



THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

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To End the War in Colombia: *Conversatorios* among Security Forces, Ex-Guerrillas, and Political Elites, and Ceasefire Seminars—Workshops for the Technical Sub-Commission

Jennifer Schirmer

I have been carefully listening to everyone these last two days in this Conversatorio, and I find I have a question to ask ourselves here at the table: If the government wants peace, if the armed forces want peace, if the guerrillas want peace, if the international community wants us to want peace, then where lies the problem?

—Air force colonel, participant in the *Conversatorio* “Conflict, Negotiations and Post-Conflict in El Salvador: Lessons for Colombia,” 2006

In this chapter, I describe a low-profile project called Skilling for Peace, which I quietly began in 2000 to constructively engage the security forces in dialogues with former guerrillas, political representatives, journalists, and other members of Colombian civil society at the height of a crisis in

the peace talks. These dialogues, known as *Conversatorios*, served as precursors to the more formal peace negotiations that later took place in Havana between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). All of the police and military officers who sat at the table in Havana passed through these dialogues during their Course on Strategic Studies (Curso de Altos Estudios Estratégicos) at the War College (Escuela Superior de Guerra) on their way to being promoted to generals and admirals. They were the *crème de la crème* of the officer corps. The *Conversatorios* featured more than fifty-two structured dialogues, which sought to develop constructive perspectives on peace negotiations with both the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) insurgencies among the armed forces and members of the police, former guerrillas, and political elites. Based on a dozen years of building trust, by 2012, when the peace talks began under President Santos, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the delegation of government negotiators requested that more than twenty Ceasefire Seminars-Workshops be organized over three years to prepare a delegation of nineteen civilian and military advisors. Later, an additional five active-duty generals and admirals worked jointly with members of the FARC leadership in Havana in formulating a ceasefire and disarmament and demobilization design as well as a tripartite mechanism for monitoring and verification with the United Nations, all suited to the particularities of the conflict in Colombia.

Many analyses emphasize what is intractable about a conflict and its spoilers, but in this project I sought to discover and act on that which could be identified as entry points to dialogue and changes in perspective. Such an approach did not presume the future to be inescapably violent. Rather, it rested on the assumption that it is imperative to parse the mindsets of actors on both sides of the conflict—especially the “skeptical spoilers” who have felt excluded from processes in the past or mistreated after the failure of previous peace talks—in order to better understand how to engage them directly in peace. For we can be reasonably certain that if these armed actors continue to be ignored, negotiations are doomed to failure.

This chapter reveals that in some instances, an openness to different perspectives can occur among some military officers on one side of the conflict and some former and current guerrillas on the other, both of whom are more than aware of the need to adapt to changing circumstances

during a conflict. This project thus runs counter to the assertion that political violence among state and nonstate armed actors is endemic and intractable in Latin America, and particularly within Colombia.

The following analysis is presented in three parts. The first is devoted to the history of spoilers in peace processes in Colombia over the past three decades. The second focuses on the political background to the dialogues, including the nature of Colombian society and the social barriers to dialogue that Colombians needed to overcome if the security forces were to engage positively with peace negotiations. Finally, I discuss the *Conversatorios* and Ceasefire Seminars-Workshops central to the Skilling for Peace Project.

Spoilers and Attempts at Peace in Colombia

Since the late 1940s, according to Carlo Nasi, “spoilers have threatened to derail every single peace process” in Colombia. These have included “guerrilla groups (or their splinter factions), the armed forces, the Colombian Congress, drug-traffickers, entrepreneurs, rightwing paramilitary groups and even the U.S. government.”¹ Because these groups all firmly believed that peace emerging from negotiations “threaten[ed] their power, worldview, and interests,”² they used violence and nonviolent sabotage and influence to undermine attempts to achieve it. One of the only peace processes during this period—initiated by President Virgilio Barco (1986–90) and continued by César Gaviria (1990–4)—was a result, according to Nasi, of the government’s two “spoiler management techniques.”³ These techniques included the assurance to the armed forces that peace agreements with various guerrilla groups⁴ did not entail institutional transformations of the army, coupled with the peace commissioner’s request that the armed forces participate in “crafting a road-map in the Initiative for Peace.” These measures of engagement were meant to secure, in particular, the army’s compliance. Nevertheless, cooperation between the armed forces and the government remained deeply problematic, as one retired-colonel-turned-analyst recounts:

Without being able to specify if it were for lack of communication, disagreement of visions, the lack of definition of

the truce, or all three, the government's peace efforts were not sufficiently well-received by the armed forces.⁵

The Barco and Gaviria governments also offered, in turn, some form of protection to demobilized guerrillas "to contain the potential damage caused by the spoilers."⁶ There were two major spoilers at this time: on the one hand, the right-wing paramilitaries, sometimes in collusion with the army, assassinated over three thousand members of the FARC's political party, the Unión Patriota. On the other hand, the FARC assassinated some four hundred members of the demobilized Maoist guerrilla group the Popular Liberation Army. These spoilers threatened but ultimately failed to derail the peace process. Yet because the violence continued, observers consider this particular peace process to be only partially successful. Later attempts by President César Gaviria to negotiate with the FARC and the ELN yielded no results, and the armed conflict continued to escalate.⁷

Hence the opposition by the army to the Barco government's peace efforts did indeed diminish, especially in comparison to the resistance seen during the earlier tenure of President Betancur (1982–6). It was maintained, however, *sotto voce*, owing not so much to differences in strategy over how to address the "guerrilla problem," but "because officers did not feel committed to it and . . . because some of their members were involved with or believed in the 'dirty war.'"⁸

President Samper (1994–8) attempted to set up a demilitarized municipality of La Uribe to reinitiate peace dialogues with the FARC. But given that Samper's campaign had purportedly received money from the Cali Cartel, this attempt was roundly rejected by the commander of the army, General Bedoya, with many other commanders refusing to accept orders from a president with "ethical" issues.⁹ During this period, the military regained its autonomy over security matters and conjured a dismissive attitude toward peace.¹⁰ The FARC also took full advantage of this delegitimization of the presidency, initiating twenty-six simultaneous attacks throughout the country.

By 1997, citizens had deposited over 10 million symbolic votes in favor of "finding a negotiated solution to the Colombian armed conflict."¹¹ War fatigue brought Andrés Pastrana, with a conservative Nueva Fuerza Democrática platform for peace, into the presidency in May 1998.

However, with 450 members of the military and police held by the FARC as “prisoners of war,” there was serious demoralization among the armed forces.¹² At this time the commander general of the armed forces, General Tapias, informed newly elected President Pastrana that “the democracy is in danger and the armed forces are in intensive care.”¹³ Nonetheless, Pastrana pressed forward with his platform, declaring peace negotiations with the FARC and the ELN to be a priority of his new administration. He proposed a “mini-Marshall Plan,” referred to as Plan Colombia, which began as an economic blueprint for peace, offering alternative crops to small coca farmers. But lacking funding, the plan was completely rewritten in English by the US State Department with an antidrug focus. With 9/11 and a change of regime in the United States, aid that would amount to over \$10 billion over the next ten years was primarily reserved for security forces’ attacks against the guerrillas, in alignment with Washington’s new priorities.¹⁴

Background to the Project

The *Conversatorios* project emerged from these efforts at peace between 2000 and 2002. During this period, there was little communication between President Pastrana and his peace commissioner and the High Command. A small advisory group of retired generals was created, but it had little influence (*muy al lado*).¹⁵ This lack of dialogue would prove to be a serious error on the president’s part.

Discontent among officers developed after the sacking of two generals by President Pastrana under pressure from the United States for having connections to paramilitaries. This was especially delicate as many officers interpreted this action to be the result of indirect pressure from the FARC, which was implied in the group’s criticisms of paramilitary activities. Within a matter of days, the situation worsened: without an initial briefing to the armed forces by the executive office or peace commissioner, the president announced an indefinite extension of the demilitarized zone (*zona de despeje*). This resulted in a full-blown crisis, with twelve generals and twenty colonels offering their resignation in solidarity with Defense Minister Rodrigo Lloreda, who resigned after publicly stating that he did not believe the FARC were interested in negotiating. Emergency meetings

with the generals limiting the *despeje* to a time period of six months temporarily resolved the crisis. Tension within military circles throughout the Pastrana government nonetheless continued: heavy military surveillance of both peace commissioners, Víctor Ricardo and Camilo Gómez; a press conference with the commander of the army, General Mora, railing against the prisoner exchange; and finally, a threat by the head of the air force to shoot down the plane of Peace Commissioner Gómez, then on his way to negotiate with the FARC.¹⁶ Ultimately, the negotiations failed as a result of the FARC's hijacking of a commercial jet on 20 February 2002. That night, President Pastrana announced the suspension of the peace talks and authorized the remilitarization of the *zona de despeje*.¹⁷

The ELN talks in Geneva from 25 to 27 July 2000 were also thrown into crisis in the middle of the second meeting between Peace Commissioner Gomez and the ELN delegation when news arrived that paramilitaries led by Carlos Castaño were attacking the ELN's principal encampments in the province of Sur de Bolívar.¹⁸ ELN commander Antonio García temporarily suspended the talks, noting that the paramilitary attacks "with the collaboration of the armed forces" were a provocation to impede the talks, and subsequent negotiations did not materialize.¹⁹

The paramilitary spoiler—with its military nexus—was extremely problematic, as Nasi points out. "In some regions, the military turned a blind eye to (and sometimes collaborated with) the activities" of these groups, with the claim they were unable to fight so many irregulars simultaneously. But after Plan Colombia strengthened the security forces, Nasi asks, "How could the military look the other way when the AUC [United Self-Defenders of Colombia] carried out massacres and extra-judicial killings?"²⁰

Curiously, with the talks with the FARC and the ELN failing once again, the High Command believed there was nonetheless progress. Some of the officers who had previously opposed negotiations began to reconsider, as General Tapias recounted in a 2009 interview:

In the beginning, [the officers] didn't understand. . . . Whatever kind of negotiations with illegal groups they always understand as a concession of the state, as a weakness of the state. . . . That was a difficult period, I won't deny it . . .

terribly traumatic, and one encountered direct opposition from some commanders.

But, General Tapias goes on, officers began to realize they needed to re-think *la estrategia* and bring the other officers on board for negotiations:

It was a labor of persuasion, of conviction. Besides, there was no other alternative as it was a popular mandate with an elected president, with all the presidential candidates having committed themselves to a [*zona de despeje*]. . . . But little by little, they began to see our reasoning about what it was that was being done, when it was presented in the larger context. . . . At the end of it all, [President Pastrana's talks at el Caguán] were a failure due to the total lack of willingness by the FARC [to negotiate], but the realists made us realize that this was a necessary stage that had to be gone through in order to explore if the FARC were willing or not [to negotiate] in order to begin the following stage, which was to impose the force of the state on these [insurgent] groups.²¹

For the Skilling for Peace Project, the history of the Colombian military's role as spoiler of and antagonist to peace raised the larger question of how to include militaries in peace processes. Extrapolating from the history of spoilers in Colombia, I came to ask how it is that commanders are willing and able to create conditions within their institution to work in alliance with a president's peace efforts. Must there always be an incoherence between what is considered "the political" and "the military," leading military commanders to view negotiations as merely an extension of the battlefield, or worse, an extension of the privileges of a political elite that might, in a peace process, "sell out" the military's prerogatives?²²

Over the following years, an increasingly precise bombing campaign, begun in 2002 but escalating in 2007, took its toll on the FARC. When President Santos reentered talks with the FARC in 2012, the military's newly minted strategy, supported by Plan Colombia, had indeed solidified, indicating to the political and economic elites (*los cacaos*) that military force was central to bringing the guerrillas to the negotiating table,

and that the military's institutional interests and future needed to be considered if peace was to be realized. This called for a gradual acceptance of a combined strategy of "negotiating in the midst of the conflict" (*negociar en medio del conflicto*) with no ceasefire in place.²³ General Tapias explained:

You have to understand that the term "negotiation" without disarmament and without demobilization has been so discredited in so many processes in Colombia. . . . Nevertheless, if you are one of those officers who still perceive of negotiations as implying military defeat, then clearly you will not support it. But if you see it as a form of achieving victory with fewer deaths and less suffering, then you will.²⁴

Over time, in the *Conversatorios*, negotiations with the insurgency became increasingly acceptable to officers under these conditions. But early on, what the dialogue project was able to discern was that with this initial rethinking of military strategy came the need for a forum in which officers could express their uncertainties and anxieties about what peace negotiations might mean for them and their careers as well as their institution. This was an anxiety prompted by a perceived, and at times real, marginalization of the military by the governing elite (the president and his advisors), especially during past peace negotiations. (As we shall see, General Tapias's remarks also help explain why ceasefire and a disarmament and demobilization [DDR] program became for both sides such central elements in the creation of an architecture for peace under President Santos.)

Hence, despite their proven legacy as spoilers, in my initial conversations with many high- and middle-ranking military and police officers, along with political elites and former guerrillas, during the 2000–2 period, I discovered a rather different set of wishes on the part of the armed forces. When I asked what I could proffer that would not duplicate other donors' efforts, there was a strong interest in establishing off-the-record, low-profile dialogues with those elite sectors in Colombian society to which officers normally did not have access. They were also keen to learn about "international options" in ending armed conflicts. Officers were interested

in learning how to negotiate with the guerrillas at the same time as the military buildup was getting underway. This indicated three things. First, they believed that the correlation of forces “from the qualitative angle” between the FARC and the armed forces was at the time—2000—entirely “disadvantageous” for the state forces. This realization required, in their minds, a *delay but not a total rupture* in the possibility for negotiations with the FARC until a more coherent political-military strategy designed to equilibrate this correlation could be achieved in favor of the government, in order to increase its strength at the negotiating table. Hence the earlier negative reaction of many officers to President Pastrana’s lack of time limits for the demilitarized zone demanded by the FARC.²⁵ They believed the zone provided a military advantage to the FARC, and that the guerrillas were merely utilizing the negotiations to gain time for a new redeployment of its forces rather than a sincere willingness for peace (we will return to this concern below).

Second, this indicates what was clear in all the *Conversatorios* since this initial period: officers believed that the Colombian conflict with the FARC had to end at a table of negotiations. Many maintained, though, the common view among armed actors in conflicts: that there was a need for a military campaign to “weaken” the enemy and establish respect for military strength was the only avenue to force the enemy to the negotiating table. By 2011, after close to a dozen years of a US-financed military campaign, the FARC and the ELN had been “very weakened but not totally weakened,”²⁶ and as a result, fewer and fewer military officers came to believe in the possibility for a complete military victory. As one colonel put it, “only the civilians who don’t have to fight the war believe this.” This officer made it clear, sotto voce, that he was including in this grouping President Uribe, known for his demands for “body counts.”²⁷

A third element was the recognition that the guerrillas had decades of experience in negotiating: the ELN in numerous attempts since 1991,²⁸ and the FARC, who had negotiated with several governments since 1984.²⁹ Many officers were extremely cognizant of the military’s lack of experience in this regard, putting the armed forces at a distinct disadvantage. As one officer who characterized himself as “hardline but pragmatic” argued, “we don’t have the years and years of training in negotiations as do the ELN or FARC. Will we be taken advantage of at the table *by all sides*?”³⁰ As

we shall see, this fear became paramount in 2015 when military advisors, as part of the Technical Sub-Commission, journeyed to Havana to negotiate a ceasefire with the FARC.

While the prospect of having to reach political accommodation with the guerrillas was still met with much suspicion and ambivalence, the recognition of the need to draw the FARC into the political arena, where they were perceived to be most vulnerable, gained increasing legitimacy among the officers. As was discussed in the *Conversatorios*, broad electoral participation would likely debilitate the FARC and “dissolve” them as a political movement in very little time.³¹ This recognition of the guerrillas’ political fragility was the lesson from the Pastrana government, as some officers slowly came to realize:

In a few years’ time, Pastrana will be the hero of Colombian politics because he was able to foresee that the only way to defeat the guerrilla was to bring them into the political arena, and that this military campaign against them was all for naught at great cost.³²

These new perspectives on negotiations and political fragility, I found, reflected a growing unease among some of the more moderate officers with the absolutist and triumphalist narratives so prevalent throughout the Uribe period (2002–10)—that of “*el fin del fin y no el comienzo del fin*” (the end of the end and not the beginning of the end of the guerrilla) proclaimed by the president and a number of officers in the High Command.

The Dialogues Project

In 2000 and 2001, serious concerns were raised about how to manage the armed forces and prepare officers for potential peace talks in the future. At this time, I was asked by both the High Command and Defense Minister/Vice-President Gustavo Bell to speak with the director of the Escuela Superior de Guerra, General Medina—who was keen to modernize CAEM officers’ education—about organizing events to engage them in peace-building. With my academic background as an anthropologist, and my status as a neutral party who stood outside daily Colombian polemics, it

was suggested that I could move easily among sectors and facilitate dialogue between the armed forces and civilian sectors, listening equally to all participants. After months of discussions with the military, the police, academics, journalists, as well as International Red Cross representatives in Bogotá, I organized a 26–28 March 2001 Seminar entitled “Military Operations within the Framework of the Respect and Defense of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law” at a hotel in Bogotá at which the director of the War College and the commander of the armed forces, as well as international invitees, spoke to 320 officers (colonels and majors). The opportunity also arose (as had been planned) for these officers to speak directly with President Pastrana’s peace commissioner, Camilo Gómez, in a respectful environment. This discussion lasted two long hours, with many difficult questions for the commissioner. This was his first opportunity to meet with officers, he admitted, and he vowed to meet with them more regularly in the future.

To build on the success of this initial event I was subsequently asked by General Medina to establish, with the approximately twenty-five colonels and navy captains who would be promoted to the rank of general and admiral each year, a long-term series of dialogues (three per year), referred to as *Conversatorios*. Over the thirteen years of the project, I would invite, in consultation with my two Colombian associates on the project,³³ three to four Colombian parliamentarians, academics, businessmen, journalists, and former guerrillas, among many others, for each event. Themes discussed ranged from the roots of the conflict, agrarian reform, the political participation of members from the previously disarmed and demobilized guerrilla groups, paramilitarism, as well as lessons learned from other peace processes.³⁴ As my associates would continually remind me, the multiple meetings I held with individual participants to prepare them for each event, especially with the officers of the High Command and government officials, were not so easily done by fellow Colombians. My status as a neutral academic and outsider who could foster trust as director of the project, I was assured repeatedly, was essential. It may also have helped that as a woman I was seen as a careful listener and circum-spect interlocutor.

The Uribe Presidency

Adamantly opposed to the Pastrana-FARC talks, Álvaro Uribe won the elections in May 2002 (and again in 2006) by practically declaring war on the FARC, arguing that he and the armed forces would *exterminar la guerrilla* to uphold his Democratic Security Policy. He presented his Plan Patriota as an all-out attack on two fronts: drugs and the FARC. There would be no negotiation in the midst of the conflict. During Uribe's tenure, the FARC remain designated as terrorists on the US State Department list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) (since 1997). The DEA also called for extradition to the United States of the entire FARC Secretariat on the basis of drug trafficking.

Uribe eagerly assumed his role as commander of the armed forces on 7 August 2002, directly giving orders to mid-level commanders, especially during his first term.³⁵ Often, each commander attending a *Conversatorio* would receive a call on his cellphone from the president late in the evening, asking how many *bajas* ("kills" of FARC members) he had achieved that day. This provoked some notable responses: many were bothered by this micromanagement by the executive, which they saw as undercutting, indeed at times entirely marginalizing, the military High Command. They were also deeply concerned about Uribe's fanatical focus on body counts "rather than focusing on strategy," as one officer complained sotto voce.³⁶ And when the president attempted to change the Constitution so that he could run for a third term, a number of officers were furious, stating quite openly that "he is being absolutely undemocratic."

During Uribe's eight-year tenure, there was a 50 percent increase in the presence of armed forces and police in the more rural areas, and a battle strategy was implemented that had troops hold their ground and stay in place, which meant the FARC lost control of considerable territory. By 2007, and throughout the rest of the Uribe government (as well as the rest of the *Conversatorios*, which lasted until early 2014), with the direct access of multiple US advisors to seven major bases, there was a guaranteed influx of US military aid. The United States also provided and oversaw the technical operations of the bombing campaign that was ever more capable of surgical strikes. The objective of this broadening of US cooperation was "to destroy definitively [FARC] terrorism."³⁷ As part of Operación Fénix,

on 1 March 2008, a US-coordinated bombing raid 1.1 miles inside of Ecuador killed, for the first time, a member of the FARC leadership: Raúl Reyes, who was number two in the group's Secretariat. The US president and several senators (but not Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa) were informed beforehand.

This bombing and strafing of FARC encampments caused a shift in the calculus of the war: panic among the FARC ensued, with scores of fighters killed, captured, or deserted, and the group's internal communications were disrupted, isolating the Secretariat from its commanders, some for years. The FARC nonetheless managed to survive such constant Colombian military pressure by breaking into smaller mobile units, moving into rugged mountainous terrain with heavier cloud cover (returning to earlier guerrilla tactics), and with a steady flow of weapons, explosives training, and funding from drug trafficking. By 2008, one air force colonel at the US Embassy in Bogotá admitted ruefully, "We really underestimated how long this bombing campaign to bring the FARC to their knees would take. We thought it would be over by now."³⁸ In the end, Uribe never felt he would have to negotiate or be seen as "giving in to the narco-terrorists," but if another president came along and did negotiate, it would provide him with an opportunity to remain influential politically, as we will see with the referendum of October 2016.

Santos's Negotiating Strategy

A shift in strategy occurred with the election in 2010 of former defense minister Juan Manuel Santos. On 23 September 2010, the FARC's top military chief, Mono Jojoy (located by military intelligence after they managed to place a GPS chip in his specially designed new Adidas for his diabetes), along with twenty other guerrillas, was killed in another military air strike in the Macarena region, a FARC stronghold. But while Santos escalated the bombing campaign, reducing the seven-member military and political FARC Secretariat to two, and neutralizing numerous units by killing mid-level commanders and troops, he *remained open to negotiations*, marking a noteworthy change of direction from his predecessor. However, if the FARC refused, he insisted, "they can only await jail or the tomb." Overtures and letters to and from top FARC leader Alfonso Cano

were made in 2010 and 2011, but when one of his generals phoned him after a bombing operation on 5 November 2011 to say that he “had Cano surrounded. Should we proceed?” Santos gave the order, and Cano was shot and killed.³⁹

Unlike Uribe, Santos saw the FARC’s ideological alliance with Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Movement as an entry point. Indeed, the very first week of his presidency, Santos directly approached President Chávez and asked him to intervene and speak with the new FARC leader Timochenko, who was then living in an isolated corner of Venezuela. Timochenko would later recall this meeting with Chávez:

There was at this time so much fear, so much insecurity . . . and [Chávez] said to me, “Listen, I have all the certainty that through peace negotiations, one can attain something, but through war [you attain] nothing.” I was certain that here was someone who would not put a knife in our back, that he wouldn’t leave us hanging in the breach. . . . He provided us with the certainty that we needed [to go into these negotiations].⁴⁰

Secret preparatory talks thus began in 2010–11, followed by secret exploratory talks with the peace commissioner, Sergio Jaramillo, and the president’s brother, Enrique Santos, in Havana in early 2012; these progressed into formal, public negotiations later that year. In Havana, the FARC leadership understood they could not continue the fight much longer; they spoke in Havana of still being traumatized by the bombings. They realized they had only a limited margin of maneuverability, and thus, having taken the decision to transform the movement into a legal political party, came to the table having already decided they would disarm and demobilize. It then became a difficult matter of negotiating precisely how, when, and to whom they would hand over their weapons. The military, too, had its own concerns: the FARC’s continued resilience in the face of devastating losses, and the terrible consequences for Colombian soldiers due to the FARC’s increasing reliance on sharpshooters and explosives, meant that landmines were the leading cause of the high rate of military casualties. As General Flórez, the head of the Technical Sub-Commission, pointed

out in 2016, “Our generation of officers of the armed forces and police were born in the conflict, we have lived the war. Even just three years ago, in 2013, there were 652 amputees and 200 deaths from combat.”⁴¹ In 2018, the commander of the armed forces confirmed that the armed conflict had “left 30,000 soldiers and police wounded, 12,000 amputees and 6000 dead.”⁴² Many elements of the air war, of combat casualties, and of the uncertainties over whether the conflict could in fact be ended were continually raised among the police and military officers in the *Conversatorios* during these years.

All of these elements led both the FARC and the Santos regime to view this moment in early 2012 as an opportunity. As the high commissioner for peace remarked, “we have before us the best opportunity in our history to end the conflict. I say this because I have been engaged with the FARC for more than a year in Havana and I am convinced that the opportunity is real.”⁴³

Divisions within Colombian Society

Divisions exist at all levels of Colombian society between civil society and the military, the rebels and the government, and the left and the right, creating barriers to the building of peace.⁴⁴ This was especially true with regard to the barrier between the armed forces, the political elite, and both former and current guerrillas.

For the military, the reluctance to cross boundaries is sometimes ideological, as General Tapias recounts: “One must dismantle many *tabús* [within the military]. When I was a young officer, there arose the opportunity to speak with a *guerrillero*, and that was almost a mortal sin!”⁴⁵ The fear was that by merely having a conversation, one would be seen as having been infiltrated by the FARC.⁴⁶ This *tabú* would arise a number of times in the *Conversatorios*.

But the reluctance is also social: military and police officers live in their own segregated communities, locked into a conflict that breeds its own form of exclusion and insider mentality.⁴⁷ It is extremely unlikely that Colombian military officers would have social ties, much less informal friendships, with journalists, academics, intellectuals, or political analysts. In the officers’ universe, the “public sphere”—filled with politicians,

ideologies, and everyday debates—is often viewed more as an intimidating social and political arena, and not as an arena of opportunity for deliberations about peace.

In parallel, social isolation is the norm for most political elites, including business leaders, intellectuals, journalists, and academics who keep to their own, with little access to members of the armed forces, whom they often hold in disdain. These sectors lack a forum that is generative of political debate, analysis, and reflection with officers.

Finally, there exists a critical mass of former guerrillas from the handful of revolutionary groups in Colombia who, as a result of the multiple peace negotiations in the late 1980s and '90s discussed earlier, disarmed, demobilized, and “reinserted” themselves back into civil society. Although often socially shunned by elites, these *reinsertados* have “crossed” a number of social boundaries to become politically active as governors, parliamentarians, and presidential candidates in the various political parties formed since 2004.⁴⁸

How does one cross these boundaries between these military and civilian “subcultures,” with their significant disparities and volatilities, “to dismantle these tabús” and embark on a series of conversations that, hopefully, help shape the makings of a negotiated peace?

The *Conversatorios*

Faced with these challenges, *Conversatorios* predicated on shifting the historical spoiler narratives were established. Their overriding purpose was to open a debate in which representatives from the political class, military officers, and ex-guerrillas would have the opportunity to entertain and analyze together important and current political issues in the midst of the conflict. Between 2002 and 2013, 665 active-duty colonels and navy captains from all four branches (army, air force, navy, and police) participated as part of their one-year promotional course (Curso de Altos Estudios Militares, or CAEM) at the War College. In addition, at the request of the police officers at CAEM, I organized two separate police *Conversatorios* for a number of generals in 2003 and 2004. Between 2007 and 2010, the entire corps of 68 generals and admirals participated in a number of *Conversatorios* specifically organized for them, and between

2010 and 2012, the 5 officers of two separate High Commands (some of whom had previously participated in the *Conversatorios* first as colonels and navy captains, and then as generals and admirals) participated in three separate *Conversatorios* organized specifically for them. In addition, hundreds of Colombian civilian presenters and a number of international experts participated. Finally, a series of courses on international humanitarian law and human rights were organized over a period of two years (2005–7) for 30 pilots as well as approximately 90 frontline combat troops at the request of two military schools (the Special Forces and the Cadets). Overall, at least 775 officers and noncommissioned officers participated in these dialogues and courses over the entire period of the project.

The *Conversatorios* encouraged a level playing field in which all participants had a chance to speak and to listen in an equal and respectful manner. Most significant for the officers was their low-profile nature; there was no media presence and all statements were unattributed in order to maintain the “Golden Rule” that everything said was off the record. These dialogues, then, were about instilling a process of dialogue within a society in which there is little dialogue or trust between sectors.

During this period, national security doctrine, refashioned primarily from the perspective of US counterinsurgency experience, remained the touchstone of the curriculum at the War College. Nonetheless, the majority of the school’s directors during these years welcomed the *Conversatorios* into the curriculum in an attempt to introduce a peacebuilding perspective, and they were enthusiastic about attending the events as well.

I initially accepted the limits imposed by the directors of the school and the CAEM officers as to which participants they would and would not invite to the dialogue and what themes they would and would not discuss. Over the years, these limits were overcome (former guerrillas were invited, for example) and the dialogues sought to incrementally and gradually expand the officer, political elite, and ex-guerrilla dialogue horizons to move each sector outside their enclosed social circles and intellectual comfort zones to encourage dialogue about topics that were challenging and, at times, especially sensitive.

The method didn’t demand doctrinaire agreement or assume ideological antagonism. Rather, a stream of conversation was encouraged that allowed participants to address the nature and roots of the political

violence within Colombia. By removing conversation from the realm of the polemic—the norm in Colombia—and placing it in a more or less neutral forum in which all participants have equal time, some interesting concurrences of thinking and transformation of attitudes occurred. One former guerrilla expressed his views on social justice and poverty, while officers agreed that Colombia should address social inequality and poverty, especially in the countryside. At times, each side came to the realization that they may share similar ideas, even though such thinking may emanate from very different historical narratives.

A Modus Operandi of Gradualism

This range and variety of themes for the *Conversatorios* did not come about immediately or easily. Initially, officers did not easily forfeit their demonized image of the guerrilla-as-enemy (*bandidos*) and as *terroristas*; nor were they very open to members of civil society from “the left.”⁴⁹ Hence, in the early *Conversatorios*, I at first felt it was too risky to introduce either themes or speakers who the officers considered “too progressive” and who were outside of their comfort zone. If officers suggested speakers, it was often more for the opportunity to make critical statements face to face than to have a respectful dialogue. Oddly, human rights NGOs mirrored this response. When I approached certain members of these groups, they were adamant in their unwillingness to meet with the military; they either offered a firm no or were only willing to participate if they could either confront or denounce the security forces. While a couple of NGOs dealing with forced displacement did enthusiastically participate in these dialogues, they remained an exception. And even with these NGOs, many officers believed they were “ELN guerrillas in disguise.” It became clear that overcoming *tabús on both sides* was of paramount importance in the dialogues.

Thus, in the first series of *Conversatorios*, I organized a more academic discussion about the roots of the conflict, inviting Colombian academics and economists to discuss levels of impoverishment and the lack of land reform—points on which many of the officers agreed. Subsequently, I decided to involve increasingly progressive participants, including moderates from various political parties who held ideas about how to resolve the

conflict that differed markedly from those of the officers. At each step, a careful calibration was made, after long discussions with my Colombian associates as well as with various potential participants, as to how far beyond their intellectual comfort zones each side could be taken. Occasionally, and only after careful deliberation, a former guerrilla would be invited to speak, intentionally attempting to break the *tabú* that General Tapias spoke of. This opened up space for discussion of the nature of the conflict, the actions of the insurgency, and the potential for future negotiations.

Before every event, I made an effort as director of the project to meet alone with each participant, both civilian and military, to help prepare them for an open, respectful discussion by suggesting ways to rephrase a question or comment to make it less antagonistic. This preparation, I would argue, was of significant help in furthering discussion and “calming the waters” between the parties.

By 2005 new political circumstances in Colombia made it possible to broaden the pool of discussants and the range of dialogue. With the initiation of paramilitary demobilization talks in 2003–4, the election of a number of congressional representatives from the new social democratic party, Polo Democrático Alternativo, together with a number of independent new mayors and governors in Medellín and Cali, I felt confident I could open up the political discussions by reaching out to these new, more progressive politicians. Interestingly, with each subsequent *Conversatorio* with a Polo or independent or *ex-guerrillero* representative, the officers insisted on having the opportunity to meet with similar representatives in the future. The increasing institutionalization and legalization of the Polo party, as well as the “multiplier effect” each *Conversatorio* had on the officers from one year to the next, made it easier to work with each new group of colonels and navy captains. Over time, I could touch on more “delicate” topics, inviting participants, for example, to discuss the government’s demobilization talks with the paramilitaries under way at that time, as well as the potential for a humanitarian accord with the FARC, which the Uribe government was then considering.

By 2008, with my academic credibility, I took a leap of faith (and against the advice of one of my associates) and set up two rather historic events. At first the officers were reluctant to meet with former guerrillas, with whom there had been visible tension in the early conversations. Nonetheless, over

time, each side came to value these discussions, surprised by the extent to which they could converse in a frank but respectful manner. Officers also came to learn that former guerrillas, who had been elected parliamentarians, mayors and governors, were, like themselves, not monolithic in their views but deeply divided, voicing strong disagreement, for example, with the FARC's violent agenda and drug-trafficking activities. This ideological friction among the former *guerrilleros* surprised the officers.

Yet *el tabú de la guerrilla* and “the left” in general was still very much present in officers' minds: in one special *Conversatorio* in 2004 organized for majors, I invited one of my associates, an ex-ELN guerrilla, to speak. At the end of his talk, one officer raised his hand and said “how very worried I am,” as he found that he agreed with most of what this ex-guerrilla had said. Everyone drew in a breath, and then laughed. On another occasion, in 2006, the same associate spoke to a group of colonels and navy captains. One colonel remarked, “You know, I have been told by my colleagues from *Conversatorios* last year that I shouldn't listen to your talks, because I may be convinced by your ideas.” Again, there was nervous laughter. The success of this gradual broadening of the discussion in the *Conversatorios* would generate a significant advance in a *Conversatorio* in 2008 when officers met with a former guerrilla commander who had just recently left the ELN.

Between 2010 and 2012, with the election of President Santos, I decided, in consultation with my associates, to focus on the bills that Congress was debating, one of which became the new Law on Victims and the Restitution of Land. I invited congressional representatives who wrote these laws and members of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) team in Bogotá to discuss their report on land distribution in Colombia.⁵⁰

By 2006, as the number of officers who participated in the three *Conversatorios* each year multiplied, we started to see a ripple effect: an *expectation* on the part of each new group that they would participate in these discussions, which allowed me to open each new year by asking them what they would like to discuss and with whom. There was a growing desire to have more engagement with a broader selection of participants and themes and to meet with those who held key positions in government—whom, they admitted, they normally would have little or no chance to meet in such small, off-the-record encounters, including over lunch and

dinner during these two and a half days outside of Bogotá. By 2008, these dialogues had become an organic part of the curriculum for colonels who would soon be promoted to generals and admirals, playing a significant role in establishing durable contacts with different sectors of civil society. As they gradually progressed, there was a noticeable easing of officers' resistance to the perspectives of those they originally had believed to be fundamentally antagonistic to their own and their institution's interests. Veterans of past *Conversatorios* were able to converse fluently with members of different sectors, and they readily served as mediators between new, more nervous and standoffish officers and their similarly nervous civilian counterparts.⁵¹

Former guerrillas, leftist politicians, journalists, and human rights lawyers were subject to a similar ripple effect. They came to understand that their own negative prejudgments of the military had been erroneous. Having experienced a kind of ethnographic education, participants overcame their initial predispositions and caricatures of "the other."

Thus, the intention of these dialogues was to instil an openness to dialogue and comfort with and acceptance of difference within a military culture that had been fundamentally distrustful of and at odds with politicians and the elite as a whole, and with "the more progressive and leftist" civilians in particular.

This process of dialogue began to take on its own dynamic, such that if the formal talks broke down, the good relations and connections between parties were not necessarily damaged. This was the case in at least two instances. When President Pastrana called off peace talks in February 2002, a group of officers who were attending one of the first *Conversatorios* held long discussions into the night with the civilian commentators present about what this would mean in terms of the peace and in terms of the war. In the second instance, when talks with the ELN did not resume in late 2007, the *Conversatorio* with officers and an ex-ELN guerrilla not only continued unaffected, but indeed shifted more directly into the theme of negotiations and conflict resolution.

Illustrative Examples of *Conversatorios*

Concurrent with the political debates in Colombia, *Conversatorios* provided a forum in which different themes could be presented in some depth during two and half days of discussions with the participants at a hotel outside of Bogotá. These gatherings were intended to be generative of political debate, analysis, and reflection on a wide range of politically sensitive themes. The following selective descriptions of a number of *Conversatorios* are chosen from the thirteen years of work. They are organized into six themes: land tenure and economic inequities, negotiations with guerrillas, international models for peace, paramilitaries, the ELN peace talks, and negotiations with the FARC at el Caguán. I chose them to provide a sense of the range and depth of the discussions that unfolded over the years and the extent to which, at times, the armed forces and the other participants were introduced to new ideas and realities, and the extent to which there was more or less agreement. Overall, what I saw was a general expansion of the knowledge and horizons of the participants, which provided a better basis for the peace negotiations that would emerge.

Land Tenure and Economic Inequity

In one of the earliest *Conversatorios*, a leading Colombian social economist presented the social and economic disparities of the country. He laid out the costs of the conflict for Colombian society, particularly in terms of poverty, the need for social services, and the expanding military budget.⁵² Although the officers were first taken aback by the speaker's long hair and attire ("He is a hippie!"), expecting to be hammered by "a leftist," they were surprised by how much they agreed with the analysis and arguments proffered by him and other speakers. They took copious notes, nodding their heads in agreement at the lack of social services and absence of the state in rural areas, and their discussions with the experts continued over lunch and dinner.

Another *Conversatorio* in 2005 dealt with the causes of the conflict, with an ex-M-19 guerrilla who was then serving as a Polo Democrático parliamentarian. He outlined the historical foundations of the conflict and the nature of agrarian "ruralism," detailing the expulsion of peasants and the concentration of land ownership, the impoverishment of the

countryside, and the historical incapacity of the state to implement true agrarian reform. The next participant, an independent official of the mayor's office in Medellín, built on this history by describing how his office had played a decisive role in stopping the violence. He illustrated how the city's culture of illegality included the security forces in the 1980s, which called for "social cleansing": clandestine activities to assassinate petty criminals and delinquents associated with *bandas* in order to control the city. Based on these analyses and perspectives, discussion revolved around the dire poverty in the rural countryside, immigration of the poor to the cities, and the drug economy and its undermining of the capacity of job-creation to keep up with structured underemployment. As the parliamentarian remarked, "The next million dollars which is invested in the armed conflict should be earmarked not for security but for social investment." The officers, who had seen the poverty firsthand, commented on the need for the state to deliver social services to areas abandoned by the state, including poor *barrios* of the major cities, to undercut poverty and violence.

In one *Conversatorio* conducted in 2006 with the economic elite, entitled "The Role of the Private Sector in the Resolution of the Conflict and Post-Conflict," some of the officers voiced anger that this elite was only willing to pay a one-off war tax and little to nothing for social investment.⁵³ This *Conversatorio* was one of the more difficult in terms of facilitation, and reflected the historical tension between the political and economic elites and active-duty officers, which would manifest itself quite dramatically in 2016.

Conflict Issues: Negotiations with the Guerrillas

One *Conversatorio* in late 2005 centered on the humanitarian initiatives between the FARC and the Uribe government for the exchange of prisoners.⁵⁴ With peace and humanitarian initiatives between the Colombian government and the ELN as well as the FARC going on at the time, officers had the opportunity to speak with those involved in the mediation. This was a political period, toward the end of 2005, when the ELN, surprisingly, took the initiative to begin a dialogue in Havana with President Uribe during his reelection campaign. It was an attempt by the ELN to shift from a "military solution" toward the possibility of a negotiated accord, taking

advantage of the promising success of the political left and independents with a governorship in Valle de Cauca and mayoralties in Bogotá, Medellín, Pasto, and Bucaramanga. President Uribe's inaugural address on 7 August 2006 took this initiative one step further. "Even at the risk of seeming to contradict his hardline Democratic Security Policy," he was willing to pursue a peace process with the ELN as well as meet with FARC commander Marulanda. He offered amnesties and pardons—all withdrawn when a car bomb attributed to the FARC exploded on the grounds of the Cantón Norte military base in Bogotá on 19 October 2006.⁵⁵

Thus, this *Conversatorio* took place during "rumors" of potential negotiations with the ELN and humanitarian gestures for the recovery of the hostages held by the FARC—all of which starkly illustrated how the politics in Colombia do not fit into "black and white" categories, even under a hardline presidency. The participants in this *Conversatorio* included a Catholic bishop, an ex-minister with strong mediation experience with the FARC, a former M-19 guerrilla and now parliamentarian, a political analyst of security affairs, and the spokeswoman for the relatives of those kidnapped by (and who at the time remained in the hands of) the FARC. This *Conversatorio* entailed two parts. First, a discussion of a provision in the juridical framework of the special accords on humanitarian exchange in light of article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions. In these presentations, it was made clear that a humanitarian exchange has no juridical obstacles given that Colombia is a signatory of the Conventions and the Additional Protocols. Second, a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages in political and military terms for the state on the one hand, and the FARC guerrillas on the other, to enter into such an accord. There were presentations by the invited participants and a great deal of discussion, with two representatives in particular emphasizing the political nature of these initiatives and the need to reflect upon the armed forces' own constructive role in such processes.

Lessons Learned from International and National Peace Processes: El Salvador

Peace and post-conflict were the themes, selected by the CAEM officers themselves, to be discussed in the 2006 *Conversatorios*. They expressed the

desire to base the discussions on several questions. How to make peace? What should be the social programs for peace? In what ways will the private sector support the post-conflict situation and overcome poverty? As such, one of the three *Conversatorios* focused on “Conflict, Negotiations and Post-Conflict in El Salvador: Lessons for Colombia” in an attempt to provide the officers with an opportunity to learn from other peace processes, with special attention paid to the participation of the armed forces in El Salvador.

Several high-level civilians participated: the former foreign minister of Colombia, who had served as director of the UN Mission in El Salvador, a Colombian social scientist and professor who had written on transitional justice and post-conflict scenarios, and a professor and ex-security consultant to President César Gaviria who had written on the Colombian armed forces and their role in the post-conflict situation. There was discussion about the challenges to a state of law posed by a transitional process that seeks reconciliation and a balance between peace negotiations and demands for justice. In addition, there was a discussion about the need for a major effort on the part of the armed forces to confront the challenge that peace negotiations and post-conflict settlements bring in terms of insecurity, especially with the demobilization of the *maras* in El Salvador.

It was suggested that the lessons from other peace processes could be applied to the ELN peace talks ongoing in Havana at the time, and a discussion ensued about negotiating peace in Colombia in the midst of the conflict without a ceasefire.⁵⁶ The conversation between the officers and the invited speakers focused on how the war in Colombia had been increasingly debilitating for all of the actors: for the guerrillas, for the paramilitaries, and for the armed forces. The professor suggested this was a conflict with a “horizontal characteristic”: a confrontation of all actors with all others, in which there had been a surfeit of irregularities of war. This reality, another speaker suggested, had to be taken into account so as to apply the international standards of justice, but this did not imply total impunity. The debate about the characteristics of the conflict was quite animated, and the officers participated in a very active manner by bringing in examples from their own combat experience, arguing, questioning, and disputing the issues within an ambiance of trust.

Talks with Paramilitaries

In a 2007 *Conversatorio* entitled “Reflections about the Peace Processes in Colombia,” two Colombian academics presented critical analyses of the partial demobilization process of paramilitaries adopted by the Uribe government.⁵⁷ Paramilitaries in Colombia, they explained, morphed from a punitive force of cattle ranchers and narcotraffickers to become part of the control mechanisms used by regional governments for territorial expansion over terrified populations. Their violent actions coexist with elected government in what has been called a “democratisation of violence.”⁵⁸ Given this complexity, the presenters indicated the difficulties of dealing with such groups without a coherent state policy regarding disarmament and demobilization. They also identified the dangers represented in various areas of the country by the rearming of “new bands at the service of drug trafficking” with some of the same characteristics of the paramilitaries but “without the same attitude of counterinsurgency. It was unclear, they said, whether this was a “third generation” of paramilitaries or just drug traffickers. Several officers offered their own field experiences and worries, which coincided with the presenters’ observations as to the relative “success” of these talks with paramilitaries and drug gangs, and the grave implications of these new “bands” for the escalation of conflict in their zones. As evidenced by their questions, the officers were deeply involved in trying to understand the complex implications of this analysis for the success of their military strategies against such an economic behemoth.

The ELN Peace Talks

While ex-guerrillas and officers in the *Conversatorios* made small but significant connections with regard to lessons learned in peace processes, there was still a sense among some officers that the guerrillas were unapproachable. Hence, in a 2008 *Conversatorio* entitled “Visions of Peace,” I took a leap of faith and provided officers an opportunity to speak with a former high-ranking guerrilla who had recently voluntarily left the ELN. When the director of the War College learned who would be participating, he cancelled his other plans and flew with the group to the event for the full two and a half days at an *hacienda* near Medellín.

The evening began with a wine reception before dinner, and at my request this ex-guerrilla, with his long beard and glasses, reflected on his decision to leave the movement and his belief in the urgent necessity to conclude the Colombian conflict as quickly as possible through a negotiated political settlement. The officers were spellbound. In the morning, after breakfast, he spoke of the ineffectiveness and inappropriateness in the twenty-first century of armed struggle as a path for transforming Colombian society. Despite the military victories the armed forces were continuing to have against the guerrilleros—especially the FARC—without dialogues about a peaceful settlement, he averred, the country would begin to transition toward a new cycle of escalated violence. This would be fed by strategic alliances between the guerrilleros and narcos to protect drug transshipment routes and further monopolize the ownership of mega-projects for agrarian exploitation of energy, minerals, and water. Peace negotiations needed to be prioritized, he emphasized, if the necessary degree of economic justice and peace were to be realized.

A discussion ensued as to how both sides “constructed their views of the enemy.” The former *guerrillero* asked the officers, “Who precisely is the enemy?” For the guerrillas in the rural countryside, there are two kinds of enemy: the rich (the landowners) and the security forces (police and military). But what you see as the enemy is not really the “enemy,” only *los imaginarios del enemigo*—the imaginings of the enemy who you really don’t ever know. These imaginings have led each side to place insurmountable barriers in the way of discussion and reconciliation, based not on material reality but on mental constructions.

Officers were extremely attentive throughout the *Conversatorio*, and especially when this ex-guerrilla raised the question toward the end of the two and half days, “If other countries have been able to negotiate an end to their conflicts, why not Colombia? If the old formulas to negotiate have failed, new approaches with both guerrilla groups could and should be undertaken to end the violence.”

The urgency of these officers’ questions indicated a desire on the part of many of these generals-to-be for a negotiated end to the conflict: “How does one negotiate with the ELN? With the FARC?” they asked him. “How does one end all this violence?” But what the officers expressed quietly to me during these two days was, “We *never* thought we would have this

opportunity in our lifetime to meet with [such a prominent *guerrillero*] and meet with him, face to face. *Never, never!*" For the *guerrillero*, too, it was "very eye-opening" to speak with high-ranking officers on an informal, *non-confrontational* basis about the different possibilities for negotiating peace. Each side expressed surprise at how open the other side was to negotiations.

Yet when it came time to take photos with this guerrilla, a number of officers backed away. For some, *el tabú*, especially over the Internet, still prevailed, and they feared how this might affect their careers. Nonetheless, others were enthusiastically open: one colonel, whom I would visit in the field two years later, told me that based on this "extraordinary meeting," he had attempted to organize his own *Conversatorios* with cattle ranchers and members of civil society about local problems, with very mixed results.

The Talks with the FARC at San Vicente del Caguán: A View from the Peace Commissioner

In early 2012, a *Conversatorio* was organized under the title "Towards a Negotiation: Lessons from the Process at el Caguán." The intention was to gain insight into the lessons learned from past peace talks. To this end I encouraged Peace Commissioner Camilo Gomez to participate in a critical discussion with the officers to address a series of questions: How does one negotiate? What is negotiated? What are the conditions, strategies, and political/military/international climate for negotiating? Should one negotiate a bilateral ceasefire? What type and for how long? Should it be at various locations or a concentration of forces for which one would need a *zona*? Do you utilize a third party for verification? Must a ceasefire preempt talks? Does a ceasefire imply military defeat?

At the beginning, officers readily admitted they had felt "deceived" by the FARC and had had little faith in the government negotiations during President Pastrana's tenure. But towards the end of the two and a half days of discussion, they said they came to appreciate, by trying to answer these questions, how very difficult negotiations are.

A Shift in Mindset

Over time, one could sense a shift in the *Conversatorios*. The more moderate officers were more questioning and, as General Tapias had hoped, increasingly open to negotiations with the FARC as the way to end the conflict. Over the years, one sensed this silent minority becoming more of a vocal majority. However, it is also clear that there remained, and remain today, officers—mostly older colonels from the more hardline *tendencia* primarily but not only from army intelligence—who still hold to the Cold War ideas that negotiations are equivalent to military defeat, who still refuse to consider the possibility of dialogue with *la guerrilla*, and who still harbor deep suspicions and *tabús* about “the left.” My later work on more than twenty Ceasefire Seminars-Workshops with the Technical Sub-Commission and the new Comando Estratégico de Transición between 2013 and 2016 provided me the opportunity to gain a better sense of the new and younger generation of navy, police, army, and air force intelligence officers who would work with the FARC in Havana on the architecture and implementation of the ceasefire, and who are slowly replacing these hardliners and their *tabús*.

Conversatorios with Generals, 2009–12

As the CAEM colonels who had participated in the *Conversatorios* were being promoted over the years to brigade and division generals, and then moved up into the High Command, a new threshold for the Skilling for Peace Project was reached when, in 2009, the chief of the armed forces (who had participated in the first *Conversatorios* in 2002) requested I provide *Conversatorios* for “my sixty-eight generals and admirals as well as the High Command.” I suggested that the first two *Conversatorios* for the sixty-eight officers (who were divided into two smaller groups of thirty-four for easier discussion) could serve as a venue in which the officers could meet with high-profile presidential candidates regarding their visions of “Security, Human Rights and Peace.” This was the first time dialogues had been held between the security forces and presidential candidates, among whom were several congressional representatives of left-wing and liberal parties. In a country so long afflicted by armed conflict, the relationship between these parties and the armed forces has

been characterized by serious mutual recrimination and distrust. The left and liberal parties have viewed “la Fuerza Publica”⁵⁹ as a source of human rights violations and political crimes—as well as a major obstacle to their coming to power. For the military and police, the left/liberals have been allied or even complicit with *la guerrilla*, directing a juridical and political war internationally against Colombia and against the armed forces.

This frank dialogue included critical discussions of human rights violations, the successes and failures of President Uribe’s democratic security policy, and the urgent need to negotiate with the guerrillas. At one point, a left candidate asked the generals and admirals whether the armed forces would respect and comply with a democratically elected left government; a number of the officers asked in turn if the left “considered the current military and police class as legitimate”? Based on affirmative responses from each side, an interesting exchange of viewpoints occurred later as to how to resolve the conflict. There were also very frank criticisms by a number of the candidates regarding human rights violations by the security forces and the need to follow international humanitarian law in military operations.

This *Conversatorio* indicated how much trust and access had been developed with high-ranking officers, and how important it was to maintain this trust. With direct access to the entire corps of sixty-eight generals and admirals stationed throughout the country, this remained the only dialogue space where officers could express their concerns with other members of Colombian society.

Moreover, at the request of the admiral (the first to be appointed chief of the armed forces and who had served as a fellow cadet with the now President Santos), three more *Conversatorios* were organized strictly for the five-member High Command: one with the authors of the new UNDP report on the Law of Restitution of Land; another with ten directors of the media concerning “Debates on the Current Reality of the Country”; and one for the High Command to explain to these same directors the Strategy for Security and Peace then being drawn up under President Santos.

Taking the Project in a New Direction, 2012–17

In my discussions about a new series of *Conversatorios* in early 2012, the new director of the War College urgently requested seminars on conflict resolution and international examples of how other militaries were engaged in peace processes. This request was clearly the result of discussions among high-ranking officers about the secret talks with the FARC underway in Havana since February. In March, moreover, representatives from three different sectors—military officers, former guerrillas, and parliamentarians—raised concerns with me about the role of the armed forces in potential negotiations. It became increasingly clear that trust-building dialogues between the armed forces and different sectors of Colombian society to discuss current political issues needed to be broadened to prepare officers for such an eventuality. By August 2012 when the talks became public, even the FARC were demanding active-duty officers be seated at the table in Havana.

Hence, toward the end of 2012 and throughout 2013, my discussions with members of the High Command and several *plenipotenciarios* (negotiators) of the Colombian government delegation led me to take the decision to shift the focus of the *Conversatorios*. At the request of the newly appointed director of the War College, I invited a number of international experts to the *Conversatorio* of 4–6 April 2013, to discuss “International and National Experiences with DDR” in the disarming and demobilizing of insurgent groups in Northern Ireland, Mozambique, and Aceh (Indonesia). It was at this event that colonels were first introduced to the idea of a “dignified exit” for insurgents coupled with the paramount need for a respectful and solemn handing over of weapons to a third party to help ensure the combatants did not feel humiliated and return to war.

In addition, with increasing demands from the Joint Command and the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace to prepare their advisors on ceasefire typologies and the different modalities of monitoring and verification, *Conversatorios* began to parallel Seminars-Workshops that focused increasingly on the empirical and technical elements of a Colombian ceasefire and DDR program that would directly engage the military, police, and civilian advisors. The demand was so great that an intensive four-day course on ceasefires was requested for January 2014 by

the director of the War College for the twenty-two CAEM colonels (one police colonel would later join us as a general on the Technical Sub-Commission). Given the advances at the negotiating table, and the demand for more training, the Seminars were able to build on the trust the *Conversatorios* had engendered over the thirteen years; eventually, due to time and funding constraints, the *Conversatorios* were entirely replaced by the Seminars. My decision to shift the focus for these next four years of the peace process proved to be prescient.

FARC-Government Talks, August 2012

With President Santos's official announcement on 29 August 2012 that formal, public negotiations were indeed in progress, with a negotiating team focused on "Six Points on the Route to Peace,"⁶⁰ he made it a point to meet with active-duty officers at the Special Forces air base in Tolemaida, as well as with the retired officers associations, to try and head off any forms of resistance (unlike President Pastrana in 2000). He and his defense minister insisted that, contrary to what had occurred at el Caguán, there would be no *despeje*, and that military actions would continue throughout the country during the talks. Santos also appointed two retired officers to the delegation: a former chief of the army, General Mora, and former chief of the National Police, General Naranjo,⁶¹ to provide a voice for *La Fuerza Pública* at the negotiating table. The president emphasized that "we are learning from the errors of the past in order not to repeat them."⁶²

High Command Special *Conversatorio*

With this official pronouncement, I was summoned in early September by the newly appointed commander of the armed forces to a meeting with the High Command. He requested that I organize a Special *Conversatorio* in October for his five-member High Command (almost all of whom had participated in the *Conversatorios* as colonels and navy captains), as well as forty officers, entitled "International Experiences of Peace Processes." At this meeting, participants insisted they wanted to learn what roles the military had taken on in these processes, and what this would mean for their institution in the long run. "We know nothing about peace, we are only trained in combat," the general stated frankly to me. I accepted

wholeheartedly, but suggested it would be opportune not only to focus on two peace processes in Nepal and El Salvador but also to invite both sides of each process to gain the perspectives of insurgent and military commanders, and what challenges both faced. This idea of inviting insurgent commanders was acceptable to some, but not all, of the High Command at this time.⁶³

At the Special *Conversatorio* in October 2012, the Salvadoran and Nepali generals explained that they had each been summoned by their respective governments to arrive directly by helicopter from combat to the negotiation table *without any preparation*. “It took a great deal of time for me to adjust from seeing the Maoists as my hated enemies to my partners in negotiations,” remarked the Nepali general. This lack of preparation astonished the Colombian officers, and in many ways facilitated the next steps in preparing themselves, their officers, troops, and their institution in general for the talks, as well as for the implementation of what was finally decided in Havana. It was a complicated period for the armed forces, which had to maintain combat offensives while also preparing for peace.

Ceasefire Seminars-Workshops, 2013–16

Learning of this Special *Conversatorio* for the High Command, General Mora, whom I had met with in 2002, and who now served as part of the government delegation in Havana, suggested he and I organize a breakfast for all of the government negotiators and the international invitees to briefly discuss each of their experiences. Based on this breakfast, and the positive reputation the *Conversatorio* project had long enjoyed at the War College and at the High Command, the negotiators requested that I provide a series of seminars for themselves and their advisory teams on a number of themes in relation to the points of the peace accords in Havana.⁶⁴ In particular, they wanted to discuss Point 3, “El Fin del Conflicto”: the international options and experiences with ceasefire agreements, with monitoring and verification, as well as how to design a DDR program.

Between early 2013 and mid-2015, fourteen Ceasefire Seminars-Workshops were then organized by me in Bogotá in close collaboration with a Swiss senior mediator for each of the advisory committees of the Joint Command and the Peace Commissioner’s Office.⁶⁵ International experts

were invited to speak about how the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning of the IRA had functioned, the possible modalities for disarmament (referred to as *dejación de armas* by the FARC, based on past Colombian peace processes), arms containment, the different typologies of ceasefires and their protocols, the different structures for monitoring and verification, as well as forms of insurgent-disciplined demobilization, among many other topics. We drew examples from Aceh, Mozambique, Nepal, El Salvador, and Northern Ireland, among many others, but the focus always remained on the nature of the conflict and how to end the war in Colombia. We made it clear there was no “magic” international formula for a successful process; we were presenting “options” to help the Colombians fashion their own ceasefire and DDR to fit the particularities of the Colombian conflict.

An important element included was the concept of DDR-in-peace, which places at the center of its focus preventing the demobilized combatant from once again picking up a gun and joining criminal bands or other guerrilla groups still operating. This “end of the state of war” profile demands a DDR program that provides a dignified exit from the life of combat, and an accompaniment during the most difficult stage when a combatant hands over his or her weapon to a third party, and gradually leaves the structured environment of a chain of command for an individualized new life of constructive employment and family. *Negotiations are not about a humiliating surrender*, we would emphasize.⁶⁶ This “exit with dignity” meant that in late 2016 and early 2017, when over eight thousand FARC combatants were moving from their encampments to the twenty-six zones in which to disarm, overseen along the way by police and military, who formed rings of security, they would be treated with respect, and provided medical treatment, food, and housing. This element first met with some resistance among officers and civilian advisors in the Ceasefire Seminars, who were more familiar with the DDR-in-war model, but over time, it was assiduously incorporated into the training, and would impress two Salvadoran monitors of the ceasefire later on.⁶⁷

In August 2014, the two advisory teams were collapsed into one, with President Santos appointing Major General Flórez head of the new Comando Estratégico de Transición, within which the SubComisión Técnica, with nineteen officers and civilians, functioned. Major General Flórez was

later accompanied by a coterie of three other generals and one admiral (all of whom had participated in the *Conversatorios* of 2007, 2008, and 2014 as coronels and navy captains). The Sub-Commission was slated to finalize Point 3 with the FARC in Havana.

Between April 2013 and December 2014, an intensification of our work focused on helping the group design a carefully calibrated Colombian bilateral and definitive ceasefire, and a timetable and architecture for zones of disarmament and a modality for demobilization. The model went through at least twenty-eight drafts over an intense several months. These were then presented by the Sub-Commission to the High Command and the presidency, both of which would pass on their edits. Once the Seminar preparation was complete in early 2015, the Sub-Commission arrived in Havana to meet with the FARC commanders.

At the first meeting on 5 March 2015, there was a stiff formality, uneasiness, and much distrust. With a series of confidence-building measures, however, more cordial relations developed, and a bilateral and definitive ceasefire was worked out and signed on 23 June 2016. During this same period—throughout 2015 and into early 2016—Major General Flórez requested that I undertake another series of Seminars to train other military advisors in his Comando Estratégico de Transición (COET) in Bogotá in ceasefire and its implementation.

The Referendum Vote of 2 October 2016

Despite this careful crafting of the ceasefire at the negotiating table, one particular decision imposed by the political elite could have resulted in a terrible failure. When President Santos unilaterally imposed a referendum for 2 October 2016 onto the timetable (apparently on the advice of personal international advisors), the FARC feared disarming beforehand, as had been scheduled; they worried that a negative vote could have left them vulnerable to a new US president's policy towards Colombia, and the possibility of a *santista* government's willingness or incapability to pursue authentic implementation—or worse, a renewed bombing campaign. “They would be rabbits trapped in the headlights,” one advisor remarked. Indeed, at that moment, there were several columns of FARC combatants outside their enclaves under the protection of the army. While President

Santos was considering resigning after such a defeat, Timochenko sent a text message to the peace commissioner that “the FARC continue to be willing to proceed towards peace.”⁶⁸

With the No vote prevailing, the now Senator Uribe began making hundreds of demands for changes to the original accord, of which President Santos accepted some forty. It was fortuitous that the structures of the ceasefire, signed only four months earlier and of which there were no violations over the subsequent period of thirteen months, could underpin the negotiations while there ensued, as one Colombian advisor surmised, “a battle between the elites.” (That same advisor asked, “Who are the spoilers now?”) Although they had fought against the referendum in Havana, it was extremely fortuitous that the FARC were willing to accept any changes to the accord, and the final agreement was signed on 24 November 2016.

From War to Peace?

It is no small achievement that the traditional adversaries in this conflict—military officers and guerrillas who had felt the brunt of the combat with high casualty rates, and both of whom had been serious spoilers over the past thirty-two years, especially during the presidency of Pastrana—sat down and jointly wrote a bilateral, definitive ceasefire; traveled together by helicopter to the twenty-six zones to delineate the coordinates and protocols for disarmament and demobilization; coordinated rings of security by the police and military around these zones; maintained radio contact during the movement of eight thousand combatants to these zones, who then handed over their weapons; and established a joint Monitoring and Verification Mission with the United Nations. Right-wing politicians, led by two past presidents who had failed at peace, Pastrana and Uribe, served as spoilers with the No campaign and an attempt to legislatively block implementation of the accord. The security forces’ and the FARC’s carefully and jointly crafted ceasefire effectively saved Colombia from another peace failure.

In an interview in September 2016, General Flórez summed up his thoughts about being part of this peace process as a soldier:

INTERVIEWER: When President Santos named you the head of the Technical Sub-Commission [in August 2014], what went through your mind?

GEN. FLÓREZ: I thought: would peace be positive for my career, for my life as a military officer? To make peace with a Sub-Commission with a guerrilla I have fought personally? . . . I thought that for me, as a Colombian soldier, and my family, absolutely nothing good would come of it. But for the country, yes. . . . You know that in the past three [peace] processes, combat continued with the FARC. In this process, I didn't have to fire one single shot. With such differences of visions, we of the Sub-Commission achieved consensus, which had seemed impossible. We achieved this with dialogue, we reached an agreement, an understanding between us to construct a bilateral, definitive ceasefire. It represents a commitment to compliance. . . . We must end this war and enter into reconciliation.

INTERVIEWER: How do you respond in one word when I mention the word "guerrilla"?

GEN. FLÓREZ: Colombiano.⁶⁹

Constructively engaging the military and police with civil society in trust-building *Conversatorios* and providing Ceasefire Seminars for advisors for close to seventeen years, I would argue, helped officers deal with the contradiction of waging a war while negotiating a peace, and with moving from annihilation of the enemy to negotiating a structure, timetable, and protocols for a bilateral ceasefire and definitive peace. By initiating colonels and generals into the language of "operational negotiations" in these Ceasefire Seminars, a clear commitment was generated on their part to begin to accept a peace settlement, and to begin to visualize negotiations with the other side.

The hope for the Skilling for Peace Project was, from the beginning, to prevent spoilers from once again stymieing efforts at peace, to generate

dialogue with civil society, to end the *tabú* against speaking with ex-guerrillas as well as progressives, and to initiate changes of *mentalité* that would allow for negotiations and put an end to the war. But events suggest much more was accomplished—namely a direct engagement with and commitment to peace by high-ranking, active-duty officers and their military advisors in conjunction with civilian advisors from the Peace Commissioner’s Office. This Technical Sub-Commission drafted a Colombian ceasefire and negotiated its details and coordinates with the FARC in Havana, with both sides working on a pedagogy of peace for their own troops. And when the No victory in the 2016 referendum threatened the peace talks with collapse, both sides worked together to make certain that the ceasefire held, with no violations. By virtue of these commitments, it is my firm belief that these *Conversatorios* and Ceasefire Seminars accomplished what I had hoped they would. And they underscore two important elements that are too often ignored in these processes: how central ceasefires and DDR programs are to the success of peace processes; and the need to prepare the armed forces for a ceasefire by shifting them away from a demand for a humiliating surrender to a faith in the value of working together with the insurgency.

More recent attempts at peace negotiations with the ELN provide interesting insights into the possibility of further gains. In January 2017, the same general who headed COET and the Technical Sub-Commission requested that I urgently organize new Ceasefire Seminars to parallel the peace talks with the ELN in Quito, Ecuador. Four Seminars were undertaken between January and August 2017 to complement the work of the government delegation, which included two retired army generals. There was also an effort to acquaint the ELN delegation with potential ceasefire models and protocols, which had to be, in their minds, “very different from that of the FARC.” A three-month bilateral ceasefire was negotiated in September 2017, but because of violence on the part of two ELN commanders, this was suspended after January 2018.

In the lead-up to the presidential elections of May 2018, President Santos tried to accelerate the talks, calling in three “advisors” in November 2017, which unfortunately led to the resignation of the peace commissioner and many in his original delegation, further stalling the process. With a new delegation, talks in Havana continued to the end of Santos’s tenure.

Despite these procedural difficulties, the urgency with which the military sought to continue its preparations for the talks with this second guerrilla group indicates the continuation of a strong commitment to the peace effort on the part of the armed forces. As one officer who had been part of the earlier Technical Sub-Commission commented to me in late 2017, “If we can bring the ELN on board, then we would be able to put an end to the guerrilla epoch in Colombia!”

The 2018 Presidential Election

As this chapter goes to press, Iván Duque, the *uribista* candidate for Centro Democrático, has won the second round of the 2018 presidential elections against Bogotá mayor and ex-M-19 member Gustavo Petro, with Duque securing 50.87 percent of the vote and Petro 46.42. Despite a victory for anti-peace *uribistas* under Duque, many analysts are hailing this election as the largest vote for a leftist candidate in Colombian history, with more voters choosing pro-peace candidates than those critical of the accords.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, Duque is a fierce critic of the peace accords. It is likely he will seek changes in details of the accord and withdraw funding for its implementation. Instead of the promised restitution of land and reparations for victims, it is believed he will likely promote rural development for extractive industry and favor large landowners. He may even prohibit the FARC from taking their seats in Congress, even though this was an essential part of the negotiated accords, once they had disarmed. Moreover, it is unclear if he will continue the peace talks with the ELN guerrilla group in Havana, or what his presidency means for the security forces, especially those officers whose openness to dialogue with the FARC was essential for a successful end to the conflict.⁷¹ It is expected this new government will bring in an entirely new High Command with promotions of more hardline officers, who would be very different from those promoted by President Santos.

Narco-paramilitary spoilers are increasing their dirty war in the first weeks of the Duque presidency, with five systematic assassinations of rural social leaders and demobilized FARC guerrillas in the demilitarized zones—a situation that has grown increasingly grave since 1 January 2016, with a total of 311 leaders assassinated.⁷² Is this escalation of violence an

indication narco-paramilitaries will continue to serve as serious spoilers, as in every other process in the past?

Notwithstanding all that may happen, what this small, low-profile project illustrates is that with the appropriate venue and form, it is possible to create dialogues that can help to shift spoiler narratives. Such *Conversatorios* and Seminars have led, and may continue to lead, to the discovery that quite a significant number of military officers, political representatives, and former guerrillas are more than willing to engage in meaningful dialogue on how to build peace together and to potentially change the historical narratives, *mentalités*, and institutions of which they are a part. But more than that, they are also willing to go further—to put their careers on the line, if necessary, to bring about an agreement with the other side. What this account demonstrates is that over the long term, the very possibility of the military and the guerrillas dismantling *tabús* and working together to make certain a ceasefire is carefully crafted and fully implemented—indeed, rescuing the process at a time of crisis and potential failure—roundly refutes the image of Colombia, and of Latin America in general, as inexorably and intractably violent.

NOTES

- 1 Carlo Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia: Actors and Strategies,” in *Challenges to Peacebuilding: Managing Spoilers during Conflict Resolution*, ed. Edward Newman and Oliver Richmond (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2006), 219.
- 2 Stephen Steadman, “Spoiler problems in peace processes,” *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997): 5.
- 3 Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia,” 227 and 237.
- 4 Demobilizations of M-19, EPL, CRS, PRT, and MAQL rebels.
- 5 Col. (retired) Carlos Velásquez, “Las fuerzas militares en la búsqueda de la paz con las FARC,” Working Paper No. 7, Fundación Ideas para la Paz (June 2011): 16.
- 6 Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia,” 227 and 237.
- 7 Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia,” 237.
- 8 Velásquez’s analysis of the armed forces in the peace process implemented by Barco differs quite decidedly from Nasi’s. See Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia,” 17.
- 9 Velásquez, *Las fuerzas militares*, 22.

- 10 Ironically, Bedoya included at this time the new term “narco-guerrilla” to describe the FARC and the *cocaleros*, reflecting the “hyper-narcoticized” language of the DEA, while the military served a government that had received drug monies from the Cali Cartel for its political campaign, as Velasquez points out. See Velasquez, *Las fuerzas militares*, 23.
- 11 León Valencia, cited in Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia,” n45.
- 12 General Fernando Tapias, interview by Cecilia Orozco, *Y Ahora Que?*, 2002, 38; General Fernando Tapias, interview with author, 2 March 2009.
- 13 The 18,000-member FARC demanded a demilitarized zone the size of Switzerland within which to hold talks. Within this zone, the FARC were holding hundreds of captured military and police officers, together with kidnapped civilians and politicians. Andrés Pastrana, *La Palabra Bajo Fuego* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2005), 92; General Fernando Tapias, interview with author, 2 March 2009.
- 14 Col. (retired) Carlos Velázquez, interview with author, 24 November 2008. Nasi’s data from the Defense Ministry shows that during Pastrana’s administration, the armed forces fought against the guerrilla far more intensely than against paramilitary groups. See Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia,” 235.
- 15 Velázquez, *Las fuerzas militares*, 20.
- 16 Personal communication with Camilo Gómez, 22 September 2011, as well as several other conversations in 2012. Gómez complained that “the High Command did not allow me to meet with the generals at the time”; author’s conversations with staff at the presidency in late 2001 and early 2002. The concern over preparing and calming the anxieties of the armed forces with briefings arose several times in meetings between generals and President Pastrana, one of whom noted that the president had met more often with FARC leader Marulanda than with his own generals. See Téllez and Sanchez, *Ruido de Sables*, 317, and 292–329. For more general background on the Colombian armed forces, see Francisco Leal, *El Oficio de la Guerra* (Bogotá: IEPRI, 1994), and Andrés Dávila, *El Juego del Poder* (Bogotá: Uniandes/CEREC, 1998).
- 17 Téllez and Sánchez, *Ruido de Sables*, 337. This incident occurred during one of the first *Conversatorios*, referred to later on.
- 18 See Gustavo Duncan, *Los señores de la guerra* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2006), and Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas 1982–2003* (Bogotá: IEPRI, 2003).
- 19 León Valencia, “The ELN’s Halting Moves Toward Peace,” in *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, ed. Virginia Bouvier (Washington, DC: USIP, 2009), 108. There were also differences between 2 generals, the president, and the peace commissioner when the ELN kidnapped 60 persons in September 2000, and in response, FUDRA (Fuerza de Despliegue Rápida) troops killed 17 guerrillas and held territory so that the hostages were deprived of medical treatment. In the end, the hostages were released, and one general was sacked. See Téllez and Sánchez, *Ruido de Sables*, 325–6.
- 20 Nasi, “Spoilers in Colombia,” 235.
- 21 General Tapias, interview with author, 2 March 2009.

- 22 Col. (retired) Carlos Velásquez's excellent historical overview of the armed forces' very unstable collaboration with civilian presidents' attempts at peace in Colombia suggests a number of these questions. See *Las fuerzas militares*, 16.
- 23 Velásquez, *Las fuerzas militares*, 21.
- 24 Tapias, interview with author, 2 March 2009.
- 25 The FARC had demanded the total withdrawal of troops from the barracks at the Batallón de Cazadores in San Vicente del Cagúan, as well as the withdrawal of the staff at the Public Prosecutor's Office in this *zona de distension*. The guerrillas' insistence on territorial use during talks is not new in the history of Colombia. See León Valencia, *Adiós a la Política, Bienvenidos a la Guerra* (Bogotá: Intermedio Editores, 2002), 35 and 38.
- 26 Comment by army general to author, anonymous, 18 February 2012
- 27 Velásquez, *Las fuerzas militares*, 22.
- 28 See Valencia, "The ELN's Halting Moves," 108.
- 29 "Declaraciones de Alfonso Cano," 30 July 2012; Marc Chernick, "The FARC at the Negotiating Table," in *Building Peace in a Time of War*, ed. V. Bouvier (Washington, DC: USIP, 2009).
- 30 Comment by army colonel, anonymous, 22 February 2002. Emphasis is his, indicating a lack of distrust in everyone, including the political elite.
- 31 León Valencia, Luis Eduardo Celis, Joe Broderick, Fernando Hernandez, and Antonio Sanguino, *El regreso de los rebeldes: De la Furia de las armas a los pactos, la crítica y la esperanza* (Bogotá: Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, 2005), 20. Curiously, given the ELN's closer connections to social movements and trade unions, the officers believed a loss of political legitimacy would be very much less costly for this insurgency group than for the FARC.
- 32 Comment by army colonel, anonymous, 12 September 2008.
- 33 León Valencia is a former ELN guerrilla who led the dissident group Corriente de Renovación Socialista (CRS) in taking the decision to demobilize under President Gaviria, a novelist, and former *Semana* columnist. Alberto Lara is a human rights lawyer.
- 34 All *Conversatorios* over thirteen years were generously funded by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, with the exception of the High Command Special *Conversatorio* in October 2012, whose costs were shared with the Swiss Embassy in Bogotá. In addition, the Swedish Embassy in Bogotá generously funded numerous Seminars on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law between 2004 and 2006 as well as four Ceasefire Seminars in 2017. Finally, the Swiss Embassy and Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs very generously funded part of the 2012 Special *Conversatorio*, as well as over twenty Ceasefire Seminars between 2013 and 2016.
- 35 Velásquez, "Las fuerzas militares," 29.
- 36 Army general, anonymous interview with author, 18 February 2008.
- 37 Velásquez, "Las fuerzas militares," 30.

- 38 US air force colonel, interview with author, Bogotá, 21 November 2008.
- 39 At a talk at Harvard on 20 September 2017, Santos explained his decision by saying that he had been informed that Cano was not interested in peace talks. In an earlier interview with Jon Lee Anderson, he stated, according to Anderson's paraphrase, " 'We had begun our talks with the FARC and I didn't want to ruin them. . . . And it worked out.' If the FARC commanders were talking, it must be because they were weakened by the strikes, and Cano's death wouldn't change that; it could even help." See Jon Lee Anderson, "Colombian guerrillas come out of the jungle," *New Yorker*, 1 May 2017.
- 40 "Démosle una oportunidad a la paz: Timochenko" *Semana* (Bogotá), 30 January 2016.
- 41 "Pregunta Yamid," *Semana TV*, 7 September 2017.
- 42 General Mejía, "Panel de Paz: Colombia 2040," Colombian Student Conference, Harvard University and MIT, 2 May 2018. Comparative figures for the FARC are difficult to obtain.
- 43 Sergio Jaramillo, "Transition in Colombia" (lecture at Externado Universidad, 9 May 2013).
- 44 See Marco Palacios and Frank Safford, *Colombia: País Fragmentado, sociedad dividida* (Bogotá: Norma, 2002).
- 45 General Tapias, interview with author, 2 March 2009.
- 46 Army colonel, comment to author, anonymous, 6 April 2005. Such infiltration (posing, for example, as soldiers) and buying information was known by the military to be an integral part of the FARC's strategy at least since 1982. See Juan Estéban Ugarriza and Nathalie Pabón Ayala, *Militares y guerrillas: la memoria histórica del conflicto armado en Colombia desde los archivos militares, 1958-2016* (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2017), 134, *passim*.
- 47 This social distance also holds between the police and the military, with only a handful of "cross force" couples.
- 48 For example, *los indignados* was a new political movement of greens, progressives, liberals, and ex-Polo Democrático Alternativo (the first new left-center political party formed in 2003), that arose in August 2012, among whose members included an ex-M-19 guerrilla. See "Los 'indignados' que se dieron cita en Ríonegro," *Semana* (Bogotá), 12 August 2012.
- 49 Indeed, while the term "former guerrilla" is used in this chapter to describe those guerrillas who recently left the movement as well as those who left as a result of the accords worked out with the Barco and Gaviria governments in order to recognize differences of views internal to the insurgency movements, military officers as a general rule did not make this distinction. Their mindset is that once a guerrilla, always a guerrilla, even if she/he "claims" to have left the movement due to ideological differences.
- 50 See *Quinto Informe Nacional de Desarrollo Humano de la Tierra al Territorio: Hacia el Desarrollo Humano Rural en Colombia*, PNUD, 16 September 2010.

- 51 It was usual for generals in whose jurisdiction a *Conversatorio* was being held, to be invited to the reception and dinner the first night of the event. They often participated in long discussions with both military and civilian participants.
- 52 For background, see Luis Jorge Garay, ed., *Repensar a Colombia: Hacia un Nuevo Contrato Social* (Bogotá: Agenda Colombiana de Cooperación Internacional y PNUD, 2002).
- 53 The first and one-off “security tax” was levied from a small number of wealthy individuals and large corporations shortly after President Uribe took office in 2002. At a meeting in Cartagena with Bill Clinton in the late 2000s, the elites were told that if they wanted to win the war, they had to pay with money and blood. That is, pay more taxes and go to the front in combat. “And as the rich don’t want to pay taxes and don’t want to fight, they are trying to resolve the war with professional soldiers.” See “La Guerra se puede acabar: Entrevista con Marco Palacios,” *Semana* (Bogotá), 12 August 2012.
- 54 For a chronology of humanitarian agreements and prisoner exchanges between 2002 and 2007, see “Boletines de Paz: El acuerdo humanitario y las posibilidades de un proceso de paz,” Fundación Ideas para la Paz.
- 55 Valencia, “The ELN’s Halting Moves,” 95.
- 56 Several authors have raised this issue, presuming that one must come before the other. However, as Luc Chounet-Cambas’s study points out, the Salvadoran *guerrilleros* held out until the last meeting for such a ceasefire, once their demands for political reforms were met. See Luc Chounet-Cambas, “La negociación del alto el fuego. Problemas y opciones para los mediadores,” *Serie Prácticas de Mediación* #3 (Geneva: Centro para el Diálogo Humanitario, March 2011).
- 57 Between 1998 and 1999 alone, massacres by the paramilitaries in different areas of the country increased by 71 percent, with the number of victims increasing 36 percent; see Velásquez, “*Las fuerzas militares*,” 171. On paramilitarism, see Mauricio Aranguren Molina, *Mi Confesión. Carlos Castano revela sus secretos* (Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 2001).
- 58 Francisco Gutiérrez y Mauricio Barón, “Re-Stating the State: Paramilitary Territorial Control and Political Order in Colombia (1978–2004),” *LSE Working Paper No. 66*, Crisis States Programme, September 2005.
- 59 The term “la Fuerza Pública” (public force) includes both the armed forces and the police.
- 60 “Los seis puntos de la ‘hoja de ruta’ de la paz,” *Semana* (Bogotá), 29 August 2012.
- 61 General Mora had authorized and supported the participation of twenty-two colonels in the first *Conversatorio* in February 2002; the chief of police had participated in one *Conversatorio* in 2002.
- 62 “Acercamientos Gobierno-FARC: por qué no es el Caguán,” *Semana* (Bogotá), 1 September 2012.
- 63 Funding for half of the Special *Conversatorio* in 2012 as well as for all fourteen Ceasefire Seminars for the SubComisión Técnica between 2013 and 2015, in addition to another series of seminars for the Comando Estratégico de Transición in 2015–16 was

- generously provided by the Swiss Embassy in Bogotá and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.
- 64 Ultimately, the Norwegian Special Envoy to Colombia rejected the government delegation's request to hold the Seminars in Havana; he also declined to share the costs. Subsequently, Seminars-Workshops for the delegation's advisors were organized in Bogotá, entirely funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.
 - 65 Julian Thomas Hottinger, a senior mediator at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, has been involved in the negotiations of various ceasefires throughout the world.
 - 66 This is in contrast to DDR-in-war, one of the central elements of counterinsurgency programs used by armed forces around the world since the US war in Vietnam. In Colombia, it had been set up as a campaign (through radio advertising, among other methods) to encourage the desertion and surrender referred to as the "demobilization and reinsertion" of guerrillas. Its major purpose was to provide military intelligence with access to the internal workings of the FARC and ELN and their leaders for combat and bombing purposes.
 - 67 Salvadoran ambassador to Colombia, personal communication, 23 May 2017.
 - 68 María Jimena Duzán, "La noche de las lágrimas: un capítulo del nuevo libro de María Jimena Duzán," *Semana* (Bogotá), 14 July 2018.
 - 69 "Pregunta Yamid" *Semana TV*, 7 September 2017.
 - 70 The independent former mayor of Medellín and governor of Antioquia, Sergio Fajardo, matched Petro in the first round, with 24 percent, and former negotiator Humberto de la Calle brought in 2 percent of the vote.
 - 71 ACORE, the Colombian Association Retired Officers, which supported Duque's candidacy and has always opposed the peace process with the FARC, was publicly very critical of the active-duty officers negotiating in Havana, especially General Flórez.
 - 72 Defensoría del Pueblo report, cited in "Imelda Daza considera volver al exilio ante ola de violencia contra líderes sociales," *El Espectador* (Bogotá), 6 July 2018; see Nasi, "Spoilers in Colombia," 235.

