

Interview - Harvey F. Kline

Written by E-International Relations

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Harvey F. Kline is Professor Emeritus at the University of Alabama. He is an expert on Latin America, specializing on Colombian politics. Professor Kline has written extensively on both Latin America and Colombia, and is the author of many books including *State Building and Conflict Resolution in Colombia, 1986-1994* (2001), *Chronicle of a Failure Foretold: The Peace Process of Colombian President Andrés Pastrana* (2007), *Showing Teeth to the Dragon: State-building by Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez* (2009), and the *Historical Dictionary of Colombia* (2012). His newest book, *Fighting Monsters in the Abyss: The Second Administration of Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2006-2010)* (2015) examines the second Uribe administration's successes and setbacks in initiatives aimed at resolving the Colombian conflict. With Howard Wiarda, he was co-author and co-editor of eight editions of the textbook, *Latin American Politics and Development*, and is currently working on the ninth edition with new coauthor and coeditor Christine Wade.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I consider 'my field' to be the study of Latin American politics in general, and Colombian politics specifically. The most exciting debates occurring within Colombian politics have to do with the current peace process under the Santos administration. Has Santos given the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the FARC) too much? Will the government be able to carry out the agreements? Will the National Liberation Army (the ELN) also negotiate a peace treaty? And, will the Colombian government be able to come up with an effective policy to deal with the 'emerging criminal bands' (*bandas criminales*, the BACRIM)?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The end of the Cold War, the appearance of the illicit drug trade, the lack of effective policies to end it, and the terrorist problem have prompted the most significant shifts in my thinking.

The Colombian government is in the final phases of peace negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the FARC). As previous administrations have failed to secure a final settlement with the guerrillas, what do you think has been different in President Santos' approach towards the insurgency?

To me, the most important change in this current round of negotiations is that neither side believes that it can win the conflict. For the Colombian government, this means that even after all of the funds from Plan Colombia and all of the successes it has had in occupying territory (especially in the Andean region), combined with the successes in killing FARC leaders, the government realizes that a military victory is not likely. For the FARC, although it's not certain what the leaders thought before, by the late 1990s it was clear that they thought a victory was indeed possible. FARC troops were closing in on the major cities, and people were afraid to leave those cities because of kidnapping. During the Uribe years, initiatives under Plan Colombia changed that.

Why do you think the FARC has been so cooperative in this current round of negotiations?

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For the same reasons stated in the previous question. In addition, FARC leaders today are younger and no longer among the founders from 52 years ago. Finally, at least according to some critics of the current peace process, the government has been willing to give more than it had before.

A final peace agreement with the country's insurgencies would be a win for the Santos administration. However, what do you think will be some of the challenges that the Colombian government will face in an immediate post-conflict environment?

Now the question is in the plural. Some experts think that a peace process with the ELN will be more difficult than the one with the FARC has been because of key ideological differences. Also, to this point the ELN has refused to stop kidnappings, something that the Santos government has said is necessary for a peace process with the insurgency to begin. In addition, the 'insurgencies' include the remnants of the paramilitary groups, the so-called 'emerging bands' and the drug dealers.

Even if the negotiations are successful with FARC and the ELN, the major challenge for the Colombian government would be in the implementation of the agreements. It will be difficult for many reasons, including the costs involved, the resistance of powerful groups, the ambiguity of land tenure in the country (legal title is lacking in many cases), and the Colombian tradition of coming up with ambitious plans without the ability or even intention of carrying them out.

Do you see parallels between the Colombian struggle with guerrilla movements and other past Latin American experiences, such as those in El Salvador, Guatemala or Nicaragua?

Yes, there are similarities. Major differences however include that Colombia is a much larger country with more physical challenges (mountains, tropical rain forest etc.), and that the Colombian guerrilla groups have been able to finance their activities through the illicit drug trade.

President Obama has recently pushed for a shift from 'Plan Colombia' to 'Peace Colombia' in the event of a successful settlement. The White House Fact Sheet states that the Peace Colombia framework is designed to help 'win the peace'. As Plan Colombia has traditionally been framed as a counter-narcotics initiative, do you feel that there will be a degree of continuity between these policies?

That continuity is a probability. Coca cultivation in Colombia has increased since the Santos government agreed to end aerial fumigation. Some experts I have interviewed hold the opinion that dealing with the drug trade is much more important than either the FARC or the ELN.

A peace deal with the FARC will mark the end of the longest, Marxist-Bolivarianist insurgency in Latin America. Historically, what do you feel have been the greatest 'lessons learned' from the emergence of 'leftist' guerrillas throughout the region?

Only in exceptional circumstances, such as the cases of Cuba and Nicaragua, are guerrilla movements successful. In some instances, apparent victories by guerrilla groups are not later approved by the constitutional process in the country. We've seen this in the case of Guatemala, and it could potentially happen in the Colombian case. Sometimes guerrilla conflicts end with an agreement between the two sides but, in the long run, nothing really changes in the country, either because the government never intended to carry out the policies it agreed to, the status quo forces are too strong, the agreements were unattainable, or some combination of these three factors.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My advice would be to develop as many methodological abilities as you can. Be prepared for change in the world and in the preferred paradigms. Remember that not all the important aspects of international relations can be reduced to a number.

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This interview was conducted by Alexandra Phelan. Alexandra is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.