TERROR, CAPITAL AND CRUDE: US COUNTERINSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA

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During the Cold War the US intervened in more states in Latin America than in any other continent, with US-sponsored counterinsurgency as the primary means of US coercive statecraft. US planners argued that this kind of ‘support’ for allied states was designed to contain the influence of the Soviet Union through the destruction of left-wing armed insurgencies that were portrayed as instances of Soviet expansionism. George Kennan, the architect of the US’s Cold War grand strategy of containment, explained that in dealing with communism in Latin America the final answer ‘may be an unpleasant one’ but the US ‘should not hesitate before police repression by the local government’. It was, he continued, ‘better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists’.1

Throughout this period Colombia remained one of the largest recipients of US counterinsurgency funding and training aimed at destroying the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), an indigenous insurgency movement. The FARC were portrayed as Soviet-backed guerrillas, and a threat to the pro-US Colombian state. During these years the Colombian military carried out widespread human rights abuses. Although these abuses were not publicly approved, they were considered a necessary evil required to prevent the alleged devastating consequences to US security should a potentially pro-Soviet state come to power in Latin America. Since the end of the Cold War the US has not only continued to fund and train the Colombian military for its fight against the FARC, but actually dramatically escalated its support, to the extent that Colombia is now the third largest recipient of US military aid in the world. This is despite the US’s publicly declared commitment to post-Cold war democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention to prevent human rights abuses, and the contin-
ueing record of gross human rights abuses committed by the Colombian military and their paramilitary allies.

In 2002 there were over 8,000 political assassinations in Colombia, 80 per cent of them carried out by paramilitary groups allied to the Colombian military. While the US has been ‘promoting polyarchy’ in Latin America generally, relying more on consent than coercion to maintain its domination, in Colombia it steadfastly supports a state that primarily relies on state terror to crush dissent and popular pressures for reform. Insofar as the US continues to underwrite and sponsor this state terror, it may fairly be said – without minimizing the role of the Colombian ruling class in this process – to be ‘promoting terrorocracy’ in Colombia.

This is not to say that consensual mechanisms are unimportant even in this case. As David Harvey argues, US policy relies upon processes of consent and cooperation in order ‘to make the claim that it is acting in the general interest plausible to others, even when, as most people suspect, it is acting out of narrow self-interest. This is what exercising leadership through consent is all about’. In relation to Colombia the principal means for the forging of consent during the post-Cold War era has been the deployment of new discourses on the ‘war on drugs’, and now the ‘war on terror’, to secure consent for the use of coercion. The aim of this essay is to show, first, that the US has used counter-insurgency as the principal coercive means for the stabilization and defence of capitalism in Colombia; second, that inherent within this US coercive strategy in Colombia is the promotion of sectoral interests of transnational capital primarily concentrated in oil; and third, that internal to this process has been an attempt to make the coercive forms of US-sponsored terror seems necessary and acceptable.

COUNTERINSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA DURING THE COLD WAR

The mutually supportive relation between US coercive statecraft and the reproduction of capitalism was recognized at the very beginning of the US’s counterinsurgency (CI) aid and training for the Colombian military in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Following a decade of civil war in Colombia, there were growing US concerns about armed peasant ‘enclaves’ throughout Colombia’s southern regions. A 1959 US memo from Roy Rubottom, US assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, outlined the rationale for the provision of US CI training for Colombia. The memo argued that although ‘it would be difficult to make the finding of present Communist danger in the Colombian guerrilla situation’, the ‘continuance of unsettled conditions in Colombia contributes to Communist objectives’ and threatens the ‘establishment of a pro-US, free enterprise democracy’. Colombia was
one of the largest recipients of US direct foreign investment (FDI) in South America. Of the $399 million of US FDI in Colombia in 1959, most ($225 million) was in oil, followed by manufacturing, public utilities and trade.⁶ Colombia’s close proximity to the Panama Canal also worried US planners in the early years of CI assistance: instability near the canal zone could potentially damage world trade and US strategic access. In 1960, Colonel Edward Lansdale, US Assistant Secretary of Defence for Special Operations, argued that the US should ‘undertake assistance to Colombia to correct the situation of political insurrection’ near the Canal Zone, a ‘place so vital to our own national security’.

Internal US documentation related to CI reveals the American state’s active promotion of the widespread surveillance and policing of progressive elements in civil society so as to prevent the ‘subversion’ of capitalist socio-economic relations. One manual used to train Colombia CI forces told them to ask: ‘Are there any legal political organizations which may be a front for insurgent activities? Is the public education system vulnerable to infiltration by insurgent agents? What is the influence of politics on teachers, textbooks, and students, conversely, what influence does the education system exercise on politics?’⁸ They then were told to ask what ‘is the nature of the labor organizations; what relationship exists between these organizations, the government, and the insurgents?’ In outlining targets for CI intelligence operations the manual identified a number of different occupational categories and generic social identities. These included ‘merchants’ and ‘bar owners and bar girls’ and ‘Ordinary citizens who are typical members of organizations or associations which … play an important role in the local society’. In particular US-backed CI forces were to concentrate on ‘[l]eaders of Dissident groups (minorities, religious sects, labor unions, political factions) who may be able to identify insurgent personnel, their methods of operation, and local agencies the insurgents hope to exploit’. In an overt indication of the equation of labour movements with subversion the manual then went on to state that insurgent forces typically try to work with labour unions and union leaders so as to determine ‘the principal causes of discontent which can best be exploited to overthrow the established government [and] recruit loyal supporters’. The manual stated that organizations that stress ‘immediate social, political, or economic reform may be an indication that the insurgents have gained a significant degree of control’, and moved on to detail a series of what it terms ‘Insurgent Activity Indicators’:

Refusal of peasants to pay rent, taxes, or loan payments or unusual difficulty in their collection. Increase in the number of entertainers with a political message. Discrediting the judicial system and police
organizations. Characterization of the armed forces as the enemy of the people. Appearance of questionable doctrine in the educational system. Appearance of many new members in established organizations such as labor organizations. Increased unrest among labourers. Increased student activity against the government and its police, or against minority groups, foreigners and the like. An increased number of articles or advertisements in newspapers criticizing the government. Strikes or work stoppages called to protest government actions. Increase of petitions demanding government redress of grievances. Proliferation of slogans pinpointing specific grievances. Initiation of letterwriting campaigns to newspapers and government officials deploiring undesirable conditions and blaming individuals in power.9

US CI strategy was thus directly at odds with broad swathes of democratic activity and served to entrench a particular kind of political stability in Colombia. Central to this security posture was the secret advocacy of state terrorism and the development of covert paramilitary networks. In 1962, the head of a US Army Special Warfare team that provided the initial blueprint for the reorientation of the Colombian military for CI, General William Yarborough, stated:

It is the considered opinion of the survey team that a concerted country team effort should be made now to select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training in resistance operations in case they are needed later. This should be done with a view toward development of a civil and military structure for exploitation in the event that the Colombian internal security system deteriorates further. This structure should be used to pressure toward reforms known to be needed, perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States … The apparatus should be charged with clandestine execution of plans developed by the United States Government toward defined objectives in the political, economic and military fields. This would permit passing to the offensive in all fields of endeavor rather than depending on the Colombians to find their own solution.10

Prior to the ending of the Cold War, the Office of Public Diplomacy (OPD) was set up to manage public perceptions of US policy and to sell US intervention in Latin America to both domestic and international audiences.11 It was particularly concerned with producing consent for the Reagan administration’s interventions in Central America against the El Salvadoran insurgents and the Sandinista (FSLN) government in Nicaragua. Importantly, the OPD concluded that anti-communism was becoming an increasingly
ineffective pretext to justify US intervention in Latin America prior to the ending of the Cold War. One OPD memo argued that new propaganda themes needed to be developed so as to ‘stress and exploit the negative characteristics of our adversaries’. These themes were identified in another OPD memo that yields especially important insights into the evolution of US propaganda themes and their development prior to the ending of the Cold War. The memo outlined a series of ‘supporting perceptions’ that needed to be stressed so as to ease the Administration’s goal of portraying aid to the Nicaraguan contras as a ‘vital national interest of the United States’. These supporting perceptions were that the ‘FSLN is racist and represses human rights’, that the ‘FSLN is involved in U.S. drug problem[s]’, and that ‘the FSLN are linked to worldwide terrorism’. These themes were identified using public opinion surveys ‘to see what turns Americans against the Sandinistas’ and thus produce consent for US intervention. (In 2002, the Bush administration appointed Otto Reich, the man in charge of the OPD throughout the 1980s, as its Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs.)

In 1987, John Waghelstein, a leading US CI specialist, explained the utility of stressing drugs to sell US intervention to appropriate audiences. He argued that it would foster a ‘melding in the American public’s mind and in Congress of this connection [leading] to the necessary support to counter the guerrilla/narcotics terrorists in this hemisphere’. With the linkage between guerrillas and drugs, ‘Congress would find it difficult to stand in the way of supporting our allies with the training, advice and security assistance necessary to do the job’ of CI whilst those ‘church and academic groups’ who have ‘slavishly supported insurgency in Latin America’ would ‘find themselves on the wrong side of the moral issue’. Most importantly the US would ‘have the unassailable moral position from which to launch a concerted offensive effort using Department of Defense (DOD) and non-DOD assets’. The forging of consent has thus been crucial in smoothing the way for the US’s continued terrorocracy promotion in Colombia.

COUNTERINSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA AFTER THE COLD WAR

The $1.3 billion ‘Plan Colombia’ initiated under President Clinton was sold to both US domestic and international opinion as an essential component of the US’s war on drugs in South America. In the words of Congressman Cass Ballanger, since the end of the Cold War ‘US foreign policy toward Colombia has solely focussed on counternarcotics activities.’ The US Congress’ concern to limit US ‘efforts to [a] counterdrug strategy in an attempt to avoid getting tangled in what seems to be an endless internal
struggle’ ensured that Plan Colombia was presented as a ‘counternarcotics operations only’. A central component of Plan Colombia’s implementation was the formation and retraining of a series of new Colombian ‘counternarcotic’ brigades to ultimately destroy the FARC. The latter were now characterised as ‘narco-guerrillas’, and as the principal agents in Colombia allegedly responsible for drug trafficking to the US.

The designation of the FARC as ‘narco-guerrillas’ is grossly disingenuous. In Colombia’s southern region there is a long-standing pattern of small-scale coca cultivation by peasants displaced through the decades of civil war and unequal landholding, but by the late 1990s cultivation had spread quite widely throughout the country, with coca concentrations in eastern and western Colombia, as well as in the paramilitary strongholds in Colombia’s northern departments. More important than the geographical areas where coca is grown, however, are the trafficking networks that are concentrated in the north of Colombia. These are operated, protected and sustained by Colombia’s narco-mafia and their paramilitary armies. It is these trafficking networks that are responsible for transhipment into US markets and laundering the proceeds into both Colombian and international financial networks. The US has completely ignored these in Plan Colombia.

The former Deputy Administrator with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), James Milford, has acknowledged that, while the FARC ‘generate revenue by “taxing” local drug related activities’ in those regions it controls, ‘there is little to indicate the insurgent groups are trafficking in cocaine themselves, either by producing cocaine … and selling it to Mexican syndicates, or by establishing their own distribution networks in the United States.’ On the other hand, he pointed out that Carlos Castano, who heads the paramilitary umbrella group, the AUC (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia), is a ‘major cocaine trafficker in his own right’ and has close links to the North Valley drug syndicate which is ‘among the most powerful drug trafficking groups in Colombia’. Donnie Marshall, the former Administrator of the DEA, also confirmed that right-wing paramilitary groups ‘raise funds through extortion, or by protecting laboratory operations in northern and central Colombia. The Carlos Castano organization and possibly other paramilitary groups appear to be directly involved in processing cocaine. At least one of these paramilitary groups appears to be involved in exporting cocaine from Colombia.’ Marshall concluded that ‘at present, there is no corroborated information that the FARC is involved directly in the shipment of drugs from Colombia to international markets’.

Klaus Nyholm, the Director of the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), has pointed out that the ‘guerrillas are something
different than the traffickers, the local fronts are quite autonomous. But in some areas, they’re not involved at all. And in others, they actively tell the farmers not to grow coca’. In the rebels’ former Demilitarised Zone, Nyholm stated, ‘drug cultivation has not increased or decreased’ once the ‘FARC took control’. Indeed, Nyholm noted in 1999 that the FARC were cooperating with a $6 million UN project to replace coca crops with new forms of legal alternative development. And he recently went so far as to say that

drug trafficking undoubtedly is much more intimate [than the FARC’s]…. Many of the paramilitary bands started as the drug traffickers’ hired guns. They are more autonomous now, but have maintained their close relations with the drug traffickers. In some of the coastal towns it can, in fact, sometimes be hard to tell whether a man is a paramilitary chief, a big coca planter, a cocaine lab owner, a rancher, or a local politician. He may be all five things at a time’.21

Clearly, the FARC are bit players in comparison to the paramilitary networks and the cocaine barons that these paramilitaries protect. So why, with the both the US and the UN anti-drug agencies consistently reporting over a number of years that the paramilitaries are far more heavily involved than the FARC in drug cultivation, refinement and transhipment to the US, has Plan Colombia emphasized the FARC’s alleged links to international drug trafficking? The reason is quite simply that paramilitaries have long been central to the operation of US-backed Colombian counterinsurgency and terrorocracy. Going all the way back to William Yarborough’s call in 1962 for an integrated paramilitary network, the US has been instrumental in setting up and perpetuating the paramilitary networks that are responsible for the vast majority of human rights abuses committed in Colombia today, the victims primarily being trade unionists, journalists, teachers, human rights workers and the poor.22

Crucial to this was a US-led reorganization of Colombia’s military intelligence in 1991, with the help of US Department of Defence and CIA advisers in Colombia. Human Rights Watch obtained a copy of the official Colombian government order authorizing this secret reorganisation, and it was confirmed as authentic by the then Colombian Defense Minister, Rafael Pardo. The order said nothing about aiding the Colombian military in counter-narcotics efforts. Instead it focused solely on combating what was called ‘escalating terrorism by armed subversion’ through the creation of what Human Rights Watch characterised as a ‘secret network that relied on paramilitaries not only for intelligence, but to carry out murder’. The reorganisation further incorporated the paramilitary networks within Colombia’s
military whilst making this relationship harder to track. For example, the order stated that all ‘written material’ was to be ‘removed’ and any ‘open contacts and interaction with military installations’ was to be avoided by paramilitaries. The handling of the networks was to be conducted covertly which allowed for the ‘necessary flexibility to cover targets of interest’. Human Rights Watch noted that once this secret reorganisation of Colombian military intelligence was complete, paramilitary violence ‘dramatically increased’.

By thus facilitating the incorporation of the principal paramilitary terrorist networks into the prevailing Colombian CI strategy, the US sought to obscure the linkages further by making the relationship more covert – this despite the US State Department’s admission that the paramilitaries are essentially ‘a mercenary vigilante force, financed by criminal activities’ and the paid private army of ‘narcotics traffickers or large landowners’.25 Paramilitary involvement in narcotics quite clearly takes a back-seat in relation to the overriding priority of the US: the destruction of the FARC and the maintenance of terrorocracy so as to insulate the Colombian political system from democratic pressures. In a moment of candour, Carlos Castano, the head of the paramilitary AUC already mentioned above, not only conceded that drug trafficking and drug traffickers financed 70 per cent of his organization’s operations, but boasted that his paramilitaries ‘have always proclaimed that we are the defenders of business freedom and of the national and international industrial sectors.’26

The explicit counter-terror orientation of US policy in the aftermath of September 11th has led to a shift from the language of counter-narcotics to counter-terrorism to justify US CI operations in Colombia. US Attorney General John Ashcroft now designated the FARC the ‘most dangerous international terrorist group based in the Western Hemisphere’.27 And US Senator John McCain argued that ‘American policy has dispensed with the illusion that the Colombian government is fighting two separate wars, one against drug trafficking and another against domestic terrorists.’ The US, he said, had abandoned ‘any fictional distinctions between counter-narcotic and counter-insurgency operations’.28 The Bush administration’s 2003 aid package for the Colombian military, the Andean Regional Initiative (ARI), allocated approximately $538 million for 2003. Tellingly, the ARI also contains a component that will send $98 million to a new 4,000 strong Colombian military unit trained to protect the Caño Limón pipeline owned by the US multinational oil corporation, Occidental Petroleum.

Both the new US discourse and increased military aid, despite the ongoing and widespread collaboration between the Colombian military and their paramilitary allies, flies brazenly in the face of Amnesty International’s compelling documentation of the long-standing collusion between paramil-
itary forces and the Colombian military whereby in ‘areas of long-standing paramilitary activity, reliable and abundant information shows that the security forces continued to allow paramilitary operations with little or no evidence of actions taken to curtail such activity’. One Colombian military unit set up specifically to deal with paramilitarism was no more than a ‘paper tiger’, Amnesty noted, and called the official Colombian government office that allegedly monitors paramilitary massacres ‘a public relations mouthpiece for the government’.29

Colombia’s new hard-line President, Alvaro Uribe, has begun to negotiate with the paramilitaries so as to grant them a general amnesty and incorporate them more overtly into the Colombian military. Uribe’s negotiations with the AUC are ongoing, and he has put a bill before the Colombian Congress that will allow paramilitary leaders to buy themselves immunity from punishment for human rights abuses. According to Human Rights Watch, this ‘amnesty bill’ essentially amounts to ‘checkbook impunity’.30 The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has also condemned the bill and argued that it ‘opens the door to impunity’ as it ‘voids prison sentences by allowing responsible parties to avoid spending a single day in jail’.31 Yet Uribe’s policies have been endorsed by the US. Secretary of State Colin Powell has declared that the US is ‘firmly committed to President Uribe and his new national security strategy,’ pledging that the Bush administration would work ‘with our Congress to provide additional funding for Colombia.’32 Gordon Sumner, who was formerly President Reagan’s special envoy to Latin America, stated bluntly the best way to get around the public relations problem presented by Uribe’s amnesty bill: ‘First, have them answer the law, cut out the drugs, and embrace human rights’, then try to ‘bring them under the tent, to fight against the guerrillas, who are the biggest threat’. In Colombia, he said, the ‘battle is never too crowded with friends’.33

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COUNTERINSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA

The US CI intervention in Colombia cannot be separated from a wider set of regional US economic, strategic and political considerations that transcend conventional juridical definitions of sovereignty. The interlocking ties between US and Colombian capital have depended on the maintenance of a favourable investment climate, unhindered market access and the repatriation of profit by US-transnationals. This interwoven nature of the political economy of US and Latin American markets figures prominently in the thinking of US military planners. For example, General Peter Pace, the Commander in Chief of the US’s Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM)
under the Clinton Administration, and thus responsible for implementing US security assistance programs throughout Latin America, argued that vital US national interests, which he defined as ‘those of broad, over-riding importance to the survival, safety and vitality of our nation,’ included the maintenance of stability and unhindered access to Latin American markets by US transnationals in the post-Cold War period. Noting that ‘our trade within the Americas represents approximately 46 per cent of all US exports, and we expect this percentage to increase in the future’, Pace went on to explain that underlying the US military’s role in Colombia was the need to maintain a ‘continued stability required for access to markets … which is critical to the continued economic expansion and prosperity of the United States’. US security assistance to the Colombian military was necessary because any ‘loss of our Caribbean and Latin American markets would seriously damage the health of the US economy’.

The current Commander in Chief of USSOUTHCOM, General James T. Hill, has taken the same position. He has stated that the ‘US conducts more than 360 billion dollars of annual trade with Latin America and the Caribbean, nearly as much as with the entire European Community,’ and added that by the year 2010 ‘trade with Latin America is expected to exceed that with the European Economic Community and Japan combined … these links will only grow as we progress toward the President’s vision of a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas’. In this context, General Hill outlined the utility of the Southern Command’s ‘security cooperation activities’ which were designed to expand US ‘influence, assure friends, and dissuade potential adversaries’ whilst promoting stability ‘through training, equipping, and developing allied security force capabilities’. Notably, Hill argued that ‘Southern Command will play a crucial role in developing the kinds of security forces that help provide the ability to govern throughout the region, and particularly in Colombia’.

All this makes it abundantly clear that US security assistance to Colombia serves a broader agenda for capitalist stability in South America. The principal non-state threat to this is the Colombian insurgency. Stability therefore requires the eradication of this threat. Marc Grossman, US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, underscored the crucial role that economic interests play in driving US intervention in Colombia, when he stated that the Colombian insurgents represent a danger to the $4.3 billion in direct U.S. investment in Colombia. They regularly attack U.S. interests, including the railway used by the Drummond Coal Mining facility and Occidental Petroleum’s stake in the Caño Limón oil pipeline. Terrorist attacks on the Caño Limón pipeline also pose a threat to U.S. energy security.
Colombia supplied 3% of U.S. oil imports in 2001, and possesses substantial potential oil and natural gas reserves.36

Colombia is now the US’s seventh largest oil supplier and has discovered vast oil reserves within its territory.37 Brent Scowcroft, a former US National Security Adviser, has argued that ‘Colombia’s oil reserves of 2.6 billion barrels – only slightly less than OPEC members Qatar, Indonesia and Algeria – could serve as a major energy source, but will remain untapped unless stability is restored’.38 Perhaps even more important is the fear that instability in Colombia threatens regional stability, and in particular Colombia’s neighbour Venezuela. Republican Senator Paul D. Coverdell explicitly explains the regional focus of US intervention in Colombia in terms of the possibility that the ‘destabilization of Colombia’ could directly affect bordering Venezuela, now generally regarded as our largest oil supplier. In fact, the oil picture in Latin America is strikingly similar to that of the Middle East, except that Colombia provides us more oil today than Kuwait did then. This crisis, like the one in Kuwait, threatens to spill over into many nations, all of which are allies.39

The wider strategic considerations that link counterinsurgency in Colombia to US access to South American oil grow out of fears of regional instability generated by the FARC. General Pace had already made this clear before the election of George W. Bush, let alone September 11. He started by explaining how important South American oil is to the US, arguing that there is a ‘common misperception’ that the US ‘is completely dependent on the Middle East’ for oil, when in fact Venezuela provides ‘15%-19% of our imported oil in any given month’. Pace then went on to note that the ‘internal conflict in Colombia poses a direct threat to regional stability’ and US oil interests, with ‘Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama’ the ‘most vulnerable to destabilization due to Colombian insurgent activity along their borders’.40 Of course, unhindered access to South American oil became an even more pressing concern for US planners after the September 11th attacks, and this concern can only increase in the context of the continuing instability generated by the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq. The US Ambassador to Colombia, Anne Patterson, explained that ‘after September 11, the issue of oil security has become a priority for the United States’, especially as the ‘traditional oil sources for the United States’ in the Middle East have become even ‘less secure’. By sourcing US energy needs from Colombia, which ‘after Mexico and Venezuela’ is ‘the most important oil country in the region’, the US would have ‘a small margin to work with’ in the face of a crisis and could ‘avoid [oil] price speculation’.41
The centrality of US oil concerns in Colombia has been illustrated clearly by the Bush administration’s request for $98 million for the specially trained Colombian military CI brigade, mentioned before, as part of the Andean Regional Initiative. Unlike the more generic Colombian CI brigades, this brigade will be devoted solely to protecting the US multinational Occidental Petroleum’s 500-mile long Cano Limon oil pipeline in Colombia. US Secretary of State Colin Powell explained that the money will be used to ‘train and equip two brigades of the Colombian armed forces to protect the pipeline’ to prevent rebel attacks which are ‘depriving us of a source of petroleum’. Acknowledging that the money involved had nothing to do with the war on drugs, Ambassador Patterson said bluntly: ‘it is something that we must do’ because it is ‘important for the future of the country, for our oil sources and for the confidence of our investors’.

This new security arrangement between the US, Colombian CI brigades and US oil transnationals essentially makes official what has been a longstanding relationship. In December 1998, for example, US mercenaries working for the US security company Airscan (which has managed the protection of Occidental Petroleum’s pipelines in Colombia since 1997) were involved in planning a Colombian military attack on an alleged FARC column near the community of Santa Domingo in Colombia’s Arauca region. During the attack a Colombian air force helicopter dropped a bomb on the community; it killed eighteen civilians, including nine children (no FARC rebels were killed). In their testimony to Colombian investigators of the incident, the helicopter pilots stated that the operations were planned at Occidental’s facilities. (British Petroleum also financed paramilitaries in Colombia to protect its oil pipelines, and was condemned for this by the European Parliament in 1998.) The special pipeline CI brigade will thus formalise this longstanding and intimate relationship, and will use the so-called ‘counter-narcotics’ brigades for the protection of the sectoral interests of the transnational oil companies. Bush himself made this clear when he stated in 2003 that ‘the budget will extend the reach of counter-narcotics brigades in southern Colombia while beginning training of new units to protect the country’s economic lifeline, an oil pipeline. In 2001, Colombia was the source of about two percent of US oil imports, creating a mutual interest in protecting this economic asset’. In sum, the destabilising presence of the FARC and the ELN combined with their bombings of the pipelines of the large oil transnationals has necessitated the elimination of these groups so as to guarantee a relatively unhindered source of non-Middle Eastern oil.
THE CURRENT SITUATION

The Colombian state remains firmly wedded to the implementation of neo-liberal reforms, and the increasing militarization of social life under the pretext of a ‘war on terror’. The reforms are pushing more of Colombia’s people into poverty. In 1999, at the inception of Plan Colombia, the World Bank noted that ‘more than half of Colombians [were] living in poverty … the proportion of poor [has] returned to its 1988 level, after having declined by 20 percentage points between 1978 and 1995.’ The recession of the mid-1990s added to Colombia’s woes and contributed to ‘a rise in inequality, a decline in macroeconomic performance, and a doubling in unemployment’.49 The picture is less bleak for Colombia’s elites. In 1990 the ratio of income between the poorest and richest 10 per cent was 40:1. After a decade of economic restructuring this reached 80:1 in 2000.50

Under Uribe Colombia is undergoing further IMF structural adjustment in the interests of transnational corporations. In the oil industry, for example, Uribe is lowering the royalties paid to Colombia by foreign oil companies and has effectively privatized the state-owned oil company, Ecopetrol. Uribe argued that this was necessary in order to make Colombia internationally ‘competitive’ and to prevent it becoming a net importer of oil. Meanwhile, Colombia’s oil regions are becoming fully militarized, with the paramilitaries effectively running a number of towns. This model of what Uribe euphemistically terms ‘Democratic Security’ is being rolled out across Colombia as an integral part of the joint US-Colombia militarization program.51

Given the ongoing difficulties in maintaining the occupation of Iraq, there is every reason to assume that Colombia and Venezuela will become increasingly important to US oil needs, leading to further militarization, with Uribe’s Colombia increasingly acting as a base for destabilization directed against Hugo Chavez’s government in Venezuela.52 Amidst these developments the Bush Administration is looking to increase its support for the Colombian state by seeking to raise the number of US troops stationed there whilst maintaining the very high levels of military assistance.53 There is no reason to assume that a Democratic administration under John Kerry would follow a different path, given his wholehearted endorsement of Bush’s ‘war on terror’ and his hard-line condemnation of Chavez as a dictator.54

On the other hand the FARC remain a formidable military force in Colombia, Uribe’s security reforms having failed to deal the guerrillas any significant military blow. The FARC has not yet been weakened to the point where they can be drawn in to a peace process which ends the war but leaves intact the existing unequal economic and social structures. In short, there is a deadlock between the CI strategy of the US-backed Colombian state and
the guerrillas, which in the absence of any political process or redistributive economic reforms continues to contribute to the suffering of Colombia’s civilian population.

NOTES


11 My detailed analysis of the OPD will be forthcoming in 2005 as ‘Gluing the Hats On: Power, Agency and Reagan’s Office of Public Diplomacy’ in International Relations.

Record of Ambassador Otto Reich’, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB40/.
19 The Washington Post, 10 April 2000.
20 Associated Press, 6 August 1999.
21 Correspondence conducted by author with Klaus Nyholm, 23 January 2003.
26 This was reported on 6 September 2000 by Reuters and CNN, http://www.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/americas/09/06/colombia.paramilitary.reut/.


37 Donald E. Schulz, *The United States and Latin America: Shaping an Elusive Future*, Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000, p. 3.

38 Brent Scowcroft and Bob Graham, ‘Quick Aid to Colombia – For Our Sake’, *Los Angeles Times*, 26 April 2000.


