

**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
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THE FLAWED STRATEGY IN COLOMBIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

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While the current global threat of terrorism is the nation's utmost priority, it is extremely important for the United States to review its policy towards supporting Plan Colombia and the Andean Regional Initiative. The United State's policy should reflect a better understanding of the true nature of the conflict in Colombia to include an increase of support for the Colombian government's counterinsurgent operations. The United States' exclusive concentration on counter drug operations has hindered the Colombian government from finding a long term solution to their internal problems. To dictate and maintain the peace from strength, the Colombian government must develop a counterinsurgent campaign that includes the coordinated use of the political, economic, social, and military elements of nation power. This campaign ought to consist of offensive actions to attack the insurgents' centers of gravity and expose their critical vulnerabilities. In order to support the campaign, the United States should provide the necessary Special Forces personnel to train the mobile counterinsurgent brigades and abandon the policy of supporting only counter drug operations. The United States and Colombia must capitalize on the unprecedented cooperation between nations in the war on terrorism to renew their efforts on maintaining the peace in Colombia.

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PREFACE

A special thank you to my family, Sheila, Danny, and Sarah. Dedicated to my father and all other brave citizens who are engaged in the fight against the use of illegal drugs in the United States.

THE FLAWED STRATEGY IN COLOMBIA

Since Colombian drug traffickers supply approximately 90% of the cocaine used in the United States, U.S. assistance to Plan Colombia's interdiction, eradication and alternative crop development efforts will be necessary if we are to stem this deadly flow into the United States.

— President William J. Clinton
A National Security Strategy for a Global Age

On 11 September 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell visited South America to review U.S. policy contributions toward combating the drug trade in Colombia. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September, he immediately flew back to Washington to deal with this urgent national crisis. While engaging the current global threat of terrorism is now the nation's utmost priority, it is still extremely important for the United States to continue to review its policy towards supporting Plan Colombia and the Andean Regional Initiative. The review of United State's policy should reflect a better understanding of the true nature of the conflict in Colombia. This policy should include increased support for the Colombian government's counterinsurgent operations and an expanded role for the United States military to help the Colombia military develop a campaign to support the political aim of the government.

To date, the United States military effort in Colombia have been limited to no more than training support for counter drug operations. However, the situation in Colombia is more complex than just illegal drug trafficking. This exclusive concentration on counter drug operations has hindered the Colombian government in finding a long term solution to their internal problems. If the United States is genuinely interested in counter drug operations in Colombia, then it needs to develop a policy that supports legitimacy of the Colombian government. To obtain and maintain legitimacy, the Colombian government must dictate and maintain the peace from strength and not give concessions to guerrilla insurgents out of weakness. They have to compel the guerrillas to want to negotiate for peace on Colombia's terms. To accomplish this objective, the United States should support the Colombian government in developing an overall counterinsurgency strategy and military campaign. This refocused strategy and increased military effort will help Colombia regain control of its national territory and strengthen the desperately needed support for the Colombian government in their internal conflict to uphold democracy against the paramilitaries and leftist guerrillas. The end result will meet the United State's political aims of reducing terrorism, human rights abuses, and illegal drug trafficking while increasing stability throughout the Andean Region.

On 2 September 2001, when commenting on United States' support for Colombia, Anne Patterson, the American Ambassador to Colombia, said, "The political stomach for going into the counterinsurgency business is zero."¹ In the aftermath of the 11 September terrorist attack in the U.S., the international community and the Colombians expect a tougher line on combating terrorism from the United States. Given the tougher line, it is important to remember the relationship between global terrorism and the illegal drug trade. International crime, terrorism and illegal drug trafficking are all interlinked and are precisely what makes the situation in Colombia so important. As President Bush remarked at the signing ceremony for the Drug Free Communities Act Reauthorization Bill, "If you quit drugs, you join the fight against terror in America."² The illegal drug trade in Colombia provides the resources the insurgents and terrorists require to finance their cause or struggle for power. In order to defeat these insurgents and terrorists, the Colombia government must develop a strategy that will galvanize the Colombian population and focus the military on the insurgents' "center of gravity" vice their means of resource, which is drug trafficking.

BACKGROUND

The second most populated country in South American with a population of over 42 million, Colombia is a vast territory covering over 440,000 square miles, which is about the combined size of Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas.³ An industrially diverse member of the five-nation Andean community, Colombia is the fifth largest exporter to the United States in Latin America with two way trade exceeding 11.1 billion dollars. The seventh largest supplier of oil to the United States, Colombia exported \$3.6 billion worth of oil to the U.S. in 2000.⁴ Unfortunately, Colombia is also the world's leading supplier of refined cocaine and a growing source for heroin. From 1995 to 1999, the cultivation of Colombian coca more than doubled from 125,700 acres to 302,500.⁵ A main contributor to this increase in illegal drug cultivation is the government's inability to control its considerable mountainous and tropical territory within its borders.

The second oldest democracy in the Western Hemisphere behind the United States, Colombia's history has been permeated with a constant struggle for power between the Conservatives and Liberals. Today, Colombia is an instable nation on the verge of becoming a failed state and is one of the most troubled countries in the region. Due to an on-going conflict with insurgents, it is in a severe political crisis in which the institutions of the Colombian government are so weak that it can no longer maintain authority of political order within its borders. Colombia has been plagued with a 38 year-old internal war against the leftist insurgent

group called the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolutionarias Colombianas or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) over the political control of the country.⁶ Additionally, the Colombian government is also engaged in a conflict with the smaller leftist group ELN⁷ (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional or National Liberation Army) while trying to control right wing paramilitary groups, AUC⁸ (United Self Defense Forces of Colombia), fighting against both the FARC and ELN. Because all three groups (FARC, ELN, and AUC) finance their operations through the illegal drug trade and utilize the terror tactics of kidnapping, bombings and assassinations as their method of warfare, the U. S. Department of State has listed all three groups as terrorist organizations.⁹

Due to the Colombia government's incapacity to protect its citizens from the trinity of drug traffickers, guerilla insurgents, and paramilitaries, violence is a daily part of Colombian life. At least ten judges, prosecutors and investigators have been gunned down in Colombia this year and three members of the Attorney General's Office have been assassinated in the past 10 months.¹⁰ In October 2001, two Colombian Congressmen, Representatives Luis Alfredo Colenares and Octavio Sarmiento were slain in the same week.¹¹ Twenty-nine people were killed two weeks later in a wave of bombing and murders by guerrillas and paramilitary groups.¹² While violence is not new to Colombia, politically motivated murders have soared in the last decade. The homicide rate in Colombia increased from 15 to 92 per 100,000 residents between 1974 and 1995. From 1980 to 1995 the homicide rates for males aged 14-44 years rose 1350 percent from 29 to 394 per 100,000 people.¹³ This inability to provide the basic form of government and protection for their people is contributing to the failing state and is the most crucial threat to Colombia. Even President Pastrana's administration acknowledges the problem:

There is no question that Colombia suffers from problems of a state yet to consolidate its power: a lack of confidence in the capacity of the armed forces, the police and the judicial system to guarantee order and security; a credibility crisis at different levels and in different agencies of government; and corrupt practices in the public and private sectors. All this has been fed and aggravated by the enormous destabilizing effects of drug trafficking, which with vast economic resources, has constantly generated indiscriminate violence while undermining our values....¹⁴

The aforementioned lack of confidence in the Colombia military, corruption, and indiscriminate violence not only poses a threat to Colombia's sovereignty, but also challenges the stability of the entire Andean region. To date, the Colombian government has a plan but lacks a coherent strategy to regain control of its territory. The United States policy has contributed to this

strategic void and must adopt a support policy for a Colombian military campaign to counter the destabilizing effects of the FARC, ELN, and AUC.

FARC - REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA

One of the world's oldest and largest insurgencies in the region, the FARC roots actually began in the late 1940's as liberal armed supporters during the "La Violencia" war which claimed over 200,000 lives. In 1964, it was reorganized to establish a Communist-oriented independent republic in southern Colombia.¹⁵ However, the Colombian army defeated the communist self-defense group and Manuel Marulanda Velez, a liberal armed supporter from the 1940's, again reorganized the leftist group into the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1966. Manuel Marulanda, also known as "Tirofijo" or "Sureshot", is one of the world's oldest guerrilla leaders at the age of 73 and is still involved in the leadership of the FARC.

The FARC is a Marxist ideology based group that received funding and weapons from the Communist Party of Colombia and Cuban President Fidel Castro. Their strategy is to slowly expand its ideology by advocating widespread reform and redistribution of wealth in Colombia. Their goal, as with most insurgencies, is to gain power and governmental control. During the 1960s until the 1980's, the FARC basically fought for its survival by capturing military equipment, food and supplies, hostages, and informants. Throughout this period the FARC divided itself into fronts. These fronts are not defined by the number of guerrillas, but refer to a geographical area. It is similar to a guerrilla operational area with each front having its own combatants and commander.¹⁶

In the 1980's Soviet and communist support for the FARC began to wane. To resolve their need for financial support, the FARC began linkages with the illegal drug trade industry, which used the FARC controlled areas for harvesting drugs. In the 1990's, as the FARC began to expand its control and establishing new fronts, the relationship between the FARC and drug trafficking proliferated.

Today, the FARC consist of about 15,000-20,000 fighters in over 70 fronts and controls approximately 40 percent of the national territory of Colombia.¹⁷ To entice the FARC into peace negotiations in 1998, President Pastrana created a "demilitarized zone" where arrest orders were suspended and the presence of the army and police were restricted.¹⁸ During the negotiation process, Pastrana agreed to turnover 16,000 squared miles of Colombian territory to the FARC in exchange for peace. However, because the FARC has no real incentive to make concessions to the weaker Colombian government, the results have been disastrous. There is

no peace in Colombia. The FARC uses their demilitarized zone as a safe haven to conduct military training, a staging area for terrorist activity, and the harvesting of illegal drugs.

In addition to the drug trade, the FARC taxes many of the local farmers for use of the FARC controlled land and kidnaps Colombian family members as a means for additional funding. One of the most recently publicized kidnapping was of a Colombian police officer, Corporal Norberto Perez. Although the kidnapping occurred over two years ago, it gained world attention after Corporal Perrez's terminally ill 12-year old son pleaded for his father's presence before he died. Doctor's claimed that the boy's life could be saved if Perez was able to donate his kidney to his son. The FARC refused and the boy died without ever seeing his father.¹⁹

Because of the FARC's terror tactics, unlawful taxes, and links to criminal activities, the lack support from the Colombian population is the FARC's major weakness. This lack of popular support is uncharacteristic for most insurgencies and is a critical vulnerability for the FARC. The combination of unpopular terrorist guerillas with the inability of the Colombian government to protect the general populous has contributed to the formation and support of paramilitary organizations to combat the FARC. To counter the paramilitary movement, the FARC has waged a campaign to link the AUC to the government and vehemently oppose their existence. The FARC believes the AUC is supported by the Colombian military and wants to Colombian government to more actively engage the paramilitaries to disband them.²⁰ The FARC actually fears the paramilitaries more than the Colombian military and has played an important role in getting the FARC back to negotiating the peace process.²¹

ELN - EJERCITO DE LIBERACION

Colombia's second largest rebel group, the ELN or the National Liberation Army began around the same time as the FARC in the late 1960's. With Cuba influence and some radical Catholic support, the ELN was initially a major threat to Colombia. The Colombia government was able to contain the ELN most of the 1970's, but the ELN was still able to terrorize the Colombia people by conducting kidnappings, robberies, and killing the Army's inspector General in the mid-1970's.

In the 1980's, after the Soviet Union's collapse and losing the support of Fidel Castro, the ELN looked for other means to support their cause. The solution was to attack, harass, and blackmail Colombian petroleum and energy industries. Their aim is to extort protection money from the oil companies by threatening to blow up the oil pipeline, which they have done over 700 times.²² This sabotage and disruption of the oil industry cost the Colombia government and oil companies approximately 400 to 500 million dollars last year.²³

After some initial setbacks in 1998, when the ELN's longtime leader, Spanish priest Manual Perez, died, the 5000 combatant sized force sought its own demilitarized zone similar to the FARC's DMZ.²⁴ The ELN desires to have a smaller 3100 square mile safe haven in oil rich northern Colombia. Knowing the ELN cannot obtain a military victory in Colombian, the ELN is attempting to negotiate a truce with the Colombian government and seeks a status as a "political movement" vice a terrorist guerrilla status with the Colombian authorities. In the meantime, the ELN is satisfied with disrupting the economical and energy powers of Colombia. This disruption of the oil product denies the government the much need tax funds from the export of Colombian oil. These criminal activities by both the FARC and ELN insurgents have fueled vigilantism and have only added to the rise in popularity of the paramilitaries.

AUC - THE PARAMILITARIES - AUTODEFENSAS UNIDAS DE COLOMBIA

As a result of the Colombian government's inability to control the insurgents and protect its citizens, paramilitary groups began to develop in the 1990's. Preferring to be called a united self-defense force, the largest and most powerful paramilitary group in Colombia is the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia or AUC. It is important to understand the AUC is involved in a conflict with the FARC and ELN and is not yet an anti-state insurgent. They claim to be filling a void left by the Colombian government. The AUC complains, "The government, out of a lack of political will to use the resources at its disposal, neither proposes nor executes an efficient process of political, economic, social, and cultural reform to eliminate the conflict."²⁵

Their political leader, Carlos Castano, became involved in the conflict 20 years ago after his father was kidnapped and killed by the FARC.²⁶ He believes they are fighting for a just cause to protect Colombian citizens from the leftist guerrillas. However, they are a vigilante group that has the opportunity to take the law into their own hands, which has resulted in a horrendous human rights record. For example, Carlos Castano claimed responsibility for the assassination of a presidential candidate, Carlos Pizarro in 1990. He stated that was justified and a "true patriotic act" because "Pizarro was collaborating with the drug lord, Pablo Escobar and would have been a danger to Colombia if elected president."²⁷ However, Castano claims he is not anti-state and stepped down 6 June 2001 as the official leader of the AUC because he refused to conduct operations against Colombia.²⁸ He has since been replaced by a nine member Central Command with a Cordoba based AUC leader, Salvatore Mancuso, emerging as the central figure.²⁹

Although the AUC claims to be justified in their cause, they are allegedly the most ruthless and violent of the three insurgent and terrorist groups in Colombia. The AUC, whose fighters

number from 8000 to 11,000, are seemingly responsible for most of the violence in Colombia today.³⁰ It is estimated that of the 23,000 plus murders between 1988 and 1997, over 3500 were killed by the guerilla's while over 19,000 were killed by other organizations, to include the AUC and other paramilitary organizations.³¹

While the strategy and tactics of the AUC may be similar to the leftist guerillas, their goals are not. The AUC exists to combat or counter the leftist guerillas' presence. Their end state is a Colombia free of armed leftist insurgents. The AUC tactics include engaging in large-scale attacks on villages suspecting of supporting the guerillas.³² The AUC is also suspected to be behind the September 2001, killing of the Yolanda Paterninu, one of the aforementioned members of the attorney general's office. Since January 2001, she was the third member of the attorney general's office to die or disappear while investigating a massacre of 26 people by a paramilitary force in the village of Chenque in which an arrest warrant had been issued for Castano for his involvement in the crime.³³ However, Castano claims it was actually the FARC that carried out the atrocities and then blamed them on the AUC.

Another similarity between the FARC and AUC is how they fund their forces. While it is not known exactly how much the AUC receives from the illegal drug trade, Castano admitted during a television interview that drug trafficking and the taxation of peasants produces about 70 percent of his financing for his forces.³⁴ The remaining funds come from their extortion fees to protect the local farmers from the other leftist guerrillas.

Unlike the FARC and ELN, the AUC is more popular with the local populace because they are able to accomplish what the Colombian military cannot, control the rural areas. Although they use terror tactics on those who harbor or support the FARC, Colombians are more tolerant of the AUC's tactics because they are able to defeat the FARC and ELN. The AUC maintains that the claims of human rights abuses are skewed against them because the human rights activists are supportive of the FARC. The paramilitaries contend if the AUC is so abusive, they would not be more popular than the FARC or ELN. A cattle rancher summed up the Colombia feeling towards the paramilitaries after the AUC forced out the FARC from his ranch, "With out them [the AUC], the guerrillas would be back within two hours...they are heroes here, people of glory. I will help them in any way I can."³⁵ Regardless of the methods and tactics, the AUC remains popular because they are performing a function the Colombian government does not or will not provide.

THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY

Although the U.S. provides financial aid to the Colombia military, it often comes with strict provisions and limitations. In describing the willingness to support the Colombian military, Tim Rieser, an aide to Senator Patrick J. Leahy, said:

The [United States] Congress wants to provide assistance, but not a blank check, given the history of the Colombian armed forces and the abuses that have gone on, as well as the failures of the Colombian judicial system to hold people accountable.³⁶

Given the situation and restrictions imposed on the military by the Colombia government and U.S. policy, the Colombian military has done a creditable job fighting against the insurgents. While they have not been able to put down the insurgents, they have demonstrated their resolve to the FARC and other insurgents to defend Colombia's sovereignty.

However, there have been allegations from groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Groups of cooperation between the Colombian military and the AUC. The military is frequently sited by these groups because they share a common enemy with the AUC in fighting the FARC and ELN. Frustrated with the government's effort, approximately 20 percent of the AUC is made up of former members of the Colombian military.³⁷ However, no matter how successful the AUC is against the common enemy in the guerilla insurgents, the Colombian government and military cannot overlook the paramilitaries' human rights abuses. These human rights abuses strengthen the FARC's and ELN's anti-government cause and increases sympathy for the insurgents in the international community. Only a stronger, better supported, and more professional Colombian military will reduce the need for the people to support or join the AUC. The Colombian military must be permitted to focus their efforts on counterinsurgency against the leftist guerrillas vice counter drug operations and therefore, reduce sympathy and need for the illegal paramilitary groups.

With a force numbering about 250,000 personnel for both military and police, it appears the Colombian military has the numbers to counter the guerrilla insurgents and the paramilitaries.³⁸ The problem is they lack the sufficient number combatant personnel required to provide a sizable force and constant presence on the ground. The territory of Colombia is approximately 50 times the size of El Salvador, but its combat force is not much larger than El Salvador's forces during its civil war.³⁹ Richard Millett, an American analyst on the Colombian Army said, "And even when the army has carried out successful operations, it has often been unable to set up a permanent presence, a weakness magnified by the state's own absence in much of Colombia."⁴⁰

After some setbacks and defeats in the middle 1990's, and as a result of increased "counter drug operations" training and transport helicopters received from the United States, the Colombian military has gained some success mounting offensive operations against the FARC. However, after the successful operation, because of insufficient number of personnel, the Colombian military frequently departs after conducting their raids. For example; in May 2001, the Colombian Army retook Barbacoas, Colombia from the FARC, who controlled it for four years. Although the civilian leadership of Barbacoas requested the military to stay, the Colombian army pulled out and the FARC reestablished control in a month.⁴¹

This inability to establish a permanent presence permits the AUC to step in and control the area instead of the military. It also improves the AUC's standing with the local populous and even receives some unofficial approval from the lower level Colombian commands. This unofficial approval leads to charges of ties between the AUC and the military. These accusations are collaborated when the AUC claims that it sometimes assists the Colombian military in the fighting against the FARC.⁴²

While the Colombian military has made some improvements on filling their ranks, such as promotions based on merit, more needs to be done to balance the social classes in the military. High school graduates are exempt from the draft and many middle-class and wealthy Colombians do not serve in the military. This lack of balance in the military leads to an under educated force that is not trusted and understood by the civilian Colombians. The average Colombian is not mobilized to fight the counterinsurgency. The United States experienced a similar phenomenon during the Vietnam War. U.S. student draft deferments and the lack of mobilizing the reserves in the Vietnam War generated mistrust and alienated the military from the people. Harry Summers refers to this phenomenon as fighting a war "in cold blood".⁴³ The same phenomenon holds true in Colombia. This mistrust leads to a lack of commitment to the Colombian military and only strengthens the resolved and status of the paramilitaries who accordingly abuses human rights and the law.

Finally, the key to the Colombia's military success will hinge on units, such as, the recently structured counter drug brigade of approximately 3,000 soldiers trained by the 7th Special Forces Group out of Fort Bragg, NC. This brigade, capable of conducting highly mobile operations both night and day, should be permitted and sanctioned to conduct counterinsurgency operations against the insurgents.

THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT

Many of today's problems in Colombia are a direct result by the lack of diplomatic relations between the United States and Colombia in the middle 1990s. In 1995, United States and Colombia relations cooled after Colombia President Ernesto Samper was accused of using drug money during his presidential campaign. Samper was removed from the status of a fully cooperative partner in the counter drug efforts in Colombia. This led to an increase in the drug trade and power of the guerrilla and paramilitary groups because most of the aid was curtailed with the exception of the money provided for the counter drug efforts of the Colombian Nation Police.⁴⁴

In 1998, after President Pastrana won the election, the United States provided 289 million dollars in counter drug operations. President Pastrana immediate strategy was to negotiate peace with the FARC and ELN, but he could not negotiate from the position of strength because the FARC and ELN were expanding their influence in Colombia. He then subsequently turned over a 16,000 square mile of Colombian territory to appease the insurgents into peace and demonstrate his resolve for the peace process to the United States. However, it has not produced the peace results Pastrana and the Colombian people desired. Commenting on the FARC demilitarized zone, a Colombian army officer recently said, "This is our Afghanistan...the President made an enormous mistake handing it over without any rules".⁴⁵ Major Wilson Barrios, the police commander in El Doncello, Colombia, said when describing the situation in Colombia, "This whole region is a theater of war and in the middle of it they have a place to hide, a place to gather men and make their attack, it is a huge advantage that we just do not have."⁴⁶ With Colombian patience running low and unemployment running near 20 percent, President Pastrana's popularity is decreasing. With less than a year left in office, he and the United States should begin re-evaluating their strategy in Colombia.

In 1999, in order to reverse the downward trend of violence, attenuate the United States, and combat the illegal drug trade, President Pastrana developed a new plan for peace in Colombia. This new plan called "Plan Colombia" asked for over 7.5 billion dollars in three years to fight drug trafficking, insurgencies, and corruption within Colombia. The plan required Colombia to provide 4 billion dollars while the United States, Japan, Canada, and Europe provides the remaining 3.5 billion dollars.⁴⁷ The Plan Colombia strategy consisted of ten elements:

1. An economic strategy that generates employment and supports the ability of the State to collect tax revenues and allows the country to have a viable counterbalancing economic force to narco-trafficking.

2. A fiscal and financial strategy that includes tough austerity and adjustment in order to boost economic activity.
3. A peace strategy that aims at a negotiated peace agreement with the guerrillas on the basis of territorial integrity, democracy and human rights, which should further strengthen the rule of law and the fight against drugs.
4. A national defense strategy to restructure and modernized the armed forces and the police, so that they will be able to restore the rule of law and provide security in the country, to combat organized crime and armed groups and protect and promote human rights and international law.
5. A judicial and human rights strategy to reaffirm the rule of law and assure equal and impartial justice for all.
6. A counter narcotics strategy, in partnership with other countries involved in some or all of the links of the drug chain, production, distribution, sale, consumption, asset laundering, precursor chemicals, and arms dealing. And, at the national level, stop the flow of drug money-the fuel of violence-to the insurgent and other armed organizations.
7. An alternative development strategy that will promote agricultural schemes and other profitable economic activities for peasant farmers and their families.
8. A social participation strategy aimed at collective awareness to develop more accountability in the local government, community involvement in anti corruption efforts and continued pressure on the guerrillas and other armed groups to end the kidnappings, violence and internal displacement of individuals and communities.
9. A human development strategy to promote efforts to guarantee, within the next few years, adequate education and health, to provide opportunities to help the young and vulnerable groups in Colombia.
10. An international oriented strategy to confirm the principles of shared responsibility, integrated action and balance treatment of the drug issue.⁴⁸

The United States' primary focus in support for Plan Colombia was on the counter narcotic strategy in item six. The bulk of the U.S. aid for Plan Colombia came as a 1.32 billion dollar support package passed by Congress in 2000.⁴⁹ This aid package was intended for the anti-drug operations in the entire Andean region, but 65% or 860.3 million went exclusively to Colombia. From the 860.3 million dollars, 519.2 million went directly for military assistance for counter drug operations. This included the military training for newly created counter drug brigade, 18 UH-60 Blackhawk, and 42 UH-1H Huey helicopters.⁵⁰ In December 2001, Congress continued its support for counter drug operations by approving 625 million dollars under President Bush's Andean Regional Initiative package.⁵¹

Another problem with the United States' support for Plan Colombia is that it mistakenly does not challenge the validity of item three. The third element of Plan Colombia can be restated as a peace strategy aimed at a negotiated peace agreement on the basis of the FARC's territorial integrity. In other words, by not objecting to this type of negotiated territory peace agreement, the United States supported the drug trafficking terrorist organization, FARC, in having its own controlled territory.

THE PROBLEM: UNITED STATES POLICY

The United States may be dismayed and distracted by the events in the Balkans, but its interest are truly menaced by what is happening in Colombia. Yet the United States has invested enormous amounts of diplomacy, prestige, and military force in the Balkans despite far greater potential there for long-term entrapment in a quagmire, and it remains timid and nervous about a much less risky, costly, or hazardous effort to try to help bring peace to strife-torn Colombia.⁵²

—Ambassador David Passage, U.S. Army War College, March 2000

Before a problem can be solved, it first must be acknowledged. The inconsistencies of United States foreign policy have been sending a mixed signal to the government, people, insurgents and paramilitaries in Colombia. The United States' focus on counter-drug operations ignores the civil conflict and violence in Colombia. This policy is centered on avoidance of getting involved in another quagmire similar to Vietnam. Yet as Ambassador Passage correctly points out, the threat of a quagmire is higher in the less important Balkans than in Colombia. The reason for the policy inconsistencies is the current U.S. national strategy for fighting drug trafficking.

The current U.S. national strategy for combating illegal drug trafficking is a responsive strategy that concentrates on the use of international law enforcement to dismantle drug trafficking organizations. The five stated strategic goals for fighting drug trafficking is outlined in the goals of the 2001 National Drug Control Strategy.⁵³ They are:

Goal 1: Educate and enable America's youth to reject illegal drugs as well as alcohol and tobacco.

Goal 2: Increase the safety of America's citizens by substantially reducing-drug related crime and violence.

Goal 3: Reduce the health and social cost to the public of illegal drug use.

Goal 4: Shield America's air land, and sea frontiers from the drug threat.

Goal 5: Break foreign and domestic drug sources of supply.

Although it appears logical for the United States military strategy to be centered on the fourth goal, the bulk of the military effort has been focused on the fifth goal. The United States assistance includes the use of the transport helicopters and provides Special Operators and trainers to support the Colombian military effort in the aerial eradication of the coca plant in Colombia. The aerial eradication program is run by the Antinarcotics Directorate of the Colombia National Police (DIRAN-CNP) and supported by the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá. While a majority of the spray pilots are Colombians, U.S. State Department contractor pilots fly some eradication missions.⁵⁴ The strategic concept in the aid for Plan Colombia is to support the defoliation of the massive acreage of the coca plant fields through aerial spraying to prevent the harvesting of drugs. In other words, the objective in Colombia is to reduce the supply of drugs at the source vice combating its trafficking.

The aerial eradication policy has two major flaws. The first is this policy does not reflect the proper nature of Colombia's conflict. A common error in counter insurgency operations and the dictum of Clausewitz is applicable in Colombia:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that a statesman and commander have to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.⁵⁵

Neglecting to officially recognize and support the type and nature of Colombia's conflict with the insurgents and paramilitaries invites disaster and is doomed to fail. By limiting support to just counter-drug operations and defoliation in Colombia, the United States is contributing to the stalemate between the government and the insurgents. Insurgents thrive on stalemates. It legitimizes their cause and demonstrates the government lack of ability to govern. Additionally, the U.S. counter drug policy ignores the favorable regional climate and vastness of Colombia's landscape for growing the coca plant elsewhere and thereby, increasing the risk of spreading drug harvesting beyond Colombia's border. Yet, the spreading of drug trafficking is exactly what the Bush Administration is trying to avoid in the Andean Regional Initiative.⁵⁶

The second major problem with the eradication strategy is that it isolates the rural farmers and people from the Colombian government. It divides and causes an imbalance in Clausewitz's remarkable trinity of the people, military and government.⁵⁷ The support of the Colombian people is a center of gravity in the conflict and an unexposed major critical vulnerability of the insurgents. Alfredo Molano, a Colombian journalist, said, "What happens to the people whose farms are being fumigated and families being terrorized? The young go join the guerrillas. Fumigation is designed to get rid of base support of the guerrillas, but it is actually

strengthening the guerrillas.”⁵⁸ While the target of Aerial eradication is the guerrillas’ base of illegal drug support, to the rural farmer trying to support his family, it is an attack on his livelihood.

Opponents of the aerial eradication program often argued that the only reason the coca plant is grown is because there is such a high demand for it in the United States and there is little else profitable to grow. The Colombian farmers are not getting rich by growing coca. One kilo of coca sold in the paste form, before processing is worth about \$2000, while the dealers will sell the same kilo for \$150,000 in the U.S. markets.⁵⁹ Additionally, a supply glut in coffee caused by the expansion of the Vietnamese coffee market has resulted in the profitability of growing coffee. In the 1960s through 1970’s, Colombia coffee traded on the commodities market for approximately \$3 a pound and today it is about 62 cents.⁶⁰ The coca plant can be harvested up to three times a year compared to the once a year harvest of coffee.

Critics also complain that aerial fumigation is an environmental hazard and causing a massive deforestation in Colombia. The U.S. State Department and Colombia government claim the eradication program is environmentally safe. The U.S. State Department says the Colombian government is responsible for choosing the area to be sprayed and has an independent auditor that monitors and reviews the aerial spraying. They admit that the spraying of commonly used agricultural chemical, glyphosate, can be slightly toxic to birds and “practically non-toxic” to fish because it rapidly decomposes in soil and water.⁶¹ They also claim the deforestation is caused by the illegal drug traffickers attempting to cultivate more coca and any negative environmental impact is caused by chemicals used for narcotic processing.⁶² However, regardless of the environmentally soundness or effectiveness of the aerial eradication program, it creates the perception of both the U.S. and Colombian governments fighting against the poor rural Colombian farmer. This appearance caused the U.S. Congress to include a requirement for the Secretary of State to report to the Committee on Appropriations to ensure fumigation is being carried out in accordance with the EPA and in adherence Colombian law. Additionally the eradication program must not pose unreasonable risk to humans or the environment and must ensure that procedures are available to evaluate local Colombian citizen health claims in the “International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Act”⁶³

Finally, the aerial eradication program is similar to squeezing a balloon. If the coca plant is eliminated in Colombia, it will most likely just spread to the bordering countries. There is no evidence that the program has been successful. According the U.S. State Department, the estimated coca cultivation in Colombia increased from 98,500 hectares in 1997 to 183,200 hectares in 2000.⁶⁴ The United States should reconsider its support for this program in

Colombia in favor of a more regional support program for the containment of illegal drug trafficking. Once Colombia regains the sovereignty of its own territory, they may choose to restart the eradication of the coca plant by the safest and most efficient means.

THE SOLUTION: A CIVIL STRATEGY SUPPORTED BY THE MILITARY

For any government to overcome an insurgency, it must be prepared to rapidly take offensive actions against the insurgents. To succeed against an insurgency, the Colombian government must be prepared to wage a more effective insurgency against the FARC and ELN. Author Donald W. Hamilton, when describing one of the first lessons of counterinsurgency, said:

[T]o be successful at defeating a subversive insurgency, the government cannot be *countering* anything, as the mere thought of counter insurgency is reactionary and therefore produces a defensive posture which allows the subversive organization to initiate all principal political and military moves.⁶⁵

The Colombian government along with its military and with the assistance of the United States must develop a coordinated strategy that acknowledges the true nature of the Colombian conflict, exposes the insurgent's critical vulnerabilities, and attacks their centers of gravity. The strategy should not just include a counter guerrilla military solution, but include political, economical and social engagements. A strategy that includes a synchronized effort of Colombia's national power would give the government the strength it needs to dictate the terms for peace. It should remain clear to both the United States and Colombia that this is Colombia's conflict. The United States should offer and provide the necessary military training and equipment to support a Colombian military strategy in pursuit of higher Colombian national objectives.

The Colombian national objectives should be:

- Establish control of all of its sovereign territory.
- Defeat and contain the insurgents' influence on the Colombian populace.
- Restore human rights and reestablish the rule of law and equal justice.
- Establish a vibrant economy that will permit equal opportunity for all Colombians.

The military campaign to achieve these objectives should first focus on the counterinsurgency operations against the FARC and the ELN while severing all ties with the AUC. This military campaign should focus on each of the insurgents' centers of gravity or "hubs of all power and movement which everything depends."⁶⁶ Once these hubs of all power and movement have been identified, they should be aggressively attacked to weaken the insurgent's source of power.

The FARC's center of gravity is not illegal drug trafficking or the coca plant, it is the land and people they control and influence. The 16,000 square mile FARC controlled territory allows them freedom of movement, a safe haven, and the ability to operate within their interior lines. Safe havens or bases are critical to the success of the insurgents. Leroy Thompson, an author on counter-revolutionary warfare, when describing the importance of safe bases to insurgents, said, "One of the first criteria for such bases is that access must be difficult to prevent security forces from attacking and wiping out the nucleus of the movement before it has reached the strength necessary to enable it to move into full scale warfare."⁶⁷ President Pastrana's concession of a demilitarized zone gave the FARC their safe haven. He should demand control of this area or be prepared to take it back by military force. Alfredo Rangel, a defense expert and advisor to Colombia's military was correct it right when he said, "The zone has been a problem from the start, all the problems in the process come from it."⁶⁸

Similar to the FARC, the ELN's center of gravity is its ability to disrupt Colombian economy and oil exports. The ELN's goal is to weaken the government by undermining the Colombian national economy by stripping away vital resources. Colombia's known reserves of crude oil are being rapidly depleted. It is estimated that if new reserves are permitted to be tapped into, Colombia will become a net importer of oil by 2004.⁶⁹ As any other insurgency, the ELN desires a safe haven to conduct their unconventional military operations. Fortunately, after the experience with the FARC, President Pastrana has flatly denied the ELN such a safe haven. The Colombian military campaign should conduct offensive actions against the ELN to prevent the further disruption of oil production. At a minimum, at least another mobile "specially trained" brigade will be required to address the ELN threat. As with the counter- drug brigade, this counterinsurgency brigade may be trained by the U.S. 7th Special Forces Group. By protecting the oil production, Colombia will preserve their crucial resources for economic reform and additional funding.

Simultaneously, while engaging the FARC and ELN in their safe havens, it is important to target the leadership and organization of all the insurgents. The military strategy should pursue a top down attack on the leadership of the FARC and ELN while working on a bottom up approach to counter the influence of the AUC. As the Colombian government achieves success against the FARC and ELN, it will reduce the public support and legitimacy of the AUC.

Another important objective after regaining control of their sovereign territory is to establish a local police force for to enforce the rule of law. As the British learned in the Malayan Emergency (1948-60), "restoring civilian policing as soon as possible", improved both the flow of intelligence and recreated an air of normality and legitimacy.⁷⁰ Establishing a local police force,

reduces the appearance of a military occupation, emphasizes the importance of adherence to the law, and frees the military to conduct other counterinsurgent operations. It is important to use member of the local populace to be a source of this local police force. The local police force must have the respect of the local citizens and gain their trust to gather intelligence on future insurgent intentions. Of course, this would require professional training with the emphasis on the importance the rule of law and the dignity of human rights.

Finally, it is important for the military campaign to tie all the elements of Colombian national power to support the counterinsurgency effort. Local support for these insurgents is their critical vulnerability. Insurgences are caused by local grievances and the perceptions of injustice. If the Colombia rural populace does not see a productive future, more insurgents will reorganize and just attempt to move into another safe haven within the Andean region.

REGIONAL APPROACH

The United States must not only address Colombia's insurgency and drug trafficking problem as a local issue, but as a regional problem. In the early 1990's, Bolivia and Peru were the main harvesters of the coca plant in the Andean region. As both countries began to successfully combat illegal drug trafficking, Colombia's coca production increased. Subsequently, if the drug trafficking problem is eliminated in Colombia, it will likely just move to a bordering country. Former U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen when commenting on the drug problem, said, "Many of Colombia's neighbors fear that drugs and violence will spread like a cancer."⁷¹

The 2001 Andean Regional Initiative is a step in the right direction because it addresses drug trafficking as a regional issue but falls short of dealing with Colombia's insurgency problem. The legislation calls for the renewal of the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA) to provide economic alternatives to narcotics trafficking in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. However, solitary economic aide solution will not resolve the regional problem. In order for an economic solution to take root and expand, stability, the rule of law, and the ability to basic forms of sovereign government must be maintained. The U.S. should encourage the Andean region nations to band together to help solve the counterinsurgency, violence and drug problems. A bilateral approach to this problem will not work. For example, Colombia needs a commitment from Venezuela that it will not provide a safe haven for the FARC or ELN if Colombia chooses to retake the demilitarized zone. This commitment is not only serves Colombia's interest, but also prevents Venezuela from inheriting the corruption and violence that accompanies the narco-terrorist insurgents.

UNITED STATES MILITARY SUPPORT

The United States military should only provide the assistance required to support the Colombian counterinsurgency campaign, to include a limited number Special Forces advisors for the training of the mobile brigades. The limit of the number of military personnel depends on the requirements to train, equip, and develop infrastructure support along with intelligence support, detection, and monitoring information to the Colombian military. This is not a new military requirement. The U.S. military currently provides this support to the Colombian military, but it is limited to just counter drug trafficking information. DOD should submit a recommended required number of personnel to support the counterinsurgency and mobile brigade. However, it should not be necessary to exceed the arbitrary cap of 500 permanent and temporary U.S. personnel presently imposed by Congress.⁷² On average, the number of U.S. military personnel supporting Plan Colombia has been about 200, including approximately 90 Special Forces personnel.⁷³

As in El Salvador in the 1980s, it is of the utmost importance that it remains clear that this is Colombia's conflict and not the United States. The Colombian military are the combatants in this counterinsurgency campaign, not the U.S. military. It is naïve and a false assumption to assume the U.S. military would be any better at conducting counterinsurgency operations in Colombia than the experienced Colombian military. The Colombian military has already assumed some of the burden of conducting counterinsurgency and with the help of their own and U.S. government, they can accomplish their counterinsurgent mission.

Because of the vastness of Colombia, mobility will be the key to success. The U.S. should continue its policy of providing modern helicopters and training aircrews, but not tie their use to just counter drug operations. The training should include the extensive use of night vision devices to provide force protection for the Colombian helicopters and aircrew.

THE VEITNAM QUAGMIRE

Most of the criticism of a U.S. supported counterinsurgency strategy in Colombia is the fear of the U.S. getting involved in another Vietnam conflict. The core of this position assumes the U.S. has learned nothing from its experience in Vietnam. Responding to the critics who propose that U.S. military assistance in Colombia would lead to the United States being trapped in another disastrous counterinsurgency, Ambassador David Passage said:

One of the saddest results of America's involvement in Vietnam is how resistant we are from learning it, how traumatized we remain by it, and how paralyzed our national decision-making process is by the specter, however implausible, that the United States might get involved in another such experience.⁷⁴

The only real similarity between Colombia and Vietnam is their tropical and mountainous topography. In fact, the current flawed counter drug strategy reflects more similarity to Vietnam than a counterinsurgency course of action. Reminiscent of the Vietnam conflict, the U.S. counter drug strategy in Colombia fails to recognize the true nature of the conflict. Also, similar to Vietnam, both the U.S and Colombia are failing to recognize and address the insurgent's center of gravity. The Viet Cong were permitted to thrive in South Vietnam because they were permitted the use of their safe haven in Laos and the use of Ho Chi Minh Trail. Several members President Johnson's administration conceded it was a flawed policy. Ambassador Bunker urged President Johnson to attack Laos. He stated, "I am more certain than I was in 1967 that our failure to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a strategic mistake of the first order."⁷⁵ Mr. Walt Rostow also "declared that the failure to act against Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1962 may have been the single greatest mistake in United States foreign policy in the 1960s."⁷⁶ Consequently, the only merit to the Vietnam quagmire comparison is the current flawed policies and strategies in Colombia.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the 11 September terrorist attack in the United States, the United States needs review its policy towards supporting Plan Colombia. This policy should include a better understanding of the true nature of Colombia's conflict. It should recognize that Colombia is involved in a fight against three separate terrorist insurgents for the sovereignty of their state. Once Colombia has gained control of its sovereign territory, it will become more effective in controlling the drug trafficking problem within its borders.

The Colombian government needs to develop a counterinsurgent campaign that includes coordinated use of the political, economic, social, and military elements of nation power. This coordinated campaign would give the Colombian government the ability to negotiate peace from the position of strength.

While the Colombian military has demonstrated some limited tactical success against the insurgents, it must develop a military counterinsurgent campaign. To support the campaign, the Colombian military will require increased mobility and counterinsurgent capabilities. This campaign should be an offensive effort to attack the insurgents' centers of gravities and expose their critical vulnerabilities. Additionally, the Colombian military must remain increasingly sensitive to human rights abuses and continue to cut all ties with the paramilitaries.

Finally, the United States should support this campaign by providing the Special Forces personnel necessary to train the mobile counterinsurgent brigades. It should abandon the

policy of supporting only counter drug operations. It should remain committed to support the Colombian effort, but make it clear that this is solely Colombia's conflict.

Colombia is a country with tremendous potential, but is one of most trouble states in the Andean region. The United States and Colombia must capitalize on the unprecedented cooperation between nations in the war on terrorism to renew their efforts on maintaining the peace in Colombia. This peace is not only desired and obtainable for the Colombians, but will provide the much needed stability in the Andean region.

(Word Count: 8454)

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