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**COLOMBIA ON THE BRINK**

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# **COLOMBIA ON THE BRINK**

## **Introduction**

Colombia is a nation on the brink of anarchy. It has been marred by nearly forty years of continuous civil war, indiscriminate violence, and corruption. Each year nearly 30,000 Colombians die from diverse acts of violence.<sup>1</sup> Its citizens are rapidly losing confidence in their government's ability to carry out its primary function of protecting them. This current state of affairs has its roots in the deeply interwoven problems of leftist insurgencies, the vigilantism of the paramilitaries, the drug trade, and the social inequities of Colombian society. This volatile mix jeopardizes not only Colombia's democracy, but also threatens the region's stability. As David J. Rothkopf, an adjunct professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University, wrote in an independent task force report on Colombia in 2000, "...the United States faces few threats in the world today that can generate the casualties among U. S. citizens that result from Colombian drug flow to this country, few threats that could be destabilizing to so many important allies, and few threats that are at such a critical juncture."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, if Colombia fails as a democratic state it could very easily become a breeding ground for terrorists with a global reach made possible by the huge profits derived from the illegal drug trade.

## **Thesis**

To prevent Colombia's precipitous slide into anarchy and the associated negative consequences to America's domestic and regional interests will require the long-term comprehensive application of American economic aid, military assistance, and diplomacy.

## Historical Background

Colombia's current situation is inextricably tied to its political past. Since declaring independence from Spain in 1811, shifting borders, violence, and political turmoil have marked the national character.<sup>3</sup> In its original formulation in 1821, Colombia was generally known as Gran Colombia and encompassed what are now the modern states of Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, and Ecuador. Gran Colombia's existence was short lived. By 1830, civilian and military rivalry for public office and regional jealousies led to the secession of both Venezuela and Ecuador.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the political turmoil, Colombia (including the Isthmus of Panama) developed a liberal democracy. Slavery was abolished in 1852 and the constitution provided for trial by jury, freedom of the press, and other civil rights. However, deep political divisions existed between the liberal and conservative elements of society. The "Liberals" favored greater sovereignty for the states, land reform, and support for the peasantry. The "Conservatives" were generally the landed aristocracy who favored a strong central government. This deep political division, characterized by distinction between the classes, would manifest itself throughout Colombia's history and is at the root of many of Colombia's problems today.

In 1861, civil war broke out between the Liberals and the Conservatives. Following the Liberals' victory, a new constitution was adopted that provided for a union of sovereign states and changed the name of the country to the United States of Colombia.<sup>5</sup> By 1880, the Conservatives had reclaimed power and instituted yet another new constitution. This latest variant abolished the sovereign states created by the previous constitution, changed the country's name to the Republic of Colombia, and established the basic political structure of the country that is still in use today.<sup>6</sup>

In 1899, the country once again descended into civil war between the Liberals and Conservatives. The Liberal Party represented coffee plantation owners and workers who had been largely excluded from the government after the Conservatives' ascension to power in the 1880's. The main Liberal forces were defeated within seven months. However, disorganized guerrilla warfare continued for the next two and a half years in the rural areas, resulting in significant destruction of property and loss of life. The Conservative government was unable to pacify the countryside through military means (a foreshadowing of things to come), imprisonment, or expropriation of property. To re-establish order in the nation, the Conservative government negotiated a peace with the Liberals promising amnesty to the rebels, free elections, and political reform.<sup>7</sup> By the time the conflict, known as the "War of a Thousand Days," ended in 1902, up to 130,000 lives had been lost.<sup>8</sup> Following the war, the national government was too weak to suppress a revolt in Panama. Subsequently, with the aid of the United States, Panama seceded from Colombia in 1903.

Over the course of the next forty years, power alternated relatively peacefully between the two political parties. Following World War II, an intense political feud developed between the two parties that had little to do with the class conflict that had characterized their previous conflicts. The period witnessed the assassination of the Liberal Party's leader in 1948, a military coup against the Conservative president in 1953, and the takeover of the government by a military junta in 1957.<sup>9</sup> The period between 1946 and 1964, during which nearly 200,000 people were killed by indiscriminate violence, is known as La Violencia.<sup>10</sup>

In 1957, following the second coup of the decade, the Liberal and Conservative parties came together to restore democracy to Colombia. A coalition of Conservatives and Liberals, with the mandate to establish joint governance between their respective parties, established the National Front party. The National Front's presidential candidate alternated between the parties and

ministerial and other government posts were to be shared. Since the National Front dominated the political landscape, its candidate was assured election. The coalition effectively ended the political war between the Liberals and Conservatives and brought to a close the La Violencia.<sup>11</sup> However, it did nothing to alter the underlying conditions that had given rise to the La Violencia in the first place. Thus by 1964, as an outgrowth of continued economic instability and growing dissatisfaction with the National Front, the first Marxist guerrillas began appearing in Colombia.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Rise of the Guerrillas and Paramilitaries**

The first Marxist group to arrive on scene was the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). The ELN was formed by a group of Colombian students that had studied in Cuba. In that same year the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), was formed from the peasant leaders who had emerged from the Liberal uprising during the La Violencia.<sup>13</sup> Since their inception, both groups have fought a continuous violent ideological war pitting the rural poor against the state. With the demise of their economic backers in the former Soviet Union and Cuba, and the breakup of the large drug cartels in the mid 1990's, the FARC and ELN became actively involved in the highly profitable drug trade as a way to continue funding their revolutionary wars against the state. Both the FARC and ELN derive much of their income from the drug trade by extorting money from the peasants who cultivate the fields and by taxing the drug traffickers who operate in the areas under their control. Many of the rural poor who cultivate, harvest, and process the drug crops are actively involved with the FARC and ELN. The FARC operates primarily in the largely uninhabited southeastern part of the country. They have approximately 15,000 combatants in the field.<sup>14</sup> The ELN is much smaller, with roughly 3,000 to 5,000 thousand members. It operates primarily in the northeastern part of the country where much of Colombia's oil production is located. In addition to revenues from the illegal

drug trade, the ELN also derives significant income through kidnapping and extortion.<sup>15</sup>

Together, these two groups control roughly forty percent of Colombia's territory and have incomes of several hundred million dollars a year.<sup>16</sup>

As a direct result of the government's loss of control over nearly forty percent of its territory and its inability to protect its citizens from the violence of the FARC and ELN in these areas, civilian self-defense groups emerged to take matters into their own hands. These self-defense groups initially formed their organizations independent of one another. Their only common denominator was defense against the FARC and ELN. Initially these militia groups attempted to directly confront the guerilla regulars, but were largely unsuccessful due to the better training and equipment possessed by the guerilla forces. To compensate for their weaknesses, they switched tactics and began to attack the guerilla's support structure, going after non-combatant administrators and suspected guerrilla sympathizers. These tactics proved successful and the militias started to exert control over some of the territory formerly under the dominion of the guerrillas. Because of their success, many farmers who were being extorted by the FARC and ELN began to openly support the self-defense groups. Since most of these organizations support the government and have the same objectives as the Colombian military, individual military officers have in the past tolerated and supported them. This support included providing them with intelligence and weapons.<sup>17</sup> The largest self-defense organization, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), serves as an umbrella group representing some 400 local groups with up to 14,000 members<sup>18</sup> and 7,400 combatants.<sup>19</sup> Under the auspices of the AUC, these independent self-defense groups have grown into a paramilitary organization that is capable of rivaling the FARC and ELN for control of the rural territories. The AUC has as its stated mission, "... to finish the terrorist actions of the guerrillas, that are destroying the Colombian people, and to contribute to the building of a free, just, worthy, and peaceful nation."<sup>20</sup> However, the founder

and current political director of the AUC, Carlos Castano, has admitted that up to 70 percent of his organization's financing is derived from the illicit drug trade.<sup>21</sup> The Colombian government outlawed all paramilitary groups in 1989, because of their tactics and involvement in the narcotics business.<sup>22</sup> Over the course of the next decade, the Colombian landscape was marred by violence as the FARC, ELN, AUC, the drug cartels, and government forces all vied for control of Colombia.<sup>23</sup> As the decade drew to a close, Colombia's citizens having grown weary of the continuous violence were ready to try to achieve peace through negotiations.

### **Negotiations with the Guerrillas**

In 1998, Andres Pastrana was elected President of Colombia on a peace platform with broad political support to negotiate a peace settlement with the FARC and ELN, and to fight the vigilantism of the paramilitaries.<sup>24</sup> In 1999, he began a dialogue with the FARC in an attempt to reach a negotiated settlement. As a sign of good faith to further the process, he withdrew government forces from territory nominally controlled by the FARC in the southeastern region of the country. By doing so, he granted the FARC de facto control over nearly forty percent of Colombian territory.<sup>25</sup> After more than two years of fruitless negotiations, the FARC made it clear they had no real intentions of settling the conflict. Their stated goal, "... to overthrow the government and ruling class," left the Colombian government with no room to negotiate a settlement.<sup>26</sup> As Mark Falcoff, a resident Latin America scholar at the University of Illinois, wrote in a Latin American Outlook article, "... it is by no means clear that the guerrillas have ever wanted to end the war in the first place. With little public support, no real political movement of their own, no demonstrated government skills in the areas they have controlled, and no temperament for routine, the insurgents are not about to exchange life in the field (relieved by occasional junkets to glamour sites like Stockholm or Ottawa) for collecting garbage in Bogata."<sup>27</sup>



By granting the FARC a sanctuary with no pressure against their existence and an uninterrupted source of financing from the drug trade, the Colombian government made a serious mistake. It gave them time to consolidate their position and strengthen their forces. As T. E. Lawrence, (of Lawrence of Arabia fame) wrote, "... granted mobility, security ... time and doctrine the insurgents would win."<sup>28</sup>

### **Interests/Threats for the United States in Colombia**

There are six key areas of interest/threats in Colombia that are of primary importance to the U. S. government. First is to preserve Colombia's fragile democracy. The United States as the world's preeminent democracy has an acknowledged responsibility to foster democratic governments worldwide and especially in the Western hemisphere. An historical precedent for this support was clearly established in the Truman Doctrine speech of 1947, when President Truman called for economic and military aid "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, Colombia's democracy is under assault from the insurgencies of the FARC and ELN and the vigilantism of the AUC. A few American analysts actually believe that the Colombian government's survival is in jeopardy, as the guerrilla groups are relatively that much stronger.<sup>30</sup> If Colombia's government collapses it could have significant negative consequences for American national security. Certainly, the flow of illegal narcotics from Colombia to the United States would only increase, but even more ominously, the country might become a safe haven for transnational terrorist bent on harming the United States. Terrorism coupled with the income derived from drug trafficking would be able to directly threaten the security of American citizens.

The second primary area of interest/threat to the United States is to stem the flow of the Colombian drug trade. The flow of cocaine and heroin into the United States has a corrosive effect upon American youth, with up to 10,000 deaths annually attributed to illegal narcotics, not to mention the ancillary crime related to the marketing of drugs on America's city streets.<sup>31</sup> Of course, the United States bears considerable responsibility for the societal damage the drug trade inflicts upon its own citizens, due to the high American demand for cocaine and heroin. Because of this demand, even if interdiction efforts were successful in eliminating Colombian supply, production would just move to one of Colombia's neighbors threatening the new host's stability. This is sometimes referred to as the balloon effect.<sup>32</sup>

The third area of interest/threat is regional stability. There is a real possibility that Colombia's instability could spread to the region as a whole. As Mr. Marc Grossman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, stated in his testimony before Congress on 24 April 2002, "The FARC, ELN and AUC also threaten regional stability. The FARC regularly uses border regions in Panama, Ecuador, Brazil, and Venezuela for arms and narcotics trafficking, resupply operations, rest, and recreation. The insecurity created by the FARC, AUC and ELN creates a haven for criminal activity that affects Colombia's neighbors."<sup>33</sup>

To stop the spread of the illegal narcotics business and insurgencies to Colombia's five neighbors (Panama, Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil), the United States needs to take a holistic approach to the region. If the United States does not engage the region as a whole it will simply become a matter of chasing the problem from one country to another.

Fourth, there are strong economic ties between the United States and Colombia. Colombia is the fourth largest economy in South America and the fifth largest U.S. export market in Latin America.<sup>34</sup> Two-way trade with Colombia was nearly \$11 billion in 1998.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Colombia is a significant oil-exporting nation. Its Cano Limon pipeline pumps over 600,000

barrels of oil per day for export.<sup>36</sup> From this outflow, Colombia exported \$3.4 billion in crude oil to United States in 2000, making it America's seventh largest crude oil partner.<sup>37</sup>

With the United States trying to lessen its dependency on Middle East oil, Colombia could become an even more significant supplier of oil for the U.S. market.<sup>38</sup> There is significant risk to the flow of this oil. Last year alone, FARC and ELN bombings of the Cano Limon pipeline cost the government of Colombia almost \$500 million in lost revenue.<sup>39</sup> Securing the pipeline against attacks is of vital interest to both the United States and Colombia.

The fifth area is human rights. Caught in the internecine warfare between the FARC, ELN, AUC, and the Colombian Army, the citizens of Colombia have suffered greatly. Non-combatant deaths from fighting have exceeded 30,000 in the last ten years with nearly 4,000 in 2001.<sup>40</sup> A 1998 government study linked 70 percent of the human rights abuses to the paramilitaries, 25 percent to the guerillas, and 5 percent to the public forces.<sup>41</sup> Because of the former link between the paramilitaries and the public forces, the United States must continue to work with the Colombian government to eliminate human rights abuses. Without human rights there can be no effective democracy.

Finally is the issue of displaced persons. Because of the war, Colombia has the fourth largest population of internally displaced persons in the world.<sup>42</sup> If the current situation continues, fleeing Colombians could become a more significant source of immigration to the United States, putting an additional strain on affected state and city governments that are already financially burdened.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the drain of middle and upper class educated Colombians from their country will only exacerbate the current situation and make recovery all the more difficult.

## **Post 9/11 Opportunity**

The post-September 11, 2001, environment has altered American thinking about Colombia. Colombia has come to be seen by some as the Afghanistan of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>44</sup> U.S. Senator Zell Miller reinforced this point when he said; “A two hour flight from Miami will land you in Colombia, the most dangerous and terroristic country in the world. This is not the far away, distant Middle East. This is our neighborhood....”<sup>45</sup> In the post-9/11 political environment, the U.S. recognizes that Colombia’s disintegration poses significant risk to its security. This awareness and the global war on terrorism provide U.S. policy makers a new opportunity to reassess and redirect U.S. government economic and military aid to help the Colombian government combat the guerrilla’s and paramilitaries that have destabilized the country. Prior to 11 September 2001, recognizing the political realities in Congress (an unwillingness to get involved in Colombia’s civil war), U.S. policy in Colombia sought to differentiate the counter-narcotics effort from the Colombian government’s counterinsurgency effort. Even though the FARC, ELN, and AUC have long been on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations, military and economic aid were directed toward supporting only the counter-narcotics effort.<sup>46</sup>

Distinguishing between the counter-narcotics and counterinsurgency efforts is nearly impossible to do, since both the guerrilla and the paramilitary networks are inextricably intertwined with the illegal narcotics business. From the Colombian point of view, as shocking as the terrorist attack against the United States was (which claimed nearly 3,000 lives), it is a reality Colombians have lived with each year for the past ten years as over 30,000 civilians have been murdered by the guerrillas or paramilitaries.<sup>47</sup> In light of the new world view of confronting terrorist organizations head on, the terrorist activities of the FARC and ELN, which include kidnapping, murder and mayhem, have been brought into sharper contrast with their

supposed political agenda of reform and social justice for the rural poor. As a direct result of this new reality, the Bush administration in its counter-terrorism supplemental appropriation request asked for and received congressional authorization to, “support a unified campaign against narcotics trafficking, terrorist activities, and other threats to its (Colombia’s) national security.”<sup>48</sup>

In his testimony before Congress, Marc Grossman stated that, “These new authorities recognize that the terrorist and narcotics problems together threaten Colombia’s security, prosperity and democracy.”<sup>49</sup> This clear shift in policy will enable the Colombian government in conjunction with its U.S. advisors to more efficiently and effectively use U.S. aid to engage the guerrilla’s and paramilitaries and ultimately to achieve the political objectives necessary to eliminate the threats to U.S. interest emanating from Colombia.

### **Political Objectives**

The primary political objective of the United States in Colombia is to stabilize and preserve Colombia’s fragile democracy. To that end, the United States’ policy is geared towards helping Colombia attain the promises guaranteed in its constitution’s preamble; “... *to strengthen the unity of the nation and ensure its members life, peaceful coexistence, work, justice, equality, knowledge, freedom, and peace within a legal, democratic, and participatory framework that may guarantee a just political, economic, and social order and committed to promote the integration of the Latin American community....*”<sup>50</sup> In short, a functioning stable democracy where the borders are secure and the rule of law prevails. By achieving this aim, the two primary security threats to the United States – the influx of illegal narcotics and the potential international terrorist haven that Colombia might become – can be eliminated. Thus, a stable Colombian democracy is an end and a means, – a desired end-state for the Colombian people and a means to an end for the United States’ security concerns. Achieving this ultimate end-state requires

achieving other objectives. These are, ending the Colombian civil war; disbanding the paramilitaries; eliminating the illegal drug trade as a national economic enterprise; and ameliorating the inequalities in education, health, and economic well being within Colombian society.

### **Means/Instruments**

To achieve the ultimate aim of securing a just and stable democracy in Colombia requires the comprehensive application of American economic and military aid woven together in a mutually reinforcing interagency process. It will also require a multinational diplomatic effort in concert with European and Latin American nations, particularly those nations that are most affected by the spillover of Colombia's problems. To apply these means in a systematic way, the United States has thrown its support behind Plan Colombia. The plan's full name, Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State, was put together by former Colombian President Andres Pastrana in 1999.<sup>51</sup> The \$7.5 billion multiyear plan is a political and economic tool comprised of ten interlinking elements. These elements combine economic aid, political reform, international cooperation, and military action to: strengthen the state, reenergize the economy, reduce the production and trafficking of drugs, and restore civil society. The plan calls for significant multi-national assistance from the United States, the European community, and the Andean nations.<sup>52</sup> The United States pledged \$1.3 billion in aid with over fifty percent earmarked for counter-narcotics efforts. The five main components of U.S. participation in Plan Colombia are:

- I. Support for Human Rights and Judicial Reform: Specific initiatives include providing protection for nongovernmental organizations, establishing human rights units within the Colombian National Police and providing training for judges and prosecutors.

- II. Expansion of Counter-Narcotics Operations into Southern Colombia: A multi agency effort that provides military aid to train and equip counter-narcotics battalions in the Colombian army and humanitarian aid to the International Red Cross and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to assist displaced persons in the region.
- III. Alternate Economic Development: An interagency effort that supports alternative and economic programs to assist small farmers who now grow coca and opium to make the transition to legal economic enterprises. The program also includes Bolivia and Ecuador.
- IV. Increased Interdiction: Additional funds are provided to enhance U.S. and Colombian interdiction, primarily through equipment upgrades for the U.S. Customs Service and the Colombian police and military. Additional funds are earmarked to support interdiction programs in other countries in South and Central America and the Caribbean.
- V. Assistance for the Colombian National Police: An interagency aid package that provides for training and operational maintenance.<sup>53</sup>

Most European nations refused to contribute to the plan, because they view the U.S. and Colombian approach as too heavily weighted towards fighting the war as opposed to instituting social reform. In February 2001, the European Parliament voted 474 to 1 to reject Plan Colombia.<sup>54</sup> The plan also faced strong criticism from Colombia's neighbors: Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama.<sup>55</sup> American leadership and diplomacy are necessary to overcome the reticence of the Andean nations and the European Community.

## **Strategy**

Plan Colombia is a broad-based holistic plan that attempts to simultaneously address and correct the economic, political, and social problems in Colombia that make the insurgencies, paramilitaries, and drug trade possible. The plan has three basic elements. The first is to implement social reforms to correct the social inequalities that have supposedly given rise to the guerrillas. The second is to interdict and suppress the drug trade that has corrupted Colombian society from the rural peasant to the highest office holders in the land. The final and most

important element of the plan is to reach a negotiated peace settlement with the guerrillas based on territorial integrity, democracy, and human rights. The United States government's role is to provide the means through economic and military aid so that the Colombians can solve their own problems and thereby lessen the security concerns for the United States.

### **Plan's Weakness**

The weakness of the plan's approach is that it does not directly confront the FARC and ELN. They are the immediate threats to the stability of Colombia. Ameliorating the societal inequalities will not bring the FARC and ELN to the negotiating table. They have been fighting for 38 consecutive years to achieve their stated political objective of overthrowing the government and ruling class. The only way to reach a settlement with the FARC and ELN that achieves the stated criteria in Plan Colombia is to apply sufficient military pressure through a concentrated effort, so that in the guerrilla's cost/benefit analysis it is more beneficial to settle with the government than to continue the fight. Obviously, the Colombian government has been unable or unwilling to put forth the necessary resources to achieve this outcome for the past 38 years. Nevertheless, that can change.

### **The Military Approach**

A purely military approach would follow a more linear line of thinking. The FARC and ELN insurgencies are the root causes of Colombia's instability. Their repeated attacks against Colombian society have destabilized the government to such an extent that ordinary citizens are compelled to take up arms for their own security. This has given rise to the paramilitaries and their overarching command structure, the AUC. The internal war between the AUC and the guerrillas has further eroded national security and prevented the Colombian military and police



from gaining effective control over the nation's territory. This lack of state control has allowed the illegal drug trade to expand. The potential collapse of the Colombian government and the proliferation of illegal narcotics directly threaten the security of the United States.

Therefore, to break this chain the primary military objective is to eliminate the FARC and ELN's capabilities to wage guerrilla war. Once this is accomplished, the AUC and paramilitaries will have no reason for being and will ultimately disband. Without having to battle the FARC, ELN, and AUC, the police and military will be able to concentrate on law enforcement and regaining control of territories that produce illegal narcotics. Once law and order are established and the drug-producing territories are under the direct control of the government, the supply of illegal narcotics to the world market and to the United States in particular will be greatly reduced. Furthermore, the two primary security threats to the United States emanating from Colombia will be eliminated or at least greatly reduced.

### **Military Strategies**

The guerrilla's basic strategy to achieve their ultimate political objective of a Marxist state can be summarized in four sequential steps. The first is to consolidate control over their base camp areas. Second, they need to expand their area of operations to the entire country, to disperse the government's forces. Third, they would then move on to isolate the major cities and fourth, move to large-scale operations that would result in a general uprising.<sup>56</sup> The guerrillas are waging a classic Revolutionary protracted struggle against the Colombian government with the intent to exhaust the government's will to continue the fight against them. The Colombian military and police forces have demonstrated over the past forty years they are incapable of bringing the war to a decisive conclusion. The ELN and FARC's combined strength of roughly 20,000 fighters in a nation of over 40 million is relatively insignificant, yet they continue to

persist.<sup>57</sup> This begs the question, “Why?” There are four fundamental reasons. First, the Colombian military as currently constituted is not up to the task. They do not have the size, tactical mobility, or logistical support to complete the job. According to Dr. Gabriel Marcella, who teaches strategy at the U.S. Army War College, classic counterinsurgency doctrine requires a 10 to 1 advantage in fielded forces over the guerrillas.<sup>58</sup> This would require nearly doubling the military’s current size. Of the current military strength of 144,000 personnel, over half is either in training, defending fixed installations, or defending critical infrastructure points such as roads, bridges, oil and electrical installations, and airports.<sup>59</sup> The remaining force is simply not large enough to retain the territory it regains because it must constantly re-deploy.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, the professionalism of the force is a real issue. Seventy percent of those serving are draftees; of this number, fifty percent are not high school graduates. Colombian law states that high school graduates are exempted from combat duty, thus the bulk of the combat is borne by the uneducated, lower class members of society.<sup>61</sup> The second reason is that the Colombian government has attempted to wage a limited conventional war against a highly mobile dispersed opponent that has waged total war against them. The FARC and ELN have used fear, intimidation and murder to control the civilian population. The Colombian military has been severely restrained in its response by the international community’s concern over human rights abuses. The AUC, on the other hand, has had much better success in regaining territorial control from the FARC than has the military, simply because they employ the same tactics against the FARC as the FARC uses against the civilian population. They fight “fire with fire” and match intimidation with intimidation. The third reason is the guerrillas do not depend on any external support to wage war, due to the nearly unlimited revenue they derive from the illegal drug trade. Finally, the Colombian citizenry has not demonstrated the will, to this point, to commit the necessary resources to achieve final victory. As long as the war was confined to the rural

backwoods of Colombia and the elite did not have to involve themselves the Colombia effort has been half-hearted. Now that the war is being brought closer to home there is an awakening among Colombia's upper classes that their way of life is truly being threatened.

### **American Military Intervention?**

The salient question then is, "How to eliminate the insurgencies?" As a direct result of American military success in Afghanistan (which demonstrated the effectiveness of airpower combined with elite U.S. Special Forces and local troops), there is increased speculation about the possibility of direct American military action in Colombia's civil war. American Forces' superior mobility, firepower, and C4ISR,<sup>\*</sup> working with the Colombian military would be able to seek out and destroy guerrilla base camps, devastate FARC/ELN leadership, and disrupt the guerrillas' essential lines of communication. Some polls in Colombia have shown that three in five Colombians favor just such an intervention.<sup>62</sup> The next question is; would the American public and international community support such an intervention?

The domestic and international debate before any direct American involvement in combat operations in Colombia would center around three questions. 1) Are the security risks to the United States emanating from Colombia great enough to justify direct American military involvement in Colombia's civil war? The point is debatable. The United States has been living with the illegal drug problem for many years now and before 9/11, there was not much concern about the terrorism threat from Colombia. 2) Would the Congress and American public tolerate U.S. casualties to help Colombia's government win its civil war? The very mention of American

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<sup>\*</sup> C4ISR – Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance.

involvement in a guerrilla war conducted in the jungles of Colombia evokes past memories of 56,000 American deaths in Vietnam. There is a fear that the United States could end up enmeshing itself in another un-winnable war, with no clear exit strategy. 3) Would the Latin American and European communities support direct U.S. involvement? Probably not, the Latin American nations view American involvement in the region with suspicion due to our past record of involvement in the area. As Julie Sweig, Deputy Director for Latin America Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, has written, “U.S. Armed Forces are widely regarded as having been complicit in years of repression in Latin America.”<sup>63</sup> Colombian foreign minister, Guillermo Fernandez de Soto, has gone so far as to state publicly that his country “will never accept” U.S. military intervention.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the European’s do not even support the “political” Plan Colombia, because they consider it too militaristic, so it is doubtful they would support direct U.S. military action in Colombia. For all of the above reasons direct U.S. involvement would most likely not be supported either domestically or internationally and is not prudent at this time.

### **The Compromise**

Alternatively, the most prudent solution would be to provide the Colombian military with the means to force the FARC and ELN into a negotiated settlement without direct American involvement in combat. It is highly unlikely that without direct American intervention the total defeat of the FARC and ELN will be possible, but as Carl Von Clausewitz wrote, “there are other grounds for making peace: the first is the improbability of victory, the second is its unacceptable cost.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, the Colombian military must convince the guerrillas they will never achieve their stated objective of overthrowing the Colombian government and/or there will be an unacceptable price to pay to continue their effort. The way to achieve these aims is by applying

unrelenting pressure on the FARC/ELN command structures and their primary source of income, the illegal narcotics business. With U.S. supplied air mobility assets and intelligence, Colombian Special Operations forces must target FARC/ELN leadership to disrupt the guerrilla forces' essential command and control. To interrupt the income stream generated through the sale of illegal narcotics, the raw materials essential for production of cocaine and heroin must be destroyed. To that end, the United States must continue to supply the material resources necessary to eradicate the coca and poppy fields. To further reduce drug revenue, interdiction efforts by the United States Navy in the critical transport sea-lanes in the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean should be stepped up along with tighter control of the U.S. border with Mexico. Finally, U.S. law enforcement forces must attack the FARC/ELN's de facto fielded forces within America's own borders, the drug users who through their use of illegal narcotics provide the insurgents with the financial means to wage war. Arresting and vigorously prosecuting all illegal drug users will drive down demand and reduce illegal drug revenues. Unless demand is reduced, it might not be possible to reduce the income stream sufficiently through eradication and interdiction to force the FARC and ELN to the negotiating table.

### **Potential Outcomes**

There are five potential outcomes that might result "from the collision between the Colombian government and guerrilla strategies:"<sup>66</sup>

1. The complete disintegration of the guerrilla forces and their unconditional surrender.

This is the most favorable outcome. The Colombian government would be able to consolidate its hold over its territory diminishing the potential terrorist threat to the United States and minimizing the outflow of illegal narcotics. This outcome is highly unlikely.

2. The FARC and ELN realize they will never achieve their stated political objective of displacing the Colombian democracy for a Marxist state and a settlement is negotiated that meets the objectives of Plan Colombia. This outcome is a possibility so long as both Colombia and the U.S. have the will to stay the course. A specific timetable is difficult to predict. A negotiated settlement would bring peace and stability to the Colombian state and also alleviate the potential threats to the United States' security interests.
3. The stalemate continues. The ultimate day of reckoning for either side is postponed. This outcome is favorable to no one, except perhaps for the FARC/ELN. The pain and suffering of the Colombian people would continue and the security threats to the United States would remain or grow worse over time.
4. The FARC and ELN gain the upper hand and a settlement is negotiated that on balance is more favorable to the guerrillas. The government might make territorial concessions to the guerrillas. The FARC might set up a semi-autonomous state within Colombia's borders or Colombia might become permanently partitioned. This outcome would definitively be a failure of America's stated goal of promoting democracy worldwide and a blow to American prestige.
5. The FARC and ELN win their protracted struggle and replace the democratically elected government with a Marxist/Leninist state. This is the worst of all possible outcomes for American interest. It would represent the abject failure of American policy in South America and represent a major reversal in the Western Hemisphere.

If the situation in Colombia were to significantly worsen and the potential outcomes described in paragraphs four or five became likely, the United States would almost certainly revisit the option of direct military involvement to prevent their occurrence.

## **Conclusion**

It is in the best interest of the United States to help Colombia secure for itself a stable peaceful democratic government by working through the framework of Plan Colombia. Even with American economic aid, military assistance, and diplomatic leadership, the inevitability of a favorable outcome for Colombia is not guaranteed. It is dependent upon the Colombian government prevailing in its clash of wills with the guerrillas. Whichever side is willing to bear the greater burden to achieve its stated political objectives will ultimately triumph. Colombia's citizens must be willing to forsake appeasement and bear the burden of intensifying the war against the FARC and ELN. The burden of waging war against the guerrillas must be shared by all elements of Colombian society and not just the lower classes and rural poor. Only then will Colombia be able to achieve peace and stability. If Colombia is ultimately unable to secure for itself a stable democratic government free from the tyranny of criminals who pose as liberators, then the United States will do what it must to protect its security and regional interest, even if it means making Colombia's fight against the terrorist insurgencies America's fight. As President George W. Bush said in his West Point address on June 1, 2002, "Our Nation's cause has always been larger than our Nation's defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace – a peace that favors liberty. We will defend the peace against the threats from terrorists and tyrants..."<sup>67</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.interpol.int/Public/Statistics/ICS/1995/Colombia1995.pdf> [Accessed 1 Oct, 2002].
- <sup>2</sup> Bob Graham et al., *Toward Greater Peace and Security in Colombia: Forging a Constructive U.S. Policy*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Publications office 2000.) 27.
- <sup>3</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article?eu=109139> [Accessed September 25, 2002].
- <sup>4</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- <sup>5</sup> "Colombia," *Encarta*, <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/refpages/RefArticle.aspx?refid=761564636&pn=4> [Accessed September 25, 2002].
- <sup>6</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- <sup>7</sup> "The War of a Thousand Days," *OnWar.com*, December 16, 2000, <http://www.onwar.com/aced/data/9999/1kdays1899.htm> [Accessed September 28, 2002].
- <sup>8</sup> "The War of a Thousand Days," *OnWar.com*.
- <sup>9</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- <sup>10</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- <sup>11</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- <sup>12</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- <sup>13</sup> "Colombia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- <sup>14</sup> Graham et al, 6.
- <sup>15</sup> Graham et al, 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Mark Falcoff, "Colombia: A Questionable Choice of Objectives," *AEI Latin American Outlook*, March 2002, <http://www.aei.org/lao/lao13801.htm> [Accessed September 16, 2002], 1.
- <sup>17</sup> David Spencer, *Colombia's Paramilitaries Criminals or Political Force*, December 2001, <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usassi/ssipubs/pubs/pubs2001/pcpara/pcpara.pdf> [Accessed September 16, 2002], 8.
- <sup>18</sup> "The EU's relations with Colombia," *External Relations*, August 2002, [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/colombia/intro](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/colombia/intro) [Accessed September 16, 2002], 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Spencer, 10.
- <sup>20</sup> "Philosophical Foundations of the AUC," *AUC Auto defensas Unidas de Colombia*, <http://www.colombia-libre.org/colombiaeng/organizational.asp> [Accessed October 5, 2002].
- <sup>21</sup> Spencer, 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Spencer, 7.
- <sup>23</sup> "An Overview of Recent Colombian History," *Colombia Human Rights Network*, <http://colhrnet.igc.org/timeline.htm> [Accessed November 9, 2002]. 1990-1998.
- <sup>24</sup> Julia Sweig, "What Kind Of War For Colombia?," *Council On Foreign Relations*, September/October 2002, <http://www.cfr.org/publication.php?id=4737.xml> [Accessed October 10, 2002], 5.
- <sup>25</sup> Sweig, 5.
- <sup>26</sup> "Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)," *The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, [http://www.ict.org.il/inter\\_ter/orgdet.cfm?orgid=37](http://www.ict.org.il/inter_ter/orgdet.cfm?orgid=37) [Accessed October 16, 2002] 1.
- <sup>27</sup> Falcoff, 1.
- <sup>28</sup> John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 831.
- <sup>29</sup> "President Harry S. Truman's Address before a joint session of Congress, March 12, 1947" *U.S. Department of State*, 12 March 1947, <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/funddocs/truman.txt> [Accessed 24 October 2002].
- <sup>30</sup> "U.S. Aid to Colombia," *Congressional Digest*, Vol. 80 No. 2 February 2001, 38.
- <sup>31</sup> Graham et al, 27.
- <sup>32</sup> *Latin America Working Group*, <http://www.lawg.org/drugcert3.htm> [Accessed November 9, 2002]
- <sup>33</sup> Mark Grossman, "U.S. Policy Towards Colombia," *U.S. Department of State*, April 24, 2002, <http://www.state.gov/p/9712.htm> [Accessed September 18, 2002].
- <sup>34</sup> Graham et al, 16.
- <sup>35</sup> "Why Americans Should Care About Colombia," *U.S. Department of State*, 21 February 2001, <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2001/1040pf.htm> [Accessed 15 October 2002]. 1.
- <sup>36</sup> Falcoff, 3.



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- <sup>37</sup> Jonathan Ernst, "Colombia: A War On Drugs, A War on Terror," *The Florida Times Union* 28 April 2002, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document> [Accessed September 16, 2002]
- <sup>38</sup> Timothy Burn, "U.S. Weans Itself Off Oil from Mideast," *Washington Times*, 14 Oct 2002, sec A.
- <sup>39</sup> Grossman, 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Sweig, 2.
- <sup>41</sup> Spencer, 17.
- <sup>42</sup> "U.S. Aid to Colombia," *Congressional Digest*, 64.
- <sup>43</sup> Graham et al, 17.
- <sup>44</sup> Ernst 2.
- <sup>45</sup> Ernst 2.
- <sup>46</sup> Gabriel Marcella, "Colombia Alert. Plan Colombia: An Interim Assessment," *CSIS*, January 25, 2002, <http://www.csis.org/americas/pubs/h020125.htm> [Accessed September 16, 2002], 1.
- <sup>47</sup> Sweig, 2.
- <sup>48</sup> Grossman, 5.
- <sup>49</sup> Grossman, 3.
- <sup>50</sup> "Test of the Constitution of Colombia (1991)," *Constitution Finder*, [http://confinder.richmond.edu/columbia\\_const2.html#pre](http://confinder.richmond.edu/columbia_const2.html#pre) [Accessed 24 October 2002].
- <sup>51</sup> Marcella, 1.
- <sup>52</sup> "Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State," *United States Institute of Peace Library*, [http://www.usip.org/org/library/pa/colombia/adddoc/plan\\_colombia\\_101999.html](http://www.usip.org/org/library/pa/colombia/adddoc/plan_colombia_101999.html) [Accessed October 12, 2002]
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- <sup>54</sup> Anna Carrigan, "Plan Colombia: A Foolish Drug War," *New York Times*, February 10, 2001. *New York Times*
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- <sup>57</sup> "U.S. Aid to Colombia," *Congressional Digest*, 36.
- <sup>58</sup> Marcella, 2.
- <sup>59</sup> Rebassa and Chalk, 103.
- <sup>60</sup> Marcella, 3.
- <sup>61</sup> Rebassa and Chalk, 104.
- <sup>62</sup> Falcoff, 3.
- <sup>63</sup> Sweig, 11.
- <sup>64</sup> Falcoff, 3.
- <sup>65</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 91.
- <sup>66</sup> Rebassa and Chalk, 103.
- <sup>67</sup> The Office of the President of the United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2002), 1.

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