Adam Jones
PARAMILITARISM, DEATH SQUADS AND
GOVERNANCE IN LATIN AMERICA
PART I: ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW AND TWO CASE-STUDIES
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Abstract

This paper, the first of a planned two-part analysis, examines the institutions of paramilitarism, death squads, and warlords in Latin America, with a focus on the case-studies of Mexico and Peru. It begins with an overview of the small comparative literature on paramilitary movements and death squads around the world, seeking to define and clarify the terminology. The literature on "warlordism" is then reviewed, and the similarities and distinctions between paramilitaries and warlords are considered. Lastly, I examine two case-studies that have not, as yet, received extended attention in the comparative literature: Mexico and Colombia. The paper concludes by summarizing the findings and charting a course for future investigations.

Resumen

Este documento, planeado al principio como un análisis de dos partes, examina las instituciones del paramilitarismo, los escuadrones de la muerte y los señores de la guerra en América Latina, enfocándose en los estudios de caso de México y Perú. Buscando definir y aclarar la terminología, el estudio comienza con una perspectiva general de la poca literatura comparada en relación a los movimientos paramilitares y escuadrones de la muerte alrededor del mundo. La bibliografía en relación a los señores de la guerra es revisada, considerando las similitudes y diferencias entre paramilitares y señores de la guerra. Por último, examino dos casos de estudio que no han recibido, todavía, una gran atención en la literatura comparada: México y Colombia. El trabajo finaliza resumiendo las conclusiones y traza un curso para investigaciones futuras.
Introduction

This paper is the first of a planned two-part analysis of paramilitarism and governance in Latin America. Its counterpart, to be prepared after fieldwork and interviews in 2002, will consider the impact of human-rights agents and influences, both internationally and within case-study countries, on the character of paramilitary and death-squad activity. Special attention will be paid to some of the “perverse incentives” that human-rights activism may create. Most notable here is the fact that pressure on government authorities to refrain from the direct commission of human-rights abuses and atrocities may encourage those authorities to “sub-contract” state violence to actors who allow the state greater deniability in its negotiations with both domestic forces and, especially, foreign governments and non-governmental organizations.

This initial instalment paves the way for subsequent research and analysis as follows. First, I review the small comparative literature on paramilitary movements and death squads movements worldwide. Second, I offer a range of definitions and explorations of some of the key terms deployed here, including “governance”, “terrorism”, “paramilitarism”, and “death squads”. I then review another limited but useful literature, this time on the phenomenon of “warlordism”. I argue that the warlord literature needs to be better integrated with the studies of paramilitarism and death squads, since there are important areas of conceptual and empirical overlap; at the same time, warlordism deserves to be maintained as a separate category of analysis. Third, I consider two Latin American case-studies that have not received detailed attention in the paramilitary/death squad or warlord literatures to this point: Mexico and Colombia. These sections rely heavily on the reporting of Human Rights Watch, a New York-based NGO, which has provided the most in-depth reporting on paramilitarism and death-squads in these two countries, and which also has a high international reputation for the credibility and accuracy of its investigations. I also draw in scholarly treatments and media accounts as these seem relevant. The paper concludes by summarizing the findings and charting a course for future investigations.

Paramilitarism and Death-Squads: The Literature

Broad comparative study of the phenomena of death-squads and paramilitary movements is a very recent occurrence in both political science and anthropology. It did not, however, arise in a vacuum. It can be seen as the outgrowth of work in two main spheres and by two distinct sets of actors. The first, and probably more important, of these is the work done by non-governmental, human-rights-focused organizations, most notably Human Rights Watch (with its associated bodies such as Americas Watch and Middle East Watch) and Amnesty International, along with a
host of less visible, much more vulnerable, but no less significant human-rights groups within key states. From the 1970s, these organizations began to devote extensive attention to the phenomenon of death-squads and paramilitary movements closely linked to state security forces, and have continued to do so to the present. The result has been a rich, if very grim, body of documentation of these actors and activities, one that is indispensable to the present study.

The work of these activist organizations was gradually buttressed by an impressive body of scholarship that strongly influenced the evolving awareness of death-squad and paramilitary activity. With rare exceptions, this literature hailed from the left of the political spectrum, was heavily concentrated in the United States, and was spurred by the intimate involvement of successive U.S. governments in countries where death-squad and paramilitary activity was rife, especially Central and South America. The key figures in this literature include Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, writing both together and separately;\(^1\) Alexander George, with his edited volume on *Western State Terrorism*;\(^2\) and Michael McClintock, author of a classic two-volume study of *The American Connection in Latin America*.\(^3\) These scholars were vital in broadening existing definitions of “terrorism” to focus on state (or “wholesale” terrorism), rather than—or in addition to—the “retail” terrorism of non-state actors. They also focused strongly on the alliance among domestic state, international state, and nonstate actors in perpetrating the type of death-squad killings and paramilitary marauderings that were commonplace around the world, especially in “the American sphere of influence”, from the 1970s onwards. They were, of course, highly dependent upon the human-right reporting of international and national non-governmental organizations, noted above.

In 2000, two edited volumes appeared that were the first in English to adopt a comparative, theory-building approach to death squads, paramilitaries, and their positioning within the wider spectrum of state terror. These were Bruce B. Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner, eds., *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), and Jeffrey A. Sluka, ed., *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) The late arrival of these tomes is a little remarkable, given that the death-squad and paramilitary phenomenon can be traced back to the early years of the twentieth century, if not before; given, too, the ubiquity in recent decades of death-squad activities and atrocities.

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There is, nonetheless, an extensive and growing literature on state terror, mostly written by political scientists and sociologists, or by the dedicated staff of human-rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Sluka offers a useful review of this literature, from a distinctly radical perspective. Whereas Bruce Campbell, in his introduction to *Death Squads in Global Perspective*, notes perfunctorily that "some theorists simply blame the United States for most, if not all, state terror" (p. 9), then abandons the subject, Sluka wisely gives such arguments much greater credence. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, for example, are credited for their "pioneering work ... report[ing] that the global rise in state terror [in the 1970s and 1980s] was concentrated among Third World states in the U.S. 'sphere of influence', and provid[ing] extensive information on the terror occurring in the United States' client states in Latin America" (p. 8).

The principal advantage of the Campbell/Brenner volume is its careful theorizing of death squads as "sub-contractors" of state terror—a means by which "legitimate" state authorities (or powerful private actors) can avoid association with atrocities committed on their behalf. Since this theme is so central to the analysis that follows, it is worth quoting Campbell's introduction at some length:

One major factor for the use of death squads [and, we might add, paramilitaries] lies in the need of states to deny that they are breaking established norms of behavior. The modern state is bound by a whole range of internal and external norms that place strict limits on a state's range of options—if respected. Only death squads and other covert means provide plausible deniability of state involvement in violent acts. Domestically, citizens expect the rule of law, adherence to certain norms of behavior, or at least predictable behavior from their governments. States may engage in covert violence in order to protect the sensibilities of domestic populations and thus preserve state legitimacy. ... The rise in interest in human rights and legal norms for state behavior internationally since at least the late nineteenth century also plays a role. Today states find themselves under scrutiny from foreign governments, both allied and enemy; semigovernmental agencies such as the World Bank; and a multitude of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Greenpeace, not to mention the international media. Failure to meet international norms of behavior can have all sorts of serious repercussions today, including loss of foreign loans and investment, diminution or loss of foreign aid, loss of tourist revenue, trade boycotts, etc. States wishing to use extreme forms of extralegal violence thus have every reason to appear uninvolved. Though the charade doesn't usually last very long, it is difficult to prove government complicity in death squad actions—such proof usually comes at great cost to local human rights.
organizations and monitors, who are themselves often among the prime targets of the death squads. This is one of the many cruel ironies that crop up in connection with state violence, for it is quite likely that the increased concern for human rights has itself inadvertently been a contributing factor in the use of covert violence by governments, and in particular, in the use of death squads.  

These volumes, while welcome, are not without their oversights. Most obviously, neither has anything significant to say on Colombia and Algeria, the two countries where death squads and state terror are arguably most pervasive today. Neither Death Squads in Global Perspective nor Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror, however, pretends to be anything other than a preliminary attempt to chart a course for future research in these areas. It is to be hoped that other scholars and students will be persuaded not only of the inquiry’s validity, but of its necessity.

**Definitions and historical background**

The following definitions of key terms can be advanced to guide the discussion. The term “terrorism” is regularly employed in the analysis; “a good dictionary definition...the avoids the ideological subterfuge of excluding state terror” is “the policy of using acts inspiring great fear as a method of ruling or of conducting political opposition”. The concept of “governance”, meanwhile, needs to be distinguished from “government”; as Adrian Leftwich notes, the former is more encompassing than the latter:

> From a broad systemic point of view, the concept of governance is wider than that of government. The latter conventionally refers to the formal institutional structure and location of authoritative decision-making in the modern state. “Goverance”, on the other hand, refers to a looser and wider distribution of both internal and external political and economic power... In this broad sense, governance denotes the structures of political and, crucially, economic principles and relationships and rules by which the total productive and distributive life of a society is governed... In short, it refers to a system of political and socio-economic relations governed by agreed rules or, more loosely, a regime, which [can be defined as]... “principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge”.

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6 Adrian Leftwich, States of Development: On the Primacy of Politics in Development (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 118. The quoted definition of “regime” is Stephen Krasner’s, as
The emphasis placed, in conceptions of “governance”, on economic as well as political power and distribution is of considerable importance to an analysis of paramilitarism. We will see, for example, that many paramilitary forces begin (at least) as the direct agents of economic elites, particularly large landowners, in the country in question. As well, to the extent that paramilitaries grow apart from their sponsors, whether in the security forces of the state or among these economic elites (as has clearly happened, for example, in Colombia), their political agenda will be inseparable from their sources of economic and material support. Examining what links are forged with other key economic actors, especially informal and illegal ones like narco-traffickers, is essential to understanding the political reach and capacity of the actors in question. This is still more true when paramilitarism spills over into warlordism, as examined below. Warlordism requires the creation of a regional or local economic base, the exploitation of which is often the *raison d'être* of the warlord authority. (That is to say, whatever political project or orientation may have animated the warlord apparatus in the past, it has frequently been eroded down to the simple determination to preserve political power and governance capacity against the perceived predation of the centralized state or other powerful non-state actors. The primary purpose has become imposing one’s own predation on the material and human resources on warlord-controlled territory, and extracting the maximum economic benefits for personal profit and patrimonial distribution to the warlord’s clients.)

One definition of “paramilitaries” defines them as “private organizations that resort to the physical elimination of presumed auxiliaries of rebel groups and of individuals seen as subversive of the moral order.” Three caveats can be raised about the definition: first, the notion of “private” organizations tends to downplay paramilitaries’ links with, and frequently roots in, the security apparatus of the state. It is not fundamentally inaccurate, though, since paramilitaries—and this is certainly the case in our two case-study countries—tend to receive initial and immediate sponsorship from private actors who share close links and a strong commonality of interests with government authorities and state agents. Most notable here are the large landowners who in both Mexico and Colombia have mobilized paramilitary formations to defend their properties not only against rebel attack, but against the spread of agitation over labour and property rights by disgruntled peasants. Second, paramilitarism need not necessarily or primarily involve the “physical elimination” of members of targeted groups. This is standardly the case, but should be seen as the furthest point on a continuum of strategies of intimidation and violence. Finally, paramilitaries do not only target

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those "seen as subversive of the moral order". It is the defence of the political and economic status quo that tends to be uppermost in the calculations of those who found and sustain paramilitarism, although vigilante-style atrocities against perceived "marginal" elements, especially prostitutes, street children, and homosexuals, also figure prominently in paramilitary and death-squad activity in countries like Colombia and Brazil. One could therefore rework the above definition to designate paramilitaries as "private and/or state-affiliated organizations that use violence and intimidation to target and/or eliminate groups and individuals seen as subversive of the social, political, and economic order".

In his groundbreaking co-edited volume *Death Squads in Global Perspective*, Bruce Campbell defines death squads as clandestine and usually irregular organizations, often paramilitary in nature, which carry out extrajudicial executions and other violent acts (torture, rape, arson, bombing, etc.) against clearly defined individuals or groups of people. Murder is their primary or even sole activity. Except in the rare case where an insurgent group forms them, death squads operate with the overt support, complicity, or acquiescence of government, or at least some parts of it. In many cases, government security forces have participated directly in the killing. Yet at the same time, death squads may be privately constituted, almost always involve the support and participation of elements outside of government, and develop considerable independence from their backers.

Campbell seeks to distinguish death squads "from three other distinct but closely related phenomena: assassination, vigilantism, and terrorism". Death-squads generally employ assassination but "on a much larger scale", with "their victims typically numbering in the thousands". Somewhat more questionably, Campbell suggests that "the differences between death squad and vigilantism" lie in the fact that death squads directly involve the state in addition to other actors, while vigilantism comes primarily at the initiative of private (civil) interests and therefore involves a greater degree of spontaneity". This may be the case, but it is equally likely, in my view, that "social cleansing"-style vigilantism, of the type widely

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8 Fernando Cubides's definition is less detailed but serviceable: paramilitary are "irregular forces of the state, extra-legal organizations that have taken the law in their own hands ... Such groups take as their preferred targets the support networks, the sympathizers or auxiliaries of the guerrillas" —or, we might say, of any dissident or "subversive" social and political forces. His definition has the advantage of emphasizing linkages with the state. Cubides, "From Public to Private Violence", p. 130.

9 Campbell, "Death Squads", p. 2.

10 The author defines vigilantism as "the temporary usurpation of the state's powers of law and monopoly on violence by groups of ordinary citizens, usually to control crime or enforce social norms" (Campbell, "Death Squads", p. 2).
practiced in Colombian and Brazilian cities, frequently arises from the determination of state-security agents (off-duty police, etc.) to “clean up” streets through methods that are officially out-of-bounds to them in their day jobs. Campbell appears to acknowledge as much, noting that “vigilantism often involves state or elite influence and participation, even instigation”, and “members of death squads may even see themselves as vigilantes working to enforce justice”. Lastly, Campbell seeks to distinguish death squads from terrorism, defined as “the commission of acts of murder and extreme, exceptional brutality and destruction in order to influence groups of people to act or refrain from acting in certain ways”. Campbell points out that “death squads may well be a part of a government strategy of state terrorism, and they very often attempt to use terror themselves ... [thus] the two concepts easily exist simultaneously”. But he stresses “an important distinction” between the concepts: “Terrorism differs from death squad activity in that its targets are largely instrumental or symbolic and the main effect is intended to be felt elsewhere. To put it another way, in terrorism, murder and other dreadful acts are committed to send a message, while for death squads, murder is the main point”. He wisely adds that “the distinction between the two remains an academic one; in practice it is often much less clear”, but this possibly does not go far enough to eliminate the difficulty of the distinction, which lies in the fact that paramilitaries clearly do intend to broadcast a wider message through the assassinations and other atrocities that they inflict. Campbell acknowledges this fact, but suggests that while “terrorists may intend to send a message ... they usually pick targets as painful for their enemies as possible, so that the infliction of damage can quickly overshadow the sending of a message”. This might ignore, however, the extremely broad and sometimes nebulous categories of “enemies” that paramilitaries may designate: anyone young and male who resides in a community deemed to be “dissident” or “subversive”; or an entire social class, like landless peasants. The macabre character of death-squad murders in Central America in the 1970s and '80s, for example, was clearly designed to terrorize those broader sectors; arguably, this was at least as central to the project as the largescale elimination of specific individuals. My own leaning is to define the death squad as a form and strategy of terrorism, rather than an analytically distinct phenomenon.


Campbell, “Death Squads”, p. 3. The U.S. FBI’s definition of terrorism is congruent: “Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives”. Cited in Phillip Cryan, “Defining Terrorism”, Counterpunch (www.counterpunch.org), 29 November 2001.

Campbell, “Death Squads”, p. 4.
Death-squad activity can also be seen as a form and strategy of paramilitarism, although Campbell does not explore the distinction in detail. In his study of the Colombian AUC paramilitaries, Fernando Cubides notes that, especially in recent years, "the paramilitaries cannot be equated so easily with death squads. That death squads have operated episodically... is clear. But it is even clearer today that the paramilitaries have an origin and characteristics different from the death squads and that in their activities lies a method and a strategy that have been crucial for their growth and for the consolidation of the enormous territorial power they have acquired". In the Colombian case, it is the paramilitaries' roots in the "self-defense" groups established by large landowners that distinguishes them from the predominantly urban and vigilante-oriented death squads; although in many other countries, such distinctions would be much harder to draw.

Campbell's most important contribution to the debate of definitions is his stressing of "several key, distinguishing characteristics" that make death squads "either unique or unusual within the panoply of possible ways of organizing violence":

First of all, they are covert, without necessarily, however, being secret. The solution to this apparent paradox lies in distinguishing organizations from actions. What makes death squads different from the murderous use of regular police and military forces is that death squads give no visible indication that they exercise legitimate use of force and they make no acknowledgment of whose orders they follow. Regular military forces and most police war uniforms, which shows that they act in the name of the state and that the power they exercise is therefore legitimate. ... Regular security forces also have a formal organizational structure and clear chain of command which allows responsibility for their actions to be determined. Death squads have neither. This makes it possible for the state (and/or any other backers they may have) to claim no knowledge of or influence over death squads, and therefore to deny any responsibility for their actions.\(^{15}\)

The element of the "subcontracting" of state violence is another important theme both of Campbell's analysis and of the present paper. Campbell links the modern popularity of "subcontracting" to the growing influence of classical liberal conceptions of the state, which posited, perhaps from the French Revolution and certainly from the later 19th century onwards, that the state should take on an increasingly wide range of activities and responsibilities. However, Campbell notes that

\(^{15}\) Campbell, "Death Squads", p. 5 (emphasis added).
the means at the disposal of states have not always kept up with this expansion, so that in the twentieth century, states have increasingly felt it necessary to reach outside themselves—that is, to reach outside that normative liberal-legal framework established in the nineteenth century—in order to find the tools or helpers necessary to perform all the tasks at hand. This has led to the widespread use of semistate or semi-public entities by modern states to 'subcontract' important political, social, and economic tasks. ... Benign examples of the process include such diverse organizations as the Boy Scouts and regulated monopolies such as the former Bell Telephone System. Yet in crisis situations or situations in which the legitimacy of states is called into question, this "subcontracting" can assume more malevolent forms, such as the formation or toleration of paramilitary auxiliaries or, in extreme cases, death squads. This way of looking at death squads [and paramilitarism] ... is consistent with scholarship that sees an increased danger of extreme violence in situations in which states or elites are in the process of rapid modernization.  

The term "death squad" appears first to have been used in the 1930s to describe the behaviour of Nazi assassination squads. But it assumed a whole new significant in Latin America in the 1960s, and the term staged a resurgence when civil war and state terrorism consumed the Central American country of Guatemala, beginning in the 1960s. Under the direction of Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, "familiar anti-guerrilla tactics" were supplemented in Guatemala by "a new weapon ... political assassinations on a mass scale". As Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer summarize the impact of this development:

Death squads linked to the Army reached into every sector of national life. Street-corner murders of lawyers, schoolteachers, journalists, peasant leaders, priests and religious workers, politicians, trade union organizers, students, professors and others continued on a daily basis. ... The intention of the military leaders [of the squads] was essentially to destroy the political center. Anyone not supporting the regime was almost by definition a leftist, and therefore an enemy. The military apparently believed that eliminating the center precluded the possibility of a moderate government, therefore leaving the citizenry a sterile choice between a revolutionary Communist regime and the existing military dictatorship  

16 Campbell, "Death Squads", pp. 16-17.
17 Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala (New York: Anchor Books, 1983), pp. 246, 251. Susanne Jonas's assessment is similar. "After 1966, the terror was engineered by a series of right-wing death squads such as the MANO Blanca ('White Hand') and Ojo por Ojo ('An Eye for an Eye')—a by-product of the dirty
—a sanguinary strategy that was soon to be followed by military and/or elite dictatorships in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua (under Somoza), and the "Southern Cone" countries of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay.

Warlords and Warlordism

Though the phenomenon of warlordism is a feature of many classical societies, notably in Asia and Caucasus, it has only recently begun to attract a modicum of interest from scholars of political science and international relations. To the best of my knowledge, Paul B. Rich's 1999 edited volume, Warlords in International Relations, is the first to explore the subject in some detail. My argument in this paper is that paramilitarism frequently "bleeds into" warlordism; that the phenomenon is powerfully evident in one of the two case-study countries examined here, namely Colombia; and that in the Colombian case, the shift from paramilitarism to warlordism helps to explain the increasingly ambiguous attitude of state authorities, including even military commanders and foreign backers in the United States, to the Colombian paramilitaries.

Rich notes in Warlords in International Relations that the term "warlord" has yet to acquire "any great analytical precision", though it "remains ... a word with considerable emotive connotations".

In recent years the concept of the "warlord" has increasingly entered into popular political parlance. The word has been particularly popularized by the international media as a general term to explain the fissuring of nation states and the emergence of militarized sub-national groupings. Warlords increasingly appear to be a major counterinsurgency war. They were allegedly clandestine and beyond official control. In fact, these groups operated with total impunity and were based in the army and police forces (generally being composed of off-duty or former members of these security forces); they complemented government counterinsurgency operations by carrying out the activities that violated even Guatemalan laws. Their tactics ranged from publication of death lists to kidnappings, torture, and assassinations. Under the Arana regime (1970-74), Cabinet ministers were said to be directly involved in drawing up the death lists. Typical of the integration between official forces and the terrorist Right was the experience of thousands of victims (40,000 by the 1980s) who simply ‘disappeared’, often after being picked up by police or army vehicles or by unmarked cars; after friends and relatives searched for them in the jails for weeks, their corpses would generally be found, tortured and mutilated, in a ditch or ravine or a "clandestine cemetery". Jonas, The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 62-63. On the Guatemalan "counterinsurgency state", see also James Dunkerley, Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 456-61.

The institution of caudillismo in the Iberian peninsula and Latin America can also be cited in this context.

feature of the post-Cold War international scene in which the writ of
governments scarcely runs outside national capitals and the
countryside has been rendered insecure through armed gangs and
militias struggling for political and economic influence. Beleaguered
state administrative machines in a number of different countries have
been found incapable of containing threats to their authority from
various clan, tribal and ethnic factions, while the legitimacy of
national leaders is continually threatened by local and regional strong
men.20

The most ambitious attempt at a definition of warlordism in the Rich volume
is offered by Stephen Chan, in his chapter on “The Warlord and Global Order”. For
Chan, “Warlords are ... defined as those prepared and able, by force or its threat, to
deny ideological and operational space to a state and who put forward, to the
populations under their control, an articulated alternative to citizenship and who
secure allegiance through a combination of that force and articulation, allied
sometimes with charisma or claims to certain ancestries more compelling to their
adherents than affiliation to a state”.21 Though aspects of this definition help to
illuminate the complex linkages between paramilitarism and warlordism, at least one
seems arbitrarily constraining. There is no reason that warlords should necessarily
seek to “put forward ... an articulated alternative to citizenship”. Indeed, they may
present themselves and their activities as encapsulating what it means to be a citizen
of state X; this is certainly the approach of Carlos Castaño’s AUC paramilitary force
(see the Colombia case-study), which depicts itself as the guardian of Colombian
sovereignty and representative of the desires of all “true Colombians”. Nonetheless,
Chan’s emphasis on state breakdown, the use of force, and charisma are all
important elements of any attempt to link paramilitarism and warlordism. Chan also
provides a useful typology of warlords, including “the local warlord”, who seems to
fit best with the type of paramilitarism practiced in Colombia:

This (“local warlord”) situation may resemble gangsterism in the
outset of its development, but evolves into a distinct form of
organization to defend the integrity of a community. The warlords
(usually called so in popular parlance) of the South African shanties
are such local heroes (or villains). At the other end of the scale, the
Druze of Lebanon, in their mountain fastness, with their
internationally-educated leadership, represented a highly
sophisticated and enlarged variant. They remained committed to a
local integrity, however, and did not wish to overcome the state.

20 Paul B. Rich, “The Emergence and Significance of Warlordism in International Politics”,
Relations, p. 164.
while resisting its encroachments and those of others who did seek to overcome the state.  

This seems quite accurately to depict the activities of paramilitary formations in Colombia, although it should be noted that Chan actually discusses the Colombian case under one of his other warlord "types" ("the warlords of international crime") —though he limits the analysis to the Colombian drug lords, in order to stress the difference between them and warlords. This difference, for Chan, resides fundamentally in the fact that the drug barons "do not seek to compose or represent alternative forms of sustained political organization. In fact, ... [they] need the state, because it either facilitates or disguises, or officially denies and thereby permits unofficial room for their own international trade and international relations". What is missing here is some kind of relaxation of the framework to recognize that a) the "local" warlords may also be "committed to a local integrity" and not "wish to overcome the state", though they might "resist its local encroachments"; and that the reason they might not wish to overcome the state is that it provides important support and cooperation as well as sporadic opposition (as in the case of the Colombian paramilitaries' links to the official military and state-security forces).

The emergence of the literature on state breakdown and resultant warlordism has tended to be viewed as a rather new historical phenomenon linked to the collapse of the global superpower conflict. Again, this may be too limiting a framework for our purposes. Typical of the claims is Rich's that, as a result of the "particular phase of International politics in the post-Cold War era in which superpower hegemony in many parts of the international system has all but disappeared". In the Colombian case, this framework can be adapted slightly, since the historical conjuncture appears far less relevant —though the connection between warlordism and the state's inability or unwillingness to establish control over large areas of the national territory remains key. (Students of modern Colombian politics will instantly recognize Rich's depiction of a state where "the writ of governments scarcely runs outside national capitals and the countryside has been rendered insecure through armed gangs and militias struggling for political and economic influence").

25 Jeffrey Sluka provides a somewhat broader, and perhaps more tenable, historical framing of the worldwide resurgence of state terror, including paramilitarism and death squads, in the past three decades: "It strikes me that the growth in state terror is fundamentally linked to the continuing growth in the concentration of power in the hands of the power elite, and the increase in the social inequality and stratification —the ever widening gap between rich and poor, within countries and
A number of common features, and also differences, between paramilitarism Colombia-style and warlordism can be isolated. A key similarity is the reliance of paramilitarism on the “vacuum” left by the central state’s abandoning of effective claim to swathes of countryside and certain conflictual spheres (in the Colombian case, leaving the “dirty work” of struggle against subversion to the paramilitaries in key conflict zones). Both paramilitaries and warlords also feature a prominent component of terror and violence in their operations and military strategies: as Rich notes, “There is a strong tendency in such situations for terror to be ... employed to buttress the leadership of the warlord”, creating “a régime of terror” where systematic violence works to maintain power relations”. The Colombian case-study below will offer ample indication that such a “régime of terror” indeed operates in areas where the paramilitaries exercise influence or dominance. Likewise, the “structures of hierarchical power” in warlordism “bear little resemblance to doctrines of popular mobilization”, instead founding themselves in “various forms of patronage, nepotism and political clientelism” — also trends evident in the case of the Colombian paramilitaries.

The most obvious difference between standard paramilitary and warlord formations, of course, is the fact that the latter tend to have their roots in “clan, tribal and ethnic factions”, as the Rich passage quoted above illustrates. (See also Chan’s reference to “charisma or claims to certain ancestries more compelling to their adherents than affiliation to a state”, cited above.) The Colombian version of paramilitary warlordism, however, arises more from key economic interests and a de facto alliance with members of the still-strong military and state security forces. Rich’s contention that warlordism is “one important form of militarization of ethnic identities in contemporary international politics” is too limiting. Likewise, as a

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27 I am thinking here, in particular, of the patronage networks created to draw current or ex-army officers into paramilitary ranks; and the well-publicized material incentives offered to ordinary recruits, in a country where younger-male unemployment is rife. In the paramilitary-dominated city of Barrancabermeja in the Magdalena Medio region, “paramilitaries reportedly recruited many local young people, offering status, weapons, a cellular telephone, and a regular salary that dwarfed those on offer for legal employment”. The paramilitaries were also renowned for “pay[i]ng store owners for supplies a month in advance and contract[ing] with taxi drivers for a whole month of service”, according to one human-rights investigator. See Human Rights Watch, The “Sixth Division”: Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 2001), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/colombia/ >.
28 Rich, “Emergence and Significance”, p. 10. Emphasis added. Elsewhere in Rich’s edited volume, Glen Segell explores the nexus between drug trafficking and warlordism in Asia and Africa, which would appear to be peculiarly appropriate to analyses of the Colombian case. But he places the same emphasis on the ethnic variable: “The root of warlordism ... is an ethnic aspect of the structure and culture of society where drug trafficking and its associated criminal activities are more
result of their roots in enduring systems and structures of economic and social relations, this kind of "paramilitary warlordism" is perhaps less dependent on the post-Cold War conjuncture that Rich and others 29 have identified as critical to understanding the modern phenomenon of warlordism. Likewise, Rich suggests that "the warlord phenomenon appears at present to be confined to regions of chronic economic backwardness and instability such as Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Southeast Asia such as Indo China". 30 If the framework can usefully be applied to the Colombian case, as I believe it can, then the element of "chronic economic backwardness" can be seen as somewhat less relevant; Colombia historically has had one of the stables macro-economies in Latin America, and much of the rise in paramilitary influence can be traced to the economic "boom" associated with the emergence of the narcotrafficking cartels in the 1980s.

We will return to the paramilitary-warlord linkage in considering the Colombian case-study, where a clear progression seems to be evident from one form of social and military organization to the other. Let us first, however, devote some attention to another Latin American country in which paramilitaries have been a fact of political life for many decades: Mexico.

Case-Study (1): Mexico

In August 2001, the Mexican newspaper Milenio broke news that would better be considered an open secret: that rural paramilitary forces were operating across Mexican territory, specifically in the states of Chihuahua, Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Morelos, Nueva León, Tlaxcala, and (as was already well-known) heavily-indigenous Chiapas in the deep south. The Milenio reports focused on the Bajio state of San Luis Potosí, where some 65 paramilitary groupings, encompassing 550 officially-designated members, were said to be operating in 28 municipalities. The members were licensed by the Mexican army, who issued them with identity cards, weapons permits, and the weapons themselves (mostly outdated rifles). Nayeli Cortés Cano reported that "the members of the Rural Defense Units are subject to military orders; that is, they can be judged under military laws and they carry arms, although not in meetings of a civilian character. ... These units, [which] complement the Army, are organs of information, military guides, guarantee the material security of main communication routes, and receive training". Cortés Cano added that the paramilitaries "have the capacity to apprehend alleged delinquents and to hand them over to the commanders of the nearest military zones, catalysts towards generating the means for conflict". Segell, "Warlordism and Drug Trafficking: From Southeast Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa", in Rich, ed., Warlords in International Relations, p. 38.


[who are] their immediate bosses”. Army leaders, along with PRistas like former general (now congressman) Alvaro Vallarta, were quick to leap to the defense of the groupings, with Vallarta going so far as to state that it would be “ideal” if the paramilitary operations were extended to urban areas. National security adviser Adolfo Aguilar Zinser similarly argued that paramilitary activities were “not directed at creating bodies that are going to generate problems of violence; on the contrary, it is a form of support to ensure that the municipal level has the resources and capacity to confront problems of order”. The official authorities, Aguilar Zinser claimed, were not being superseded by the groups, but were rather serving as “mechanisms of support” for them.¹¹

There was nothing new about the rural paramilitary formations. According to Milenio reporter Nayeli Cortés Cano, the “rural defense bodies” (known today as the Unidades de Defensa Rurales —Rural Defense Units, or UDR) dated back to the 1930s administration of Lázaro Cárdenas, widely perceived as the most populist and reformist of Mexican presidents. Cárdenas issues a regulation titled Instructivo para la organización, funcionamiento y empleo de los cuerpos de defensa rurales (Instructions for the organization, functioning, and employment of the rural defense bodies). The declared intention was to quell unrest, banditry, and vigilantism in areas in which the state was unable to guarantee security —a profile that remains largely intact today, with the more recent development of largescale narcotrafficking offering further justification for the bodies. For example, Fidel Herrera Beltrán, president of the Commission of Legislative Studies of the Mexican Senate, claimed that “Far from fomenting fear, the rural squads [pelotones] are ideal instruments to avoid barbarities such as the [recent] lynching in Tlalpan. [It is a form] in which organized society, in accordance with the law, can participate in organizing itself to defend its community, to avoid confused mob justice [turmas desorientadas], lynchers, and those eager to implement ‘an eye for an eye’ [ansiosas de aplicar la ley del Talión]”.

The paramilitary formations in San Luis Potosí and elsewhere did not stand accused of extensive human rights violations. But according to “one of the principal promoters of human rights in Chiapas”, Miguel Angel de los Santos, the clear trend was towards the “officializing of paramilitary groups”, which could threaten human rights and engage crimes similar to those that have afflicted Chiapas state.¹² A possible danger-sign, in this context, was the evolution of paramilitary groups in


¹² Manuel de la Cruz, “Chiapas: paramilitares y contrainsurgencia”, Milenio semanal, August 6, 2001, p. 32.
Guerrero state, heartland of the “dirty war” of the 1970s and 1980s, in which such groups “were converted, in many cases, into gangs, kidnappers, and assaultants [asaltantes] who operate in the rural zones of the state”. As is standard for paramilitary forces, they were able to count on both their own resources and significant state assistance, including “vehicles and arms that the government delivered to them, as well as credentials from diverse federal, state, and army offices”. And they targeted those opposed either to the state or to powerful economic interests, including ecological activists opposed to largescale deforestation; according to Organization of Ecological Peasants (Organización de Campesinos Ecologistas, OCE), the paramilitaries played a crucial role in supplying information that led to more direct acts of state terror, such as the murder of 11 civilians in El Charco (Ayutla municipality).^33

The response of the administration of Vicente Fox, whose PAN party ended seven decades of effective one-party rule in Mexico in the December 2000 national elections, to state complicity in death-squad and paramilitary violence has been sporadic, despite Fox’s recent pledge to “chang[e] the way power is exercised in Mexico”.^34 The pledge was made (or rather reiterated) after the National Human Rights Commission—a body established under the Institutional Revolutionary Party as a fob to both domestic and foreign critics of human-rights abuses—submitted a groundbreaking multi-volume report on the “dirty war” waged against leftist dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s, which featured both direct abuses by the army and more shadowy ones by the network of paramilitary organizations in the country. The report named “at least 74 officials from 37 government agencies [who] were involved in a campaign of disappearances, torture and executions of leftists”. Accepting the report at a press conference, where he was accompanied by both the military chief and minister of the interior, Fox declaimed that “nobody will be beyond prosecution”, but The Chicago Tribune noted the opinion of some activists that “they will believe Fox only when they see government officials charged, tried and punished”.^35

At the same time as the government, in a burst of publicity, accepted the Commission’s findings, another decision was taken—this time by a judge in Chiapas state—that emphasized the difficulties of bringing death squads and paramilitary formations to justice. On November 16, Judge Felipe Consuelo “released six paramilitary members convicted of taking part in the 1997 [Acteal] massacre of 45 [alleged Zapatista] rebel sympathizers”, citing “inconsistent” witness testimony. The six convicts released then headed back to the area of Los Chorros, which includes Acteal, prompting Diego Perez, a spokesperson for indigenous refugees, that “We are afraid because they [the released prisoners] are the ones that

^35 Ibid.
organized the massacre, and they could regroup with other paramilitaries that have not been arrested and take revenge".  

**Chiapas**

The origins of the paramilitary formations in Chiapas state extend back decades into the past, and bear a strong similarity to the growth of similar groups in Colombia. Central to the proliferation of the paramilitary forces has been the mobilization and support extended by *caciques* (large landowners), standardly affiliated with the then-ruling PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). As Milenio noted in its expose of paramilitary activity throughout Mexico, “After the appearance of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, there arose groups paid by *caciques* to protect their lands, which [groups] subsequently dedicated themselves to counterinsurgency work”. Such groups became known as "guardias blancas" (white guards), and dedicated themselves “to protecting the prominent coffee plantations Liquidámbar and Prusia, property of the German Laurenz Hudler. Almost immediately, they extended their operations to the municipalities of Ángel Albino Corzo, La Concordia, Villa Corzo, Chicomuselo, Zinacantán, Palenque, Tila, Yajalón, Sabanilla and Salto de Agua. With the support of elements of the army or Bases of Mixed Operations [*Bases de Operaciones Mixtas*], the ‘white guards’ attacked communities ... and expelled families, destroying their houses or assassinating anyone who opposed their [the guards’] bosses”. The only error in this evaluation is to present the rise of the *guardias blancas* as a recent phenomenon, linked to the 1994 Zapatista uprising. In fact, such pistoleros existed, in organized form, almost from the dawn of PRIista power in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

It was, of course, the Chiapas uprising of 1994 —followed by the Acteal massacre of December 1997— that focused the attention of the world on human rights abuses in Chiapas. Acteal, in particular, cast the role of paramilitary formations, and their close relationship with the official security forces, into sharp relief. Forty-five indigenous peasants were slaughtered, and according to Amnesty International, “compelling evidence ... shows that the authorities facilitated the arming of paramilitaries who carried out the killings and failed to intervene as the savage attack continued for hours”. The Zapatista National Liberation Front (EZLN) argued persuasively that “public security police of the state of Chiapas

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backed up the attack and during the afternoon and evening dedicated themselves to picking up cadavers in order to hide the magnitude of the massacre."^39^39

The links between the Mexican state and *guardia blanca* formations similarly have a long history. In the evaluation of Human Rights Watch, the white guards "for many years ... have worked alongside the state security police to evict peasants from occupied lands". It spoke of "the continuing acquiescence and complicity of state authorities in the activities of white guards", while "state government officials steadfastly refuse [even] to acknowledge" the existence of the guards. The organization's 1996 report, *Implausible Deniability: State Responsibility for Rural Violence in Mexico* summarized the coordination between state security and paramilitary forces as follows:

By permitting white guards to work alongside police, Mexican authorities acquiesce to the violent crimes committed by the armed civilians, in violation of international human rights standards that require the Mexican government to guarantee that its agents enforce the law and to ensure that those under its jurisdiction are able to exercise their rights. *The coordination of police and armed civilians indicates that officials are actively complicit in these violations, not just passively permissive.* When this complicity is combined with the impunity for police who permit white guards to operate, the state government must be seen as facilitating the abuses of armed civilians organized as white guards. Though the violations fall under state jurisdiction, the federal government has also failed to fulfill its international human rights responsibilities to ensure that human rights

^39^ "Details of the Acteal massacre", EZLN press release, December 23, 1997, [http://flag.blackened.net/revoltezln/1997/cci_acteal_details_dec.html](http://flag.blackened.net/revoltezln/1997/cci_acteal_details_dec.html). In 1999, a Mexican judge sentenced 20 of the participants in the massacre to prison terms of 35 years each, a move that was hailed as indicating a new judicial willingness to target paramilitary violence. However, as the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center commented, the sentences contrasted markedly with that handed out to "the former military officer accused of giving military training to the paramilitary group that carried out the massacre, and with the three year, nine-month sentence given to 10 former police officers that permitted the massacre and transported the arms of the aggressors. ... There is no evidence that members of the National Defense Ministry and of the Chiapas state government are being investigated for their presumed participation in planning, supplying arms, training, covering up the existence of paramilitary groups, altering a crime scene, and altering evidence and results. Rather, the former governor of Chiapas, Julio Cesar Ruiz Ferro, who was removed from his post after the massacre, was assigned to the Mexican Embassy in the United States. In this sense, the government of Roberto Albores appears to have the goal of hiding grave violations of human rights that may have involved the state and federal governments, by sending an amnesty initiative to the national congress which would bury a good portion of the existing evidence against these authorities*. Excerpts from "Perpetrators of Acteal Massacre Sentenced" and "Acteal: Partial Justice", SIDIH bulletins, [http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/mexico/mil/ActealSentences.html](http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/mexico/mil/ActealSentences.html).
are respected in Chiapas, preferring instead to accept the state government’s facile dismissal of the problem of white guards.\(^{40}\)

Much as in Colombia, the growing strength of paramilitary formations appears to be geared at allowing the state to effectively confront the Zapatista insurgency, while maintaining “deniability” in the face of the worst atrocities, like Acteal.\(^{41}\) As Marc Becker has analyzed the relationship between official and unofficial agencies,

Despite a ceasefire and signed peace accords, the Mexican government has expressed a desire to wipe out, to “liquify” this opposition. The best way to do this is by erasing their civilian base of support. The army as a formal institution of the Mexican state, however, cannot directly carry out this operation. To do so would mean that the Mexican government would have to face political, economic, and diplomatic sanctions from European governments and possibly even the United States. Rather than risking such sanctions, the Mexican government trains, equips, and supports informal paramilitary forces to carry out such campaigns. The members of these forces are local wealthy landowners who would lose their privileged position in society if a successful revolution would redistribute wealth and resources equally to the impoverished and marginalized Indians and peasants living in Chiapas. These paramilitary forces use such oxymoronic names as Paz y Justicia (Peace and Justice) and Guardias Blancas (White Guards). The strategy which these paramilitary forces appear to be following is to conduct egregious attacks on the Zapatista civilian base of support, thereby attempting to force the Zapatista guerrillas to respond militarily. This would therefore legitimize the formal Mexican military forces moving in and militarily crushing the armed opposition. The result would be a bloodbath, and the end of people’s hopes for social change and justice in Chiapas.\(^{42}\)


\(^{41}\) Indeed, this notion is implicit in the title chosen for the Human Rights Watch report cited above: Implausible Deniability.

Case-Study (2): Colombia

In few countries of the world have paramilitary and death-squad violence been so prevalent as in Colombia, and in few other cases have paramilitary formations gone on to amass so substantial a share of territorial control and political power.

As in Mexico “private” violence is a longstanding tradition in Colombia, but it received a quantum boost during La Violencia, when rural supporters of Liberal or Conservative factions renewed their decades-old hostility by waging war against each other in the countryside. It was not until the mid-1980s, however, that the phenomenon became prevalent, indeed almost ubiquitous, throughout both rural and urban Colombia. The spur appears to have been dissatisfaction among the Colombian military, economic and political elites, and narcotraffickers with an amnesty granted to guerrillas belong to the EPL (Ejército Popular de Liberación, Popular Army of Liberation). According to Jenny Pearce,

> The army objected deeply to the amnesty; it believed that the guerrillas were taking advantage of a political space in which to grow. The peace talks coincided with a rise in killings by paramilitary death squads. The first of these, “Death to Kidnappers” (MAS), appeared in 1981 after [the] M-19 [guerrilla group] had kidnapped Marta Nieves, the daughter of Fabio Ochoa, a leading cocaine mafia boss; it hunted down and killed a number of M-19 activists and sympathisers. Subsequently MAS became an infamous agent of summary right-wing justice, based in the Magdalena Medio [region] but with influence in a number of other departments where popular unrest and guerrilla forces threatened the local elites. Between 1983 and 1984 killings took place in the Cauca valley, Antioquia, Urabá and the Magdalena Medio; in the latter region the situation was explosive. When the attorney-general investigated MAS in early 1983, 59 members on active military service were accused of belonging to it. The army command rallied to their defence. ...  

Pearce writes of a “‘functional alliance’ ... that emerged in the 1980s between the drug barons, sectors of the army, businessmen, landowners and political bosses to eliminate suspected guerrillas and left-wing civilian activists.” A 1986 report on violence in the Magdalena Medio (an oil-rich region running along the Magdalena river) by Colombia’s attorney general made clear both the military’s links to MAS activities in the area, and the typical role of paramilitary formations in handling “security” responsibilities that the official military was unable or unwilling to take on:

44 Ibid., p. 195.
MAS was an authentic paramilitary movement. The attempts to deny this truth have failed before public opinion. The perverse habit of the military of relying on private citizens to carry out its counter-insurgency activities is spreading. In this way the military could make up for its own limitations. What we are talking about purely and simply are officers who break all bounds when presented with the temptation of multiplying their capacity for action and who make use of private citizens whom they initially take as "guides" and "informants", collaborators and auxiliaries in general, and end up using them as a hidden arm and who, as contract killers (sicarios) can do unofficially what cannot be done officially.

In the latter half of the 1980s and into the 1990s, it was the UP (Union Patriótica, Patriotic Union) party—which included many former guerrillas who had laid down their arms after the amnesty—that became the primary target. An astonishing one thousand UP members and activists were assassinated between 1985 and 1990, including two of the party's presidential candidates. Trade-union members became another favourite target, with Colombia accounting for more than half of all unionists killed worldwide from January 1990 to March 1991, according to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. As paramilitary and death-squad activity mounted, so did the element of vigilantism become more prominent, with the same alliance of drug traffickers, security forces, and right-wing businesspeople behind the mayhem. David Bushnell writes that "both groups of traffickers [the Medellín and Cali cartels] ... became involved in shadowy campaigns to 'cleanse' their respective environments of petty thieves, prostitutes, homosexuals, and other undesirables. Such people would be killed by nighttime death squads, apparently assisted by off-duty police and right-wing vigilantes."

The links between these early paramilitary/death squad formations and the security apparatus of the state were obvious very early on, though they were standardly denied by the government. According to a researcher with Justicia y Paz, a Colombian non-governmental human rights commission comprising members of 55 religious organizations,

These civilian paramilitary groups have very close relationships with the hierarchy of the military. How do we know this? Because they already have the census of the population. They know who goes out.

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45 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 246. Emphasis added.
who travels. ... They have a tremendous system of information. In their recruiting meetings, paramilitaries always say they are working with the permission and authorization of the army. Paramilitaries who have left and refused to be part of it and denounced it publicly have indicated places and dates for meetings of the armed forces with them.49

The rise of the AUC

We don't have a government in this country anymore. Carlos Castaño [leader of the AUC paramilitary confederation] is our president.
—Peasant survivor of AUC massacre at village of Chengue, January 2001.50

We started out as a reaction to the guerrillas, but we have evolved and now represent the social interests of big sectors of this country. We now have a concept of what the state should be in terms of economy, human rights, and justice. ... We are now in the larger scene because there are no leaders who think this way.
—Carlos Castaño, leader of the AUC paramilitaries, March 2001.51

"Modern states have a habit of subcontracting", writes Bruce Campbell, and "in certain crisis situations ... this subcontracting can occur even at the risk of diminishing the states' legitimacy by violating the law, or by compromising its monopoly on the use of violence".52 Extending the latter point, we can say that paramilitary and death-squad activity may, and frequently does, lead to a situation in which these organizations come to stand in opposition to the state, as a contender for at least local or regional power. The ambiguous positioning of such bodies vis-a-vis the state—with their origins and frequently their membership perhaps rooted in the state-security apparatus; with a high degree of practical cooperation with security agencies in the field; but also with frequent tensions and clashes over issues and territories in which each “side” claims predominance—accounts for much of the complexity in the relations between these official and unofficial purveyors of violence. I suggested earlier in the paper that paramilitarism and associated death-squad activity can spill over into a real semi-autonomy for its agents vis-a-vis the state and other powerful actors. When it does, paramilitarism can be seen to bleed

49 Pseudonymous researcher quoted in Rampton, "Colombia", p. 36.
51 Quoted in Wilson, "Colombia's Other Army".
52 Campbell, "Death Squads", p. 17 (emphasis added).
into warlordism, and paramilitary formations can pose a real challenge to the state’s ability to assert its central authority.

Nowhere in the world has this trend been so evident as in Colombia. The trend was visible as early as the 1980s, when one observer wrote that while “the paramilitary may have been a useful ally for the elite against the Left ... once the popular threat receded last year, the death squads became a greater threat to the state than the forces they had been repressing”, constituting virtually a “state within a state”, in the estimation of Gen. Miguel Maza Márquez, head of “the only Colombian security agency responsible directly to civilian authorities”.

The genesis of the paramilitary “umbrella group”, the AUC, lay in the tumultuous conflicts over land that had swept the Colombian countryside for decades, receiving a crucial injection of material support from the rise of Colombian narco-traffickers, especially the Medellín cartel under Pablo Escobar. The narco-traffickers plowed much of their vast earnings into investments in land and property across Colombia, and as the guerrilla threat mounted to established social relations in the countryside, both the old agrarian guard and the arriviste narco-traffickers banded together to mobilize death squads and private armies against “subversives” in both rural and urban areas. The Peasant Self-Defense Force of Córdoba and Uraba (ACCO) in northern Colombia was the largest of these private armies. When Castaño took it over, “he transformed a regional protection force into a national political movement”, which took the form of an umbrella grouping called the AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia). The organization’s roots in the landholding oligarchy, both old and new, have remained strong to the present: Castaño claimed in 2001 that “some 80 per cent of our [the AUC’s] income comes from contributions” from such actors, with the remainder composed of revenues from taxation of the trade in illicit drugs.

Ironically, though, it was only after private “self-defense” groups were banned by the Colombian government that the transition to fully-fledged and largely-autonomous paramilitary formations was spurred. Cubides writes that “the accelerated growth of the paramilitary groups coincides with the period following the declaration of the illegality of self-defense and all private justice groups”. He adds: “In their origins, these groups benefited from legal ambiguity, but once they were freed of all legal protection, and consolidated themselves as clandestine movements ... they entered into a stage of rapid expansion”. Once such expansion was underway, the initially limited goals of the paramilitaries —essentially defending the interests of large landowners and helping them to exploit the commercial bonanza that accompanied terror and displacement of the landed peasantry in the countryside— wholly new political opportunities opened up. Cubides acknowledges that “the paramilitaries had purely instrumental origins ... [as] simple tools in the process of hacienda expansion”, but contends that “the initial

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54 Wilson, “Colombia’s Other Army”.
55 Cubides, “From Private to Public Violence”, p. 132.
successes in the fight to displace the guerrillas have had unexpected longer-lasting effects. These operate in the paramilitaries’ favor in the medium range, surpassing their initial goals and offering them unforeseen possibilities. In short, the paramilitaries “have discovered that an organization is a structure of power and that diversification within it yields multiple additional advantages.” Having successfully established themselves as a “state within a state”, and confronting the ideological challenge from the armed Colombian left, the paramilitaries have taken to issuing portentous pronouncements about the state of Colombian society: “Documents with [true] programmatic pretensions have been few and extremely repetitive”, Cubides claims, but the determination to maintain a national profile and presence is obvious.

Along with the paramilitaries’ growing political power has gone an exponential escalation of their terrorist violence. By the dawn of the new millennium, the AUC was accounting for a full “79 percent of the political killings and forced disappearances registered in Colombia”, versus 16 percent for the various guerrilla groups and 5 percent for the Colombian security forces. This statistic alone suggests something of the degree to which violence against dissident or “subversive” groups and organizations has effectively been subcontracted by the Colombian military to the AUC.

The AUC has also benefitted substantially from the charisma of its leader, Carlos Castaño—an enigmatic figure whose reclusiveness gave way in the later 1990s to virtual “media star” status. “His life story ... [is] a baroque family saga of suffering and revenge”, which saw Castaño’s father kidnapped and killed by guerrillas in 1980. The story has “captured the nation’s imagination”, elevating Castaño to “folk hero” status, while the paramilitary leader’s “populist reforms—including the distribution of 14,000 hectares of ranch land to peasants—have won him support in the territory he controls.”

State/paramilitary linkages

In March 2001, Scott Wilson of The Washington Post interviewed Castaño in an undisclosed location, and subsequently published a profile with the revealing title, “Colombia’s Other Army.” In the accompanying interview, Castaño worked manfully to undermine the claims that his organization was dependent upon the Colombian military for key operational and logistical assistance, if not for its very existence. He depicted the AUC’s military role in classic “subcontracting” terms as filling a space that the central authorities were unable or unwilling to fill: “We are

57 Cubides, “From Public to Private Violence”, p. 145.
58 Cubides, “From Public to Private Violence”, p. 140.
60 Wilson, “Colombia’s Other Army”.
doing a patriotic duty that the military did not want to do or were not able to do. ...

[T]he AUC has played an important role in keeping this nation from a failed government ... [and] has prevented this country from falling into guerrilla hands".

The arrangement was clearest in the conflict-ravaged Putumayo region of the south, according to Castaño: "Anywhere in Putumayo where we are present it is because the military is not there. There are not enough troops to control all of Putumayo or the rest of the country. We wait for the military to leave, and then we go in to act irregularly".

At the heart of the AUC's relationship with the military, Castaño claimed, lay the realization that both faced a common threat: leftist revolution. "I think a member of the AUC is never going to encounter [i.e., clash with] a soldier", Castaño stressed, "because when they see each other, when they look into each other's eyes, they understand they are not going to shoot because an officer says so. They are like brothers. Our enemy is the guerrilla and that has not changed".

We should also acknowledge that terms like "the state" or "the government" can give a picture of an internally consistent and harmonious structure working towards a common goal. This is a fiction, if an analytically advisable one. Any state or governmental bureaucracy is riddled with internal factionalism and sets of ambitions and priorities that may stand at cross-purposes with one another. A particularly vivid, and common, example of this tension lies in the relationship between security forces and agents of the civilian legal apparatus. This was amply evident in the heated debates that followed the ascension to power of Vicente Fox in Mexico in December 2000. Key questions asked about the new government included whether it would be able to establish civilian authority over military and police depredations, and a number of individuals and bodies—from President Fox himself to the government's Commission on Human Rights—have sought, to some degree, to do so. They have, predictably, encountered stiff resistance from institutions long accustomed to benign tolerance and limited oversight of their activities on the part of their alleged civilian overlords. According to Human Rights Watch, a similar role has been played in Colombia by "the Attorney General's office, the CTI [Cuerpo Técnico de Investigaciones, the Attorney General's Technical Investigation Unit], a core of ranking CNP [Colombian National Police] officers, the office of the Public Advocate, and isolated government officials". These actors have had some successes, notably in detaining and prosecuting members of the Colombian military and paramilitaries for abuses and atrocities. In May 2001, for example, "the Attorney General's office carried out unprecedented arrests and searches in the city of Montería, Córdoba, long considered a stronghold

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61 Non-governmental organizations, both national and international, have also played a powerful role in engineering the campaign against military and security-force impunity. For an overview in the Latin American context, with case-studies of Mexico and Argentina, see Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, "Human Rights Advocacy Networks in Latin America", ch. 3 in Keck and Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 79-120.
of [AUC leader] Carlos Castaño”. But “even these arrests can prove illusory. Investigators have been threatened and even killed,” many of those convicted by Colombian courts have subsequently been released, and since 1998, at least fifteen alleged paramilitary leaders who have been arrested have later walked past prison guards, soldiers, and police to freedom”. And the degree of government support extended to these brave organizations, institutions, and individuals has been profoundly inadequate: “Far from strengthening key government institutions that investigate human rights cases, the Pastrana administration has significantly weakened them by cutting their budgets, failing to adequately protect prosecutors and investigators, and failing to provide adequate funds to protect threatened witnesses.”

The most detailed and impressive recent investigation into links between state security and paramilitary forces is Human Right Watch’s 2001 report, “The ‘Sixth Division’: Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia”. There is a wry twist to the title: Colombia has five official military divisions. The implication is that the paramilitaries, as is standard practice in most parts of the world where they are found, serve as an adjunct to the state’s security forces: enabling the state to counter “subversion” in areas where it would otherwise be unable to—at least without resorting to the type of mass atrocities that characterize paramilitary operations across Colombia, and that could provoke an international outcry. According to the report, paramilitaries are ... fully integrated into the army’s battle strategy, coordinated with its soldiers in the field, and linked to government units via intelligence, supplies, radios, weapons, cash, and common purpose ... At their most brazen, the relationships ... involve active coordination during military operations between government and paramilitary units; communication via radios, cellular telephones, and beepers; the sharing of intelligence, including the names of suspected guerrilla collaborators; the sharing of fighters, including active-duty soldiers serving in paramilitary units and paramilitary commanders lodging on military bases; the sharing of vehicles, including army trucks used to transport paramilitary fighters; coordination of army roadblocks, which routinely let heavily-armed paramilitary fighters pass; and payments made from paramilitaries to military officers for their support. In the words of one Colombian municipal official, the

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64 Human Rights Watch, The “Sixth Division”.
The relationship between Colombian military units, particularly the army, and paramilitaries is a "marriage". The report leaves little doubt as to the terrorism that is at the heart of "Sixth Division" operations. Paramilitary activity "translates into a daily terror that is impossible to evoke in these pages", Human Rights Watch notes:

Heavily armed paramilitaries move virtually unimpeded, captured paramilitary leaders elude detention with ease, and government forces make no more than token efforts to pursue or capture paramilitaries even when they are in major cities, footsteps away from military or police bases, and engaged in macabre caravans of death. Soldiers even tell civilians that paramilitaries will follow in their wake, prompting panic and forced displacement. Witnesses brave enough to testify about the "sixth division" and its links to the security forces are threatened or murdered with numbing precision. Meanwhile, paramilitaries give exclusive interviews to dozens of journalists, address presidents, international academics, and European government ministers, meet with high-level government officials, and even claim responsibility for their crimes and promise more, methodically expanding a reign of fear town after town, street after street, home after home, heart after heart.

Some sense of how such linkages work in a given case can be gleaned from The New York Times' account of the three-day massacre in February 2000 of some 36 peasants in El Salado, a village in Bolivar province:

During the three days of killing, military and police units just a few miles away made no effort to stop the slaughter, witnesses said. At one point, they said, the paramilitaries had a helicopter flown in to rescue a fighter who had been injured trying to drag some victims from their home. Instead of fighting back, the armed forces set up a

65 Human Rights Watch, The "Sixth Division".
66 Ibid. For an account of a typical AUC attack, see Leslie Wirpsa, "Economics Fuels Return of La Violencia", National Catholic Reporter, October 1997. "William Rozo spoke in a hushed staccato from his desk at the office of the Catholic church's local Committee for Justice, Life and Peace. Flanked by posters—one heralding the rights of civilians to remain neutral during armed conflicts, another from the United Nations urging Colombians to 'join the force for peace'—Rozo gave a preliminary accounting of the massacre committed by a paramilitary squad in the town of Mapiripán. 'The diocese has a record of 26 people killed. Most were mutilated with machetes, their heads were chopped off, their chests sliced open in the sign of a cross so the bodies wouldn't float when thrown into the river. All were men. The killings began July 16 and ended July 20', Rozo, 24, said. 'It seems they used heads for soccer balls. There were heads 50 yards from bodies, next to stones that looked like goal markers', he said". 
roadblock on the way to the village shortly after the rampage began, and prevented human rights and relief groups from entering and rescuing residents. At the time of the El Salado massacre, the senior military officer in this region was Col. Ridrogio Quiñones Cárdenas, commander of the First Navy Brigade, who has since been promoted to general. As director of Naval Intelligence in the early 1990's, he was identified by Colombian prosecutors as the organizer of a paramilitary network responsible for the killings of 57 trade unionists, human rights workers and members of a left-wing political party [the UP]. In 1994, Colonel Quiñones and seven other soldiers were charged with "conspiring to form or collaborate with armed groups". But after the main witness against him was killed in a maximum security prison and the case was moved from a civilian court to a military tribunal, the colonel was acquitted.

The operational linkages and coordination between the Colombian military and paramilitaries is mirrored by the extensive crossover between the institutions, largely as a result of the recruiting of "discharged active duty military officers linked to human rights abuses and support for paramilitary groups". The paramilitaries welcome such candidates "with generous salaries, cars, cellular telephones, and even land. According to Carlos Castaño, the AUC currently employs at least thirty-five former high-ranking officers, more than one hundred former lower rank officers, and at least one thousand former professional soldiers or policemen." Human Rights Watch accuses the Colombian government of complicity in this process: its repeated dischargings of officers and soldiers suspected of complicity in paramilitary activities has been conducted "without ensuring that the information against them is fully investigated and, if appropriate, made available to the Attorney General’s office for prosecution ... [T]hese dismissals reinforce lawlessness and impunity and strengthen [the] paramilitaries".

The role of foreign aid

The relationship of paramilitary formations to outside support and sustenance is a complex one. As I have already argued, the rise or entrenching of paramilitarism and related death-squad activity frequently reflects the desire of state authorities to

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69 Human Rights Watch, The "Sixth Division".
avoid the direct connection with mass atrocities that could jeopardize foreign, especially military, aid. At the same time, many critics have argued that in key cases—notably Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s—foreign aid has been crucial to sustaining the military/paramilitary nexus. These same critics contend foreign donors have been reluctant to lean heavily on central authorities to rein in paramilitary activity, since it is at least “effective” in suppressing rebel, dissident, or narcotrafficker activity. In the Colombian case, as in El Salvador and (by a more indirect route) in Guatemala, the principal target of such allegations has been the U.S. government. Typical is the criticism levied against the Clinton administration by Human Rights Watch in its “Sixth Division” report, which stressed the longstanding U.S. military support for Colombian army units closely linked to the paramilitaries, and noted the wavering stance of U.S. government authorities towards the rampant abuses in Colombia:

On August 22, 2000, President Bill Clinton signed a waiver that lifted the human rights conditions imposed [on Colombia] by the U.S. Congress, in essence allowing security assistance to be provided to the Colombian military even as the State Department reported that some of its units continued to be implicated in support for paramilitary groups. With one signature, the White House sent a direct message to Colombia’s military leaders that overshadowed any other related to human rights. Put simply, the message was that as long as the Colombian military cooperated with the U.S. antidrug strategy, American officials would waive human rights conditions and skirt their own human rights laws. ... Even as Colombia’s high command has agreed to scrub some units for human rights problems, the rest of the military appears to have a virtual carte blanche for continued, active coordination with the paramilitary groups responsible for most human right violations in Colombia. ... The message that the United States does not take human rights seriously was underscored on January 18, 2001, when the White House announced that it would not issue a new certification or waiver.


For over four decades, the United States has trained, advised, and equipped Colombia’s soldiers and police. ... [T]he United States routinely provided training and equipment to abusive Colombian army units. In 1996—the year before the Leahy Provision became law—an End-Use Monitoring report (EUM) filed by the State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) noted that two of the Colombian Army units that received American weapons and munitions were the Fourth Brigade in Medellin, Antioquia, and the Seventh Brigade in Villavicencio, Meta. Both have notorious and extensive records of human rights abuses and collaboration with paramilitary groups”. Human Rights Watch, The “Sixth Division”.
required for the release of aid scheduled for disbursement in FY [fiscal year] 2001. The argument made was convoluted, but added up essentially to a legal loophole, a way to skirt the law and continue to fund an abusive military while minimizing the political cost of publicly ignoring a worsening human right situation.\(^2\)

There is another side to U.S. policy, however: the side that, pressured by Congress, has increasingly moved to recognize that paramilitary formations are essentially terrorist in Colombia, and to place them on the State Department’s list of active terrorist groups. The *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000* report, according to Garry Leech, “finally acknowledge[d] what human rights organizations and even the State Department’s own annual human rights reports have stated for years: the AUC is responsible for the majority of civilian massacres and human rights abuses in Colombia”.\(^3\) The AUC made it only to the “secondary list” of terrorist organizations, suggesting —very dubiously— that Colombia’s main guerrilla groups remained responsible for the bulk of terrorist violence in the country. Nonetheless, a Colombian specialist on the paramilitaries, writing even before the State Department report was issued, claimed that U.S. “efforts against paramilitarism” in Colombia were “perhaps the only positive dimension of U.S. involvement in the Colombian conflict”.\(^4\) Though these sharply-differing perspectives are difficult to reconcile, the following synthesis can be attempted: 1) U.S. policymakers for many years overlooked the paramilitary presence and threat, preferring to focus on the operations of leftist guerrillas: 2) that the change in U.S. policy correlates strongly with the increasing prominence of the hemispheric “drug war” (in which paramilitaries, partly as a result of Carlos Castaño’s bold admissions, were increasingly recognized to be key players) and the entrenching of the paramilitaries as a law unto themselves across substantial swathes of the national territory (see further below); and 3) whatever the new rhetorical stance towards the paramilitaries, and whatever the limited impact of diplomatic pressure on the Colombian government to rein in paramilitary activity, intimate ties still exist between the Colombian security forces and the paramilitaries, and these ties are materially buttressed by the increasing flood of U.S. military aid to the Colombian armed forces.

\(^2\) Human Rights Watch, *The “Sixth Division”.*


\(^4\) Cubides, “From Private to Public Violence”, p. 147 (n. 3). Cubides cites as “illustrative” the statements of Ambassador Miles Frechette and Subsecretary Barry McCaffrey in November 1997. *The Economist* recently reported that “the country’s rightist paramilitaries are being ostracised abroad ... The State Department announced recently that it had suspended the American visas of four Colombians linked to them, and blacklisted 40 others”. “Guerrillas—or terrorists?”, *The Economist*, 8 December 2001, p. 37.
The Uribe Era

The growth of paramilitary "warlordism" in Colombia, together with ongoing guerrilla violence and kidnapping, was one of the key factors in the presidential elections that brought Álvaro Uribe to power in August 2002. Uribe moved quickly to exploit the security fears that had bolstered his candidacy. He announced a planned increase in the regular armed forces, from 55,000 to 100,000, along with sharp increases in police forces. It was, however, his plan to draw ordinary Colombian citizens into the struggle against terrorism of left and right that attracted the greatest notice. As governor of Antioquia province, Uribe had experimented with civilian security groups known as Convivir, which "allowed armed civilians to patrol and gather intelligence under the control of local military commanders". Now the plan was to be extended nationally, with one million citizens planned to participate. There were concomitant dangers: "It would be frankly impossible to avoid replaying [the Convivir] scenario today at the national level, with the AUC's explosive growth, budding sympathies from the middle class, and well-documented links with elements of the Colombian military". There were fears, as well, that the Colombian tradition of vendetta and "history of private retribution" would be bolstered by the new citizen force, with an invitation to "one million civilians to participate in citizen militias". Human rights groups immediately pointed out that, by Uribe's own admission, the Convivir forces had been penetrated by the paramilitaries. More generally, involving civilians on a massive scale "would blur the distinction between civilian and combatant, and would likely violate international humanitarian law". Uribe also introduced new emergency powers, imposing a "state of unrest" in mid-August, which allowed security forces to "conduct searches without presenting warrants and", while the president himself could "create special zones [known as "Zones of Consolidation"] in which travel can be restricted and curfews imposed".

The measures, and the high level of popularity that Uribe garnered in his first-round presidential victory, suggest that the civil war in Colombia may be reaching a decisive point. What is uncertain is whether the Uribe government will target paramilitary forces with the same verve that has characterized his approach to the FARC and ELN guerrillas, or view them tacitly as allies in the campaign against the guerrilla left.

Comparison and Conclusion

First, this study has sought to show that the case-studies of Mexico and (especially) Colombia are powerfully relevant to any comparative analysis of paramilitarism and

death squads, and need to be granted greater prominence in the comparative literature now emerging. Both countries display important structural and conjunctural features that have sustained and promoted paramilitarism over the decades:

- A powerful and reactionary landholding class, familiar with the practice of mobilizing “private armies” and death squads to defend their perceived interests;
- A political culture in which the “private” settling of scores, often by violent or atrocious means, is well-entrenched;
- A geography that further inhibits the extension of state control over the national territory, and allows for the creation of de facto zones in which paramilitaries and their sponsors (especially large landowners) hold sway;
- A domestic economic structure embedded in wider patterns of international trade that both create new elite interests (notably in the area of official or informal export-based agriculture) and provide important sources of material support for paramilitaries, death squads, and their sponsors;
- A state whose writ does not run effectively throughout the national territory, and that therefore permits the rise of regional and local contenders for power, though these may not formally or ideologically question the legitimacy of overall state sovereignty;\(^7\)
- A state that often identifies its own interests with those of the regional or local forces fuelling paramilitarism and death-squad activity — or at least does not consider those interests so radically opposed as to warrant effectively “cracking down” on such activity;
- A resulting trend towards de facto “sub-contracting” of state violence to paramilitary and death-squad formations; and
- A largely tolerant or disinterested international community — that is, one that has not brought decisive pressure to bear upon central states to rein in paramilitary and death-squad activity.

There are also important differences between the two cases studied here. Most obviously, paramilitarism as a social and political phenomenon has not advanced nearly as far in the Mexican context (with the arguable exception of Chiapas) as it has in Colombia. This reflects a number of factors and variables, notably the macro-stability of the Mexican state in the twentieth century; the lack of

\(^7\) Cubides offers an interesting parallel when he notes that the Colombian paramilitaries behave “are comparable, in more than one way, to what the North American tradition terms ‘typical frontier entrepreneurs’ who, in turn, were also principled promoters of private justice organizations” (“From Public to Private Violence”, p. 136). Note that such figures in the “North American tradition” rarely disputed formal state sovereignty over the areas in which they operated, at least to the extent that such sovereignty was claimed; their primary concern was to make a good living in the interstices left by weak state power.
largescale social upheavals like La Violencia in the decades following the consolidation of PRI power in the 1920s; and the Mexican government’s effective counterinsurgency response to incipient guerrilla movements in the 1960s and 1970s. (It was precisely when a significant guerrilla threat did arise, with the Chiapas rebellion of 1994, that paramilitarism began to resemble the early “self-defense” stage of the phenomenon in Colombia, though in Chiapas alone.) The use of outright terror by Mexican paramilitaries has also been more muted than in Colombia. Many of the groupings in the center of the country seem to resemble “civil defense patrols” and have kept a relatively low profile; death-squad activity has tended to be at the initiative of the state security forces or, frequently, the narcotraffickers based in northern Mexico. And there is no real comparison between the extensive control over territory and economic resources that the AUC has amassed in Colombia, and the far more restricted operations of the Mexican paramilitaries.

The rise of the AUC as a serious contender for regional power, and as a prominent national political voice, suggests that paramilitarism in its most advanced stages can spill over into warlordism, another feature of many divided and conflictive societies worldwide. Paramilitarism tends to share with warlordism a dependence on a weak central state, reliable (often informal) economic means of support, the use of violence and terror, patrimonial means of resource distribution and political mobilization, and charismatic leadership. It differs to the extent that warlordism is viewed as a) primarily an ethnic or tribal phenomenon, and b) a challenger to state power. As I indicated earlier, both these elements of warlordism, though common, do not seem to warrant presentation as definitional features of the phenomenon; and the common ground between paramilitarism and warlordism is best appreciated when the framework is relaxed to eliminate or at least downplay these supposedly essential features.

It remains to consider, in closing, the implications of paramilitarism and death-squads for conceptions and practices of governance. Clearly, the paramilitary phenomenon tends to arise at times of an absence or a crisis of central governance. Whether this takes place in a context of enduring marginalization from central authority (as in the Chiapas case), or a progressive breakdown of that authority in the face of rebel opposition (as in Colombia), the situation is tailor-made for the semi-private and irregular imposition of “security” measures by paramilitaries and death squads. This generally operates in the interests of the central state, which is why most paramilitary movements and their sponsors exhibit close (if usually informal) linkages with state authorities, and why the phenomenon as a whole can generally be analyzed under the rubric of the “sub-contracting” of state terror. Such sub-contracting offers a double advantage: freeing the state from direct security responsibilities, allowing resources to be devoted elsewhere; and protecting central authorities, to some extent at least, from the vigilance and protest of domestic and international actors, upon which the state may rely for both material benefits and prestige. In the era of the “human rights regime”, states do not have the
unchallenged free hand they once enjoyed to suppress dissidence and “subversion”. Resort to paramilitaries and death squads expands the range of possible governance strategies to include violence and terror against civilian populations, while granting the central state an important measure of “deniability”. The regime’s primary purpose is to avoid sullying its international reputation in an era when “failure to meet international norms of behavior can have all sorts of serious repercussions”, as Bruce Campbell notes. This concern attests to “the rise in interest in human rights and legal norms for state behavior”; failure to abide by such progressive international standards “can have all sorts of serious repercussions ... including loss of foreign aid, loss of tourist revenue, trade boycotts, etc”. Ironically, then, “it is quite likely that the increased concern for human rights has itself inadvertently been a contributing factor in the use of covert violence by governments, and in particular, in the use of death squads”. This is a “perverse effect” of agitation for human rights which I will explore in greater detail in the forthcoming second instalment of this paper. Its implications for the development of a global human rights regime—differently phrased, for a regime of global governance in which human rights “trump” state sovereignty—are all too apparent.

If human-rights activism can have unanticipated consequences, though, so too can the state’s encouragement of paramilitary networks. As the Colombian case shows so clearly, if allowed to reach an advanced state of development, paramilitary groups can become serious contenders for state power, at least across broad regions of the national territory. The Colombian AUC now demands a place at the table in any peace negotiations with the country’s main guerrilla groups, greatly complicating attempts to bolster the peace process. The paramilitaries’ increased power, when combined with enduring linkages to the official military and state-security forces, may also lead to the central authorities being placed “under a microscope” in exactly the fashion they had sought to avoid by sub-contracting to paramilitaries and death squads in the first place. This trend was also evident during the last years of PRI rule in Mexico, where human rights issues grew increasingly prominent in the national and international debate; events like the Acteal massacre deeply embarrassed the government and focused attention on the continuing marginalization of certain regions, like Chiapas and Guerrero, where state tolerance of military and paramilitary abuses was rife. Mexico’s claim to be entering an era of first-world-style modernization was powerfully undermined by these vestiges of the PRI’s autocratic and elitist rule.

A few avenues can be proposed for future research into paramilitarism, death squads, and warlords, in Latin America and worldwide. A key subject for exploration is the relationship between paramilitarism and death squads, on the one hand, and degrees of central governance, on the other. Are paramilitaries and death squads more likely to flourish at times of an absence or a crisis of central governance? It would seem that such movements can arise both in the context of

78 All quotes from Campbell, “Death Squads”, p. 13.
enduring marginalization from central authority (as in the case of Chiapas), or a progressive breakdown of that authority in the face of rebel opposition (as in Colombia). In either instance, the situation appears tailor-made for the semi-private and irregular imposition of "security" measures by paramilitaries and death squads. On the other hand, the link between the state and paramilitary/death squad formations is frequently both intimate in its character and critical to the functioning of these "non-state" formations. Paramilitaries and death squads can be seen as freeing the state from direct security responsibilities, allowing resources to be devoted elsewhere; and protecting central authorities, to some extent at least, from the vigilance and protest of domestic and international actors, upon which the state may rely for both material benefits and prestige. Thus there appears to be a connection between the rise of "unofficial" agents of violence, and the supportive role of a powerful, though not omnipotent, state authority.

A related line of research involves the enabling conditions for the rise of paramilitary movements, death squads, and warlordism. Some of these were explored in the comparison of Colombia and Mexico, above. Closer attention to Latin American contemporary history, however, suggests that a more rigorous typology of both paramilitary movements and warlordism is warranted. In the case of paramilitaries, the need for such careful categorization is demonstrated 1) by the absence, to this point, of serious comparative study of the phenomenon, and 2) by a genuinely fascinating recent case of paramilitarism: the rondas campesinas of Peru, whom many observers credit with playing the decisive role in the defeat of Sendero Luminoso insurgents. The rondas were extensions of traditional peasant forms of self-defence, rooted in the need to protect villages from bandits and cattle-rustlers. When Sendero launched its assault on indigenous communities of highland Peru, the rondas were rapidly reorganized to confront the perceived threats to lives and livelihoods. What is striking is that the rondas appear to have been largely spontaneous in their conception and organization. Only subsequently—some years after their proliferation—did the state, and notably the military, appear to recognize their potential utility in the struggle against terrorist subversion. And only later still were these institutions able to overcome their innate distrust of peasant organizing, especially militarized peasant organizing, and begin to integrate the rondas into their broader counterinsurgency campaign.

Thus, while on their face the Peruvian rondas resemble the paramilitary "self-defence" formations forced upon peasant communities by the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran military (to cite just two examples of a global trend), their origins

and guiding impetus were strikingly different. Thus, analyses of paramilitarism should allow for the possibility of semi-autonomous and semi-spontaneous structures arising within poor peasant communities, rather than simply being imposed from without, by the state or by powerful private actors like large landlords. A subsequent step is to attempt to theorize why and when such formations arise. A preliminary hypothesis can be advanced: that when peasant communities perceive a high level of direct threat emanating from guerrilla or other “subversive” forces, and particularly when this threat assumes the form of generalized terror, they will be more likely to mobilize against it, with or without outside assistance. When, on the other hand, subversive forces are able to garner a higher degree of popular support from peasant communities, or at least to establish a viable modus vivendi with them, paramilitary organization is much more likely to be imposed by the state, the military, or “private” actors. In the absence of such outside pressures, in fact, paramilitary formations are highly unlikely to arise.

A separate and more speculative line of inquiry is into the future of paramilitarism and death squads, particularly with reference to emerging regimes of international human rights. What is the likely impact of greater vigilance of, and activist protest against, state violations of human rights? Two opposed hypotheses can be advanced:

1. The norm-compliance hypothesis: the increasing prominence of human-rights concerns in state policymaking, and the growing role of non-governmental actors both within and outside a given nation-state, are likely to result in increased pressure upon states to conform to international rights norms, and to reduce or eliminate their support for paramilitary and death-squad formations. Such pressures may also result in increasing state confrontation of private actors (notably large landlords and regional “warlords”) to rein in their own support for these bodies.

2. The hypothesis of perverse consequences: the increasing attention to state violations of human rights may lead to an increased role for paramilitaries and death squads as subcontractors of violence that can no longer “legitimately” be undertaken by state authorities, especially the official military and police. According to Bruce Campbell, “it is quite likely that the increased concern for human rights has itself inadvertently been a contributing factor in the use of covert violence by governments, and in particular, in the use of death squads.” If this trend is a broad one, its implications for the development of a truly global human rights regime—that is, for a regime of global governance in which human rights “trump” state sovereignty—are all too apparent.

Study of paramilitary movements, death squads, and warlords fits fairly naturally into studies of global security, particularly the revisionist approach that

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80 All quotes from Campbell, “Death Squads”, p. 13.
emphasizes non-traditional threats to security and the body of scholarship examining "failed" or "quasi-" states. Revisions of existing theoretical frameworks have rarely incorporated paramilitaries and death squads into their frameworks. It is notable, for example, that Barry Buzan's classic *People, States & Fear* includes no index entries for either phenomenon. Mary Kaldor's *New & Old Wars* does emphasize paramilitaries' role and atrocities, but only in the context of the former Yugoslavia; she defines paramilitary groups as "autonomous groups of armed men generally centred around an individual leader ... mostly composed of redundant soldiers, or even whole units of redundant or breakaway soldiers which sometimes include common criminals ...". As a generalization, this seems largely untenable, and even in the former-Yugoslav context the idea of paramilitary "autonomy" is highly questionable. This again points to the need for systematic comparative studies, both within and between regions. As for contemporary warlordism, in the contemporary era it has so far been studied overwhelmingly in the African context. This again leads to problems when the framework is adapted for comparative research: in sub-Saharan Africa, as Paul Rich, an "ethnic base" has standardly underpinned warlord institutions, but this analysis seems largely irrelevant to, for example, the Colombian case-study.

Finally, and related to the above, it may be worth examining possible links between the phenomena examined here and the broader trend of "globalization" that has become such a buzz-word in scholarly study and public commentary. How does globalization affect patterns of central, regional, and local governance, and what are the implications for the growth or survival of paramilitaries, death squads, and warlords? Does globalization promote greater involvement (whether on the military or human-rights front) by outside state and nonstate actors, and with what consequences? How do paramilitary movements and warlords use globalized economic relations and communications infrastructures to support and proselytize for their activities? (The Colombian AUC’s diligent resort to both international drug-trafficking and Internet propagandizing suggests an intriguing case-study.) How do citizens and communities within afflicted countries exploit the same trends to confront the perceived threat of paramilitaries, warlords, and death squads? (The Zapatistas’ renowned international campaign to draw attention to paramilitary abuses in Chiapas, and the "Zones of Peace" projects organized in Colombia’s Chocó and Cauca regions, provide useful examples.)

The recent literature on paramilitarism, death squads, and warlords has opened up a number of promising lines of scholarly inquiry, and in the case of death squads and warlords has begun to generate significant attempts at comparative study.

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82 The examples of Chinese warlordism in the early part of the twentieth century have been extensively studied, but here I limit myself to post-World War II cases. See, e.g., David Bonavia, *China’s Warlords* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Edward A. McCord, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
and synthesis. Most research remains case-bound or regionally-bound, however, suggesting that further research will be needed to draw together the disparate strands of investigation. Likewise, there has been little attempt to integrate study of these phenomena with broader trends such as security and insecurity, globalization, and international regime formation (particularly in the fields of human rights and humanitarian intervention). The present paper represents a tentative attempt to move beyond the self-imposed restrictions of most scholarship in these fields, and to propose some fruitful avenues for future investigation. Given the prominence of paramilitarism, death squads, and to a lesser extent warlordism in Latin America, scholars of this region might be expected to play a central role in deepening the analysis.

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