
Working on human rights in Colombia in the 1990s was an exercise in dread and frustration. The dread anticipated each morning’s headlines. There seemed to be no “floor” to the violence, as fighters on all sides seemed committed to finding ever more clever ways to mutilate the human body and devastate the human spirit. The main paramilitary leader, Carlos Castaño, led a private army known as the “Moche Cabezas,” or Head Splitters. Often, they’d dismember bodies or leave them posed in macabre dioramas on the side of the road.

The guerrillas weren’t any better. As a Human Rights Watch researcher, I remember quite clearly the day the news arrived about a tiny village called Machuca, in the same department (state) as Colombia’s second largest city, Medellin. At 2 a.m. on October 18, 1998, members of the National Liberation Army ([Ejército Nacional de Liberación] ELN) dynamited one of Colombia’s oil pipelines. An enormous, viscous glob of aerosolized oil spilled out, slid down a hill, jumped the narrow Pocuné River, and landed on the town, bursting into flame with the spark of the lanterns poor people use throughout this rural region. In an instant, 84 people burned to death.

Meanwhile, Colombia’s military routinely helped the paramilitaries conduct a “cleansing” campaign that cost thousands their lives and tens of thousands their homes and livelihoods, forcing them to flee to the country’s major cities. A common military tactic was to kill civilians, then dress them in old guerrilla uniforms already marked with bullet holes, assuming that investigators would fail to match the wound to the tear. High body counts meant faster promotions and more praise.
For their part, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia ([Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia] FARC) launched their own massacre campaign against banana workers who refused to support them and coca farmers who resisted their takeover of the cocaine business in the country's vast, southern lowlands. As Winifred Tate, a fellow human rights researcher and now anthropologist, describes in her fascinating new book, *Drugs, Thugs, and Diplomats: US Policymaking in Colombia*, this was a frantic world of daily emergencies. Paramilitary gunmen occupied villages for days, killing and dismembering their victims. Activists were pulled off buses and shot by the side of the road. Families fled their homes in the cover of darkness with only what they could carry. (1)

Next comes the frustration element, largely supplied by Washington, where in the 1980s, Congress and the White House took a new interest in Colombia due to the country's role in supplying US consumers with cocaine (and, while the opium-hating Taliban briefly ruled, heroin). Tate's introductory summary of the shift in US thinking is crisp and detailed, showing how a focus on drugs as a national health issue during the Nixon administration morphed under President George H. W. Bush and then President William Clinton into a high-tech military campaign meant to eradicate coca plants and send soldiers after traffickers and so-called "narco-guerrillas"—in other words, directly into the heart of Colombia's decades-long internal conflict. The fact that traffickers were often also the paramilitaries who were massacring and "disappearing" innocents was the kind of pesky fact I was paid to shout into what was usually a void.

As Tate notes, "Military aid became a solution to the Clinton Administration's political vulnerability generated by Republican concern about domestic drug consumption and the ongoing culture wars" (31). In this calculus, Colombia's military was championed by hawkish Democrats while the Colombian police, newly fitted with body armor, helicopters, and US dollars, were Republican darlings, their long-time chief lauded by Republican Dan Burton (R-IN) as the "world's best cop."

In her introduction, Tate describes how she first became involved as part of the policy-making machine, as an analyst for the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a human rights NGO founded during the political battles over General Auguste Pinochet's murderous rule in Chile. That gave her prime access to the shacks where the Colombian farmers who
grow coca resided and attempted to understand the forces shaping their daily lives. Meanwhile, backed by the Americans, the Colombian government sent spray planes to eradicate their livelihoods and military platoons to arrest and sometimes kill them.

Tate also began to haunt the halls of Congress, the State Department, and the NGO swirl of press conferences, briefings, strategy meetings, and late-night drink-a-thons for bewildered Colombians flown north to share their eyewitness views, mainly to the choir. After several years of this, Tate found herself drawn to examine the cultural assumptions brought to this debate by the entrenched political parties as well as how the mainly disenfranchised, poor Colombian peasants attempted to engage with the global policy-making machine to convey their views and expertise.

Following in the footsteps of pioneers like Judith Butler, Timothy Mitchell, and others, in her book Tate aims to set the frame for an anthropological analysis of what became known as Plan Colombia, with research not only in the steaming coca fields of the Putumayo but also the air-conditioned halls of Congress. The two chapters in Part I survey domestic drug policy and how it morphed into a military strategy that made eradicating drugs at the source priority. In Part II, Tate delves into the tangled realities of Colombia that US policy makers either didn’t want to or refused to understand, including the close relationship between the Colombian military and their paramilitary proxies, many also drug traffickers.

Tate’s writing is smart, and she ably deploys both the facts and anthropological theory. One inevitable feature of any book on Colombia is how much history she has to excavate to get to the core of her book. That’s no criticism. The sad fact is that few Americans knew or cared to know about what their government was up to in Colombia in the 1990s and 2000s. The summary is necessary and rich, with Tate skillfully piecing together the myriad groups, characters, and events that engaged in a debate that was largely irrelevant to mainstream American politics.

In Part III—and in the chapter titled “Origin Stories”—Tate finally digs into what she means by creating an “anthropology of policy,” phrased as a search for the “origin stories” of competing political views. Here, she faces a thorny problem. Not only does she have to describe how US policy on Colombia “legitimizes existing practice rather than originating it” (11), following the work of David Mosse (2004) (particularly his work on ethnographies of expert knowledge). She also has to fit this into an overall analysis of US foreign policy around the world and where the drug
war fits—or doesn’t—with other initiatives. It’s a kind of 3D Star Trek-style ethnographical chess, with coca farmers on the lowest board facing off against the state, American drug warriors and their opponents in the middle, and on top the broader geopolitics of the moment, with presidents and their parties calculating not only cost-benefit but also how to keep swing states like Florida and Ohio on their side of the score card. We’d likely have to add a fourth tier to fully satisfy Tate, who perceptively argues that Plan Colombia was the model for current US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, shape-shifted from a war on drugs into a “war on terror.”

Tate is certainly up to the task of teasing out these tangles. Although, I have to confess, I’m less swayed by the theory she’s brought to the argument. To me, it served more to obfuscate than illuminate these crucial questions. As an ethnographer, Tate is deeply embedded in her subject and is a virtual encyclopedia of the names, reports, conferences, and briefings that are the connective gristle of any policy. But the application of the “origin story” model didn’t convince me. Some policy makers were more than happy to trade one origin story for another, when the political winds began to blow cold. Most of the people Tate includes, especially the thickly medalled generals who are among Washington’s most consummate wonks, are not, in the end, prisoners of any “story,” but rather operators who dart and angle. Of course, the origin stories remain, but they’re a little like runway fashion, changing with each season until, in a few years’ time, they are unrecognizable.

That’s not to say that Tate’s analysis doesn’t have great value. For any student of politics or anthropology, Tate’s book sets a high bar for future researchers interested in the provocative work of shifting the gaze from the poor or marginalized to the powerful, particularly in the policy-making sphere of Washington. I think this is a vital and still under-researched area. Perhaps, I would have been more compelled by the book if Tate had done more digging on some of her prime players, whose lives, influences, and quirks are largely absent from this text. Rarely does Tate physically describe her interviewees or their surroundings, lending a flatness to the text. Since so much of the book is devoted to Washington, I was surprised to see that all of the photographs were taken in the Putumayo. It would have been refreshing to see a few Beltway images among them, underscoring the central concern of the book.

After all, those “suits” are the ones who’ll shape American policy for future generations. I can’t help but wonder, even after concluding Tate’s
book, what could change to compel Americans to really examine the ongoing—and failing—drug war. In her final chapters, Tate examines the communities on all sides of this issue: pro-law enforcement, pro-human rights, pro-legalization, pro-peasant, and so on. For her, “The utopian visions and emotional entanglements of policymakers play a central role in their efforts to orchestrate and impose social transformation abroad” (167).

Yet most of these policymakers are astoundingly ineffective in grappling with the real costs of this campaign. There’s just as much cocaine entering the US as there was when Plan Colombia was first unveiled. Negotiations with the FARC may yet bear fruit, but even a fully verified peace threatens to leave untouched the massive cocaine economy. Most top paramilitaries are jailed or dead (Castaño was likely executed by his drug thug elder brother in 2004). But kingpins continue to emerge to profit from this multi-billion dollar business.

What also seems unchanged is the “origin story” that puts the onus of illegal drugs on the producers and not the consumers. The drug trade is as powerful as ever—and unlikely to be challenged any time soon.