

Imperialism by Another Name: The US "War on Drugs" in Colombia

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GRACE LEE, AUG 22 2017

US-Colombia relations are often discussed in the context of the "war on drugs," a shift in policy paradigm that put illicit substance control at the top of American domestic and foreign policy agendas towards the end of the 20th century. Specifically, much of the literature focuses on Plan Colombia, President Bill Clinton's 2000 initiative whose highly controversial legacy continues in the country that is the world's top producer of cocaine today.[1] However, US intervention in Colombia began long before the "war on drugs," and must be understood in the larger framework of the Cold War, which prompted increasing American involvement there as part of its regional security calculations from the 1940s onwards. This paper examines American policy towards Colombia from the Truman to Reagan presidencies, tracing the emergence of its "war on drugs" and assessing related political, economic, and military strategies employed in the country. Analysis reveals that the US "war on drugs" in Colombia has largely been an extension of its Cold War objectives and methodologies, namely the preservation of a pro-US government through military tactics. This finding reinforces revisionist claims that Cold War American policy was ultimately only about preserving its geostrategic capitalist interests in both Latin America and the world.

The beginnings of US intervention in Colombia can be traced back to the first century of Colombian independence. From the early years of post-independence, Colombia faced considerable political instability due to its opposing Liberal and Conservative Parties, leading to eight civil wars between 1849 and 1899 and the "Thousand Days War" between 1899 and 1903.[2] It was at the end of this war when the US backed Panama's secession from Colombia in order to facilitate the construction of the Panama Canal,[3] marking its first major intervention in the country. This 'theft' "soured relations" [4] between the two states until a 1921 compensation payment by the US, after which relations improved such that Colombia entered the Second World War in support of the Allied Powers. However, during the war its domestic political situation quickly destabilized once more, with the rise of a popular movement protesting widespread inequality in the country.[5] Truman's Cold War doctrine of containment would be applied in Colombia in response to this domestic political instability.

Foreign policy towards Latin America under both Truman and Eisenhower focused on the containment of a communist threat through the creation of a unified hemispheric defense. In the first decade of the Cold War, there was minimal effort to address the underlying social problems creating instability in most Latin American states. Instead, a unified hemispheric defense was primarily achieved through supporting right-wing military dictatorships and signing mutual defense treaties, to which Colombia was no exception.

For instance, in 1948, Liberal Party leader and Presidential frontrunner Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in an operation widely speculated to have been orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency.[6] Regardless of whether or not the US was directly involved in his murder, it did financially and politically support a military coup bringing military dictator General Rojas Pinilla to power in 1953, providing him as well with a US \$170 million loan in 1955 that was subsequently used to suppress armed resistance and peasant organizations.[7] In addition, in 1952 the US signed a Mutual Defense Assistance Act with Colombia, agreeing in Article One to "make available to the other . . . such equipment, materials, services, or other military assistance . . . to promote the defense and maintain the peace of the Western Hemisphere." [8] The same year, Colombia became the location of the first American counter-insurgency school in Latin America.[9]

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By actively supporting pro-US military leaders, as well as creating a framework allowing ease of military assistance to Colombia, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations attempted to maintain American geostrategic interests in a country experiencing much political turbulence. These institutions and motivations would only become more prominent as the 1959 Cuban Revolution presented the first real regional communist threat. Importantly, they would also later be employed in the name of counternarcotic operations as part of the "war on drugs."

In response to the Cuban Revolution, President Kennedy announced a new Alliance for Progress initiative for Latin America in 1961. Rhetorically, it was a departure from US-directed military involvement towards individualized economic improvement, asking each Latin nation to "formulate long-range plans for its own development . . . which . . . will be the foundation of our development effort, and the basis for the allocation of outside resources." [10] However, in the same year counter-insurgency warfare became officially codified as part of the Foreign Assistance Act, which included increased aid for both bilateral military ties and economic development. [11]

As US foreign policy expert Stokes argues, the latter was quickly overshadowed by the former due to concerns about internal security. [12] The perceived urgency of these concerns are illustrated in a Department of Defense memo in May of 1961, which warned of an "ineffective strategy and insufficient capability to guard against the most likely threat—the threat to internal security." [13] Significantly, the Cuban-Soviet connection was extended such that all reformists were immediately assumed to be a part of the international communist movement. [14] Hence, American policy became chiefly about aiding local militaries not only with controlling armed insurgencies but also with suppressing unarmed civil society. [15]

In Colombia specifically, US intervention "[entrenched] the strategy of state terrorism" in a country whose leadership was already repressive prior. [16] It actively sought to "develop more efficient . . . military establishments" and "expand the capability of indigenous forces to conduct counterinsurgency, anti-subversion and psychological warfare operations." [17] This strategy manifested in the form of Plan Lazo, a counterinsurgency strategy that from 1962 to 1965 targeted peasants in the south who were seen as threats to the US because of their opposition to the repressive pro-US government. [18] Importantly, a 1964 US-backed operation under this plan eventually prompted the creation of a rebel movement that would pose significant threats to future right-wing governance: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). [19]

Thus, despite the proposal of a new approach to Latin American relations based on fostering economic development through the Alliance for Progress, US-Colombian relations under Kennedy and Johnson continued to use military means to ensure that a pro-American government prevailed. Additionally, counter-insurgency activities became the preferred military strategy, serving to further polarize pre-existing political divides in the country and, significantly, resulting in the creation of the FARC. American motivations and methodology for ensuring its narrow definition of Colombian security became well-established by this point, long before the "war on drugs" emerged as the definitive guiding principle of US foreign policy.

It was only in the 1970s that the "war on drugs" began showing up on the US domestic and foreign policy radar. During this period, various factors led to real questioning of American institutional legitimacy, including a capitalist crisis at home and failure in Vietnam abroad. [20] Repeated humiliation domestically and internationally became a "fertile breeding ground", which Nixon and the Republican Party provided in the form of a new neo-conservative ideology that emphasized a resurgence of morality. It was in this context that a "war on drugs" was first publically declared by Nixon in 1971 as "America's public enemy number one" requiring a "new, all-out offensive." [22]

In terms of foreign policy, however, anti-drug objectives appear to have had little bearing on US-Colombian relations. Drug control at this time was focused on heroin, with marijuana being a secondary concern and cocaine barely registering on the "policy radar screen" through to the next two presidencies. [23] In fact, a 1976 telegram from the Department of State to the Colombian Embassy on the topic of narcotics clearly stated that "we have heavy and increasing (counter-narcotics) assistance commitments to other countries, certain of which must be given higher priority." [24] Overall, Nixon's anti-drug policy expended more resources on domestic rather than international measures. [25]

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Nonetheless, under his presidency the Colombian military “continued to work closely with the Pentagon,” with their 1969 guerrilla-fighting guidelines being based “entirely on US training texts and overseas special warfare courses.”[26] Moreover, in 1973 the CIA taught Latin American officers bomb-making and assassination techniques, with highest student attendance coming from Colombia.[27] Importantly, in the late 1960s Colombia became the fourth-largest recipient of military aid from the US, up from the fifth-largest recipient between 1950 and 1966.[28] These measures indicate continued military intervention in the country that was largely independent from any anti-drug initiatives, which were only in their infancy at the time. Consequently, Nixon-era US policy towards Colombia demonstrates a clear instance of Cold War stability calculations being applied to the country, separate from any considerations of a “war on drugs.”

The next two administrations saw increasing links between “war on drugs” foreign policy and existing military intervention in Colombia that would eventually escalate to full conflation of the two under Reagan. Ironically, there was actually a softening of attitudes towards drugs domestically, especially during the Carter years, when policy and public opinion moved “towards a more tolerant approach.”[29] However, narcotics control abroad moved to the forefront of the “war on drugs,” increasingly legitimizing US intervention in Colombia in the name of counter-narcotics operations and bringing it to the attention of the public as such.

For instance, Carter’s 1977 Drug Abuse Message to the Congress focused primarily on international cooperation. Unlike in the Nixon era, it explicitly identified “heroin *and* cocaine”[30] as drugs requiring the attention of foreign policy. Colombian President Lopez-Michelsen was also mentioned as a key partner in anti-drug efforts.[31] Significantly, Carter’s address suggested that the cultivation, supply, and trafficking of drugs “[corroded] political stability,” and called for the Secretary of State to emphasize the international narcotics control program and “reiterate to foreign governments our strong desire to curtail production of, and traffic in, illicit drugs.”[32] This rhetoric effectively lent the counter-narcotics agenda the same level of urgency as anticommunism in foreign policy.

At the same time, the counter-narcotics agenda offered something that previous anti-communist interventions could not—a law enforcement framework that legitimized American actions in Colombia in an unprecedented way. In accordance with this framework, the US signed an extradition treaty with Colombia in 1979,[33] and in the same year founded the State Department Bureau for International Narcotics Matters focusing on non-military approaches to drug control.[34] As US-Colombia policy analyst Isacson observes, however, these programs remained “small and marginal” [35] for most of the Cold War because in practice, counterinsurgency tactics continued to dominate US action in Colombia.

A 1976 telegram from the Colombian embassy to the Department of State is particularly revealing of America’s real priorities in the country. In the telegram, US Ambassador to Colombia Viron Vaky reported that the Colombian Minister of Defense felt that the US was not devoting enough resources towards proposed narcotics interdiction efforts.[36] In response, Vaky claimed that countering narcotics was not significant enough to warrant “large levels of funds or even equipment.”[37] Nonetheless, Colombia continued to receive increasing amounts of military aid, by the 1970s becoming the third-largest recipient in Latin America.[38] This exchange is indicative of the true objective of American aid to Colombia—it was about preserving pro-US government rather than countering narcotics.

Clearly, despite US foreign policy in Colombia becoming increasingly tied rhetorically to the “war on drugs” under Ford and Carter, there was no significant departure from previous military approaches to maintaining geostrategic stability. However, unlike in the Nixon era when counterinsurgency activities in Colombia continued independently of “war on drugs” foreign policy, the Ford and Carter administrations progressively used the latter to justify the former. The Reagan administration would then fully consolidate Cold War objectives and methodology with anti-drug hysteria in Colombia.

Reagan was voted into office on a platform of defensive ideology that aimed to repair US reputation through the re-establishment of traditional values, and the “war on drugs” was a central part of this platform.[39] Thus, under his administration it was politically, militarily, and economically combined with anti-communist measures in Colombia, eventually even “[replacing] the defunct fight against communism” [40] as the new vehicle by which the US would justify its intervention in Latin American states including Colombia. Importantly, American actions in the country at

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this time escalated previous counterinsurgency activities into a full out military response, virtually eliminating all other aspects of foreign policy in order to preserve American interests in the country.

Rhetorically, Reagan's "war on drugs" was not only portrayed as a health issue but a moral one, where the traditional values of family, community, and faith in Western society were being jeopardized and the "very foundations of civilization" [41] were at stake. In this way, it was distinctly aligned with the ideological foundations of the Cold War. Moreover, "circumstantial connections between narco-traffickers and Latin American guerrillas" [42] were exploited in order to maximize national sentiment and domestic support for increased interventions in countries such as Colombia. Importantly, much like in its general Cold War efforts, the goal was to "encourage, persuade, bribe, or coerce foreign governments" [43] into aiding US action with minimal consideration for their national circumstances.

In Colombia, this took the form of increased American support for counterinsurgency activity despite an ongoing peace process and ceasefire between the government and the FARC in 1984.[44] By sending in more than US \$50 million in arms that year and training 4844 Colombian personnel between 1984 and 1990,[45] the US severely undermined any chances of a stable democracy developing in the country. Another striking example of American disregard for democratic stability in Colombia would follow in 1986, when the CIA joined the Colombian military in implementing the Condor Plan to eliminate all progressives, liberals, and revolutionaries in the country.[46] Repeated American-backed interventions against the FARC during this time were often justified under the guise of the drug war. However, they were evidently aimed at preserving American interests in keeping non-reformist leaders in power.

In addition to increased support for Colombian counterinsurgency activities, American drug control in the country was also formally militarized under the Reagan administration. Beginning in 1981, Congress passed amendments to the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act, relaxing prohibitions on "the use of military personnel to enforce civilian laws." [47] These amendments were followed by the National Defense Authorization Act the next year, allowing the US army to join the "war on drugs." [48] 1986 would be a particularly significant year in this process, with the signing of National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 221, which declared drug trafficking to be a threat to US national security and enabled the development of military operations accordingly.[49]

Contents of the recently declassified NSDD 221 reveal the extent of authorized US military involvement in countries such as Colombia in the name of countering narcotics. For instance, the military was directed to assist other US agencies engaged in counter-narcotics; collect, analyze, and disseminate intelligence; participate in coordinated interdiction programs; train and assist foreign military forces to carry out their own counter-narcotics operations, and provide "technical and materiel [*sic*] support" [50] to foreign governments. Importantly, NSDD 221 highlights the underlying reason for American concern about the international drug trade: regimes "unwilling or unable to cooperate with counter-narcotics" could quickly change into ones "unable to control elements of [their] own judiciary, military, or economy," which would in turn negatively influence US interests.[51] Hence, at its core, Reagan's militarized approach to drug control in Colombia was motivated by the same desire to maintain pro-US regimes that drove all previous Cold War foreign policy.

This conclusion is supported by examining the Reagan administration's economic drug control measures in Colombia. The key piece of legislation in this realm was the 1986 Drug Abuse Act, which made eligibility for US foreign aid and preferred trade status based on cooperation with drug eradication and interdiction activities.[52] Much like the early Cold War Marshall Plan, this act was essentially aimed at ensuring compliance with American policy through the exertion of economic pressure. Specifically, any government deemed non-compliant with US drug control efforts were subject to significant losses in assistance, aid, and loans, as well as the denial of its "most favoured nation" trade status and imposition of punitive tariff measures.[53] Despite counter-narcotics objectives being cited as the official rationale behind these measures, broader American interests in maintaining control over the Colombian government are more convincing explanations for their implementation.

In fact, Reagan's entire supply-side approach to drug control in Colombia relied disproportionately on suppression tactics, ignoring other contributing factors to narcotics trafficking such as "economic crisis, rural pauperization, institutional weakness, territorial disintegration, and spreading violence." [54] For instance, by 1988 production suppression activities accounted for 70% of drug control budgets.[55] Furthermore, eradication efforts largely failed

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to consider the economic and cultural significance of the coca leaf in Colombia, offering minimal compensation for voluntary substitution and no real alternative means of livelihood to coca farmers.[56] Moreover, fumigation missions meant to eradicate coca, marijuana, and opium crops also wiped out food crops that farmers depended on for their livelihoods.[57] Unlike Kennedy-era economic policy which at least rhetorically considered the importance of developmental aid to improve Colombian stability, Reagan's "war on drugs" in the country actively destroyed the Colombian economy with the repeated justification of narcotics control.

In response to the claim that US intervention in Colombia was primarily for the purposes of advancing its own interests, it is often argued that the FARC was in fact funding its activities with drug trafficking money and hence, the US was correct in its equation of narco-traffickers with leftist guerrillas. According to this argument, the Reagan administration's military policies in the country truly aimed to eradicate the drug trade by supporting counterinsurgency against the group. As historian Marcy explains, however, the truth is that "guerrilla participation in the narcotics trade had followed opportunity and initially could have been prevented." [58] This is especially true during the ceasefire and peace talks that the US instead chose to sabotage in 1984. By pursuing counterinsurgency and supply side policies against all leftist movements with minimal discretion, the US only exacerbated social and political conditions strengthening bonds between guerrillas and the drug industry.

As US foreign policy expert Stokes concludes, US counterinsurgency strategies in Colombia were above all meant to "insulate the Colombian state from popular pressures for reform." [59] The same could be said more broadly about Reagan's foreign policy towards Colombia on the whole. Ultimately, it conflated Cold War ideology and "war on drugs" rhetoric and policies for the underlying purpose of maintaining a pro-US government that would ensure status quo stability in the country.

The argument advanced thus far that the American "war on drugs" in Colombia was essentially an extension of Cold War policy begs the question: why has it continued after the end of the Cold War? Detailed discussion on Plan Colombia and later counter-narcotics initiatives in the country is beyond the scope of this paper, but the simple answer to this question is that the "war on drugs" continues to serve as a useful policy paradigm to justify interventions that secure US interests in the country. Moreover, it effectively fills the void left by the Cold War in terms of justifications for military spending in Colombia.

Regarding American interests in the country, "the preservation of capitalist socio-economic relations and (...) unhindered access to (...) markets" [60] remains just as important in the post-Cold War period as during the previous four decades. Specifically, access to South American oil and the Panama Canal remain two key considerations of US policy towards Colombia.[61] Hence, continued US support of the Colombian military in its suppression of guerrilla insurgencies is logical, because these very guerrilla groups are the same ones calling for social reform that could threaten American economic interests in the country. The "war on drugs" represents a powerful means by which to induce this support.

In addition, with the end of the Cold War in 1991, there was a real concern amongst US military officials that their budget would be significantly cut, and continued counter-narcotics programs were a welcome solution to this problem.[62] While this view was not unanimous, and many officers were hesitant to get into another "Vietnam-like quagmire" in the Andes,[63] counter-narcotics strategies did result in a retained role for the US military. Under Bush's Andean Initiative, for instance, military aid to Colombia reached a "record high of US \$73 million." [64] Under Clinton's Plan Colombia, 80% of the budget went towards military aid, "a big part [going] directly to US military contractors." [65] Regardless of the intentions of individual officers, it is undeniable that the continued "war on drugs" in Colombia has bolstered US military spending, sustaining a military-industrial complex that has survived beyond the Cold War.

The US "war on drugs" in Colombia presents a compelling case of anti-communist rhetoric being combined with and eventually overtaken by counter-narcotics rhetoric to justify continued intervention in the country. Beginning with the Truman administration, American foreign policy towards Colombia remained remarkably consistent throughout the Cold War, by supporting repressive governments with counterinsurgency activities against left-wing groups calling for social change. The only shift was in the recasting of these groups as narco-guerrillas, and the development of

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legal frameworks to legitimize such actions in the name of drug control. Underlying both anti-communist and counter-narcotics efforts in Colombia was the central objective of maintaining US capitalist interests in the country, an objective that perpetuates American involvement in the country to the present. The case of Colombia aptly demonstrates revisionist claims of American imperialism in its Cold War policy, which are easily extended to other developing countries in the region and abroad during the same time period. It also serves as a reminder to critically examine overtly stated shifts in foreign policy historically and in the present, which often mask considerable continuities in states' underlying objectives.

Notes

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Date written: March 2016