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Ryan Hill, University of Idaho, undergraduate student, “The Cause and Effect of Paramilitary Groups”

Abstract: In my paper, I talk about the reasons why paramilitary groups form while listing examples of groups for each factor. I go over items such as vigilantism and I bring up examples of groups in South Africa, such the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs who originally was a political group who staged protests and marches asking the police and government to do something about the gangs which were taking over the community. They later morphed in a vigilante group who began bombing and assassinating drug lords. Ideology is another item I bring up and I use the IRA as an example. They were a group who wanted to unite Ireland under one rule and get the British out. That attracted lots of members. I then examine power vacuums that can lead to paramilitary groups forming to take control of an area. For this I examine Columbia’s history of paramilitary groups and their impacts. My final item I bring up is why governments tolerate such violent groups at times and the impacts of leaving such groups unchecked for they can cause problems for the government down the road.

## “The Cause and Effect of Paramilitary Groups”

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A core concern in the modern age has been about the government’s ability to provide physical protection to the populace. What happens though when people perceive a failure? Paramilitary groups have often formed because of a government failing to protect their people from a perceived threat, such groups include the United Self Defense Forces of Columbia who formed in response to relentless attacks and extortion perpetrated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

The definition of a paramilitary group is a semi-militarized force whose organizational structure, tactics, training, subculture, and (often) function are similar to those of a professional military, but which is not included as part of a state's formal armed forces. Now according to some definitions, the police and border security forces are defined under “paramilitary organizations,” since they receive military-like training and act like an elite force, however they work for the government; which means they have to follow laws and have restrictions that are placed upon them by the government, and they receive state funding. The groups I shall be focusing on are the unofficial forces. They are groups who form do to fear, ideology, or even a power vacuum. These are groups who act outside the government’s power, have different ideologies, and have their own set of interests. Their interests may be either similar or contradictory to the government's stance on issues, but they all have different ways of achieving them. There are times where governments and people decide to tolerate their actions if they are assisting in a fight, however it’s dangerous to tolerate paramilitary groups and their actions

simply because they are fighting the same group the government is. Even tolerating vigilante groups can be the start of problems down the road.

Paramilitary groups are often formed due to fear fueled by vigilantism. During the 1990s the African National Congress had just recently been legalized by the president of South Africa, this was a way of easing relations between the Afrikaners and the black population.

Unfortunately, it encouraged the formation of a group known as Blanke Veiligheid - Afrikaans for White Security. There had been hostility between the Afrikaners and the ANC, mainly because the ANC had been declared a terrorist group by South Africa's government and were known for targeting the white population in bombings, and other killings. The Afrikaners see the ANC as a group that wants to kill all the whites, and the ANC views the Afrikaners as the oppressors. Unfortunately this source of vigilantism has its consequences, because a right wing group with access to fire power means that in their crusade to defend their people, innocent people get hurt in the crossfire, such as Mnikelo Ndamase, who was killed on March 28, 1990 by members of Blanke Veiligheid after they found him shopping in a white neighborhood. Yet why do people flock to the Blanke Veiligheid? The answer: protection. People want to feel safe, and they will be willing to join a cause just to feel safe. One miner joined because he felt threatened when black miners were painting ANC symbols on the walls of the mines, he claimed that, "Anyone who says they're not scared is lying. Sometimes there are blacks who are pushing you and you can't do anything about it." Fear driven membership is what forms these groups.

Groups like these have become so prevalent and violent, that at times the South African government doesn't have the resources to combat them or protect the people. One solution that was introduced in 1993 was to enrol paramilitary groups to combat the rise in violent crime in

South Africa. This is a form of non-state policing, and it can range from either private security contracts, to community militias, all the way to vigilante groups. There is just one problem though, while the groups will be monitored by the police in South Africa, anyone can join, which includes the ANC, Blanke Veiligheid, Umkhonto we Sizwe (translates to the Spear of the Nation, which is an armed faction of the ANC), and the racist neo-nazi Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging; and to top it all off the order is that these groups can't be political. This already presents a problem. Expecting groups who have radically different political ideologies to work together in unison is just a recipe for disaster. I can't imagine Nazis and the ANC working together to stop crime, their ideologies differ on so many levels. While it is good that these groups will be monitored by the police, there's still problems that can arise. For one, with political groups mixed in with these paramilitary groups, political groups could potentially recruit more members for their cause. There's also the potential that groups could take advantage of these neighborhood watch groups to see where opposing groups family members live or where rival members live. So by day they act like the neighborhood watch and take notes on what the area is like, who lives in it, and the day to day life of the people, but by night they go back to their political groups and strike. The problem with putting trust into vigilante groups is that everyone has a different political agenda and it can be taken advantage of. Also, those very same neighborhood watch groups can become a big problem later if the government solely relies on them.

In Cape Town, South Africa, a group known as People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) had enough with gang violence and decided to do something about it. First they acted within the law, staging protests, marches, and demonstrations to condemn gang violence and protest police policies they believed were racist, didn't do anything to help poor colored

communities, and their slow response to organized crime. However, the group then shifted to more violent actions. They started a bombing campaign against drug dealers, they heavily publicized their assassinations against the drug lords; in just 2 years they had killed 30 drug dealers and gang leaders.

There was the expected retaliations against innocents, however it didn't deter them from their attacks against the gangs which they heavily decimated. It seemed this was a decent group that wanted to help people. They only started fighting back because they had had enough of the violence. They believed that they didn't have to work within the law if the police were not going to protect them. They were justified in their attacks if it meant that drug dealing scum were wiped off the street. However, this group later became a threat. They started shifting their attacks on police officers and police stations for weapons, they also attacked stores who refused to make 'donations' for their cause. On top of that, in 1998 they adopted anti-West Islamist values and launched bombing campaigns against businesses and other Capitalist targets.

Originally, this group had support of the media, businesses, and even some members of the government. This was a group of people who were sick of being pushed around by criminals and decided to do something about it. This support for them is what gave them a positive image, the image that they were the good guys who only wanted to help people. However, once they started becoming a terrorist group all that support disappeared. That's the problem with supporting vigilante groups, they start out being your greatest ally, and later they become your worst enemy. Because of the failure of the police department to do anything about the gangs, it left a void which was filled by vigilantism. This group was left unchecked simply because their targets were criminals. However, all it took was a little radicalization and a religious ideology to

turn this group into a grave danger for South Africa's population. What originally attracted recruits was its message of fighting gangs and people flocked to that. However, it later became a terrorist group. It shows why people join these groups, and why it's never a good idea to give these groups power.

In Columbia, a different factor drove the creation of paramilitary groups: a power vacuum. It all started with the bloody civil war between Liberals and Conservatives after the killing of populist Liberal leader on April 9, 1948, which occurred during the Inter American Conference in Bogotá. His death led to massive rioting in the streets, prompting Liberals and Conservatives to hire hitmen called pájaros (birds) who would eliminate political opponents and cause chaos for the opposing party. These men were the stepping stones for what was about to come for Columbia.

Finally, the civil war ended. There was peace between the Liberals and Conservatives, and now deals and compromises could be made. However, one group got left out of the negotiations, the communists, who then decided that the only way to achieve representation politically was through violence and thus: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, was born. Professional assassins were the stepping stones simply because they operated like them: they had some military training and guns, however they didn't work for the government. Not only that, but they could get away with all the killings, since they had no badge at all, no human rights group could hold the government accountable. The politicians were able to hire their own deathsquads to take care of business and not have to worry about consequences, because if they die, there's plenty more to hire.

The FARC formed simply because they had their own set of grievances and they believed they knew what was best for the people. While there was a treaty between the Liberals and Conservatives, there was still a power vacuum that needed to be filled, something the government couldn't do. They were left out of the negotiations, so the only way they would be able to represent themselves was by force. However, there was another factor as well that caused the ranks of the FARC to swell. Since the 1920's, the Texas Petroleum Company had been a dominant player in Columbia and had rubbed unions and Liberals the wrong way. Many settlers despised the company because in the 1950s and 60s, the company began taking land from vulnerable and defenseless settlers by forcing them to either sell the land for less than what it was worth, or use violence to forcibly remove the people. In response to this violence, people started taking the very weapons that were used to oppress them and turning them on the oppressors. The FARC swelled in numbers, and it also led to other Liberal guerilla groups forming as well. These groups targeted oil company, ranchers and businessmen as the enemy of the people who needed to be dealt with.

Unfortunately, there's always a consequence for one's actions. The FARC's attacks left another power vacuum in the country. One that the Colombian government couldn't fill simply because they didn't have the resources to put an end to the FARC extortion. Their absence was leaving a huge power vacuum that needed to be filled, and the people who were going to fill that vacuum were going to make Columbia a little more bloody. To fight the communists and protect themselves from further Communist attacks, some villages, towns, and even some ranchers decided to form their own paramilitary groups to counter the threat: United Self Defense Forces of Columbia (the AUC) .

In Columbia, the U.S actually helped the government create and fund paramilitary groups, this was in response to all the disorder in the country. The U.S and Colombian governments launched Plan Lazo which listed the goals paramilitary groups had to perform: first they had to combat enemy insurgents and second, they had to monitor and gather intelligence on the rebels, their civilian supporters, and social organizations by establishing networks throughout the country. The U.S and Colombian forces also supplied the groups with weapons so that way they could fight effectively. The support of the U.S is what formed paramilitary groups, U.S aid is a powerful item to have, they pay for the guns and they provide the funding. However, the job of keeping the groups in line falls onto the country, not the U.S. So if one group gets a little too powerful, it's out of the U.S's hands, it's now the country's problem.

It's not uncommon for governments to ally themselves with militias or other groups in war, they can provide valuable intel and fighting. Also, it helps free up government resources that can be used against a certain area where there's a higher concentration of rebels. The paramilitary groups deal with the threats that the government can't spare the resources for.

However when there's collusion, the government always lays out the ground rules for the groups: such as obeying the rules of war, and trying to minimize the amount of human rights violations. However, at times, the government simply allows paramilitary groups to do whatever they want. This is the case for the United Self Defense Forces of Columbia (the AUC). This was a right wing paramilitary group that formed up to fight the FARC and other leftist groups. It was created by the Castaño brothers after their wealthy father was kidnapped and killed by FARC guerrillas, which fueled their personal war against the FARC. When the AUC fought the FARC, they would not only go after the soldiers, but supporters as well. The Cataño brothers started this

due to their intense hatred of the FARC. Whenever they entered a territory formerly controlled by the FARC, they decided to set an example. This led to the practice of *limpieza*, where a town is massacred and attacked for being a “guerrilla nest”(pueblo guerrillero) . This practice is how the AUC from 1997 to 1999 was able to kill 19,000 people who were suspected of sympathising with guerrillas. This was a way to instil fear into the people, to discourage them from helping the other groups or else they would be shot. Because of their hatred of leftists, they were also paid by companies to assassinate union organizers as well. Coca Cola and the Chiquita Banana Company paid the AUC to be their own personal death squad to take care of union organizers. This demonstrates a problem if a group with a lot of power like the AUC isn't kept in check, they will keep killing to get the job done and it gets very difficult to stop them.

With these violations, you think the Colombian government would instantly clamp down in this activity and put a stop to it, though it's a little more complicated than it seems. The AUC was fighting not only against the leftists, but Pablo Escobar, Columbia's most feared drug lord as well. The AUC had formed a splinter group known as ‘Los Pepes’ (people persecuted by Pablo Escobar)and it had the backing of rival cartels and police officers. The government needed them to keep up the pressure on the FARC and Pablo Escobar as well because simply they were overwhelmed. They were trying to fight Escobar and other drug lords in one area, and leftists guerillas in another area, so the AUC and their splinter group was seen as necessary so government forces wouldn't be stretched thin. This is the problem with tolerating paramilitary groups, it doesn't keep them in check and they continue a reign of terror on the population. As long as they attacked the FARC, they were safe from government retaliation. Whereas when the FARC attacked, the force of the Colombian military was brought down upon them.

The FARC had to deal with self defense groups before, however another paramilitary group that was well funded and known for brutality was not what they had in mind. It shows that if one paramilitary group forms, chances are another forms in response to that groups actions. These groups will then compete to attract more people to help their cause, and the government is just powerless to stop them. It creates an endless cycle of groups being formed, and a never ending cycle of violence.

The problem with also tolerating the AUC was their habit of kidnapping and torture. While other guerilla groups did things like this, when it's a group the government is tolerating, then problems start to arise. In the town of San Carlos on October 27, 1998, 200 members of the AUC arrived and started setting up roadblocks, and frisked 1,000 people. Then, it turned violent; several local village leaders were accused of supporting guerrillas, and they were beheaded on the spot, bodies left for everyone to see. The violence didn't stop there though, they went from house to house with a list of potential suspected sympathizers and killed them. However, no one would stop them, the AUC was too powerful, and nobody wanted to cross them.

The problem with tolerating this type of violence is it sets off a chain of events, it makes it seem as though everyone can get away with killing, as long as who you are killing is an enemy of the government. In the Columbian cities of Medellin, Cali and others, death squads started popping up not only wiping out drug dealers, but petty thieves and prostitutes as well; even more shocking was that off duty police officers were a part of these death squads. There's a big problem if off duty officers are joining death squads, it means they are violating the rules police officers and not setting an example for the people. If they were in uniform, violating those results in discipline from superiors and the enemy using that as propaganda. So simply being off duty,

not in uniform, and a part of a death squad makes it ok, because they aren't representing the government at the moment, it's only them since they feel that the law is holding them back. The AUC had caused several problems for the Colombian government later in life, they interfered with peace talks between the government and the FARC and on top of it, they got involved with the drug trade (though they did do a purge to get rid of those associated with the drug trade). This is what later caused the government to go on the offensive against the AUC to put a stop to them.

We see how paramilitary groups are effective at fighting, and how they rise. It's understandable about why people join them and why governments sometimes tolerate certain groups. These groups can get their hands as dirty as they want, and it won't be tied to the government at all. War is tough and people have interests. There is a price that is paid though because of their tolerance towards such groups. They can start out as a group that wants to help, but end up becoming a terrorist group. They are seen as a necessary evil, but then what happens when that evil becomes a problem? It shows what happens when there's a power vacuum in society and government forces can't fill it. A government's failure to respond quickly or help, will lead to another group to fill the void. It's important for governments to protect their people so that way no vigilante groups will form. This is what happened in South Africa with PAGAD, who went from vigilante group to full on terrorist group. It's also critical that they avoid power vacuums in areas. If they don't have a presence in an area or aren't strong enough to stop chaos, ideological groups will seize the opportunity to gain an influence over the people in that vacuum and use them to push their ideology, this is how groups like the FARC was able to form and gain support. And if governments fail to respond adequately and protect the people, another vacuum opens up which will draw more people into an opposing side. This is how the AUC and UDA

were able to recruit, a failure of government presence and protection encouraged people to join groups that would actually protect them and get the job done.

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