

Negotiating Peace

Rationale This module is designed to enhance students' understanding of internal conflict within a country by addressing the history and socio-economic climate of Columbia. Students will increase their understanding of the government as a complex institution and will gain an understanding of their own position of which political response strategies are warranted.

Materials Latin America Data Base (LADB) Article; Vocabulary; Comprehension Questions; Essay Questions

Article Summary

Colombia Might Be Edging Closer to New Peace Negotiation (Friday, August 19, 2011)

Perhaps in few countries of the world is the "peace-dialogue" concept as clearly incorporated into the political language and a society's yearning as in Colombia. That is not to say, however, that, after nearly a half century of a bloody internal war, the belligerent parties are in a constant search for some form of negotiation.

Activity

To introduce the material to students, begin by soliciting the students' prior knowledge about internal conflict within a country, civil warfare, and perceived governmental legitimacy. You may use some of the vocabulary provided to initiate discussion.

Assign the students to read the LADB article and complete the comprehension questions for homework.

Guide a whole class or divided small group discussion which encourages students to share their responses for the comprehension questions with one another. Guide the discussion towards information which will help them better understand the essay questions.

You may choose to assign students a second night of homework or choose to conduct a timed class essay. Allow students to choose which of the two essay questions to answer in written detail.

Vocabulary

Guerrilla: Spanish; "little war" typically used in English to describe a combatant or the tactics of a small independent group taking part in irregular fighting, typically against larger regular forces

Paramilitary: Unofficial force, similar organization structure, strategies, and tactics to military but not recognized or condoned by government

Counter insurgency : military actions taken by recognized government against factions who intend to challenge the government's political authority / decisions

Campeño: Spanish; subsistence farmer or resident of the countryside

Mesa de diálogo: Spanish; “table for dialogue”

Colombia Might Be Edging Closer to New Peace Negotiation

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Author: Andrés Gaudín

Perhaps in few countries of the world is the "peace-dialogue" concept as clearly incorporated into the political language and a society's yearning as in Colombia. That is not to say, however, that, after nearly a half century of a bloody internal war, the belligerent parties are in a constant search for some form of negotiation. The war is waged between the national armed forces and the **guerrilla** organizations but also involves the drug mafias' private armies and the **paramilitary** groups, which have turned the pain of Colombian society into a big business.

In the last three decades, under three administrations, three dialogue panels (*mesa de diálogo*) were set up to negotiate peace. Between 2002 and 2010, however, during the two terms of former President Álvaro Uribe, the very concept of peace was erased from official discourse. For the rightist government, the phenomenon of a strong and deeply rooted **guerrilla** force was strictly a military problem and, consequently, could only be resolved militarily.

In 2010, President Juan Manuel Santos took office. Little by little, the former defense minister has distanced himself from the shadow of his predecessor. Following passage of a law providing reparations to victims of the conflict ([NotiSur, July 8, 2011](#)), he admitted in June that Colombia's problem is not military but rather social.

In this new environment, Colombians think that, perhaps, the moment has come when, for the fourth and hopefully final time, the government and the **guerrillas** can establish the minimal basis for a peaceful future. This will, however, be impossible if the mafia armies and the **paramilitary** groups are not first eradicated.

Before the May 2010 elections in which Santos was victorious, the **guerrilla** Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the oldest **guerrilla** group in Latin America, raised the idea of resuming peace negotiations. Analysts were convinced that it was just a slogan that formed part of the FARC's political strategy aimed at influencing the electoral process and sending out a sign of its constant presence in the life of the country.

FARC makes new overture for peace talks

In late May of this year, the FARC again signaled that it wanted a "civilized exit to the conflict," lamenting that the Colombian governments of the last half century "have been under the directives of [US] imperialism" and formalizing their peace proposal. "We have never rejected a political solution to the social and armed conflict, which the Colombian oligarchy intensified with each government cycle, because the search for peace with social justice is part of our being and the reason for our struggle, alongside our conviction that we can only build it with the participation of the people," read a statement released on May 30 to mark the 47th anniversary of the founding of the organization. The document also

gave a brief summary of the history of the failed peace dialogues with the administrations of Presidents Belisario Betancur (1982-1986), César Gaviria (1990-1994), and Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002).

As it did in February 2010, before the presidential elections, the FARC defined itself, saying, "We are not warmongers nor do we fight for personal vengeance; we have no material resources or privileges to defend. We are revolutionaries of conscience committed to an unending search for a just and sovereign society."

After pointing out that it is "profoundly humanist," the FARC explained that it was "obliged to wage war against a leadership class subservient to the empire, which has systematically used violence and personal threats as a political weapon to maintain its power from Sept. 25, 1828, when it tried to assassinate the Liberator Simón Bolívar, until today, when it practices state terrorism to maintain the status quo."

The FARC says that a prerequisite to sitting down at the negotiating table is first setting certain minimal guidelines, because until now "the difficulty that Colombia has faced in achieving reconciliation through dialogues and accords has been the government's oligarchic concept of peace, which only accepts the insurgency's absolute submission to the 'established order,' or, as an alternative, 'the peace of the grave.'"

Past talks provide cautionary tale for guerrillas

The **guerrilla** document recalled how, as an outcome of the peace dialogue with Betancur, the Unión Patriótica (UP)—the legal arm of the FARC and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)—was created in May 1985 to participate in the political life of the country. That experience ended with the extermination of more than 3,000 people by the Army and the **paramilitary** groups, among them three presidential candidates, eight senators, 13 deputies, 70 city councilors, and 11 mayors ([NotiSur, May 5, 2000](#)).

"In Colombia, many good and capable people who wanted a better country and who struggled through nonviolent means, such as Jaime Pardo Leal, Bernardo Jaramillo, Manuel Cepeda [the three presidential candidates], and others were victims of premeditated murder by the state intelligence services in alliance with the paramilitaries and the mafias, enemies of the people, in an unprecedented genocide that physically liquidated an entire emerging dynamic political movement: the Unión Patriótica," said the FARC.

The last presidential candidate assassinated was Cepeda, then a national senator, in 1994 ([NotiSur, Aug. 26, 1994](#)). His case was presented to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), which, in its May 2010 ruling, defined the crime as an act of state terrorism. The IACHR ruled that Colombia had to apologize for the assassination and publically vindicate the figure of Cepeda, a ruling that Uribe ignored. Finally, on Aug. 9, in a historic act celebrated in Congress, Interior Minister Germán Vargas complied with the IACHR order.

In early June, the **campesinos**, who have said, "We civilians are bearing all the pain," expressed their support for dialogue. In a convening document for the Encuentro Nacional de Comunidades Campesinas, Afrodescendientes e Indígenas por la Paz, held Aug. 12-15, they invited the "government, business groups, military leaders, political parties, and the **guerrillas**" to participate in the event. The text emphasized the need "to look for ways to physically or however possible hear the voice of the FARC and the ELN."

They did not provide the necessary security, and the two long-standing **guerrilla** organizations could not participate in the event. The group that organized the Encuentro, the Asociación Campesina del Valle del

Río Cimitarra—winner of the national peace prize—said, "The Colombian conflict can end through dialogue and through attacking its objective causes by carrying out political, economic, and social reforms that allow the national population's living and working conditions to improve. But also through the willingness and the express political decision by the forces in contention, the government and the **guerrillas**." It is clear that the *campesinos* consider the armies of the mafias and the paramilitaries not a part of but rather beneficiaries of the conflict.

Santos holds out vague possibility of talks

From the time he took office, Santos did nothing more than condition any possibility for dialogue on prior capitulation by the **guerrilla** organizations. However, since passage of the Ley de Víctimas and his recognition of the state's full responsibility for Cepeda's assassination, a door might have been opened. In any event, the president gave a vague hint on July 5, when he spoke to bishops at the meeting of the Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia (CEC). And he did so mixing what could be defined as "the best of President Santos" and "the worst of former minister Santos."

The president highlighted the role that the Catholic Church plays "in the search for peace" and said that "what's needed is for the **guerrillas** to realize that arms will only continue to bring prison or the grave."

Santos then spoke for the first time about the possibility of establishing a *mesa de diálogo* to negotiate peace. "When we see that circumstances can be propitious, we will call on the Catholic Church to help us obtain our longed-for objective [peace], because, if the conditions are not there, our public forces will have to continue acting," he said.

For the FARC and the *campesinos*, there is a social conflict to resolve, and the government now says that when it sees the possibility for dialogue in favor of peace it will do so with the participation of the Catholic Church. The only problem is that the bishops want the armies of the mafias and the paramilitaries to sit at the same table, and those two sectors are not part of the conflict but rather are taking advantage of it to do business.

Comprehension Questions

Support your answers with passages from the article.

1. How did former President Álvaro Uribe respond to guerrilla violence?
2. What is different about recently elected President Juan Manuel Santos' approach to the problem?
3. What demands has FARC made on the government?
4. How does the history of FARC's peace talks with the government affect both parties willingness to meet?
5. What role does the president believe that the Catholic Church should play?

Potential passages that could be used to formulate response to comprehension questions:

1. *“Between 2002 and 2010, however, during the two terms of former President Álvaro Uribe, the very concept of peace was erased from official discourse. For the rightist government, the phenomenon of a strong and deeply rooted **guerrilla** force was strictly a military problem and, consequently, could only be resolved militarily.”*
2. *“In 2010, President Juan Manuel Santos took office. Little by little, the former defense minister has distanced himself from the shadow of his predecessor. Following passage of a law providing reparations to victims of the conflict, he admitted in June that Colombia's problem is not military but rather social.”*
3. *“The FARC again signaled that it wanted a ‘civilized exit to the conflict,’ lamenting that the Colombian governments of the last half century ‘have been under the directives of [US] imperialism’ and formalizing their peace proposal. ‘We have never rejected a political solution to the social and armed conflict, which the Colombian oligarchy intensified with each government cycle, because the search for peace with social justice is part of our being and the reason for our struggle, alongside our conviction that we can only build it with the participation of the people’”*
4. *The Columbian government “has systematically used violence and personal threats as a political weapon to maintain its power from Sept. 25, 1828, when it tried to assassinate the Liberator Simón Bolívar, until today, when it practices state terrorism to maintain the status quo.”*
5. *...”there is a social conflict to resolve, and the government now says that when it sees the possibility for dialogue in favor of peace it will do so with the participation of the Catholic Church.”*

Essay Questions

1. FARC, a faction of guerrilla combatants in Columbia, claims that they “are revolutionaries of conscience committed to an unending search for a just and sovereign society”. Do you think that using violent strategies makes their demands more or less likely to be heard and considered by their government? Compare FARC’s strategies to the strategies of other historical political groups, pacifist or non -pacifist, with which you are familiar.
2. FARC claims that the Columbian government has utilized force and coercion to remain in power since their attempted assassination of Simón Bolívar. Research the history and works of Simón Bolívar and how his ideology may have influenced the FARC.

Potential responses:

1. *Historical political movements using pacifist strategies: Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights and racial equality in the United States, Mahatma K. Ghandi and the caste system/religious violence in India, Nelson Mandela and apartheid in South Africa, César Chávez and farm workers’ rights in the United States. Political movements utilizing violence/paramilitary tactics: Eco-terrorism, Black Panther Party, Provisional Irish Republican Army, Minutemen Project along the US/Mexico border.*
2. *Simón Bolivar’s was the 2nd president of Venezuela. His ideology and written works advocated against imperial forces and for sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and inter-relationships of South American countries. He also supported public education for all and not just the elite.*

Standards

National Council of Social Studies <http://www.ncss.org/>

- ***Time, Continuity, and Change***
Studying the past makes it possible for us to understand the human story across time.
- ***Individuals, Groups, and Institutions***
It is important that students know how institutions are formed, what controls and influences them, how they control and influence individuals and culture, and how institutions can be maintained or changed.
- ***Power, Authority, Governance***
 - a. The development of civic competence requires an understanding of the foundations of political through, and the historical development of various structures of power, authority, and governance. It also requires knowledge of the evolving functions of these structures in contemporary U.S. society, as well as in other parts of the world.
 - b. In exploring this theme, students confront questions such as: what are the purposes and functions of government? Under what circumstances is the exercise of political power legitimate? What are the proper scope and limits of authority? How are individual rights protected and challenged within the context of majority rule? What conflicts exist among fundamental principles and values of constitutional democracy? What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a constitutional democracy?
 - c. Through student of the dynamic relationships between individual rights and responsibilities, the needs of social groups, and concepts of a just society, learners become more effective problem-solvers and decision-makers when addressing the persistent issues and social problems encountered in public life.

Common Core <http://www.corestandards.org/>

Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies

Grade 9-10

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

3. Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

Grade 11-12

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

3. Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.



Written by LAII staff, News in the Classroom modules provide an excellent way to bring Latin American current events into the classroom, while also encouraging literacy development. Each module is based upon an article in the Latin America Data Base (LADB), a subscription news service for which teachers can register to receive free access. For more information, visit <http://lail.unm.edu/>. This module was prepared by Kathryn Peters, LAII Graduate Assistant.