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The Culture of Fear

Noam Chomsky

July 1996

North American readers of Father Giraldo's documentation of the reign of terror that engulfed Colombia during the "Dirty War" waged by the state security forces and their paramilitary associates from the early 1980s. The first is that Colombia's "democra-tatorship," as Eduardo Galeano termed this amalgam of democratic forms and totalitarian terror, has managed to compile the worst human rights record in the hemisphere in recent years, no small achievement when one considers the competition. The second is that Colombia has had accessories in crime, primary among them the government of the United States, though Britain, Israel, Germany, and others have also helped to train and arm the assassins and torturers of the narco-military-landowner network that maintains "stability" in a country that is rich in promise, and a nightmare for many of its people.

In July 1989, the U.S. State Department announced plans for subsidized sales of military equipment to Colombia, allegedly "for antinarcotics purposes." The sales were "justified" by the fact that "Colombia has a democratic form of government and does not exhibit a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights."

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A few months before, the Commission of Justice and Peace that Father Giraldo heads had published a report documenting atrocities in the first part of 1988, including over 3,000 politically-motivated killings, 273 in “social cleansing” campaigns. Political killings averaged eight a day, with seven people murdered in their homes or in the street and one “disappeared.”

Citing this report, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) added that “the vast majority of those who have disappeared in recent years are grass-roots organizers, peasant or union leaders, leftist politicians, human rights workers and other activists,” over 1500 by the time of the State Department’s praise for Colombia’s democracy and its respect for human rights. During the 1988 electoral campaigns, 19 of 87 mayoral candidates of the sole independent political party, the UP, were assassinated, along with over 100 of its other candidates. The Central Organization of Workers, a coalition of trade unions formed in 1986, had by then lost over 230 members, most of them found dead after brutal torture.

But the “democratic form of government” emerged without stain, and with no “consistent pattern of gross violations” of human rights.

By the time of the State Department’s report, the practices it found praiseworthy were being more efficiently implemented. Political killings in 1988 and 1989 rose to 11 a day, the Colombian branch of the Andean Commission of Jurists reported. From 1988 through early 1992, 9,500 people were assassinated for political reasons along with 830 disappearances and 313 massacres (between 1988 and 1990) of peasants and poor people.

Throughout these years, as usual, the primary victims of state terror were peasants. In 1988, grassroots organizations in one southern department reported a “campaign of total annihilation and scorched earth, Vietnam-style,” conducted by the military forces “in a most criminal manner, with assassinations of men, women, elderly and children. Homes and crops are burned,

obligating the peasants to leave their lands.” Also in 1988 the government of Colombia established a new judicial regime that called for “total war against the internal enemy.” It authorized “maximal criminalization of the political and social opposition,” a European-Latin American Inquiry reported in Brussels, reviewing “the consolidation of state terror in Colombia.”

As the State Department report appeared a year after these events, the Colombian Minister of Defense again articulated the doctrine of “total war” by state power “in the political, economic, and social arenas.” Guerrillas were the official targets, but as a high military official had observed in 1987, their organizations were of minor importance: “the real danger,” he explained, is “what the insurgents have called the political and psychological war,” the efforts “to control the popular elements” and “to manipulate the masses.” The “subversives” hope to influence unions, universities, media, and so on, and the government must counter this “war” with its own “total war in the political, economic, and social arenas.”

Reviewing doctrine and practice, the Brussels study concludes realistically that the “internal enemy” of the state terrorist apparatus extends to “labor organizations, popular movements, indigenous organizations, oppositional political parties, peasant movements, intellectual sectors, religious currents, youth and student groups, neighborhood organizations,” indeed any group that must be secured against undesirable influences. “Every individual who in one or another manner supports the goals of the enemy must be considered a traitor and treated in that manner,” a Colombian military manual prescribes.

The manual dates from 1963. At that time, violence in Colombia was coming to be “exacerbated by external factors,” the president of the Colombian Permanent Committee for Human Rights, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfredo Vasquez Carrizosa, wrote some years later, reviewing the outcome. “During the Kennedy administration,” he continues, Washington “took great pains to transform

our regular armies into counterinsurgency brigades, accepting the new strategy of the death squads.”

These initiatives “ushered in what is known in Latin America as the National Security Doctrine, ... not defense against an external enemy, but a way to make the military establishment the masters of the game ... [with] the right to combat the internal enemy, as set forth in the Brazilian doctrine, and the Colombian doctrine: it is the right to fight and to exterminate social workers, trade unionists, men and women who are not supportive of the establishment, and who are assumed to be communist extremists.”

The “Dirty War” escalated in the early 1980s — not only in Colombia — as the Reagan administration extended these programs throughout the region, leaving it devastated, strewn with hundreds of thousands of corpses tortured and mutilated people who might otherwise have been insufficiently supportive of the establishment, perhaps even influenced by “subversives.”

North Americans should never allow themselves to forget the origins of “the Brazilian doctrine, the Argentine doctrine, the Uruguayan doctrine, the Colombian doctrine,” and others like them. They were crafted right, then adapted by students trained and equipped right here. The basic guidelines are spelled out in U.S. manuals of counterinsurgency and “low intensity conflict.”

These are euphemisms, technical terms for state terror, a fact well known in Latin America. When Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote to President Carter in 1980 shortly before his assassination, vainly pleading with him to end U.S. support for the state terrorist, he informed the rector of the Jesuit University, Father Ellacuria, that he was prompted “by the new concept of special warfare, which consists in murderously eliminating every endeavor of the popular organizations under the allegation of Communism or terrorism ...” So Father Ellacuria reported shortly before he was assassinated by the same hands a decade later; the events framed the murderous decade with the symbolism as gruesome as it was appropriate.

over barbed wire until the flesh falls from their bones while parents are forced to watch.” “The aesthetics of terror in El Salvador is religious.” The intention is to ensure that the individual is totally subordinated to the interests of the Fatherland, which is why death squads are sometimes called the “Army of National Salvation” by the governing ARENA party.

The same is true in neighboring Guatemala. In the traditional “culture of fear,” Latin American scholar Piero Gleijeses writes, peace and order were guaranteed by ferocious repression, and its contemporary counterpart follows the same course: “Just as the Indian was branded a savage beast to justify his exploitation, so those who have sought social guerrillas, or terrorists, or drug dealers, or whatever the current term of art may be.” The fundamental reason, however, is always the same: the savage beast may fall under the influence of “subversives” who challenge the regime of injustice, oppression and terror that must continue to serve the interests of foreign investors and domestic privilege.

Throughout these grim years, nothing has been more inspiring than the courage and dedication of those who have sought to expose and overcome the culture of fear in their suffering countries. They have left martyrs, whose voices have been silenced by the powerful — yet another crime.

But they continue to struggle on. Father Giraldo’s remarkable work and eloquent words should not only inspire us, but also impel us to act to bring these terrors to an end, as we can. His testimony here contains an “urgent appeal.” It should be answered, but it does not go far enough. Our responsibilities extend well beyond. The fate of Colombians and many others hinges on our willingness and ability to recognize and meet them.

established political stability” — conclusions that are not inaccurate, if not quite in the sense he seeks to convey

The effects of U.S. arms and military training are not confined to Colombia. The record of horrors is all too full. In the Jesuit journal *America*, Rev. Daniel Santiago, a priest working in El Salvador, reported in 1990 the story of a peasant woman who returned home one day to find her mother, sister, and three children sitting around a table, the decapitated head of each person placed on the table in front of the body, the hands arranged on top “as if each body was stroking its own head.” The assassins, from the Salvadoran National Guard, had found it hard to keep the head of an 18-month-old baby in place, so they nailed the hands to it. A large plastic bowl filled with blood stood in the center of the table.

Two years earlier, the Salvadoran human rights group that continued to function despite the assassination of its founders and directors reported that 13 bodies had been found in the preceding two weeks, most showing signs of torture, including two women who had been hanged from a tree by their hair, their breasts cut off and their faces painted red. The discoveries were familiar, but the timing is significant, just as Washington was successfully completing the cynical exercise of exempting its murderous clients from the terms of the Central America peace accords that called for “justice, freedom and democracy,” “respect for human rights,” and guarantees for “the endless inviolability of all forms of life and liberty.” The record is endless, and endlessly shocking.

Such macabre scenes, which rarely reached the mainstream in the United States, are designed for intimidation. Father Santiago writes that “People are not just killed by death squads in El Salvador — they are decapitated and then their heads are placed on pikes and used to dot the landscape. Men are not just disemboweled by Salvadoran Treasury Police; their severed genitalia are stuffed in their mouths. Salvadoran women are not just raped by the national guard; their wombs are cut from their bodies and used to cover their faces. It is not enough to kill children; they are dragged

The agents of state terror are the beneficiaries of U.S. training designed to ensure that they have an “understanding of, and orientation toward, U.S. objectives,” Defense Secretary Robert McNamara informed National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy in 1965. This is a matter of particular importance “in the Latin American cultural environment,” where it is recognized that the military must be prepared to “remove government leaders from office, whenever, in the judgment of the military, the conduct of these leaders is injurious to the welfare of the nation.” It is the right of the military and those who provide them with the proper orientation who are entitled to determine the welfare of the nation, not the beasts of burden toiling and suffering and expiring in their own lands.

When the State Department announced new arms shipments as a reward for Colombia’s achievements in human rights and democracy, it surely had access to the record of atrocities that had been compiled by the leading international and Colombian human rights organizations. It was fully aware of the U.S. role in establishing and maintaining the regime of terror and oppression. The example is, unfortunately, typical of a pattern that hardly varies, as can be readily verified.

As the “Dirty War” of the 1980s took its ever more grisly toll, U.S. participation increased. From 1984 through 1992, 6,844 Colombian soldiers were trained under the U.S. international Military Education and Training Program. Over 2,000 Colombian officers were trained from 1990 to 1992, as “violence reached unprecedented levels” during the presidency of Cesar Gaviria, WOLA reported, confirming conclusions of international human rights monitors.

President Gaviria was a particular favorite of Washington, so admired that the Clinton administration imposed him as Secretary-General of the Organization of American States in a power play that aroused much resentment. “He has been very forward looking in building democratic institutions in a country where it was sometimes dangerous to do so,” the U.S. representative to the OAS explained — not inquiring into the reasons for the “dangers,” how-

ever. The training program for Colombian officers is the largest in the hemisphere, and U.S. military aid to Colombia now amounts to about half the total for the entire hemisphere. It has increased under Clinton, Human Rights Watch reports, adding that he planned to turn emergency overdrawing facilities when the Pentagon did not suffice for still further increases.

The official cover story for the participation in crime is the war “against the guerrillas and narcotrafficking operations.” In its 1989 announcement of new arms sales, the State Department could rely on its human right reports, which attributed virtually all violence to the guerrillas and narcotraffickers. Hence the U.S. is “justified” in providing military equipment and training for the mass murderers and torturers.

A month later, George Bush announced the largest shipment of arms ever authorized under the emergency provisions of the Foreign Assistance Act. The arms were not sent to the National Police, which is responsible for almost all counter-narcotic operations, but to the army. The helicopters and jet planes are useless for the drug war, as was pointed out at once, but not for other purposes. Human rights groups soon reported the bombing of villages and other atrocities. It is also impossible to imagine that Washington is not aware that the security forces it is maintaining are closely linked to the narcotrafficking operations, and that exactly as their leaders frankly say, the target is the “internal enemy” that might support or be influenced by “subversives” in some way.

A January 1994 conference on state terror organized by Jesuits in San Salvador observed that “it is important to explore ... what weight the culture of terror has had in domesticating the expectations of the majority vis-a-vis alternatives different to those of the powerful.” That is the crucial point, wherever such methods are used to subdue the “internal enemy.”

Israeli physician Ruchama Marton, who has been at the forefront of investigation of the use of torture by the security forces of her own country, points out that while confessions obtained by tor-

ture are of course meaningless, the real purpose is not confession. Rather, it is silence, “silence induced by fear.” “Fear is contagious,” she continues, “and spreads to the other members of the oppressed group, to silence and paralyze them. To impose silence through violence is torture’s real purpose, in the most profound and fundamental sense.” The same is true of all other aspects of the doctrines that have been devised and implemented with our guidance and support under a series of fraudulent guides.

To impose silence on the internal enemy is necessary in the “democratorships” that U.S. policy has sought to impose on its domains ever since it “assumed, out of self-interest, responsibility for the welfare of the world capitalist system,” in the words of diplomatic Gerald Haines, senior historian of the CIA, discussing the U.S. takeover of Brazil in 1945—and indeed before, with important echoes at home as well. It is particularly important to impose silence in the region with the highest inequality in the world, thanks in no small measure to policies of the superpower that largely controls it.

It is necessary to impose silence and spread fear in countries like Colombia, where the top three percent of the landed elite own over 70% of arable land while 57% of the poorest farmers subsist on under 3% — a country where 40% of the population live in “absolute poverty,” unable to satisfy basic subsistence needs according to an official government report in 1986, and 18% live in “absolute misery,” unable to meet nutritional needs. The Colombian Institute of Family Welfare estimates that four and a half million children under 14 are hungry, half the country’s children.

Recall that we are speaking of a country of enormous resources and potential. It has “one of the healthiest and most flourishing economies in Latin America,” Latin Americanist John Martz writes in *Current History*, lauding this triumph of capitalism in a society with “democratic structures” which, “notwithstanding inevitable flaws, are among the most solid on the continent,” a model of “well-