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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### GUERRILLAS, SOLDIERS, PARAMILITARIES, ASSASSINS, NARCOS, AND GRINGOS:

#### The Unhappy Prospects for Peace and Democracy in Colombia

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*DRIVEN BY DRUGS: U.S. POLICY TOWARD COLOMBIA.* By Russell Crandall. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002. Pp. xiv+193. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

*KILLING PEACE: COLOMBIA'S CONFLICT AND THE FAILURE OF U.S. INTERVENTION.* By Garry Leech. (New York: Information Network of the Americas, INOTA, 2002. Pp. x+106. \$10.00 paper.)

*MORE TERRIBLE THAN DEATH: MASSACRES, DRUGS, AND AMERICA'S WAR IN COLOMBIA.* By Robin Kirk. (New York: Public Affairs, 2003. Pp. xxiv+311. N.p.)

*THE HEART OF WAR IN COLOMBIA.* By Constanza Ardila Galvis. (London: Latin America Bureau, 2000. Pp. 223. N.p.)

*OUR GUERRILLAS, OUR SIDEWALKS: A JOURNEY INTO THE VIOLENCE OF COLOMBIA* (2nd ed.). By Herbert Braun. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003. Pp. 304. \$69.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

*SYSTEMS OF VIOLENCE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WAR AND PEACE IN COLOMBIA.* By Nazih Richani. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002. Pp. x+225. \$65.50 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

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*BLOOD AND FIRE: LA VIOLENCIA IN ANTIOQUIA COLOMBIA, 1946–53.*

By Mary Roldán. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Pp. xvi+392. \$64.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

*COLOMBIA: THE ECONOMIC FOUNDATION OF PEACE.* Edited by Marcelo M. Giugale, Olivier Lafourcade, and Connie Luff. (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2003. Pp. xlviii+994. \$65.00 cloth.)

*COLOMBIA AÑOS 50: INDUSTRIALES, POLÍTICA Y DIPLOMACIA.* By Eduardo Sáenz Rovner. (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002. Pp. 265. N.p.)

Finally approaching its own overblown cliché of a country awash in violence, Colombia today is not unlike Germany during the Thirty Years War. Overrun by private armies and opportunistic soldiers of fortune, it is home to many powerful people who find political and economic advantage in the fluid and lawless situation. Not surprisingly, few of these individuals show any eagerness for peace. It is a plundered land full of displaced and desperate people, and while none of the combatants is strong enough to prevail, none is so weak as to quit the field.

This violent history stands in stark contrast to the Colombian experience of the mid-twentieth century. During the 1930s and 1940s especially, Colombia's political system moved in increasingly democratic directions under the reforms instituted by the governing Liberals, a movement that achieved critical mass under Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the populist left-wing party leader. In the presidential election of 1946 Gaitán split the Liberal vote, giving the minority Conservative party the institutionally powerful presidency for the first time since 1930, although the contest did lead to his taking control of the Liberal party in 1947. It was, in fact, the Liberals that ushered in the return of political violence, so prevalent in nineteenth-century Colombia, by attempting to intimidate Gaitanista Liberals in the 1946 election. The Conservatives, aware that a reunited Liberal party under Gaitán would prevail in the 1950 presidential election, intensified the campaign of political repression begun by the establishment Liberals. It was under this cloud that Gaitán was assassinated on April 9, 1948, bringing the violence to levels not seen since the last and bloodiest conflict of the nineteenth century, the War of a Thousand Days (1899–1902). During the ensuing period known as *La Violencia* (1946–1966), Colombia suffered more than 200,000 violent deaths and hundreds of thousands more were displaced by the violence.

Ironically, from the end of World War II until the late 1990s Colombia enjoyed almost continuous economic growth, and avoided the debt crisis that plagued most of its neighbors in the region. But even in the midst of its successful capitalist expansion, Colombia also experienced almost six decades of partisan civil war. In the last thirty years, the country has undergone violent revolutionary and counterrevolutionary struggles, and

the violence of everyday life has never really ended. In the late 1960s, from the smoldering ashes of the *Violencia*, emerged the principal guerrilla groups active today. During the 1970s the “muchachos” did little more than survive, but they exhibited a new vitality in the 1980s as they successfully extracted “war taxes” from the oil industry, from wealthy landowners, and from industrialists they kidnapped, and (as the trade in cocaine became ever more lucrative) from drug traffickers. In reaction, the traffickers and the major landowners they were beginning to merge with started their own paramilitary organizations, allying themselves with the Colombian military. As this neo-*Violencia* has reheated over the last fifteen to twenty years, more than 350,000 Colombians have died violent deaths directly related to the conflict; another 2.9 million people (and counting) have become internal refugees and hundreds of thousands more have abandoned the country. The works addressed in this essay—ranging from policy pieces to memoirs, monographs, and a multi-author institutional report—seek to shed light on the origins of Colombia’s conflict and the reason it has become so protracted, and offer insight into what can be done to end it.

For some observers, the key issues are drugs and the role of the United States. Russell Crandell makes his case that U.S. policy regarding Colombia is *Driven By Drugs*. He argues that “the [efforts to override] U.S. priorities . . . in Latin America since the end of the Cold War are increasingly linked to ‘intermestic’ issues (combining international and domestic concerns)” (7). In the Colombian case, this has meant a “narcoized” foreign policy. He points out that such policies rest on a Washington consensus that “crosses ideological boundaries” (8), and has become deeply entrenched in government institutions. While there is some consistent interest in human rights, “the thrust of the congressional focus over Colombia policy” has “remained with the drug hawks” (108). Crandell shows how drugs became the central feature of U.S. policy beginning with the Reagan administration, and how invariably futile U.S. efforts have been. Since the money generated by drugs far outstrips the profits of any other agricultural commodities, their popularity has endured among small farmers. Regardless of the eradication method, cultivation springs back quickly and even diversifies after government offensives. This has led to a “glaring gap between the initial and actual results of U.S. drug policy over the course of the 1990s” (40).

Crandell shows how attempts by the guerrilla groups to enter mainstream politics have universally been met with assassinations carried out by paramilitary organizations, and that this repression coincided with the expanded opportunities for the guerrillas resulting from the booming drug trade. Although he acknowledges the involvement of both guerrillas and paramilitaries in the drug economy, he still rejects the “narco-guerrilla” concept, arguing that, “while guerrillas do

participate in the drug trade, they maintain a distinct political and economic ideology" (91). Crandell demonstrates that whereas drugs are not the cause of the conflict, and that at its core it remains a political struggle, U.S. domestic concerns about drugs assured that Clinton's Plan Colombia remained focused on the drug war. One can add that this basic dynamic has not changed under the George W. Bush administration, though the emerging emphasis on the war on terrorism has undoubtedly opened new possibilities for heightened U.S. military involvement.

In *Killing Peace*, a work even more fixated on the influence of the United States, Garry Leech outlines the failures and disruptions of U.S. intervention. Though Leech purports to deal with "the history and root causes of Colombia's violence" (a lot to do in ninety-one pages of text), most of his efforts are in demonstrating that despite the United States' resources and avowed commitment to human rights and democracy, its involvement "has only exacerbated an already dire situation" (2–3). After a quick overview, Leech zeros in on "links to the death squads" (24–29), emphasizing the role of the U.S. Army's Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formally called the School of the Americas (SOA).<sup>1</sup> Leech addresses the war on drugs, pointing out that each "victory" has only "resulted in the emergence of new, more efficient, and obscure organizations" (43). He convincingly touches on the impact of economic globalization in aggravating Colombia's economic crisis, tying it to the Dirty War and the paramilitary penchant for assassinating non-governmental activists and union leaders. These in turn are connected to the interests of U.S. corporations in Colombia, the impact of Plan Colombia on the drug war (and the continued relationship between the Colombian army to the paramilitaries), and the now vanished peace process. Though this short book is somewhat given to polemic, and was written with the 2002 Colombian presidential election in mind, it presents a succinct snapshot of the key elements at play in Colombia.

Finally, in *More Terrible than Death*, Robin Kirk addresses drugs and the role of the United States through the telling of "stories." She insists that "[stories] are where the truth of things lie." This is a highly personal and impressionistic narrative that grew out of her years as a Colombia researcher for Human Rights Watch. Kirk has traveled widely in regions that are dangerous for Colombians, and doubly so for gringa

1. By presenting a list of some of the 150 or so Colombian graduates of the SOA, Leech begs the question about the School's importance in Colombia. While it is true that the United States trains Colombian soldiers, it is also true, as I discuss further on, that Colombians have been employing different types of government sponsored, or at least sanctioned, death squads since the late 1940s. The forces of Colombian reaction do not need the gringos to teach them how to intimidate, murder, and massacre their "subversives."

human rights activists, and she spoke with many of the most important protagonists. For Kirk “what is happening there” is deeply connected to our “pleasures,” “addictions and experimentations” (xv).

She correctly senses that the roots of Colombia’s predicament are political, and that the rank-and-file Liberals were the most vulnerable targets of political murder during the opening phases of the *Violencia*. Even though both Liberals and Conservatives participated in the killing, she notes that, “clearly the Conservatives had greater resources to kill and force people to flee” (26–27, 31). Kirk intelligibly lays out the mechanics of political murder in the central squares of small towns and from the backs of motorcycles in big cities. She follows the connections between the paramilitaries and their supporters within the military establishment from their *autodefensa* origins in the 1950s, through the Vietnam era “hunter-killer” units, to the present-day *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). She also outlines the rise of the drug trade, and the relationship that flowered between drug traffickers and landowners. As she makes clear, regions controlled by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) became prime areas of coca cultivation. Guerrillas made demands on and kidnapped landowners and traffickers. In response traffickers started their own death squad called *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS) that evolved into some of today’s most brutal paramilitary groups, which also employ retired or moonlighting military personnel.

Kirk is right to point out the massive impact of drugs on Colombia’s convoluted struggles, and how all sides are now funded “one way or another” by the trade. But she goes off track when she insists that drug traffickers underwrite “their partners on the ideological left and right” who “invest their percentage in bullets and bombs” (xvii). In an attempt to be balanced, she misses the clear ideological alliance on the right, and muddles our understanding by implying a merger between guerrillas and narcos. She skims over the distinctions between the goals and methods of FARC leader Tirofijo, and those of the principal rightwing paramilitary leader, Carlos Castaño. This is symptomatic of a general denial of ideas behind the struggles of Colombian history. Taking her cue from Colombianist historians like David Bushnell, and even from Gabriel García Márquez, she asserts that what was at stake “was not, fundamentally, ideology, but power” (16).

Kirk notes the dynamics of political murder whereby demobilized guerrillas, such as those in the *Unión Patriótica* (UP, a political movement that included former FARC soldiers), have been consistently wiped out. She explains that the motivation for paramilitary massacres is most often the denuding of whole regions of troublesome guerrilla supporters. But she does not seem to follow the political implications of her own stories. She understandably scolds people in the United States for

their role in creating drug demand, but misses a fundamental problem. Although she recognizes that the consumption of recreational chemicals is not about to subside, rebuking drug users for the error of their ways is likely to have little effect. She acknowledges that “[as] long as there is demand, there will be supply” (xvii). And one could add, as long as the trade remains illegal, it will generate huge profits.

It is curious that none of these works ever raises the question of decriminalization, or explores its possible impact. By focusing on drugs and the role of the United States, as so many observers do these days, the danger of obscuring the fundamental political elements at play remains.

Two other impressionistic works dive into the dilemmas of Colombia’s situation, but from a more Colombian jumping-off point. Constanza Ardila Galvis’s *The Heart of War in Colombia*, initially published in Spanish in 1998 and now appearing in a slightly wobbly English translation with an introduction by Marcela López Levy, grew out of therapy sessions for its ten displaced subjects. Indeed, at times it is difficult to separate their personal struggles from the larger picture, though this is undoubtedly on purpose, and often locations are vague and the chronology unclear. Although it presents a messy and disjointed narrative with many conflicting points of view (her subjects run the political gamut from arch-Catholic Conservative smallholders to militant and unrepentant former guerrillas), *The Heart of War in Colombia* offers an intimate look at the impact of war on people’s lives. In structure, Ardila Galvis’s work is reminiscent of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, with each of the ten taking turns telling their stories, though its tone is immeasurably darker.

Beginning with their childhood experiences in the Violencia and its later permutations, the ten narrators present anecdotal insight into the experiences, outrages, injustices, and ideological perspectives that sustain Colombia’s conflict. They give reasons to support the guerrillas: “Who doesn’t warm to being told that you deserve respect, that you should be the owners of the land, that your children deserve an education?” (33). And they give reasons to resent them: “Yes, sure the guerrillas are good . . . so good that when we’d prepared the land for cultivation they came to charge us their damn tax” (34). They speak at great length about political murder, as when the MAS “committed massacres with the complicity of the army” and “nearly always killed unarmed peasants” (82). They remember how the UP was wiped out, and how the paramilitaries lumped all popular political movements together. “In politics [these groups] were all the same to the killers—what mattered was showing that social change was impossible” (196–97). And they show that the struggle is still, for some people anyway, about ideas. Certainly many are confused, as the participant who admitted, “I never fully understood the muchachos’ politics” (77). Yet

others insist that we cannot “invalidate the armed struggle . . . I participated with them and also fought to build a better world for everyone” (103), and point out that “if we continue to unveil the rules of the power game and how it is legitimised, we’ll be able to bring about change” (204).

Herbert “Tico” Braun also demonstrates the intense ambivalence permeating the conflict in an updated and expanded edition of his 1994 book, *Our Guerrillas, Our Sidewalks*. It chronicles the 1988 kidnapping by the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) of his brother-in-law, Jake Gambini, a Texas-born oilman and longtime resident of Colombia. Gambini was released after several months of negotiation (in which Braun himself was intimately involved) and the payment of a ransom. Braun writes in journal-entry form, recording his raw feelings and cogent observations, and includes clippings from the press and other sources. In general, this was a “normal” kidnapping and followed the usual script. The “muchachos” had been selective, had researched their target, and were (in the end) reasonable about the ransom. Aside from some psychological maneuvering with both Gambini and his family, they treated him humanely. As Braun notes, this was not a business for their personal enrichment, but a way to raise cash to advance their struggle. During the 1980s the guerrillas insisted that they only abducted industrialists or representatives of multinational corporations, and that the ransoms paid were “war taxes.” Braun makes clear his political sympathies for the left, as well as his long-held belief at the time of the kidnapping that the guerrillas were trying to fight the good fight for social justice. Yet he experienced profoundly contradictory emotions, as his abstract beliefs came into conflict with the reality of his brother-in-law’s horrendous experience. Braun could not shake his misgivings about the guerrillas’ methods and the real problems kidnapping created for their revolutionary legitimacy.

Fifteen years later, Braun’s worst fears for his native Colombia have become routine. Kidnapping is big business as lots of entrepreneurs have gotten involved, though the FARC alone holds an estimated three thousand captives. Targeted indiscriminately, the hostages include journalists, children herded off school buses, progressive leaders, and scores of people foolish enough to get in their cars and drive out of town. The clear moral distinctions the guerrillas tried to make have been engulfed by the widening practice. Popular anger generated by the phenomenon helped sweep Álvaro Uribe Vélez into office in 2002 as a “get-tough” president.

Braun asserts that the guerrillas “are more unpopular today than ever,” and at various points distances himself from their violent struggle. But he reveals a great deal of internal conflict about the road ahead, since he also seems to discount a return to more peaceful political struggles, noting that now “everyone talks as though participating in

electoral politics is tantamount to the actual practice of democracy." He laments that, "few people these days even contemplate social or economic change" (254–55). But much of his apparent pessimism could be driven by the futility of attempting conventional politics under current conditions. As he recognizes, the paramilitaries make this largely impossible. They are "committed to getting rid of most anyone who seems to express an independent public voice," killing human rights advocates, journalists, intellectuals, and so on (246).

Other recent works delve into Colombia's historical complexity in a more systematic way. Nazih Richani presents a sophisticated effort in *Systems of Violence*. Using Colombia as a comparative test case, Richani examines two fundamental issues: "why conflicts protract," and "what type of socioeconomic and political structural configurations make their peaceful resolution difficult to obtain" (2).<sup>2</sup> He argues that a "war system" arises from three conditions, all found in Colombia: the failure of institutions; the establishment of a "positive political economy" by the antagonists; and a balance of forces among the actors that results in "a comfortable impasse" (3–4). Richani locates Colombia's institutional failures within a discussion of property rights and disputes over land distribution, as well as "an endemic lack of hegemony" (15). Despite the Liberal governments' constitutional and land reform efforts, no effective solution to land struggles has been found. When the elite of both parties finally united to protect the ever more exclusive political and economic system, they agreed upon a sustained campaign of violent repression.

Based on extensive interviews conducted between 1994 and 1999, Richani walks the reader through the different perspectives of the military, the more important guerrilla groups, the paramilitaries, and the "dominant classes." During the *Violencia*, the elites allowed the military to become increasingly autonomous, and more directly responsible for security issues. Given this independence, the military could follow its own interests, which clearly did not include peace. The strategies of low-intensity war and containment created a useful stalemate for the military that furthered its long-term institutional health. Thus the military created the conditions for the guerrillas' comfortable impasse. These groups, as Richani makes clear, could not demobilize to pursue political engagement because of the consistent murder (beginning in the 1950s) of any guerrilla who laid down his arms. Also, by protecting only strategically important regions, the military gave the guerrilla groups relative freedom elsewhere. The guerrillas defended

2. In passing it should be noted that SUNY Press did a sloppy job of editing what is otherwise an excellent book. The text and notes display consistently clunky sentences, and so many grammatical rough spots, missing accent marks, and spelling mistakes that it does begin to distract at times. Authors non-native to English deserve better.



subsistence, smallholding peasants while providing services and local government. And with the growth of the drug trade, which rendered huge amounts of cash in war taxes, the guerrillas became increasingly potent military forces. By the mid 1990s, the FARC in particular, which had become the largest guerrilla force with “fronts” scattered throughout Colombia, could take on the army in pitched battle and prevail, though they remained incapable of defeating the military in its strategic strongholds.

This conflict became much more complex and unstable with the resurgence of the paramilitaries. Richani identifies “an unholy alliance” that arose in the 1983 in the Magdalena Medio between narcos, large landowners, multinational corporations, industrial groups, and the Colombian state with the foundation of *Autodefensas Campesinas* (102–103). He shows how three different paramilitary formations, those of the emerald mafias, the narcos, and the landed elite, “converged in the 1990s under a unified leadership and with a conservative political program in support of the state’s armed forces” (104). He then examines the political economy of paramilitary homicides and their impact on land struggles, arguing that “massacres became an effective tool in the process of concentration of land” and that they were also employed to eliminate the guerrillas’ base of support (120). Richani demonstrates that with the “clear trend in the increase of homicides which took hold after 1985,” the comfortable impasse was obviously eroding by the mid 1990s (127).

Finally, Richani turns to the attitudes of the “dominant classes” and the outlook for peace. Colombia’s elites have long benefited from the elimination of populist politics and the expanded opportunities for capital accumulation in the decades of growth since World War II, and this has been especially true of what Richani refers to as the “narcobourgeoisie.” But the downsides of the resort to violent repression have become clear to parts of the economic elite, especially those tied to international conglomerates. Richani conjectures (writing before 9/11) that given the growing instability of the war system, as well as the maturing inclination of important parts of the elite for peace, that the time could be “ripe” to bring an end to the war system (154).

Richani ably demonstrates that the ongoing war system has many sustaining elements beyond drugs, pointing to disputes over emeralds, gold, oil, and land. Yet one could argue that he overemphasizes the “struggle over land,” (using Barrington Moore’s term, “default axis” [5]), at the expense of overlooking the political aspects of the conflict, and his hopes for alternative crops are uninspiring. With the election of President Uribe and in the midst of U.S. concerns over “terrorist” organizations, the moment hardly seems ripe for an end to the war system.

In another work that digs into the roots of Colombia’s crisis, Mary Roldán makes a strong case “that recent and past periods of violence

are inextricably intertwined" (1).<sup>3</sup> In *Blood and Fire* she focuses on the Violencia in Antioquia during its most intense period (1946–1953). Non-Colombianistas should be advised that this is a country within a country study. At various points she affirms the differences between Antioquia and the rest of Colombia. It was more conservative (and Conservative), more Catholic, and its elite was more unified. She demonstrates that violence was more pronounced in Antioquia's peripheral zones, and argues that it was an expression of deeper cultural patterns that were in many ways more important than partisan divisions. She maintains that the violence represented a largely failed attempt by whiter-skinned *paisas* (as Antioqueños are known) in the department's core to impose a cultural hegemonic project of patriarchy, obedience, and Catholic values on the darker-skinned residents of Antioquia's peripheries, who often originated in neighboring departments. These people were also much more attuned to the 1930s Liberal reform program and likely to be Gaitanistas.

Roldán's hegemonic-project argument sounds quite plausible, though she does not return to it often nor tie it in to the dense mosaic of primary evidence presented in her four long chapters. She does a less-than-adequate job of engaging the historiography on Colombia outside of Antioquia and beyond a narrow focus on the Violencia. Roldán also seems to idealize the *paisa* elite as moderate, technocratic, and willing to compromise at the expense of the middle-class Laureanistas (followers of Laureano Gómez), who she claims became the partisan driving force of the ruling Conservative party during the Violencia.

But what Roldán does well is give a detailed portrait of the violence in its regional complexity, as well as connect the origins of political violence to elections and the process of "Conservatization" of Liberal municipalities. Most importantly, she clearly demonstrates the early links between paramilitary groups and the government on the local, depart-

3. As unassailable as this stance may be, Roldán nevertheless seriously misstepped with her use of photographs. She "demurred" regarding the use of photos of the Violencia proper, arguing that "[m]ost of the existing images of the period were ones used to fan partisan hatred by one group against another and were almost without exception lurid representations that exploited the victims and titillated the viewer but contributed little to a deeper understanding of the complexity and human sorrow of violence" (vii). Instead, she included photos of the more recent violence in Antioquia taken by Jesús Abad Colorado between 1998 and 2001, and placed them throughout the book to illustrate her narrative. This decision is deeply problematic on two levels. First, it is simply preposterous to disregard an entire genre of historical documents by pronouncing them "lurid representations." She has not proved this assertion, and in any case, it is the historian's job to deconstruct and interpret documents, photos included. Second, though there are clear parallels and continuities between the 1946–1953 and 1998–2001 periods, they are not identical. We might as well illustrate the War of a Thousand Days with photos taken during the Violencia.

mental, and national levels. Much of her book deals with “state-endorsed Conservative civilian police forces” called *contrachusmas* (43). Even before Gaitán’s assassination, Conservatives were busily “establishing the legal basis for armed civilian patrols,” and after April of 1948 they moved quickly to arrange for the “creation of permanent, auxiliary, civilian police forces at the municipal level” to carry out partisan violence (73). Using Conservative civilians gave the government plausible deniability, and training these forces amounted to little more than handing out .38 specials. Conservative mayors, of whom many had criminal records, and partisan police, in league with local Conservative extremists, drove the violence. Assassins were aided by police, mayors, party bosses, and even priests, all who called for more paramilitary units. Liberal guerrillas were often displaced Gaitanistas, and in many places, mobilized by attacks and massacres (*contrachusmas* were much more likely to attack civilians than to actually fight guerrillas). In a familiar pattern, terror made it next to impossible for guerrillas to demobilize. Roldán shows that violence was not inevitable. The *Violencia* “was not an organic development but the result of repeated provocations by the regional authorities” and was “directly proportional to the presence of irregular forces” supported by the state (127, 221).

To complete the picture, the World Bank offers a massive font of information in its report, *Colombia: The Economic Foundation of Peace*. This report was produced by three editors and over forty contributing authors who maintain that there “is now an opportunity” for Colombians to break the “deepening circle of violence, destruction, and poverty.” They acknowledge the thousands killed and millions displaced, but point to the “resilience and ingenuity of the Colombian people” that allowed them until 1998 “to keep their economy growing every single year for the previous seven decades.” Yet they also point out that there is a “disturbing message” to be found in this economic vigor: “material prosperity alone has not and will not stop the war” (1–2). The “development agenda” the World Bank authors prescribe includes three main elements: “Achieve fast and sustainable growth; Share the fruits of growth with all Colombians; [and,] Build a government of quality” (3), all within a largely neoliberal framework. Although these suggestions are obviously quite desirable, they fail to address the more immediate political dynamics at play; they also fail to acknowledge the difficulties of subduing the economic power generated by the illegal drug trade. In the end it is hard to visualize the “opportunity” they describe for the Colombian people to move toward things they have long lacked, such as an equitable distribution of wealth, effective ways to combat corruption, and a healthy judicial system.

The deficit of hope generated by the World Bank report is brought home by Eduardo Sáenz Rovner’s survey of the 1950s, *Colombia años*

50, in which he draws the parallel between the effects of orthodox liberal policies instituted by the Bank five decades ago and the results of its policy in Latin America in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The consequences, he argues, were structural and immediate, such as the erosion of health services and education, and the concentration of income in fewer hands. Indeed, Sáenz demonstrates that throughout the *Violencia*, business boomed in Colombia as the elites set out to modernize the economy, whatever the cost. This took place in an atmosphere created by the United States, he argues, whose post-World War II policy makers slammed the brakes on the process of democratization, worked to exclude leftist and labor groups from politics, and played a fundamental role in moving Colombian policy from reformist to anti-reformist. Sáenz insists that Colombian trade and business associations, a principal focus of his study, do not have a “natural affinity” for either democracy or dictatorship (25). He does show, however, that these associations have consistently exercised their power to protect the economic and political interests of the elites, and (as long as they could make money) they remained quite cozy with the utterly undemocratic regimes controlling Colombia during the worst years of the *Violencia*.

As these works confirm, the connections between the past and the present of Colombia’s conflict are clear. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, paramilitary bands emerged with overt support from and links to the regional and national governments. Then as now, civilians were not accidental casualties of fighting but often the actual targets, and the displaced survivors moved on to cities where their increasing numbers heightened social tensions. Several of the authors discussed in this review show that the guerrillas’ terror tactics and kidnappings have helped to de-legitimize their struggle, yet for a significant portion of the population, the paramilitaries are worse. And it is impossible to deny the continued base of support for the guerrillas in several regions.

At one point Robin Kirk declares that “[t]he point of Colombia’s war eludes me” (217). For insight, she could turn to one of Ardila Galvis’s therapy subjects who mused, “How do you think the war benefits the powerful?” (203). The powers that Gaitán called the *oligarquía* have prospered since his death. They control the economy to a degree undreamed of by his contemporaries, and they have successfully smashed or controlled most popular political challenges. Early on a decision was made about the costs of repressing popular politics as opposed to engaging in them, and this decision has produced a well-established pattern: instead of addressing popular concerns, it is easier and more profitable to tolerate the guerrillas in the ever more depopulated countryside, and repress popular movements in the cities. There is, of course, the possibility of some obvious but unlikely beneficial policy changes, such as really pressuring the military to dismantle the paramilitary groups,

ending the environmentally destructive but ineffective aerial fumigation of illicit crops (and in general reexamining the rationality of the war on drugs), instituting agrarian reform that would bring the guerrillas back to the table, and easing back on neoliberal austerity. But, as Ardila Galvis's speaker goes on to say, "I don't see an end to this war in the short term. There are too many people who stand to gain by continuing it. Many speak of peace, but no one really wants it" (212).