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Oil, Presidents, Congress, and Cocaine

The Bloody Legacy of Plan Colombia

by MATEO PIMENTEL

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“U.S. support for the Government of Colombia (GOC) is designed to attack every element of the drug trade and to assist the GOC to re-establish government control and the rule of law in areas threatened by drug-related violence.”

– Fact Sheet, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, US Department of State, Washington, DC, August 12, 2002

“The experience that we have gathered through Plan Colombia together with the United States is something that we have the obligation of sharing with our brothers in Central America who are going through difficult times. So that is the reason why we have decided to strengthen and improve joint assistance mechanisms for these countries.”

– President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, speaking at a Presidential Press Conference with US President Barack Obama in Cartagena, Colombia, 15 April 2012

From Threat to Ally

The Colombian people yet again weather their state's close alignment with Washington and her interests. A unique history sustains the growing relationship. In cold war times, Colombia assumed Washington's anticommunist bent. It granted primacy to America's crusade against drugs within its own sovereign territory. In the early 1950s, Colombia was the only Latin American nation to send troops to aid the US in its Korean war. In 1961, at the Punta del Este Conference, Colombia promoted Cuba's expulsion from the Organization of American States (OAS), flaunting its pro-American orthodoxy. Colombia's leaders have gone so far as to assume the "security doctrine" developed by Washington Southern Cone militaries. President George W. Bush at one point recognized Colombia as America's "strongest regional ally in the war against terrorism." Obama furthers the legacy by deepening economic ties with free trade. Colombia has also signed other agreements with the US apropos intelligence sharing, and Washington has appointed specific diplomats for each branch of its armed forces to Bogota's American embassy.

The connections continue, but the Colombian state's relationship with the US is not new. Riots in Panama caused the deaths of American citizens in 1857, which spurred the US to pressure New Granada (Colombia) for compensation. When securing British protection proved bleak, New Granada President Mariano Ospina Rodríguez made Washington a proposal: America should annex his entire republic. Frank Safford has argued that Colombia acted this way because it understood the US' irrepressible expansionist mission. With the US-Mexican War and the "filibuster adventures in Nicaragua of the 1850s," New Granada's fate was perhaps already appeared sealed. The proposition for annexation was part of a larger vision for the transfer of power but without the gratuitous carnage. Ospina Rodríguez thought the US might bring stability, security, and prosperity. More than a century and a half later, the stability of Colombia's institutions, its sustained economic growth, and incredible levels of violence (in recent decades) has presented Latin America with a very dismal and bloody kind of pro-American model indeed.

The presence of Colombia's guerrilla forces, which dates back to the 1960s, has made the country a "convenient" workbench for testing US-sponsored counterinsurgency strategies. Counternarcotics policies took root in 1973, or as Peter Kingstone argues, the same year as neoliberalism's advent in the region. Starting with Ronald Reagan's 1986 prescription for a crazed, reactionary drug war, neoliberal economic policies alloyed counterinsurgency. This consummated the American approach to measuring security in Colombia. Until 1991, likeminded policies and agendas secured a popular perception of Colombia as a teetering democracy. The criminalization of social protest and political opposition also manifested, as well as the militarization of responses to social conflict. General military control of "public order"—rather than, say, civilian control—proved an issue. The 1991 Constitution may have replaced the "state of siege" in Colombia with a limited "state of emergency," but there were no significant reductions in military might. Towards the end of the 1990s, Colombia's internal warring continued to spread, and violence, coupled with the rise in cocaine production, gave Washington the excuse it needed to declare Colombia a "threat to regional security." The specter of a threat made room for Washington's contested 'Plan Colombia', an aid package that made Colombia the world's third largest recipient of US military aid, the foremost recipient of direct US military training, and the cornerstone in Washington's global counter-narcotics program.

The events of September 11, 2001, caused many changes in US foreign policy and security agendas that would affect Colombia and its neighbors. Terrorism became the greatest threat to US national security, and America's subsequent war on terrorism erupted everywhere. Colombia's 2002 lapse in relations with its guerrillas—namely the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)—and America's domestic experience with 9/11 presented an opportunity for Washington to reconsider “counterinsurgency efforts” as already fundamental to America's “global war on terror.” This convenient recalibration of the US-Colombian approach to security issues especially took root after Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's successful election under the suspect aegis of “democratic security.”

Investing in America's Drug War

When foreign policy analysts examine America's war on drugs, the general focus pertains to areas of US national security interests, intermestic (international-domestic) issues, and domestic politics, or US state imperialism and economic interests. Some argue that policy, such as Plan Colombia, which Bill Clinton made law in July of 2000, cannot be understood through nation-state paradigms alone. The emerging consolidation of neoliberal state power in Colombia, the influence of transnational lobbying of US and Colombian public policy and administration, and the influence of transnational corporations are also important. Why? Because each of these other factors has been instrumental in the induction, manicure, and implementation of Plan Colombia.

The Plan consisted in US governmental contribution to both Colombia's counternarcotics and development itineraries. It approximated \$1.6 billion dollars for US financial and military assistance to Colombia's government. It also provided a nominal portion for the country's Andean neighbors. The aims of the package was precisely the reinforcement of Colombia's military capacities and effectiveness in its war against guerrilla insurgency. Accordingly, US contributions emphasized and prioritized the militarization of counternarcotics efforts, contextualized by establishing the rule of law in those Colombian regions seen as vital to the successful outcome of America's abortive drug war. Areas of considerable coca cultivation as well as the enduring, decades-long presence of the FARC, a 20,000-plus guerrilla force, became near-immediate targets. Overall, determining state authority and security in anti-drug missions complemented Colombia's strategy for development. It placed emphasis on market solutions to problems such as poverty and inequality, which were endemic to rural departments.

Foreign investment faced open hostility in Colombia, and particularly in the extractive sector. So, private multinational firms came to depend on Colombia's governmental security, providing “diplomatic support” to the Colombian government for its continued reproach of the guerrillas. Occidental Oil and BP, for example, lobbied the American Congress to increase military assistance to Colombia. Consequently, these firms made themselves elemental to “war system dynamics,” and, as Nazih Richani also argues, “the main financier of its different warring actors.” US policy on Colombia experienced dramatic changes within the first few years of the 21st century, which directly resulted from multinational firms, their lobbying, and their interests. Obviously, multinational oil firms threw their support to Plan Colombia because of the increase in US military presence it portended. To fortify key areas and protect interest and property against guerrilla attacks, especially along the Colombia-Ecuador border, oil firms spent roughly \$25 million lobbying Congress from 1995 to 2000 alone.

Colombian President Andrés Pastrana (1998 to 2002) reportedly met with George W. Bush (when governor) as well as oil and electric company executives in Houston, Texas. Researchers note that Pastrana made promises of large concessions for oil and gas firms—some of which belonged to Reliant Energy, a Bush campaign contributor. Reportedly, Occidental enjoyed close ties to the George W. Bush administration, and spent \$1.5 million on US presidential and congressional elections from 1995 to 2000. The firm spent another \$8.7 million lobbying US officials from 1996 to 2000, specifically in regards to Latin American policy. Oil and energy firms, such as ExxonMobil, BP-Amoco, Unocal, Texaco and Phillips Petroleum, spent some \$13 million in the same period to achieve their desires for US policy on Colombia. Incidentally, US, Canadian, and British oil firm contracts have increased since 1999.

Presidential and Congressional Contributions

Towards the end of the 1990s, the US channeled resources through Colombia's National Police. A Republican group in America's Congress known as the "drug warriors" initiated the agenda. Of course, congressional politicians touted their claims for concern about America's youth. They identified Colombian police (and military) as the best conduit for state intervention. American Congressional delegations even traveled and assessed military technology, weapons, and they underwent counternarcotics scenarios and operations firsthand. These excursions only increased America's congressional emphasis on military expertise, and they framed the boundaries of policy debates afterwards. Congressional debate and praxis thus played a key role in US foreign policy on Colombia.

Congressional travel to Colombia did more than amplify America's growing domestic concern with drugs; it provided a politically important opportunity for American policymakers who regarded the consumption of illicit narcotics to be an incredible threat to the nation. Military technology and training for counternarcotics operations quickly became the only apt response in their minds, and any headway on human rights legislation, or bureaucratic procedures, was condemned as moral heresy. A technological focus set the boundaries for policy debate, which muted dissent and mystified alternate possible policies. Material commitment in the ensuing transnational politics defined the solidarity of policymakers. Per usual, America justified its policy and actions due to the fact that it fancied itself an actor with moral license for direct intervention. But these transnational political projects clearly smacked of "neo-colonialism."

It was Reagan's 1986 National Security Directive 221 that formally declared drugs a threat to national security, following Richard Nixon's declaration of the first 'war on drugs' in 1971. Militarized transnational law enforcement efforts made use of military equipment and technologies originally developed for the cold war, which obviously helped to justify their undergirding budgets. Prominent US military research hubs readily incorporated counternarcotics technologies into their agendas. Arms manufacturers and other corporations promoted and backed national conferences. Defense contractors saw their role expand and bleed out into developing counternarcotics and law enforcement hardware in an era the Wall Street Journal christened the "Cold War of the '90s."

Today

The political and economic factors that buoyed Plan Colombia continue into the second decade of the new millennium in US foreign policy. Gian Carlo Delgado-Ramos and Silvina María Romano argue that US policy in Latin America has hardly any roots in real diplomacy. The “openly democratic discourse” of the Obama administration, for example, springs from its outright military authority in Colombia, which strictly serves US economic interest and that of its allied elites in the region. Thus, governing US administrations only focus on specific issues (security, narco-insurgency, terrorism, etc..) that will help America secure the free-market context for its access to strategic Latin American resources in the 21st century, such as all the oil that sits beneath a sovereign and socialist Venezuela. The US specifically supports Latin American juntas with increased military presence in government to guarantee an “internal stability during a time of increasing violence” as Delgado-Ramos and Romano put it. Nevertheless, the consequences of this paradigm suggest a precarious balance between stability and instability, which makes the region dependent on the US in sinister ways that preserve the region’s status as “lifeline” for American wealth and power.