

Plan Colombia: The Drug War's New Morass

by Ted Galen Carpenter

The United States is again flirting with deep involvement in a murky, parochial conflict—this time in South America. Under the banner of a new offensive in the international war on drugs, Washington risks becoming entangled in Colombia's multisided civil war. Although there is still time for America to draw back from the abyss, the Bush administration's policy is moving the nation straight toward it.

The vehicle for U.S. involvement is Plan Colombia. As envisioned by Colombian president Andres Pastrana, Plan Colombia is an ambitious blueprint to solve many of the country's economic problems as well as combat narcotics trafficking. The United States has been an eager participant from the beginning, although its focus is somewhat narrower than Pastrana would like. Washington agreed to provide \$1.3 billion to assist Bogotá specifically in combating drug trafficking. Most of the U.S. money goes to the Colombian military to purchase hardware, provide training, and otherwise fund drug eradication efforts. About 300 Green Berets are already in the country training Colombia's quite active military in counternarcotics techniques.

Colombia's Volatile Politics

Colombia's political setting is extraordinarily complex, with the government involved in a struggle with no fewer than four factions. Arrayed against the government are two radical leftist insurgent movements, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Both have been designated as terrorist groups by the U.S. Department of State. Violently opposed to FARC and ELN are the right-wing para-

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Leanne J. Abdnor, who served as Cato's vice president for external affairs from 1995 to 1998, has been named to a vacant position on the President's Commission to Strengthen Social Security. Here she talks with José Piñera at a Cato Forum on Capitol Hill in 1996.



Thomas Saving, a member of the President's Commission to Strengthen Social Security, discusses the commission's Interim Report at a Cato Policy Forum on July 25. Saving's remarks were attacked by columnist Paul Krugman in the *New York Times*, and Saving defended his analysis in a *Times* op-ed on August 12.

military groups, most notably the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Finally, there are various narco-trafficking organizations, most of which have no strong political allegiances. They are primarily profit maximizers, willing to form tactical alliances with whatever faction can advance their business prospects in a given region. At times they have worked closely with the rebel forces and paid "taxes" to FARC and ELN on drug crops and raw cocaine. On other occasions and in other places, they've cooperated with the AUC against the rebels.

Not surprisingly, this political witch's brew has produced chaos and violence. More than 2 million Colombians have fled their homes to avoid the fighting. Some 35,000 civilians have died in the conflict over the past decade, and according to some human rights groups, around 300,000 were made homeless in 2000 alone. The economy is a shambles with unemployment estimated at 20 percent. Capital flight is epidemic, and middle- and upper-class Colom-

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bians are beginning to leave the country in large numbers. In the past five years more than a million Colombians—of a population of 40 million—have emigrated.

The strength of the guerrilla forces has surged in recent years. In 1985 FARC had 3,000 fighters and was active in 25 isolated sectors. Today it has at least 20,000 better-armed fighters—the largest insurgent force in Latin America—and launches strikes all over Colombia. In the south it controls a swath of territory nearly the size of Switzerland. The ELN is considerably smaller, but its forces dominate the territory in the northeast through which runs Colombia’s economically crucial oil pipeline.

Meaningless Distinctions

Into this snake pit now wanders the United States. The lack of realism underlying U.S. involvement in Plan Colombia was illustrated by the Clinton administration’s original assurance that the funds would be used only to fight drug trafficking, not support the government’s struggle against FARC and ELN. Critics point out the obvious: military hardware purchased can and will be used for both purposes. Indeed, most of the military operations ostensibly directed against narco-traffickers take place in areas that have a large guerrilla presence. In many cases, narco-trafficking organizations are allied with one or both of the guerrilla groups. Any action against the former will be considered by the latter as a blow against their cause.

The impossibility of distinguishing between the fight against narco-trafficking and the fight against insurgents was conceded early on by some officials in the Bush administration. Robert Zoellick, a top foreign policy adviser to Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign and now U.S. Trade Representative, scoffed at the tactics of the Clinton administration. “We cannot continue to make a false distinction,” Zoellick stated. “The narco-traffickers and guerrillas compose one dangerous network.” Candidate Bush himself took a similar line, vowing that U.S. assistance “will help the

Colombian government protect its people, fight the drug trade, [and] *halt the momentum of the guerrillas.*” Actions in the field may already be blurring the line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency assistance. In April 2001 Counter-Narcotics Battalion 1, an elite Colombian army unit that had been specifically trained by the United States to conduct anti-drug operations, clashed with FARC guerrillas in southern Colombia. Nine rebels and one government soldier were killed.

Whatever the initial intent, Plan Colombia draws the United States into Colombia’s civil war. Pastrana clearly wants Washington to play a role in ending the insurgency as well as fund anti-drug efforts. During a visit to Washington in late February 2001, he urged the Bush administration to participate in peace negotiations between his government and the two rebel organizations. Initially, President Bush and other administration leaders firmly rebuffed that initiative. Within days, however, U.S. policymakers seemed to have second thoughts. Trial balloons appeared in the news media suggesting that, perhaps, the United States could play a constructive, albeit supporting, role in the negotiations.

Colombia probably would be a violent and turbulent place even without the drug factor, but the lucrative illegal drug trade makes an already bad situation even worse. Both rebel organizations (and to a lesser extent the AUC) derive much of their revenues from the drug trade. The bulk of the money appears to come from “tax levies” the groups impose on drug-crop farmers and drug traffickers. But there is also strong evidence that FARC and ELN are directly involved in trafficking. One estimate places the revenue flow from drug-related sources to FARC at more than \$600 million a year, which would make that group the best-funded insurgency in the world today.

The flow of drug money to insurgents should be embarrassing to drug warriors in the United States and Colombia. After all, when the Cali and Medellin drug cartels were broken in the 1990s, victories were loudly proclaimed. In reality, the traffickers merely adapted to the new environment and adopted a more decentralized form of organization. Today rough-

ly 300 loosely connected families control the drug trade, and Colombia still accounts for approximately 80 percent of all the cocaine produced in the world and two-thirds of the heroin consumed in the United States.

Human Rights

Human rights advocates in the United States and elsewhere have grave reservations about Plan Colombia. They worry that Washington is crawling into bed with some of the worst abusers of human rights in the Western Hemisphere, especially given the ties between portions of the Colombian military and the AUC. Congress sought to deflect such criticism by attaching a number of conditions to the aid package, including one requiring the executive branch to closely monitor the behavior of Colombia’s military and police forces.

However, as is often the case with congressionally imposed standards, those “requirements” have turned out to be little more than political window-dressing. Indeed, Congress gave the executive branch a spacious legal escape hatch, allowing a presidential waiver on national security grounds—a depressingly familiar shell game. Sure enough, the first time executive branch certification of an improvement in Colombia’s human rights record came due, in August 2000, the requirements were waived by President Clinton.

Even President Pastrana is alarmed at the growing strength of the right-wing paramilitary organizations. He has blasted the paramilitaries as a “veritable cancer spreading in our body politic” and accuses the AUC of being “responsible for 70 percent of the massacres.”

The AUC fighters are hardly the only parties guilty of committing atrocities, though. In May 2001 FARC troops massacred more than two dozen farmers in northern Colombia; many of the victims were hacked to death with machetes. The rebel forces had invaded an area where a new crop of coca was being grown to generate income for the AUC. The massacre was also part of a larger FARC campaign to open a transportation corridor to the Caribbean and Panama to facilitate the flow of drugs and arms. Achieving that goal

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meant eliminating a stronghold that the AUC had seized more than five years earlier.

Failure of Eradication Efforts

Human rights organizations are not the only critics of Plan Colombia. Governors of the coca-producing provinces, although strongly opposed to the Marxist guerrillas, condemn aspects of the plan. They reserve their harshest rhetorical fire for the aerial spraying campaign that Washington pushes with such enthusiasm. The governors warned in January 2001 that the operation would imperil the livelihood of thousands of poor peasants. Their worst fears were soon confirmed as the herbicide used in the spraying program killed acre upon acre of legal crops along with the coca plants.

Predictably, both Colombian and U.S. officials touted the “spectacular” early success of the aerial spraying campaign. Just as predictably, details soon emerged to cast doubt on those claims. *Washington Post* correspondent Scott Wilson, traveling in Colombia just weeks after the most intensive phase of the spraying offensive in December 2000 and January 2001, noted Bogotá’s claims that some 40,000 acres of coca had been destroyed in one province, Putumayo, alone. Yet “in interviews around this village [El Tigre]...farmers said many drug plantations remained untouched, protected from spray planes in hard-to-reach valleys by jungle cover and guerrilla troops. Valleys full of coca were evident from the main east-west highway. And on almost every farm hit by the herbicide since December, small tents protected young coca plants for future cultivation.”

Evidence emerged in May 2001 that cast even more doubt on the effectiveness of the crop eradication strategy. A source within the Colombian government leaked information about a study that contained revised estimates of the country’s cocaine production. According to those revised estimates, Colombia is producing 800 to 900 tons of cocaine annually, not the 580 tons estimated by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. If accurate, the new estimates mean that Colombia is producing more cocaine than the earlier U.S. estimate of

News Notes

Leyland, Kiely Join Cato

Jackie Leyland has joined the Cato Institute as director of development. She will oversee the Institute’s direct mail program and meet with Sponsors and potential Sponsors. Leyland earned her master’s degree in computer science from Duke University and worked as a fellow in nuclear weapons safety at Sandia National Laboratories before spending four years in business marketing at Capital One Financial Corporation. She can be reached at jleyland@cato.org.



Jackie Leyland

Jefferson Kiely has joined Cato as director of marketing; he will oversee all aspects of marketing and advertising for



Jefferson Kiely

Cato publications and events. Kiely most recently founded and served as president of the Kiely Agency of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. At other communications firms, he supervised a number of corporate accounts, including an advertising campaign for McDonald’s of South Florida. He also developed cross-promotional efforts with many Florida enterprises, including the Miami Heat, the Miami Dolphins, Coke and Minute Maid, Busch Gardens, Sea World, and Disney. He has been a libertarian all his life; his parents named him for Thomas Jefferson. He can be reached at jkiely@cato.org.

total world production (780 tons). Furthermore, if the Colombian government study is correct, the actual acreage under cultivation in Colombia is considerably greater than previously thought—perhaps as much as 50 percent greater. In short, even if one accepts the notion that the spraying completely eradicated the coca plants in the 75,000 acres hit so far, the reality is that the amount of acreage under cultivation today is greater than the total estimated acreage when the campaign began. As the Colombian source put it, Plan Colombia has “not made a dent” in the country’s output of cocaine.

Increasing Risks

As if the reports leaking out of Colombia were not enough to cast doubt on the effectiveness of Plan Colombia, Donnie Marshall, head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, conceded barely a week later that cocaine prices in the United States were not rising despite the eradication efforts in Colombia. If those efforts were having an effect, they should have produced at least a modest supply short-

age in the United States. That, in turn, should have created upward pressure on street prices for the drug. Yet Marshall admitted that prices had remained steady since December 2000, when eradication efforts under Plan Colombia began.

The risk exposure to the Americans waging the drug war in Colombia is also on the rise. Planes conducting spraying have been fired on. In February 2001 an armed search and rescue team including several Americans, and working under contract with the State Department, was also fired upon as it recovered the crew of a Colombian police helicopter that had been disabled in a fire-fight with guerrillas trying to protect a coca crop.

One of the great dangers of Plan Colombia is that it will cause Colombia’s troubles to spill over its borders into neighboring countries. As soon as it became evident that the United States was financially backing Plan Colombia’s military, anti-drug component, officials in other countries began to express concern and objections.

True, some of the professed reluctance

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to endorse Plan Colombia appears to be part of a cynical strategy on the part of various governments to extract more money from the United States. Ecuador's foreign minister Heinz Moeller was not subtle when he warned that it would be impossible to prevent Colombia's war from spreading to Ecuador (and other neighboring countries)—unless the United States came up with additional financial assistance. He thought another \$400 million to \$500 million over five years ought to cover it.

Indeed, the lure of U.S. aid dollars eventually caused most Latin American leaders to embrace Plan Colombia, however reluctantly. By April 2001 even Venezuela's eccentric leftist president, Hugo Chavez, was on board—despite remarks a few months earlier warning of the “Vietnamization” of the Amazon basin. Coincidentally, his conversion took place barely two weeks after the Bush administration proposed doubling the aid package for Colombia's neighbors.

But some influential Latin Americans have refused to mute their objections despite the draw of U.S. dollars. One hundred prominent Latin Americans, including Argentine Nobel laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, sent President Bush a letter calling U.S. military aid and forced coca eradication in Colombia “misguided and harmful” and warning that the policy “will [adversely] affect the entire Andean region.” Ecuadorean congressman Henry Llanes, a prominent critic of his government's decision to allow the United States to run its anti-drug surveillance flights out of an air base at Manta, cites as one reason for his opposition the fear of a dangerous entanglement. “We are compromising our neutrality in the Colombian conflict with the Manta base,” Llanes warns, “dragging ourselves into a war between the Americans and their enemies in Colombia.”

His fears are not unfounded. A few days earlier Ecuadorean troops killed six men at an illegal drug lab near the border with Colombia. Evidence at the scene indicated that they were members of FARC. That marked the first armed clash between the Ecuadorean military and the Colombian

rebels. Other incidents soon followed. In early February more than 500 Ecuadoreans fled their Amazon jungle homes after armed Colombian groups threatened their border hamlets—seemingly a direct response to the earlier destruction of the lab. In early June an Ecuadorean army unit clashed with ELN guerrillas some 13 miles inside the border.

Fighting in Colombia has also created a flow of refugees into neighboring countries. In one such incident in early February 2001, more than 400 people from four villages sought refuge in Venezuela after paramilitary forces pillaged their homes. Other victims have fled to neighboring countries to avoid harassment by the rebels. More than 100 refugees crossed the border into Panama after FARC guerrillas killed the mayor of their Pacific coast village and terrorized them.

In addition to the spillover of violence from Colombia's civil war, there has been a spillover of the drug trade. Even as U.S. support for Plan Colombia got under way in 2000, U.S. officials were reporting a marked increase of drug trafficking in the upper Amazon River region in Brazil as well as in Panama. By late 2000 U.S. officials promised that additional funding would be forthcoming to deal with the problem. Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering was surprisingly candid, explaining, “As we increase our efforts in Colombia, there will be a tendency [for the drug organizations] to find new areas, either in Colombia or outside Colombia, in which to move the cultivation and production of cocaine and heroin.” One would be hard-pressed to come up with a more concise description of the “push down, pop up” (or “balloon”) effect and the inherent futility of the drug eradication component of the hemispheric war on drugs. But Pickering did not draw the obvious conclusion.

In March 2001 the Bush administration proposed a significant increase in funding for Colombia's neighbors in the 2002 budget. As part of a \$731 million Andean Initiative (the name is cribbed from a similar initiative of Bush the elder), the administration earmarked \$332 million for anti-drug efforts. The new Andean Initiative request included an additional \$399 mil-

lion for Colombia, \$156 million for Peru, \$101 million for Bolivia, and about \$75 million for Colombia's four other neighbors—Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela.

Trouble Ahead

For all the claimed successes, Plan Colombia is already showing signs of trouble. Barely months after the program went into effect, Pastrana was calling for substantially more money. In an interview shortly before his summit meeting with President Bush in February 2001, Pastrana asserted that perhaps as much as another \$500 million a year was needed. Those funds, he argued, should be spent on economic development in the provinces where the aerial spraying programs were taking their greatest toll. He added ominously, “This is a long-term plan, maybe 15 to 20 years.”

And Plan Colombia already shows signs of creating a nasty anti-U.S. backlash among portions of the Colombian population. When Pastrana visited Putumayo province in May 2001 to sell the “softer” (economic development) side of Plan Colombia, he was repeatedly confronted by groups of protesters. Many of them waved signs showing a Colombian flag subsumed by the Stars and Stripes, with the caption “Plan Colombia's achievements.” Other demonstrators greeted the president with chants of “Pastrana subservient to the gringos.” “The United States thinks they're the boss here,” one angry resident told a reporter. “We don't want fumigation, and we don't want money from Uncle Sam.”

There is, of course, another troubling possibility in connection with Plan Colombia. If the effort fails to achieve its objective, pressure will mount on the United States to escalate its commitment. Even during these relatively early stages of the campaign, one can already hear arguments that America's credibility is on the line.

As we have seen in regions as diverse as Southeast Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Balkans, once America's “credibility” is invoked, it is very difficult to blunt the drive toward a major military commitment. In Colombia another quagmire is beckoning. ■