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The U.S. government's Plan Colombia worked almost despite itself.

Colombia's Catastrophic Success

Russell Crandall

Several years ago the Colombian government launched a witty advertising campaign: "Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay." The ads were aimed at luring foreign tourists who had shunned the country due to its well-deserved reputation for drugs and violence. Next to the iconic but fictional coffee farmer Juan Valdez, Pablo Escobar was probably the best-known Colombian outside the country. Although the notorious drug-trafficker from the provincial city of Medellín had been dead more than a dozen years, the ad campaign still had a lot of explaining to do.

But perhaps the time has come to try again. For Colombia, a country that not long ago held the dubious distinction of being the kidnapping and internally-displaced-persons capital of the world, is changing for the better. Compared to

the past, when drugs fueled a climate of violence and lawlessness, when Marxist FARC guerrillas and rightist paramilitaries roamed the countryside with impunity, Colombia today is a paradise. Starting about a decade ago, the country has gradually inched its way up to the prized consolidation phase of counterinsurgency. Many of the country's stateless "red" zones are now "yellow." A few are even "green." In counterterrorism speak, that means normal, but since most of Colombia hasn't been anyone's definition of normal for most of its modern history, it's not entirely obvious what that means to Colombians.

Nevertheless, Colombians in Escobarlandia or FARClandia can see the change in the Colombian government's "consolidation centers." During a recent visit to one such center in Medellín, I witnessed a motley assortment of uniformed police officers and combat boot-clad soldiers at work alongside civilian social workers, all frenetically reviewing maps and documents as part of a massive and unprecedented campaign to bring security, technical assistance, infrastructure and social welfare programs to Colombia's once guerrilla-infested hinterlands and jungles.

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Welcome to Colombia, your new vacation destination?

With its mix of “government-in-a-box” counterinsurgency and nation-building strategy—an approach similar to what has been attempted with varying degrees of success elsewhere—this satellite counterinsurgency office is definitely seeing green. Something is working.

Over the past decade, kidnappings have dropped by 95 percent to about 200 per year. Murders are down by half, tracking at a rate last seen in 1984. Senior Colombian defense officials privately say that the country might be on the cusp of “catastrophic success.” They seem to mean by this that they are approaching maximum feasible achievement, but that this maximum still falls short of being irreversible, which is the frustratingly elusive goal of most counterinsurgency campaigns. Obviously, Colombia is not yet Costa Rica (and these days, Costa Rica has its own growing “drugs and thugs” problems). Human rights violations, absence of the rule of law and economic depravity remain a way of life for many Colombians, who still cite security as their overarching concern.

Very likely, part of the concern expressed by these Colombians is the optic of the traumatic past, but part also has to do with the so-called Bacrim—short for *bandas criminales*, or criminal bands. In recent years, supposedly demobilized former rightist paramilitary fighters have often joined the more apolitical but still narco-driven Bacrim. Since they wear no uniforms and espouse no ideology, they do not look like refugees from the former paramilitaries. Some of these gangs even routinely collaborate with the FARC (drug profits make for strange bedfellows). Active in bands of up to a few hundred fighters, the narco-gangs continue to drive Colombians from their homes. They also serve as “guns for hire” and thus are a bitter reminder that Colombian society hosts individuals who are unusually prone to settling domestic family disputes or national political contests with a bullet in the back of the head.

On the positive side of the ledger, Colombian authorities are moving beyond counterinsurgency, all the way to a recognition of what

makes for good government. Its reformist yet hawkish President Juan Manuel Santos is determined to achieve a sort of humanitarian revolution. Colombian governmental agencies and citizen groups are now more openly talking about and pursuing actual acts of justice, restitution and even the taboo subject of land reform. Colombia's democratic government passed legislation in 2011 that for the first time allows citizens to be recognized as victims of the state or other armed actors. It also recognized the existence of an internal armed conflict, something once considered taboo, as a potential legitimization of the insurgencies.

Colombians are also slowly but decisively adapting to life in a normal country. They now take domestic vacations, travelling from rural towns to provincial cities without the fear of, say, *pecas milagrosas* ("miracle fishings"), whereby armed FARC roadblocks would search for wealthy citizens worth kidnapping. Bolstered by a dynamic economy—part of the ongoing peace dividend—in recent years more than a million Colombians have moved out of poverty. Another million have arrived in the middle class.

Any story about Colombia's "revolution of sorts" is inescapably tied to the deep and controversial role the United States has played in the country, especially since the advent in the late 1990s of the multibillion-dollar military and economic aid package known as Plan Colombia. While the Plan was deeply flawed, needlessly narcotized by America's obsession with its "war on drugs", the now ebbing strategy can itself be considered a catastrophic success, of sorts.

During most of the late 1990s, Washington's focus in Colombia was almost exclusively on the drug war. (This isn't surprising given that, during the height of the crack cocaine scourge, a majority of Americans expressed a "great deal" of concern about drug use.¹) U.S. policy in Colombia in the two decades before Plan Colombia was already centered on interdiction: busting clandestine drug labs, customs seizures, eradicating coca plantings and the vaunted "kingpin strategy" designed to decapitate high-profile drug lords like Escobar. Yet despite a few high-profile successes, an explosion in coca production and a concomitant surge in violence knocked the Colombian state back on its heels. Fearing headlong

state collapse, the Clinton Administration, late in its second term, unveiled Plan Colombia, which, in typical Clintonian triangulation fashion, borrowed Republican demands to do more to save Colombia and threw loads more money at them.

Plan Colombia attempted to save the country by drastically escalating drug war methodology. Most Colombians thought the money would have been better spent going directly after the illegal armed groups, but what they could not possibly have understood is that Plan Colombia represented a typical Beltway response to a foreign policy crisis: U.S. congressional debate over the policy was driven more by the need for politicians to score political points in their home districts than by sober foreign policy analysis. Members of Congress bickered from day one over the composition of the assistance package, something they could not as easily have done if the United States had launched a small war on the FARC. While much was made of the unprecedented initial sum of money going to Colombia (\$860 million), the reality was that most of this money was going to domestic defense contractors to construct and deliver materiel to Colombia. One of the biggest initial disputes involved the allocation of helicopter purchases between Bell-Textron (headquartered in Texas) and Connecticut-based Sikorsky. Even long-time Latin America policy dove Senator Christopher Dodd sought a piece of the action by urging that the package include a hundred Sikorsky-made Black Hawks and no Bell-Textron Hueys. This led one observer to quip, "This was supposed to be Plan Colombia, not Plan Connecticut."

Despite its somewhat sordid birth in Washington, Plan Colombia produced results, albeit not anything as dramatic as rescuing Colombia from collapse. The numbers tell the story in broad outline form.² During 1999, there were approximately 2,000 terrorist attacks and 3,000 kidnappings in Colombia, and the country's murder rate was sixty per 100,000 residents, far higher than drug gang-riddled Mexico in 2012,

¹That number has since dropped by half. See Michael Shifter, "Plan Colombia: A Retrospective", *Americas Quarterly* (Summer 2012).

²See Thomas R. Pickering, "Anatomy of Plan Colombia", *The American Interest* (November/December 2009).

which saw a rate of 24 per 100,000. In that same year, the FARC's ranks had swollen above 25,000 soldiers (including many adolescents and women), and drug revenues had surged to \$50 billion per year and perhaps as much as \$100 billion. Today both its size and revenues are markedly lower. The number of active FARC operatives might even be less than 10,000 in a country twice the size of Texas and with a population of about 50 million.

Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that Plan Colombia achieved all this by itself. Its immediate impact was a marked increase in the amount of Colombian military hardware used to fight the drug war, but all that hardware meant that the Colombian armed forces had to dramatically increase training. That training proved to be far more important than the equipment: Colombia's security forces showed themselves to be the capable endogenous national actors that are central to almost all successful counterinsurgencies. As Colombia has absorbed and institutionalized the capabilities of these forces, Plan Colombia money, now totaling around \$8 billion, has gone more toward economic development assistance. The popular impression was that Plan Colombia basically entailed Washington assuming Colombia's defense spending; even at its height, U.S. assistance represented only 6 percent of Colombia's annual military budget. The real lesson here is that unless the U.S. government has a willing and capable local counterpart, no amount of money or equipment will make a difference in an insurgency.

The importance of the Colombian security forces as a competent U.S. partner, however, should not overshadow the importance of the Colombian political class. Colombian elites, made up overwhelmingly of the roughly 37 percent of the population that is of European "white" descent, had been detached from the country's general misery long before the FARC ever existed. This aloofness, in fact, probably explains in large part why the FARC arose in the first place. The highly urbanized elite only decided that enough was enough when the insurgency began to touch its members directly, trapping them inside their own cities through the fear of *pescas milagrosas* kidnappings. Their new resolve manifested itself in the 2002 election of the hawkish President Álvaro Uribe. Uribe imposed almost immediately

a war tax on wealthy citizens that raised more than \$4 billion over four years—a sum roughly half the size of total U.S. assistance under Plan Colombia since the program began.

If we were to judge U.S. counter-narcotics efforts in Colombia by their effect on the war on drugs in Latin America, we would have to conclude that they had fallen short. Whenever the policy succeeded in suppressing drug activity in Colombia, it merely migrated to other countries—not least, Mexico. The total supply available for illegal entry into the United States did not change very much.³

At the same time, other American-financed programs have generated many beneficial security, and even social, developments in Colombia. Take the U.S.-funded and trained, 10,000-man-strong *carabiniero* element of the National Police. Over the past several years, this crack unit has acted as a highly mobile and effective rural police force. In the not-so-distant past, Colombian generals ritually sent poorly trained and equipped police and military units to remote areas of the country. To keep the troops in their garrisons, the FARC and other groups would only attack them if they ventured into the countryside. The result was a stalemate favoring the insurgents. These 150-man *carabiniero* squadrons turned this strategy upside down, taking the fight directly to the insurgents. To be sure, their main mission remained busting labs and arresting traffickers, but they also guarded roads and local elected officials and confronted guerrillas, paramilitaries and common criminals.

In a sharp departure from the golden age of trafficking during the Escobar era, in recent years the cocaine trade has been controlled by about a half dozen lower-profile groups (including Bacrim) that often specialize in one element of trafficking and offer their services to the highest bidders, including insurgent organizations, mostly the FARC. In the Colombian government's battle against these organizations, the National Police's Sensitive Investigative Unit (SIU) represents the crown jewel of Plan Colombia-era technology and training. Deploying more than 300 agents countrywide, and descended from the vaunted "search blocks" that

³See Peter Reuter, "Do No Harm", *The American Interest* (March/April 2009).



AFP/Getty Images

Colombian police officers escort an alleged FARC member in April 2013.

spearheaded the capture and killing of Escobar back in 1993, the SIU scours intelligence sources to crack the drug traffickers' spiderweb-like chain of command.⁴

President Uribe took office in 2002 on a simple yet fundamental promise to the war-weary Colombian population: that his government would establish security in all areas of the country. This was a bold claim. Since its founding in the early 19th century, the Colombian state had never effectively governed wide swaths of national territory, especially ones far from large cities such as Bogotá and Medellín. Uribe's insight, "security first and everything else later", was considered politically incorrect abroad, on account of its polarizing *mano dura* component, but it resonated with a Colombian populace that was weary after years of violence.

With the security forces swelling in numbers, materiel and lethal capability, Colombian military convoys now began opening up key highways by placing an armed soldier every kilometer or so. Enhanced air mobility allowed the security forces to chase FARC bands across high mountain ranges and thick jungle. The message

to Colombians was clear and unequivocal: The Colombian state will protect you; you will no longer be a prisoner in your own country.

Not surprisingly, Uribe's hardline approach was controversial. Critics believed that it simply used violence to fight violence. Yet Uribe's closed-fist approach can only be understood in the context of what had transpired in Colombia during the administration of President Andrés Pastrana over the preceding four years. In 1998, Pastrana unilaterally granted the FARC an El Salvador-sized "liberated zone" as a diplomatic carrot to get it to negotiate a peace. Pastrana was far from the only person inside or outside Colombia who felt that an olive branch would entice the FARC to lay down its arms and integrate into Colombia's democratic political system. Many believed that the FARC had maximized its military reach and would be eager to cut a deal at its point of maximum negotiating

⁴This research is based on author interviews conducted in Colombia in January 2013. Also see Chris Kraul, "Colombia units use US techniques to bust drug operations", *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 2012.

leverage. But instead of sitting down for peace talks, the FARC used the zone to grow coca, traffic cocaine, host IRA bomb-making specialists, and train and arm its swelling ranks.

Having become a more formidable fighting force, the FARC launched a violent offensive against both “hard” military and “soft” civilian targets. Buoyed by a huge war chest that financed the purchase of highly sophisticated weaponry and foreign mercenary advisers, for the first time the FARC went “downtown” by placing bombs in the large cities, including Bogotá. The FARC also declared that anyone who ran for or held elected office was under a sentence of death. At this point in 2002, few Colombians believed that the FARC would negotiate a settlement, so Uribe’s “war first, peace later” stance made sense to a political majority disabused of excessive hope.

The FARC miscalculated. Long out of reach of the security forces, its ideological leadership soon began to suffer from what American advisers dubbed a “bombs-on-foreheads” approach: the use of precision-guided missiles to directly target FARC commanders. This began in March 2008, when the military attacked a FARC jungle camp just over the border in Ecuador. The raid was controversial in that it violated Ecuador’s sovereignty, but it killed Raúl Reyes, the FARC’s second-in-command. The raid also recovered FARC laptop computers full of incriminating information—most sensationally, the group’s clandestine relationship with Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez.

The FARC’s fortunes sustained another blow a few weeks after the Ecuador raid, when the group announced that its original leader, Manuel “Sureshot” Marulanda, had died of a heart attack. That July, the Colombian military conducted one of the most successful rescue operations in history when, without firing a shot, it freed former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, three American counter-narcotics contractors, and several other Colombians. Using commandos disguised as humanitarian workers, the military’s “Operation Check” checkmated the FARC as the rescue deprived the guerrilla group of its highest-profile hostages.

On the run and increasingly unable to communicate with each other, the FARC adopted a much lower profile throughout the

countryside. Not surprisingly, life as a “FARC-ista” became far less enjoyable. FARC soldiers, most of whom were forcibly recruited into the guerrilla ranks in the first place, began fleeing. Deserters reported that hunger was often what drove them to flee, even though they faced certain death if the FARC captured them. In a sign that even some die-hard revolutionaries were losing faith, Bogotá also reported that increasingly FARC deserters were those who had spent 10–15 years with the rebel group. (It’s no fun becoming middle-aged in the jungle, it seems.) At times, the military debriefed deserters and then reinserted them into FARC ranks without the guerrilla commanders’ even noticing they had left in the first place. These “plants” provided critical on-the-ground intelligence to the Colombian security forces.

The Colombian military’s aggressive and occasionally shrewd counterinsurgency effort dealt the FARC a devastating blow, which in large part explains why the diminished guerrilla group is presently talking peace with the despised Colombian government. Not only is its manpower diminished; its finances have also been reduced, as illicit trade revenues have plummeted from perhaps \$500 million to \$250 million in recent years.

Getting to “green” requires more than eliminating security problems, however. It requires a change in the thinking of the Colombian elite. That elite can no longer define the society that matters as just 37 percent of the population; it must include everyone. Amazingly, that seems to be occurring. One of the first signs is Colombia’s transformation of a slow, corrupt and ineffective judicial system from an oral to a written accusatory system. Colombian leaders, for the first time in the country’s history, seem intent on winning the hearts and minds of the population as a whole.

To this end, the Colombian government’s clear-and-hold counterinsurgency strategy has enabled soft-side projects to flourish, especially economic development programs in formerly coca- and FARC-infested regions. This reality contrasts with just a few years ago, when things like alternative crop development programs floundered as the absence of security protection meant that insurgents would eventually return

to areas they had been driven from. The Medellín consolidation center is part of this broad strategy of attempting to secure these enormous yet still precarious gains.

The Colombian military is more professional and effective than it was a decade ago—one of the goals of Plan Colombia as well. It still suffers from an institutional legacy of insufficient respect for the rule of law and civilian oversight, however. Just as the military used to allow paramilitaries to roam the countryside and commit atrocities with impunity, some security forces recently lured 11 youths from a poor town near Bogotá to a location hundreds of miles away, dressed them in guerrilla clothing, and murdered them. Known as the “false positive” case, the officers attempted to cite these deaths as FARC kills (the “positive”) to boost their stats. There are hundreds of these suspected “false positive” cases. That this situation can reasonably be described as “much improved” just goes to show how bad things were a decade ago.

That improvement has turned on an accident, one connected to late developments in Plan Colombia. In the aftermath of September 11, Washington decided to allow Plan Colombia aid and training to be used for counterterrorism as well as drug war operations, and to use them to improve and train police forces as well as soldiers. It was a fateful decision, although no one understood it as such at the time. Freed from the narrow narcotized restrictions of the original Plan, the more expansive post-9/11 authorization enabled U.S. personnel to engage in much more expansive training of the Colombian military, which had grown to more than 400,000 soldiers over the first decade of Plan Colombia. In 1999 almost 200 of the country’s 1,000-plus municipalities had mayors who would not go to their offices for fear of leftist or rightist threats. Today, each municipality has a police force and a mayor who show up for work.

While Colombia’s security situation has improved radically over the past decade, the illicit drug front offers a more mixed picture. Coca cultivation is down by about half from its late-1990s peak, but Colombia remains the world’s primary producer of cocaine, with much of it winding up in the United States, Western Europe and, increasingly, Brazil as that country gets richer and

its tastes get fancier. In this sense, ironically, the Plan Colombia era has been a security success for Colombia but not for the U.S.-led war on drugs.

The irony grows when one realizes that, eager to demonstrate that there is still a sizeable bang for the buck in the U.S. aid dollars flowing to Colombia, the Colombian military is now actively involved in training Central American and Mexican security forces in an effort to replicate Colombia’s supposed magic formula. Colombian advisers in Mexico say that the country feels like theirs did a decade ago. Honduras has a war-like murder rate of ninety per 100,000 inhabitants. As one Colombian defense official contended, “We were part of the problem, and now we’re part of the solution.”⁵ It’s another clever advertising slogan but we should not pretend that this violence will cease until there is a break in the demand side of the problem in America and Europe.

Meanwhile, eager to maintain its war chest, the FARC went to new lengths to sustain its market share in the cocaine trade. It even built and commanded “narco-subs”—ocean-going, semi-submersibles that can hold four to seven tons of cocaine and cost about \$1 million to manufacture. The FARC has even cashed in by renting its narco-subs to other narcotics traffickers looking for a way to get their goods to Guatemala or the Dominican Republic.

The FARC has also responded to the Colombian military’s gains by embarking on a defensive strategy. Part of this effort has entailed leaving thousands of landmines in vacated terrain. Like the Vietcong during the Vietnam War, the FARC has also placed excrement on the shrapnel to increase the likelihood and severity of infections in those who triggered them. In the past several years, about 6,000 people have fallen victim to these tactics, one-third of them civilians, usually poor rural farmers and their children. The FARC has also continued to bomb oil pipelines, causing sizeable local environmental disasters and lost revenue for the national and local governments. In a further sign of desperation, the FARC reportedly lowered its recruiting age to 12. The group has long forcibly recruited child soldiers

⁵Author interview with Colombian defense ministry official, January 2013.

to fill its ranks, but this step marks a new low. All that said, however, today the FARC can wreak only a fraction of the havoc it did just a few years ago.

If the Pastrana government thought it could negotiate with a strong FARC, the question now is whether the Santos government can, or should, negotiate with a weak one. Legalizing former FARC leadership cadres for political standing could help heal Colombia's longstanding ethnic and social divisions; yet as many as a third of the "former" guerrilla ranks would probably continue their illicit ways in narcotics trafficking, illegal mining and logging, and the like. So a peace agreement, though arguably useful in several ways, would not actually guarantee peace. But it might shrink the war even further—no small accomplishment given the 600,000 dead and four million displaced over the past fifty years. It might also lead to many hundreds of thousands of Colombian expatriates returning home with new skills and international connections.

On balance, this is why the newest round of talks, which began in Oslo last year and continues presently in Havana, makes sense, and why the U.S. government should support them despite some misgivings. The beginning of wisdom here is the recognition that the Colombian military will never fully defeat the FARC. Rather, as we saw in places like 1980s El Salvador, a "victory" must entail a negotiated settlement predicated on the FARC laying down its arms in return for the political legitimization of its socio-ideological point of view. As always, what might happen at the negotiating table is a function of the state of play beyond it. And make no mistake: This is no stalemate where both sides are eager to find a mutually satisfactory end to the conflict. Rather, backed by his swollen and lethal Plan Colombia-era military, President Santos knows that the FARC leadership feels increasingly vulnerable in its mountain and jungle lairs—the very places that were once comfortable sanctuaries. The FARC faces a tough but hardly unique choice: Make peace and hope the government does not betray its promises, or make war and likely be pounded asymptotically into near nothingness.

It is tempting to seek larger lessons from Colombia's experience with counterinsurgency, but this temptation should only be indulged with great care. Colombia's gains are unusual in the timeless and murky realm of counterinsurgency; the reasons for these gains are not easy to understand. Yes, the ratio of anti-insurgency forces grew to near classic Malayan/General Templer levels. Yes, appropriate training mattered. But these military metrics do not even begin to explain outcomes. With its educated political class, entrepreneurial genes and vibrant urban-based civil society, Colombia was especially well suited to be a "client" government partner to the United States. Those conditions never existed in Afghanistan or Iraq, and they won't exist to the same extent in places like Pakistan or, perhaps one day, Thailand.

At the same time, one also has to acknowledge the major role played by inadvertency—and that brings us back to Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia played a key role in the successes of the past decade. Yet it achieved success not in the narrow, narcotized version of its inception but only when it became a broader effort, almost in spite of its implementers (and Congress). It became broader militarily, via its training and then its anti-terror components, and it became broader as the money flowed into development accounts. Colombia needed militarization and pacification efforts to quell threats to its existence as a democracy—and even to its existence as a state. Then it needed development aid to encourage and support an elite on the verge of formulating a more inclusive definition of Colombian society. No one could have foreseen this complex sequence of events back in the late 1990s.

If the peace talks succeed (and especially if they don't), there is plenty yet to do to push Colombia into a condition of "green" normalcy. If Colombia reaches a deal with the FARC, it will need its own "surge" in national policing in order to ensure that increasingly apolitical violence does not undermine fragile state institutions in far-flung and newly pacified areas. A normal Colombia does not require a swollen Plan Colombia-era military, however, so the United States must prepare itself now to make a major shift in the emphasis of its aid. We have a chance to do some good deliberately instead of accidentally. Are we up to the challenge? 🇨🇴