

Colombia: It's Present State and Suggested Solutions

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Rampant violence in Colombia continues to escalate as a result of the country's large economic gap; the failure of the governments involved to recognize and implement the necessary policies to remedy this has only enhanced this problem. American influence is largely responsible for directing Colombia down this path; the U.S. top-down crime control policy operated domestically is currently executed in Colombia, too. Here, it is also unsuccessful. The drug industry has grown out of necessity among the impoverished residing in the rural areas. A shift of focus from strict narcotic eradication and security to broad social reform is necessary to remedy this crisis.

La Violencia, occurring from 1946 to 1964, has had lasting effects on Colombian economy; violence has yet to cease. The civil war was the result of "...differing partisan perspectives" and "... the Cold War exacerbated the Liberal-Conservative division from the top to the bottom of society" (Safford, Palacios 345). Peasants were forced to abandon their lands; violence among guerrillas and paramilitaries resulted. The warfare continues today.

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army, or FARC, formed in 1964 as a guerrilla movement in efforts to protect the humanitarian rights that were continuously violated during La Violencia. Today, leadership contends that they represent opposition to an overwhelming domination of the wealthy minority over the impoverished majority; for example, the landowners gain much through the privatization of business and introduction multinational corporations and rural farmers are left struggling to survive. FARC cites official government statistics; 27 million people, 64 percent of the population, live below the poverty line, and 20 percent are unemployed; 33 percent under employed (Thus is Colombia). However, the methodology utilized by FARC is extremely violent in nature. Beginning in the 1980s, FARC become involved with the illegal activity of narco trafficking. To fund their efforts and maintain their power the guerrilla groups FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) continue to engage in narco trafficking, raids of the wealthy, kidnapping and demand for large ransoms. Kidnapping oftentimes results in the death of innocent civilians. Narco trafficking, a lucrative business, is competitive and oftentimes there is fighting between the two main guerrilla groups and regularly against paramilitary forces.

The paramilitary, including the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), was introduced by wealthy landowners as a means of protecting their property and families. Paramilitary has since become involved with the drug trade as a means of financing their desire for arms, power, and other resources. Both guerrillas and paramilitaries operate under the same mentality; they desire to secure and protect their freedoms. Both also use violence as a mean of achieving this. It is obvious that through the actions of both groups that “. . .the state and the licit economy are being greatly undermined” (Vellinga 78). “The drug industry has acted as a catalyst that accelerated a process of ‘delegitimation of the regime’ that has contributed to the country’s stagnation” (Vellinga 78).

The American criminal justice system operates on the philosophy that the establishment of punishment as a deterrent is the most effective means of lessening crime. This is a top-down methodology; the government works to imprison the “big fish” and continues to work its way down the chain of command. Peter Benekos, author of *Crime Control: Politics and Policy*, contends that “Behavior is based on free will. . . This emphasizes a voluntaristic understanding of criminal behavior” (Benekos 11). The criminals operate in accordance with the “hedonistic calculus” he states; that is to say, if the pleasure a criminal experiences when committing a crime outweighs the pain, or punishment, than he will continue. It is for this reason that proponents of crime control seek to employ deterrence and punishment as a primary means of ending crime. The solution here is to increase the visibility and powers of law enforcement officers.

Plan Colombia was implemented in 1999 with this philosophy at its foundation (Council on Foreign Relations 1). This approach focuses on the supply-side of curbing the drug industry. Aerial sprays of illicit crops, extradition of top tier cartel members and the consistent effort to halt drug trafficking activities are all common, important aspects according to this perspective. Yet Colombia, today, remains responsible for supplying 80 to 90 percent of cocaine in American society (CFR 22).

The “. . .supply-side approach is undermined by absence of effective state sovereignty and law enforcement by local governments” and the existence of corruption within Colombian government (CFR 19-20). For example, aerial spraying effectively kills illegal crops; however, the Colombian government lacks the resources to prohibit replanting the

coca and poppy crops. “. . .the government does not have a strong presence or control over the regions in question. . . it has contributed to planting displacement around the country” (Vellinga 81). Plans to eliminate ‘baby cartels’ are oftentimes undeveloped and under planned causing many movements against these cartels to fail. Angered traffickers often retaliate, and those killed or captured are easily replaced. In fact, a need to protect the organization from imprisonment, and especially potential extradition to the U.S., creates incentive to cultivate support networks within Colombian government and among law enforcement officers. For example, “Extradition is the main source of conflict between the government and traffickers, who have all the available resources to fight it. This was the main cause of ‘narco-terrorism’ in the late 1980s, which included the assassination of many prominent politicians. . .” (Vellinga 79). Narcoterrorists utilize campaign financing as a method of infiltrating government. Even though the guerillas are not guaranteed a positive result from their contributions, their contributions are minimal in the scope of their entire illicit income; this is, therefore, a small gamble. If this method fails, operations can be run from jail cells; police forces are paid off handsomely in comparison to their licit income (Vellinga 78-9). In 1998 “. . .the Pastrana administration granted the FARC guerillas control over a large part of the country where coca plantings are widespread. . . [they] have profited from selling to trafficking organizations” (Vellinga 74). Obviously, this has only increased FARC power.

The government cannot even retain the support of the wealthy constituency. The country’s elite have acquired a great amount of wealth and “. . .have long preferred to conduct business outside of formal institutions bound by the rule of law” (CFR 26). Furthermore, lands not controlled by guerrillas have come under paramilitary control. In the other “coca-growing areas. . . paramilitary groups [are the] substitute for the state, imposing a very authoritarian regime, defining and applying their own laws and regulations, and providing education, police and civil justice to solve conflicts among the population” (Vellinga 73). In recent months, it has been leaked that corrupt government officials exist on behalf of the paramilitaries, too. Violence between the rivals and innocent civilians adds to the hurdles the government must overcome.

Focus must be shifted from the supply-side to an elimination of the demand for drugs in conjunction with social reform. During the Nixon administration two-thirds of the American aid was spent on countering the demand-side of

narcotrafficking; a mere one-third was spent on programs of eradication (CFR 23). The 1980s and 1990s brought about the reverse policy; supply-side intervention reached its climax at the end of the 20th century with the implementation of Plan Colombia. In August of 2003 Donald Rumsfeld spoke upon his return from Colombia,

My impression is that, in a very real sense, it's a demand problem. It's a problem that there are a lot of people who want it; a lot of people with money who will pay for it; a lot of people who will steal from others to pay for it. And that you can squeeze it down in one country to zero and you don't change at all the amount of the product that ends up in Europe or the United States because it's demand that determines how much is going to get in there. . . . And the higher the price and the greater the willingness of people to take risks, the greater the willingness of people to buy the kinds of things they need to hide what they're doing, and to protect them as they transport these materials. And it's a vicious cycle (CFR 34).

There is, however, little to show for the forty-five percent of funds that the Bush administration claims to spend countering demand. It becomes apparent that most American interactions are in strict adherence to American interests. Rather than working to lessen the demand for drugs at its root within American society, Washington is most interested in merely keeping drugs out of the country, and out of the reach of American citizens in the quickest way possible. For this reason much of American resources are used to combat drugs in the top-down manner previously described. This method provides instant gratification, and they are short-term results. It becomes clear that not all that all steps that could and should be taken are being not, in fact, taken in order to prevent the continuation and escalation of the drug trade.

American interests are also served through free trade in Latin America; great financial gain is made accessible and extremely possible; of course, it is contended that Colombia has much to gain as well. The Washington Consensus is an operation that works to expand the role of the free market and confine the role that the state plays within the economy. The pretense used to promote free trade between the U.S. and Colombia is the idea that both countries can, and will, benefit; accepted is the fact that America, the larger country with more to offer as export, has more to gain. The reductions of tariffs spur foreign investment and intraregional commerce; diversification of rural crops is thus made more possible

and, in theory, people move away from the production and sales of narcotics. In conjunction with other measures the opportunity for a flourishing economy exists, however, the current setup only further enhances and increases the gap between the rich and the poor; prosperity in Colombia is far from automatic.

The so-called Washington consensus did not directly hurt the poor, but nor did its reform prescriptions translate into economic gain for the poor or middle class. Indeed, the vast majority of the region's poor—ranging from 60 to 80 percent of the population—still does not have sufficient market access. . . this means exclusion both from the global economy and from legitimate economic opportunities. Instead, the primary beneficiaries of the reforms were the rich (CFR 12).

Access to the U.S. market is also used as incentive to “. . .make concrete commitments to the rule of law, equitable development, and lasting security” but, a failure has occurred in that Washington has failed to take the necessary steps to curtail any immediate negative effects possible through the implementation of social protection programs (CFR 27-8).

Washington's involvement is not providing the aid that is required to remedy the humanitarian crisis. The wide, and exponentially increasing, income gap within Colombia causes those who are impoverished to turn to alternative sources of income. Many have come to depend on the monies earned through participation in the drug industry. In an economy that caters more to the rich, for most, the profits the narcotrafficking industry offers are far more accessible. “Workers who had lost their jobs because of commercial liberalization or because of declining prices of [agricultural goods]. . . found employment on the drug frontier. . . [This] helped to stop the fall of rural wages. By the same token, the profitability of nondrug crops declined” (Safford, Palacios 316). The national income from coffee, the chief national export, during the years of 1980 to 1995 was 31.2% of Colombia's GDP; comparatively the sale of illegal drugs was equal to 41.4% of the nations GDP (Safford, Palacios 315). “. . .any criminal organization exporting 50 or more tons of cocaine annually would have profits that compete with those of the largest financial conglomerates of the country” (Vellinga 77). Furthermore, “. . .as U.S. policymakers focused their energies and funds into counternarcotics programs,

they did not simultaneously work to build multilateral support for the sustained investment and engagement needed to strengthen the region's legitimate economies" (CFR 16).

The situation in Colombia continues to decline, much less improve, irregardless of US efforts and monies spent. "...U.S. policy embodied in Plan Colombia does not enumerate and prioritize the actions, incentives, and resources necessary to move Colombia toward peace. Nor does it plan for a post-conflict, post-drug environment..." (CFR 29). The Council on Foreign Relations cites the "fixed" policy out of Washington focused almost solely on countering the drug trade as the problem; the time to adjust policy is now – before the "humanitarian crisis" deepens beyond recovery. "...sustainable, peaceful democracies... depend as much on... implementation of wide-ranging development initiatives targeted to the poor majorities and disenfranchised rural populations—as on "hard" counternarcotics and counterterror initiatives... [There is] too little emphasis on complementary, comprehensive, regional strategies" (CFR 2).

It is crucial that the U.S., in conjunction with the Colombian government, invests in socioeconomic and political reform to remedy these grave miscalculations and narrow focus on security and eradication. Poverty is enhanced, and becomes increasingly inescapable, due to the failure to remedy "...high rates of infant mortality, generalized illiteracy, overcrowding in precarious housing, as well as the lack of public services, credit institutions and agricultural instruction..." (Safford, Palacios 306). The Council states, "new economic reform strategy must include economic development initiatives for the poor majority; stimulus measures to generate growth; and actions to address the structural problem of income inequality, which has a negative effect on growth and poverty reduction" (CFR 13). This begins with the enactment of land reform laws, land tax collection and the fostering of local businesses and governments through cooperative efforts internationally and involving public and private sectors within Colombia.

Land reform must be implemented to repair the rural crisis and lack of infrastructure. Even in cities, large portions of the population do not own their own home; 43% of people residing in Bogotá do not own their own home (Safford, Palacios 304). Plans to solve this overwhelming problem have, in a large part, been ignored. For example, land

tax which would take a toll on large landowners, suggested in 1950 by the World Bank, has never been implemented (Safford, Palacios 310-1).

...the imposition and enforcement of property taxes; the acceleration of land titling and registry; and the enactment of strategic, market assisted land reform in an accountable and transparent fashion... the Colombian government—with U.S. assistance—[should] halt the ongoing coercive land grab by left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, and narcotraffickers. It is also crucial that Colombia's asset forfeiture laws are effectively applied to ill-gotten land gains now in the hands of Colombia's illegal armed actors and drug traffickers" (CFR 14).

However, "Redistributive policies, administered by the Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria (INCORA), were neutralized by other government policies favoring large landowners..." (Safford, Palacios 309-10). Countries that implement a land tax often find that lands become evenly distributed among the population. Also, an increase in government power results from exponential increase in national income that results through raising taxes (CFR 43). The council cites that the enforcement of stricter tax collection policies in combination with "...the institution of a process for clearing title of land abandoned by owners, whereby those who work the land receive title after an established period..." (CFR 43-4). U.S. aid should be spent sending IRS agents to properly train Colombians in this industry (CFR 44).

Inequalities in land distribution are further remedied through the credible land titling and demarcation, boundary, systems; all policies must be strictly enforced. The Council on Foreign Relations maintains that redistribution becomes possible under asset forfeiture laws. U.S. aid should be redirected; money should be spent ensuring strict, rapid implementation of policies of this nature (CFR 45-6). The U.S., to guarantee the success of land reform, must aid the weak Colombian government in the administration of these reform policies. Specifically, "...the U.S. government [should] provide its own senior-level task force to assist in the technical and legal issues involved..." (CFR 47). Also, businesses operating on "ill-gotten lands" should be boycotted (CFR 46).

In Colombia's rural areas the infrastructure for irrigation, education and healthcare are also lacking (Safford, Palacios 310). For example, as of 1993 Colombian illiteracy soared at 11% (Safford, Palacios 304). "Short-term investments in these areas would also create jobs and strengthen the capacity of local governments and community organizations" (CFR 48). Cooperation and collaboration between the public and private sectors, especially at the local level, ensure successful reforms (CFR 48). The U.S. can support the private sector's investment in the community; "By harnessing and leveraging the resources of the private sector, this approach would result in significant change at the local level without requiring large international investment" (CFR 49). Washington's investment in small and medium-sized business, in combination with technological aid and advancement, presents potential to improve marketing for these companies on both small and global scales. "Efforts in these areas have proven effective in reducing poverty and raising living standards" (CFR 49). Undoubtedly, job creation increases as domestic business thrives and grows. Furthermore, "Ensuring the success of future reform programs will require a concerted effort by Washington to work with regional leaders to substantially overhaul and recreate domestic institutions, and to build alliances with multilateral institutions and other bilateral donors committed to sustainable strategies for long-term development in the region" (CFR 16-7) Foreign trade that encourages and fosters job growth in rural areas "... particularly in the manufacturing sector, which provides year-round, rather than seasonal, employment and can be a first step to long-term growth strategy..." (CFR 26). Without this "... U.S. tax dollars spent on spraying illicit crops, protecting oil pipelines, and prosecuting a counterinsurgency war will be wasted" (CFR 16).

A shift of focus from drug eradication and security to social, economic, and political reform is the key to leading Colombia down the path towards peace. Necessary is the cooperation among the public and private sectors to foster growth and job creation. Policies that are enacted must be strictly adhered to and implemented; U.S. aid, funds and trainers should be involved. Targeting crime cannot be forgotten, however, institutions that create a peaceful future must be developed in conjunction or other efforts become a waste.

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