

U.S. Interventions in Latin America:

“Plan Colombia”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mauricio Solaún is a professor of Latin American social and political institutions at the University of Illinois. He holds degrees in law, economics, and sociology from the Universidad de Villanueva, Cuba, Yale University, and the University of Chicago, respectively. Among his published books are *Sinners and Heretics: The Politics of Military Intervention in Latin America*; *Discrimination without Violence: Miscegenation and Racial Conflict in Latin America*; and *Politics of Compromise: Coalition Government in Colombia*.

Solaún has been a visiting professor at the Universidad de los Andes and the Universidad Pontificia Javeriana in Bogota, the Universidad de Belgrano in Buenos Aires, and the Universidad Católica de Valparaíso in Chile. He has been awarded several international fellowships and research grants, and has been a guest lecturer throughout Latin America and several countries in Europe and Asia. He has organized and directed study/internship programs in Colombia, Chile, Argentina, and Mexico.

Solaún was the first Cuban-American to serve as a U.S. ambassador. From September 1977 to February 1979 he served in Nicaragua, where he organized locally a United States-sponsored mediation by the Organization of American States to avert civil war and obtain the peaceful democratization of the country. These international efforts failed in the face of the local unwillingness to compromise, and Solaún returned to his university post.

PART ONE

Plan Colombia

“Plan Colombia” is a proposal of the government of Colombia that was submitted to foreign countries in late 1999, to obtain their political and financial support in its fight against violent men and women: revolutionaries; narcotraffickers; self-proclaimed vigilantes; and common criminals. The Colombian government called it a “plan for peace, prosperity, and the strengthening of the state,” and sought \$1.5 billion of new, emergency foreign assistance. But the overall Plan contemplated a \$7.5 billion budget.

A new administration had been inaugurated recently in Colombia in critical circumstances, the legacy of the disreputable four-year term of the previous president, Ernesto Samper. In effect, Samper had been elected in 1994 with a drug financed campaign, which was made public and resulted in the incarceration of top aides. Subsequently the U.S. Government engaged in an interventionist campaign to destabilize the president. In 1996 Samper’s visa to enter the United States was suspended; that same year the U.S. decertified Colombia, cataloging it as not cooperating in the war against drugs. (When a country is decertified the door is opened not only to suspend U.S. assistance but normal trade relations with it as well, by imposing economic sanctions). This hostile policy aggressively vocalized by the U.S. ambassador, however, was unsuccessful. The Colombian Congress voted down Samper’s impeachment, the military did not rebel, and the president ended his term.

But in spite of Samper’s reactions to the interventionist pressures—for instance, in 1995 the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, kingpins of the Cali drug cartel, were jailed, and in 1997 the political Constitution was amended to permit the extradition of narcos to be tried in the United States—drug production and commercialization were not under control. Colombia had become also a producer of heroin. Indeed, the so-called “narcoguerrillas,” for the Marxist revolutionary guerrilla groups also were involved in the sordid drug business, had made substantial gains. In the last months of Samper’s tenure it was estimated that about half the country was not under the Colombian government’s control. In March 1998, it was reported that army morale was at rock-bottom—the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the largest and oldest guerrilla movement, had driven the Colombian armed forces from several bases in the south of the country. In a survey conducted weeks before the inauguration in August of the new president, 63 percent of the respondents opined that the guerrillas were capable of seizing power by force. Reportedly, the size and potency of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)—the federation of private, anti-Marxist vigilantes, created in so-called “self-defense” against the guerrilla insurgency, who are also known as “paramilitaries”—had also increased.

In sum, when the current president, Andrés Pastrana, was sworn-in in 1998, Colombia’s unstable democracy was in a serious crisis: discredited political institutions; escalating insecurity and violence; exodus of trained Colombians to foreign lands; major economic recession, high debt and unemployment levels.¹ Plan Colombia was devised as the mechanism of foreign assistance for democratic institution-building and consolidation, peace, and national general prosperity.

You will note that the projection of resources by the U.S. in a nation like Colombia with regime instability tends to result in patterns of client-state politics, that is, in interventions of a foreign power in processes to determine a foreign government. And this foreign intervention—the allocation of resources for regime maintenance (or its termination)—can be sought by insufficiently supported democratic regimes (and oppositions), which can seek clientelistic alliances with the United States and other nations.

The Plan Colombia proposal consisted of a lengthy, very broad program of government. The text elaborated ten strategies to achieve its principal objectives, and recognized that these could only be gradually achieved. Its lofty tone was of the social democracy currently in vogue in Latin America. The goal, I quote: “a Colombia in peace, progressive and free of drugs, modern, democratic..., [prosperous with social justice], with pride and dignity as a member of the world community.” Throughout the text emphasis was placed on the rule

of law and protection of the human rights of all. The strategies are, of course, interrelated. For simplicity I will only highlight segments of five problem areas.

The Economic Strategy

Colombia urgently needed to stabilize its economy, bringing its budget back to equilibrium and cleaning up its banking system, in order to return to a growing, developing economy and address the social needs of the population. Employment would be generated by a mixed economy with an important role of national and international private enterprise. But although tax reforms had been implemented and were under way, the indebted state did not have the resources to conduct effective wars against terrorism and drugs. The country urgently needed foreign assistance to finance a budget to generate peace and make the necessary supportive social investments. Concretely, the narco traffic was not simply a Colombian problem: it involves producing and consuming nations; hence the problem should be addressed with international cooperation and co-responsibility, its cost should be allocated based on the economic capacity of the countries involved, thus the legitimacy of the claim to the U.S. and other nations that they assist Plan Colombia.

The Peace Process

An integral part of the Plan was the so-called Peace Process. Before being elected, president Pastrana had met with Manuel Marulanda, aka Tiro Fijo (Sure Shot), the old peasant leader of the FARC, and had promised to seek a negotiated peace settlement with the guerrillas. Although Pastrana's inauguration was met with a massive guerrilla violent offensive and no cease-fire was acceptable to the FARC, three months later (November 1998) the government of Colombia began to withdraw from an area about the size of Switzerland in the south of the country, and declared it a "*zona de distensión*" (i.e., zone of détente). The purpose of this, alternatively called "demilitarized zone" because by law the armed forces, police, and other security forces could not enter it (and orders of capture against the guerrillas were suspended), was to guarantee the necessary security to negotiate a peace agreement sought before the end of the president's term (in August of this year). As you may know, on 20 February 2002 Pastrana ended the Peace Process in the face of continued FARC violence, and ordered the army to reoccupy the détente zone. Of course, the noted economic difficulties were related to the guerrillas: massive kidnappings resulted in business bankruptcies; extant insecurity contracted investment levels; petroleum pipeline sabotage reduced export levels; and very costly attacks against the nation's infrastructure, including electrical substations and transmission lines, blown up bridges, explosions of aqueducts, etc. Although the Peace Process was mainly focused on the FARC, initiatives were also to be taken with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, or National Liberation Army), the second largest guerrilla movement, the Plan stated, as well as to obtain the peaceful dismantling of the Autodefensas or the vigilantes pursuing armed conflict with the guerrillas and their supporters (AUC).

The explicit objectives of the Peace Process were to: establish state control over the nation's entire territory; achieve the full acceptance of a democratic regime with only peaceful contests for power; end human rights violations—the guerrillas were notorious transgressors, e.g., the assassinations and kidnappings of civilians; and also terminate guerrilla involvement in the narco business. The idea was, as in the Central America of the 1990s, to obtain a cease-fire and negotiate a peace accord transforming the guerrillas into political parties, unarmed participants in the democratic processes.

In all of this the international community was seen playing a vital role. For one thing, during the Peace Process foreign assistance was to be channeled to the Colombian armed forces and the police, to enhance their capabilities to protect the population. Second, in agreement with international law several countries and international organizations were expected to assist as observers and mediators of negotiations, and later to verify the implementation of the peace agreements. Third, international agencies were to play a role advising and assisting in the control of investments of the Fondo de Inversión para la Paz (Fund for Peace), the channel of national and international funds for peace.

Obviously, if successful the peace initiative would have resulted in an extraordinary triumph in the wars against terrorism and drugs. There was precedent in Colombia of successful negotiation with a guerrilla group, as with the April 19 Movement that culminated in its participation in the elections of 1990 under Virgilio

Barco. I visited its guerrilla camp in 1989 in the mountains of Cauca when negotiations already had started. However, the M-19 movement was of a different revolutionary kind than the FARC. And as I found out, at that time its leadership was being motivated into a peace accord because of the belief that violence was futile, that nothing could be gained by continuing with it, that only Colombia would lose. Indeed, Mr. Pastrana was taking a big risk with his unprecedented, unilateral and unconditional surrender of such huge territory to what had become a highly economically profitable, rural gangster movement, despite its Communist revolutionary historical ties.

The Antinarcotic Strategy

With the end of the Cold War, in Latin America the U.S. Government shifted security issues to the war against drugs. The new American “Big Stick” took as one of its forms the aforementioned yearly certification process. Yet the strained relations between the U.S. and the Samper administration had coincided with the dramatic deterioration of conditions in Colombia. One thing Pastrana sought was to improve relations with the United States (actually in August 2000 Bill Clinton visited convulsed Colombia for a few hours). Thus, there were more reasons to emphasize the fight against drugs in Plan Colombia. I mention this because Colombian public opinion has been often inclined to view the narcotraffic problem more as an international problem than a very high domestic priority.

The narcotraffic poses a serious threat to Colombia in the vast resources that it generates and its links to violence and the corruption of public and private institutions, and it distorts the economy and destabilizes the nation, the Plan stated. The Plan went on to specify a series of measures that would be taken to destroy the “chain of the drug,” from its agriculture to its consumption. I will not detail the proposed reforms in law enforcement, which included measures to appropriate funds and properties originated by the traffic. I will rest with this.

The objective was to reduce the production of the drug industry by 50 percent in six years. In phase one, the destruction of the industry would be concentrated in the Putumayo region and other southern areas during the first year.² Phase two would take two to three years and take place in the southeast and center of the country. And phase three, from three to six years, would be carried out throughout Colombia.

As in other places in Latin America—such as Bolivia and Peru—crops were to be eradicated, and this was related to the development of alternative legal crops and other types of employment, “profitable, environment conscious and sustainable.” Of course, this is easier said than done given the profitability of drug related production. \$570.8 million were planned to assist this alternative-development program, a cost estimated for the remainder of the presidential term, which included the development of rural infrastructure in strategic areas and land distribution.

The Strengthening of the State

The growth of the guerrilla movement consisted of its territorial expansion at the expense of the state’s presence in such areas; and in remote regions not controlled by the state narco activities had developed. Indeed, in Colombia the state was not exercising its authority nor complying with its basic obligations: the life, freedom and property of its citizens were not effectively protected, entire communities were displaced by the violence, and so on. To establish the norms of a peaceful society, the armed forces, police and judicial system were to be reformed and strengthened, guided by the rule of law and respect of human rights. To end the extant widespread impunity, the organs of the state themselves would be under transparent and accessible control, the armed forces included. While the policy of extradition of Colombians to foreign countries would continue, the highly inefficient local jail system would be transformed into a high security one. And a Presidential Program Against Corruption in the public and private sectors was proposed, as well as establishing a High Commissioner for Human Rights, a Permanent Commission for Human Rights, and formally extending the Program for Witnesses and Threatened Persons to control human rights performance. International assistance to develop these initiatives and strengthen the state’s more traditional organs of law enforcement included the implementation of training programs.

At the core of the state-building, of course, was the modernization/professionalization of the armed forces and police to gradually construct peace. The various branches of the Armed Forces would specialize in combating the revolutionaries or insurgents, the narcos, the vigilantes, and organized crime; the National Police (PN) drugs and other types of crime; and the DAS (Colombia's closest equivalent to the FBI) all types of economic crimes. The goal: more mobile forces, more agile in their responses, better trained forces that emphasize offensive operations. Fundamental to the task was to transform the army into a voluntary corps that as such would have more permanent, career oriented personnel. And its size would be increased substantially. While wider authority would be given to military or police *comandantes* in operation-areas to restrict movement and traffic, the commitment of the state to uphold international humanitarian law was sustained, proposing the transfer of military cases to the civilian jurisdiction. And the role of the United States in the military and police modernization was fundamental beyond funding. The U.S. would assist in their reorganization, creating and training specialized units, and be a sustained ongoing source of intelligence. There was no substitute to the U.S. supportive role in some areas, as in the planned more frequent and effective operations to control air space.

Social Development

Finally, Plan Colombia had a "social component." It sought developmental assistance for special kinds of programs, participatory grassroots programs at the municipal and community level. It was considered that the violence and correlated corruption would progressively end with increases in civil social participation to obtain better, more accountable and controlled local government, and to exercise social pressure against the *violentos*. Grassroots participation had a pedagogic function: the development of a tolerant, democratic collective conscience. I should note that the focus on participatory, popular, human development found precedent in a prior period of heightened U.S. intervention in Latin America: John Kennedy's Alliance for Progress initiated in the early 1960s. You may recall that he established the Peace Corps. Colombia became one of its main destinations, and in its spirit the Colombian government led the formation of a nationwide community development movement. Government "promoters" of the Communal Action agency assisted local grassroots groups, formed to carry out a great variety of community projects: building roads or schools, a health unit, water service, etc.

Since then, non-government organizations (NGOs) had proliferated and were to play a fundamental role in the social strategy. In effect, the three principal entities in charge of it were the Presidency (Departamento Administrativo de la Presidencia), the aforementioned Fund for Peace (Fondo de Inversión para la Paz), and the Colombian Confederation of Non-Governmental Organizations (CCONG). Among other functions, the latter monitors the process of empowering entities to compete to obtain funds to implement social projects.

About a year ago the initiation of Plan Colombia's "Social Component" was widely advertised by the government and a call for projects to be selected was formally made. Eight areas were started:

1. Families in Action: cash subsidies to families of the poorest economic level in exchange for health and educational commitments; the target: 380,000 families in counties of less than 100,000 people.
2. Employment in Action: employment for unskilled workers building urban infrastructure; the target: 300,000 unemployed throughout the nation.
3. Youth in Action: training programs for semi-skilled work opened for unemployed individuals between eighteen and twenty-five years old in the seven cities with highest unemployment rates.
4. Roads for Peace: construction and improvement of 10,700 kilometers of roads in 260 counties generating directly and indirectly 105,000 jobs.
5. Countryside in Action: social and economic, sustainable production projects to benefit small and middle-sized agricultural producers in three priority areas of conflict.
6. Humanitarian Attention: to address the needs of the victims of terrorist attacks and the population displaced by the violence.
7. Human Rights: to promote the development of a human rights culture.

8. Transparency and Peaceful Living Together: projects supportive of developing democratic public administration and citizen control, and to provide legal property rights in areas where pacts are made to eradicate illegal crops.

* * *

That the government of Colombia sought U.S. assistance was not surprising. In 1986, under Ronald Reagan, the United States had formally confirmed (regardless of our own personal opinion) that it considered the “war on drugs” necessary for the nation’s security, by establishing the yearly Certification of Drug-Producing Nations mentioned earlier. U.S. military and economic aid to combat coca production and its derivatives became established in the Andean nations. In 1991 the U.S. Congress passed the Andean Trade Preference Act under the first Bush. This trade benefit exempting certain exports from Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador from any U.S. tariffs, was an offshoot of the certification process to wean the hemisphere’s coca-growing nations from the drug trade. And under Clinton, despite the decertifications during the Samper administration, anti-drug aid had increased to Colombia in three years, from \$22 million to about \$100 million in 1997.³ In the fiscal year up to September 1999, when Pastrana was already president, \$287 million were given to Colombia in military aid to improve tactics, mobility and firepower for greater effectiveness in drug eradication and interdiction.

In July 2000—toward the end of Clinton’s tenure—the U.S. Congress approved \$1.3 billion for Plan Colombia. During the first year (2000-1), \$860.3 million were allocated; of these \$642.3 million (74.66%) were for the Armed Forces and the Police. And on top of Plan Colombia, about \$330 million went to on-going U.S. assisted projects.

The bulk of the Plan’s military assistance (\$416.9 million) was destined to build, train and equip three antinarcotic Army battalions and to develop drug interdiction operations (\$101.8 million). The Police received \$115.6 million. These antidrug operations were supported with the delivery of helicopters and air radar systems. The U.S. also built a technologically sophisticated intelligence system. At the same time, U.S.A.I.D. invested \$42.5 million in legal crop substitution programs, \$30 million to assist individuals displaced by the violence, and \$47 million in human rights and democracy programs.⁴ I should note in the light of the post-September 11 “war on terrorism” reaction, that in approving Plan Colombia, the U.S. Congress not only prohibited a combat role for our military and their assisting Colombian military operations in the field; the United States was only to exclusively aid the war on drugs, it would have no involvement in the counterinsurgency war. The position is a bit bizarre in that the Marxist guerrillas are involved in the narcotraffic! But such sophistry is not absent from Washington: during the Nicaraguan Contra war it was stipulated that its purpose was not to change the Sandinista government, but rather only to interdict Nicaraguan military supplies to El Salvador’s Marxist rebels.

Colombia’s neighbors manifested concern with Plan Colombia: the escalation of fighting could displace Colombian guerrillas or refugees through porous jungle borders into their own territory; narco activities might be displaced to them... Thus the current Bush administration requested \$882 million for an Andean Regional Initiative, which complements Plan Colombia and included the other countries (except Venezuela). In 1991, the administration obtained \$731 million, of which \$399 million were destined to supplement Colombian needs.

Currently the situation is fluid in light of the post-September 11 “global war on terror” and the breakdown of the Colombian peace process. The Bush administration has been making statements to the effect that the United States should broaden its security role beyond counternarcotics assistance, to help Colombia take more aggressive, proactive action against the insurgency. The FARC, ELN and the AUC “paramilitaries” are on the U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations. What is now called the Andean Counterdrug Initiative covers \$379 million in assistance for Colombia in 2002. And of the \$537 million earmarked for Colombia in President Bush’s budget request for 2003, \$98 million would be used to train and equip a new brigade of Colombian soldiers, to defend an Occidental Petroleum oil pipeline repeatedly blown up by the rebels.⁵ The U.S. press has also reported that the Bush plan considers sharing with Colombia intelligence useful for reasons other than counternarcotics missions, and to provide anti-kidnapping assistance. Also the U.S. Government is requesting the extradition of guerrillas involved in the drug traffic.

PART TWO

Magnitude of the Problem

When in 1965 two prominent Colombian businessmen were kidnapped and killed, a state of consternation took hold in my circle of Colombian social contacts. Since then allegedly “more than half the world’s kidnappings occur in Colombia.”⁶ I personally know (as a result of my University of Illinois activities) more than a dozen persons killed, kidnapped or seriously injured, not to speak of those who have for security reasons become exiles. In the late 1980s, when I was doing research again in Colombia, there were about 10,000 permanently armed and active insurgents, not counting narco gangs. The current estimate is 30,000.⁷ A prominent Colombian political analyst, with whom I collaborated for many years, tells me that he does not feel secure enough to go to rural areas and even in Bogota avoids going out at nights. Indeed, the old Colombia where we had so much fun has disappeared.

I make these personal references to convey a sense of the very serious, giving way of governability and law and order in the country because of the unreliability of statistics. In effect, there are confusing significant variations in the published estimates. I will just present this brief picture.

Since the violence between the two traditional parties* was unleashed by the 1946 election and change in the ruling party—a process that became known as *la violencia*—Colombia has never been pacified. Of course, there have been ups and downs. For example, by the mid-1960s there was a lull: the old interparty violence had virtually disappeared and the banditry into which it had evolved appeared to be rapidly receding.⁸ Yet we could not be entirely optimistic. So-called “independent republics” of originally Liberal Party connected Marxist guerrillas, which became the FARC, were already in control of a few relatively isolated rural pockets. More troublesome, in the radical spirit of the Cuban Revolution—although with its own distinction and the participation of Father Camilo Torres, a precursor of Liberation Theology—in 1965 the ELN social revolutionaries established themselves as armed rebels in the mountains. In 1970 yet another important revolutionary group was formed, the very audacious April 19 Movement (M-19). And other relatively less important insurgent groups were formed in the 1960s and ‘70s, years in which the symbolism of the Cuban Revolution powerfully attracted sectors of South American opinion.

Moreover, in the eighties during Belisario Bentancur’s term (1982-86) a dual phenomenon took place: a strengthening of revolutionary groups partly as a consequence of the resources provided to them by Betancur in his failed peace negotiations; and the emergence of the narcotraffic as a potent, obvious factor of terrorism, either as an independent force of mafiosi groups who violently fought the political order, or as an added financial resource of the guerrillas. Since then some changes have taken place (e.g., as mentioned the M-19 negotiated its transformation into a peaceful, electoral party; after the killing of Pablo Escobar, the narcoterrorist leader, and the constitutional prohibition of narcos’ extraditions during César Gaviria’s term of 1990-94, narco violence against political leaders and its indiscriminate urban terrorism subsided; and the FARC and the paramilitaries became more prominent actors). But the overall trend was of an increased deterioration of the state’s strength and substantially increased violence. The objective of Plan Colombia was precisely to redress this trend.

Colombia’s war is complex because it consists of a multiple-band affair. It is not that the state fights narcos and guerrillas. Narcos have fought guerrillas while some guerrillas are narcos themselves (narcoguerrillas). Chaos is heightened by the so-called paramilitaries. It is known that the incapacity of the army and police to maintain order tends to result in the formation of vigilante militias. They can perform “services” for the state’s forces. Thus the latter’s inclination to have links with them. Property owners can be natural allies of anti-Communist vigilantes. And a fact of life is that in Colombia narco money became huge and generous: not only do paramilitaries welcome it, it can help repair a local church, build a football field for a

*Conservative and Liberal.

town... Drug linked individuals are local property owners with status in some communities. Thus there has not been a simple war against drugs in the country. Furthermore, while the paramilitaries' thrust is not to exercise revolutionary violence against the state, to defeat the guerrillas they have engaged in coercion and mass murder of perceived or real sympathizers of guerrillas, and in drug trafficking and kidnapping. While the U.S. State Department informs of continuing links between some members of the security forces and paramilitary groups, the Colombian military hierarchy is reported to be aware that the just mentioned patterns are counterproductive; reportedly military force has been used against paramilitaries.⁹ The above actors—plus common criminality which for decades has been exceptionally, conspicuously high in Colombia—make the country a human rights nightmare.

Indeed, at the initiation of Plan Colombia it was being estimated that over 3,500 were killed by the political violence every year.¹⁰ And in 2000, 3,706 were reported to the government as kidnapped, typically a misreported figure; the National Police guessed that \$250 million had been paid in ransom. On the other hand, the government's planning office (DNP) estimated that in 2000 the subversives received \$1.111 billion for drugs, \$570 million for extortion, and \$320 million for kidnapping. The common people were experiencing high costs: for instance, in 1999 some 300,000 had been driven by the violence from their rural homes and displaced to other communities. Colombia also suffered by the exodus of its human and financial capital: in the last three years about 1.8 million emigrated abroad and \$4.5 billion were transferred by Colombians to foreign countries. "Colombia is being left alone and poor," a local newspaper stated.¹¹

In short, in spite of the absence of support for a revolution by the general public—consistently shown by public opinion surveys—and the desires of the population for peace, minorities of *violentos* had gained a military power that far outweighs their political support through their accumulation of resources and inadequate public policies. One thing is clear: the *violentos* had been able to place sympathizers in some strategic positions of the power structure, but this did not mean any substantial public support for a Marxist revolution, especially after the dramatic collapses experienced by European Communism and the end of the Cold War.

But the task of bringing a semblance of law and order to Colombia was awesome, hence Plan Colombia. As noted, the complex, vicious, many-sided violence had grown vis-à-vis a state without any coherent strategy to meet the challenge and an unprepared armed force. Obviously as the presence of *violento* groups increases throughout a territory the magnitude of the problem is compounded.¹² Public policy was characterized by zigzags. For example, four candidates for the 1990 presidential election were killed. When in 1989 the Liberal Party leader was murdered allegedly by narcos, the government abruptly reacted by occupying vast properties and reintroducing their extradition to the United States. It is revealing that at that time the armed force was so ill-equipped that my regular diplomatic contact informed me that the government had confiscated from the targeted narcos more helicopters than those in service for the Colombian armed forces! Yet subsequently no *sustained effort* was carried out by the following administrations to provide the resources to the Armed Forces to turn "the war" in their favor. They remained underfinanced and undermanned. The state's strategy cannot exclusively be repressive but it has required a politically backed, more substantial military component.

Since Plan Colombia, the military situation is reported to have improved: a stronger army, with newly formed professional units of better trained and equipped salaried soldiers, with a modern helicopter fleet, better intelligence, coordination and mobility, capable of inflicting severe losses to guerrillas engaged in open battle. It was predicted at the recent end of the Peace Process that the guerrillas could not initiate battles lasting days, as opposed to more classical operations of small-scale attacks against isolated units, ambushes and terrorist actions and sabotage.¹³

At the same time, however, it was considered that the security forces were still underequipped and undermanned, especially to control small-scale actions: terrorism can be done only by a few, for instance, it takes two or three to blow up an energy tower...¹⁴ Colombia's terrain is very difficult, with multiple mountain ranges and vast jungles. And the army was still considered insufficiently proactive, about half of its personnel being used to protect fixed places.

I should note that despite the links with the paramilitaries imputed to the army, in public opinion surveys the armed forces have been holding a good institutional image being ranked high. Pro-military sources claim that leftist NGOs have engaged in disinformation campaigns to tarnish the army's image, "judicial wars" against military commanders to purge the armed forces of competent leadership and reduce their resources.¹⁵

The case in point, the theory that poverty and social injustice have resulted in Colombia's most atypical *decades of violencia* finds little logical support in the Latin American context of very different historical experiences with political violence and banditry.

PART THREE

On the Sociology of the Problem

How did Colombia get to the point that it turned to proposing Plan Colombia, in spite of years with a moderate nationalism that sought a low-key U.S. presence in the country and did not favor U.S. military assistance?¹⁶ The problem of violence with its domestic and foreign pressures had reached the point where it overwhelmed the nation. The best method for understanding the phenomenon is through a historical-sociological approach.

In the mid-1940s Colombia found itself toward the bottom of Latin America's group of most developed nations socioeconomically. Politically, however, it was characterized by a tradition of civilian rule through a resilient two-party, multi-social class system. The two parties found roots from the upper class to the peasantry. Unfortunately, this condition—theoretically favorable for political democracy—had only been related to an absence of military coups d'état and rule, for in fact the prevalent form of government had been only "protodemocratic" by party civilian oligarchies.¹⁷ That is, while governments were periodically changed per constitutionally prescribed "elections," these were not considered genuine or fair by substantial oppositions. The usual type of rule consisted of the "hegemony" of one of the parties: the notion that normally the party in power, although changing its leaders, would not recognize electoral defeat.* The democratic creed had not sufficiently flourished among either the elites or the masses. The adaptation to these conditions had been long periods in which the opposition acquiesced to subordinate roles, not contesting displacement from power of the hegemonic party. Indeed, interparty nationwide competition to change the ruling party was associated with escalated violence. But for historical reasons, from 1946 until 1949 such sustained, full-blown interparty competition took place. The result: the breakdown of the traditional system in the face of escalated political violence, and the brief dictatorship (not the protodemocratic hegemony) of one of the two parties. About a decade later—in the late 1950s—the civilian elites of the two parties agreed on an interparty consociational or coalition regime as a way to restore their political control (although a shared one) hopefully in a pacified country.¹⁸ A military regime had briefly replaced them (1953 to 1957).

Peculiar to the period of escalated political violence from 1946 on was the latter's relative autonomy from the highest party elites, an "undeclared civil war" as Colombians said. For in contrast to the previous pattern of "declared wars," in which party national leaders became generals in the civil wars, now this was not the case: the civilian leaders did not take up arms and fight, although their "salon" politics were in serious crisis. In short, for more than a decade Colombia's top ruling political class had coexisted with a violent populace in large regions of the country. However, after the initiation in 1958 of the power-sharing constitutional arrangement dividing the control of the state between the two parties,** the rationales for the extreme partisanship—the traditional *sectarismo*—of the two parties lost basis, with the traditional *violencia* progressively disappearing and its remainders turning into banditry. As mentioned earlier, by the term of the second president of the coalition regime, Guillermo León Valencia (1962-66), it was generally considered that the problem of violence had improved.***

Colombia's political establishment had shown a detached, relative tolerance not only for political violence but for other illegalities as well. In the mid-1960s, although I was coming to Colombia from the crime-ridden area surrounding the University of Chicago, I was astounded with the levels of common criminality that I found. Furthermore, in large sections of the principal cities markets openly specializing in contraband products

*Until recently, the best known variant of this kind of regime was the Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party).

**Technically, the new regime—the National Front—was a consociational democracy.

***Incidentally, some gruesome patterns of violence reported recently were notorious during the early years.

operated in front of everybody. Violent mafias already controlled the mining and commercialization of emeralds, a precedent of the future narcos...

At about the same time in the early 1960s, in the political realm a U.S. Alliance for Progress-John Kennedy inspired counterinsurgency strategy was adopted by the Colombian army, which during the Valencia administration focused against the Marxist “independent republics” introduced earlier in this paper. Those were the years of the Operación Marquetalia, the Plan Lazo... Actually, these military operations did not succeed. Tiro Fijo, today’s FARC leader, survived, as well as what are considered to be his oldest guerrillas of the Americas. Quite simply, while for years the Colombian army published its “successes” in producing many casualties to the revolutionaries, and blamed the continuing violence on the periodic amnesties given by the civilian governments to captured insurgents, forty years ago already the Colombian security forces lacked the resources to pacify the country!¹⁹ And to repeat, starting with the Valencia administration, under the influence of the Cuban Revolution the problem of violence was compounded by the successive formation of new guerrilla groups: the ELN, the M-19, etc. True, the extant post-1958 coalition regime was an experiment in imperfect democracy (deemed necessary as a *temporary* transition to overcome the historical protodemocracies). But rather than seek to perfect democracy, the revolutionaries were new expressions of Colombia’s incapacity to institutionalize a democracy. Indeed, while the establishment progressively democratized the regime, to this day the undemocratic character and criminality predominant among the violent revolutionaries is obvious.

Of course, the civilian governments (of virtually uninterrupted interparty coalitions) that started forty-four years ago must be considered responsible for the lack of a sustained, coherent strategy to effectively deal with the violence. But the context in which they operated consisted of a public opinion generally, even very substantially opposed to war. This contributed both to the unviability of a successful revolution, to relatively weak revolutionary momenta, and to the recurrent initiatives by governments to negotiate with the radicalized armed minorities.²⁰ Secondly, the public opposition to violence usually coexisted with high levels of alienation from the political regime. Majorities were normally unhappy with their form of government (although this did not translate into concrete support for a military dictatorship). This contributed to governmental timidity. After all, the military modernization to pacify the country was a very costly proposition—the elites themselves resisted increases in taxation—and to successfully complete an administration’s four year term it was best not to rock the boat. And then Colombia’s governments eventually were faced with the “bad luck” of the dramatic development of the powerful narco phenomenon, which was largely blamed by Colombians on the foreigners who were the drug consumers.

The nature of civilian-military relations also conspired against developing a better prepared armed force. Colombia’s military had a tradition with an explicit professional doctrine of bureaucratic subordination to presidential authority (determined by others). Normally the party system reinforced this tradition, by systematically changing its leaders and not forming political coalitions with army factions to determine the executive. Moreover, in the past decades retired military officers critical of the establishment’s policies did not find significant political party support for their aspirations to form an elected government,²¹ limiting their political scope. This is not to say that relations between the civilian governments and the army in the difficult task of fighting subversion were always smooth. There is credible evidence that there were instances in which top commanders were available to move to replace the government. Yet, since 1957 such an event did not take place. Thus, the military policies of the political class—deficient as they might have been perceived by officers—prevailed. And such tensions that publicly produced military retirements reminded politicians of the dangers of relying too much on an armed force strategy in their governance. My own impression from interviewing Colombian officers was that the armed forces constituted Weberian formal legal bureaucracies that were allowed autonomy by the governments in their routinized operations (except in some limited areas, such as in top personnel/promotions decisions); officers with comfortable bureaucratic careers assured by their loyalty to governments headed every four years by a new leader; and officers not too anxious about technical military needs while enjoying the conviviality of their military clubs and expecting satisfactory retirement payoffs.

Colombia had gone through many years of unawareness of a vital aspect of its social reality, without any real public debate of its own security issues.²² As we have seen this not only resulted from the influence of *violentos* over the ruling political class nor because the latter was corrupted by them.

PART FOUR

Security Implications

Colombia is a large country (1.14 million square kilometers, 40.8 million people), rich in natural resources (including petroleum), and not that far from the United States (it is closer to fly from Miami to Bogota than from New York to London). Colombia finds itself between Venezuela and Panama, and also has borders with Brazil, Ecuador and Peru. A convulsed, violent Colombia—because its state cannot either control revolutionaries financed through crime (drugs, kidnappings, etc.) nor exercise reasonable control over wealthy, organized mafiosi criminals—poses serious threats to its own security. In the last few weeks the press has reported grisly, antidemocratic acts attributed to both challenges (e.g., the kidnapping and indefinite retention of a presidential candidate and of a senator, among others, part of the campaign to sabotage the coming elections; the murder of the archbishop of the country's third largest city, an outspoken opponent of the mass kidnapping of churchgoers by insurgents and of the financial control of candidates by drug lords). Colombia should not have a state dominated by such bestial revolutionaries nor a narco-state. This is especially the case when such power does not result from the democratic support of its own people.

Plan Colombia was an emergency assistance, a classic example of (a primarily) U.S. foreign intervention in support of a regime in crisis, to stabilize it and thus retain an international environment friendly to the United States. The context of assisting Colombia's amicable government was the pre-September 11 priority for international cooperation to control drug trafficking.

It is in the interest of the United States not to have hostile nations in this hemisphere. Clearly, if Colombia were controlled by the aforementioned groups the governments formed would be unfriendly to the U.S., if for no other reason that they were and are committed to have unlawful economic relations with the United States: narcotics exports. Even if the U.S. Government adopted narco policies of legalization/total laissez-faire, it is very doubtful that the above groups could generate governments in Colombia with a semblance of stability. The groups lack the political frame of mind, organization and support to do so. Continuing convulsiveness in Colombia works against mutual economic gains for Colombia and the U.S., and as we saw it poses a serious challenge to American immigration policy. A Colombia in chaos poses comparable problems to its immediate neighbors and the potential to spread violence to them through porous borders.²³ It undermines the regional system of security of the Organization of American States (OAS) supportive of democratic legality.

If it is better in the still unstable Latin American political/economic environment to have friendly governments in place, Plan Colombia must be assessed on its own nature. As in the successful U.S. Central American policies of the 1980s and '90s the Plan envisions a limited U.S. military commitment. But for Colombia the U.S. Congress limited the assistance only to fight the drug traffic, not terrorism. Further, as earlier in Central America, the assistance to the government is conditioned to its human rights performance, and the number of American military personnel involved in the assistance is limited and cannot participate in combat situations in the field. Given the total resources available, clearly the United States is involved in supporting a limited war to bolster Colombia's security forces, and replace a mood of defeatism by one of greater hope that the anarchy can be progressively reduced. My reading of Colombian materials suggests that the prevalent scenario is locally limited to meet the internal violent aggression with increased strength, so that—as in Central America—conditions materialize conducive to negotiate peace agreements in the future.

As reported earlier, the Bush administration has been seeking to expand the U.S. role in the Colombian fight. I find disquieting the messianic, Manichean, bellicose tone of some of its representatives, as well as the tendency to oversimplify and oscillate between isolationism and unilateralism. U.S. assistance cannot replace the role of the political will of Colombia's elected governments. As earlier in Central America, it is wise not to commit American personnel to the fighting and to maintain human rights conditions for the U.S. assistance. However, the current limitation of aiding only the war against drugs is unrealistic in the face of the

narcoguerrilla phenomenon. Furthermore, it projects the image of a narrow-minded, selfish United States: “we only support what is of our interest and don’t care about anything else.”

There is the bigger question of the U.S. war against drugs. For the 2003 budget, the Bush administration has maintained its emphasis on controlling their supply as opposed to consumption, even though reference is made to the goal of cutting drug abuse by 25 percent in five years.²⁴ But so far the positive overall effects in reducing the supply of cocaine cannot be seen. This is the case reported for Colombia.²⁵ In Bolivia, where the illegal cultivation of coca has been reduced, this has taken place at some political costs. In the last year, coca growers have periodically created major protest disturbances with some casualties. These problems have involved the highest government officials, as well as mediation efforts of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and friction with the American Embassy. In fact, the U.S. drug policy was accompanied by a high-profile meddling in public policy on the part of the latter.²⁶ In sum, judging from the past we should not be overly optimistic about the war against drugs, a reason for the resilience of the advocacy of treatment and legalization. This is another matter, however.

Notes

¹Over 15 percent of the labor force was estimated unemployed, the foreign debt was 33 percent of gross domestic product, and the debt service ratio 30.

²It was reported that as of 31 December 1999, 56,800 hectares of coca, 71.3 percent of the national total, were in Putumayo. Rafael Nieto Loaiza, “Mitos y Verdades del Plan Colombia,” *El Tiempo*, 31 December 2000.

³*New York Times*, 27 February 1998.

⁴For details, see the source cited in note 2 and the article in *Semana*, 16 April 2001.

⁵Linda Robinson, “Next Stop, Colombia,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 25 February 2002.

⁶*Ibid.* and Lia Posada, *Colombia’s Kidnapping Industry* (Centro de Análisis Sociopolíticos, 1997).

⁷In the 1980s the M-19 terrorists were still active but the self-defense movement (AUC) that started in 1985 was yet to become important. For the end of 2001 a reasonable estimated breakdown: FARC 18,000; ELN 3,500; AUC 8,500, as reported in a personal communication by Miguel Posada Samper, Centro de Análisis Sociopolíticos, 24 January 2002.

⁸For more on the historical violence, see my “Colombian Politics: Historical Characteristic and Problems,” Chapter 1 in *Politics of Compromise: Coalition Government in Colombia*, edited by R. Albert Berry, Ronald G. Hellman, and Mauricio Solaún (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980). I have here in mind the presidential term of Guillermo León Valencia, 1962-66.

⁹Miguel Posada Samper, “Subversion, Terrorism and Drug Trafficking: the U.S. Position,” Centro de Análisis Sociopolíticos, 2001. In the reference in note 7 Posada reported the following results of military operations in 2001: guerrillas captured 1293; AUC captured 465. Number of dead bodies picked up and killed by government authorities: guerrillas 995, AUC 111. He estimates that 300 guerrillas and 200 AUC were killed in combat between themselves.

¹⁰Actually the Comisión Colombiana de Juristas reported a much higher average estimate, twenty daily. The overall number of killings was reported as 23,172 in 1999, a figure comparatively quite higher.

¹¹See *El Espectador Domingo*, 17 February 2002, p. 6A. The article does not report the moneys sent home by Colombians residing abroad but it referred to the dramatic decrease in foreign investment in Colombia from \$6.6 billion in 1997 to about \$750 million in 2000. The article quoted Anne Patterson, the U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, opining in 2001 that “the amount of capital that Colombians are taking away from the country, largely to the United States, is three times more than the U.S. investment in Plan Colombia.” Increasingly the U.S. Government had been accepting Colombians as refugees under Temporary Protection Status (TPS).

¹²Other estimates: in 1998 at least some guerrilla activity was reported in 700 of the 1071 municipalities; in 2000 the AUC claimed to be present in 550 municipalities—it had become unified in 1997 under Carlos Castaño; in 2000, 195 municipalities were without any police presence because their headquarters (*cuarteles*) had been destroyed.

¹³See Richard Lapper, “America’s New Jungle War,” *Financial Times*, 22 February 2002.

¹⁴To face the 30,000 terrorists, in early 2002 Colombia possessed this estimated security force breakdown: army 110,000; marines 10,000; navy and air force 20,000; police 115,000. Only about 2.5 percent of the national budget was spent on security, much less than several Latin American countries not facing Colombia’s escalated violence. Incidentally, throughout the years extensive *legal* private security systems developed: estimates place the numbers at 140,000 watchmen and security guards, and 21,800 legal bodyguards.

¹⁵In this sense, see the position consistently held by publications of the Centro de Análisis Sociopolíticos.

¹⁶In 1990, for example, a time of heightened narco violence, 27 percent of Colombians did not wish for any U.S. assistance, and while 53 percent were in favor of economic assistance, only 5 percent favored military assistance; 50 percent considered that “the U.S. should not loan equipment, advisers, troops or send the CIA to Colombia.” See Jack Kelley, “Drug War Splits U.S., Colombia,” *USA Today*, 9 February 1990. And in 1999, when Plan Colombia was about to start, in a survey of 538 executives of the 5000 largest firms, 60 percent disagreed with the idea of having foreign troops enter Colombia to supervise the implementation of eventual peace agreements with the guerrillas; “Encuesta Gallup Elites,” *El Tiempo*, 7 February 1999. However, in July 2000, with Plan Colombia under way, 60 percent approved of the way the government was conducting its international relations, at the same time that the disapproval of other policies, such as the Peace Process, was equally high or higher; see Hernando Gómez Buendía, “Dos Años No es Nada,” *Semana*, 31 July 2000.

¹⁷For details see my “Colombian Politics.”

¹⁸For more on this period, initially known as the National Front, see Albert R. Berry and Mauricio Solaún, “Notes Toward an Interpretation of the National Front,” Chapter 15 in *Politics of Compromise*.

¹⁹In my interviews with retired generals known for their intellectual achievements and leadership, after probing this was an accepted conclusion.

²⁰Colombian public opinion was generally receptive to the idea of negotiating with the *violentos*. Of course, when negotiations went bad the public realized it and was critical of them, but this did not mean any sustained support for war. This cycle of changes in opinion, from majority desire to negotiate when negotiations are not taking place to their rejection when they take place without results, is documented for three years in “Informe Especial,” *Semana*, 10 January 1995, p. 29. Also see “El País Por Mal Camino: Encuesta,” *El Tiempo*, 1 August 1999, and “Lo Que El País Piensa del Proceso,” *El Tiempo*, 3 December 2000.

²¹I will not deal here with the special challenge posed by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla that climaxed in the 1970 election, nor with the exceptional 1953 coup d'état and the subsequent short period of military rule. Overall, Colombia's military elite was relatively more middle class in background than the higher status politicians.

²²This unrealistic denial of the nation's reality of violence was forcefully manifested in the previously cited 1990 survey at the apex of the conflict with the murderous drug cartels: for instance, 60 percent of Colombians said that their country could win the drug war by itself; 66 percent said that the country was doing enough to fight drugs. See Jack Kelley, “Drug War Splits U.S., Colombia.”

²³The United States is Colombia's main trading partner, accounting last year for 38.3 percent and 35.0 percent of the latter's exports and imports, respectively. But Venezuela is second in importance: 10.6 and 9.6 percent of Colombia's exports and imports. Ecuador is the fourth top destination of Colombia's exports.

The violence has affected relations between Colombia and Venezuela's current nationalistic leftist, self-proclaimed “revolutionary” government “independent” of the United States in multiple ways: first, the allegations of guerrillas crossing the border in search for affluent Venezuelans to extort them; second, accusations of various kinds of support for the Colombian guerrillas by the Hugo Chávez regime. Other bordering countries have expressed concerns about contaminations from Colombia's problem, ironically seen as increased because of the perception that Plan Colombia can intensify the war.

²⁴As reported by the Associated Press, 13 February 2002. The proposed budget increases the amount for treatment by 6 percent but more for drug interdiction (10 percent). The overall budget would be 2 percent higher than the previous one, for a total of \$19.2 billion.

²⁵See Richard Lapper, “America's New Jungle War,” *Financial Times*, 22 February 2002.

²⁶For Peru, see Juan Forero, “Farmers in Peru Are Turning Again to Coca Crop,” *New York Times*, 14 February 2002. Although disputed by some U.S. officials, the United Nations Drug Control Program reports that from 2000 to 2001 the coca crop slightly expanded from 107,000 acres to about 125,000. There are alternatives to crop eradication, such as government purchase of the harvest or payments to farmers to destroy their own crops; see Richard Wolffe, “U.S. May Pay for Opium Crop Destruction,” *Financial Times*, 26 February 2002.

Note: At the beginning of this year several countries had announced their contribution to Plan Colombia, concretely to its peace process and social development components. This includes \$319.95 million from European Union sources, and \$235.5 million from Japan, Canada and Switzerland.