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Drugs replace communism as the point of entry for U.S. policy on Latin America

U.S. Policy Towards Colombia About To Massively Veer Off-Track

- *Clinton races towards Colombia quagmire.*
- *Another Vietnam? Guatemala? El Salvador? Nicaragua? Colombia's thin line separating civic strife from anti-drugs war about to be erased.*
- *Cynical alliance now being forged between McCaffrey and White House politicians who fear mounting Republican charges that Clinton-Gore Administration is "soft" on drugs.*
- *Any merger of anti-drug and anti-guerrilla wars in Washington's mind-set could prove disastrous for the White House and the nation*
- *U.S. Administration's misguided "war on drugs" is extremely selective; it all but ignores right-wing paramilitaries and their military sponsors, even though those two forces are probably much more heavily involved in drug trafficking as well as human rights abuses than the leftist guerrillas.*
- *Guerrillas are out for revenue, not to traffic drugs, as well as concerned about their personal security at the hand of the paramilitaries if they lay down their arms, which a well-intentioned President Pastrana cannot guarantee.*

- *Further militarization of Colombia's civil strife will only escalate human rights abuses; what is needed is patience regarding the guerrillas dragging their feet over negotiations, with the U.S. encouraging not opposing direct talks with the rebels.*
- *Facts invalidate Congress' belief that it can support Colombia's national police, as distinguished from the military, without contributing to human rights violations.*
- *Effective drug war would attack superstructure of the drug industry, which goes beyond coca fields and poppy plantations in the Colombian countryside, and would seek a reconstruction of the country's political and economic institutions, as well as a downgrading of the armed forces.*

Heading for disaster

The Clinton Administration is on the brink of a decisive shift in its policies toward Colombia, a country engulfed in a protracted civil war against leftist guerrillas that has cost tens of thousands of lives. Until now, the Clinton Administration, admirably, has attempted to maintain a thin line between counterinsurgency and counter-narcotics in Washington's support of the Colombian military and police forces. But following the recent visit to Colombia by White House drug policy director Barry McCaffrey and Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering, it has become clear that Washington is on the verge of more aggressive action in the region. The administration is moving from a policy of only indirect intervention and a relatively hands-off role in the guerrilla conflict to an overt strategy aimed at rooting out the threat the rebels pose to the political and economic status quo in Colombia.

In other words, a previously cautious State Department and National Security Council has lost control of the issue to Clinton Administration politicians who fear that the

Republicans are preparing a frontal attack on the administration for being “soft” on drugs and equally soft on the drug-trafficking guerrillas. As a riposte, the Clinton Administration will now ready a major public initiative to convince Americans of the imminence of the threat posed by the guerrillas, and the urgency of the need for action. Another crucial White House concern will be to reassure the public that U.S. involvement in the Colombia cauldron will be limited. But Americans were told the same thing when the U.S. first became involved in El Salvador in the early 1980’s, and ended up spending almost a billion dollars a year to fund a proto-military regime’s barbarous civil war against its own citizens. Roughly three-quarters of a million Salvadoreans fled to the United States during the conflict, and skeptics are now asking how many hundreds of thousands of Colombians will now decide to flee to the U.S. if Washington moves to “liberate” Colombia from its guerrillas, further confounding this country’s stressed social programs.

The unofficial reason for this change in policy, which eliminates any distinction between Colombia’s civil and drug wars, is that U.S. counter-narcotics efforts in the region have in the past done nothing to impede powerful, drug-running mafias from operating in guerrilla-controlled territories, which accounts for 40% of the countryside. The guerrillas—or “narco-terrorists” as McCaffrey now refers to them—are using their enhanced revenues from “war taxes” levied on the drug traffickers to finance their rebellion.

General McCaffrey in particular noted the urgency of the present situation in Colombia, calling the conflict “a disaster.” He believes the situation in the country is so grave that it will require a regional effort to tame Colombia’s drug-trafficking guerrillas.

On an August 23 visit to Brazil, the region's largest economic and political power, McCaffrey said: "We must recognize that the problem of drug-trafficking is regional...Colombia cannot combat the problem alone." Given the context in which this proposal was made, some critics are loathe to recall that Washington offered similar explanations when communism rather than drugs was public enemy number one in Latin America, or, as officials in Washington refer to the region to this day, "our own backyard." McCaffrey speaks as if he is readying a purgative crusade in the rest of the hemisphere, and those who fail to cooperate will lose their annual drug certification rating.

McCaffrey, who his critics liken to Lt. Col. Oliver North in his fervor, has chastised the White House for regarding Colombia as a relatively minor league issue relative to its other global preoccupations. The administration, McCaffrey suggests, has given "inadequate attention to a serious and growing emergency." Indeed, the deteriorating situation in Colombia was not considered grave enough to seriously concern the president until last week, when, according to the *Washington Post*, his advisers briefed Clinton on the subject for the first time.

How much aid and to whom?

Colombia is quickly becoming the major focus of U.S. Latin American policy, and McCaffrey's exhortations seem to have overwhelmed all resistance in the State Department against expanding the U.S. role in the country.

The State Department is presently considering Colombia's request for an additional \$500 million in military aid over the next two years, a figure which McCaffrey himself proposed after Colombian President Andres Pastrana first made the request

several months ago. The Pentagon has resumed training Colombian security officers and is upgrading army intelligence networks used to track the movement of the guerrillas. The U.S. Southern Command, which McCaffrey headed before assuming the drug-czar position, is currently training a 950-man Colombian army battalion whose primary objective, according to the *Washington Post*, will be to regain control of guerrilla territory in the southern part of the country. Two more such battalions are supposedly in the works, according to Pentagon and State Department officials.

The cost-benefit effectiveness of such a rapid intensification of U.S. intervention is predicated on two assumptions. First, the U.S. can strategically control the end-use of funding to such an extent that human rights abuses will be avoided, or at least minimized (to which the lie was put in El Salvador); and second, the FARC leaders, a main target of U.S. intervention, are little more than a cluster of evil terrorists and rapacious drug lords, without a popular following. As in El Salvador, the U.S. refuses to acknowledge that atrocities on the part of government security forces are the best recruitment tool that the guerrillas possess. These two assumptions are far from accurate, and have little connection to the realities of both the drug trade and the civil strife in Colombia.

Understanding Colombian realities realistically

While the FARC undoubtedly generates wealth through the “war taxes” it levies on drug processors and traffickers, as well as through the abduction of foreign corporate executives and wealthy Colombians for ransom, there is no direct evidence linking the rebels to the actual export of drugs to the U.S. Available evidence reveals that among the primary transporters of drugs are right-wing paramilitary groups in collaboration with

wealthy drug barons, the armed forces, key financial figures and senior government bureaucrats.

The creation of the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), the official title of the loosely-connected paramilitary organizations formed in the 1980's, was made possible in large part through the private fortunes amassed through their leaders' earlier involvement in the drug trade. The AUC, in fact, was outlawed in 1989 after government investigations revealed that Pablo Escobar, the notorious boss of the Medellin drug cartel, had taken over one of its largest paramilitary operations.

The paramilitaries, composed of right-wing extremists (including many military and police officials) virulently opposed to the guerrillas and their sympathizers, have become a mainstay in Bogota's anti-FARC campaign. While the AUC is personally repugnant to President Pastrana, his efforts to curb explicit collusion between the Colombian security forces and the paramilitaries have been futile. So, while army helicopters routinely attack coca and poppy fields within rebel territory, major drug lords and their paramilitary cohorts are able to conduct their own drug operations with relative impunity.

It seems clear that ranking U.S. officials are unwilling or unable to grasp the nuances affecting the narcotics industry in Colombia, which has affected not only every level of Colombia's national life, but apparently has seeped into the senior levels of U.S. officials, with the wife of the ranking U.S. anti-drug military officer in Colombia under investigation for shipping drugs into the U.S. via a U.S. armed forces pouch.

McCaffrey's rising influence

General McCaffrey seems to be the policymaker most obsessed with the notion of the guerrillas as ravenous drug barons, but Congressmen Dan Burton (R-IN) and Benjamin Gilman (R-NY) are not far behind. In an official statement, the representatives made no mention of the paramilitaries' intense involvement in drugs, while emphasizing that the FARC "narco-terrorists" reel in "an estimated \$100 million per month in revenues from facilitating narco-trafficking."

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who has been slightly more cautious and objective, says: "Both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries use the drug trade to finance their operations," although a recent op-ed which she authored suggested that she too is beginning to sanction the removal of the fine line between drug cultivation and civil strife. Albright's past distinctions are not only lost on Gilman and Burton, but they fail to convey the reality of narcotics in Colombia, which is that, as *The Economist* of London writes, "the right-wing paramilitary groups...and the traffickers they protect are far deeper into drugs—and the DEA (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration) knows it."

Another troubling aspect of current U.S. policy is the Colombian military's active and well-documented *de facto* alliance with the paramilitary organizations in their fight against the FARC and the smaller leftist force known as the National Liberation Army (ELN). The paramilitaries are notorious for their savagery, directing their aggression not only against the guerrillas but, as one major humanitarian affairs official says, "anyone involved in the defense of human rights."

In 1991, the Colombian military, in collaboration with the CIA, restructured its intelligence networks to more effectively confront the guerrillas. The country's security

officers worked closely with paramilitaries to increase their effectiveness against both the guerrillas and their suspected civilian sympathizers. Official support for the paramilitaries, however, went beyond providing covert intelligence, and included the Colombian armed forces also engaging in joint combat procedures. The country's military took part in several infamous atrocities as a result of such collusion with the paramilitaries, provoking even the State Department to acknowledge, "...the [Colombian] armed forces committed numerous, serious human rights abuses."

Despite Bogota's statements to the contrary, the paramilitary/military nexus is still very much alive. One recent example of this was a July 26th incident near the municipal borders of Curumani. At approximately 7 a.m., a group of armed paramilitaries kidnapped and then murdered several peasants at El Cano San Ignacio. The paramilitaries, uniformed and heavily armed, then fled to the nearby town of Curumani, where they must have passed either the Army military base or the police station guarding the entrances to the town. Observers add that the military and police facilities were recently upgraded and fortified with new equipment and manpower; nonetheless, the assassins were not apprehended.

The FARC regularly accounts for its share of human rights violations as well, but the paramilitary/military alliance is responsible for a disproportionate percentage of all political killings, roughly 70% as calculated by a number of reputable human rights bodies.

Clean record?

Surprisingly, McCaffrey's proposal to radically increase aid to the Colombian military might face opposition in Congress, particularly from Representatives Gilman, Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, and Burton, Chairman of the Government Reform Committee, as well as from the left. The aforementioned hardliners ordinarily could be counted upon to strongly back any action directed against the leftist guerrillas. But in this instance, they have become convinced that the Colombian military is not a reliable ally to depend upon in the anti-drug war. Gilman and Burton argue that rather than funnel aid to the tarnished armed forces, U.S. funds should be allocated almost entirely to the National Police (CNP), led by General Jose Serrano, whose "duty is not counterinsurgency, it is counternarcotics."

On several occasions, however, counterinsurgency appears to have been precisely the CNP's "duty." Numerous paramilitary massacres have been carried out in recent years with the tacit and, in certain instances, the overt support of police units operating in the affected areas. In October 1997, anti-narcotics police in the town of Miraflores welcomed paramilitaries at a local airstrip jointly run by area police and military units. The paramilitaries later killed six suspected guerrilla supporters within the next three days. The police, local residents say, were well aware of these events, which included numerous other death threats, but did nothing to prevent them. The killers remain at large, with no significant investigations yet underway.

Other incidents involving a direct paramilitary/police *de facto* alliance occurred in the towns of Mapiripan in July 1997 and Chalan in October of that year. In the case of Chalan, the police seemed to punish local citizens for what was perceived as their

allegiance to the guerrillas. After a rebel raid on the town, police commanders withdrew all of their forces, even though, according to observers, they had been alerted to an impending paramilitary attack. In the weeks that followed, paramilitaries threatened and then proceeded to kill scores of local teachers, community leaders and farmers, prompting scores more to flee the area as internal refugees.

Following the rebel incursion, General Serrano, championed by some House members as “the best cop in Latin America,” said, “If the civilian population fails to collaborate, well, we’ll withdraw the police...” Serrano’s assistant added: “The people of Chalan don’t deserve the police they have...the people either support the [guerrillas] or support us.”

In spite of such unprofessional attitudes, it should be acknowledged that the police display a somewhat higher regard for human rights observance than their military counterparts. Nonetheless, the belief that aid can be channeled to any element of the Colombian security forces without contributing to human rights violations rests on fallacious presuppositions. This is why the Dodd-Leahy amendment wisely prohibited the disbursement of military aid to any Colombian armed forces’ battalion known to be complicit in human rights violations, eventually leaving only one military unit qualifying for such U.S. assistance in the entire army.

The facile assumptions guiding U.S. support for Colombia’s anti-drug efforts are emblematic of the weaknesses in U.S. narcotics policy as a whole. The inability of Washington and Bogota’s war on drugs to bring about an overall reduction in Colombian narcotics production (or U.S. consumption) shows that a confrontational policy of direct

supply intervention, including aerial spraying and the fortification of military and police arsenals, is both shortsighted and even counter-productive.

Inequality, drugs, and rebellion

U.S. policy consistently has failed to consider the economic and social roots behind both the drug trade and the guerrilla rebellion. Many of the producers who are the object of aerial spraying and other such aggressive tactics are poor-to-destitute peasants without the means to sustain themselves in the absence of drug cultivation. Coca is often referred to among Colombia's poor as "the blessed plant," because, as one farmer in the rural town of Miraflores put it, "it is the only one which gives us enough to live on." Using force against these people merely evades the central issue, which is their lack of viable economic alternatives.

Nonetheless, Congressmen Gilman and Burton maintain that the reason drug production is so high in Colombia is not the paucity of such alternatives, but rather is attributable to the Clinton administration's miserly reluctance to donate more U.S.-made Black Hawk helicopters to the CNP for aerial spraying and surveillance purposes. The legislators lament that "the CNP only has 19 operating helicopters," and they chastise the State Department for its inability to "deliver a single helicopter on time."

Cecilia Zarate-Luan, the highly respected director of the Colombia Support Network, an outreach organization based in Madison, Wisconsin, dismisses such simplistic notions and insists that the despair of the Colombian peasantry is indeed a factor behind drug cultivation in the country. According to Zarate: "The peasants...have two options: to go the big cities and become beggars and prostitutes, or go to the

rainforest to colonize the land.” Zarate added, “Colombian peasants growing coca are the result of social, political, and economic problems that cannot and will not be solved by military means.”

Similarly, the guerrilla war can be understood only after comprehending its socio-economic roots. Inequalities of land and income distribution in Colombia and skewed living standards are among the worst in Latin America, with 3% of the population controlling 70% of arable land. Of the nearly 50% of Colombians estimated by human rights groups to be living below the poverty line, three-fourths reside in rural areas. Full-time employment, furthermore, is no guarantee of adequate living conditions. It is estimated that the wages of nearly 60% of the employed are not sufficient to satisfy basic nutritional and health needs.

With the country in economic free-fall, and beset by record crime levels, 1,000 persons line up daily at the U.S. embassy in Bogota seeking a visa to flee the country and the miasma in which it now finds itself. One has to go back to the depression of 1929 to recall such hard times in Colombia. The current malaise has created an explosive situation which only peace, demilitarization and basic economic reform can begin to cure. Lamentably, the only response that Washington is coming forth with is to militarize the impasse in Colombia, risking a wide-scale U.S. military intervention which, like in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Haiti before, will lead to hundreds of thousands of Colombians fleeing to this country. Unfortunately, Washington’s intervention model is low on political tuning and high on quick-fix schemes based on the application of force. Nor does Washington have an answer to whether the increasing political pressure on

Pastrana from all sides may void his effectiveness as president, as the country lurches into all-out conflict.

Colombia's alarming social indicators help explain not only the incentives for producing drug crops, but also, in part, the widespread support for the guerrillas in the countryside. Rather than continue to fund Colombia's dubious anti-drug institutions, or taking the dangerous step of widening the scope of the war to include a more explicit anti-guerrilla campaign, Washington should consider providing broadened support for increased economic equality, social justice and the establishment of a truly democratic political process.

The immediate effect of such support from Washington would be to inject life into the moribund peace negotiations between the Pastrana Administration and the FARC. In July, the FARC (who were proving extremely reluctant to sit down to begin peace talks) were chastised by officials in Washington and Bogota for opting to mount an offensive rather than negotiate with Pastrana. In part, the guerrillas deserve criticism for their general obduracy regarding the talks, but given the lugubrious outcomes of the guerrillas past experiences with the peace process and its aftermath, one can hardly fault the current leadership for failing to embrace diplomacy *con brio*, even though their strategy at times seems bizarre.

In 1985, former guerrilla leaders formed the Patriotic Union party (UP) in an effort to lay down their arms and participate peacefully in civil society. The UP candidates, with an economic and political agenda markedly distinct from that of the establishment Liberal and Conservative Party platforms, enjoyed tremendous popular

success, with roughly 4,000 party members voted into various state and municipal positions.

In a lesson not lost upon the present generation of FARC leaders, virtually all of these UP officials were systematically murdered by right-wing extremists, with the cases never being solved or those suspected of being involved in the murders brought to justice. Incidentally, among the assassinated were the two UP members to declare themselves presidential candidates.

“Small fish and the “core” of the problem

A more sensible U.S. policy should also include a focus on drug factors closer to home. For example, the Clinton Administration might consider cracking down on U.S. and other Western corporations involved in exporting to Colombia the enormous quantities of the precursor chemicals required to process raw narcotic plant material into hard drugs. Drug processing, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is an extremely “complicated” process, requiring “sophisticated equipment and skills,” as well as “expensive chemicals” like potassium permanganate, ether and acetone “that are harder to find and often not manufactured in the processing country.” Those that bear the brunt of aggressive U.S. supply-side drug policies in Colombia—peasant cultivators, petty drug pushers, and the guerrillas—are clearly not the major players in the lucrative, transnational narcotics industry.

The U.S. should also consider devoting funds to an in-depth investigation of the major multinational banks and companies involved in laundering billions of dollars in

drug revenues. If anything, the volume of money laundering has grown in recent years even as the U.S. public's consciousness of the problem has declined.

Alberto Galan, brother of murdered Colombian presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan, emphasized the weakness of U.S. policy in not probing this link between private corporations and drugs. Washington, according to Mr. Galan, avoids "the core of the problem...the economic ties between the legal and illegal worlds...the large financial corporations...It would make a lot more sense to attack and prosecute the few at the top of the drug business rather than fill prisons with thousands of small fish..."

Although Washington may not be ready to implement such drastic measures, it must at least take note of the complexities of Colombia's civil strife, a conflict that is not reducible to the ingenuous notion of McCaffrey's "narco-guerrillas" as the enemy, and a problem which will not be resolved by military force alone.

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