News agenda of war and peace in Colombia

By Catalina Montoya Londoño

In the peace process of President Andrés Pastrana and the FARC-EP guerilla group, carried out during the first three years of his government (1999-2002), media were the arena and journalists the fundamental actors of the battle fought for the symbolic legitimization of the actors’ points of view about war and peace in Colombia. While the conflict that took place during those years grew stronger, negotiations tried to overcome the obstacles generated by the dynamics of the conflict itself, and the confidence of those involved and the general public was undermined. What role did media play in that scenario? Why were they fundamental in the warlike dynamics and policies of those years?

The “ideal” role of media was basically to serve as parallel scenarios for the discussion of different perspectives and interests arising in peace talks through the convocation of the various opinions existing in the country to a debate that should be public and democratic; this would be a way of assuming the social responsibility of media to guarantee not only the constitutional right of male and female citizens to be informed, but also the participation of the civil society in peace processes.

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But what happened with that media scenario during these years of war and failed peace? How did mass media name, show and make visible the different actors involved, directly or indirectly, in the peace process and the armed conflict, and the different positions therein? Based on what issues did media construct their news agenda concerning peace talks, and how were these issues related to the agenda of those involved in the process? How does this agenda relate to a perhaps more complex public sphere where demands, prejudices, fears, consents, divergences, opinions and arguments regarding war and peace have arisen?

The purpose of this paper is to show the preliminary results of the analysis that was made of the information presented by one of the most important Colombian newspapers, *El Tiempo*, in order to reconstruct its representations of war and peace. The paper is part of a research that aims at describing the news agenda and the debates carried out by Colombian journalism on the peace talks between President Pastrana’s government and the FARC guerrilla group (from January, 1999 to August, 2002), and from there, to analyze how these agenda and journalistic debates relate and interact in the conformation of (a) visibility sphere(s) and the public discussion on war and peace in our country.

In terms of content analysis, the method used is based on the interpretation frames defined by Gamson and Modigliani\(^2\) as a central, organizing idea having an internal structure that gives meaning to relevant issues, and that offers a number of condensed symbols that grant meaning to problems throughout time. Such frames, therefore, are sets of interpretation packages that give meaning to a particular social issue or problem\(^3\).


This approach is useful insofar as it allows to see in depth the relationship between mass media and the public opinion. It recognizes that behind the construction of media agenda there is an interaction between media’s own interpretation frames and other «official» and institutional, but also «non official» and marginal agenda, in the midst of a conflictive public space. In addition, this approach leads to the feeling that such a large number of interactions in media discourse are filtered for the general public from the moment messages are produced; once it is broadcasted, media discourse becomes a key tool for constructing the opinion and agenda of the audience and the social sectors with respect to the issue under discussion. Support to or rejection of these opinions will influence political options.

Based on this methodological approach, the discourse used by El Tiempo newspaper was analyzed for nine periods that were chosen as a sample, from 1999 to 2001:

- Period 1: Initiation of peace negotiations (January 5th to 20th, 1999)
- Period 2: Postponement of negotiations suggested by the surveillance commission; confrontations between FARC and the armed forces; visit of the Minister of Defense to obtain help from the USA (July 9th to 24th, 1999)
- Period 3: Re-initiation of peace talks; President Pastrana’s visit to the USA looking for support for Plan Colombia; protest march called No Más [Stop it] (October 15th to 30th, 1999)
- Period 4: International support to the peace process and Plan Colombia; visit of FARC and the Government to Europe; kidnapping of journalist La Chiva Cortes and guerrilla’s statement concerning “media’s little debt” (January 21st to February 5th, 2000)
- Period 5: Peace talks were indefinitely postponed due to a “necklace bomb” (May 15th to 30th, 2000)
- Period 6: Re-initiation of peace talks and prorogation of the safety haven motivated by pressures from the EU and the UNO. *Los Pozos* Agreement (January 27th to February 12th, 2001)
- Period 7: Liberation of 305 kidnapped soldiers by FARC (June 25th to July 10th, 2001)
- Period 8: Lack of confidence between the parties involved; three Irish members of the IRA were captured; the security and defense law was passed; operation *August the 7th* was carried out (August 11th to 26th, 2001)
- Period 9: Suspension of peace talks; US Ambassador in Colombia Ann Patterson declared that FARC members are narco-terrorists (October 27th to November 10th, 2001)

The sample was analyzed at several levels:

1) a *descriptive* level, in which the type of information was identified as well as the location of the news in the newspaper (interior page, first page) and the date of publication;

2) the *script structure* level, in which news were conceived as stories narrated by the journalist as part of a continuous narrative sequence of dramatic, fractioned stories whose characters play well-defined roles, with a set of rules according to which news should respond to the “wh questions” (What? How? When? Where?, etc.). This second level comprised the identification of the news event or fact, the actors involved (the four main actors of each news were identified; marginal actors were ignored), and their actions
(classified for analysis purposes as military or warlike, and rhetorical or typical of negotiation).

3) The topic structure level, focused on the dimension of the news produced around a specific topic, problem or issue, and the report of related actions, events or ideas in the form of a hypothesis that can be proved or neglected on the basis of what is reported. In this level, it was assumed that news acquire a cognitive nature since they contain a set of propositions within a system of logical-empirical cause-effect relations; according to their structure, they can be a summary (title, lead and conclusion) and a body in which hypotheses and supporting evidence are presented. The topic structures reviewed were cause explanations, that is to say, the explanations given to the problems that generate news, and proposals for the solution of the problems identified in the news.

The purpose of this paper is to point out some significant, general findings of the first stage of analysis in which two variables were crossed and systematically analyzed for each one of the levels of analysis mentioned before. In the second stage, three or more variables were crossed several times, keeping always in mind how they evolved with respect to the sample periods, and looking for correlation coefficients in order to determine interpretation frames more accurately.

**Events that became news**

A total of 355 relevant news concerning the peace process and the main actors of negotiations --FARC and the national Government-- were analyzed; the news were reported during the nine sample periods. For analysis purposes, events were identified
directly with the news, and the most significant statements that synthesized the information were registered; the general or problematic idea was considered the core of the news. As a result, eight types of events were identified around which all news were developed.

Among these events, the **statements made by the actors of the conflict** were the ones that generated more news; there were 85 articles that represent 24.93% of the sample. This finding is very interesting because it suggests the tendency to generate news based on what information sources say rather than on facts that generate political processes. This shows the great importance of the interpretation frames of those at the top of the war and peace phenomena, and the significance of meaning mobilization power of those who manage to have access to the public sphere, generate opinion trends and guide the country politically. In the second place, **war events** generated 72 news, that is to say, 21.11% of the sample. This is not an encouraging result since it demonstrates that war inspired more news than the peace negotiation process. The symbolic space was therefore saturated with facts that, in one way or another, are obstacles to reach peace.

In the third place, there were 59 articles dealing with the **internationalization of the conflict** which represent 17.30% of the news. This demonstrated, from the beginning, that the political role of the international community and its political use in Colombia to guarantee the development of peace dialogues, would be essential. Then we found that 12.32% of the sample, that is to say, 42 articles, were devoted to the **internal reactions towards the conflict and the negotiation**, a finding that reinforces the importance of the statements made by the relevant actors as a source of news.

It is interesting to see that **progress in the peace process**, with 35 articles on this topic which are equivalent to 10.26%, and the **initiation of negotiations**, with 29 cases
(8.50%), occupied such a low rank. Similarly, news (16) about the postponement of negotiations represented only 4.69% of the information, and news directly related to the paramilitary forces (3 articles corresponding to 0.88%) were last in rank, in spite of the fact that this topic was one of the central issues in the development of negotiations. Therefore, it was not the events directly related to peace negotiations and their development what motivated the largest amount of news, but rather those related with the dynamics of war and the confrontation between the actors outside negotiation. The role played by international participants in the process, as well as the internal declarations of negotiators, generated news to the largest extent.

**Main characters of the peace process and the war**

The main characters, or more frequently mentioned actors, of the narrated events and actions in the peace process were FARC members, who appeared 178 times, that is to say, in 27.68% of the total sample. The second place was obviously occupied by the government, who was mentioned 157 times that represent 24.42% of the total sample. Of course, the parties involved in the negotiation occupied most the news agenda, not only because of their participation in the dialogues but also due to their declarations and behavior outside peace talks.

National security forces followed maybe due to the importance of the military confrontations occurred during the negotiations—which ended up defining them—with an occurrence of 66 times that are equivalent to 10.26% of the news registered. Because of the importance of the international participation in the process as a political and economic support to the Colombian government, the governments of other countries followed in rank with an occurrence of 58 times, or 9.02%.
The society or civil population were next in order of occurrence, with 8.40% corresponding to 54 cases mentioned in the press. For the purpose of our study, the civil society was made up of ordinary citizens who do not belong to any movements, groups or organized associations but who, nevertheless, play an important role in news. These findings are interesting since they lead to question the apparent visibility of civilians insofar as they are organized or formally supported by some kind of organization. However, as already mentioned, it remains to be seen how this civil society is informed and described by the Newspaper in terms of the peace process and the war events during that period.

Members of the national academic sector as well as representatives of the national and international media occupied 5.13% of the news (33 appearances). They were the main characters or just parts of the news, with reality interpretation frames that either reinforced or underestimated different viewpoints about the conflict and its negotiation; they must be revealed in order to understand how much they contributed to the creation of meaning trends. This demonstrates that media and journalists, more than being simple echoes of the political process and the warlike confrontation, became also actors of those processes and competed for the legitimization of their own social interpretations and particular interests.

Other actors involved directly or indirectly in the peace process, who had a very low level of occurrence with respect to those already mentioned, were the following: national non-governmental social and civil organizations, political parties and political leaders, economic groups, governmental bodies and international organisms, international non-governmental social and civil organizations, other State organisms (control, justice administration) and labor unions.
Causes of war and peace

What generates news? Which are the agents, situations, actions and historical references that have given rise to the problem or event reported in news? Who or what is responsible for what is happening? Why did one come to the situation news speak about? From all the information collected, 29 reasons were selected among which the most frequent one was the will to fulfill already existing commitments to carry out a peace process with a negotiation agenda, thus showing the reliability and the will of the parties involved. This reason appeared 81 times, that is to say, it represents 18.37% of all causes. Much less frequent were the armed confrontations between the military and the guerrilla groups due to the strengthening of the Military Forces in the war (35 appearances, that is, 7.94%). Very close to this cause but less frequent in occurrence was the military strengthening of FARC members (32 times which are equivalent to 7.26%) which includes terrorist actions and attacks to military bases and to the electricity and oil infrastructure. From these findings, it is interesting to see how a more abstract desire for peace becomes an important cause, as opposed to some concrete warlike events that contradict the explicit desire of those participating in negotiations, and that will become the most recurrent causes of the process implementation, according to El Tiempo’s interpretation.

In addition, it is worth-mentioning that the most outstanding military actions occurred since the strategic positioning were those performed by FARC, a fact that becomes apparent when analyzing the following news causes: the territorial positioning of FARC groups by means of attacks against small towns and villages and the search for the control of larger cities (29 appearances, that is to say, 6.58% of the information). Next was the inadequate use of the safety haven by FARC, with 28 occurrences (6.35%). The differences in terms
of the role played by the actors involved directly in the negotiation (national and international) came next, with 24 occurrences which are equivalent to 5.44% of the news, followed by the manipulation of the peace process by FARC and their lack of commitment with peace, a reason that was mentioned 21 times (4.76%). Therefore, FARC’s two-folded role as negotiators and aggressors stood out as one of the reasons that explained the development of the peace process; it was considered, from beginning to end, as the cause of all obstacles and, above all, of the rupture of the peace process.

The following places were occupied by causes derived from the operative procedures and agenda of the peace talks, as well as by the actors’ harmful behavior and attitude, particularly that of the FARC members, which reinforced their negative and two-folded participation in the negotiation. The first group of causes included the differences in terms of guarantees, control and surveillance of the safety haven by the armed forces, which were mentioned 18 times (4.08%); then followed other causes, such as the consolidation of Plan Colombia and the differences with respect to resource distribution, mentioned 16 times (3.63%) each one.

As far as the second group is concerned, the economic strengthening of the FARC (alliances with drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, front organizations, the so-called miraculous fishing, bank accounts overseas, etc.) was also mentioned 16 times. People’s general fatigue caused by the fact that peace is not feasible for the economic growth of the country, as well as a fatigue caused by kidnappings, violence, forced disappearance, massacres or extortion, a cause that represented 3.40% of the news for it was mentioned 15 times. Another cause was that FARC do not show any respect for the International Humanitarian Law (a fact that may or may not be associated with FARC not being recognized as a belligerent force). The next causes were the links between FARC and
drug trafficking, mentioned 14 times (3.17%), and the FARC’s resentment caused by media coverage of events (threats made by Marulanda – “media’s little debt” - and the kidnapping of journalist “la Chiva Cortés”), mentioned 10 times which are equivalent to 2.27%.

The causes that were next in rank reinforced the negative role of the FARC in the peace process and also emphasized the positive --but not very effective-- attitude of the government, and the role of other actors having their own interests, especially that of the United States. Thus, the Government’s commitment and will of peace appeared 9 times (2.04%); the links between FARC and international terrorism; and America’s policy and particular interests in the peace process that promote a military fight against drugs, paramilitary and guerrilla groups. The next causes were the differences in managing protocols and procedures in the negotiation, which were mentioned 8 times that represent 1.81%; and America’s policy and particular interests in the peace process that promote, from September 11th on, the identification of FARC members as terrorists, a cause that was mentioned 7 times (1.59%). The following causes appeared 6 times each one (1.36%): FARC’s attacks to jails, kidnapping threats to congressmen and senators, and the liberation of kidnapped soldiers and policemen in order to force the liberation of their men. Other causes were: the State’s weakness to manage the country; the lack of clear results of the Government’s fight against paramilitary forces; and finally, people’s lost patience at the rhythm, long time of and obstacles to the negotiation. America’s policy and particular interests in the peace process that support the war were next in rank with 5 occurrences (1.13%); the same occurred with President Pastrana’s lenient and naïve attitude towards his interlocutors; the lack of visible results in the peace process; and the lack of knowledge about war and its actors. Finally, the weakness of the Armed Forces was mentioned only once (0.23%).
Proposals concerning the issues of war and peace

What should actors do? What decisions should be made? Who should face the situation? How should it be solved? What solutions are suggested at a short, medium or long term?

In our study, 35 proposals were identified as the main solutions to the negotiation and the armed conflict in Colombia.

The most recurrent proposal in the information collected was to keep the dialogues going and to look for a negotiated solution to the conflict, which requires patience and commitment from the sectors, as well as political perseverance; this proposal represented 9.44%, for it was mentioned 56 times. To gain the support of other countries and international organizations in the peace process, was mentioned 46 times (7.76%). The proposal related to the evaluation and/or improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the population (including natural resources, non radical models, knowledge of international experiences) appeared 34 times (5.73%). The following proposals were suggested 31 times and represent 5.23% of the information collected: to get the support and participation of all national sectors in the peace process, and to put an end to drug trafficking and illegal crops by means of non explicit mechanisms or ways that underestimate the armed solution to the conflict. All the proposals mentioned so far have to do with the need to maintain peace dialogues and to strengthen them in two ways: first, with the political convocation of national and international sectors to participate in the negotiation as pillars of the political process; and second, with the inclusion of two of the most significant demands of both parties, which integrate their procedural or essential views and which are not politically contradictory at all: the anti-narcotics fight (government’s interest) through non-military mechanisms (guerrilla’s condition), and the improvement of the socio-economic conditions
of the population (guerrilla) by means of non-radical models that take into account international experiences (government’s interest).

The following proposals refer to the actors’ particular interests that, in one way or the other, facilitate the process and allow some progress through very concrete concessions: the humanitarian exchange of guerilla members for soldiers and policemen; the need for FARC members to show their good intentions and to act peacefully, and/or to honor the agreements they have made; and the liberation of all those that have been kidnapped and retained by the FARC (foreign citizens, policemen, military, ordinary citizens, etc). These three proposals were mentioned 30 times (5,06%).

Besides these, there were more radical proposals that are unlikely to be accomplished in the short run, or that may be possible as far as a peace agreement is materialized; they clearly reflect the incompatibility of the parties and the real difficulties of the process, in spite of the non material and perfectly reconcilable expectations of the FARC-EP and the Government; their desires are the desires of any Colombian citizen and they function as the engine that moves the peace process. The proposal of preparing, defining and implementing an agenda for peace talks or the agreements thereof was mentioned 29 times (4,89%); ceasing fire, truce, and no negotiation while in war was mentioned 27 times (4,55%). After these proposals, two more were identified: to respect the International Humanitarian Law and to exclude civilians from the armed conflict (26 occurrences, that is to say, 4,38%)

Other interesting proposals were identified. They reveal the military strategies underlying peace negotiations and point out the need for a strategic-military invigoration as an alternative to the political strategy, in case the latter failed, although in fact it was the most
evident alternative along the whole confrontation. These statements occurred 20 times each one (3.37%) and include: the idea of putting a military and/or economic end to paramilitary forces; the idea that military positioning strengthens the parties’ position in the negotiation; and the idea that in the case negotiation is not accomplished, the parties should get ready for war and peace and either win or lose (one of them).

The proposals that followed included for the first time other national and international sectors, either through concrete participation, or through the support to the peace process or to the Establishment. Among these are: to obtain the economic and political support of the U.S. in the peace process, with 16 occurrences that represent 2.70% of the information; that Government forces should guarantee citizens’ security and/or the punishment of crime (14 mentions, 2.36%); and the need for citizens to organize demonstrations for peace and against violence, a proposal mentioned 13 appearances, that is to say, 2.19%.

The next proposals in rank take again into consideration the role of the government and the FARC, but this time they only focus on their participation in the negotiation. Such proposals were the following: the control of the safety haven (including the establishment of an international surveillance commission or the military control of the zone), with 2.02% (12 occurrences); the need for the government and/or President Pastrana to be stronger actors of the negotiation, mentioned 10 times (1.69%); the extension or maintenance of the safety haven; the request that FARC should not use intimidating language during the negotiations (9 occurrences, 1.52%); the need for clarity and compliance with the rules of the negotiation; the inclusion of the illegal sectors in the negotiation: paramilitary forces, ELN members and/or drug traffickers; the request for not militarizing and/or turning the
conflict into an international issue; and finally the promotion of a political aperture or reform that allows rebels to participate.

The least frequent proposals, though equally important to identify the interpretation frames, referred to the behavior of other key actors not directly involved in the process, such as media, the society and international actors. They also referred to specific statements that contradict previous ones, such as the militarization of drug fighting or the military fight against rebels. All these proposals reveal the underlying strategies of the negotiation like the use of violence for the achievement of political objectives. They are: media’s responsibility reflected in objectivity, discretion, and confidentiality, a proposal mentioned 8 times (1,35%); not using violence to achieve political objectives and/or as a way of balancing forces in the negotiation; and putting a military and/or economic end to rebels, with seven occurrences (1,18%) each one. There followed freedom of the press; and the persecution and/or capture of foreigners associated with international terrorism (mentioned 6 times, 1,01%); to negotiate in the middle of war; and the need for the country to support those who defend the Establishment through solidarity, denunciation and warning (mentioned 5 times which represent 0,84%). The proposal of putting an end to drug trafficking and eradicating illegal crops with the help of the army / military forces appeared four times (0,67%); finally, the need for the direct mediation of a third (international) party in the negotiations was mentioned twice (0,34%).

**Preliminary conclusions**

From period 1 to period 9, the general framework of a negotiated solution to the conflict becomes radical and turns into the framework of a political solution through armed confrontation, in which the interests and statements made by the United States after
September 11th dominate the political scenario. Such a framework becomes evident in the way FARC members are pointed out due to terrorism, drug trafficking, lack of compliance with the International Humanitarian Law and kidnapping; these crimes are reinforced by FARC’s inadequate use of the safety haven and the manipulation of the peace process.

The peace process and news discourse were coherent in the sense that both assigned the responsibility of the process to the guerrilla groups and their will. Therefore, the change in the interpretation frames was the logical consequence of a process that was assumed without any political responsibility, a negotiation with no real talks or recognition of interlocutors, based on an unprepared discourse full of good intentions but lacking adequate procedures. Negotiation meant a historical opportunity to surrender that both actors wasted.

At this first level of analysis, it is remarkable to figure out a permanent game between two parallel dynamics of events. Firstly, there is a competition between the political and military dynamics of the peace process to reach a better position in negotiations, and to have access to and significance in the symbolic space of media representation. The game refers to the convergence of two currents: on one hand, a peace process based on the exacerbated expectations of President Pastrana; from the beginning, he overtly showed his political will by agreeing to make the peace process the fundamental stone of his program and the national policy during the years that followed, by creating a safety haven, a decision that demonstrated his trust and faith in the FARC-EP, and by accepting negotiation dynamics in which domestic and foreign policies converged and supplemented each other with one single purpose in mind.
Secondly, a military invigoration policy shared by both parties, based on two pillars: a domestic strategy and the international support. In the case of the government, the policy was reflected by the anti-narcotics fight, and in the case of the guerrilla, by taking advantage of connections with international terrorists for training troops. Therefore, both actors entered a sort of military competition parallel to negotiations under three basic assumptions: first, that if peace talks failed, both armies should be prepared for an all-out war; second, that the strategic-military position served to get a better position in negotiations; in this sense, the fact that military invigoration was parallel to negotiations allowed for the pressure of agreements; and third, that the fundamental condition for initiating peace talks was that they were held in the middle of confrontation, and that disarmament would be carried out as peace agreements were reached, not as an a priori condition.

This, of course, affected not only the grounds for negotiation but also the arena of representation, since there were two different frames of reality: in one, two actors spent long hours talking about “peace”, somewhere in the Colombian territory, in the middle of some democratic dynamics where other domestic and international sectors were also called to participate in a “public audience” type of dialogue (decisions were made based on the sectors’ opinions); they became political actors giving daily official declarations to the mass media. The other reality was that on the other side of the safety haven’s fence: two actors dressed in camouflage suits, fighting to death for a strategic-military positioning and worsening the armed conflict at the expense of the lives of millions of people who were daily informed of the peace process that was taking place in the other Colombia, while in their Colombia things only got worse.
From this reality, a second movement can be identified where the ambiguities of our democracy exacerbated the dark side of war as well as the invisible, secret and hidden aspects of public scrutiny that Bobbio\textsuperscript{4} referred to as the power of invisibility in modern democracies where there are exceptional moments of power concentration that, just like wars, erode what he calls “the power of public affairs in public.” While media claimed for freedom of expression and the guaranteed practice of their (democratic) profession, the actors of the conflict did right the opposite in the middle of the conflict: they censored, persecuted, threatened and killed from that hidden power, and issued official communications from the public sphere demanding responsibility.

From this perspective, the power of visibility, invisibility and hiding converged under the guidance of the hegemonic sectors participating in the negotiations; by involving media in the political process, they took advantage of the space of visibility to create consents for or against them, to create whole movements of public opinion to force decisions, and to manipulate --with a certain degree of success-- the meaning of the military and political process; this meaning turned out to be against the process itself, and the possibility of reaching the original goal of peace in Colombia was undermined.

These convergences in the political, military and representation grounds led to the conjunction of an interpretation frame that abruptly combines the most altruistic, utopian, encouraging and conciliatory perspectives with the most warring, pragmatic and opposite views of dialoguing as the only tool for negotiation. And it is this brutal conjunction that explains how two nation schemes which are not dramatically opposite, neither in form nor in content, supported by the general desire of peace expressed by the whole country and the international community, are bound to failure from the very beginning. Powers give rise

to a nation that is mutilated by the use of weapons, and share violence as the legitimate tool for social construction, behind a political protocol and a discourse whose basic principles nobody is really opposed to.

This converging processes and the previous analysis lead to a first hypothesis concerning the peace process and the visibility regime: the government’s relative advantage in the symbolic field over the guerrilla, versus the guerrilla’s relative advantage in the strategic-military field and the possibility of improving their combat readiness thanks to the conditions under which the safety haven was established to discourage rebels from negotiating. The military forces and members of other sectors denounced this fact several times.

From the government’s interpretation frames, President Pastrana seemed --from the beginning—to take up the cause of the whole nation which was to be politically led with political transparency, good faith and the search for trust by means of concessions. Many sustain that such concessions were excessive from the moment the safety haven was established, and that they were double-edged weapons in favor of the government and the President himself, and against rebels. This becomes evident in the President’s public declaration when he announced the end of peace talks:

“We cannot take any more maltreatment and extreme cruelty from those who allegedly look for peace; it is unacceptable to sign agreements on one side, and to put rifles in the head of innocent people, on the other. Colombia says Stop it! We are tired of the guerrilla’s hypocrisy. Because of their stubbornness and deafness, guerrilla groups have made too many serious mistakes during all these years and have undermined the possibility of reaching peace. They, and
only they, have closed the doors of dialogue; they have caused Colombian people not to believe in their peace promises and their word; they have lost the chance of having a political space in the country (...) We, Colombians, have offered our open hand to the FARC and they have answered back with a slap; a slap to peace, to the future of Colombia, and to the expectations of more than 40 million countrymen and women who are fed up with their violence (...) Manuel Marulanda: I gave you my word and I kept it; I have always kept it, but you have betrayed me, and not only me but all Colombian people. From the very first moment you left empty the seat for dialoguing; I was there, guarded by your own men, ready to speak with you (...) [about the safety haven] you have transformed it into a den of kidnappers, an illegal drug laboratory, a storehouse for weapons, dynamite and stolen cars.”

This strategy, used from the beginning of the peace dialogues, allowed the establishment of the moral superiority of the government, for it was the government who had taken the risk of loosing all political credibility in the negotiation by providing the necessary conditions for the implementation of the agreements. By exacerbating FARC’s brutality, while highlighting the efficiency and professionalism of the armed forces that were just reacting accordingly to rebels’ actions, the moral inferiority of the FARC and their scapegoat condition in the obstacles to the peace process were outlined.

The visibility of FARC’s military actions was a political strategy for political discourse to condemn their actions, and therefore, to demand the implementation of the agreements that favored one of the parties (the government) and left the other one (the FARC) without any guarantees. From the symbolic perspective, the political failure of the negotiation provided its official authors with a dignity shield so that they would not have to explain how
the negotiation was designed and developed, but rather how their political will and their
good faith was betrayed by a bunch of criminals.

Besides its use as a political lifesaver in case of failure, the symbolic vandalization of the
FARC until they were considered terrorists was also used to force short-term agreements,
without success though. This pressure probably accelerated the process of changing
opinions dramatically in three years, moving them from a position of agreement and
national reconstruction where all sectors converged regardless of the time it would take, to
a progressive radicalization of opinions in favor of an all-out war, political order and
elimination of the guerrilla as a terrorist group that threatens national, regional and world
security.

Obviously, not only official declarations and the predominant interpretation frames of El
Tiempo newspaper contributed to this phenomenon. The confluence of other currents,
actors and strategic, military and political interests also played an important role in the
process. Some of these are the events occurred on September 11th and the new direction
of US foreign policy towards Colombia and the rest of the world; the increasing fatigue of
the society caused by violence; the emergence of political actors (before elections) who
radicalized their discourse in accordance with those feelings of fatigue and war intolerance
and the lack of results in the negotiation; and perhaps those incidents that involved media
directly in the conflict and the peace process; guerrilla’s management of news and
information (if it existed in official media) was seriously harmed in terms of the interest in
and tolerance towards their members and the negotiation process, according to their own
interpretation of the political process, among other things.
Finally, it should be said that some interpretation frames were clearly identified in the public sphere. According to the previous analysis, it could be said that there are three main trends that can be summarized as follows: first, the need for a political negotiation in spite of everything; second, the need for a political negotiation under certain conditions derived from the capacity of the parties involved and the effectiveness of the political process in the middle of confrontation; and third, the strategic-military factor as the axis and guide for defining the political situation within the dynamics of war and peace in our country.