

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

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Ep 93: From Hawk to Dove, Negotiating Peace after War: Former Colombia President Juan Manuel Santos

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

LT: Hi, everyone, it's Lynn Thoman, welcome to another episode. Today, I'm excited to be with President Santos who was President of Colombia from 2010 to 2018. He was the sole recipient of the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for bringing Colombia's 50 plus year civil war with more than 8 million victims to an end. I'm excited to find out how he ended a 50 plus year civil war in Colombia, with so many victims. I'm also excited to learn more about his unique and very humble leadership style, which enabled him to change from hawk to dove on war, the environment and drugs. In 2016, President Santos announced that an agreement had been made completely settling the conflict between the Colombian government and the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which was a Marxist, Leninist guerrilla group. The peace was based on a Truth and Reconciliation like approach, in which complete admission of guilt and community service by the FARC members served in place of punishment. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has a wonderful quote about President Santos. Bringing peace to Colombia, he said, "Was a really tough thing to do. This was, frankly tougher than Northern Ireland, tougher than any conflict I have been involved in and I would put the Israeli Palestinian conflict in the same bracket." Welcome, President Santos and thank you so much for your leadership and for our conversation today.

President Juan Manuel Santos: Thank you very much for having me and it's a great honor to have this conversation today with you.

LT: The honor is mine, thank you. Congratulations on establishing peace in Colombia, I understand you started out as a hawk, but changed your position to being a dove. How did that happen?

PS: I recognized that Colombia would not have a future if we continue the war and so I started to study what were the necessary conditions to have peace with the FARC, to have a successful peace process. And I studied many other peace process around the world, to see what could be applicable to the Colombian peace process. And I studied also the attempts that my predecessors because all of them had tried to make peace with the FARC, had tried to negotiate with the FARC and failed.

PS: And one of those necessary conditions that was very clear to me was that we had to tilt the military balance of power in favor of the state, because as long as the guerrillas thought that they could win through violence, then they would never negotiate in good faith. With that in mind, I had been in politics for some time, and I was appointed as Minister of Defense. And I saw the opportunity there to create that condition, that necessary condition to negotiate peace. So I started to make a profound transformation in the Armed Forces of Colombia to give them more legitimacy, I

made a big effort to change the culture of the Armed Forces, which is very difficult, because armed forces all around the world are very conservative institutions. But we succeeded and one of those conditions was to respect the human rights of everybody, of the community, even of our adversaries, of our enemies, of the FARC.

PS: And that was extremely important to acquire what you call the moral high ground. I also made many changes in the intelligence with the help of the intelligence agencies of the US, like the CIA or the British MI6 of the Israelis Mossad. And so we did tilt the balance of power and I was elected because I became a war hero. I was very effective in combating the guerrillas, combating the FARC. So I got elected President of Colombia in the year 2010, but I had always thought that the only way to finish the war is in a negotiating table.

PS: So I had to make a transition from being a hawk, a war hero to being a dove, negotiating peace, which was a very difficult transition, because they warned me that people had elected me precisely because I was a war hero and the moment I sat to negotiate with the FARC, I would be called a traitor. I would be criticized and my political capital will go down very rapidly and that was exactly what happened.

PS: But I remember somebody saying, listen, I know you want peace in the end, I know, you are convinced that your country will never take off because peace will not allow your country to take off, it's a very rich country. If you really want peace, you need to try to negotiate peace, you can maintain your popularity, I was very popular at that time. And you can maintain the applause of the public opinion by continuing the war because you are good at it. But ask yourself the following question. What if you end up very popular in your four years of your presidency? And you look back and you ask yourself, I had the opportunity to negotiate peace to save hundreds of thousands of lives. And I didn't because I wanted to maintain my popularity. Would you go to your grave with your conscience in peace?

PS: Would you really think that that would've been a good way to look back to your life? And that question, that reasoning was what really convinced me to take the risk of initiating the peace process in Columbia. It's very different. Being a hawk, you need a certain type of leadership. It's like a vertical type of leadership. You give orders, you have a strategy, you have your tactics, you rally the forces around you, and you go against your adversaries, and as long as you win, you're okay. Making peace needs a completely different type of leadership. It's much more horizontal. You have to persuade people. You have to teach. You have to convince the people of something, many times, very difficult. How do you convince a mother whose daughter had been raped and killed to accept that their perpetrators will have legal benefits in the peace process? That is very difficult. But you have to make that transition. That's how I made the transition from hawk to dove.

LT: How did you convince the millions of victims of the FARC, those who had lost family members or whose daughters or mothers were raped, to accept what you call retributive justice, as opposed to any punishment?

PS: It was a lesson of life for me. A professor that I had, former professor in Harvard, went to visit me, and said, "Listen, you're embarking in a very very difficult journey, and you are going to be alone. And you're going to feel that you want to throw in the towel many times. So I encourage you to talk to the victims. They will re-energize you. They will give you the stamina that you need to continue, to persevere." And so I did. I started to talk to the victims to ask what happened with

them, to ask for their advice, and I thought that the victims, precisely because they were victims, were going to be the most reluctant to accept the transitional justice. The type of justice that is not the punitive justice we are accustomed to, because it includes the benefits, legal benefits for the perpetrators. But I discovered, through all these conversations that I had with them, that at the end, they all said, "No, President Santos, you must persevere. Continue. You have our support." And I asked them, "Why are you so generous with the people who committed these horrendous crimes against you?" And most of them said to me, "Because we don't want other people to suffer what we suffered." And that for me was a lesson in life. From then onward, I discovered that the human condition was much better than what I thought.

LT: You talked about the conditions for peace and making them more favorable by tilting military power in favor of the government. How did you convince the leaders of the FARC to stop fighting? And how did you convince them that peace was better for them?

PS: Well, that was also a strategy where you use the carrot and the stick. And what was the stick? The leaders of the FARC had never been touched. They were sort of war lords in the regions protected by the communities, and not one single member of what they call secretariat, which was sort of the board of directors of the FARC, had ever been touched. Well, I changed that by changing the intelligence, by changing the tactics of the military, and I started to go after, with success, the high value targets of the guerrillas. And so I offered them this, "Listen, there is a way out. You are going to be judged and sanctioned, but there is something called transitional justice." Because the peace agreement in Columbia was the first one to be negotiated under the umbrella of the Rome Statute, which was created precisely to facilitate peace processes. So I said to them, "I'm going to go after you. Now you know, because during my government and during my ministry, the military took out the number one, the number two and the number three of the guerrillas." And so they knew that, for the first time, they were in danger. And at the same time I showed them the carrot.

LT: And what was the carrot that you were offering them?

PS: A way out to be reincorporated into normal democratic civil society. Amnesty for all the soldiers, not the most responsible of the crimes, but most of the, what they call the soldiers or the guerrillas, they would have an amnesty. And the most responsible would have to be judged and sanctioned, but by a special tribunal that would be negotiated between the FARC and the government. And that was very unique of this peace process. Never before in any peace process around the world had the two parties, in an arm conflict, gone together to create a special tribunal and then accept to submit to it. That had never happened before. And this is what is happening in Colombia, and this is why all around the world, they are saying that this is a very unique precedent for other peace processes in the future.

LT: And what were the decisions with respect to the leaders of the FARC?

PS: Most of them said, yes. They got together and they decided that they would negotiate. And they started to negotiate in good faith for the first time. It was a difficult negotiation, of course. They didn't consider themselves defeated. They said, "This is a negotiation among equals." That's what they were saying, and in a way you have to respect that. And it's a negotiation, difficult negotiation, but I think it was a very successful. We not only negotiated what you call the DDR, the demobilization, the disarmament, and the reintegration. We went much further to try to correct many of the structural problems of Columbia that we have had since our independence. We are a

very unequal country with a terrible land distribution, with a lot of inequality, and...

PS: We are trying in the implementation to address these problems to make our democracy more inclusive. To give the indigenous communities and the Afro-Colombians more rights. So it went way beyond what normal peace processes have done in other parts of the world.

LT: Can you give some specific examples?

PS: Well. For example, we negotiated a rural reform that would give the peasants that had been displaced by violence, their land back and also help from the state to redo their lives. We gave the indigenous communities certain rights for them to be able to have autonomy in their health systems and their education systems. To be able to have more voice in the Congress and in the Colombian Affairs in general. The same with the Afro-Colombian community. This is the first time ever that a gender chapter was included. And it was included because I was convinced studying other peace process and studying history. That in the wars, women are the more victims of the victims. Women are the ones who suffer the most. And so I said, We need to recognize this fact, and so we need to include a complete chapter in the agreement that would give the woman a special place in the implementation of the peace of agreement and in the process. And so we did.

LT: One of your advisors was Shlomo Ben-Ami, the former Foreign Minister of Israel, who I also know. What was his advice to you on negotiation and terrorism and why was it important?

PS: Well, Shlomo Ben-Ami was one of the most important advisors because I chose some very special advisors to be my personal advisors. Shlomo Ben-Ami was one of them, Jonathan Powell a former chief of staff of the British Prime Minister and chief negotiator of the Northern Ireland peace process was another. Joaquin Villalobos was the commander of the Salvadorian Armed Forces, chief negotiator for the Salvadorian armed forces in the [inaudible] Of the Salvadorian guerrillas in the Salvadorian peace agreement. And he was also an advisor.

PS: And Shlomo Ben-Ami he was the one who told me about what would I feel at the end of my government if I had not, at least tried to make peace. For example, he gave me another very good advice, which I started to call the Rabin doctrine. He said to me, now that you have the military balance of power in your favor, don't accept a cease fire until you have an agreement. This would put a lot of pressure on the guerillas to negotiate faster. They are very slow usually in taking and making decisions. And so I followed his advice. I did not accept a ceasefire. And I said, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. And that's how things evolved. So he was very, very important that he's a person of a friend. He just wrote a marvelous book, marvelous book, which I recommend. It's the best thing I have read about the Palestinian Israeli conflict called "Prophets Without Honor." It just came out and whoever is interested in this conflict, and in peace processes, this is a great book written by Shlomo Ben-Ami.

LT: I look forward to reading the book and I will also invite him on three takeaways. Didn't he also give you advice to the effect that you should negotiate as if there's no terrorism and fight as if there's no negotiation?

PS: Absolutely. That's what the Rabin doctrine is all about. He said, Rabin told Arafat's, we will negotiate as if terrorism did not exist, but we will continue to fight terrorism as if there is no peace process. And that's exactly what I told the guerillas. There's no cease fire until everything is agreed,

but we continue to negotiate. And it was more difficult. But looking back, I think it was a correct decision. This was risky. Many times people criticize you because why are you talking, and at the same time you are allowing these people to commit these atrocious crimes. So how can you explain that, many times that is difficult to explain. But making peace is not an easy task. It's very difficult. Many times, it's like when they say about making laws. It's like making sausages, when you see how they make sausages, it's not a very pretty scenario, but once the sausage is cooked, it tastes delicious. That happens with peace.

[chuckle]

LT: Most Leaders are very self-confident and they don't change their perspectives. You are very unusual in that your perspective on war changed from hawk to dove. And you also had a similar change on the environment and on drugs. Can you talk about how you changed your position in these other key areas as Well?

PS: Well, I was one of those citizens of the world who was rather indifferent to climate change. Being indifferent is like being a denier. Now I accept that. I had for the first time communications and I got to know our indigenous communities and with them. I also was quite indifferent. They were not very important to me, when I started to talk to them and to understand them. And they started to teach me many things about them and about their culture and about the country and about the world and about life. I started to respect them, to the extent that when I became president. When I was elected president, the day I was going to be sworn in Congress that morning, I took a plane and then a helicopter to the most important, or the oldest indigenous communities in Columbia. There are many indigenous communities in Columbia but the oldest. And I asked them for their permission because they were our older brothers to be sworn in. And if they would give me their mandate. And so they did, they gave me a baton.

PS: And they said, "You go make peace. But not only peace among human beings, you have to make peace with nature. Because human beings are at war with nature. And nature is going to retaliate. And you're going to suffer this retaliation." And a week after I got sworn in, the worst La Nina phenomenon hit Columbia. And for the first year, almost a year and a half, I had to administer a flooded country. It was pouring rain and rain and rain. And I had no idea of how to handle this. So, I asked for help. I brought in people from the multi-lateral institutions experts from the United States, among them, Vice President Gore. He went to Columbia and taught me all about climate change, all about the importance of protecting biodiversity because he knew much more than I did, how important Colombia was in terms of biodiversity and source of water. So, I started to get more and more interested, more and more understanding how important it is to fight climate change.

PS: And so I became, in this process from being indifferent to a passionate green activist, which I now am. I am convinced that this is the most important challenge that the world has and every citizen of the world must contribute to stop this climate change because otherwise, we will all perish. And so, I also had a big transformation in my life, from being almost a denier to being a passionate activist in terms of the environment. And with the drugs, also was a personal experience. The war on drugs in the world was declared back in 1971. The first convention of drugs was approved in the United Nations in 1961. And this war on drugs was very punitive with prohibition, like the prohibition that the United States applied to the sale of liquor back in the 20s.

PS: That prohibition and that very punitive approach, well, made the Columbia a country where

unfortunately, we suffered the most in this war. I think no other country in the world has suffered more in the war on drugs than Colombia. And I had to apply the established procedures in fighting drugs in all the links of the chain. And I did it. And when I became minister of defense, I went by the book, spraying the Coca plantations with herbicide a very strong herbicide, eradicating forcefully, the Coca plants and the marijuana plants going after the drug lords and going after the laboratories.

PS: And I extradited more drug dealers to the United States than any other person in the world, I sprayed more hectares than any other person in the world. And I eradicated more hectares of any other person in the world. Yet, Colombia is still the number one provider of Cocaine to the world markets. So, I learned that the only way to take away the power of the mafias, which are the ones that control the business of drug trafficking, is by regulating the market by legalizing the market as the US did in the 20s with liquor.

PS: And I use an anecdote there, which I read in a recent biography that I read about Winston Churchill, the historian is called Andrew Roberts. And he tells how Churchill went to Canada in the 20s, in 1920s. He went all across Canada, and then went to California, and asked for a drink. And they said, "Oh, Mr. Churchill, this is prohibited here in the United States." And Churchill replied, "Well, how strange this country?" Referring to the United States. "Is, here you give these fabulous amounts of money that are made by the sale of liquor to the mafias, in my country, we give it to the Treasury." That in a way encapsulates the problem.

PS: So, I am now a promoter around the world of a change in the policy of the war against drugs that we have been fighting for 70 years and we have not won. We are today worse off than we were 70 years ago. So, it's a war that fails. And war that fails, you have to change your strategy. You have to change your tactics. You probably don't know that there are more people in prison in the United States for non-violent crimes related to drug trafficking than the whole population of prisoners in Europe, this is absurd. We have to change that. There are some examples already. I use the example of Portugal, they regulated the use of drugs, all drugs, and all the collateral damage has gone down tremendously.

0:25:22.7 PS: So, I think this is a way I know it's not very popular. I know that people are afraid. There are many many studies about the consequences of legalizing. And those studies don't prove that consumption goes up. It doesn't go up. And you can do the same thing as has been done with liquor or with cigarettes, you can make a good policy to dis-encourage young people of using drugs, because today, the mafias are the ones that encourage the young people to use drugs. Even in at least in a country like mine. They go even to the schools and give them drugs in order to hook them to drugs. So, I think this is a way to fight this war in a much more effective way.

LT: You've talked about the leadership required for peace and how that's different. Can you talk more generally about your style of leadership that has enabled you to accomplish so much? Is it because of your humility, your empathy, Why do you think it's been so successful?

PS: Well, thank you for saying that it has been successful. It's a combination of many things. Empathy, you just mentioned that word is extremely important, you need to be able to put yourself in the shoes of others, especially in the shoes of the people you want to lead, this is absolutely fundamental because if you don't understand their fears, their anxieties, their goals, then it's very difficult to lead any person or any group of people. You need to know where you want to go.

PS: For example, in war, you need to know how you are going to define success, and I received a lesson when I was in the Colombian Navy, and when I arrived for the first time, I had no idea of how to sail, and they taught me how to sail. An officer of the Colombian Navy, he told me that if you want to be a good sailor, you need to know where you want to go. You have to have a port of destination, then you can use all the winds in your favor, even if they're against you, you can use them in your favor. I think that is applicable to any leader. You need to know where you want to go, what you want to achieve, define your purpose, define what your goal is, or what the success is and then persevere, rally your forces, get as much advice as you can, never think that you know everything, because then you will make mistakes. In that way be humble. Don't be afraid of asking other people that know more than you do for their help, the collective intelligence always is better than the individual intelligence.

LT: President Santos having ended a 50-plus year war with over 8 million victims and won a Nobel Prize. What is next for you?

PS: I am right now honored to be a professor in Columbia University, I had wanted to be a professor all my life, this is a temporary professorship anyway. I am very much involved in the war against climate change, I am a member of some boards of NGOs that are fighting climate change and promoting conservation, like the Wild Life Conservation Society, Conservation International. I am part of a group called "The Elders" that was created by Nelson Mandela. Most importantly, I'm now a grandfather with some grandchildren who are now my reason to live.

LT: And who will now learn about the civil war in Colombia from the history books. Before I ask for the three takeaways that you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already touched upon?

PS: No, I would simply say that again, climate change is the most important challenge that the world has... This war in Ukraine has in a way, diverted the attention of the world, but we must not allow that to happen, we must persevere and continue with the challenge of stopping global warming, otherwise we will be in grave, grave problems. Also me, always an optimist, there is no conflict that cannot be solved. I think if there is the goodwill and you create the conditions, people thought that the conflict in Colombia after 50 years of war will never be solved, well it was solved. The conflict with the FARC. And so I think all conflicts can be solved, you must try to create the necessary conditions for them to be solved. And last but not least your port of destination, always identify where you want to go as a leader of a country, as a leader of an enterprise, even as a person. Where is it that you want to go? Because if you don't know where you want to go, you will never get there.

LT: What are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

PS: I've just mentioned the three takeaways that I want to leave to the audience.

LT: Terrific. President Santos, thank you so much for our conversation today, and thank you for your leadership.

PS: Thank you so much, thank you and thank you for having me.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episode be sure to sign up for our newsletter at 3Takeaways.com or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Know that 3Takeaways.com is with the number "3". Three is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com