

CHAPTER 3

The Colombian War and the Narco-Terrorist Threat

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide justification for regarding the narco-war in Colombia as a threat to the homeland security of the U.S. In order to support this premise, U.S. interest in Colombia will be defined in terms of geopolitical and socioeconomic impact. The warring factions will be outlined to ascertain that, in fact, defeating the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas*) is key to winning the war in Colombia.

Another aspect to be discussed is the threat that the intrinsic relationship between the drug trade and international terrorism poses to the U.S. homeland. This chapter intends to provide evidence that international terrorism may already be involved in Colombia's war and, therefore, our robust counter-drug defenses should expand to include this additional threat. Ultimately, the analysis centers on the need to win the war in Colombia to secure America's southern border.

Background

The Strategic Importance of Colombia to the United States

Colombia has been engaged in a vicious civil war for over 40 years. With each passing year, Colombia slips further into anarchy and today may be on the verge of becoming the world's first narco-terrorist state.

Geopolitical Interests

A narco-terrorist state, not halfway around the world, but only a 3-hour flight away from Miami, Florida, should cause alarm bells for several vital reasons. For example, Colombia is the only South American country, which borders both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans straddling the north-south sea lines of communication between the United States and Latin America. Trade in excess of \$100 billion annually traverses these sea routes.¹ Also, all land routes from the rest of South America converge in Colombia before entering Central America and then North America. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA – Mexico, Canada, and the U.S.) envisions one day including the entire Western Hemisphere, thus becoming the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Hence, the war in Colombia must be won to avoid a strategic trade choke point in the Americas.² Additionally, Colombia borders on Panama where the Canal Zone remains strategically important and it also borders on Venezuela, the number one supplier of crude oil to the U.S.³ Furthermore, in 1997, the U.S. National Security Strategy explained:

The principal security concerns in the hemisphere are transnational in nature, such as drug trafficking, organized crime and money laundering, illegal immigration, and instability generated from corruption and political or social conflict.⁴

In Colombia, every one of the U.S.'s "principal security concerns" exists in epidemic proportions. Therefore, U.S. security interests in the Western Hemisphere are under assault precisely because of the narco-war in Colombia.

Socioeconomic Interests

Colombia's crime ridden society is a "clear and present danger" to the very social fabric of its hemispheric neighbors.⁵ For instance, in the United States:

70 percent of the cocaine... originates from Colombia... with a street value of \$30 billion. In addition, 75 percent of the heroin seized by U.S. authorities on the East Coast is Colombian. ...Drug consumption caused 100,000 deaths in the [decade of the

1990s.] There are 13.9 million drug users and 3.6 million addicts in the United States. The total societal cost is estimated at \$300 billion annually from lost productivity, crime, policing, incarceration, rehabilitation, insurance and hospital care.⁶

“Colombia produces 80 percent of the world’s cocaine...” and the U.S. is its number one market, but not the only one.⁷ The drug trade routes north are causing drug markets to develop in Central America (*the Transit Zone*) as the drug runners use a portion of their contraband to exchange with local hoods for logistics support en route to the U.S. These nations do not have the resources to fight the drug plague. They are developing democracies that could unhinge, becoming narco-states following the Colombian model.⁸ Even Mexico, a large and more affluent nation, “...fears the ‘Colombianization’ of its own political process...”⁹ The statistics are staggering and surely make Colombia’s drug traffickers a threat to homeland security in the United States and throughout the region.

Defining the Enemy

The Cartels

“The cartels of the 1980s were set up...like vertically integrated corporations... Police needed to recruit only a single strategically placed informant to disrupt the entire cartel.” Moreover, the cartels flaunted their power and were incredibly brutal, bombing and murdering scores of government officials and innocent by-standers. “Colombia’s trigger-happy first generation of coke lords tended to be short-term scary but long-term dumb.” By the 1990s, the Cali, and the even more notorious, Medellin Cartels had been rolled up. Nevertheless, like the mythical hydra monster, decapitating these two powerful cartels only led to the creation of many small technologically and socially sophisticated, and less integrated cartels. In other words, the new drug lords of Colombia blend well into high society and are not excessive in their use of violence. They gather together to pool resources for a big drug smuggling deal and quickly withdraw into the fold of society.¹⁰

The Leftist Guerillas

The end of the Cold War should have also meant the end for the communist guerillas of Colombia, as aid from the USSR evaporated. In fact, the Colombian leftists were never dependent on outside sources to fund their campaigns. Instead, the communist groups first survived by making raids on isolated farms to secure supplies and ambushed small military outposts to obtain hardware. Later, they moved into resource rich areas of Colombia, where they established extortion and protection rackets.

Meanwhile, by the 1980s, the small agricultural farmers (*campesinos*) were growing marijuana and coca plants for the drug lords who would protect them using their private security forces. Marijuana and coca was a more profitable cash crop. The communist guerillas, fearing they would lose their “social base,” became astute learners of the capitalist ways of the drug trade.

By the 1990s, the guerillas were collecting “taxes” on the drug trade while providing security for the fields, through the transportation network, and even providing escort beyond the Colombian borders.¹¹ In 2000, the U.S. Drug Czar, General Barry McCaffrey (ret.), and Ambassador to Colombia, Anne Patterson, accused the FARC of “...shipping cocaine to U.S. markets...” and went so far as to accuse them of operating “...like the big cartels.”¹²

The various criminal enterprises, including kidnapping-for-ransom and murder-for-hire, have given the guerillas fabulous wealth and increased their numbers. The best known and the largest group are the FARC with 15,000 – 20,000 combatants. Another group is the ELN (*Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional*) with 3,000 – 6,000 combatants. Additionally, a smaller group of a few hundred guerillas, also operating against Colombia, is the Maoist EPL (*Ejercito Popular de Liberacion*). Additionally, at least, four other groups operated in Colombia but over the long years merged with the larger groups, faded, or made peace.¹³

The Paramilitaries

The failure of the Colombian Government forces to adequately defend the country against the leftist insurgency gave rise to numerous private armed organizations. These organizations operated in areas where the government forces were scarce. In Colombia, both the wealthy and the

narco-traffickers employ the services of private security. Initially, these units were raised with the full support and encouragement of the government, but charges of human rights violations by paramilitaries, involvement in criminal enterprises, and U.S. pressure forced the Colombian Government to reverse its policy. Regardless, accusations continue to be made against the Colombian military that they are still coordinating actions with the paramilitaries.¹⁴

The paramilitaries had been fragmented but "...in recent years the groups have clustered under an umbrella organization, the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*)" and number approximately 8,000 combatants.¹⁵ Their intense brutality against the leftist guerillas and suspected sympathizers forced the U.S. State Department to list the AUC as a terrorist organization. Perhaps in response but certainly to obtain a political voice, on 4 September 2001, the AUC "...announced it was forming a political organization called the National Democratic Movement..."¹⁶

The AUC's operations are funded by private contributions from wealthy landowners. Additionally, the AUC, like other armed organizations in Colombia, finances its operations through the drug trade. For instance, the successful 1998 U.S. DEA and Colombian police roundup of the powerful Bernal Syndicate, one of the modern high-tech cartels, discovered two senior members who were also members of the paramilitaries.¹⁷

The Government

The Colombian Government is under siege from all sides of the political spectrum, including powerful criminal conglomerates engaged in drug smuggling, kidnapping, arms smuggling, illegal alien smuggling, money laundering, counterfeiting, etc. Analysts have made strong arguments that the Colombian economy is already a narco-economy. They point to Colombia's economic success in the 1980s despite the war. Colombia was able "...to continue to service its foreign debt, while other Latin American countries had to reschedule theirs, [because of] ...the vast sums of drug money – estimated at between \$5 billion and \$7 billion annually – that entered the country."¹⁸

Arguably, the drug connection has permeated all corners of Colombia. For example, "the Colombian Government suffered a severe

loss of legitimacy... after revelations of drug network financing of the successful presidential campaign of Liberal Party candidate Ernesto Samper in 1994.”¹⁹ On September 20, 1996, President Samper was once again embarrassed when “...drug-sniffing dogs found 8 pounds of heroin on the official [Colombian Air Force] plane that Samper was to fly to New York” to speak at the United Nations on the evils of drugs.²⁰ Two days later, Colombian “...officials announced the arrest of 11 Colombian Air Force personnel, including several officers...”²¹

One must wonder how broad the corruption is when it can undermine the democratic process and the military charged with defending it. It is not surprising then when CNN reports “...that the FARC sometimes has access to intelligence about raids by the military before they occur.”²² The question then becomes, has the Colombian war already been lost?

The Global Drug Network

Sanctuary

Perhaps in desperation, deep in the Southern Colombian coca region an area the size of Switzerland (*La Zona de Despeje* – 16,000 square miles) was ceded to the FARC in 1999 to open a peace dialogue. Colombian President Andres Pastrana, with the support of the Clinton Administration, crafted a “land for peace” proposal. Although the FARC already controlled this vast area, the Colombian military would now be forbidden from conducting operations into the region. Initially, the proposal was to be a 90-day cease-fire but it has become part of the status quo of the Colombian war, so long as the FARC continues to “talk peace.”²³

There is every indication the FARC will “talk peace” ad infinitum, while waging war and protecting their criminal enterprises. Coincidentally, the ELN and AUC have publicly demanded similar deals. According to General McCaffrey, the *Despeje* was a mistake because “...there was little incentive for the FARC to lay down its arms...” and instead helped to secure nearly \$1 billion a year in profits from the drug trade.²⁴

Connection to an International Axis of Terror

Terror International has taken notice of the safe-haven in the jungles of Colombia and it may already be an important link in the terror network. The *Despeje* is already a sanctuary for the production of cocaine. The FARC then uses the cocaine shipments to exchange them for weapons and dollars.

The Crime Syndicate Connection

The FARC has plugged into crime networks from Mexico to Russia and perhaps elsewhere. Authorities have confirmed the weapons connection extends to Mexico where an alleged FARC envoy was captured attempting to make a “...cocaine-for-guns deal with Mexico’s Arellano Felix Drug Cartel.”²⁵ Even more intriguing is the FARC’s connection to the Russian Mafia; where NBC reported on April 9, 2001, “Russian crime syndicates and military officers are supplying sophisticated weapons to Colombian rebels in return for huge shipments of cocaine...”²⁶ The report goes on to explain that the arms are transported in IL-76 cargo planes from Russia or Ukraine, with stops in third world locations such as Amman, Jordan, where authorities are bribed including promises of a part of the cocaine shipment on the return trip. The IL-76 flies directly into the *Despeje* where the FARC off-loads weapons and on-loads cocaine.²⁷

The Rogue State and International Terrorist Connection

Arguably, the *Despeje* and cocaine have made the FARC a major player on the international terror scene. Perhaps most ominous is a possible Iran connection. According to ABC News, in 2000, Iran attempted to establish a meat packing plant in San Vicente del Caguan – the headquarters of the FARC in the *Despeje*. Although initially, Colombian authorities had agreed to the project, they withdrew the authorization when the U.S. became aware and advised the Colombian Government that proceeding would place a \$1.35 billion emergency aid package in jeopardy. Also, ABC went on to report “...*Hezbollah* is already well established in South America,” including facilities in Isla Margarita off the coast of Venezuela, along the Colombian and Paraguayan borders in Brazil, and in Argentina.²⁸

In addition to suspect connections to rogue states such as Iran, and possibly terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, the FARC was linked to the IRA (*Irish Republican Army*) when Colombian authorities captured three IRA “explosives experts” shortly after they departed the *Despeje*.²⁹ Consequently, U.S. authorities have vowed to keep close scrutiny of the *Despeje* because the FARC has become a major player in an “axis of terror” that includes international crime syndicates, international terrorists, and rogue nations.³⁰

The Narco Trade Routes

In Southern Colombia, the cartels, the guerillas, and the paramilitaries are busy harvesting the white gold (cocaine), which finances their nefarious activities. The vast majority of the cocaine is headed north to America’s streets. The cocaine is moved internally to clandestine points of departure. Every means of conveyance is employed to move drugs into the U.S., e.g., personal luggage, cars, trucks, even in the stomachs of people known as “mules.” Large quantities of cocaine used to move by illegal aircraft and it is still employed but the favored method is by sea where the cocaine dealer can move tons to market. The Caribbean had been the preferred sea route in the 1980s but the geography (the major Islands are natural bottlenecks) allowed successful interdiction by the U.S. and friendly countries. The smugglers have shifted to the unhindered vastness of the Eastern Pacific.³¹

The goal of the smugglers is not to reach the U.S. coast but to make it to Mexico. The Colombian drug smugglers have formed “a symbiotic relationship” with Mexican crime syndicates. In some cases, they will vary the routes and instead arrive in one of the Central American countries, where the cargo will then be moved by road after leaving a small quantity for the local market. Once in Mexico, the cargo is consolidated in smaller packages and moved by trucks to several distribution points along the nearly 2,000-mile U.S. border with Mexico. The cocaine then crosses at points in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.³²

Business has been booming; the Colombia-Mexico connection has expanded moving heroin, methamphetamine and, of course, they have always shipped marijuana.³³ Additionally, illegal migrant smuggling also occurs along these same pipelines earning the smuggler as much as

“\$70,000 per person.”³⁴ One can surmise, the FARC “...may have become the richest Marxist guerilla faction in history...”³⁵

The Decisive Phase of the Drug War

Plan Colombia

Previously, “...U.S. policy carefully delineated the boundary between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency...Mindful of the absence of support at home for counterinsurgency...”³⁶ Nonetheless, there is only one war in Colombia, and it is those who run drugs against those who do not. One can debate whether the leftist ideological slogans are Cold War relics; regardless, “...Colombia is no longer a battle over ideology, but a battle over... narco-dollars...”³⁷

The U.S. Congress has finally faced reality, eliminating the artificiality that hindered the war on drugs, such as, a few years ago when the U.S. provided helicopters to Colombia, which could not be used for counterinsurgency.³⁸ The U.S., European Union, Canada, Japan, and International Institutions have bought into President Pastrana’s Plan Colombia. The plan defines ten elements:

- Economic recovery through free trade agreements to encourage foreign and domestic investment to create jobs.
- Fiscal and financial reform.
- A peace strategy to achieve a negotiated settlement with the guerillas.
- Strengthening the armed forces and police to uphold the rule of law and restore security throughout the country.
- Judicial reform to ensure impartial justice.
- A counter-narcotics strategy in partnership with other countries.
- Agricultural development to provide an alternative to coca plantation.
- Popular mobilization in an anticorruption effort.

- Social programs for health, education, and alleviation of poverty.
- Mobilization of the international community to participate in the plan.³⁹

One can see Plan Colombia is a set of guiding principles and not meant to be a war winning strategy. Its worst critics may even call it a 'pipe dream.' Nevertheless, the U.S. Congress authorized \$1.35 billion in emergency aid to Colombia in July 2000, with additional funding to follow, and the U.S. military is moving ahead with training support for the Colombian military. Indeed, already U.S. Special Forces are in-country training Colombian troops at bases deep in guerilla territory.⁴⁰

Warning Signs

Colombia's leftist guerillas call Plan Colombia "a declaration of war" by the U.S.⁴¹ Commandante Raul Reyes, the third ranking leader of the FARC, attributes the plan as "...a way of interfering in the domestic affairs of Colombia."⁴² The FARC has announced, "...foreign military personnel in the combat zones will be military targets."⁴³ This threat was aimed at the U.S. Special Forces already in Colombia.

The Seattle Times reported in September 1999 that Colombian authorities had raided a warehouse where members of the FARC were building a Russian diesel submarine to use in their transnational criminal endeavors. The *London Times* carried a story in which Colombian police seized 1.5 pounds of enriched uranium, which a self-proclaimed scientist hoped to turn into a bomb.⁴⁴ There are even allegations of the guerillas having used "a toxic gas" in an assault on a police station, which killed four.⁴⁵ One can see that the leftist guerillas are very wealthy, technologically competent, and have a very dangerous reputation.

Colombian leftist guerillas never stopped fighting the Cold War and may still believe their slogans—in which case, they remain ideological enemies of the U.S. and its way of life. The FARC and ELN must conclude that events since September 11, 2001, changed U.S. public opinion regarding U.S. support for a counterinsurgency in Colombia. In particular, they are aware that although not mentioned by name, President Bush was including them when he defined America's enemy in the war on

terror as “...every terrorist group with global reach...”⁴⁶ Therefore, the U.S. must not let its guard down as it did prior to “9/11.” The U.S. must look south and not just east. The FARC or ELN could decide to strike at the center of gravity of the Colombian Armed Forces – The United States of America.

Consequences

The U.S. Defense Network

As a result of the 20-year drug war, the U.S. has created a robust command and control interagency organization to attempt to keep drugs away from America. The front line of the war effort has of course, been the Colombian security forces with support from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and other U.S. Government agencies, including DOD. There are three key organizations, which make command and control possible and response effective despite coordination with many U.S. Government agencies.

The Joint Inter Agency Task Forces (JIATF)

JIATF EAST is responsible for coordinating the drug war in the Southern Command Area of Responsibility (AOR) and JIATF WEST is responsible for the drug war in the Pacific Command AOR. The JIATFs have access to all necessary intelligence being gathered against drug smugglers. They also have air and maritime assets TACON (tactical control) available to them from the theater combatant commanders who retain OPCON (operational control). The JIATFs have representatives from key government agencies including each of the DOD service branches, key members from the Justice Department such as FBI and DEA, and liaison officers from friendly countries in the AOR. U.S. Coast Guard Admirals command both JIATFs.⁴⁷

Joint Task Force Six (JTF-6)

JTF-6 is directly involved in homeland defense against drug smugglers. They support law enforcement agencies engaged in counter-drug operations. JTF-6 is manned by personnel from all U.S. military

service branches, bringing a broad set of capabilities to the fight. For example, JTF-6 can fly a reconnaissance mission for the Border Patrol, establish a listening/observation post on the Canadian border, or provide divers to inspect the underside of a suspect vessel in the Port of Galveston, Texas.⁴⁸

The Colombian “Pipe Dream”

The Dim Hope of Success

The unfolding of the violence in Colombia left President Pastrana and the U.S. with no other alternative but to execute a plan whose chance of success may be very limited. Politicians at various times in Colombia’s history have introduced “peace strategies,” anti-corruption campaigns, and even five constituent assemblies (1827, 1885, 1905, 1952, and 1957) to address the nation’s tendency towards corruption and violence.⁴⁹ In the long run, they all failed. Regardless, by the beginning of the 1990s, the counterinsurgency was going poorly and the nation was once again in chaos.

Drug dealers were responsible for the death of some fifteen hundred people between August 1989 and August 1990, including the three presidential candidates who were assassinated in the 1990 presidential election. And paramilitary groups functioned in many rural parts of the country, at times assisted by drug dealers and at others by the armed forces... Common crime was rampant, with the government itself stating that 80 percent of the crimes were not reported and of those reported, 90 percent did not lead to indictment and conviction. During the 1980s murder became the most common cause of death in the country.⁵⁰

Plan Colombia in Execution

The U.S. and other wealthy foreign nations are giving President Pastrana every opportunity to bring his country back from the brink (\$3.5 billion in foreign assistance for 2000 and more to follow.)⁵¹ The first major element of “Plan Colombia” began in 1999 with the opening of a peace dialogue with the FARC.

Pastrana correctly concluded law and order has too many enemies in Colombia. The most powerful is the FARC but the various cartels, the ELN, and the AUC are also involved in causing great harm. Furthermore, the drug trade is the primary means of funds for these organizations. The hope then is to strengthen the military and police to destroy the drug trade. If the FARC is detached from its revenue source, then maybe they will make peace and, if they demobilize under a fair amnesty program, perhaps the much smaller ELN will follow suit. The AUC should also demobilize since the "...paramilitaries [would] have less reason for being." The war against the cartels would then become a controllable police affair.⁵²

Hope Shining Brighter

As of January 2002, the FARC refuses to make peace. The conclusion could be Plan Colombia is on its way to failure or perhaps the FARC has not yet been squeezed. Despite this, events on the battlefield may be changing for the better. "As recently as 1998, the FARC beat the Colombian Army in battalion-size engagements." However, this is no longer the case.⁵³ Colombia's newly reinvigorated "...Rapid Deployment Force... conducted very successful operations in 2001, including "*Gato Negro*" which captured the notorious Brazilian drug lord, Fernandinho (who was trading money and arms for cocaine with the FARC), and this success seems to be the trend.⁵⁴

Conclusions

Has the Colombian War already been Lost?

Governor Gary Johnson of New Mexico argues "drug problems are health problems, not criminal justice problems" and he goes on to add, "the war on drugs is an absolute failure."⁵⁵ One can engage in mental gymnastics with the validity of his first statement but one must hope his second statement is wrong. Otherwise, the only victors to this point are the leftist guerillas and the U.S. can ill afford such a hostile adversary so close to our shores.

The FARC has drug, personnel, and weapons smuggling pipelines that lead into the American heartland. Furthermore, they are opposed to

the American way of life and have identified the U.S. as their enemy. The leftist guerillas also keep relations with other international terrorist organizations and nations hostile to the U.S. The Green Berets in Colombia are a symbol of U.S. vigilance and resolve to turn the tide of the war.

Far from being a lost cause, the Colombian War is entering a new perhaps-decisive phase. “Remember 9/11” could be the battle cry that is bringing U.S. military support to the Colombian Armed Forces. Gone are the excessive restrictions, which sought to keep U.S. assistance away from counterinsurgency. There is a realization that the counternarcotic war can only be won if the counterinsurgency war is successful. Operation *Gato Negro* is an important indicator that the tide can be turned in favor of the forces of law and order.

In Defense of the Homeland

Defeating the FARC and other leftist guerillas in Colombia is the surest way of defending the homeland from a southern threat. The threat is more pronounced because the IRA, Al Qaeda, the PLO, Hezbollah, FARC, ELN and other terrorists share one common source of revenue; they are plugged into the global drug network. Although drug revenue is not the only source of income, it is a major portion of the financial base of international terrorism.⁵⁶ The interest shown by the IRA, Hezbollah, Iran and other criminal elements highlight the importance of the southern coca region of Colombia to international terrorism. Therefore, one can safely argue the war in Colombia is a battlefield of the global war on terror.

Monitoring and interdicting this battlefield, through the transit zone, and across U.S. borders is done by U.S. agencies involved in fighting transnational crime. They are represented at JIATF EAST and JIATF WEST, where coordination, planning, and execution of the nation’s counter-drug strategy occurs. Another key organization in the homeland defense against drugs is JTF-6, which provides DOD assets for operations along any American frontier and well inside U.S. borders.

These assets can be geared towards a broader defense of the homeland. Although previously, the overarching threat was transnational crime focused on drugs, the mission statement now would include international terrorism. As the nation prepares to defend the homeland

against the next terrorist onslaught, it would be foolish not to include this robust time-tested architecture. One cannot overemphasize that the “war on drugs” is a major aspect of the “war on terror.”

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