

“Uribismo”

How Colombia Tamed Fifty Years of Violence

by **Pete Romero**

A few months ago I was able to sit down with ex-President of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe. We discussed how his Democratic Security plan had vastly improved citizen security and, in the process, become a model (or at least a menu) for other countries confronted with a plethora of violent and armed non-state actors. His was a citizen-centric, top-down model that had at its core an interagency-oriented, whole-of-government strategy. Both military and civilian officials were held directly accountable for results. While there were proven abuses (and prosecutions in the courts) of a few in his government, his most ardent critics concede that these excesses should not take away from his accomplishments on providing basic security to his fellow Colombians.

After eight years as President, Alvaro Uribe was still the most popular politician in Colombia, leaving office in August of 2010 with an approval rating of 72 percent. There is little debate that during his two terms he did more to improve the lives of Colombians than any President that preceded him. He made Colombians believe in themselves and re-defined how government serves the people. He put the Colombian people at the center of an effective security plan and transformed the security forces into the most effective fighting force in Latin America. His chief of police was named the top cop in the world, his Minister of Defense became the next President, others from his team have gone on to head the Inter-American Development Bank, occupy the top ranks of international organizations, and become highly-sought-after experts on the new holistic approach to security and development. His successes prompted counterinsurgency experts from around the world to examine how his Democratic Security plan could be applied in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere.

With his frenetic governing style and an obsession to personally touch all Colombians, he dominated the airwaves for the greater part of a decade. Throughout his presidency, he was everywhere, leading grass-roots meetings in hundreds of towns and villages, engaging business

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elites to contribute their fair share to the country's security, promoting amnesty and re-integration programs for thousands of ex-combatants, dragging along a reluctant bureaucracy and a recalcitrant congress, meeting with the families of fallen police and military, and personally directing a wholesale overhaul of the way government does business in the country. All this became known as "Uribismo." It was the best show in town.

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As much as he was beloved, he made enemies. He would publicly challenge anybody who disagreed or even questioned his policies. He angered political elites, while delighting the common man. Many still regard these public displays as indicative of a callousness and low regard for dissident voices, but the vast majority of Colombians came to see him as their singular advocate. He reduced the size of government and drove those bureaucrats that remained relentlessly. Typically working 20-hour days, he expected the same from all others in government. Those working in close proximity to him seemed to always have that glazed-over look of the sleep-deprived.

When he told me that he felt "anguish, pain, and impotence when I do not achieve results," I wanted to know why. He deflected introspective questions as "too deep" or not relevant to what remained to be done for Colombians. He did open up about his family.

Some of his earliest memories from the late 1950s are of accompanying his mother, a women's rights activist, to rallies. At home, his father combined a strong sense of patriotism and civic responsibility with hard work and high standards for his sons. "When I lost my father it was very tough for me; I cried. Now that I have lived longer than he, I think about the other hundreds of thousands of Colombian families that had to bury a loved one murdered in that senseless violence."

His father Alberto Uribe Sierra was a highly-respected cattle and horse breeder. An outgoing and generous man, he was also known as a tough dealmaker. His kids revered him. His pronouncements were never open for discussion. He said, "We are not going back to the Guacharacas" (a family ranch), and that was final. Because of this, his son Santiago thought it strange that not more than three weeks later his father called to say that he was going back to the ranch and wanted Santiago to go with him. The shooting started shortly after the helicopter landed. Alberto spotted some of the dozen or so armed, fatigue-clad fighters moving toward the house. He immediately leapt to his feet, drew his pistol, and fired. With bullets flying, he fled into the house and returned fire from the kitchen.

The police communiqué was terse, "Alberto Uribe Sierra was assassinated by the Fifth Front of the FARC on June 14, 1983 while resisting a kidnapping attempt." The family was devastated but not surprised. Their father had always said, "I will die before ever being kidnapped."

Alberto's oldest son Alvaro had already entered politics. Named by President Betancur to head the Department of Antioquia Peace Commission, Alvaro had been directing efforts to achieve peace with the guerrilla groups in the region when his father was killed. "My father was never an exploitive landowner. He was a generous man. He never had run-ins with peasants or landowners. In fact, he turned over

land to squatters when he bought Guacharacas.”

The family nightmare did not end there. Over the next twelve years, workers were killed and cattle stolen. Then in 1995 when Alvaro became Governor of Antioquia, the ELN (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional) guerrilla group burned Guacharacas to the ground.

The 1980s was a lawless period in the departmental capital Medellin. Guerrilla groups were rampaging through the countryside, and violence was spreading throughout the country. It was the Medellin Cartel whose influence was much greater than the departmental government. The Cartel’s social programs built housing for the poor and lit soccer fields for night play. It ran an airline of 55 planes. The Cartel was at its peak of power and influence. The Cartel supplied about 80 percent of the cocaine reaching the U.S. with an estimated eight billion dollars in annual revenue. The “Cocaine Wars” in South Florida were in full-swing. In 1983, kingpin Pablo Escobar’s net worth was calculated at two billion dollars.

By the early 1980s, the Cartel had killed over 30 Colombian judges, a cabinet minister, the director of the second-largest newspaper in the country, and hundreds of police agents and informants. It was enough for the Cartel to send miniature coffins to judges, investigators, and prosecutors to have them recuse themselves and hand the cases to others. In 1982, a group calling itself MAS (“Death to Kidnappers” in Spanish) appeared. Boasting of substantial resources and having already “contracted” ten gunmen to go after kidnapers, MAS was a creation of the cartels. Importantly, historians trace the beginnings of the private armies (the paramilitaries) to MAS. Since landowners could not rely on the police, they were going to take matters into their own hands. This was the “neighborhood” in which Alvaro spent his early professional years.

In August 2002, Alvaro was sworn in as President of the Republic. The security issues

had been the axis around which he won the election. He promised to get tough with FARC, ELN, the paramilitaries, and all the armed groups plaguing the country, employing a strategy first used in Antioquia called “Democratic Security.” The strategy had shown modest gains in the Department, but what appealed to the electorate most was the promise of reversing the losses of large swatches of the country that had fallen under the control of the guerrillas; an erosion that had only accelerated during the four years of the previous President. Literally, two-thirds of the country was outside of government control.

To embarrass the President-elect in front of the nation and the international community and to show what it thought of “Democratic Security,” FARC launched a series of attacks around the country to coincide with his inauguration. While 20,000 soldiers and police stood by guarding the presidential ceremony,

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mortar rounds rained down in an adjacent poor neighborhood, killing 26 people.

Uribe acted decisively. Within minutes of taking office, he convened his Security Council literally on the steps of the presidential palace. He directed the police and military to launch Plan Meteor to take control of the country’s major transportation arteries. Looking back, Uribe told me that he was indeed surprised by the timing and audacity of the attack; however, he had to do everything he could at that moment to

show Colombians he would not be intimidated. The country would mourn its losses but never surrender. It was payback time; a response that would be repeated with each FARC provocation, like its bombing of the popular Club El Nogal in Bogota and the assassination of the Governor of Antioquia.

The country was in a sorry state. President Pastrana had spent the previous four years in failed attempts to negotiate with the guerrillas, even giving them a safe haven the size of Connecticut in a good-faith effort to get peace talks started. All the while FARC forcibly recruited (increasing its size by about 50 percent to 20,000 fighters) and built a war chest. Armed groups (FARC, ELN, AUC, paramilitary armies, and Cartel gunmen) roamed freely in two thirds of the country. Surface traffic between cities all but ceased; 190 municipal buildings had been destroyed. Massing over 1,000 fighters, FARC had overrun three military bases in the

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southeastern part of the country. In one such battle, Colombian soldiers were forced to flee into Brazil. Homicides reached almost 30,000 and reported kidnapping over 3,000 per year. The Colombian State was failing.

Proud Colombians were leaving the country. The daily line at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota for visas out of the country wound around the block; this with a six-month wait for an appointment. There was no relief in sight. At the

end of 2001, FARC income from kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking was estimated to be in the \$260–\$290 million-per-year range.

However, an even more onerous problem loomed just over the horizon. The annual coca “crop report” of Colombia conducted by U.S. intelligence agencies detected a huge 300 percent increase in areas under cultivation. The new plantings would soon start to yield, and FARC alone would have an annual budget of close to one billion dollars, well in excess of the combined budget for the police and military. This had been the unforeseen turn of events (balloon effect) of successful U.S. efforts with Peru and Bolivia that substantially reduced coca cultivation in those countries. The U.S. and its partners had squeezed the balloon there and it popped out in southeastern Colombia.

If Pastrana had been the “Peace President,” Uribe was elected to wage war, to pull the country back from the precipice of state failure. Few politicians in Colombia could speak as authoritatively about security as he. His Plan Meteor was directed at securing the nation’s roadways and going after the money. Roadways had become the sites for guerrilla shakedowns, kidnappings, and carjacking. Besides patrolling along the highways, the military and police would rapidly deploy to target areas, largely based on cell phone calls from motorists. Once on the scene, they would attack and pursue the guerrillas into the countryside. Uribe directed each operational detail.

Over the longer term, Uribe knew the only way security would be sustainable was to convince those living in guerrilla and paramilitary-infested regions that the government cared about their welfare, was there to stay, and could be trusted. Success or failure would revolve around developing this trust between the local population and government security and civilian officials. The common practice of previous governments and security forces in Colombia had been to treat

those living in guerrilla-controlled areas with a mixture of distrust and open hostility. To Uribe, this practice was like blaming a rape victim for the rape. Security forces would ferret out real or imagined collaborators or simply look the other way as right-wing paramilitaries conducted a “dirty war,” torturing and killing at will. To Uribe it was clear the people in these zones were simply trying to survive. They had to be part of the solution.

Uribe’s Democratic Security policy would become the central pillar around which Colombia would secure its national territory. Its central premise was that armed groups do not make the government weak; state weakness enabled these groups to grow and prosper. It was not enough to chase bad actors; there had to be no place to hide, and this is where the locals came in. The essential elements of Democratic Security were not unique to Colombia. They were: 1) sustain the protection of local populations; 2) reconstitute basic services and make local delivery systems more efficient; 3) vigorously target revenue from the drug trade, which was the source of terrorism, corruption, and crime, and; 4) consolidate state control and thereby deny sanctuary to perpetrators of violence. These elements were straight out of the 40-year counterinsurgency playbook. What was unique was not the “what,” but the “how.” Uribe directed that Colombia’s strategic locales be identified and that a whole-of- government approach (civilian agencies working together with the police and military) surge efforts to win these strategic villages and towns back. From these footholds, the government would drill further down to consolidate the region and create a network of informants in every corner of the country.

Uribe conducted televised, open, town hall meetings in each strategic village. As he explained, “Security requires that the President maintain a macro perspective but operate at the micro level. The people must see sincere,

committed, and persistent leadership. The President makes this easier.”

The first sessions would last for the better part of a day. People feared reprisals for speaking out. Eventually they would speak but mostly to vent: “Where was the government when my son/daughter was kidnapped?” “My husband was taken away and tortured by soldiers.” “Army officers were colluding with paramilitaries.” “Where was the government then, and why should we believe you now?”

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Uribe would accept responsibility for past abuse and abandonment, explaining that rather than placing any blame on guerrillas, paramilitaries, and assorted bad actors in their midst, it was the government who had failed them. It was the government’s responsibility to provide security, and it had not done so. He was here now primarily to listen, to construct a common agenda, and to provide services the people wanted and deserved.

Uribe wanted to know what the government could do in partnership with the local community to make it safer, healthier, better educated, and employed. For those that doubted his sincerity, he urged them to judge him on what will be done, not just on his words. As Uribe explained, “It’s all about developing trust with these communities.” Subsequent sessions would start and end with a review of the local

action plan. Local working groups would plan, execute, and review projects together with central government and departmental officials. Woe to the police, military, or civilian official that would inflate achievements, exaggerate

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progress on the action plan, or complain about a lack of interagency cooperation. The official in question would be called on the spot to address the discrepancy on national television to both the President and the community. This was a powerful incentive for security and social services personnel to coordinate their actions, stay in close touch with locals, and work through problems together. It had the added benefit of demonstrating to each person in attendance and every Colombian watching on TV that the President meant what he said, and that every member of his team was accountable to him and the community in which they served.

Every Saturday, Sunday, and Monday were dedicated to such visits. Uribe would even give his personal telephone number out to local leaders, and they called him. He explained, “The officer either got with the program or was replaced.” His private dressing downs of officials afterward left no doubt that he wanted crystal-clear assessments of progress.

During his two terms, Uribe was assisted

by U.S. Plan Colombia funds. In the initial years, these monies were heavily weighted toward military equipment and training, but subsequently more and more were directed toward generating employment through public works projects, food and shelter for displaced persons, crop substitution, training of judges and prosecutors, construction of court houses, human rights training, protection of labor union leaders, and so called “soft” elements of Democratic Security. By 2011 U.S. funding of Plan Colombia had reached \$11 billion. While appreciative, Uribe believed that village beneficiaries of this assistance should see their own government behind it. He directed that the logos and markings from the U.S. (and other donors) be removed from crates and boxes before being turned over to beneficiaries. He increased taxes on the wealthy and sold war bonds to pay for his Democratic Security plan. In addition to regular tax revenue, the country’s mayors established funds from businesses in their cities as discretionary accounts for security upgrades to be managed by a steering committee appointed by the mayor.

After eight years and almost a thousand trips to towns and villages, the results were remarkable. Now over 75 percent of the country is under the control of government. Driving between cities is no longer life threatening. FARC leadership has been eviscerated. Over 28,000 ex-combatants from armed groups have been killed, jailed, granted amnesty, or deserted. Over 1,149 drug kingpins/traffickers, paramilitaries, and guerrilla chiefs have been extradited to the U.S. to stand trial. Homicides are down by 60 percent. Kidnappings were only 8 percent of their 2002 high, and persons displaced by the conflict in 2010 were about 61,000 compared to 457,000 in 2002. The poverty rate dropped by over 8 percent. After almost 50 years, most Colombians were living in peace.

Uribe frequently returned to the issue of

trust. The key to defeating guerrillas, drug kingpins/traffickers, and common criminals is to develop trust with those in the communities where these bad actors operate, and ultimately, developing reliable sources of intelligence. He told me with considerable pride that at the end of his second administration, the military and police could count on over four million intelligence sources throughout the country. About 8 percent of the total population was reporting on bad guys and their movements to local military and police.

Intelligence was also strengthened in the areas just outside Colombia's borders. In 2009, intelligence showed that the second-ranking commander of FARC was encamped just over the border in Ecuador. Uribe ordered an attack. Fourteen people were killed, including the commander Raul Reyes and two non-Colombians (a Mexican and an Ecuadorean). Ecuador broke diplomatic relations, and President Chavez, either out of sympathy or not to be upstaged, announced Venezuela would do the same.

Relations between Uribe and his Andean neighbors continued stormy from then until he stepped down from the presidency. To most Colombians, there was no question that the raid was worth it. A treasure trove of invaluable intelligence was gleaned from laptops confiscated from the scene. What criticism there was towards Uribe for his attack on a neighbor's sovereign territory became muted when this information was used to take down guerrilla bases in the country and was responsible for one of the most daringly successful hostage releases in history.

No shots were fired and fifteen hostages were released unharmed, including three Americans and an ex-presidential candidate. As then Minister of Defense Santos later explained, "It was the guerrilla codes and ciphers taken from the Reyes laptops which enabled the armed forces to penetrate and trick the FARC

into turning over the hostages." Subsequent reporting from these same laptops detailed support and complicity to FARC by Chavez and his government and by the then-Minister of Government of Ecuador.

Uribe's detractors do not generally quibble with the success of Democratic Security, but they do point to needless excesses. His pressure on the military and police to more effectively prosecute the war contributed to the killing of innocent campesinos to inflate guerrilla body counts. Uribe's initial callous reaction was that these soldiers "were not out there picking coffee." In the end, the infamous case of the "falsos positivos" resulted in the firing and prosecution of 27 officers. He had opposed the so-called "victim's law" which would have paid reparations to surviving family members of innocent people killed by the security forces. He felt, "the law costs too much...The best reparation is to end the violence." There are also those that believe he permitted the intelligence service (DAS) to spy on suspected opponents

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of his government. A court is investigating the charges against him, but current President Santos did not await the investigatory results in disbanding the DAS at the end of 2011. Critics also point to leniency in dealing with some of the demobilized paramilitary chiefs, but as he explained, "It is important to first achieve

peace.”

His public spat with the country’s judiciary and human rights activists too frequently resulted in unfounded accusations and name-calling. When asked, many Colombians will say the biggest difference between Uribe and current President Santos is that Santos is more “composed.” Uribe believes that the justice systems, as well as all public institutions, are there to serve the people. “Justice is at the service of public order. Criminals should get what they deserve,” he told me. After having spent thousands of hours in town meetings, he clearly believes that he knows best the wishes and expectations of the common man and woman. Those in or out of government must either get with the program or get out of the way.

His successor, President Santos, has stepped out of Uribe’s shadow and re-made himself, steering his government toward a less confrontational style, making friends with Chavez and lowering tension with Ecuador. He has reached out to and made peace with the country’s judiciary and signaled his intention to support the “victim’s law.” He is capitalizing on Uribe’s security gains and placing greater emphasis on the country’s urban centers. His government has gotten exceedingly high marks for dealing with recent unprecedented flooding that left a million Colombians homeless.

Uribe’s Democratic Security is not a one-size-fits-all security strategy. It is less a model than a template. Cultural and religious differences, ethnic makeup, and historical narratives should be factored into any successful security strategy. However, the success of his “process” is unmistakable:

- Treat those living in the affected areas as victims, not the enemy.
- Engage directly to build trust by making the locals a critical part of establishing the project agenda.
- Use the local workforce to the fullest extent and monitor progress locally.
- Employ a whole-of-government approach and hold government officials accountable for advancing the project agenda.
- Make the private sector elite pay its fair share to achieve a safer environment.
- Create stakeholders (and critical sources of intelligence) willing to defend these gains.
- Be laser-focused if not obsessed in maintaining the political will to accomplish all of the above.

Perhaps the greatest lesson from “Uribismo” is that it is possible to defeat well-armed, organized, and dedicated forces of guerrillas, paramilitaries, and drug kingpins/traffickers by building trust with the civilian population and leaving bad actors no place to hide. For that the whole government has to be involved with a unity of purpose provided by strong leadership. **IAJ**