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SYMBOLS AND SPOILS: FRAMING AND MOBILIZING STRUCTURES IN COLOMBIA’S ENDLESS CIVIL WAR

JOSH WHEATLEY

The civil war that has plagued Colombia over the past four decades is often explained in the context of class-based theory. This study will examine class-based theory as it relates to Colombian socioeconomic structure, showing that it does not completely explain many specific elements that have developed in the war. This paper will instead analyze the use of framing mechanisms used by each faction, as well as the mobilization structures in which the framing arrangements are manipulated. Finally, it will demonstrate how the leaders of the FARC and AUC use these groups to promote their own interests.

A civil war has plagued Colombia over the past four decades, causing over 35,000 deaths. The hostilities officially began in 1964 when leftist insurgents, responding to military aggression, formed guerrilla armies seeking to overthrow the government and establish a regime based on leftist ideology. According to class-based theory, a civil war in Colombia is neither unusual nor unexpected. In an environment of such obvious inequality, with masses of impoverished peasants, the system’s mere structure should eventually lead to the uniting of the lower class in open rebellion against the upper class. However, class-based theory does not explain many specific elements of the Colombian Civil War and may in fact contradict them. While the conflict originally consisted of hostility between a movement claiming to represent the interests of the peasants and a military representing the interests of the oligarchy, it has evolved into a completely different kind of quarrel.

The war currently involves three principal factions: the Colombian military, the left-wing guerrilla group Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), and the right-wing paramilitary group United Self-Defense Units of Colombia (AUC). Historically, the major conflict has been between the FARC and the military, but in recent years the AUC has emerged as a powerful force, fighting against the FARC on their own, independent of the military. In 1998, the Colombian military withdrew from many FARC-controlled areas as a gesture of peace, and since then the FARC and the AUC have emerged as the conflict’s principal actors and enemies.

The FARC and the AUC both claim to be representing the interests of the common Colombian while opposing the oppression perpetrated by the elites. Despite this, both groups are actively involved in violating the human rights of the citizens they profess to protect. This article will seek to explain why the Colombian
Civil War has become a conflict in which the principal actors are poor people fighting against poor people. The leaders of the two groups use culture-based collective action mechanisms to mobilize their followers and convince them that the cause they promote is in fact a noble venture with a purpose to protect the Colombian culture and way of life. Further, the leaders of these movements are in fact significantly concerned with advancing their own interests, using the mobilized masses as their tools. It is the presence of these features that challenges the assumptions of class-based theory.

To accomplish this, I will first examine class-based theory as it relates to the Colombian socioeconomic structure. I will then analyze the organization of the FARC and the AUC, focusing on both the framing mechanisms utilized by leaders of the two groups to rally their members to action and the mobilization structures in which these framing arrangements are manipulated. Finally, I will examine the organization and operations of the FARC and AUC to demonstrate how the leaders use these groups to promote their own interests. While the bulk of my evidence will come from studies presented in scholarly books and journals, I will also rely on documents produced by the FARC and the AUC that state their official viewpoints, actions, and goals. I will also use reports published by international NGOs providing data about the Colombian socioeconomic structure and statistics related to the conflict.

**Historical Colombian Class Structure**

Colombia has a history of socioeconomic class separation. In 1849, two political parties formed within the elite oligarchy. Those same two parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, are still the predominant, if not exclusive, political actors in modern Colombian politics (Kline and Gray 2000). They are basically catch-all parties that cater to the interests of the upper and middle classes (Boudon 2000, 35). Economic disparity is rampant; the World Bank gives Colombia the fifth-highest rating of disparity in the world, with 61.5% of the wealth owned by 20% of the population. The disparity becomes even more evident when one realizes that, within that sector, 46.9% of Colombia's wealth is controlled by only the top 10% of the nation's citizens (Center for Balanced Development n.d.). Because of this tremendous inequality, the peasant class has little representation in the national political structure.

As a result of its exclusion from mainstream politics, the peasant class has historically had to make one of two choices. Most peasants chose to support one of the two elite parties. Those desiring to own land and survive through subsistence agriculture generally followed the Liberal party, whereas those who were content to survive under the employ of the elite landowners usually upheld the Conservative agenda. For decades following the establishment of democracy, party affiliation was an important element in nearly all Colombians' concept of cultural and political identity (Chepesiuk 1999).

The second option, which was practiced by a minority of the peasants, was to resort to unconventional tactics to promote their interests. As early as the 1920s, peasant groups attempted armed insurgency as a means to bring about social reform, but the military easily defeated all uprisings (Tickner 1998). In the late 1920s, Jorge Gaitan, an emerging leader of the Liberal party, actively promoted social and agrarian reforms to benefit the lower class. However, efforts led by radical conservatives and supported by moderates within both parties impeded implementation of any meaningful reform (Hoskin and Murillo 1999).

Following the 1946 election of Conservative Ospina Pérez to the presidency, violence broke out among rural supporters of both political parties. The conflict escalated following the murder of Jorge Gaitan in 1948 and resulted in a civil war known as La Violencia, a ten-year period of extreme conflict. According to Kline and Gray (2000), the violence was instigated mainly by elite Conservatives, who sought to consolidate their power, and by elite Liberals, who sought to prevent such consolidation. During this time, radical leftist guerrillas also established a presence in the countryside, hoping to take advantage of the turbulent environment to trigger a communist revolution. In 1953, a
military government took power, but the fighting continued until 1958, when the Colombian National Congress and the citizens adopted a new institution called the National Front (Kline and Gray 2000).

The National Front established a system of power sharing between the two parties, which agreed to alternate control of the executive office until 1974 and share an equal number of elected and appointed offices (Kline and Gray 2000). While it established peace between these two elitist groups, the agreement failed to address underlying socioeconomic problems that continued to plague the population's lower class. Once again at peace with each other, the two parties supported a violent military campaign against the more radical leftist insurgents that maintained demands for extensive social reforms (Hoskin and Murillo 1999, 38–9).

Rather than promoting needed agrarian reform, the National Front established policies to allow increased private ownership of land in rural areas. Under the guise of battling leftist insurgency, the military violently displaced many peasants from these newly privatized areas, forcing them into more remote and inhospitable regions. The new peasant settlements often formed community defense forces, which laid the foundation for later formation of guerilla armies such as the FARC and the AUC (Vargas 1998, 23–4).

**CLASS-BASED THEORY**

Various theories seek to explain the behavior of individuals based on the socioeconomic environment in which they live. Two of these are structuralist and rational choice theory. Structuralist theory asserts that social systems consisting of extreme socioeconomic disparity inevitably lead to revolution, because the system's structure provides the lower classes no other way to remedy the situation. Skocpol (1979) argues this view in case studies of the Russian, Chinese, and French revolutions, all of which were the result of mobilized peasant classes overthrowing elite ruling classes.

The second class-based theory, rational choice, also allows for economically constrained behavior. This school of thought focuses on “rational and strategic individuals who make choices within constraints to obtain their desired ends” (Levi 1997, 23). In other words, individuals determine their behavior based on the costs and benefits of their possible actions. Individuals living in a system of socioeconomic disparity may view armed insurgence against the upper class as providing great potential benefits for future prosperity, whereas failure to rebel could result in the continuance of poverty. In such a case, the rational behavior would clearly be violent rebellion against the elites. Armed conflict with other members of the lower class would not be rational, as it would bring about few, if any, economic gains.

Skidmore and Smith (2001) analyze Latin American politics from a structuralist, class-based perspective, focusing on such aspects as international division of labor and resource-based economies. While they do not include a case study of Colombia, they do analyze class-based social movements in such nations as Mexico and Peru. Their model would predict that the Colombian peasant class would have at some point in history united in collective protest against the elite upper class, with such action resulting in at least the creation of political parties to represent their interests and at the most a revolution to overthrow the oppressive regime.

Considering both the historical and current socioeconomic structure, the fact that civil war has raged for thirty-seven years should not be surprising, especially based upon the predictions of class-based theory. What is surprising is the fact that in recent years, when the violence has escalated to its highest levels, the nature of the conflict has changed considerably. As the FARC has increased its power, the AUC has matched the escalation. However, the lower-echelon foot soldiers of both groups are made up almost entirely of peasants from the lower classes. Rather than a class-based struggle with peasants fighting against elites, this conflict has turned into a power struggle between different groups that are able to successfully mobilize the peasants to fight for them. In the following sections, I will examine how culture-based theory
may help explain this apparent contradiction of class-based theory.

**Framing Mechanisms**

One of the key elements for successful collective action is the use of proper framing mechanisms. According to collective action theory, framing includes the use of cultural symbols to mobilize the masses into group participation. Tarrow argues, “Inscribing grievances in overall frames that identify an injustice, attribute the responsibility for it to others, and propose solution to it is a central activity of social movements” (1998, 111). Tarrow further asserts that movement leaders “orient their movements’ frames toward action in particular contexts and fashion them at the intersection between a target population’s culture and their own values and goals” (1998, 110).

Both the FARC and AUC have been successful in applying these framing mechanisms to their own causes. Both groups have delegated the blame for social injustices suffered by Colombian peasants to external sources. Each of the groups also appeals to basic cultural beliefs and desires of the Colombian peasant class. Both the FARC and the AUC claim to be the true advocates of the Colombian people, defending the common man against oppression by the political and economic elites. In appealing to the concept of cultural identity as free Colombians, these leaders elevate their soldiers’ status from that of simple mercenaries to that of freedom fighters.

**Framing and the FARC**

In the early 1960s, leftist rebels officially founded the FARC with the ultimate goal of seizing control of the national government through armed insurgence, becoming the first rebel group to actively promote change through a mainly offensive rather than defensive campaign (Vargas 2000). Since its inception, the FARC has evolved from being a minor inconvenience for the government to its current existence as a military force of 15,000 members and a political power controlling a significant amount of territory (Pardo 2000, 69). FARC leaders have taken advantage of the continually changing situation within Colombia to increase their fundraising and recruiting efforts. However, their culture-based framing structures have remained constant over the years.

FARC propaganda disseminated over the internet helps the outside observer to understand the group’s domestic framing mechanisms. According to its official homepage, the FARC was established after a group of peasants withstood an armed attack perpetrated by the Colombian military and supported by the United States. In the wake of this attack, the FARC emerged as “a revolutionary program calling together all the citizens who dream of a Colombia for Colombians, with equality of opportunities and equitable distribution of wealth, and where among us all we can build peace with social equality and sovereignty” (FARC-EP n.d.). Throughout the years, the number of active guerillas and the level of violence have increased, as the FARC claims its members remain “ready to give everything, including their lives, to realize the dreams of equality and justice that inspire our struggle” (FARC-EP n.d.).

FARC leaders have framed their armed insurgence as a struggle to protect the interests of the innocent Colombian citizen that has been and continues to be oppressed by an elitist, foreign-influenced government. As their webpage asserts, the FARC’s armed insurgence is “an option that has been imposed upon the Colombian people by the ruling class which follows the orientation of the government of the United States of America” (FARC-EP n.d). The principal symbol used by the FARC is the outline of the Colombian nation inscribed upon the Colombian flag, a simple appeal to the Colombian identity. While labeled by the government as insurgents and criminals, FARC guerillas can view themselves as freedom fighters possessing the honor to participate in Colombia’s liberation.

The FARC also appeals to the people through revisiting historical incidents of peasant-class collective action. The peasant uprisings of the 1920s and 1930s are heralded as the beginning of the people’s movement to free Colombia from socioeconomic oppression, and the leftist movements during the period of La Violencia
and the years that followed are considered a continuation of the same battle and a predecessor of the current guerilla insurgence (FARC-EP n.d.). FARC leaders have clearly taken advantage of historical events to strengthen their framing structure, even though most of the uprisings prior to 1948 were supported by a faction of the Liberal party and promoted moderate agrarian reform that was nowhere near the FARe's current stated goal to overthrow the government and replace it with a communist regime.

**FRAMING AND THE AUC**

On the other end of the conflict, the paramilitary groups of the AUC have emerged as well-armed, capable opponents of the FARC's guerillas. The AUC's groups trace their origins to 1965, when the government passed legislation authorizing the military to arm civilians in order to fight the guerillas. While this policy was later revoked, the tradition of private armies had by then become well established in the Colombian culture (Chernick 1998a, 28). In the 1980s, landowners such as drug lords and cattle ranchers began the widespread establishment of private armies to protect their holdings from the guerillas (Richani 2000, 41).

Carlos Castaño first became involved in the paramilitary movement in 1981 after FARC guerillas kidnapped and murdered his wealthy cattle-ranching father. Shortly thereafter, Castaño allied himself with Pablo Escobar, a powerful drug lord, in a vengeful organized fight against the guerillas. Over the years his group gained power with support from the military and greater revenue from the drug trade. In 1996, Castaño united various paramilitary groups to form an organization called the United Self-Defense Units of Colombia (AUC). The AUC has emerged as the most powerful and influential paramilitary group, with a well-trained and well-organized army of estimated strength as low as 4,000 active members (Richani 2000, 39) and as high as 11,000 (Wilson 2001).

Similar to the FARC, the AUC utilizes cultural framing mechanisms to justify its cause. According to the AUC webpage, paramilitary groups emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s to defend the Colombian people from the growing guerrilla threat. The AUC propaganda allows that the guerrilla movement began with noble intentions to bring about necessary social and political reforms but asserts that it had degenerated into a simple criminal operation heavily involved in drug trafficking and kidnapping that threatened the livelihood of the rural Colombian citizen (AUC n.d.). In the AUC's view, this threat is also demonstrated by the FARC's desire to take property away from wealthy landowners, upon whom peasants rely for land and employment.

The paramilitary group also argues that the government and the military give priority protection to the oligarchy and fail to provide proper protection for the lower class (AUC n.d.). In the wake of such threats to the Colombian way of life, it was necessary for the paramilitary groups to step in as the defenders. The AUC also uses the Colombian flag and map as its principal symbols, and its very name—the United 'Self Defense' Units of Colombia—appeals to protection of the Colombian identity.

Like the FARC, the AUC uses historical trends to promote cultural loyalty to its cause. AUC leaders appeal to the traditional differences between the peasants, such as the original concept of identity determined by party affiliation and the Conservative-supported peasant armies of the La Violence Civil War. They also promote the economic model of the peasant class relying upon large landowners to provide them with land and employment. The AUC framing mechanism presents this system as the model that will provide peasants the greatest levels of prosperity and stability and identifies the agrarian redistribution agenda of the FARC as implausible and unstable because it will lead to chaos and poverty for the lower class (Suarez 1998).

**MOBILIZATION STRUCTURES**

While framing is an important aspect of collective mobilization, an organized structure to manage collective action must also exist. As Tarrow states, "Social movements do not depend on framing alone; they must bring people together in the field, shape coalitions, confront
opponents, and assure their own future after the exhilaration of the peak of mobilization has passed" (1998, 123). He further analyzes many aspects of mobilizing structures, but one concept particularly relevant to this case is his concept of external resources facilitating the establishment of these structures. While Tarrow focuses on such external resources as the media to reach and motivate extensive audiences, I seek to modify his approach. I argue that actions by the Colombian government have helped to improve the cultural image of the FARC and AUC movements, thus increasing the groups' support among Colombian citizens and serving as external resources that have strengthened their mobilizing structures.

One of the principal external resources aiding the establishment of mobilizing structures for both the FARC and the AUC has been the general weakness of the Colombian government. Perceived and actual regime weaknesses have allowed the FARC and AUC to expand their objectives as well as prevent the government from intervening to stop the spread of these groups' power and influence. FARC leaders have lost confidence in the government's ability to protect them and respect their interests should they choose to lay down their arms, and AUC leaders have recognized that the government will not interfere with their violent counter-insurgency efforts.

The attitudes and perceptions of both groups can largely be attributed to the emergence of Colombia as a leading international supplier of illegal drugs, an event that has been a key factor in exposing the regime's weakness and inability to maintain order within its own borders. For many years, Colombia has ceded to pressure from the United States to reduce the supply of illegal drugs flowing from within its borders. In recent years, the government instituted a U.S.-sponsored program to eradicate coca fields by spraying them with pesticides from aircraft flying above or by sending the military to burn them. Most of this eradication has occurred in the southern part of the nation controlled by the FARC, as the government has consistently attempted to correlate the guerilla movement with drug trafficking (Vargas 2000).

Rather than having its power and influence diminished by the eradication efforts, the FARC has flourished. Many peasants hold coca cultivation as their principal source of income and view the eradication efforts, which also damage other crops, as a direct attack on their livelihood (Molano 2000, 30–1). The government's eradication program has clearly been an external force that has strengthened the FARC's mobilizing structure while legitimizing its framing mechanisms. To the coca farmers, the FARC is their only protection against a tyrannical government seeking to destroy their livelihood for no apparent reason. As the FARC informs them that the government acts this way to please a foreign power while harming its own citizens, these farmers become culturally committed to supporting the movement that seeks to protect Colombia and allow them to live life according to their desires. Most of them are then very willing to pay taxes to the FARC, and the individuals more committed to that desire to join the noble movement protecting the Colombian way of life choose to become active members of the guerilla army (Vargas 2000).

While alienating its own citizens, the government's eradication program has failed to stem the flow of coca production in southern Colombia, with most reports estimating that production has actually increased (Avilés 2001). Drug-related money constitutes an estimated 60% of the FARC's yearly revenue, which has been projected to be as high as 600 million U.S. dollars a year (Pardo 2000, 70). With the FARC's burgeoning money base and the increasing number of displaced peasants available and committed to join the organization, its membership has increased from a mere 500 in 1970 to current estimates of 15,000. The increased revenue has assisted the FARC in paying, training, and equipping its members, which has greatly increased its military capability (Vargas 2000).

Not only has the eradication program assisted in the FARC's growth, but it has also served as an external resource to strengthen the AUC's mobilizing structure. As the government and military consistently assert that the guerilla movement and drug trafficking are one and the same, they fail to address the issue of drug
production in areas controlled by the AUC. Various reports imply that the AUC is much more involved in the drug trade than the FARC, but the government refuses to acknowledge or address this claim (Montalvo 2000, 9–10). In attacking its principal enemy while leaving the AUC alone, the government has helped to legitimize the paramilitary movement. Supporters of the AUC may desire political reform, but they do not wish for the complete overthrow of the regime sought by the guerrillas. Seeing the government actively working toward the same goal as the AUC likely strengthens their cultural resolve that the paramilitaries really do seek the welfare of the Colombian nation.

Increasing drug-related revenue has allowed the AUC to become better equipped and better trained, resulting in more military successes. While individuals truly culturally committed to the AUC would sustain the group in times of success and failure, victories are always better than losses for fortifying support. A proud Colombian may see the realization of national success and prosperity as inevitable, and if the AUC is providing the mechanism through which that goal is obtained, it must be the true proponent of Colombian culture and identity.

Prior to the coca eradication project, other actions by the government had also bolstered the strength of the two groups. Throughout the civil war, various administrations had attempted to make peace with the FARC. In 1984, the FARC and the military declared a cease-fire, and many members of the FARC established a legitimate communist party known as the Patriotic Union (UP). While the government and the FARC seemed to desire peace, other interested parties did not. Over the next two years paramilitaries and drug traffickers murdered over 3,000 members of the UP, causing it to be virtually non-existent. The deaths were rarely investigated and few if any of those responsible were prosecuted (Vargas 1998, 25). As a result of the government’s failure to protect its members attempting to assimilate into the political sphere, the FARC gained new resolve to continue its armed insurgency. Similarly, paramilitaries realized that the government either could not or would not stop them from murdering their enemies, which encouraged them to continue doing it. While this event preceded the AUC, it laid the foundation for the formation of future paramilitary groups.

Government failures continued to facilitate the strengthening of the rebel groups’ mobilization structures. In 1994, Ernesto Samper assumed the office of president, actively promoting peace negotiations with the FARC. However, shortly after his inauguration, reports surfaced that he had accepted campaign donations from various drug cartels, and he instantly lost nearly all credibility. The FARC immediately withdrew from peace negotiations, and during the next few years escalated its offensive campaign to the highest levels ever (Suarez 1998). The paramilitaries responded by also increasing their strength, which likely factored into the formation of the AUC (Richani 2000, 39). In this case, as Chernick asserts, the corruption of one political leader provided extensive external fortification of the groups’ mobilization structures:

With Samper reduced to practicing the politics of survival, the growing vacuum at the center of power has prompted many political sectors—Congress, the military, party leaders, gamonales, business, paramilitaries, guerrillas—to push their own agendas and take advantage of the executive’s weakness. (1998b, 41)

FARC AND AUC LEADERS: CULTURAL CRUSADE OR RATIONAL ACTORS?

Until now, I have focused on framing mechanisms and mobilization structures used by the FARC and AUC to legitimize their movements and recruit membership. However, leaders of these groups have utilized these mobilization devices not just to establish their organizations but also to promote their own interests. Though I feel that culture-based theory is a more viable explanation for Colombia’s apparent contradiction of class-based theory, rational choice theory also deserves consideration. Not only has this crusade promoted positive action for the group, but the actions of the FARC and AUC have also provided individual-level benefits to their leaders, providing them rational incentives to continue the fight.
SYMBOLS AND SPOILS

While there appears to be strong evidence that cultural framing plays an important role in mobilizing members of the FARC and the AUC, rational choice theorists could argue that membership in these organizations results simply from rational actors seeking to further their own economic interests. It is certain that members of these factions are mercenaries; they receive monthly income for their efforts, and both groups generally pay better than the military (Chepesiuk 1999, 8). They may also feel that failure to join one of the groups will bring about accusations by both factions that they support the other, which may threaten their future survival. An examination of each group's leadership may prove useful in evaluating the merit of rational choice theory in this context.

THE FARC LEADERSHIP

As he entered office in 1998, President Andres Pastrana showed his interest in negotiating peace with the FARC by ceding to its demand that the military withdraw from a 42,000 square kilometer area in southern Colombia. He was also willing to discuss offering clemency to FARC leaders and allowing them to participate in the government if they were willing to make peace. The Barco administration had made a similar offer to the M-19 terrorist group in 1991, which resulted in that organization's demilitarization and the assimilation of its members into the legitimate political sphere (Tickner 1998, 62).

FARC leaders gladly accepted control of the area, but rather than responding with their own peaceful overtures, they converted the region into a virtual sovereign state within Colombia and then escalated the hostility. The FARC now uses the demilitarized zone to recruit and train new soldiers, cultivate coca crops, hide hostages and kidnap victims, and execute prisoners (Pardo 2000). FARC leaders are also exerting increasing influence in the local politics of municipalities they control. In some cities, FARC operatives manage such simple tasks as issuing marriage licenses and building permits. Reports have surfaced claiming that since assuming total power over the region, the FARC leadership has become divided over issues such as local power struggles and corruption involving taxes and other public funds (Chernick 2000, 36-7).

The desire to control local politics and the subsequent spoils, the kidnapping of the citizens they are supposed to protect, and the escalation of the war effort in response to peaceful gestures by the government do not prove that FARC leaders are fully self-interested, but this evidence does raise the possibility that their agenda includes more than just achieving socioeconomic equality for the peasants. Pardo asserts that the FARC's estimated $600 million per year revenue makes it the wealthiest rebel group in the history of the earth (2000, 70), which raises the legitimate question of whether its leaders receive economic kickbacks to complement their political and military power.

THE AUC LEADERSHIP

Behind all the rhetoric of defending the Colombian citizen and the Colombian way of life, the AUC seems to be little more than a well-armed and well-organized crime syndicate. Various independent studies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch report that since its inception the AUC has been responsible for 70% of war-related human rights abuses (Avilés 2001, 43–5; Human Rights Watch n.d.). AUC soldiers are routinely involved in massacres of peasants they accuse of cooperating with the guerillas. After a well-planned paramilitary operation that resulted in the murder of thirty civilians in the town of Mapiripán, Carlos Castaño was quoted as saying, "These were not innocent peasants. They were guerillas dressed as peasants" (Chernick 1998a, 31).

As stated previously, the AUC is likely to be heavily involved in drug trafficking. Exact data on the AUC's drug-related revenue is scarce, but there are other indicators that the self-defense force is also a business venture. Similar to the FARC, the AUC has begun to develop an extensive presence in the local politics of municipalities in its sphere of influence, including taxation of legitimate businesses to complement its taxation of coca production.
Perhaps a stronger indication is a recent report in the Colombian newspaper *El Nuevo Herald* citing evidence that a power struggle was occurring within the AUC leadership and that Castaño faced increasing difficulties in controlling the actions of lower-level leaders operating in the field (Rodriguez 2001). An organization that exists solely to promote the defense of Colombia will not likely have great internal dissent, but when power over local politics and the extreme potential wealth of the drug trade are factored in, such conflict becomes much more realistic.

The prevalence of former military officers in the AUC leadership also raises questions about the organization’s true motives. To contradict negative press reporting that the military and the AUC have close ties, the government has demanded that the military punish its members who do in fact associate with and support the paramilitaries. Many officers have been censured, and some expelled, but a great number of them have simply taken high-paying positions in the AUC command structure (Chernick 1998a, 31–2). It is possible that these military officers identify with the AUC and support its ideology, but it is more likely that the group has sufficient money to lure such individuals into its ranks. The officers can provide the soldiers with invaluable training, which will increase the likelihood of military success and the expansion of the sphere of influence.

**Culture or Rational Choice?**

The extreme flexibility of rational choice theory makes it possible to successfully apply that approach to almost any situation, but I feel that in this case the cultural aspects cannot be ignored. As stated earlier, FARC membership does not likely exceed 15,000, with AUC membership likely fewer than 11,000. While these are considerable numbers for groups of such nature, they still constitute a small minority of Colombia’s population of 40 million. Economic hardships have abounded in Colombia in recent years, but many destitute peasants have chosen to move to urban areas seeking work rather than hiring on with the FARC or the AUC. If enlisting in these armies was truly the best economic option available, and the people were completely self-interested, the membership of these groups would grow exponentially to mirror more closely the estimated 80% of the population who live in poverty.

Further, rational actors seeking to promote their own interests will not likely risk their lives on a daily basis, even if it comes with a paycheck. Death is a risk for many members of each group. Members of the FARC and the AUC must face the prospect of armed engagements with each other and with the Colombian military, the possibility of torture at the hands of their enemies should they be captured, and reprisal from their comrades should they choose to withdraw from active involvement (Richani 2000). Similarly, one might argue that the FARC and the AUC are havens for career criminals seeking unconventional employment; certainly a number of these individuals are found within the ranks, but for a truly rational criminal, employment with a private drug cartel would likely provide much better hope for survival and future economic prosperity.

No single social science theory can explain any situation completely. In the case of the Colombian Civil War, rational choices do play some role in the decisions of individuals to join the FARC or the AUC. However, culturally based factors also play a significant, if not major, role in explaining how movement leaders have mobilized masses of peasants to support their causes. Along with fighting for a paycheck, lower-echelon members of FARC and AUC are also battling for the protection of the Colombian way of life. This brings about the question of whether the leaders of these movements have the Colombian citizens’ best interests in mind, or if their efforts to organize private armies in the name of Colombian preservation are complex fronts disguising their true desires to further their own material gains.

**Conclusion**

Despite claims made by the government and other factions that they desire peace, all indicators show that the level of violence in the Colombian Civil War is not subsiding and is
more likely escalating. Recent U.S. foreign policy includes an aid package to provide the Colombian military with equipment and training to escalate the fight against drug supplies. The government continues to assert that the FARC is the nation's principal institution of drug trafficking and has stated its desire to use the new military strength to make a final push into the south, implying a desire to once again take the offensive to FARC-controlled areas (Johnson 2000). Such an event would have significant effects on the future of both the FARC and the AUC.

The FARC and AUC have successfully used culture-based collective action mechanisms to mobilize followers to their cause. If the increasing foreign influence on Colombian domestic politics has adverse affects on the peasant population, it is likely that the FARC's cultural framing mechanism as Colombia's national protector will continue to grow stronger, either leading to an increase in its political and military influence or an increase in casualties as the violence escalates. If the FARC is significantly weakened by a new military offensive, the AUC will likely grow stronger, and it will be interesting to see if the paramilitaries will continue to adapt their cultural framing approach to the changing situation. It also remains to be seen what approach AUC leaders will take to legitimize their cause should the anti-drug efforts begin to target them to the same degree as the FARC.

The leaders of these organizations take advantage of their armies to promote their own welfare. While the evidence I have presented does not prove that leaders of the FARC and AUC are simply self-interested individuals seeking to satisfy their own interests, I do maintain that enough evidence exists to raise questions about their motives. The extreme amount of money involved in the drug trade, the internal divisions within the leadership of the groups, the FARC's kidnapping of individuals it professes to protect, and the AUC's slaughter of peasants it claims to defend all cast doubt upon the motives presented by these groups to their own members as well as to the world. Despite the fact that the military has scaled back its counter-insurgency efforts and the government appears willing to negotiate peace, the FARC and the AUC continue to fortify themselves and escalate their offensive campaigns. Perhaps the best summation of the situation is provided by Guerrero Barón: each of the warring factions believes it can win, so they do not wish to negotiate (2001, 18). The years to come may determine the victor of the civil war and the emergent dominant Colombian culture, or the proponents of conflicting interests and ideologies may continue to do battle for an indefinite period of time.

Josh Wheatley is a senior from Clinton, Utah, majoring in international politics. After graduation he will attend the Master of Pacific and International Affairs program at the University of California San Diego.

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