

The Human Side of the Colombian Conflict
More Terrible than Death: Massacres, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia
by Robin Kirk
Review by Kaia Vereide (written 6 March 2009)

Robin Kirk weaves personal experience with history in her 2003 book on the fate of human rights in Colombia, *More Terrible than Death*. She highlights the human side of the conflict using descriptions of personal encounters, narratives analyzing the lives of key figures, and stories that she worked to record and report as a Human Rights Watch advocate. As Kirk writes in her prologue, this is a story of truth, in all its complexity, “a fabric of perceptions and lived experience.”¹ Kirk does not dismiss Colombia as a nation trapped in a hopeless cycle of violence, but she has faith that most Colombians want peace. The story of her Colombian counterpart Josué Giraldo, a lawyer assassinated for his work reporting human rights abuses, weaves through the text as a representation of “all those brave individuals who continue to work for peace and justice in Colombia.”² The Colombian government, US government, FARC, cartel, and paramilitary leaders are all approached from a human standpoint that considers each of the decisions that made them who they are today. Robin Kirk draws attention to the root causes of the violence that has constantly threatened to turn advocates of peace into victims or accomplices of violence. She calls for hope in the power of individual choices, quoting her colleague Josué Giraldo, “To give up is more terrible than death.”³

More Terrible than Death follows the chain of cause and effect leading from Colombia's civil war in the late 1940s and 1950s (known as La Violencia), to the creation of guerilla and paramilitary groups, to the complex drug trafficking situation of today. Robin Kirk illustrates the roles of all the actors, including the role played by American cocaine consumers and American lawmakers whose actions add fuel to the fire of the Colombian conflict. Colombians have a name for the chains of events that spur on acts of revenge: *culebras*, meaning snakes.⁴ In Colombia, the *culebras* tend to run back several generations.

Throughout the history of the Colombian conflict, the United States has played a role. The stated goal of US action has been to end the violence by defeating rebellions and stamping out illegal activities, but US actions have instead often served to fuel the conflict. The US began sending military aid to Colombia in 1952; US forces provided weapons such as napalm and trained Colombian forces in tactics for eliminating the Communist settlements formed during La Violencia.⁵ Brigadier General William P. Yarborough recommended not only material aid to the civilians to win their ‘hearts and minds,’ but also clandestine ‘hunter-killer’ units to target hidden ‘subversives.’⁶ The US support aimed to end the spread of communism, yet Robin Kirk cites the US support for the government forces at this time as one of the reasons why Pedro Marín, who later became the leader of FARC and took on the name Marulanda, transformed his “independent republic” into a mobile guerilla force and declared himself a Communist.⁷

In the present day, the US sends military aid to Colombia in the name of the ‘war on drugs.’ The US government began this effort in the early 1980s, targeting the supply side in Colombia and asking for the extradition of Colombian drug lords.⁸ Colombia depends upon cocaine for wealth, and Robin Kirk cites many ties between various government officials and trafficking. It is not surprising, then, that the government would seek to label the FARC as “narco-guerillas” in order to use US aid

¹ Robin Kirk, *More Terrible than Death: Massacres, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia*, New York: Public Affairs, 2003, p. xv.

² *Ibid.*, p. xx.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49-51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54-55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

to fight them rather than using the money to really combat drugs.⁹ The US ambassador in Bogotá is viewed as a celebrity, but Kirk emphasizes the relative inability of US ambassadors to affect the state of affairs in Colombia or control how military aid is put to use. She is particularly critical of the failure to prevent US aid to government forces from funding massacres by paramilitaries, let alone ‘accidental massacres’ by police and official military forces.¹⁰ Kirk suggests that US policy towards Colombia is dominated by business interests that enable Colombians to successfully lobby for more military aid to fight their war without too much interference by human rights groups (who they consider to have a left-leaning, pro-guerilla bias).¹¹ Despite the war on drugs, Colombia is producing more cocaine than ever, and all the armed groups are linked to some extent to the trade.¹² Kirk presents the “war on drugs” in Colombia as a lost cause and favors instead greater attention to demand for drugs in the United States and greater support for human rights in Colombia. She calls on American individuals to realize that “American consumer habits pay for the bullets that cut down people like Josué as well as the gas cylinder bombs that fall on churches filled with refugees and the chain saws that dismember farmers and the rockets that slam into houses.”¹³

Kirk highlights the way ordinary people are sucked into the cycle of violence in Colombia, whether they join armed groups out of fear, are forced to collaborate, or fall victim to a massacre or forced displacement. FARC commander Marín joined a rebellion during La Violencia out of fear for his own life.¹⁴ The founder of the ELN guerilla group took up arms in revenge for the murder of his father.¹⁵ Drug lord Pablo Escobar learned from his mother that illegal activities were a way out of poverty.¹⁶ Young assassins used by paramilitaries and cartels are drafted from the poorest slums.¹⁷ A Colombian woman named Pilar was hired to work as a secretary for a man who turned out to be a paramilitary commander, and this position led to her displacement.¹⁸ Anyone who does not actively support the forces in power is considered an enemy. Officials who tell the truth are targeted by the forces they offend. Displaced people have no homes to return to. Kirk reports a general fear among the human rights community, and reports on the death of multiple colleagues.

Yet Kirk does not say that this fear is ‘more terrible than death.’ Rather, what is terrible is the loss of hope. Kirk attributes the cycle of violence to an “absence of faith” and writes in praise of those who have resisted the *culebras* of past violence.¹⁹ She calls upon American drug users end the demand for drugs that fuels the war; she calls upon the forces behind US policy to support human rights as a priority; and above all, she calls on individuals in both the US and Colombia to not give up hope in the face of the cycles of violence.

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⁹ Ibid, p. 187.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 93, 225, 252.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 226.

¹² Ibid, p. 228, 239.

¹³ Ibid, p. 287.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 56.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 78.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 89.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 275-278.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.287.