THE UNITED STATES AND COLOMBIA: UNTYING THE GORDIAN KNOT

David Passage

March 2000

*****

An earlier version of this monograph was written for the U.S. Army War College conference on Colombia, December 10-12, 1998. Directors of the conference were Dr. Gabriel Marcella, Department of National Security and Strategy; and Dr. Donald Schulz, Strategic Studies Institute, of the War College. I am grateful to Dr. Marcella, Dr. Schulz (now of Cleveland State University), and to Ambassador Edwin Corr of the University of Oklahoma for their invaluable comments on the structure and content of this monograph.

*****

*****

Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Ave., Carlisle, PA 17013-5244. Copies of this report may be obtained from the Publications and Production Office by calling commercial (717) 245-4133, FAX (717) 245-3820, or via the Internet at rummelr@awc.carlisle.army.mil

*****

Most 1993, 1994, and all later Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) monographs are available on the SSI Homepage for electronic dissemination. SSI's Homepage address is: http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm

*****

The Strategic Studies Institute publishes a monthly e-mail newsletter to update the national security community on the research of our analysts, recent and forthcoming publications, and upcoming conferences sponsored by the Institute. Each newsletter also provides a strategic commentary by one of our research analysts. If you are interested in receiving this newsletter, please let us know by e-mail at outreach@awc.carlisle.army.mil or by calling (717) 245-3133.

*****

ISBN 1-58487-019-2

FOREWORD

Twenty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, the ghost of that war still haunts decisionmakers when it comes to making long-term commitments to situations that remotely resemble anything like our Indochina experience. That is the case with Colombia, which is embroiled in an internecine struggle with two guerrilla movements, bent on overthrowing the government, as well as with narco-traffickers and paramilitary forces.

In this, SSI's fourth *Letort Paper* since the series began nearly 3 years ago, Ambassador David Passage details the complicated but increasingly clear nexus between the political and social insurgencies and the drug traffickers. This, he maintains, has obliged a highly reluctant United States to reexamine whether its counternarcotics strategy can succeed if it is not accompanied by a willingness to assist the Colombian government improve its ability to defeat guerrillas and regain control of its national territory.

If the United States is to become even more involved in the internal struggles in Colombia, it is a good bet the U.S. Army will play an important role. I therefore commend to you Ambassador Passage's *The United States and Colombia: Untying the Gordian Knot*.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Interim Director
Strategic Studies Institute

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

AMBASSADOR DAVID PASSAGE is a 33-year veteran of the U.S. Foreign Service who retired from the State Department in September 1998. He has had extensive experience with both Latin America and guerrilla insurgencies in various parts of the world. Ambassador Passage was political officer at the American embassy in Quito, Ecuador, during the mid-1970s and Deputy Chief of Mission/Charge d'Affaires at the American Embassy in El Salvador at the height of that country's civil war, from 1984 to 1986. Coincidentally, he spent 6 years as a youth in Colombia and was in Bogotá during the violent uprising in May 1948 which sparked a decade-long civil war known as *La Violencia.* At the beginning of his Foreign Service career, Ambassador Passage was a pacification program analyst at the U.S. military assistance command in Vietnam. He also served as an American negotiator during the extensive U.S. diplomatic effort in the 1980s to secure the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Africa, an end to Angola's and Mozambique's civil wars which were fanned by internal insurgencies; independence for Namibia, which was also being fought for by an internal insurgency; and the policy of "constructive engagement" with South Africa (which was under the threat of possible guerrilla warfare from black nationalist movements). At the end of his career, Ambassador Passage was Director of Andean Affairs at the State Department, with responsibility for the overall conduct of U.S. relations with Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.


Caribbean Sea
Cartagena
Magdalena
Caracas
PANAMA
Panama
VENEZUELA
Medellín
Santander
North Pacific Ocean
Boyacá
Bogotá
Cali
Guaviare
Mitú
Caquetá
Vaupés
Putumayo
Quito
ECUADOR
Amazonas
BRAZIL
PERU
Colombia
International Boundary
Internal Administrative Boundary
National Capital
Internal Administrative Capital
0 50 100 150 Kilometers
0 50 100 150 Miles

THE UNITED STATES AND COLOMBIA: UNTYING THE GORDIAN KNOT

Introduction.

A long time ago in a mythical kingdom, far, far way, King Gordius of Phrygia tied an intricate and complex knot and decreed that anyone who could untie it would become Master of all Asia. Legend has it that Alexander the Great averted an ill omen, which could have resulted from his inability to untie the knot, by slashing through the latter with his sword.

Today, in Colombia, the United States is faced with just such a conundrum. Fearful of finding itself committed to a long-term struggle against Colombian guerrillas, U.S. counter-narcotics policy has been to help Colombia's government in its efforts to halt cultivation, production, and trafficking in illicit narcotics while steering clear of its internal insurgencies, driven as they are by socio-political, ideological, and economic causes.

Meanwhile, Colombian authorities have acknowledged the danger that drug trafficking poses to their society. But the mortal threat that Colombia faces is from two guerrilla armies that are intent on violent revolution. What is even more complicating is that the collusion between drug traffickers and the insurgents is growing. For the United States, the menace of drugs is real and urgent. But the memories of Vietnam also linger, giving pause to those who contemplate increasing commitments in faraway places in circumstances that even remotely resemble those extant in Southeast Asia in the last half of the 20th century.

America Decepta: A Western Hemisphere "Family of Democracies."

When El Salvador's and Guatemala's civil wars ended in negotiated settlements, U.S. policymakers breathed audible sighs of relief. Thus ended more than 40 years of internal conflicts which convulsed a number of Latin American states. Successive U.S. administrations portrayed much of this as part of the global struggle between democracy and communism—between the free world and the "evil empire," in Ronald Reagan's memorable phrase.

Because defeating the Farabund Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas in El Salvador had been a cardinal objective of U.S. foreign policy in the 1980s, and, because the end of the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala roughly coincided with the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), American policymakers were quick to take credit and pointed to the collapse of the USSR as the inevitable result of a failed economic and political system lacking widespread popular support.

But Unrest Persists.

We may have breathed our sighs of relief too soon, for we seem to have persuaded ourselves that just because governments come to power through the election process, they are therefore democratic. Elections alone do not democracies make, a truth which we ignore at our peril. Internal conflict is not yet over in this hemisphere because many of the underlying causes of the turmoil of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s remain with us.

Gross corruption still exists at virtually every level of government and society in most Latin American countries. The disparity between the rich (who, in Latin America, are *very* rich) and the poor (who, in Latin America, are *very poor)* is diminishing only slowly. And a widespread popular sense

persists in most Latin American countries that the political and economic elites who traditionally have held power are incapable of distracting themselves from petty political squabbling and personal aggrandizement to turn to the real needs of "the people." Indeed, the traditional ruling politicians do not even understand what those needs are.

Despair over this chasm between popular aspirations and on-the-ground reality has led to the rise of so-called "democratic dictators" in some Latin American countries (e.g., Peru's President Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, and Bolivia's Hugo Banzer), to populist rabble-rousers in others (such as former presidents Abdalá Bucaram of Ecuador and Ríos Montt of Guatemala), and to reignited populist insurgencies in a third group of nations.

In three key Latin American states—Mexico, Colombia, and Peru—guerrilla insurgencies challenge existing political processes and institutions and in Mexico and Colombia deny governments control over parts of their own national territory.

In Mexico, the small but annoyingly entrenched *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) and *Ejército Popular Revolucionario* (EPR) have an inviting and popular target in the corrupt and corpulent *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), even though the latter is now at last trying to democratize itself. In Peru, the faintly Maoist *Sendero Luminoso* ("Shining Path", or SL) and even more autarchic *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amarú* (MRTA) have conducted widespread and effective (but ultimately nihilistic) terrorist campaigns against Peru's government, society, and economic infrastructure. An autocratic but fiercely determined technocrat, President Alberto Fujimori has waged a relentless campaign against both SL and MRTA to good effect, but remnants of both organizations still exist and could revive to complicate Peru's political scene.

And in Colombia, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), which traces its pedigree to the

Castro-inspired M-19 movement of the 1960s, and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) have plagued Colombian governments that are seeking to end guerrilla sabotage of the country's economic infrastructure and the repeated humiliation of Colombia's armed forces and police.

The United States has an important stake in the outcome of these conflicts. While the primordial issue for the United States is no longer competition with a nuclear-tipped global arch-enemy with the capacity to "make the rubble bounce," stresses in our neighbors' internal political affairs have a direct effect on the United States including (a) a negative impact on trade and commerce, (b) increased movements of migrants seeking to remove themselves and their families from the crossfire, and (c) the northward flow of illegal narcotics to the rich and insistent American market.

The U.S. Stake in Colombia.

Economically, Colombia ranks about 25th on the list of our most important trading partners. That means that after Canada, Mexico, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, and a handful of other European and Asian countries, Colombia—with which the United States did almost $10 billion in legal two-way trade in 1998—is in the top half of the second tier of our most important trading partners. It is our fourth most important customer and supplier in Latin America (after Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela); we do half again as much business with Colombia as we do with Chile, which aspires to be the next member of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). More than 400 of the "Fortune 500" companies do business in Colombia either in their own name or through wholly-owned subsidiaries, franchises, or licensing and marketing arrangements. More than 25,000 American citizens live and work in Colombia and, while some of them are dual-nationals, all have a valid expectation that the United States will look after their

rights and, in an extreme situation, they would have a legal right to admission into the United States.

The migration issue has enormous potential for disrupting U.S. relations with Colombia. In numbers, Colombians may well comprise the second largest group of illegal aliens in the United States, after Mexicans. Moreover, the impact of civil unrest is not confined to Colombia but spills across its borders creating refugees in neighboring countries as well. The numbers of displaced persons have ebbed and flowed over the past decade, partly as a result of changing patterns of narcotics trafficking and other illegal activities, partly as a result of the perception of greater economic opportunity in the United States, and partly as a result of the growing level of violence inside Colombia. The greatest threat of large-scale illegal migration, however, comes from the latter. If domestic violence ever reaches the stage where significant numbers of Colombians (of all classes) give up hope for an end to civil conflict and simply try to get out of the crossfire, the United States could experience a wave of illegal immigrants similar to what we have seen from Mexico over the past several decades. We have already witnessed, over the past 3 years, increasing numbers of middle and upper class Colombians moving assets and family members to safety outside that country. The Colombian foreign ministry reports that more than 565,000 Colombians left during 1996-98 and have not returned, and more than 65,000 Colombians departed on one-way tickets during the first 6 months of 1999. In mid-1999, the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá reported that its visa application workload had doubled, to 50,000 per month. [1]

The third important negative result of turmoil in Latin America—the production of and trafficking in illegal narcotics—is sufficiently obvious not to require much elaboration. The wrenching dislocations and distortions in Latin America's "producer" economies by huge inflows of ill-gotten revenues have been amply documented. All one has to do is look at the gleaming and ostentatiously overbuilt cities like Cali and Medellín, see the glittering

high-rises, condos, and residential monuments to bad taste and excessive financial resources, and consider the amount of arable land that has been bought up by narcotraffickers and thus removed from agricultural development by legitimate farmers, to see what drugs do to source country economies.

A Sad Comparison to the Balkans.

Colombia is far more important to U.S. national interests, overwhelmingly so in economic terms, than anything going on in the Balkans. The United States does more business with Colombia each week than it does all year with all the countries (Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [Serbia, Montenegro, and Vojvodina]) that used to make up Yugoslavia, combined! The potential for large flows of refugees to the United States from Colombia is much greater than from the Balkans, if only because, whereas refugees from the Balkans have other European alternatives, the overwhelming majority of Colombians see only the United States as a possible safe-haven.

The United States may be dismayed and distracted by events in the Balkans, but its interests are truly menaced by what is happening in Colombia. Yet the United States has invested enormous amounts of diplomacy, prestige, and military force in the Balkans despite far greater potential there for long-term entrapment in a quagmire, and it remains timid and nervous about a much less risky, costly, or hazardous effort to try to help bring peace to strife-torn Colombia. We have managed to terrify ourselves by some ghosts from our own past in this hemisphere (c.f., the Agency for International Development's [AID] ill-begotten public safety program in the 1960s, most notoriously depicted by Costa-Gavras' film "State of Siege") as well as paralyze ourselves by our domestic political and ideological squabbling over what our national objectives ought to be in Colombia.

So What Should the U.S. Objective Be?

If the United States really believes what it says, we should want to see a cohesive and democratic Colombia led by a freely-elected government. That government should be able to exercise effective control over its national territory, safeguard the human rights and civil liberties of all its citizens, end human rights abuses by its police and its armed forces as well as by others such as paramilitaries and guerrillas, curb the production and trafficking of illicit narcotics, and be supported by all its citizens as it tackles the country's serious political, social and economic problems.

For Colombia's government to do that, its military and police forces have to be sufficiently professionally trained and equipped to be able to enforce laws and thwart armed challenges to government authority—be they from the FARC, ELN, paramilitaries, narcotraffickers, or other criminal elements.It is almost irrational to expect that a country fighting for national survival (and Colombia is, in fact, fighting for its life, even though it is not yet anywhere near mortal peril) should be able to quickly or easily achieve the truly prodigious transformation necessary to live up to accepted norms for human rights and civil liberties. It is also exceedingly difficult for police and military forces to transform themselves into professional and respectable guardians of democratic and constitutional law and order while under hostile fire from guerrilla and paramilitary forces which obey no human rights constraints and show no respect for civil liberties.

Having said that, the human rights records of both the police and military forces are clearly improving. This has been recorded by virtually all of the groups which monitor human rights performance in Colombia. It appears to be invisible only to the most determined nay-sayers and/or those who so strongly oppose Colombia's national government and that country's military and police forces that they are willing to distort the truth for the sake of

furthering their own political agendas. So here is the conundrum: Colombia's overarching national priority is to reestablish sovereignty, regain control over its national territory, end its domestic violence and resume economic growth for all its people—but the professed U.S. objective is simply to end illicit drug trafficking to American consumers.

U.S. Policy: A Gordian Dilemma.

We have tied our policy toward Colombia in a knot by determinedly confining our objectives—and therefore our supporting assistance—to counternarcotics programs, repeatedly reaffirming that we would not be drawn into that country's internal strife. But it should have been obvious to anyone not willfully obtuse that the Colombian government was slowly but steadily losing control over its national territory to *precisely* those criminal elements—the narcotraffickers and drug lords, the FARC and ELN guerrillas, and the paramilitary groups opposing the latter—who were the source of both the drug trafficking and Colombia's deteriorating internal stability.

In fairness to successive U.S. administrations which found themselves trapped in this thicket, objective analysis did not lead us here. Rather, U.S. policy was forced off the road and into the brambles by competing, highly carnivorous, pressure groups in the United States.

On the one hand, ideologically motivated and determined partisans in Congress have noisily and ferociously insisted that the only way to bring America's drug problem under control is to stamp out production in the source countries. These zealots have sought to compel the Clinton administration to implement programs and spend money on equipment and training for what has self-evidently been a futile effort to eliminate the production and trafficking of drugs.

On the other hand, equally determined human rights activists in the private voluntary organization (PVO) and

nongovernment organization (NGO) communities, Congress, and elsewhere, have insisted that the U.S. Government not train or otherwise assist Colombian military and police forces, whom they accuse, with some justification, of having committed widespread and serious abuses of human rights.

To a historian, the arguments and their proponents are remarkably similar to those arrayed against the U.S. effort to help El Salvador defeat its internal insurgency a decade ago. The words of José Miguel Vivanco, director of Human Rights Watch-Americas, who has observed these processes over the years, are perhaps revealing:

> [Colombia] is so polarized as a result of this nightmarish internal conflict, and the issue of human rights is so politicized, that there is a tendency to overlook atrocities committed by the forces one may sympathize with.[2]

So, dismayed by human rights abuses committed by Colombian police and military forces and under considerable pressure from human rights groups and elements in the Congress to forego assistance to Colombia's military forces, the U.S. Government severely restricted its training and assistance programs. But alarmed by the unconstrained flow of illicit narcotics to American consumers, it created exceptions to allow counternarcotics and limited counterterrorism training to Colombia's counternarcotics police (DANTI). This was subsequently expanded to include training and equipment for National Police units engaged in counternarcotics and counter-terrorist activities, which now have been further enlarged to include limited training for three new battalions hand-picked from Colombian army units supporting counternarcotics activities.

But the Clinton administration bent over backwards to avoid the possibility that U.S.-trained Colombian counternarcotics units might somehow end up fighting

Colombia's guerrilla insurgents. The State Department's spokesman described U.S. policy thusly:

> U.S. assistance is strictly for counternarcotics purposes. We provide anti-drug assistance to the Colombian National Police and to those elements of the military, and *only* those elements of the military, which are directly involved in counternarcotics operations.[3]

U.S. Embassy personnel in Colombia (both civilian and military) were under strict orders to monitor the use to which U.S. training and equipment were put in order to ensure that there was no diversion to Colombia's counterinsurgency effort. Helicopters and other equipment provided by the U.S. Government were to be used only for counternarcotics activities. Weapons, ammunition and other lethal equipment were only for the war against drugs. Training was almost exclusively tied to the effort to break up the narcotics trade, arrest and prosecute drug kingpins, and disrupt the production and transportation of drugs destined for the U.S. market.

At one point during 1997-98, the administration even went through an amusing, if surreal, *pas de deux* which attempted to define a region (the "box") in southeastern Colombia where narcotraffickers, but presumably not insurgents, were active. It was ultimately forced to abandon this fiction as it became increasingly clear that the FARC and ELN were moving into areas where narcotraffickers were active, and coca and opium poppy cultivation was expanding into territory controlled by the FARC and ELN.

Meantime, four realities gradually arose to dominate the debate over policy. First, the FARC and ELN were continuing to erode government control in rural areas and step up pressure in urban areas with occasional daring forays into the hearts of Colombia's cities. Second, the human rights situation was deteriorating as police and military lashed out against civilians suspected of aiding or sympathizing with the guerrillas. Third, well-armed, trained, and equipped paramilitary forces such as the

Campesino Self-Defense Force of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU) and United Self-Defense [groups] of Colombia (AUC) emerged, arrogating unto themselves responsibility for providing local community defense where government forces were unable to prevent guerrilla activity. And fourth, there was an evident and growing symbiosis between narcotraffickers and paramilitary units, the FARC and the ELN, as the latter three accepted payoffs from the drug lords in return for protecting airfields, crops, and processing facilities.

As it became increasingly clear that the two-decade American effort to stamp out drug production in the producer countries was having no impact on supplies reaching our market, the U.S. Government—under pressure from those in Congress who simply refused to believe that if the United States threw enough resources at the problem we could not stamp it out—expanded counternarcotics cooperation with the Colombian government. First, we enlarged the number of Colombian entities eligible to receive training and equipment from just the counternarcotics police to other units within the Colombian National Police. Then we added training for prosecuting narcotics cases. Finally, we find ourselves tiptoeing up to providing training and equipment to Colombian military units exclusively devoted to counternarcotics programs.

But the simple fact remains—back to the Gordian Knot—that there has been no diminution at all of the cultivation of illicit drugs in Colombia, and will not be so long as the Colombian government does not exercise control over its national territory. Despite significant increases in U.S. counternarcotics assistance over the past 6 years, acreage under coca and opium poppy cultivation has expanded every year, as has the volume of finished cocaine and heroin bound for the American market. The much ballyhooed reductions in Bolivian and Peruvian coca cultivation should—if we are honest—be seen not as a triumph for our counternarcotics effort but, rather, as an

unintended gain for Colombian narcotraffickers who now have much larger and more efficient plantations in southern and eastern Colombia, growing newer and more potent varieties of coca, able to cut several thousand miles off transportation routes and to eliminate the expense of bribing, evading, or otherwise neutralizing Ecuadorian, Peruvian, and Bolivian law enforcement officials.

Where to Begin?

A number of studies of the Colombian military's professional competence have recently been made by both Colombians and foreigners, virtually all of them identifying serious shortcomings. Despite the fact that the Colombian military has had more experience over a longer period of time in dealing with guerrilla insurgents than any other military force in this hemisphere, its track record over the past two decades has not been impressive.

By the mid-1990s, the army was suffering repeated and humiliating defeats at the hands of the FARC and the ELN. One of the most devastating was in 1996 at Las Delicias, in the southern part of the country, when a sizeable army unit was overrun by the FARC, resulting in the capture of nearly 100 government soldiers. Their release was eventually negotiated with assistance from humanitarian organizations, but the FARC used the occasion to hold a press conference and announce a political manifesto of demands and objectives. An increasing number of defeats for the army in 1998 included a unit overrun at Caguán/El Billar in Caquetá department in March, with 62 soldiers killed and 43 captured; an attack at Miraflores in Guaviare department in August, with 40 soldiers killed and 129 captured; an attack on Iribe, south of Bogotá in August, with 34 soldiers killed; and the overrunning of Mitú, the provincial capital of the Vaupés department, along the eastern border with Brazil on November 1, with 70 soldiers killed and 45 captured.

The loss at Caguán/El Billar prompted the Colombian army's high command to conduct an after-action review which discovered such appalling lapses as the fact that the officers in charge of the outpost had not even organized basic perimeter defenses! The report noted that the troops could not call in air support because their radio batteries were dead, and that a number of prostitutes frequented by the unit's members were FARC guerrillas on intelligence-gathering missions.[4] In contrast, the army had no intelligence on the massing of nearly 800 guerrillas in nearby areas for the attack.

Only since the latter part of 1998, after a number of changes in personnel at the top, has the army begun to have some success in running guerrilla groups to ground. Both the FARC and ELN, on the other hand, continue to launch audacious operations in the army's own backyard, some within sight of Bogotá itself.

Professional critiques of the Colombian army's performance begin with examples of incompetence and corruption at virtually every level of leadership, and go all the way down to ignorance and fear among ill-trained, inadequately-equipped, and poorly-led conscripts at the bottom.

A Role for the United States?

Many necessary changes can only be brought about as a result of a wholesale housecleaning of incompetents by the Colombian army itself, as it increasingly realizes the seriousness of its predicament. At the very top, former president Samper removed General Harold Bedoya as commander of the armed forces, replacing him with General Manuel José Bonett; President Pastrana continued the process by replacing General Bonett with General Fernando Tapias, who removed more than a dozen other officers and ordered other personnel changes such as the sacking of Major General Iván Ramirez, commander of the 20th intelligence brigade—an important watershed in

improving the army's intelligence collection, evaluation, and dissemination process.

But other changes are also needed, some of which Colombia's friends could help with. At the very least, a carefully designed and modest assistance program could vastly increase the speed at which the military professionalizes itself and cleans up its past record of human rights abuses. A partial list of the most important deficiencies and areas for improvement would have to include:

• Development of strategy. The Colombian army does not yet have a viable comprehensive strategy for dealing with the guerrillas and paramilitaries to restore government control over its national territory.

• Training and doctrine for small unit operations. The Colombian army is woefully unprepared for small unit combat operations. Just before he retired to run for president, then-armed forces chief General Bedoya said that, if elected, he would create three new army divisions to help deal with the guerrillas. One hopes the Colombian army's new leaders realize that divisions are not what one uses to chase small bands of guerrillas through the mountains of central Colombia.

• Training and doctrine for joint operations. The Colombian military is only just now beginning to develop a doctrine for joint operations, which should include the national police, and use army, air force, and navy assets to reinforce each others' skills and strengths and compensate for weaknesses.

• Training and equipment for night combat operations. Until very recently, night combat operations were virtually unheard of. At sundown the army repaired to its *cuarteles* and hoped the guerrillas would not attack *that* night.

• Drastic improvement in the collection, evaluation, and dissemination of usable operational intelligence. To describe the Colombian military's collection and evaluation of intelligence as "primitive" would be charitable. Dissemination of usable, actionable intelligence is virtually nonexistent due to rivalries and distrust between army units and their leaders.

• Development of quick reaction capabilities. When four American birdwatchers were kidnapped at a guerrilla roadblock in Boyaca in 1998 (along with numerous Colombian citizens), it took more than eight hours for an army unit to react—despite the fact that the roadblock was less than 10 kilometers from the nearest army base.

• Creation of an airborne strike force to react rapidly to developing tactical situations and opportunities. In 1985, the United States helped the Salvadoran military create a heliborne immediate reaction force named *Relámpago* (Lightning), designed to launch a reaction within 15 minutes of receiving actionable intelligence. One of its first operations captured Nidia Díaz, a senior FMLN *comandante,* when she and a small group stopped to rest after a raid. Colombia needs to create just such a force to react immediately to intelligence about high-value targets.

• Enhancement of the military's aerial medical evacuation capability. El Salvador president José Napoleón Duarte said that the creation of such capability gave him the equivalent of a new division because of the positive impact on his soldiers' morale and confidence. (In late 1999 it was reported that the Colombian army had three medevac helos.)

• Dramatic improvement in logistics supply and repair capabilities. All three military services need significant improvements in the way they maintain their logistics and repair facilities. These are not unknown skills in Colombia. Avianca, the national airline, oldest in the

Americas and second oldest in the world, has first-class maintenance and logistics services without which one could never run a major international airline.

• Dramatic improvement in spare parts inventorying and anticipation of need. For example, until very recently, the Colombian military had no spare helicopter rotor blades, and when the need for them arose, helicopters were sidelined or cannibalized until replacement blades could be ordered and shipped from the manufacturer—a process which usually took several weeks, and sometimes months.

• Significant improvement in transport capability and lift. Trucks and other vehicles on the ground, and rotary and fixed wing aircraft in the air.

The Vietnam Analogy and Lessons Learned in El Salvador.

Those who criticize proposals for U.S. military assistance to Colombia make three basic charges. First, the United States would risk starting down a slippery slope that could ultimately lead to our being trapped in a Vietnam-type civil war with similarly disastrous consequences. Second, the Colombian military's human rights performance is so bad that the United States should not have anything to do with it until it cleans up its act. And third, the magnitude of the problem in Colombia is so great as to make any viable U.S. training and equipment program unacceptably costly.

One of the saddest results of America's involvement in Vietnam is how resistant we are to learning from it, how traumatized we remain by it, and how paralyzed our national decisionmaking process is by the specter, however implausible, that the United States might get involved in another such experience.

The anonymous and obviously hostile Congressional staffer who described U.S. military and police training

programs in Colombia as "a perfect model of [U.S. activities] in Vietnam in 1964"[5] obviously knows nothing about either Vietnam or Colombia. There are a number of valid lessons to be learned from our national experience in Vietnam, but avoiding attempting to influence in a positive manner developments in foreign countries of importance to the United States should not be one of them.

Those of us who were involved in the U.S. effort to help El Salvador bring its civil war to a negotiated settlement without that country having to endure what Nicaragua went through under the Sandinistas applied lessons we learned in Vietnam. For the sake of brevity, let me condense these to three:

• The United States made clear that it was El Salvador's war, not ours, to be won or lost by Salvadorans, not Americans.

• The United States would help retrain El Salvador's armed forces which, at the time we became involved, had an appalling human rights record, but we would not participate in combat operations and would limit our involvement to 55 trainers (not, note, "advisers").

• The United States used all the means at its disposal to compel the Salvadoran government to make significant internal reforms: to end human rights abuses by the military, eliminate death squads, draw up a new constitution, hold free and fair elections, end the oligarchy's monopolies over the major cash crops (e.g., sugar, coffee, cotton, rice, and shrimp), implement land reform, get economic assistance to the *campesinos*, and start the process of building a true democracy—none of which the United States ever forced on the Saigon regime.

And the result in El Salvador was quite different from that in Vietnam. Even after all other factors are taken into account or discounted, the incontrovertible fact is that with a modestly designed and simple U.S. assistance program using the three key lessons learned from Vietnam, El

Salvador's armed forces improved their military performance to the point that the guerrillas ultimately concluded that they needed to negotiate a peace or risk being wiped out. The armed forces' leadership forced a halt to death squad activities, curbed abuses of civil and human rights, and was able to win the active support of the civil population. And the armed forces became the strongest defenders of the civilian government led by President Duarte, who 20 years earlier had been driven into exile by the same military which now supported him.

Ditching the Myths.

In our national discussion about what, if anything, we should do to help Colombia, we need, first and foremost, to ditch—*echar de la ventana*—the notion that U.S. training programs and military equipment sales will start us down the road to a Latin American version of Vietnam. That is nonsense and ignores the highly successful U.S. effort in El Salvador only a dozen years ago and reversal of a disgraceful human rights situation in the process—something the United States has every right to be proud of.

With respect to cost, the United States spent nearly $6 billion to help turn the tide in El Salvador—but that was an impoverished country that had already been through years of debilitating civil war. If the United States wanted to see the situation there reversed (and President Reagan made clear that he did), we were going to have to provide most of the resources ourselves.

But that is not the case in Colombia—a wealthy country, rich in resources and talent. Colombia's problem is not paucity of resources. It is the misapplication of them and a still considerable degree of corruption within the military (in the procurement process, payroll, contracts, etc.). Colombia wastes too much money on things it does not need, and does not spend enough to buy things it does. Its air force still wants F-16s to replace its aging Mirages and Kfirs; what it needs is ground attack and close air support aircraft.

Its navy dreams of destroyers, frigates, and submarines to maintain a "blue water" capability. What it needs is coastal patrol and riverine craft to regain control of its territorial waters and rivers from smugglers and narcotraffickers. And the Colombian army wants a lot of expensive high-tech equipment it does not need to chase small bands of guerrillas in the mountains; what it really needs is increased mobility and communications equipment, training in small unit operations and night combat, improved intelligence gathering, evaluation and dissemination, and improvement in leadership capability.

A viable U.S. assistance program to significantly help Colombia reorganize and reorder its internal security forces need not be very costly. Although President Pastrana and Defense Minister Luis Fernando Ramírez have visited Washington to discuss additional resources for *Plan Colombia* (the Colombian government's ambitious 5-year, $7 billion campaign to restore law and order and wipe out the illegal narcotics trafficking), the defense budget can already provide most of what that country needs. It has an essentially adequate force structure, although it needs to redesign it to deal with small but highly mobile guerrilla bands instead of invading armies from outside its borders. It also needs to take the threat it faces seriously enough to reexamine some of its practices, like exempting high school graduates from combat. It needs help drawing up tables of organization and equipment tailored to counterinsurgency warfare, not traditional maneuver warfare.

This year, U.S. assistance to Colombia may reach $289 million—the third largest military assistance program in the world—and in his State of the Union speech on January 27, 2000, President Clinton appealed to the Congress to support his 2-year $1.6 billion program to help strengthen Colombia's democracy as well as the counternarcotics effort. But we should not be under any illusions about its likely impact or effectiveness. Virtually all these funds will be spent on the continuing effort to stamp out the production and export of drugs. Of fiscal year 1999's $289 million, $249

million were earmarked for police counternarcotics work, and most of the remaining $40 million will go to train and equip hand-picked army units (two more battalions) to support the police war on drugs.

Finally, how large would a military training program have to be to be viable? How many U.S. personnel would be needed to have a significant impact on professionalizing Colombia's armed forces? If 55 trainers were required for the United States to turn around the situation in El Salvador—which one very senior American policymaker uncharitably described to me as a country barely the size of metropolitan Bogotá—how many U.S. military personnel would be needed in Colombia?

There is no reason why a viable military training and assistance program could not be accomplished with a relatively small number of uniformed personnel, perhaps even fewer than the famous "55." The United States had to help the Salvadoran armed forces develop skills in virtually every facet of their military operations—logistics, spare parts, uniforms, messing and rations, medical care, pay and payroll, motor vehicles, weapons and ammunition, housing—the works. Colombia's military, however poor its performance until now, is nonetheless a good deal more capable than the military force the United States went to assist in El Salvador in the early 1980s. And in El Salvador, we sent trainers out to battalion level headquarters, which would not necessarily be required in Colombia. There is no *a priori* reason why a military assistance program should have to be large to be effective, or why it should be costly or lead to a deeper American involvement in Colombia's internal conflict.

As for risk, bear in mind that the United States already has several hundred military personnel in Colombia including more than 100 at ground-based radar stations in exposed rural areas on Colombia's southeastern *llanos* (piedmont plains). American civilian contract personnel man the State Department's air wing, eradicating coca and

opium poppies. And AID has counternarcotics as well as development personnel across the country. The U.S. exposure to FARC and ELN retribution is already not exactly inconsequential.

Applying the Salvadoran Lesson to Colombia.

It is probably worth reiterating the criteria used for the U.S. training and assistance program in El Salvador, changing what needs to be changed in order to apply it to Colombia:

• This is Colombia's conflict. The United States isn't going to fight it for Colombia. Colombian government forces are going to have to fight it and win it—or they, not we, will lose it. This happens to be consistent with President Pastrana's view, an added advantage. [6]

• The United States can help Colombia's armed forces evaluate shortcomings and overcome them organizationally and through training—but only if they want our help and are willing to apply lessons learned (both from our and their own experience) to make the improvements necessary to turn the situation around on the battleground.

• Finally, Colombian military and police forces need to fundamentally change the way they deal with their civilian population. They need to end—definitively—the human rights abuses which have marred their interaction with the civilian populace, remove the violators from military and civilian ranks, and prosecute in civilian courts those who should be charged with civil crimes and abuses.

And the Peace Process?

There is, regrettably, little in the current situation to suggest that conditions exist for a viable negotiated peace between the Colombian government and the FARC and/or ELN under any circumstances other than those which would be regarded by most Colombians—and certainly by the powerful elites whose acquiescence would be required

for the Pastrana government to implement one—as an unacceptable surrender of sovereignty.

In fact, what should alarm those who seek a negotiated peace is the gap between FARC and ELN demands and the reality of the situation. The reality is that Colombia's guerrilla movements have never enjoyed significant popular support (unlike, for example, the FSLN in Nicaragua and FMLN in El Salvador, who at least had some minimal level of popular standing), and may be losing whatever appeal they may once have had. According to U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Curtis Kamman, in an *Open Forum* discussion at the State Department on November l, 1999, nationally respected and reputable polling institutions in Colombia have found popular support for the FARC and ELN to be no more than 3-5 percent of the voting age population. Although there have been impressive turnouts at massive rallies calling for an end to Colombia's violence, low levels of public support for the guerrillas do not suggest a very great willingness on the part of Colombia's people to see their government capitulate to guerrilla demands for the surrender of significant elements of government responsibility.

What then are the prospects for a negotiated settlement? If one reviews every similar situation over the past 50 years, viable negotiations become possible only when one side gains sufficient ground to convince its opponent (or opponents) that it is in its (or their) best interest to negotiate a settlement.

In Vietnam, the United States and Government of Vietnam yielded to reality. The United States struck the best deal it could in Paris but the jig was up and we knew it. Henry Kissinger was not under any illusion about the eventual outcome. He did the best he could under the circumstances with a very weak hand. In Malaysia,Sir Robert Thompson's forces fought well, gained a clear advantage and were on the verge of decimating the Chinese insurgents when the latter agreed to end the fighting. On

the other hand, in Kenya 5 years later, the British accepted the reality that the *Mau Mau* were not going to be subdued within any reasonable period of time or at any reasonable cost and began the process that led to that country's independence. In the Philippines, Ramón Magsaysay's Philippine Constabulary whipped the *Hukbalahap*; in Cuba, Fidel Castro's forces defeated Fulgencio Batista's armed forces; in Peru, President Fujimori has beaten back both *Sendero Luminoso* and the MRTA (at least for the time being); in El Salvador and Guatemala, government forces gained sufficient strength to persuade the FMLN and URNG to negotiate peace agreements rather than be wiped out.

The point is that there is a necessary precondition for viable peace negotiations: one side or the other needs to accept that it is losing and that its best opportunity to avoid annihilation is to strike the most favorable bargain it can—or for stasis to be reached between antagonists so both sides become willing to compromise for the sake of halting the fighting.

That is not the situation in Colombia. The government side is hurting, but it is nowhere near being defeated. Unlike El Salvador, which was genuinely on the ropes by 1982-83, Colombia is not in danger of imminent collapse or defeat. Neither the FARC nor ELN is capable of storming down out of the mountains to seize Bogotá; neither is capable of capturing any major town and holding it for very long. It is not necessary to throw resources at Colombia's problems in a panicked fashion. Neither the government nor the Colombian people are about to surrender major elements of sovereignty just for the sake of bringing an ephemeral peace.

On the other hand, there is no evident incentive for either the FARC or ELN to make concessions. They continue to slowly enlarge the territory under their control; their losses are sustainable at current rates; and they have the ability to reduce losses by reducing their activity, but

there is no real reason for them to do so by any margin that would significantly reduce the fighting. Indeed, official FARC statements into spring 2000 suggest no change in their intention to defeat the government and bring about a social, political, and economic revolution. Although the ELN may be hurting somewhat more than the FARC from Carlos Castaño's paramilitary forces and has hinted at a willingness to engage in peace talks, there is nothing to suggest that this is anything other than a tactic to try to counter the paramilitaries and reduce whatever assistance they may be getting from Colombian security forces.

This is not to say that the United States should not be willing to encourage the parties to speak to each other—or even to speak to them ourselves if there were some useful role we might play. As a generalized proposition in diplomacy, dissenting U.S. congressional voices to the contrary notwithstanding, no country should ever refuse to speak to those it disagrees with unless there is a truly compelling reason. So long as the Colombian government is aware of and concurs in U.S. approaches to the FARC and/or ELN, it would be foolish for the United States to pass up opportunities for at least informal communications with the insurgents, and President Pastrana has confirmed that he was both aware of and concurred in U.S. conversations with FARC representation.

And so, the war of attrition continues with the FARC and the ELN slowly eroding Colombian government control over its national territory, but not anywhere near becoming sufficiently strong to do more than increasingly embarrass government forces and their civilian leaders. They certainly are not likely to become strong enough to be able to dictate conditions for a negotiated peace for at least a number of years, and Colombia's armed forces are slowly starting to improve their ability to counter the guerrillas.

Coming to Terms.

Although Colombians will have to make most of the decisions and fight most of the battles which will determine the fate of their country, the United States, too, needs to decide what it would like to see happen and what it is prepared to do to influence the outcome.

If the United States is serious about wanting to see a reduction in the production and trafficking in illegal narcotics, it needs to accept the fact that no reduction is likely until Colombia's government regains control of its national territory and is able to deal with narcotraffickers on the basis of law. That is an absolute *sine qua non* for any positive impact on cultivation in Colombia of the agricultural stock (coca and opium poppies) for illegal narcotics, its transformation into usable raw material (e.g., coca and poppy gum), conversion into cocaine and heroin, and packaging and shipment to consumer countries.

If the United States is serious about wanting to see a reduction in human rights abuses, it should offer training programs to help professionalize both Colombia's police and military forces so that neither of them believe they have to abuse human rights and deny civil liberties in order to enforce laws and maintain public order. As was the case in El Salvador in the early 1980s, ties between government forces (either military or police) and paramilitary death squads, when such occurs, reflect inadequate military training and inept leadership. The way to persuade government forces to sever such links, in Colombia as in El Salvador, is to offer them an alternative—improved training and equipment—so that they do not believe they have to resort to extra-legal means to help them defend their country and its elected democratic government.

In fact, Colombia's military forces have already begun to make significant progress in cleaning up their act. In an August 16, 1999, letter to *The Washington Post,* Vice President Gustavo Bell Lemus noted that in the past 2

years, the number of human rights complaints filed against the armed forces dropped by more than 85 percent, from roughly 2,000 in 1996 to 310 in 1999, and that, whereas in 1993 approximately half of all human rights violations were attributed to the armed forces, by 1998 that number had fallen to only 4 percent. And although those are Colombian government figures, even the major international human rights organizations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch Americas Division, and the Washington Office on Latin America, acknowledge that progress is being made on curbing human rights abuses by the security forces.

For now, Congress still prohibits U.S. assistance and training programs to Colombian police and military units guilty of human rights violations in the past or with human rights violators still in their ranks. A better and more productive approach might be for the United States to insist on training precisely these units. Certainly the response to human rights abuses committed by American police forces (Los Angeles, Chicago, New York City, Washington, DC) has not been to cut off federal training programs and funds but, rather, to increase them.

Here, El Salvador can serve as a model: in the years before the U.S. military assistance program began to secure changes in that country's performance in the early 1980s, El Salvador's police and military forces routinely and repeatedly perpetrated unspeakable abuses against innocent civilians. By the mid-1980s, with a massive American military training program underway, the number of such violations went into a veritable free-fall. By 1986-87, Amnesty International and other human rights groups reported a virtual cessation of death squad activity and other abuses that had characterized earlier phases of El Salvador's civil war, and divided responsibility for the ones that remained more or less equally between the guerrillas and the public security forces. That contrasts dramatically with the example of Guatemala, where the United States engaged in no such training or assistance programs and

where the killings went on largely unabated throughout the length of the civil war, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives.

Which would we rather see in Colombia—the Salvadoran example of reform in security forces comportment and an improvement in their performance to the point that a negotiated peace became possible—or the Guatemalan example of fighting fire with fire which, to be sure, ultimately led to a Carthaginian peace?

Narcotics.

Finally, although this is not a monograph on our counternarcotics policies, there has been enough discussion about the effectiveness of U.S. national drug control strategy to warrant a couple of comments and observations.

First, one would be hard-pressed to think of another subject where we, as a nation, have engaged in more self-deception than about the effectiveness, or even efficacy, of our "war on drugs" and the likely impact of even tougher and more expensive, but likely equally futile, counternarcotics programs.

Despite the expenditure of in excess of $250 billion over the past 20 years in an effort to halt the production and shipment of illicit narcotics to the U.S. market, it is accurate to say that there has been no impact at all—absolutely none—on the street-corner price or availability of cocaine or heroin in the United States. As much of the stuff enters the United States as is necessary to maintain dependable supplies at stable and affordable prices. Every change in patterns of usage thus far (i.e., cocaine to heroin, crack to crystal methamphetamines, etc.) can be easily and convincingly shown to be the result of changing consumer preferences—not changes in availability or supply.

The test of the effectiveness of our effort to stamp out the production and transshipment of illegal narcotics to the United States is not how many hectares of the back side of

the Andes have been burned, how many acres of coca or opium poppies have been sprayed, how many labs have been smashed, 55-gallon barrels of precursor chemicals poured into the headwaters of the Orinoco and Amazon, drug kingpins arrested, cartels broken up, small drug-carrying aircraft forced or shot down, or "mules" arrested at U.S. ports of entry. The *only* valid test of the effectiveness of our effort is its impact on street-corner availability of drugs within a 5-block radius of the average American middle school. And by all accounts, drugs of choice have never been more freely available, purer in quality, or cheaper in price within that 5-block radius.

The result of our crack-down on coin-operated cigarette vending machines and convenience store sales to seventh graders is that it is now easier for the average seventh grader to get the equivalent number of marijuana joints (or worse) than it is for him or her to buy a pack of cigarettes. And the result of raising the price of cigarettes in an effort to keep kids off them has been to make some illegal drugs almost cost-competitive with tobacco. So long as there is an insistent market in a country like the United States for illegal narcotics and a sufficient profit to be made, they will probably be produced. And so long as they are illegal, their production and distribution will be through organized crime.

Bottom Line.

Let us conclude by returning to the theme of this monograph—untying the Gordian knot of counternarcotics versus counterinsurgency. If the United States is serious about *either* ending human rights abuses or curbing the production and trafficking of illegal narcotics, the first step has to be to help a democratically-elected Colombian government regain control over its own national territory.

If the United States is serious about wanting to see a reduction in human rights abuses in Colombia, it should offer training programs to both Colombia's civilian police

and its military forces to help them professionalize themselves to the point that they do not feel they have to abuse human rights and deny civil liberties in order to enforce Colombia's laws and maintain public order.

If the United States and human rights activists want to see an end to the paramilitary death squads, we need to accept that the only way these forces will be brought under control is by adequately trained and equipped Colombian military and police units. Who else do we expect to do this job? Do we really believe this can be accomplished more easily and quickly if the United States refuses to help train Colombian government forces to respect human rights and defend democracy against outlaw vigilante thugs?

It is a continuing tragedy that the United States remains so paralyzed by the ghost of Dan Mitrione (the USAID public safety official who was kidnapped and tortured by Uruguay's *Tupamaro* guerrillas in the early 1970s, portrayed in the film "State of Siege") that, as a matter of legislation (section 660a of the Foreign Assistance Act), it continues to refuse to train foreign police forces for anything but narrow exceptions such as counternarcotics operations. How odd that a country like the United States, which believes so strongly in civil law enforcement conducted and led by civilian officials, should be unwilling to train civilian police officials, answerable to civilian authority and enforcing civil laws, in countries trying to democratize themselves.

And if the United States is serious about wanting to see a halt to the production of illegal narcotics in Colombia, the place to begin is by helping Colombia's democratically elected government regain control of its national territory—whether from drug lords, bandit armies, paramilitary forces, or armed insurgents. It will not, repeat not, be possible to constrict the production or trafficking in narcotics so long as Colombia's government cannot enforce Colombia's laws over the whole of its national territory.

This hemisphere is our neighborhood. We have a vital interest in the fate and future of its inhabitants. Colombia is one of our neighbors. Its house is on fire; it has asked for and needs and deserves our help. The right U.S. reaction is not to wash our hands and walk away (on grounds that we do not want to get involved in a Spanish-speaking Vietnam or that Colombia's human rights record is not spotless)—but to roll up our sleeves and get to work to help.

ENDNOTES

1. William Branigin, "Colombians Fleeing Homeland," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 1999, p. A14.

2. José Miguel Vivanco, cited in Serge Kovaleski, "Rights Jobs in Colombia Full of Risks," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 1999, p. A1.

3. U.S. Department of State, Press Briefing, March 2, 1998.

4. Douglas Farah, "Colombian Army Fighting Legacy of Abuses, *The Washington Post*, February 18, 1999, p. A15.

5. Joshua Hammer and Michael Isikoff, "Colombia: The Narco-Guerrilla War," *Newsweek*, August 9, 1999, p. 42.

6. Enrique Comellas, "Pastrana Rejects U.S. Intervention to Fight Guerrillas," Interview with President Andrés Pastrana in *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*(Latin America), July 15, 1999. accessed via Internet.

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE

Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr.
Commandant

*****

STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE

Interim Director
Professor Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr.

Director of Research
Dr. Earl H. Tilford, Jr.

Author
Ambassador David Passage

Director of Publications and Production
Ms. Marianne P. Cowling

Publications Assistant
Ms. Rita A. Rummel

*****

Composition
Mrs. Christine A. Williams

Cover Artist
Mr. James E. Kistler