

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

COLOMBIA: MORE THAN JUST A DRUG PROBLEM

Lt Col CHARLES E. WYNNE, USAF

5601/5602

FUNDAMENTALS OF STRATEGIC LOGIC/THE NATURE OF WAR

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PROFESSOR

CAPT RENATA LOUIE/COL JAMES RABON

ADVISOR

COL JACK LEONARD

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2003		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2003 to 00-00-2003	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Colombia: More Than Just a Drug Problem				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 25	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

COLOMBIA: MORE THAN JUST A DRUG PROBLEM

Introduction

Americans consumed approximately 260 metric tons of cocaine and 13 metric tons of heroin at a cost of \$45 billion in the year 2000. While estimates vary, most experts agree between 80-90 percent of the cocaine and more than 50 percent of the heroin used in the United States comes from Colombia.¹ In terms of the total drug picture, it is estimated illegal drugs cost America approximately 52,000 lives and \$110 billion a year.²

But America is not alone in feeling the pain brought on by the illicit Colombia drug trade. In Colombia, the \$4 billion narcotics industry has heightened the effect of nearly 40 years of civil war, bringing with it overwhelming violence, a crisis in government, full-scale military battles between nonstate actors, and the potential for terrorists to use large portions of the country as a training and operational base in the Western Hemisphere. With approximately one million internally displaced persons within Colombia and an undetermined number more seeking refuge in Panama, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, the issue is no longer local in scope.³ A drug trade “marriage of convenience” between the narcotics traffickers, insurgents, and paramilitaries is threatening the Colombian government, impacting regional stability, and testing America’s resolve to ensure hemispheric security and fight terrorism.

¹ Richard Armitage, Andean Counterdrug Initiative, U.S. Department of State, 17 September 2002, available from www.state.gov/s/d/rm/2002/13558.htm

² The White House, National Drug Control Strategy, February 2002, p. 70

³ Congressional Digest, “U.S. Interests: Rationale for American Involvement”, Library of Congress, February 2001, p. 39

A risk-benefit analysis shows there are five basic courses of action the United States can take in response to this threat. They are: 1) doing nothing, 2) supporting a holistic plan that includes social, economic and limited military options, 3) using American troops and law enforcement agencies in covert operations, 4) increasing our current military assistance to Colombia, and 5) direct, large-scale military intervention. This paper will argue the correct U.S. approach begins with a public debate about Colombia with the leadership in Washington pushing for a change in the current American mindset. America can no longer afford to look at the Colombian imbroglio as merely a drug issue vice a security and terrorism issue as well. Ultimately, Colombia must implement a holistic approach designed to address all aspects of its problem. Finding a solution will require a total commitment on the part of Colombia's law-abiding citizens. That said, America must be a fully engaged partner and use its considerable diplomatic, economic, military, and informational power to help Colombia at this critical stage of its existence. The objectives for the holistic approach should include the restoration of uncontested sovereignty to the democratically elected government in Bogota, the return of regional stability, and the elimination of possible terrorist use of Colombia as a basing ground in the Western Hemisphere.

Background

Dating back to 1820, Columbia is the second oldest democracy in the Western Hemisphere behind the United States. But its democratic experience has been characterized by weak central governance, episodic violence and chaos, and three short-term military takeovers, the most recent in 1953-57. Despite such setbacks, a democratic Colombia has persevered and prospered to the point the United States considers it the "political, economic and security

linchpin in an alarmingly unstable Andean region.”⁴ The legitimate economy is based primarily on oil, coffee, and coal exports. Colombia is America’s eighth largest supplier of oil and its fifth largest market in Latin America with two-way trade exceeding \$10 billion annually.⁵

In general, relations between America and Colombia have been cooperative. During the past decade, agreements have been signed on environmental protection, civil aviation, asset sharing, chemical control, and extradition. The two countries also signed an important maritime ship-boarding agreement allowing for the search of suspected drug-running vessels. As part of its support for Plan Colombia, the current holistic approach, America is providing money, military training, increased intelligence support, expedited delivery of spare parts, and other counter-narcotics support.

The root of the narco violence plaguing Colombia can be traced to the 1982 decision by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), a communist insurgent organization, to enter into the illicit narcotics business. Since then, an “unholy trinity” of narco traffickers, insurgents, and paramilitaries has developed to the point it now threatens the legitimacy of the Colombian government and corresponding stability of the Andean region. Well-equipped and well-trained insurgent and paramilitary armies funded by “war taxes” perpetrate most of the violence. Analysts believe the FARC and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) receive more than \$300 million and \$200 million annually from narcotics trafficking alone.⁶

⁴ Cope, John, Strategic Forum, “Colombia’s War: Toward a New Strategy”, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., October 2002, p. 2

⁵ Congressional Digest, “U.S. Interests: Rationale for American Involvement”, Library of Congress, February 2001, p. 39

⁶ Cope, John, Strategic Forum, “Colombia’s War: Toward a New Strategy”, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., October 2002, p.3

The statistics on the violence are staggering: 41,564 murders in 1999; 138 mayors and 569 members of parliament, deputies and city council members murdered between 1989-99; 53 members of the federal judiciary killed in one year alone, and 11 Supreme Court justices killed in a single raid in 1985. It is estimated 1.8 million people are missing as a result of drug violence in the 1990s.⁷ The current struggle between the insurgents and paramilitaries is claiming roughly 3,500 casualties per year, mostly in rural areas. In addition, the two groups have been responsible for an estimated 3,250 kidnappings for ransom per year since 1998.⁸

The rampant violence and associated bribery are subverting the democratic process. Since President Alvaro Uribe's election in May, more than 200 mayors and municipal officials have resigned as a result of death threats from the FARC and approximately one in five of the Colombia's 1,200 municipalities lack a governmental presence.⁹ Curtis Kamman, former American ambassador to Colombia, says up to two-thirds of those elected to the Colombian congress are taking bribes from at least one of these outlaw organizations. In return for their money, the Colombian legislature has passed numerous laws designed to protect the illegally armed groups.¹⁰

The “Unholy Alliance”

Many naively thought the extinction of the Cali and Medellin drug cartels in the early 1990's would put an end to the lucrative illegal narcotics industry in Colombia. But that has not

⁷ Congressional Digest, “U.S. Aid to Colombia: Partnership for Democracy or a “New Vietnam”?, Library of Congress, February 2001, p. 33

⁸ McLean, Phillip, “Colombia: Failed, Failing or Just Weak?”, The Washington Quarterly, The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Summer 2002, p. 129

⁹ Cope, John, Strategic Forum, “Colombia's War: Toward a New Strategy”, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., October 2002, p. 2

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 6

been the case. Instead, drug trafficking experts estimate more than 150 smaller, less visible, harder-to-find narcotics organizations are doing business in Colombia today.¹¹ Exacerbating the problem, U.S.-sponsored coca plant eradication programs in Peru and Bolivia have been so successful Colombia is now the world's leading grower of the plant from which cocaine is derived (302,500 hectares in 1999, more than double the acreage of 1995).¹² In addition, since the early 1990s, these groups have become the largest supplier of heroin to the eastern United States and are running similar operations in Ecuador, Brazil, and Venezuela.¹³

Drug money has financed FARC growth from less than 2,000 members in 1982 to more than 20,000 members in 2001 and they now have a presence in more than 60 percent of the Colombian municipalities. Their stated goal is to raise and equip an army of 30,000 members capable of overthrowing the democratic government.¹⁴ The FARC, combined with the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN), control or very nearly control 40 percent of the country. In addition to exorbitant drug profits, the ELN has found kidnapping and attacks on the Cano-Limon-Covenas oil pipeline to be very profitable.¹⁵

The paramilitaries are regional with a central organization to coordinate national level strategy in their fight against the insurgents. Making huge profits off illegal drugs, they have up

¹¹ Ibid, p. 2

¹² U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, April 2002, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1831.htm>> (3 October 2002)

¹³ Congressional Digest, "U.S. Interests: Rationale for American Involvement", Library of Congress, February 2001, p. 39

¹⁴ Spencer, David, "Colombia's Paramilitaries: Criminals or Political Force", December, 2001, <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/ussassi/ssipubs/pubs2001/pcpara/pcpara.pdf>, (3 Oct 2002) p.17

¹⁵ McLean, Phillip, "Colombia: Failed, Failing or Just Weak?", The Washington Quarterly, The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Summer 2002, p. 131

to 8,000 armed combatants and a presence in 40 percent of Colombian municipalities. The AUC is the largest, most well known paramilitary group.¹⁶

Shortly after September 11, the European Union joined the United States in officially designating the FARC, ELN, and AUC as foreign terrorist organizations stating they use “terror as a tactic to keep the money flowing and the population and politicians in line.”¹⁷ All have been accused of engaging in “massacres, kidnappings, attacks on key infrastructures” and being “involved in every facet of narcotics trafficking, including cultivation, processing and transportation.”¹⁸

Flat organizations without any democratic checks and balances, these nonstate actors are far more effective and nimble than the governments they oppose and are perfectly positioned to align themselves with international terrorist organizations. The current situation in Colombia is reminiscent of Afghanistan under Taliban control when the terrorist organization al-Qaeda used poppy cultivation and heroin production to fill its coffers. Similarities include weak central governments, lack of sovereignty over their own territories, large-scale criminal and political violence, persistent corruption, lax banking regulations, and a lucrative renewable source of income. With more and more research showing “easy access to cash” being the best predictor of political violence, no matter what the motivation for the conflict, it is easy to see why

¹⁶ Spencer, David, “Colombia’s Paramilitaries: Criminals or Political Force”, December, 2001, <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/ussassi/ssipubs/pubs2001/pcpara/pcpara.pdf>, (3 Oct 2002) p.18

¹⁷ Richard Armitage, Andean Counterdrug Initiative, U.S. Department of State, 17 September 2002, available from www.state.gov/s/d/rm/2002/13558.htm

¹⁸ Ibid

international terrorists would have an interest in Colombia.¹⁹ The apprehension of two Irish Republican Army terrorists in Colombia to train the FARC indicates the insurgents have already established a working arrangement with at least one international terrorist organization. The latest U.S. national security strategy acknowledges the potential terrorist threat in Colombia when it states “poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.”²⁰

Taken together, the “unholy alliance” has become a major political, economic and military force that appears to be getting stronger at the expense of the government in Bogota. What is important to note is the challenges presented by these illegal groups are not a low-level law enforcement issue that one country alone can solve.

America’s Desired Ends, Ways, and Means

In the recently released Bush Administration 2002 national security strategy, the White House states “unrestrained narcotics trafficking could imperil the health and security of the United States” and:

“Therefore, we have developed an active strategy to help the Andean nations adjust their economies, enforce their laws, defeat terrorist organizations, and cut off the supply of drugs, while—as important—we work to reduce the demand for drugs in our own country.”²¹

In the end, America seeks a secure and stable democratic Colombia that is able to provide security at the personal and state level, the return of a firm but fair judiciary system based upon

¹⁹Dempsey, Gary T., “Old Folly in New Disguise; Nation Building to Combat Terrorism”, Policy Analysis, Cato Institute, March 21, 2002

²⁰The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, Government Printing Office, September 2002, p. 2 of introduction

²¹ Ibid, p. 10

the rule of law, the resumption of government that is free of corruption, bribery, respectful of human rights, and able to provide for the general welfare of the Colombian people. Important additional aims include regional stability, increased trade opportunities in a free, open and legitimate market, and unencumbered access to South American oil.

To achieve these objectives, American leadership needs to engage the nation and the world in a meaningful debate about the dual challenges facing the entire world in Colombia. First, the impact and pain of illegal drugs is felt all over the world. Nation states around the world spend billions of dollars each year combating this terrible scourge and its associated problems. Second, the potential exists for terrorists to use Colombia and its illicit narco industry as a source of funding and its countryside as a home base for operations astride one of the world's key transportation crossroads.

In terms of "ways," the answer lies in a holistic approach "that seeks to enhance public security, governance, defense relations, and community development" that ultimately leads to a permanent political settlement among the government, the insurgents, and the paramilitaries.²² Specifically, the United States should take the lead to get the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and other international and regional organizations to condemn the violence in Colombia and call for a major international or regional effort at restoring sovereignty to the government in Bogota. Once energized, the next step is for these organizations and America to help eliminate the environment that spawned the current crisis. Specifically, efforts need to address alternative economic development methods, the elimination of the illegally armed

²² Cope; Strategic Forum Cope, John, Strategic Forum, "Colombia's War: Toward a New Strategy", Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., October 2002, p. 1

groups, more aggressive interdiction efforts, and a worldwide effort to reduce the demand for Colombian drugs. Such actions would strike a direct blow to the centers of gravity for all three members of the “unholy alliance” and significantly enhance the chances that legitimate Colombian law enforcement agencies, to include the military, could eventually put all three out of business.

On a broad basis, America will need to help finance many of these initiatives. In addition to continued direct financial aid, America should also encourage other countries, particularly those in Western Europe, and international banking institutions to ante up financial aid as well. Facing drug and terrorist problems of their own, nations around the world have to be concerned about “the propensity for international criminal and terrorist networks to exploit” the ungovernable areas of Colombia “for operations, training, and revenue-generating purposes” as happened with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.²³ This means America should also use its soft power capabilities to persuade the more advanced countries of the world to provide expanded financial and military support to Colombia and its Andean neighbors. The United States should also exert pressure on international organizations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank to help Colombia finance its war against the “unholy alliance” and work to provide other economic trade incentives throughout the region as a way of showing support for their efforts.

In a positive sign, in late July, Washington agreed to broaden the scope of U.S. involvement in Colombia for the first time as Congress voted to allow U.S. assistance to be used

²³ Ibid, p. 1

in a counterinsurgency role.²⁴ This shows American political leadership is giving serious consideration to the necessary mindset change and signals to the world that America is serious about hemispheric security and global terrorism. The next step is for Washington to take the lead in developing and enforcing this new mindset in America and across the world that Colombia needs help in defeating both the counterinsurgency and illegal drug aspect of its current situation.

In terms of “means,” America should provide financial support, an increased level of military support, soft power influence on adjacent nations, and boost spending on drug prevention programs. Using its soft power, the White House recently announced Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia had been given special trade benefits under the renewed Andean Trade Preferences Act, allowing all three to resume shipping up to 5,600 goods to the U.S. duty free.²⁵ At the same time, the benefits were not extended to Ecuador, which has not cooperated with Colombian and American requests for sealing its borders off from the insurgents and drug traffickers. In addition, more soft power diplomatic work needs to be done to persuade the leftist Venezuelan leadership to quit supporting the FARC in what it perceives as a regional balance of power initiative.

In terms of military support, efforts could include expanded military-to-military contacts, ship visits, student exchanges, equipment transfers, training missions, and joint exercises with

²⁴ Johnson, Tim, “Colombian President Vows to Go After Rightist Militias Also,” The Miami Herald, 25 September 2002, available <http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/news/world/americas/4144345.htm>

²⁵ Wilson, Patricia, “Bush-Uribe Pledge to Crack Down on Terrorism,” Reuters, 17 Oct 2002, available http://dailynews.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story2&cid=578&ncid=578&e=15&u=/nm/20020925/ts_nm/colombia_usa_dc

the Colombian armed forces. On a larger scale, perhaps America needs to consider becoming the long-term guarantor of Andean stability much like it did in post World War II Europe.

Economic alternative development programs concentrating on individual need to be developed and financed. The lowly Colombian farmer who struggles on a daily basis to provide food for his family is not concerned about such lofty concepts as sovereignty of governments, regional stability, and the global war on terrorism. Without support at the grass root level, i.e. food on the table and the prospect of a better life, initiatives that need support and buy-in at the local level are bound to fail.

As for reducing the demand for drugs, the Bush Administration is seeking a 25 percent reduction in illegal drug use over the next five years.²⁶ To achieve this lofty goal reference Colombian cocaine and heroin, several things must happen. First, the cultivation source must be eradicated. This will take more emphasis on financial and law enforcement assistance programs between Colombia and the United States. Second, America will need to embark on an extensive education campaign in the United States that points out the dangers of drug abuse and the costs associated with it. Next, the three branches of the American government will need to work together to make punishment a real disincentive for those involved in any aspect of the drug trade.

In short, America and Colombia may want to redouble their commitment to Plan Colombia or to use it as a template for a new initiative to address the problem. A three-year, \$7.5 billion plan developed by former Colombian President Andres Pastrana in 1999, Plan Colombia is a holistic approach aimed at: restoring Colombian sovereignty over its territory, improving the economy, respecting human rights while seeking to eliminate the violence, the illegal drug

²⁶ The White House, National Drug Control Strategy, Government Printing Office, February 2002, p. 3

trafficking, and the insurgency and paramilitary forces.²⁷ It is based upon similar and successful plans used in Bolivia and Peru. Current Colombian President Uribe is on record as supporting the plan that also calls for American assistance in counter-narcotics, drug interdiction, and assistance in aerial spraying for crop eradication. So far, Plan Colombia has played to mixed or negative reviews with the military and law enforcement aspects doing well, while the economic alternatives and crop eradication portions have yet to take hold.²⁸

Military Options

Should the political, economic, and diplomatic options fail, the strategic situation suddenly deteriorate, or the public debates lead to discussion on military options, three of the five possible courses of action concentrate primarily on the use of military force. They consist of using American troops and law enforcement agency assets in covert operations, increasing the current military assistance to Colombia in accordance with the same general guidelines now in use, or large-scale military intervention by the United States. In all cases, international support would enhance the legitimacy of these operations and lead to a more conducive environment within Colombia once military operations cease. As such, American and Colombian diplomats should work to ensure there is broad international and regional support for the use of any military options. With this in mind, the rest of this paper will use the military strategy framework to determine which option would be the best choice should the holistic approach advocated above fail.

²⁷ Beers, Rand, "Plan Colombia is Well Worth U.S. Support", U.S. Department of State, July 9, 2001, available from <<http://www.state.gov/g/inl/rls/op/2001/4053.htm>>.

²⁸ Cope; Strategic Forum Cope, John, Strategic Forum, "Colombia's War: Toward a New Strategy", Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., October 2002, p. 5

In terms of political setting and objectives, the American people will not support direct military intervention unless there is a radical shift in the way the problem is portrayed to the American public. Right now, the problem with Colombia is viewed purely as a drug problem, not a hemispheric security or terrorist challenge. Neither the Commission on America's National Interest nor the new national security strategy cite Colombia as a "vital" interest.²⁹ Without such a designation and a massive shift in emphasis by the Bush Administration, it will be impossible to build the necessary public support for direct intervention.

There are three additional factors that buttress the way the American public currently thinks about the Colombian conundrum. First, many Americans believe the Colombian government is responsible for large-scale human rights abuses. This is an exaggerated claim by human rights activists since unbiased experts believe the ironically named self-defense groups commit about 70 percent of the abuse, the insurgents about 25 percent, and government forces approximately 5 percent.³⁰ It is unrealistic to expect the Colombian police and military to have a perfect record in this area under any circumstances, especially during a civil war. The second factor is many Americans believe the Colombian government actually collaborates with the enemy, especially the paramilitaries. The leaders in Bogota do admit collaboration has happened, mostly in the outlying areas where there is no formal government presence, but say they are taking steps to preclude it from happening again. They cite as evidence former President Pastrana's firing of four generals and more than 600 members of the armed forces and

²⁹ National Security Strategy, Commission "America's National Interests," The Commission on America's National Interests, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, p. 35

³⁰ Spencer, David, "Colombia's Paramilitaries: Criminals or Political Force", December, 2001, <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/ussassi/ssipubs/pubs2001/pcpara/pcpara.pdf>, p. 17

police since September 2000. In addition, the Ministry of National Defense has implemented extensive training on human rights for military and police forces.³¹ Furthermore, President Uribe has pledged “to go after right-wing militias with as much vigor as leftist guerrillas” and that Colombia’s commitment “to observe human rights is absolute.”³² Finally, many Americans do not believe Colombians really want to solve their dilemma. They cite as evidence Colombia’s historical tolerance for violence, its maintenance of an incredibly small army, the spending of only 3.5 percent of the Colombian gross domestic product on the military and police forces, the ill-advised giving away of a demilitarized zone the size of Switzerland (*zona de despeje*) to the FARC by Pastrana, and the Colombian elitist’s view that military service is only suitable to the lower class.³³ But perhaps the most damning indictment against the Colombian people is their view that drug legalization in the United States is the remedy for their societal ills.³⁴ A mentality such as this just doesn’t sit right with Jacksonian America. Added all up, the American public sees military intervention into Colombia as another potential Vietnam and thus will not support direct military intervention on a large-scale unless it is given sufficient reason to think otherwise. For that to happen, the leadership in Washington would need to prepare the battlefield of American opinion before proposing this option.

In terms of the military strategic setting, there are numerous factors that work against America putting large-scale forces into Colombia. First, current American law limits American involvement to counter-narcotics operations only, manpower to 400 military advisers and 400

³¹ Marcella, Gabriel, “The U.S. Engagement With Colombia: Legitimate State Authority and Human Rights,” The North-South Agenda, The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center, University of Miami, March 2002, p. 4

³² Johnson, Tim, “Colombian President Vows to Go After Rightist Militias Also,” The Miami Herald, 25 September 2002, available at <<http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/news/world/americas/4144345.htm>>

³³ Marcella, Gabriel, “The U.S. Engagement With Colombia: Legitimate State Authority and Human Rights,” The North-South Agenda, The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center, University of Miami, March 2002, p. 4-5

civilian contractors to spray the coca fields, and has artificial provisions stating certain equipment can only be used for counter-narcotics purposes, not counter-insurgency.³⁵ Such constraints would limit the effectiveness of American fighting forces in a bitter guerrilla war where it will be difficult to differentiate between the innocent indigenous population and the criminals. A second factor is the historic weakness of the Colombian Army, ostensibly our ally in these operations. Combine this with the civilian government's ineptness at using the army and you have a recipe for disaster. Things may be changing, however, as President Uribe plans to double the army's combat force to 100,000 combat forces and the national police to 200,000.³⁶ But there is no guarantee the civilian population is willing to step up to this commitment. In Clausewitzian terms, the "trinitarian" relationship of "mutual support among the people, the government, and the armed forces is noticeably weak in Colombia" and shows no signs of getting better.³⁷ Even if President Uribe is successful in getting the Colombian citizenry to support larger defense forces, it will take time and money to raise, equip, and train the additional forces. On the downside, diplomacy will come into play since such a plus up will alter the regional balance of power. Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela all have slashed their defense budgets in recent years for economic and political reasons. A considerably larger and more professional

³⁴ McLean, Phillip, "Colombia: Failed, Failing or Just Weak?", *The Washington Quarterly*, The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Summer 2002, p. 126

³⁵ The Center for International Policy's Colombia Project, "U.S. Military and Police Aid; Supplemental Aid for 2002," Available at < <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/02supp.htm>>, accessed 4 October 2002

³⁶ Cope, John, Strategic Forum, "Colombia's War: Toward a New Strategy", Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., October 2002

³⁷ Marcella, Gabriel, "The U.S. Engagement With Colombia: Legitimate State Authority and Human Rights," *The North-South Agenda*, The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center, University of Miami, March 2002, p. 11

army in Colombia will not be welcomed, especially in Venezuela where it will be seen as a potential threat to Venezuelan national security and territorial integrity.³⁸

Should American forces be engaged, the obvious military objective would be the quick elimination of the drug traffickers, insurgents, and paramilitaries and the return of sovereignty of all Colombian territory to the government in Bogota. Given sufficient time and resources, a coalition or American force of appropriate size would undoubtedly achieve this military objective. But achieving the military objective does not necessarily mean the achievement of the political objective. Weak to nonexistent governance is at the heart of Colombia's ills. If the social and governmental ills that spawned the problem are not addressed, achieving the military objective wins the battle but not the war. That is why a comprehensive and integrated social, economic, and military plan is the only way to achieve lasting victory.

In terms of military capabilities and vulnerabilities, remote enemy base camps in mountainous and tropical terrain mean a guerrilla war against the indigenous population. The terrain itself will limit the use of air power, tanks, large infantry divisions, etc., in the conventional manner. The cat-and-mouse nature of the conflict will mean no pitched battles, no opportunity for American firepower to score a decisive victory. Operations will have to be offensive in nature and carried out against nonstate forces capable of melting away into the forests or finding refuge in adjacent states if neighboring countries don't seal their borders. The enemy will try and draw the war out, inflicting casualties where they can, all the while hoping the leadership in Washington weakens its resolve or diverts resources to some other more

³⁸ Wilson, Patricia, "Bush-Urbe Pledge to Crack Down on Terrorism," Reuters, 17 Oct 2002, available http://dailynews.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story2&cid=578&ncid=578&e=15&u=/nm/20020925/ts_nm/colombia_usa_dc

pressing crisis. They will seek sympathetic media coverage by trying to portray the conflict as “David versus Goliath” with Goliath being wrong in the first place for interfering in an internal dispute, not to mention the fact that Goliath cannot control its own people’s desire for illegal drugs.

This will be a Special Forces-type war calling for specialized skills involving intelligence, rapid mobility, lethal strikes, and persistence on and over the battlefield once combat begins. Unfortunately, these limited assets are already overtaxed and will most likely play a major role on any attack against Iraq. This makes their availability for use in Colombia highly questionable. Another key will be sealing Colombia’s borders. This will be critical or else all three legs of the “unholy trinity” will move their operations into neighboring states, thus prolonging the war and regional instability. Ecuador is already on record as saying sealing its border with Colombia is “impossible.” Out of fear of reprisals from the illegally armed groups, Ecuador’s leaders in the past have steadfastly maintained their policy of neutrality when asked to cooperate with U.S. and Colombian efforts against the insurgents and drug traffickers.³⁹

As for potential results, a complete military victory against the drug traffickers, insurgents, and paramilitaries is possible but not probable for a number of reasons. First, all the factors are in place for a long campaign. While the Colombian people, conditioned by their history, may be accustomed to such drawn out affairs, Americans and the Western world are not. So, it will become a matter of watching and waiting, a test of patience America most likely will fail. Second, the terrain is crisscrossed with mountainous ranges that provide any number of

³⁹ “Colombia Military Expansion Poses Problems for Venezuela,” Strategic Forecasting STRATFOR.COM, Available at <http://www.stratfor.com/standard/analysis_view.php?ID=204949> Accessed 4 October 2002

inaccessible cul-de-sacs for the enemy to hide in. This will present challenges in finding the enemy, attacking them, and maintaining a presence to ensure they do not return. Third, no one can say for sure how the indigenous population will react to a major offensive. With their life and economic future on the line, will they support the legitimate government in faraway Bogota that has done little or nothing for them in the past or their local insurgent or paramilitary benefactor? If they choose to support their local warlord, legitimate law enforcement agencies will have a tough time finding the enemy, let alone successfully attacking and defeating them. Fourth, will the Colombian military and police force have enough operational and communications security to strike without the enemy having prior warning? It would be naive to think the “unholy trinity” would not be paying informants for the very information they need to survive. Fifth, will the new Uribe Administration be able to mobilize its nation to allot sufficient resources, both military and nonmilitary, to such a concerted national effort? Sixth, can the war be conducted in such a way that the cure is not worse than the disease? In other words, are we going to have to destroy Colombia to save it?

The sum of the unknown answers to all these questions is debatable in terms of the final military outcome. What is for certain is the American public will not support large-scale American military intervention into Colombia unless there is a dramatic change in its mindset. Given the current administration’s frenzied focus on Iraq, it is not likely the Bush White House will devote the necessary resources to an informational campaign designed to persuade Americans of the urgent need to act in regards to Colombia. This removes large-scale and overt American military action from the list of options. Covert action, on the other hand, basically requires only an executive finding and Congressional support. In the current and delicate Iraq-

centric political climate, it would be hard to believe Congress would support such an initiative even if the White House worked up the audacity to ask.

This leaves the final option of increasing American military assistance to the Colombians. This option might be sellable to the American public and Congress based on President Uribe's intentions to dramatically increase the size and professionalism of the Colombian military and law enforcement forces. Senior U.S. military leadership believes President Uribe will probably seek to implement a "strike-and-hold" strategy to permanently occupy and defend areas currently held by the FARC, ELN and AUC. To do so, Colombia will need more "military personnel, attack and transport helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, river patrol gunboats and better intelligence and communications capabilities."⁴⁰ The United States and other worried nations would need to help with these capability and equipment plus ups. The expanded forces also would benefit tremendously from additional top-notch counterinsurgency and low-intensity conflict training.

If, indeed, this is the strategy President Uribe decides to implement, the leadership in Washington can cite historical precedence for helping in terms of increasing the number of American military advisers and equipment used. As Vietnam taught us in a negative way but El Salvador in a positive way, we should not take "away the burden of sacrifice and of the benefits of learning by doing" from our ally in the field.⁴¹ Defeating the "unholy alliance" is still the responsibility of Colombians, who are perfectly capable of successfully winning their internecine war with aid from the outside world. Colombian military victories, not American, will lead to a

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Marcella, Gabriel, "The U.S. Engagement With Colombia: Legitimate State Authority and Human Rights," The North-South Agenda, The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center, University of Miami, March 2002, p. 11

legitimate government in Bogota. The United States cannot and should not try to impose its political will through the use of the American military on the citizens of Colombia. That said, if properly educated to the big picture security and terrorist challenges, the American people and Congress may agree to a limited increase in the number of American advisers on the ground in Colombia, along with a simultaneous increase in foreign military sales to Bogota.

Conclusion

The situation in Colombia continues to deteriorate. In addition to drugs, it has become a regional and hemispheric security issue with global war on terrorism implications. The rise of the “unholy trinity” around the drug trafficking industry threatens the legitimate government of Colombia, the stability of the entire region, American prestige in the Western Hemisphere, and has brought increased violence and crime to the transit countries in the Caribbean region and the United States. In the aftermath of the attacks on New York City and the Pentagon and the invasion of Afghanistan, America and the Western World need to look at the Colombian situation through the prism of counter-terrorism. This is no longer a one-country law enforcement issue centering on illegal drug trafficking. There is real potential for international terrorists to take over large portions of Colombia as a Western Hemisphere base of operations.

America has ample reasons to act now in response to the many threats presented by the current situation in Colombia. The best way for America to help is by enthusiastically supporting a holistic approach comprised of economic, political, social and military objectives such as outlined in Plan Colombia. The United States should also use its diplomatic, economic, military, and informational power to influence international and regional organizations such as the United Nations and Organization of American States to help defeat this multi-faceted threat. Key components of any plan must include reduction in the demand for Colombian drugs,

increased coca and poppy crop eradication, increased interdiction efforts, increased Colombian sensitivity to human rights, the elimination of government corruption, bribery, and collaboration, and viable economic alternatives for Colombia's citizenry.

The first step is for the leadership in Washington to engage the world and the American people in a public debate about the seriousness of the problem and what the options are to solve it. Direct American or foreign military intervention is not the answer. A new, larger, more professional Colombian army buttressed by increased American military support in terms of training, advice and equipment is a necessary first step. Once the legitimacy of the government in Bogota has been reestablished by eliminating the illegal armed forces, the social and economic aspects of the holistic plan (Plan Colombia?) should be able to take root and flourish. Except for reducing the demand for Colombian drugs around the world, the final answer must be Colombian in character and execution lest we win the short-term battle only to lose the long-term war.

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