

Inside the 'Crystal Triangle': The US 'War on Narcoterrorism' in Colombia

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For half a century, the United States and its client state in Colombia have been unsuccessful in eliminating Latin America's oldest and most powerful Marxist insurgency the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), via the Cold War, the 'War on Drugs,' and the 'War on Terror' after 9/11. This is an astonishing feat for a so-called 'terrorist' organisation in the twenty-first century. This paper will explore an area much eluded in Washington's 'Axis of Evil,' the US 'War on Narcoterrorism' in Colombia with a particular focus on the cocaine drug trade and the FARC.

Field of Research: Latin American Studies, Political Economy, American Foreign Policy, International Relations.

1. Introduction

For half a century, the United States and its client state in Colombia have been unsuccessful in eliminating Latin America's oldest and most powerful Marxist insurgency the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), via the Cold War, the 'War on Drugs,' and the 'War on Terror' after 9/11. This is an astonishing feat for a so-called 'terrorist' organisation in the twenty-first century. This paper will explore an area much eluded in Washington's 'Axis of Evil,' the US 'War on Narcoterrorism' in Colombia with a particular focus on the cocaine drug trade and the FARC.

2. Literature Review

The paper evaluates available literature and evidence on the cocaine drug trade, the Colombian civil conflict, and the US 'War on Drugs and Terror.' Since the 'cocaine decade' between 1980 and 1989, the importance of cocaine to the political economy of Colombia was met with an increase of insurgent activity by FARC and other left-wing rebel organisations. United States government funding for Colombian security forces also increased throughout this period.

3. Methodology and Research Design

The research explored a critical aspect of the Colombian civil conflict that is confronting the Colombian state and its key political and military backer, the United States government. The paper offers an alternative framework underpinned by a class-historical analysis of the development of the drug economy and the FARC.

4. Discussion

During the Cold War and throughout the history of US foreign policy, the United States has intervened in more states in Latin America than in any other continent, with US-sponsored counterinsurgency the primary means of US coercive statecraft (Schoultz, 1998). The US considers Latin America as its own 'backyard.' George Kennan, America's Cold War strategy planner and designer of 'containment,' explained that in dealing with Communism in Latin America, the final solution, 'may be an unpleasant one' but the US 'should not hesitate before police repression by the local government.' For Kennan, it was 'better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists' (Kennan quoted in Schmitz, 1999, p. 149). From a military science standpoint, Colombia – not Vietnam – has been America's longest and most enduring counterinsurgency war up to date.

The picture in Colombia is dominated by the view that the US and Colombian governments are at war with left-wing terrorists funded by the cocaine drug trade i.e. 'narcoterrorists.' As in the Middle East, the fact that a US counterinsurgency is being waged in an 'Axis of Oil' only this time in its own 'backyard' is hardly disputed by progressive writers (see for instance, Scott, 2003; Murillo, 2004; Livingstone, 2004; Stokes, 2005; Leech, 2006; Wilpert, 2007). Colombia is the seventh largest supplier of oil to the United States and shares with Venezuela and Ecuador the Venezuela-Orinoco belt, one of the largest pools of hydrocarbons in the world (Murillo, 2004; Hylton, 2006). But 'big oil' alone cannot fully explain the US logic for waging the world's most expensive war after the wars of the Middle East (which also includes financing US allies Israel, Egypt, Pakistan, and Jordan) (The Center for Public Integrity, *Collateral Damage: Human Rights and U.S. Military Aid After 9/11*: <http://projects.publicintegrity.org/militaryaid/>).

Colombia shares with Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador the 'Crystal Triangle' – the world's coca producing zone – making Colombia the world's number one producer of processed cocaine by supplying 100 percent to American streets and 76 percent globally (Lee, 2002; Changing Dynamics of Cocaine Production in the Andean Region, *Drug Intelligence Brief, US Drug Enforcement Administration*, Jun. 2002). This is the leading exponent of the US 'War on Drugs-War on Terror-Narcoterrorism' in the Western Hemisphere.

To understand the contemporary Colombian conflict properly, it is important to revisit some relevant history and facts about this Andean nation. Since the Spanish Conquest, landowners and merchants have played a powerful role in Colombian economic life (Zamosc, 1986). A system of colonial exploitation called the *hacienda* was introduced developing a rural class structure of Spanish landlords and landless *campesinos*

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(peasants). In the *hacienda* system, the colonisation of land by the property owners was met with militant resistance by the poor peasantry. For the exploited classes land meant freedom, and when Simon Bolivar's wars of independence against Spanish rule swept Latin America, the landlords of Colombia pledged their allegiance to Spain (McFarlane, 1993).

The *hacienda* system, however, created its own internal contradictions, the *colonos* (landless workers) and the poor peasantry struggling for land. The result of this phase of struggle was a class society based on sizes of land ownership that in the early twentieth century appeared as follows: *minifundias* in the highlands, mixed patterns of production in the slopes, and *latifundias* in the plains (Sanchez, 1984).

The class struggle over land erupted during a period known in Colombian history as *La Violencia* (1948-1958), when the compradors in their struggle against the landless workers and peasantry split along political, ideological, and regional lines in their own parliamentary political system (Richani, 2002). By the 1940s, a power struggle within the Colombian ruling class determined the fate of Colombian politics. Old rivalries between the two major political parties in the parliament, the Liberals and Conservatives, noticed this struggle. Amidst this parliamentary infighting, a Liberal presidential candidate named Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, enjoyed popular appeal. His message was to the people against the oligarchy, the 'real country' against the 'political country' (Pearce, 1990; Livingstone, 2003; FARC-EP, 2000). For the 'oligarchy,' populism in any form was tantamount to Communist subversion and required state repression. It reached a climax when Gaitan was gunned down on April 9, 1948. His assassination, believed to be the first crime organised by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Colombia, spurred a major uprising called the *Bogotázo* (Atherton, 2003; Idels, 2002; FARC-EP, 2000).

Liberals and leftists alike blamed the ruling Conservative government for Gaitan's assassination. Workers, the middle class, and common people stormed the city attacking anything which symbolised a government that excluded and impoverished them instigating *La Violencia* (Peace, 1990). The upsurge convulsed the country and liberal landowners organised peasant-guerrilla armies. Paramilitary groups comprised of civilians and police carried out military operations (Richani, 2002). Unions retaliated by organising self-defence groups in the mountains. The Communist Party reorganised the peasant resistance including the foundation of guerrilla camps under the political leadership of the Communist Party aligned to Moscow (Peace, 1990). With the support of the US, the Colombian military responded by destroying the encampment while survivors were forced to flee to distant zones (Pearce, 1990; FARC-EP, 2000).

On May 18, 1964, the US guided and financed counterinsurgency campaign began when Colombian Armed Forces surrounded and attacked Marquetalia, the principal rebel agrarian community (Schneider, 2000). Labelling these autonomous communities as 'independent republics,' the Colombian government sent 16,000 troops, accompanied by tanks, helicopters, and warplanes, and carried out bombing campaigns against the departments of Marquetalia, Rio Chiquito, El Pato-Guayabero, and Santa Barbara. The Communist Party and peasant rebels retreated to the agricultural frontiers in Amazonia where the state had a limited presence (Schneider, 2000; Rabasa & Chalk, 2001; Kirk, 2003).

La Violencia made an important impact on land ownership in Colombia. The landless remained landless and the power of the landlords was assured with a dominant position in the nation's body politic. Political opposition was outlawed and repressed. Rewarded

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by the United States with financial support, Colombia was labelled a 'showcase' for the 'Alliance for Progress' of 1961, which saw huge expansions in commercial agriculture and landowners highly represented in the government (Randall, 1992).

The US moved along two tracks in the early 1960s: to overthrow Cuba and neutralise revolutionary movements throughout the region; and to launch the 'Alliance for Progress' – promoted as a free market solution to poverty but serving only to deepen US economic penetration of Latin America (Hylton, 2006). The irony of its results was that the Colombian and US government in the 1960s and 1970s actually sought to achieve their free market reforms to prevent a Colombian revolution. These radical political developments led to the founding of the FARC in 1964 by *La Violencia* veterans, Jacobo Arenas and Manuel Marulanda Velez (nom de guerre – 'sure shot'), the former Chief Commandant of Central High Command, and other armed groups, the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and M-19 soon after.

The agrarian class conflict that begun during Spanish rule persists to the present – between the peasantry seeking to colonise lands – and the landlords who resist this process (Sanchez, 1984). Between 1970 and 1982 the FARC grew from the 500 who survived the old wave of state terror to a peasant army of 3,000. The *campesinos* stood in the parameters of class struggle, whilst an emerging drug economy throughout the 'cocaine decade' of the 1980s provided an opportunity to relieve their pauperisation by beginning to grow coca. While no legal crop offered the advantages of growing and selling coca for the *campesinos*, cocaine became a lucrative and ever expanding industry that produced an emerging 'narcobourgeoisie' in Colombia (Richani, 2002).

The 'cocaine decade' witnessed a period of continual state-terror with the use of right-wing paramilitary death squads, when the FARC and sectors of the Colombian left signed a peace pact with the government to engage in electoral politics. Approximately 5,000 activists and leaders, including two presidential candidates of the FARC's political party the *Union Patriótica* (UP) were exterminated (Petras, 2000; Molano, 2000). It was during this time when Colombia's current President, Alvaro Uribe Velez, began his political career by granting pilot licenses to drug traffickers as head of the aviation company *Aerocivil* (Hylton, 2003). With the support of his father, Alberto Uribe Sierra, Alvaro Uribe made his most important contacts with the emerging 'narcobourgeoisie' as head of *Aerocivil*. Uribe Sierra became a household name when he was indicted for his involvement in the widely reported raid on a cocaine-processing laboratory in Tranquilandia (Hylton, 2003).

Uribe Sierra owned extensive cattle ranches in Antioquia and Cordoba and became a real-estate intermediary for the Medellin drug cartel led by Pablo Escobar. When he was killed by FARC guerrillas at his ranch in 1983, Alvaro Uribe flew there in Pablo Escobar's helicopter (Contreras & Garavito, 2002). His father's wealth and connections to the underworld practically assured him a place in Colombia's emerging nascent form narco-state (Hylton, 2003).

Alvaro Uribe Velez's political career grew by providing known traffickers such as Pablo Escobar with local distributors. When Uribe's attendance at a cartel meeting in Escobar's hacienda *Napoles* was made public, Uribe was removed from his post as mayor (Contreras & Garavito, 2002). But between 1995 and 1997 he became governor of Antioquia and helped set up a paramilitary force called *Convivir*, later controlled by the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), an umbrella right-wing paramilitary organisation. Uribe's right hand man, Pedro Juan Moreno Villa, was Colombia's leading

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importer of potassium permanganate, the main precursor chemical in the manufacture of cocaine (*El Spectador* Sep. 1, 2002).

A recently declassified major report by the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) in 1991, ranked Uribe number 82 from a list of 104 'most important Colombian narcoterrorists contracted by the [Colombian narcotics cartels] for security, transportation, distribution, collection and enforcement of narcotics operations in both the US and Colombia.' The report states:

No. 82. Alvaro Uribe Velez – A Colombian politician and senator dedicated to collaboration with the Medellin Cartel at high government levels. Uribe was linked to a business involved in narcotics activities in the U.S. His father was murdered in Colombia for his connection with the narcotics traffickers. Uribe has worked for the Medellin Cartel and is a close personal friend of Pablo Escobar Gaviria. He has participated in Escobar's political campaign to win the position of assistant parliamentarian to Jorge (Ortega). Uribe has been one of the politicians, from the Senate, who has attacked all forms of the extradition treaty (US Intelligence Listed Colombian President Uribe Among 'Important Colombian Narco-Traffickers in 1991,' Confidential, p. 2, *The National Security Archive*, Georgetown University, Aug. 2, 2004: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB131/index.htm>).

The US and Colombian governments' allegation that FARC are 'narcoterrorists' was first devised by Rachel Ehrenfeld of the American Center for Democracy. Ehrenfeld is a member of the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), a neo-conservative lobby group chaired by former CIA Director James Woolsey. After 9/11, CPD became an influential lobby group which alleged the existence of a Saddam Hussein – Al Qaeda link (*Asia Times* Jun. 23, 2006). During the 'cocaine decade,' Ehrenfeld published three books on 'narcoterrorism' where she argued that a link between the FARC – the Soviet Union – Cuba – the Nicaraguan Sandinistas – and the Medellin drug cartel existed, and which therefore necessitated the US 'War on Drugs' to be directed against them.

A major report produced by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs found no evidence of FARC involvement in drug trafficking, its main findings, however, pointed to extensive drug smuggling to the United States by 'right-wing paramilitary groups in collaboration with wealthy drug barons, the armed forces, key financial figures and senior government bureaucrats' (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, Aug. 1999). Congressional testimony by James Milford, former Deputy Administrator of the DEA, argued there is little to indicate the drug trafficking claim, 'The FARC controls certain areas of Colombia and the FARC in those regions generate revenue by taxing local drug related activities' (James Milford – DEA Congressional Testimony, *House of International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere*, Jul 16, 1997). This view is supported by Klaus Nyholm, the Director of the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) which has agents throughout the drug producing regions. He argues that local FARC fronts are 'quite autonomous,' and in some areas 'they are not involved at all' in coca production which is not cocaine production, and in others 'they actually tell the farmers not to grow coca' (*The Washington Post* Apr. 17, 2000, p. 3). Ricardo Vargas of the Transnational Institute (TNI), an independent research centre which specialises in drug issues in Colombia, describes the role of the FARC as 'primarily focused on the taxation of illicit crops,' where the guerrillas have called for a development plan for the peasants that would 'allow eradication of coca on the basis of alternative crops' (Vargas, 1999).

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FARC's power and influence is estimated to extend across 60 percent of the country according to recent figures (Brittain, 2005). It was estimated that in less than three years over 93 percent of all regions of recent settlement in Colombia had a guerrilla presence (Bergquist, Penaranda, & Sánchez, 2003; Richani, 2002). In the department of Cundinamarca, which completely surrounds the capital city of Bogotá, FARC extends throughout 83 of the department's 116 municipalities. Some areas are formally organised by the FARC with schools, medical facilities, grassroots judicial structures and other social projects. According to fieldwork conducted in Colombia:

The FARC, unlike many recent revolutionary movements and struggles in Central and South America, is a peasant-based, organised, and maintained revolutionary organisation. The revolutionaries were not formed within classrooms or churches; they are not a movement led or consisting of lawyers, students, doctors, or priests. Rather, the FARC's leadership, support-base, and membership comes from the very soil from which it provides its subsistence, for the insurgents largely consist of peasants from rural Colombia, who account for approximately 65 percent of its members (Brittain, 2005, p. 23).

The present Uribe government has been implicated in a series of '*Parapolitica*' (AUC paramilitary connected) scandals which involves an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation (Plan Colombia and Beyond, The Center for International Policy: <http://www.cipcol.org/>). They include members of the government directly linked to the AUC as well as Uribe's appointment to Colombia's national intelligence service DAS, Jorge Noguera, which prosecutors have found held ten meetings with paramilitary leaders and passed on to them compiled lists of trade unionists and academics to be assassinated, among other serious charges (*Oneworld.net* Jan. 28, 2008; *People's Weekly World* Feb. 24, 2007). Other scandals have included an alleged assassination plot against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez; the murder of political opponents including FARC spokesman Raul Reyes while negotiating the possibility of a prisoner of war exchange with President Chavez, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, Ecuador's Interior Minister Gustavo Larrea, and the Colombian Red Cross; the violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty; electoral fraud and bribery; the doctoring of police and judicial records to erase paramilitary cases; and an alleged war crime involving the use of the 'Red Cross' emblem during a supposed 'daring' and 'perfect' military rescue operation against FARC, apparently choreographed by the Colombian government and media (*The Guardian* Mar. 8, 2007; Petras, 2008; *CNN.com* Aug. 6, 2008; Leech, 2008).

Annual profits from the drug trade are estimated to be \$500 billion; \$250 billion (50 percent) is estimated to go to US banks and is not hard to monitor. The US Federal Reserve System registers any deposit over \$10,000 (US Department of Treasury, 2000). Colombia's Central Bank estimates only \$76 billion (15 percent) goes to Colombia, less than half of US annual profits from the drug trade and 30 percent of Colombia's total wealth (www.unam.mx/cronica/1996/a8096/int006.html cited in Richani, 2002, p. 181, n. 54). Conservatively, the total revenue for the commercial export of cocaine for Colombia is estimated to be \$3.5 billion (close to \$3.75 billion made from oil and more than two and a half times the earnings made from coffee), while North America's gross revenue from sales to consumers is \$11 billion (Livingstone, 2003; Anonymous, 2002).ⁱⁱ

Cocaine must be exported to the United States by air from remote airstrips or by sea from Colombia's northern and western coasts. It has been reported that right-wing

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paramilitaries regularly fly Colombian military helicopters to army garrisons for the purpose of collecting cocaine and transporting it to Antioquia for export. In the areas to the south of Bolivar and Catatumbo, the helicopters used come from Colombian military bases (Flounders & Gutierrez, 2003). Jeff Brunner, a DEA supervisor in Colombia, states the AUC controls the coastal region where cocaine leaves the country. According to Brunner, traditional drug lords still exist but they have to work with the AUC if they want to ship their drugs to the US, Europe, or Africa (*The Tampa Tribune* Jul. 4, 2004). The DEA estimates that Colombia's net coca cultivation more than tripled, from 50,000 hectares in 1995, to 169,800 hectares in 2001, while cultivation in Peru and Bolivia declined. This increase marked the eighth consecutive year of net growth for the nation's premier illicit cash crop (The Drug Trade in Colombia: A Threat Assessment, DEA Intelligence Division, 2002). 'Over the years, [the AUC] have worked to control the coast, knowing that's where all the dope's got to leave from. They have their hand in every bit of dope. It has to, at a minimum, be authorized and taxed by them and, at a maximum, controlled by them,' says Brunner (*The Tampa Tribune* Jul. 4, 2004). *The Tampa Tribune* (Jul. 4, 2004) reports that US government court filings indicate the AUC controls the manufacture and transportation of tons of cocaine off the Pacific coast of southwest Colombia to Mexico for distribution in the United States.

5. Conclusion

By any means, standard, or methodology, if the link between the Colombian economic system and the US economy is to be properly understood, then the real and existing importance of cocaine to the political economy of Colombia merits close attention. The US 'War on Drugs and Terror and Narcoterrorism' is a product of US imperial policy continuity to eliminate FARC resistance to US domination in Latin America. Colombia is a dynamic case in point where the US global 'War on Terrorism' has imposed a 'narco-capitalism' which traces back to the United States with impunity. Will the under-examined 'Crystal Triangle' in America's 'backyard' become a remedy to the current US-led global economic crisis?

For half a century, the governments of Colombia and the United States have failed to wipe out the FARC insurgency, even with the presence of a right-wing authoritarian regime backed by the world's sole remaining superpower. Given Colombia's long history of class struggle over land, this failure to eliminate FARC through counterinsurgency, state-terror, and political repression of Colombian leftists is inevitable.

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ⁱ Ehrenfeld wrote, *Narcoterrorism: The Kremlin Connection* (1986); *Narcoterrorism and the Cuban Connection* (1988); and *Narcoterrorism* (1990). Notably, Ehrenfeld has been a participant in a new series of Western intelligence conferences held in Israel which began in 2003.

ⁱⁱ Colombia's National Association of Financial Institutions (ANIF) estimated the nation's total 1999 income from the illegal drug trade to be \$3.5 billion. The ANIF estimate was based on an assumption that somewhat less than 10 percent of total earnings from illicit drug sales are repatriated to Colombia each year, and on reported total world retail level sales of Colombian cocaine, heroin and marijuana of \$46 billion. The figures are based on a 1999 study. Based on these estimates, Colombian drug earnings would be considerably higher today.