

Two, Three, Many Colombias

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This past September, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton drew criticism for comparing the current situation in Mexico to “Colombia 20 years ago.” [1] Most of that criticism questioned whether the analogy was appropriate or whether the statement was an unnecessary affront to a close U.S. ally, the Mexican government of Felipe Calderón. But the more significant part of Clinton’s comments was her enthusiastic praise for Plan Colombia—the massive U.S. military aid package started by her husband in 1999—and her insistence on the need “to figure out what are the equivalents” for other regions, particularly Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. [2]

The idea that Plan Colombia should be emulated anywhere is appalling to those acquainted with Colombia’s human rights record, which has been the worst in Latin America for the past 20 years. Ché Guevara once famously called for “two, three, many Vietnams” in order to overthrow capitalist imperialism in the Third World. Clinton’s call for the replication of the Colombia model elsewhere is no less bold, for she too called for international transformation. That prescription appears less surprising when grounded in the broader context of recent U.S. policy toward Latin America.

For Whom Did the Colombia Model “Work”?

In her September 8 remarks, Hillary Clinton commented that “there were problems and there were mistakes” with Plan Colombia, “but it worked.” As with any policy, it is critical to understand how, and for whom, it “worked.” [3] If implementation of the Colombia model—my shorthand for U.S. policy toward Colombia over the past two decades—reflects the Obama administration’s vision for the rest of Latin America, the logic and consequences of the model must be addressed.

In 1999, Bill Clinton initiated Plan Colombia, billed as an anti-narcotics program. [4] Since then, the primary stated justification for appropriating more than \$5 billion in U.S. military and police aid to Colombia has been the “war on drugs.” But the program has not been motivated by a sincere concern for public health. First of all, more substantial threats to public health have elicited little concern in Washington. Cancer, heart disease, and diabetes each kill more people than cocaine or heroine. And their links to tobacco use, industrial food production, and corporate pollution, as well as the U.S. government’s encouragement of these practices through subsidies, foreign trade agreements, and lax regulations, are well documented. Tobacco alone kills more people than illegal drugs, alcohol, car accidents, murders, and suicides combined. [5] A recent study by the medical journal *Lancet* found that alcohol harms far more people than crack and heroin. [6] Yet few politicians are willing to propose a “war on tobacco” or a “war on alcohol,” complete with mandatory prison sentences for producers, users, and distributors.

The second problem is that Plan Colombia has had little effect on the flow of narcotics into the United States. In 2007, Colombian economist Héctor Mondragón noted that “[n]ever before have

drug traffickers had so much power in Colombia.” [7] Colombian coca production has fluctuated—for example, rising by 27 percent in 2007 [8] and declining by 18 percent the next year. [9] At the broader regional level, periods of decline in Colombian production have coincided with increases elsewhere, and vice versa. Most recently, many producers and traffickers have relocated from Colombia to Peru [10], and to a lesser extent Bolivia [11], increasing coca production in those countries. Even so, Colombia remains the world’s leading cocaine producer.

Former Colombian President César Gaviria, who co-chairs the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, summarized [12] the commission’s extensive 2009 report [13] by saying that “[w]e consider the war on drugs a failure because the objectives have never been achieved...Prohibitionist policies based on eradication, interdiction and criminalization have not yielded the expected results. We are today farther than ever from the goal of eradicating drugs.” Similar conclusions apply to Mexico [14], which in the 1990s replaced Florida and the Caribbean as the primary narcotics transport hub due to anti-drug campaigns elsewhere. As analyst Laura Carlsen noted recently [15], since the Mexican government began a U.S.-funded, \$1.4-billion anti-drug program in 2008, “Drug-related violence has exploded...with nearly 30,000 dead since the launch of the drug war in late 2006. Human rights violations charged against the army had gone up sixfold by [2009], and just in the past months [of mid-2010] Army forces have shot and killed several civilians.”

The Colombian state is also closely linked to the people and activities that Plan Colombia alleges to be targeting, a reality understood by the U.S. government long before Plan Colombia started [16]. The United States is deeply implicated in enabling this relationship, for example through USAID’s “alternative development” programs in non-traditional agricultural products [17], such as African palm oil. Colombian Senator Gustavo Petro notes that “Plan Colombia is fighting against drugs militarily at the same time it gives money to support palm, which is used by paramilitary mafias to launder money,” [18] so in effect the U.S. government is “subsidizing drug traffickers.” Right-wing paramilitaries continue to enjoy a close, if technically illegal, working relationship with the Colombian military, whose officials have helped them steal tens of thousands of acres of land from small farmers in recent years [19]. Evidence suggests that a similar intimacy exists between officials and drug lords in Peru [20] and Mexico [21], though the details for the latter are a bit murkier.

Experts have long acknowledged these aspects of Plan Colombia-type anti-drug programs—their ineffectiveness from a public health standpoint, the massive human rights abuses they bring, and their fundamental corruption. Former President Gaviria’s statement about Plan Colombia is accurate, except that the “expected results” were not drug eradication. Independent experts had predicted the program’s “failure” well *prior* to its implementation, warning that militarization at the site of production is a highly ineffective way of combating illicit drug flows and usage compared to drug treatment programs and poverty reduction [22]. The “war on drugs” within U.S. borders, which involves incarcerating over half a million people each year for drug offenses, is likewise a patently ineffective (as well as profoundly inhumane and hypocritical) way of reducing drug use. The enormous and longstanding discrepancy between experts’ knowledge and drug policy raises significant questions about the real motives of the “war.”

So what has Plan Colombia achieved? Despite some decline in overall violence levels and improved security for middle-class urban residents, since 1999 Colombia has become even more infamous than it already was for extrajudicial executions, massive internal displacement, land theft, and the close ties between paramilitary death squads and the country’s right-wing government. Most violence targets workers and the poor, particularly those seeking to restrain the power of landlords and business elites. Since 2005, paramilitaries have murdered 45 peasant farmers [23] because they had sought to reclaim land that had been stolen. Colombia accounted for almost half of all murders of trade unionists in the world in 2009 [24], and it has long been known as the most dangerous country in the world for labor activists. This trend continues under the new president, Juan Manuel Santos.

New revelations of horrendous human rights violations and politicians' connections to paramilitaries surface regularly. In late 2009, a mass grave of more than 2,000 corpses was discovered near Bogotá [25]. Although the left-wing guerrilla forces in Colombia have themselves committed significant human rights violations, the majority of abuses are attributable to the government and right-wing paramilitaries, who enjoy an atmosphere of "generalized impunity" according to a March 2010 UN human rights report. [26]

Colombia's ascendance to the rank of the continent's worst human rights violator has coincided with the increase in U.S. military aid to the country. Since 1990, Colombia has received more U.S. military and police aid than all other countries in the hemisphere. A January 2010 report by the Center for Global Development [27] examined the link between political violence and U.S. military assistance and found that "collusion between the military and illegal armed groups...means that foreign assistance directly enables illegal groups to perpetuate political violence and undermine democratic institutions, such as electoral participation." Furthermore, the authors noted "a distinct, asymmetric pattern: when U.S. military aid increases, attacks by paramilitaries, who are known to work with the military, increase more in municipalities with [Colombian military] bases." A recent study by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the U.S. Office on Colombia [28] also tracked the impact of military aid on human rights. Their research revealed that over the past nine years, "areas where Colombian army units received the largest increases in U.S. assistance reported increased extrajudicial killings on average," even though U.S. law prohibits the disbursement of military aid to any regime guilty of sustained human rights abuses.

As early as 1994, the CIA and U.S. diplomats were aware that Colombia's U.S.-funded security forces used "death squad tactics" and worked closely with drug-trafficking paramilitaries [a[<http://www.gwu.edu/%7Eensarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB266/index.htm>]]. Yet that knowledge has not discouraged U.S. military ties to Colombia. During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama mildly criticized the human rights situation in Colombia. But once in office, he consolidated a strong alliance with the Colombian regime with a 2009 deal that, if it overcomes the current legal obstacles within Colombia, will give the United States access to seven military bases in the country [29]. The deal is intended "to make Colombia a regional hub for Pentagon operations" according to "senior Colombian military and civilian officials familiar with negotiations," the Associated Press reported at the time [30]. The actual text of the deal pledges U.S.-Colombian cooperation "to address common threats to peace, stability, freedom, and democracy," language which is at once vague and bone-chilling for those familiar with the history of U.S. policy in the region.

Within Colombia itself, the big winners have been the overlapping sectors of narcotraffickers, government officials, right-wing paramilitaries, landlords, and business elites. Most other Colombians have not fared so well, however. According to UN figures [31], "Colombia is one of only three Latin American countries where economic inequality increased between 2002 and 2008" (the others were Guatemala and the Dominican Republic). Foreign investment has tripled in recent years, contributing to significant economic growth, but poverty (43 percent) and extreme poverty (23 percent) have changed little. In the countryside, 0.4 percent of landowners hold 61 percent of the land. In a region where powerful social movements and left-leaning governments have challenged the traditional power of the U.S. government and multinational corporations, Colombia remains a staunch supporter of U.S.-style "free trade," or neoliberalism, characterized by the privatization of services, the liberalization of markets, and a government policy that collaborates with capitalists to suppress the rights of workers, peasants, and minorities, and ignores the environment. The World Bank and International Finance Corporation recently lauded Colombia's strides toward maintaining a "business friendly environment," [32] designating it, along with Mexico and Peru, as the top three Latin American countries for "ease of doing business." [33] Incidentally, these countries are also the three closest U.S. allies in the region.

The Logic of Militarized Neoliberalism

If concerns about public health and safety cannot explain the U.S. militarization of Latin America, other explanations can be found in documents from the past few years. In 2008, a Council on Foreign Relations Task Force argued that “Latin America has never mattered more for the United States.” [34] Among a handful of reasons why, the first mentioned was that “[t]he region is the largest foreign supplier of oil to the United States.” The promotion of “free trade”—understood as policies that redirect public resources into the hands of private corporations, while sacrificing human welfare and environmental sustainability in the process—remains central to the U.S. strategy.

But policies that benefit U.S. corporations must overcome the usual obstacles, namely the resistance of local populations. The election of left-leaning governments across the region is but one manifestation of that resistance. A 2008 report by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) [35] noted the threat posed by “a small group of radical populist governments” that “emphasize economic nationalism at the expense of market-based approaches,” thus “directly clash[ing] with U.S. initiatives.” Unfortunately, the report said, this “competing vision” is quite popular in the region, where “high levels of poverty and striking income inequalities will continue to create a potentially receptive audience for radical populism’s message.” The 2010 DNI report [36] by the Obama appointee repeats these basic concerns: governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador are “opposing U.S. policies and interests in the region” by advancing “statist” alternatives to “market capitalism.”

Hillary Clinton and other high-level officials have been quite candid about U.S. objectives in Latin America [37]. Clinton has blasted the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez [38], demanding that Venezuela “restore private property and return to a free market economy.” The promotion of “moderate” political “counterweights” to the current governments in Venezuela [39] and Bolivia [40] has been a consistent focus of U.S. policy in recent years, confirmed most recently by a number of documents released by Wikileaks detailing U.S. [41]. efforts to undermine and overthrow Hugo Chávez. Taken together, these statements and documents provide a fairly coherent picture of U.S. priorities in Latin America: promote U.S.-friendly political regimes while steering Latin American economies along an essentially neoliberal economic path.

But why has the U.S. government, including Obama, placed such emphasis on *re-militarizing* Latin America in the past decade? Outside Colombia, there is no direct military threat to U.S.-friendly regimes. Couldn’t U.S. goals be achieved primarily through economic and political imperialism alone, or at least with less emphasis on militarization, as some establishment intellectuals seem to favor? [42] There is no single, simple explanation for militarization, but I want to suggest five contributing factors. The first two factors are closely linked to the U.S. priorities mentioned above, while the others reflect the nature of the U.S. economy, the reality of declining U.S. global influence, and Washington political culture.

Repressing dissent. Although the formal targets of U.S. military and police aid are drug traffickers, in many countries that aid enables the repression of these social movements. In recent years, “security” forces funded and often directly trained by the United States have killed or otherwise repressed protesters throughout Latin America: Colombian unionists [43], Indians [44], and peasants [45]; communities protesting extractive industry in the Peruvian Amazon [46]; Honduran activists and journalists following the June 2009 coup [47]; and broad coalitions of Mexican civil society [48]. The basic logic is simple: the suppression of human rights tends to create a climate favorable for business; in underdeveloped countries where cheap labor and raw materials are the primary attractions for foreign capital, governments that guarantee strong political, social, and

economic rights for all their people simply will not be very attractive to foreign investors. As neoliberal policies have become increasingly unpopular among Latin Americans [49], and have in turn helped trigger the resurgence of powerful Latin American social movements, those movements have been targeted by state repression.

Maintaining a strong U.S. presence in the region. Latin America has always held enormous geopolitical importance, which largely derives from economic interest but is not exactly the same. Maintaining control over “our little region over here”—in former Secretary of War Henry Stimson’s words—is in some sense a goal in and of itself. In the present context, the United States maintains or supports a strong military presence as a counterweight to left-leaning governments, particularly Venezuela. U.S. bases in countries like Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama, as well as vast amounts of military aid to Colombia and Mexico, are intended to reassert U.S. dominance. The original 2009 Pentagon budget [50] request to Congress spoke of the need for “full spectrum operations throughout South America,” in part to counter the presence of “anti-U.S. governments” and “expand expeditionary warfare capability.” Although removed from the final document, that language probably reflects the thinking of many in Washington. While an outright U.S. attack on Venezuela or Bolivia seems unlikely in the near future, militarization serves as a buffer against the further spread of “radical populism.”

The political influence of U.S. military contractors and weapons makers. Militarization is a subsidy to U.S. arms producers. U.S. officials have viewed military aid to Latin America as a way to support the military-industrial complex at least since the 1940s, when leaders like General Hoyt Vandenberg argued that such aid “would also give added impetus to the aircraft industry,” as well as to shipbuilding and other sectors. Since then, the weapons industry has become the world’s most profitable industry, with the United States the leading global weapons exporter. In addition to direct Pentagon aid, in 2008 the U.S. weapons industry and U.S. government sold almost \$2 billion in arms to Latin America [51], over 60 percent of which went to Mexico and Colombia. In the case of Plan Colombia, military equipment providers [52] and oil companies [53] lobbied hard for the bill’s passage, and some of the very same companies are currently benefiting from Plan Mexico (the “Mérida Initiative”). [54]

Military power as the one remaining realm of U.S. dominance. As the U.S. economy has declined in relation to those of China, India, and East Asia, the one area of unquestioned U.S. superiority remains its military might. David Harvey, in *The New Imperialism*, notes the increased tendency of the U.S. government “to flex its military muscle as the only clear absolute power it has left.” Military power has increasingly become a first resort for a diverse range of problems and objectives, even when ultimately counterproductive.

Washington’s machista political culture. The association of physical strength and military prowess with masculinity is widespread, and the metaphor is frequently deployed in elite political discourse in order to justify aggressive policies. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, U.S. political cartoons routinely portrayed Latin Americans as effeminate and in need of U.S. protection [55]; today’s corporate press reproduces similar motifs [56] in a more subtle fashion. Machismo and chauvinistic pride (often infused with racism) are not just a rhetorical strategy for justifying aggression. They are deeply embedded within the minds of many U.S. policymakers and help shape policy as well as rhetoric. One of the clearest modern articulations of their importance came from Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton in a 1965 memo regarding U.S. policy toward Indochina. He wrote that by far the most important U.S. goal in Vietnam was “to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat,” thus justifying the slaughter of several million innocent people.

Spreading the Model

The consequences of militarized neoliberalism are not debatable. While a few drug lords, politicians, and corporate profiteers benefit, the bulk of the population suffers from increased poverty, which in turn accelerates everything from social protest to migration to drug production, street crime, and violence—all of which are then used to justify more militarization. This cycle, with all its winners and losers, is likely to persist in Colombia, Mexico, and everywhere that the same basic model is applied.

The Obama administration has shown a strong preference for the three basic ingredients of that model—neoliberal economic policies, political leaders obedient to the United States, and militarization— [57] and has shown little desire to modify policy in a progressive direction (even along the lines of the exceedingly modest, pragmatic changes recommended by the Council on Foreign Relations in 2008). Since Obama became president, Mexico has displaced Colombia [58] as the hemisphere's leading recipient of U.S. military and police aid as part of the effort that one U.S. official has called "armoring NAFTA." [59] The incorporation of Central America [60] into a U.S.-sponsored "security corridor" [61] stretching from the U.S.-Mexico border down to Colombia proceeds apace. If the Obama presidency has brought any "change," it's certainly not the sort of change that most ordinary people would find desirable.

Much current debate within progressive circles revolves around the question of whether Obama is personally in favor of continuing his predecessors' policies or is actually a progressive-at-heart handcuffed by entrenched elite interests. The latter notion seems unlikely in the case of Latin America. If Obama were genuinely interested in a more humane and less imperialistic policy, he could set in motion some modest changes by, for example, ending the cynical U.S. "democracy promotion" programs in countries like Venezuela [62] or restoring the trade preferences for Bolivia [63] that he revoked in 2009.

But Obama's inner motivations are much less significant than the structural and institutional barriers to substantive change. The basic policy goals and strategies transcend party lines and electoral outcomes. Even if ultimately detrimental to certain long-term U.S. interests, continued militarization delivers many short-term benefits to corporate and government stakeholders. Given the current constellations of power in the United States and Latin America, a substantial demilitarization of policy would simply incur too much elite resistance and deliver few political rewards.

Any major policy change in a progressive direction, if it occurs, will result from pressures emanating from Latin America and/or from non-governmental forces within the United States. Latin American social movements, and a few organizations in the United States, have been doing their part. It's time the rest of us do ours.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

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