# WASHINGTON'S 'NEW WAR' IN COLOMBIA
## THE WAR ON DRUGS MEETS THE WAR ON TERROR

PAUL WOLF

*Schoolgirls pass by paramilitary graffiti in the southwestern Colombian town of San Vicente del Caguán.*

BY ADAM ISACSON

In 1997—back when there was no such thing as a "war on terror" and George W. Bush was just a Texas governor on the make—U.S. aid for Colombia rose to a previously unheard-of level, $88.5 million. This money was tightly restricted to police counterdrug efforts, and almost none supported the Colombian military's decades-old war against insurgent groups. "There will be no U.S. government assistance for fighting the guerrillas," the ambassador in Bogotá, Myles Frechette, flatly stated in a January 1997 cable to Washington, "The issue raises too many human rights concerns and has been a searing experience for us in Central America."[1]

By November 2002, though, the U.S. ambassador had a much different message. "The U.S. strategy," Anne Patterson told Colombia's cattlemen's federation, "is to give the Colombian government the tools to combat terrorism and narcotrafficking, two struggles that have become one. To fight against narcotrafficking and terrorism, it is necessary to attack all links of the chain simultaneously."[2]

Note the post-September 11 change in vocabulary: the word "terrorism" appears in the place of "guerrillas" in Patterson's statement.[3] Frechette's concerns about human rights and "mission creep"—though still unresolved—have melted away. In the interval between the two comments, as "Plan Colombia" and the "war on terror" fundamentally re-shaped Washington's approach, the Bush administration managed to remove long-standing legal curbs that had kept the war on drugs officially separate from counterinsurgency.

The Bush team, which includes some of the most enthusiastic architects of the U.S. role in the Central

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*The coffin of slain community leader Darío de Jesús Roman at the mayor's office in San Vicente del Caguán. His killers remain unknown.*

American wars of the 1980s, pushed through a U.S. aid package that now gives Colombia over seven times as much aid as in 1997—$650 million in 2003, $500 million for the security forces.[4] Most of this aid seeks to turn the Colombian armed forces into effective defenders of oil pipelines and drug-crop fumigation planes. Concerns about human rights violations and military over-commitment have lost prominence, and military programs have far outpaced the search for peaceful, long-term solutions to Colombia's crisis.

In fact, it is difficult today even to discuss peace negotiations or non-military solutions in Colombia. The U.S. and Colombian governments—and even most Colombians, if polls reflect reality—are eagerly backing a sharp escalation in their nation's 39-year-old war, which already kills over 3,500 people a year. The prime beneficiaries of the current mood are the Colombian military and a new hard-line president—Álvaro Uribe, who won a first-round victory in Colombia's May 2002 elections and took office in August.

President Uribe is the scion of a wealthy Antioquia landowning family whose father was assassinated by Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in 1983; he has made security his overwhelming priority. He has held dozens of regional "town meetings" to discuss security needs, and his close supervision of the military—including weekly calls to cajole brigade commanders into greater action—led the Colombian newsweekly *Semana* to dub him Colombia's "field marshal."[5]

Colombia's military budget is increasing sharply under Uribe, fed by cuts in social spending and a "war tax" on the wealthiest. A state of emergency decree has limited civil liberties and increased the security forces' power to monitor civilians and perform "preventive arrests."

Controls on citizen movement are stronger still in two so-called "rehabilitation and consolidation zones" in the departments of Arauca, Bolívar and Sucre. The new president has offered civilians an active role in the conflict as part of a network of informants, some of whom, wearing hoods to protect their identity, have accompanied the military on operations to round up suspected guerrilla collaborators. The army is creating a hybrid force of lightly trained "campesino soldiers," charged with defending rural towns but living in their homes instead of barracks.

The new president has set near-impossible terms for renewed peace talks, demanding that guerrillas declare a unilateral cease-fire before the government will sit at the table. Most paramilitary groups, however, have accepted Uribe's offer, raising concerns that members of the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), the main paramilitary umbrella organization, may be amnestied and "recycled" as "campesino soldiers" or well-paid informants.

It would have been impossible to imagine a Colombian president with such an agenda in 1997, back when Ambassador Frechette was trying to limit the U.S. military-aid mission. At that time, Colombians were filling the streets to demand peace negotiations with guerrillas, and the following year they elected a new president, Andrés Pastrana, who promised to follow through with a peace process. Those talks failed spectacularly in February 2002, though, leaving in their wake a bitter public mood and a thirst for a forceful anti-guerrilla campaign. For the first time in memory, opinion polls are showing a majority of Colombians believing that the military can win the war against the 18,000-member FARC and 4,000-strong National Liberation Army (ELN).[6]

In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that Uribe owes his popularity to the FARC, which appears to be solidly in the hands of its hardest-line leaders, those who seem least aware of Colombian public opinion

and political realities. To pressure for the release of imprisoned fighters, the FARC have kidnapped dozens of public officials during the last two years, including presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, the governor of Antioquia and a former defense minister. The latter two were taken hostage while on a peace march. Guerrilla threats in early 2002 forced at least half of Colombia's 1,050 mayors either to resign or to govern from provincial capitals. During a May 2002 battle with paramilitaries in the village of Bojayá in northwestern Colombia, FARC fighters launched a crude, poorly aimed gas-canister mortar into a church sheltering frightened residents, killing 119 of them. This extreme behavior has led even many of the poorest and most vulnerable Colombians—the population for whom the FARC claims to be fighting—to give up on peace talks and to seek protection from a wealthy landowning president and an army with a history of abuse.

Uribe is also very popular with a U.S. government caught up in its unfolding "war on terror." Bush administration officials praise the new Colombian president's "courage" and "commitment." They are thrilled by his desire to expand aerial eradication of drug crops; Uribe has frequently signaled his will to "spray and spray" until no more coca exists in Colombia.[7] The goal for 2003 is to spray 200,000 hectares. They are responding to Uribe's requests for more weapons, training, equipment and intelligence for his heightened war effort.

The result is a growing harmony of interests and strategies behind a common goal: counterinsurgency, which U.S. Army field manuals define as "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat subversive insurgency."[8] The imperatives of counterinsurgency underlie virtually all of the Uribe government's initiatives since August 2002.

As recently as November 2000, however, Bill Clinton's drug czar, Gen. Barry McCaffrey, was still promising that "as a matter of Administration policy, the United States will not support Colombian counterinsurgency efforts."[9] U.S. foreign aid law divides military assistance among several programs, according to their purpose; nearly all aid to Colombia during the late 1990s and early 2000s—including the controversial "Plan Colombia" aid package—had been appropriated through counternarcotics aid programs. This meant that U.S. officials could not permit the Colombians to use their U.S.-donated helicopters, guns, or specially trained brigades against guerrillas or paramilitaries, unless this use was part of a counterdrug mission.

The incoming Bush team shared the Colombian military's frustration with these restrictions—but saw little congressional support for reversing McCaffrey's promise and dismantling the "firewall" between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. After September 11, though, most obstacles to an expanded U.S. mission disappeared.

As Washington prepared for a global antiterrorist crusade, officials looked south and saw three Colombian groups—the FARC, the ELN and the AUC—already on the State Department's list of international terrorist groups. Even so, in the days after the February 20, 2002, collapse of Pastrana's talks with the FARC, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell shot down a Pentagon plan for Colombia's "formal inclusion in the war on terrorism," the *Washington Post* reported. "The decision," according to the *Post*, "reflected a belief by Rice and Powell that a fundamental shift in U.S. policy was not advisable at the moment because of uncertainty about congressional reaction."[10]

Within a week, however, House Republicans had made clear that the Pentagon's proposal would get a green light from them. Though Democrats softened the language somewhat, the House of Representatives passed a March 6 resolution calling on President Bush to submit legislation "to assist the Government of Colombia to protect its democracy from United States-designated foreign terrorist organizations."

The Bush administration was quick to oblige. On March 21, it asked Congress for a $28.9 billion "emergency" budget outlay for counterterrorism efforts at home and abroad. Deep within the bill was a single sentence with a major change in the law, allowing Colombia to use all past counterdrug aid for "a unified campaign against narcotics trafficking [and] against activities by organizations designated as terrorist organizations" such as the FARC, ELN and AUC. By allowing aid to be used against Colombia's "terrorist" groups—which in fact are not shadowy undercover cells but territorial armies with a combined total of nearly 40,000 members—the bill made official the switch to counterinsurgency. Since August 2, when the bill became law, the United States can support Colombia's war against insurgents, just as the United States supported El Salvador's military effort against the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in the 1980s.

During the May 2002 House debate on the bill, Representatives Jim McGovern (D-Massachusetts) and Ike Skelton (D-Missouri) led an effort to remove the "unified campaign" language. "This is a major policy change," warned Representative Skelton, the senior Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee. "We could find ourselves engulfed in a

morass that would eat up American soldiers like we have not seen in years." Their attempt failed, but not overwhelmingly: It lost by a narrow margin of 192 to 225.

The Bush administration has since joined Uribe in a counterinsurgency alliance. The largest initiative so far is the $104 million effort to help Colombia's armed forces guard an oil pipeline. The 480-mile-long Caño Limón-Coveñas tube, which runs from the oil fields of Arauca near the Venezuelan border to the Caribbean port of Coveñas, is a frequent target of guerrilla dynamite attacks—in 2001, a record 170 bombings forced a shutdown in the flow of oil for much of the year. The Uribe government's two "rehabilitation zones"—where something akin to martial law reigns—are on either end of the pipeline.

The U.S. and Colombian militaries are working together to protect the 480-mile-long oil pipeline partly owned by Occidental Petroleum.

The pipeline is the property of a joint venture between Colombia's state-owned oil company, Spain's Repsol, and—with a 7/16 share—Occidental Petroleum of Los Angeles, California. Occidental, whose Colombian oil operations gained notoriety in the 1990s when it sought to drill on the traditional lands of the U'Wa indigenous group, pays about 50 cents per barrel in security costs.[11] Its lobbyists have long been among Washington's leading proponents for increased military assistance to Colombia, and their persistence paid off in 2002.

The Bush administration's 2003 foreign aid request—which, after long delays, was expected to pass Congress in February 2003—includes $98 million in weapons, equipment, helicopters and training for the Colombian Army's 18th Brigade and a new 5th Mobile Brigade, both of which will operate in Arauca. An additional $6 million to "jump-start" the pipeline-defense program was part of the same anti-terror legislation that broadened the U.S. mission into a "unified campaign." Using those funds, seventy U.S. Special Forces members arrived in Arauca in January 2003 to begin training their Colombian counterparts. Arauca—a zone with oil, thousands of hectares of coca, and a heavy presence of all three armed groups—may be Colombia's most intensely contested battleground in 2003.

"These brigades that we're talking about will be very offensively oriented," Gen. Galen Jackman, the Southern Command's director of operations said at a media roundtable last September. "That is, focused on the enemy, as opposed to a static defense around the pipeline."[12] Ambassador Patterson told a Colombian newspaper that pipeline defense could be only a first step. "There are more than 300 strategic infrastructure points for the United States in Colombia. ... But first we'll see how this Caño Limón project goes."[13]

Beyond the pipeline program, the United States is using counterinsurgency aid to establish a new commando battalion within the Colombian Army. According to Britain's *Jane's Defence Weekly*, "The commando unit, to be modeled on a U.S. Army Ranger battalion, will learn long-range tactical level reconnaissance and surveillance, and direct action focused on terrorist leaders. . . . The unit is set to be operational by the end of [Fiscal year 2003]."[14] The United States is also helping Colombia's police to equip and train sixty-four 150-man mobile "carabinero" squads to operate in rural zones where Colombia's government maintains little presence.[15] For 2004, the Bush administration is requesting a $50 million increase in military and police assistance, bringing the total somewhere near $550 million.

Though administration documents and statements are careful to use the term "counterterrorism," it is clear to all that the line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency has been obliterated.

But perhaps "counterinsurgency" is not the right term for what Uribe and Bush are pursuing in Colombia. Classic counterinsurgency doctrine, for all its many tragic faults, at least had a so-called "hearts-and-minds" component: a large-scale effort to address poverty and the lack of economic opportunity that encourages insurgency in the first place. The present policy in Colombia, however, has only an anemic, underfunded poverty alleviation and institution-building component.

Despite Uribe's frequent promises that he would not neglect social needs, his government is slashing social spending to pay for its war effort. Organizations like Plante, the state alternative development agency, desperately needed to be strengthened, but are instead being eviscerated. The United States has shown remarkable efficiency in getting helicopters delivered and doubling the rate of fumigation. But efforts to deliver alternative development assistance, improve civilian governance or aid displaced persons are either too small to reach more than a tiny fraction of the target population, or too mired in bureaucracy to respond in a timely way. By September 2002 nearly all of the 2000 "Plan

Colombia" aid package's $642 million in military and police assistance had been delivered. Alternative-development aid deliveries, by contrast, totaled $31.8 million out of $68.5 million appropriated in 2000, and more than half of funds for judicial reform remained unspent.[16] Only the repressive part of counterinsurgency seems to be working.

Nowhere is this more evident than in areas where coca is being fumigated. Spraying has taken away tens of thousands of peasant families' illegal means of feeding themselves—but other than a lucky few thousand, most have received no help in making a living in these neglected rural zones where no legal crop can make a profit. Resentment and distrust of Colombia's government has grown among a population in areas where guerrillas and paramilitaries are strong and recruit frequently. The result is tantamount to counterinsurgency in reverse. "How ironic," a Colombian human-rights activist said to me recently, "that while the FARC is winning support for Uribe, the United States is winning support for the FARC."

A genuine "hearts and minds" approach would also call for encouraging Colombian security forces to respect human rights and punishing those members who violate them or work with the paramilitaries. The U.S. Congress did put human rights conditions on its 2002 aid to Colombia, freezing aid until the Colombian military took a tougher approach to violators within its ranks. The Bush administration sent the opposite message, however, by certifying—despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary presented by all major human rights groups—that the Colombian military was punishing violators, cooperating with human rights investigators and fighting the paramilitaries.

When critics point out the weakness of economic and social assistance, the policy's proponents frequently respond that it is impossible to think about economic aid in the absence of security. Certainly, security is a crucial need that even the policy's critics cannot ignore—the role of any state is to protect its citizens from harm.

In fact, there is reason to wonder whether aiding Colombia's military can truly protect Colombians from illegal armed groups. Actually protecting all Colombians—even the poorest and most vulnerable—would be a revolutionary change in the Colombian Army's mission. Historically, local military leaders have been able to abuse their power with impunity and act at the whim of the wealthy and powerful. While the military has proven poor at fending off armed groups, it has shown itself all too skilled at taking out non-violent reformers, from labor leaders to human rights defenders to land-reform advocates.

GARRY M. LEECH

*A U.S. Army Special Forces soldier in Saravena, Colombia.*

After the breakdown of the FARC peace talks, this author predicted that the second half of 2002 would be "the bloodiest we've seen."[17] I was wrong. For months after Uribe's inauguration, the movement toward all-out counterinsurgency was met with—nothing. After launching unprecedented mortar attacks in Bogotá during Uribe's August 7 inauguration, the FARC entered into a months-long "tactical retreat." Other than the occasional ambush or kidnapping—such as the failed abduction of Jorge Enríquez, the bishop of Zipaquirá—the guerrillas made few moves. Guerrilla secretariat leaders reportedly held a rare meeting to re-think their strategy.

Colombians began to think that the new president's policies were working. The air force reported that

bombing raids had destroyed dozens of guerrilla encampments. Heavily guarded "caravans" allowed holiday travelers to drive to the beach unmolested. Accompanied by hooded informants, the army retook Medellín's Comuna 13 slum from ELN militias in an unprecedented urban battle. (The paramilitaries with whom the ELN was disputing control of the neighborhood were left in place, however.)

Pilots contracted by the U.S. and protected by the army's new counterdrug brigade sprayed 60,500 hectares in and around Putumayo. The paramilitaries—increasingly divided and openly supportive of President Uribe—reduced the scale of their operations, largely complying with a policy of avoiding attention-grabbing massacres. The number of people killed and kidnapped in Colombia's conflict actually decreased in 2002.

Uribe government officials began sounding notes of triumphalism. Defense Minister Marta Lucía Ramírez said in January 2003 that Colombia's guerrillas were "on the verge of demise."[18] Uribe's combined justice and interior minister, Fernando Londoño, told Colombia's *El Tiempo* newspaper that spraying had killed every last coca bush in Putumayo. The next day he promised that Colombia would be able to wipe out the entire drug trade by the end of the year.[19]

But now this "light at the end of the tunnel" view is increasingly shaky. In January 2003, the FARC emerged from its "tactical retreat." Working frequently with the ELN, guerrillas have hit the military and paramilitaries—and civilian populations—hard in Arauca, Antioquia and Nariño. Relying increasingly on bombings in population centers—such as a February 2003 car-bombing that destroyed a crowded social club in one of Bogotá's most exclusive neighborhoods—the guerrillas' methods have reached new levels of brutality. "The tactics suggest the FARC has regained its war footing after a year of logistical planning," suggests *Washington Post* correspondent Scott Wilson.[20]

While it won the FARC no support, the offensive showed that the guerrillas have not been weakened by six months under Uribe. In fact, there are several reasons to believe that the conflict is about to get much worse.

On the battlefield, the resource-strapped Colombian military may see its effectiveness improve only marginally as a result of Uribe's security policy and the broadened U.S. aid mission. The United States—distracted by wars elsewhere—could come to find even a billion dollars per year having little impact on a war in a country more than twice the size of all of Central America. The war is likely to drag on, with guerrillas far from being forced into a unilateral cease-fire.

Then, U.S. officials may find themselves frustrated by the poor coverage that 100-plus helicopters and a few thousand men in vetted units can offer in such a large country. The lack of progress will create great pressures to go back to Congress to ask for further big aid increases.

**The war in Colombia is likely to drag on; frustrated U.S. officials will go back to Congress to ask for even bigger aid increases.**

If even some of this comes to pass, the failure of the counterinsurgency consensus will be evident to all. To continue the war on drugs and terror to that point (or beyond) will lead only to quagmire and tragedy. As signs of failure continue to mount, the need to discard counterinsurgency becomes ever more urgent.

A new policy, however, will still have to confront the need to provide security. Yet the United States does not have a proud history of offering security assistance in Latin America. If the United States were to help Colombia's military become a force that protects even the most vulnerable Colombians, while swiftly punishing human-rights abusers within its ranks, it would be a radical break with the past for both countries. There is absolutely no sign that such a break is currently underway.

A new policy must abandon costly projects like pipeline protection and fumigation expansion, decreasing military aid in favor of long-term efforts to strengthen Colombia's democracy. Washington must greatly broaden the circle of Colombian leaders involved in the design of its assistance. It must consult and fully involve local officials, civil-society representatives, and target populations in the planning and execution of aid programs. These traditionally excluded groups have no shortage of proposals. The United States should be identifying and supporting honest reformers, both within and outside government, who want to make state institutions viable and accountable.

These alternatives do not promise an immediate end to Colombia's conflict. But at least, unlike the version of counterinsurgency the Bush and Uribe governments are pursuing, they can bring that end closer, not farther. A new policy must recognize that Colombia's crisis has structural, historical, and complex causes. These deserve far more attention than coca bushes and oil reserves. ■

# NOTES

**Mexicans and Central Americans 'Can't Take Anymore'**

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**Washington's 'New War' in Colombia**

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**Worker President Raises Workers' Hopes in Brazil**

1. Most of Brazil's current system of labor relations dates back to the code put in place by President Getúlio Vargas in 1943. Under this system, the government grants a labor organization the power to represent all the workers in a given professional category (i.e., metalworkers) for a given geographical area. The official structure is financed by a compulsory dues payment exacted from all workers. Like Mussolini's system, on which it was modeled, the Brazilian system is one tightly controlled by the state. It distributes benefits to workers while quashing real labor independence. Starting in the 1980s, independent labor organizations like the CUT were created, and today many of these function both within and without the official structure. For more background see Stanley Gacek, "Brazil: Labor Fights Back,"*NACLA Report*, Vol.XXII, No. 6, March 1989, <http://www.nacla.org/art_display.php?art=1366> and Iram Jacome Rodrigues, "The CUT: New Unionism at a Crossroads," *NACLA Report*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 6, May/June 1995. For a comparison of the U.S. and Brazilian systems see Stanley Gacek, "Revisiting the Corporatist and Contractualist Models of Labor Law Regimes: A Review of the Brazilian and American Systems", *Cardozo Law Review*, August, 1994.

**New Chance, New Challenge for Brazil's Landless Movement**

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