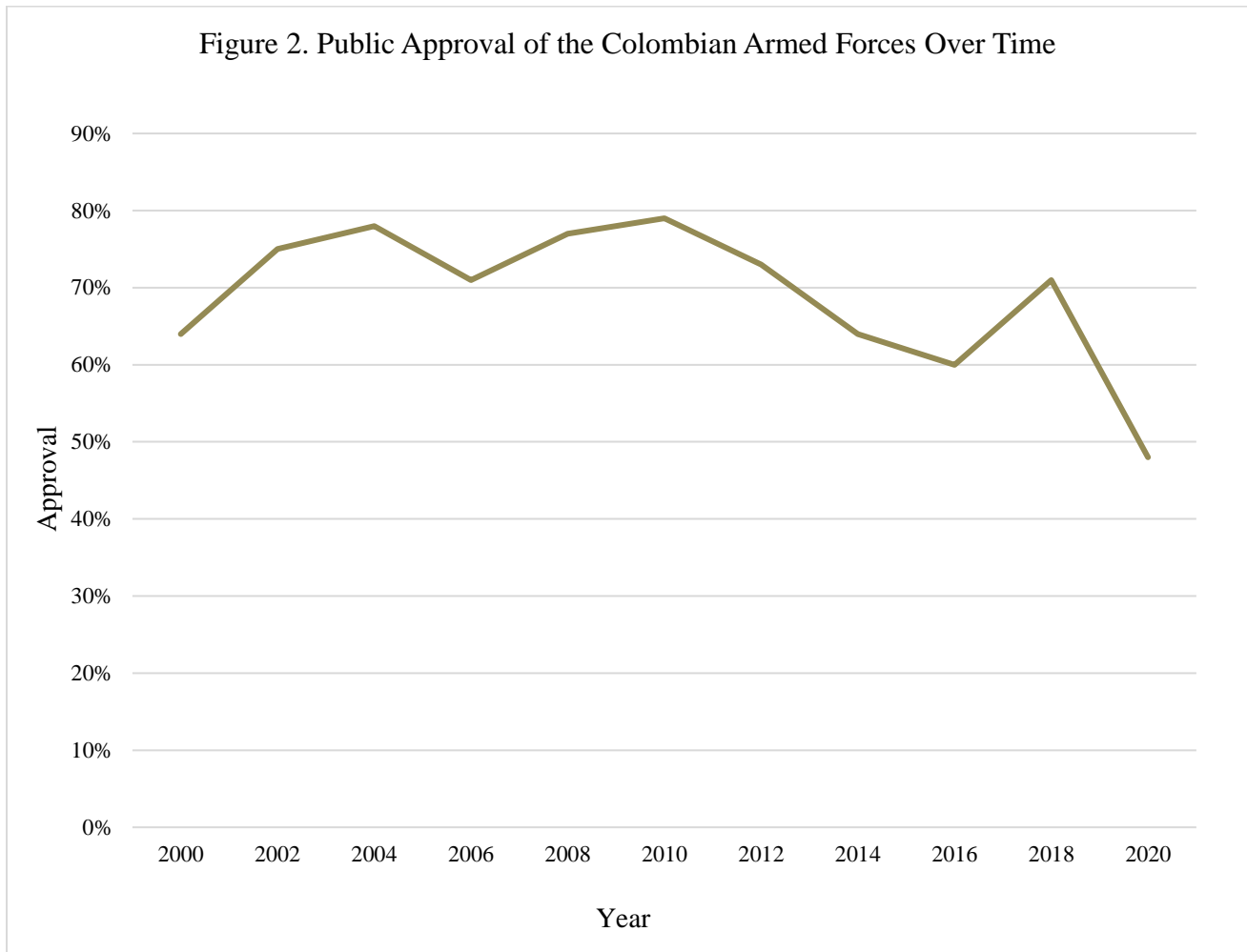


Note: Data on trust in the Catholic Church was only collected from self-reported Catholics.

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project, 2019, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Ejército de Colombia,” *Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa*, May 3, 2020, <https://flip.org.co/index.php/es/informacion/pronunciamentos/item/2505-por-que-nos-vigilan-preguntas-publicas-al-gobierno-del-presidente-ivan-duque-y-al-ejercito-de-colombia>.

According to public opinion data collected by Invamer/Gallup, 79 percent of Colombians held a favorable opinion of the armed forces in July 2002, just prior to President Uribe’s inauguration.¹¹³ During Uribe’s eight-year administration, the amount of popular support for the military did not drop below 70 percent (see Figure 2). Even the false positives allegations, which broke in the media in 2008, did not immediately affect the armed forces’ popularity. In fact, that same year the armed forces saw approval ratings peak because of propitious battlefield victories against the FARC, including the death of Raúl Reyes and *Operación Jaque*.¹¹⁴



Note: The data shown is the lowest percentage of approval from each year represented.

Source: Gallup Poll, Invamer S.A.S., 2020.

The public’s attitude toward the armed forces is fairly consistent when controlling for gender.

¹¹³ The Invamer/Gallup data reflects a slightly higher annual trust than that which was reported by peer pollsters but covers more years of data. Invamer S.A.S., *25 años del POLL*, Colombia, June 2020, <https://www.valoraanalitik.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Resultados-Poll-137.pdf>

¹¹⁴ “La verdad de la Operación Jaque,” *Semana*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-verdad->

Although men have a slightly higher opinion of the military and women hold a slightly higher opinion of the Colombian National Police, the margins of difference remain low. No demonstrable difference of opinion was observed according to skin color.¹¹⁵

Controlling for educational attainment and age, more highly educated people express greater distrust in the armed forces, as do younger poll respondents.¹¹⁶

Public opinion of the U.S. Armed Forces, Colombia's preferred security partner and primary provider of security assistance, reflects a moderate level of trust, but the number of poll respondents indicating complete distrust increased from 2012 to 2014, a period during which U.S. security assistance decreased considerably (see Figures 3 and 4). In the following years, U.S.-Colombian military-to-military ties faced increased scrutiny on both sides of the bilateral partnership, as lawmakers in Washington and Bogotá questioned the militarized approach to stemming illegal drug flows and expressed concerns about human rights violations.¹¹⁷ After the arrival of 54 U.S. servicemembers as part of a Security Force Assistance Brigade in May 2020, a Colombian court suspended the deployment on the grounds that President Duque had not received the appropriate authorization from Congress—an uncommon challenge to a traditionally strong security partnership.

¹¹⁵ Miguel García Sánchez, Juan Carlos Rodríguez Raga, Mitchell A. Seligson, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, "Cultura política de la democracia en Colombia, 2014," *Latin American Public Opinion Project*, May 2015, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/colombia/AB2014_Colombia_Country_Report_v21_revised_W_06042015.pdf.

¹¹⁶ Diana Alejandra Rivera Rivera, Juan Camilo Plata Caviedes, and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Raga, "Barómetro de las Américas Colombia 2018: Democracia e Instituciones," *LAPOP*, July 2019, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/colombia/Colombia_2018_Democracia_e_Instituciones_W_11.07.19.pdf.

¹¹⁷ Jake Kinkaid, "Legality of U.S. drug war aid challenged in Congress and Colombia," *Miami Herald*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/colombia/article244590722.html>; "Misión military de EE.UU. seguirá suspendida, a pesar de pedido del Centro Democrático," *El Espectador*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/mision-militar-de-ee-uu-continuara-suspendida-a-pegar-de-pedido-del-centro-democratico/>.

Figure 3. Level of Trust in the United States Armed Forces, 2012
(1=None, 7=High)

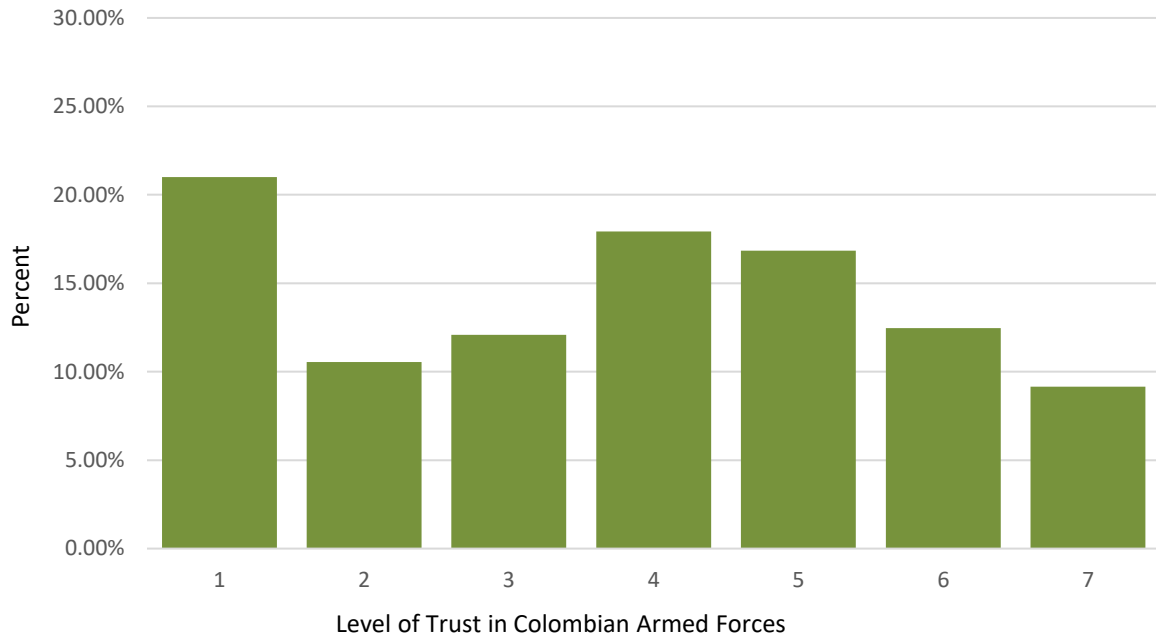
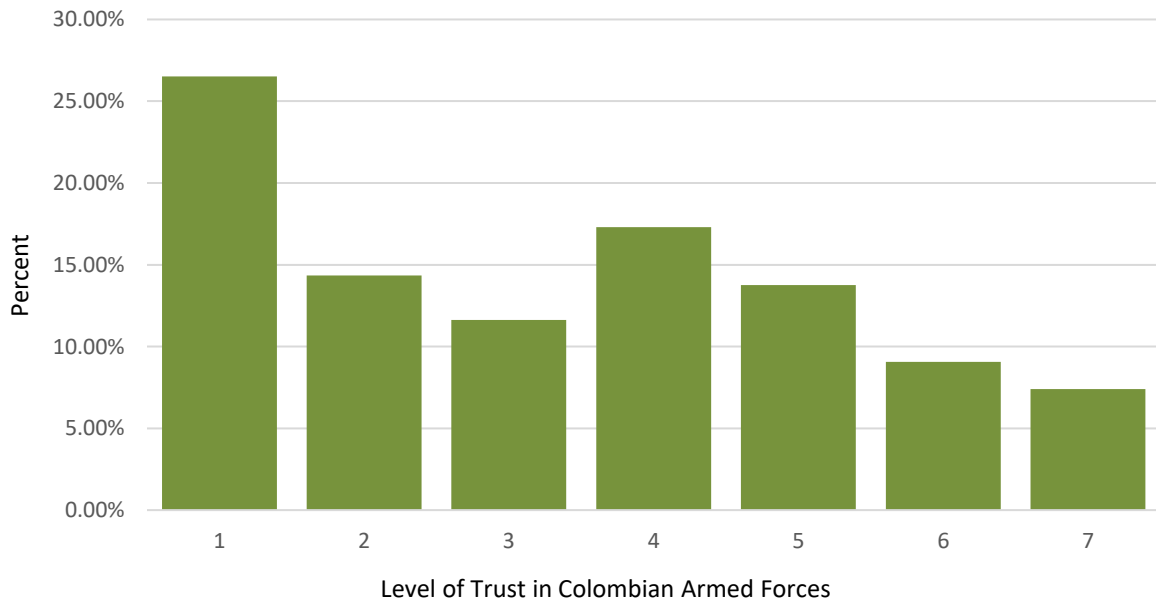


Figure 4. Level of Trust in the United States Armed Forces, 2014
(1=None, 7=High)



Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project, 2012/2014, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Increased scrutiny of the U.S.-Colombia security relationship is consistent with an overall decline in satisfaction with Colombia's institutions and political system beginning in 2013.¹¹⁸ During this period, the Colombian Armed Forces' approval rating suffered. In 2014, popular approval dropped to 64 percent after recordings surfaced implicating the armed forces commander in a possible attempt to interfere with judicial investigations into the false positives scandal.¹¹⁹ The public's perception of the military remained relatively depressed throughout the second term of President Santos. During this period, peace negotiations with the FARC in a more limited role for the military amid a ceasefire. Yet the military's commander, General Alberto José Mejía Ferrero, stood behind the president's bid to bring an end to the armed conflict. Additionally, the Colombian Prosecutor General's office advanced investigations into more than 5,000 extrajudicial murders at this same juncture, and Human Rights Watch published a 2015 report that documented nearly as many false positives, most of which had not been resolved in the courts.¹²⁰ It is plausible that the military high command's steadfast support for the FARC peace process, which divided the country, and negative publicity surrounding the alleged murders affected popular approval, which did not exceed 80 percent for the remainder of Santos' tenure.

During the Duque administration, the Colombian military intensified drug crop eradication and drug interdiction, bringing down Colombia's overall cocaine yield, but corruption scandals, extrajudicial murders, illegal surveillance, and sexual violence perpetrated by members of the military saw the public approval rating dip to below 50 percent for the first time in more than 20 years.¹²¹ Despite a surge in support following the military's implementation of coronavirus precautions and quarantine measures in early 2020, an uncharacteristic crisis of public confidence in the armed forces underscores the growing demands of Colombian civil society to enact major

¹¹⁸ Diana Alejandra Rivera Rivera, Juan Camilo Plata Caviedes, Juan Carlos Rodríguez Raga, "Barómetro de las Américas Colombia 2018: Democracia e Instituciones." *LAPOP*, July 2019, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/colombia/Colombia_2018_Democracia_e_Instituciones_W_11.07.19.pdf.

¹¹⁹ "Leonardo Barrero Gordillo," *La Silla Vacía*, January 31, 2019,

<https://lasillavacia.com/quienesquien/perfilquien/leonardo-barrero-gordillo>.

¹²⁰ "Más de 5.000 agentes del Estado son investigados por 'falsos positivos.'" *El Espectador*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/mas-de-5000-agentes-del-estado-son-investigados-por-falsos-positivos/>; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Informe Anual 2015: Capítulo V: Seguimiento de Recomendaciones Formuladas por la CIDH en sus Informes de País o Temáticos," *Organization of American States*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/docs/anual/2015/doc-es/informeannual2015-cap5-colombia-es.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, *El rol de los altos mandos en falsos positivos*, 2015, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/colombia0615sp_4up.pdf.

¹²¹ Revista Semana, "Las carpetas secretas," *Semana*, January 5, 2020, https://especiales.semana.com/espionaje-desde-el-ejercito-nacional-las-carpetas-secretas-investigacion/?_ga=2.47932327.1049143403.1595071182-1890025188.1594843716; Revista Semana, "CIDH pide investigar 'sin dilación' casos de violación de niñas indígenas," *Semana*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/cidh-pide-investigar-sin-dilacion-casos-de-violacion-de-ninas-indigenas/687529>; Nicholas Casey, "Colombia Army's New Kill Orders Send Chills Down Ranks;" Revista Semana, "Dimar: el crimen al que quisieron echarle tierra," *Semana*, May 12, 2019, <https://especiales.semana.com/el-asesinato-de-dimar-torres/index.html>; "Acusan a Mindefensa de ocultar muerte de siete menores en bombardeo," *El Espectador*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/acusan-a-mindefensa-de-ocultar-muerte-de-siete-menores-en-bombardeo/>.

reforms to the institution—including doctrinal reforms—to guarantee accountability for abuses and to ensure that the military is equipped to deal with twenty-first century challenges.

CONCLUSION

The Colombian Armed Forces have been the guarantors of Colombia's sovereignty and the constitutional order since the end of the nineteenth century, but the military's enduring role in the internal security problems of the country has led to a progressive expansion of mission areas, improved professionalism, and increased contact with the Colombian citizenry. A history of military autonomy and an institutional reluctance to become involved in partisan politics has permitted the military to develop its culture and identity without the interference of politicians and bureaucrats, which distinguishes it from many of its regional counterparts.

The military's protagonism as a counterinsurgent and counternarcotics force, as an agent of nation-building, and as a global leader in military innovation are a source of great pride for the institution and have proven critical to the formation of the military's institutional identity. Its increasingly successful performance of these roles has also improved the Colombian citizenry's overall perception of their armed forces, leading to historically high rates of approval in the early twenty-first century. Moreover, its preferential relationship with the U.S. military has boosted the Colombian military's confidence domestically and its credibility globally.

The Colombian Armed Forces remained ardently obedient to civilian authorities as of 2020 but faced growing concerns from the citizenry over institutional corruption and abuse. How civilian political leaders navigate investigations into and sanctions against military personnel who have overstepped their democratic mandate will no doubt determine public perception of the institution in the coming years. The Colombian Armed Forces have proved adept at embracing reform and innovation in the past, and thus, the military's best chance at securing an auspicious future will hinge on its ability to draw on this more yielding aspect of its institutional identity.

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