Diluting Demobilization: The Confluence of Counterinsurgency and Post-Conflict Intervention

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The Confluence of Counterinsurgency and Post-Conflict Intervention

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We aren’t going to let them fool us now. The guerrillas, trying to dissuade us, produce blood but talk of peace. We’re not going to allow this, compatriots... We punish every violation of human rights, but what we cannot allow is that, with their little story about peace and with their permanent accusations against the armed forces, they now paralyze our Democratic Security policy, as the FARC’s “intellectual bloc” seeks to do.

— Colombian President Álvaro Uribe

With these words at a town hall meeting on February 7, 2009, President Álvaro Uribe cut to the crux of the Colombian government’s efforts to spin the nation’s ongoing violent conflict to the public. His populist rhetorical strategy is unashamedly overt: by accusing the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) of talking peace while waging war, Uribe constructs them as evil deceivers. He further implies that this calculated deception is carried out by a cunning intelligentsia and peddled in the public sphere. His reference to an “intellectual bloc” carries a powerful subtext that challenges the work of intellectuals and peddled in the public sphere. His reference to an “intellectual bloc” carries a powerful subtext that challenges the work of intellectuals and peddled in the public.

At the same time, the FARC has marked those who desert its ranks as military targets, ensuring that even the most humanitarian rehabilitative treatment on the part of the state cannot separate the two expanding spheres of militarism and humanitarianism. In her essay, “Transitional Subjects,” Theidon describes Colombia’s curious conjunction and conflation of post-conflict technologies and counter-insurgency strategies as “pre-post conflict” (The International Journal of Transitional Justice 1). The term evokes the jumbled temporality of the experience of trauma and aptly speaks to a national history in which wars’ recursions have irreversibly blurred distinctions such as conflict and post-conflict. As one demobilized rebel put it, “we may be demobilized from the war, but we live with the sword of Damocles over our heads.”

Demobilization and Information War

Demobilization as a term emerged after World War I, when European governments had to reintegrate their soldiers into a non-military economy (see Cohen’s The War Come Home). The term has since broadened to refer to state and non-state fighters, but the goal of reintegration has remained the ultimate objective of demobilization. By turning military intelligence into a commodity to be purchased from the demobilized and thereby continuing to keep ex-combatants involved in the conflict they sought to escape, the Colombian government dilutes the ideals behind demobilization and reintegration and muddles the realms of counterinsurgency and post-conflict intervention.

Consider the case of alias Rojas. Motivated by a reward of $320,000, Rojas defected with other members of his column and the severed hand of its slain leader Ivan Rios (a member of the FARC secretariat) in tow. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santost originally promised Rojas his reward. However, the dubious legality (let alone ethics) of so amply rewarding such brutality has foreclosed both the payment and Rojas’ incorporation into the government’s reintegration program. The case has both pleased and perturbed the Colombian government.

As the state appropriates the rebels’ guerrilla tactics—dramatically exemplified in the rescue of Ingrid Betancourt and her fellow captives in July 2008—the need for ever more detailed information about their adversary is stoked. There is no indication that such a valuable source of information as former rebels will go untapped, despite complex ethical concerns that have yet to be resolved. These former rebels are at the heart of Colombia’s information war,

Commentary

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