

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Previously Published Works

**Title**

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

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9782705t>

**Journal**

Anthropology News, 50(5)

**ISSN**

1541-6151

**Author**

Fattal, Alexander L

**Publication Date**

2009-05-07

**DOI**

10.1111/j.1556-3502.2009.50512.x

Peer reviewed

# Diluting Demobilization

## The Confluence of Counterinsurgency and Post-Conflict Intervention

ALEX FATTAL  
HARVARD U

We aren't going to let them fool us now. The guerrillas, trying to disorient 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, Pres-



ident 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 unabashedly 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 national and international human rights activists, critical academics and students in public universities.

At the same time, the Uribe administration could itself be accused of talking peace while waging war: the government is ratcheting up counterinsurgency efforts while experimenting with post-conflict interventions, including demobilization and reintegration programs, truth telling events, and reparations for victims of political violence. Such an accusation, however, would hinge on an analysis of the post-conflict interventions that were created under the legal framework of the Justice and Peace Law of 2005, which is beyond the scope of this essay. Here I want to instead

focus on one Colombian Ministry of Defense program—the Program for Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized (PAHD)—as a way of analyzing the increasingly incongruous conjugations of humanitarianism and militarism in Colombia.

### Guerrilla Marketing: Tricky Business

In many ways, the contradictions involved in the militarization of humanitarian politics are exemplified by the PAHD, which deploys a multifaceted marketing campaign to promote desertions from rebel ranks. The marketing of the PAHD program to FARC rebels refashions "guerrilla marketing" tactics from the private sector. Ironically inspired by guerrilla warfare, guerrilla marketing combines aggressive, targeted, furtive and creative interventions to win market share (*Mao in the Boardroom* 2003). When guerrilla marketing is applied to counterinsurgency, it relies upon knowledge (or intelligence) about insurgent culture, publicity blitzes in areas where the FARC is under pressure, and former rebels' social networks. The PAHD offers cash incentives to demobilized ex-combatants in exchange for strategic intelligence, and conducts focus groups to gain cultural knowledge about the FARC. Like the Human Terrain Systems program run by the US Army, the PAHD reveals the porous borders between military intelligence and anthropological knowledge; however, it also interjects another overlapping practice: market research.

The former rebels who navigate this elaborate program face conflicting experiences as perpetrators and victims, traitors and collaborators, social outcasts and insiders who reshape the national body politic. These contradictions are implicit in the problem of quickly turning vilified enemies of the state into intimate allies. One instantiation of these tensions is illustrated by the conflict between the Defensoria del Pueblo (the Colombian government's overseer of human rights) and the Ministry of Defense, which have an ongoing debate about the participation of former rebels in military operations.

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 conjuncture and conflation of post-conflict technologies and counterinsurgency 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 unresolvably 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 Santos originally promised Rojas his reward. However, the dubious legality (let alone ethics) of so amply

rewarding such brutality has forestalled 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

which hinges on gaining an edge in both information technologies and their social uses (Berkowitz and Goodman 2000). When a former rebel sends a text message to his ex-commander assuring him the state is not torturing him, but is rather paying for his health care and putting his children through school, and that ex-combatant invites the commander to demobilize as well, communication and collaboration between demobilized rebels and state security forces is required.

In this case, counterinsurgency and post-conflict methods do overlap, but without demobilized rebels returning to the regions from which they fled or physically participating in military operations. However, the highly problematic overlap between the military's counterinsurgency efforts and the state's post-conflict reintegration practices continues. If the state is to accuse FARC rebels of talking peace while waging war, it should make sure its own acts of peace not only give the appearance of humanitarian post-conflict interventions, but also in practice exemplify the humanitarian ideals behind the vision of a post-conflict society.

*Alex Fattal is a PhD candidate in social anthropology at Harvard University, currently researching his dissertation "Guerrilla Marketing: Information War and the Demobilization of FARC Rebels." His studies have been supported by the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program and Social Science Research Council's International Dissertation Research Fellowship.* [✉](#)