

# Optimism, Pessimism, and Terrorism: The United States and Colombia in 2003

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ADAM ISACSON  
Senior Associate  
Center for International Policy

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IN AUGUST 2003 COLOMBIA AGAIN became the center of lavish attention from Washington, DC government officials. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Richard Myers, Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman, and Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy John Walters each paid separate visits to the South American nation. Interestingly, every Washington official arrived in Colombia empty-handed, with the exception of Rumsfeld who announced a long-expected renewal of suspended aerial narcotic surveillance. They offered nothing but words of encouragement and support for their Colombian counterparts and the current policy. During his stay in Bogotá, Grossman gushed, "We have exceeded expectations, and that's because Colombians are ready to fight for their democracy, their human rights and to have a state that functions, an economy that seriously functions."<sup>1</sup>

Why the sudden show of interest in a country that, in spite of being the third-largest recipient of U.S. military and police aid, had dropped sharply on Washington's list of post-11 September 2001 priorities? Was a significant policy change afoot, perhaps a move to bring Colombia to the fore of the Bush Administration's war on terror? ("Colombia is a staunch U.S. ally in the war on terrorism," Gen. Myers reminded reporters.<sup>2</sup>) Or was the parade of occurring officials at a time when the new U.S. ambassador to Colombia, William Wood, had just been sworn in simply an offer of attention to a non-Middle Eastern hotspot during a traditionally slow month in Washington?

The VIP visitors offered few clues. A year after Congress authorized Colombia's military to use U.S. anti-drug aid against guerrillas and paramilitaries, the Bush administration was still deciding how to use this expanded authority and how deeply to

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ADAM ISACSON is a senior associate at the Washington based Center for International Policy. He has coordinated the Center's Colombia activities since 1997.

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get involved in the protracted, bloody conflict. “What we are doing—as a partner, and anxious to be as cooperative as possible—is working, military-to-military, to see what are the kinds of things we can do as the Colombian war on terror migrates into a somewhat later stage, as is now happening,” said Rumsfeld. “And as progress is made the circumstances change, and the needs change, and the opportunities for us to be of assistance may evolve as well.”<sup>3</sup>

For U.S. policy toward Colombia, August 2003 was also a month of recent anniversaries. President Bill Clinton paid a brief visit to the country in August 2000, shortly

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after Congress had approved his administration’s contribution to Plan Colombia, which sharply increased Washington’s military contribution to Colombia’s war on drugs. By 2 August 2002, the pretense that U.S. guns and training were restricted to the drug war was obliterated as President Bush signed a war on terror funding bill that allowed all past and present aid to support a “unified campaign” against both drugs and

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Colombian groups on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. These groups included the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the right-wing, anti-guerrilla paramilitary United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Just a few days later in 2002, Colombia inaugurated a new president, Álvaro Uribe, who promised to make the guerrilla’s defeat his main priority in contrast to his predecessor’s attempts to negotiate peace with the guerrillas.

Since Plan Colombia became law in 2000, the United States has appropriated US\$2.44 billion for Colombia, with US\$1.97 billion—US\$1.35 million a day for four years—supporting Colombia’s police and military. An estimated US\$688 million more (US\$553 million of it for the security forces) will go to Colombia in 2004, and “supplemental” funding requests could increase that amount still further.<sup>4</sup> U.S. funds pay for a 2,300-man army brigade equipped with dozens of helicopters, naval and air force support, radar sites, base construction, and a police-run aerial drug-crop fumigation program that has sprayed herbicides over nearly 400,000 hectares of Colombian territory, an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. The United States trains more military and police personnel from Colombia than from anywhere else in the world. In 2002 alone, over 6,400 Colombians were trained.<sup>5</sup>

In the past year, the United States has used its broadened counter-terror authority to provide Colombia with forms of military assistance unrelated to counter-narcot-

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ics. The most well known is a US\$99 million effort to help Colombia's security forces take on guerrillas in the embattled province of Arauca near the country's northeastern border with Venezuela. Arauca is the origin of the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline, a 500-mile tube that is the target of near-weekly dynamite attacks by guerrillas. The oil in the pipeline is 44 percent owned by Occidental Petroleum, a U.S. company based in Los Angeles. Other non-drug related efforts the United States has undertaken include the creation of a Colombian Special Forces commando battalion to capture or kill guerrilla and paramilitary leaders; the establishment of mobile *carabiniero* units as part of a move to increase police presence throughout the country; an increase in aid to anti-kidnapping units; and an effort to improve the provision and flexibility of intelligence.

U.S. and Colombian officials, as well as certain analysts and editorial-writers, have put an overwhelmingly positive spin on the effects of increased U.S. aid. Supporters cite statistics showing a drop in cultivation of coca (the plant used to make cocaine), declines in some indicators of violence, and signs of macroeconomic growth. "The critics were wrong," crowed the *Washington Post*. "Though Plan Colombia still hasn't achieved many of its goals, there can be little question that the US\$2.7 billion invested by the United States so far has gotten results."<sup>6</sup>

Praise for President Uribe after one year in power has been effusive, to say the least. U.S. officials roundly reject concerns that the new president's draconian security policies are militarizing much of public life and diminishing political space for peaceful dissent. "President Uribe has infused his government with energy, organization, and a sense of purpose," Gen. James Hill of the U.S. Southern Command told a Senate caucus in June. "He is getting results now, and will continue to direct all his resources toward making Colombia a safe, prosperous, democratic nation."<sup>7</sup> During the same hearing, Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Alabama) called Uribe "Colombia's Abraham Lincoln." The new president has maintained high approval ratings within Colombia as well. This popularity is largely because of his hardworking, results-oriented style and the perception that he is above the corruption that has long marked the country's political class.

Critics of Plan Colombia, such as the House Democrats whose efforts to cut U.S. military assistance to Colombia were defeated twice this year in Congress, interpret a far different version of events. They argue that many indicators do not point to success, warning that Washington's increasingly warlike approach combined with Uribe's hard line are making Colombia's crisis even more intractable. "Plan Colombia has made a bad situation in Colombia even worse and has not provided any measurable benefit to the American people," Rep. Janice Schakowsky (D-Illinois) told the House in July 2003.

**DRUG ERADICATION: BEYOND THE NUMBERS**

By nearly every measure of success or failure, there is a wide gulf between the governments' version of events and that of Plan Colombia's critics. Concerning drug eradication, for instance, officials trumpet estimates that cultivation of coca fell as aerial fumigation expanded between 2000 and 2001. The U.S. State Department's statistics indicate a drop from 169,800 hectares to 144,400 hectares during that period; the United Nations estimates a steeper decline, from 145,000 hectares to 102,000 hectares.<sup>8</sup> However, taking into account the simultaneous increases in coca cultivation in neighboring Peru and Bolivia, this achievement appears far less impressive. In fact, the State Department's figures reveal that the overall South American coca crop decreased only slightly from 223,700 to 205,400 hectares in 2000. Moreover, coca cultivation remained at a level higher than any other year since 1995. Some regional drug policy experts speculate that coca-growers are adapting to massive fumigation by cultivating the crop not in densely packed geographic zones as before, but in smaller plots scattered throughout Colombia's extensive backcountry.

Skeptics also point out that the prices of coca base and cocaine on U.S. streets—which one would expect to rise if supply fell—have remained constant, leaving cocaine as easy as ever to obtain. Drug Czar John Walters explained this initial contradiction by insisting that FARC guerrillas have been feeding the market with stockpiled cocaine to maintain the supply. Further, he predicted that “significant disruptions in the purity and availability of cocaine throughout the world” would occur by early 2004.<sup>9</sup>

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**WINNING THE WAR?**

Supporters of Plan Colombia and Uribe's security strategy proclaim success, citing indicators of violence that are decreasing for the first time in years according to statistics from Colombia's Defense Ministry. Comparing the first six months of 2002 and 2003, these figures find a 61 percent decline in guerrilla attacks on population centers, a 35 percent reduction in massacres (killings of three or more people at a time), a 34 percent reduction in kidnapping, a 21 percent decrease in murders, and an increase in rank-and-file guerrilla desertions.<sup>10</sup> The Uribe government claims that these reductions are a direct result of its security strategies. Examples of these efforts include increasing the military and police forces present in urban areas, paying civilians for information, easing arrests and searches with a state of emergency, and providing military-escorts to allow safe road travel.

Encouraged by its own numbers, the Uribe administration is sounding increasingly triumphant. Minister of Defense Marta Lucía Ramírez predicted in June 2003

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that the guerrillas and paramilitaries—whose combined membership exceeds 35,000—will be so weak by late 2004 that they will have no choice but to surrender.<sup>11</sup> Armed Forces Chief Gen. Jorge Mora speculated in July that the guerrillas' defeat is so near that a peace process may not be necessary: "There are some arguments that the only way to resolve the Colombian conflict is through negotiations. It's not the only way."<sup>12</sup>

Colombia's human rights groups, however, maintain a different set of statistics. They argue that while murders may be decreasing, this stems from a reported drop in common crime. In fact, the number of politically motivated or war-related killings and disappearances has remained roughly the same. For example, the Colombian Commission of Jurists counted 6,978 of these killings between July 2002 and June 2003, an insignificant decrease from the 7,426 during the prior year.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, many of these groups also maintain that Colombia's crisis of forced internal displacement continues to worsen. The Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), which tracks this phenomenon of internal refugees, found that in 2002 violence displaced 412,000 Colombians, the largest number since the widely cited non-governmental organization began keeping records.<sup>14</sup>

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In addition, critics contend that the decline in massacres is not the result of democratic security efforts as the Colombian government reports, but rather the effort by paramilitaries—long the largest perpetrator of mass killings—to avoid bad publicity by killing fewer people at a time. "The decrease appears to have reflected a change in paramilitary tactics rather than a decrease in overall violence," noted Human Rights Watch's annual report for 2002. "Witnesses, church officials, and municipal observers, among others, described to Human Rights Watch how paramilitaries seized large groups of people, then killed individuals separately, to avoid the publicity that results when incidents are recorded as massacres."<sup>15</sup>

A number of analysts are questioning whether the decrease in guerrilla attacks is due to the new government's aggressive security policies or to the insurgents' deliberate decision to undergo a tactical retreat. Indeed, indications are that the FARC and ELN have been avoiding large-scale fights and allowing the Uribe government to deploy small military and police contingents to towns in their longtime strongholds. Significantly, these local security forces have failed to capture or kill any of the groups' leaders, and not a single kidnapping victim has been recovered. "According to this hypothesis,"

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an article in the Colombian newsweekly *Cambio* speculates, “the terrorist group has resolved to hide its leadership while what they consider to be the ‘Uribe thunderstorm’ runs its course.”<sup>16</sup> If the guerrillas were truly weakened, Colombian security expert Alfredo Rangel told Reuters in August, “then they’d be showing signs of accepting the government’s conditions for negotiations [a unilateral cease-fire], and there’s no indication of that.”<sup>17</sup>

## HUMAN RIGHTS

Government officials in Bogotá and Washington have proclaimed dramatic improvements in Colombia’s human rights record as a result of increased U.S. engagement through Plan Colombia. “President Alvaro Uribe and his administration have stated repeatedly their commitment to improving the human rights situation in Colombia, both publicly and in discussions with USG [U.S. government] officials,” read a July 2003 State Department document certifying Colombia’s compliance with the human rights conditions placed on military aid.<sup>18</sup> “Allegations of human rights violations by the military have dropped to less than two percent of all allegations, and today the Colombian military is one of the most respected organizations in the nation,” Gen. Hill told the House Armed Services Committee in March.<sup>19</sup>

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Another version of events asserts that Colombia’s human rights panorama is getting bleaker. The UN High Commission for Human Rights indicated in its February 2003 report that human rights abuses committed directly by military personnel, as opposed to paramilitary abuses tolerated or ignored by the security forces, were increasing for the first time in several years. It further alleged that some of the growing violations “were committed pursuant to the new Government’s security policy.”<sup>20</sup> Despite an increase in the number of paramilitaries captured or killed in some regions, reports from the UN, the U.S. State Department, and major human rights groups portray a continuing pattern of military-paramilitary ties in many parts of the country. In particular, observers note a disturbing pattern accompanying military offensives to retake guerilla-held territory: the military enters with overwhelming force, empties the zone, and leaves paramilitary fighters in control. Examples of this phenomenon include “Operation Merry Christmas” in Barrancabermeja in December 2000; “Operation Tsunami” in the coastal zone of Nariño in February-March 2001; “Operation Araguá” in southern Arauca department in June 2001; Operations “Orión” and “Mariscal,” in marginal neighborhoods of Medellín in late 2002; and a mid-2003 offensive in western Cundinamarca department.<sup>21</sup>

Suspensions of human rights violations taint the Uribe government’s security policies and official appointments. A number of measures instituted blur the distinction

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between citizens and combatants while increasing the state's ability to monitor the activities of non-violent dissenters. A proposed "anti-terror" reform now before the Colombian Congress would turn back a key gain of the country's 1991 Constitution by granting the military "judicial police powers" (i.e., the ability to detain and interrogate civilians.)

Critics claim that Uribe has strengthened the state security apparatus at the cost of weakening the institutions designed to curb its excesses. The Attorney General's office, which investigates and prosecutes allegations of military wrongdoing, has grown remarkably less aggressive under its current leader, Luis Camilo Osorio. "The office's ability to investigate and prosecute human rights abuses has deteriorated significantly," noted Human Rights Watch in a scathing late-2002 report.<sup>22</sup> The Human Rights Ombudsman's office, which documents abuse through a network of municipal *personeros*, has seen its budget cut so sharply that at times employees cannot even place phone calls outside of Bogotá.

Political space for Uribe's non-violent opponents shrinks further whenever an official publicly accuses non-governmental organizations—particularly human rights groups—of being the guerrillas' fellow-travelers. While several of his closest associates had inspired outrage with such comments during the president's first year in office, Uribe added his voice to a chorus of hard-liners accusing non-governmental activists of guerrilla links. In a September 8 speech before the military, Uribe called some human rights groups – he didn't specify which – "spokesmen for terrorism" and "politickers of terrorism."<sup>23</sup> He challenged them to "take off their masks ... and drop this cowardice of hiding their ideas behind human rights."<sup>24</sup> In an environment like Colombia's where union leaders, independent journalists and human rights defenders are often the targets of violence, words like these can be deadly, especially when uttered by the president and his closest associates.

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#### NEGOTIATING WITH THE PARAMILITARIES

Although the possibility of renewed peace talks with guerrilla groups is far-off, Uribe and his lead negotiator, Luis Carlos Restrepo, have advanced negotiations with most of the right-wing paramilitary groups. The largest paramilitary group, the AUC, has committed to a process of gradual demobilization tentatively scheduled to finish in late 2005. Not surprisingly, the AUC includes several leaders who openly supported Uribe's candidacy in the 2002 elections.

While negotiations with paramilitaries look like a giant leap toward peace, the reason it could fail is also the main reason why most paramilitary leaders support it: the agreement will most likely include a mechanism to grant the leaders amnesty in both

Colombia and the United States for their crimes. The U.S. Justice Department has asked for several leaders' extradition for narcotics-trafficking offenses. In order to move the process forward, the Uribe government has introduced a conditional freedom bill in Congress; it is a piece of legislation that would, in Restrepo's words, "allow the state to apply alternative punishments to prison for those responsible for internationally recognized crimes."<sup>25</sup> Human rights groups and even some of Uribe's supporters in the Colombian Congress have attacked the forgive-and-forget approach contained in the bill. In an August 2003 statement, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights argued that it "opens the door to impunity, because it essentially voids prison sentences by allowing responsible parties to avoid spending a single day in jail."<sup>26</sup> Yet the paramilitaries have made clear that they will never agree to any deal that forces them to go to jail.<sup>27</sup> This impasse looms for the foreseeable future.

#### NEXT STEPS FOR U.S. POLICY

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In mid-2000, when the U.S. Congress debated its contribution to Plan Colombia, many of the measure's opponents warned that a steadily increasing military aid commitment could evolve into something much larger: a long-term involvement in an intractable foreign conflict. Some cited the model of Vietnam (a large U.S. force stuck in a guerrilla war of attrition); others cited El Salvador (a minimal U.S. troop commitment, but years of financing and de facto stewardship of a war with high civilian casualties). Clinton administration officials swore that neither example was relevant and that U.S. aid programs sought only to reduce the northward flow of drugs.

Three years later, the mission of U.S. aid has expanded well beyond that of the war on drugs. Counter-terrorism is now the principal rationale, though policymakers are still trying to figure out what that term means in a country whose terrorist groups are armies that control territory and have tens of thousands of members. Currently, U.S. Green Berets are in Arauca training thousands of troops. Three U.S. citizens working on a Pentagon contract have been hostages of FARC guerrillas since February 2003. The U.S. military presence on Colombian soil, as determined from White House reports, has more than tripled between late 2001 and mid-2003.<sup>28</sup> Private contractor personnel from sixteen U.S. companies are in Colombia, many carrying out risky missions.<sup>29</sup> U.S. defense officials are making counter-terrorism the overarching mission for military-to-military relations throughout Latin America, guided by a doctrine called "effective sovereignty" that sees the hemisphere's less populated, ungoverned areas as potential terrorist breeding grounds.<sup>30</sup> And the Colombian government announced in July 2003 that it will soon present "Plan Colombia Phase II," a proposed package of counter-insurgent assistance.

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What is next for the United States in Colombia? In fact, the future is difficult to predict because interpretations of the present diverge so widely. What will happen depends heavily on which side in the current debate is most widely accepted.

The U.S. officials who visited Colombia in August 2003 certainly heard the rosiest possible interpretation of the present: declining drug crops, guerrillas near defeat, and a strong, popular president. Not surprisingly, their information came from Colombian and U.S. officials and agencies whose budgets and bureaucratic position require them to be able to demonstrate success.


Despite that very strong caveat, there is always a chance that the optimistic version of the past three years is accurate. If violence levels decline, coca moves elsewhere, and the guerrillas weaken, a reduction in the U.S. military commitment in Colombia could result. Indeed, some U.S. officials are already speculating about “colombianization”, the process of decreasing the annual US\$600 million of military assistance and of handing over more responsibility to Colombian agencies and personnel. “There is a general belief that we have already achieved the goals of Plan Colombia, which was conceived of as a plan with a deadline of September 2005,” outgoing U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson told a Bogotá gathering in June 2003.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its assertion of successes, this idea alarms the Uribe government. “An exit strategy now is a disaster strategy,” Vice-President Francisco Santos told *The Washington Post*. “The only sure thing is that without U.S. help we will not win.”<sup>32</sup> The nonpartisan General Accounting Office of the U.S. Congress also sees “colombianization” as a long-term goal at best: “Neither the Colombian Army nor the Colombian National Police can sustain ongoing counter-narcotics programs without continued U.S. funding and contractor support for the foreseeable future.”<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, U.S. engagement could diminish rapidly if drugs and violence decrease to the “manageable” levels of the early 1990’s. Even if the underlying cause for these ills remained, U.S. policy toward Colombia would return to what some consider the default setting for much of Latin America: benign neglect combined with occasional prodding to open markets to U.S. goods.

A much more alarming future could be in store, however, if the more pessimistic, unofficial view of the last three years turns out to be correct. Under that scenario, the drug trade would maintain the demand-meeting tenacity it has shown for the last thirty years, and the guerrillas would withstand the Uribe crackdown and emerge from their temporary retreat. A human-rights disaster would ensue as security forces, civilian auxiliaries, and paramilitaries ran rampant without legal oversight.

The implications for U.S. policy would be extremely serious in the latter scenario. Washington would find it difficult to pull out or to “colombianize”, since abandoning a neighbor beset by narco-terrorists is unthinkable in the current political climate. Either action by the United States would be an enormous blow to its credibility

regionwide. At the same time, U.S. policy makers would recognize that the military impact of aid worth US\$600 million per year is only marginal. For example, Colombia's annual defense budget is US\$3.8 billion, more than six times the U.S. contribution, yet nearly all observers agree that it is too low to fight the sort of war the country faces. The forces pulling the United States to do more militarily would be strong. Whether the result is a new Vietnam, a large-scale El Salvador, or something new, it could be quite painful.

It is likely that Colombia's future lies somewhere between the two extremes of optimism and pessimism. And even if Washington's and Bogotá's claims of progress turn out to be hollow, military escalation is not their only available response. For instance, much more can be done with drug treatment, which many studies find to be the most effective method of reducing demand for drugs at home. A decrease in demand for narcotics would diminish the major source of funding for Colombia's illegal armed groups. Also, economic aid could be part of an overall strategy to revitalize the country's devastated rural sector. Local governments, which provide most services, desperately need improved capacity. The basic human needs of hundreds of thousands of internal refugees require immediate attention. Lastly, the judicial system must be able to enforce the rules of its own society. Pulling out is not the answer, but the military aspects of the U.S. commitment must be de-emphasized. Addressing the root causes of Colombia's problems will not yield immediate results, but it is the surest way to end the country's troubling conditions. 

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