

Plan Colombia and Plan Patriota: The Evolution of Colombia's National Strategy

by Robert W. Jones Jr.

IN more than fifty years of battling with anti-government insurgent movements, Colombia has used a number of strategies in an attempt to achieve victory. *Plan Colombia* and *Plan Patriota* are the latest plans designed to defeat the insurgency. The difference between *Plan Colombia* and previous campaigns is threefold. First, the scope is larger. *Plan Colombia* covers the entire country and is not limited to isolated enclaves. Second, it is a combined political, military, and economic effort as opposed to seeking a strictly military solution. Finally, there is the unprecedented level of support from the United States. This article will explain *Plan Colombia* and the follow-on *Plan Patriota* in the context of U.S.-Colombian relations. The historical roots of *Plan Colombia* date to the 1960s.

From 1948 to 1966, Colombia endured a harrowing period of internal strife known as *La Violencia*. More than 250,000 people were killed as warring political factions in the country vied for supremacy. Ultimately, a power-sharing arrangement known as the National Front alternated power between the Liberal and Conservative parties. In 1962, U.S. Army Brigadier General William P. Yarborough visited Colombia and helped draft a plan to quell the insurgency. Known as *Plan Lazo*, the fundamental elements were national to community-level civic action done in conjunction with aggressive counterinsurgency operations by the military and police. *Plan Lazo* helped the first two National Front administrations (1958–1966) end *La Violencia*. With the drawdown of most political violence, Bogotá policy makers reclassified the rural guerrilla movement as a criminal problem. This made the insurgency a law-and-order issue and gave the primary responsibility to the national police. The government increased the scope of the police mission without increasing its budget or force size. The focus of Colombia's armed forces reverted to traditional national defense. Over the next decade, these conditions led to the re-emergence of insurgent groups. In the absence of an effective government presence to counter the guerrillas, self-defense forces were formed that provided vigi-

lante-style law and order.

The first large scale attempt to defeat the insurgents was *Plan Lazo* in 1962. Rebel groups had established enclaves in the mountains. The enclaves became known as "independent republics," operating beyond government control. Initial attempts by the police, and then the army, proved fruitless. The bandits and quasi-guerrillas fought back and maintained control of their areas. The conflict led to an integrated operations plan named "*Lazo*." (In Spanish a "*lazo*" is a rope, noose, or snare.) The plan called for operations to isolate the independent republics and then use military force to defeat the insurgent groups. While a military operation, *Plan Lazo* also had a civil component, one of national- and community-level rural development, civic action, and civil defense.

The final phase of *Plan Lazo* became "*Operación MARQUETALIA*," the military operation to remove the so-called "*Marquetalia Republic*." The military force was to destroy the social and military infrastructure established by Jacobo Arenas. This Colombian Communist tried to create a socialist commune or society, based on the examples of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the 1949 Chinese Revolution. The Marquetalia Republic was an 800-square kilometer area in the Andes Mountains located at 6000 feet above sea level and was well suited for defense.¹ The Army focused a major offensive against the town of Marquetalia itself.

Following the military offensive, the surviving rebels and bandits managed to escape and scatter. The destruction of the independent republics led to the coalescing of several scattered groups and the formation of the FARC and ELN. In the



Map of Colombia indicating the Marquetalia Republic.

1970s, Colombia witnessed a rejuvenation of insurgency including the rise and fall of the M-19 as an urban group. Adding to the violence and discontent was the increase in narco-trafficking by the Cali and Medellín cartels. The chronically weak Colombian government was unable to control either the illegal drug trade or the growing insurgency.

Unfortunately, the U.S. attitude toward Latin America drifted into “benign neglect” until the 1980s. The United States was fully engaged in Vietnam and the Cold War in Europe. In the United States, the political and social upheaval of the 1960s and early 1970s only quieted down at the end of the Vietnam War. Latin America received little attention until the overthrow of the Anastasio Somoza Debayle regime in Nicaragua by Communist Sandinistas in 1979. In the case of Colombia, it was only when the Medellín and Cali drug cartels became the world’s leading cocaine suppliers in the mid-1980s that the United States focused on that country in a meaningful way. In the 1990s, a change of regime in Colombia brought a new strategy.

In 1998, after decades of violence and guerrilla warfare, President Andrés Pastrana Arango was elected—largely because he promised to seek peace with the insurgent groups. Pastrana’s advisors developed a plan entitled “*Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and Strengthening the State.*” President Pastrana presented “*Plan Colombia*” as “a set of alternative development projects which will channel the shared efforts of multilateral organizations and [foreign] governments toward Colombian society.”² At \$7.5 billion, the projected cost of the six-year *Plan Colombia* seemed enormous. The country sought outside assistance. Colombia pledged to provide \$4 billion and asked the international community for the remaining \$3.5 billion. The United States provided a \$1.3 billion package of support, which included helicopters, equipment, and training, primarily from the U.S. Army

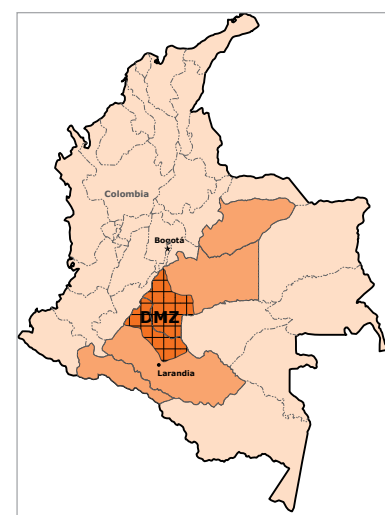
Special Forces.³

A unique feature was that Colombian diplomats and military leaders came to Washington DC to garner support for the plan even before it was fully explained to the Colombian government. The Colombian leadership briefed *Plan Colombia* to Congress to gain not only the financial, but also the political support of the U.S. government. President Pastrana’s Chief of Staff, Jaime Ruíz, wrote the first draft in English, causing rumors that the plan originated in the United States. The Colombians received Congressional support. Responsibility for *Plan Colombia* was assigned to the Department of State (DOS). Implementation would take place through the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá.⁴

Part of President Pastrana’s plan was to hold peace talks with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). To demonstrate sincerity, Pastrana formed a demilitarized zone called the “*despeje*” (des-pah-hey), meaning “clear” or “open.” Here the FARC and the government of Colombia could have “breathing space.” Cessation of hostilities in the *despeje* would ostensibly allow all sides to come to the negotiating table to discuss peace and ultimately bring an end to conflict in Colombia.⁵

Pastrana’s concept, while well intentioned, did not work. The government of Colombia moved police and military units out of the designated *despeje*, but the FARC did not honor the agreement. Instead, the FARC used the cease-fire as a time to rest, refit, and build strength without the Colombian armed forces or police disrupting its activities. The “Switzerland-sized” *despeje* became a *de facto* country within Colombia. The FARC provided public services for the people, albeit at the price of absolute loyalty. For the next three years, the Pastrana administration pursued a series of negotiations with the FARC. The failure of these negotiations led to an increase in U.S.-supported counter-drug operations.⁶

In Bogotá, the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) of the DOS became the staff agency responsible for the counter-drug mission and its subsequent support. Staffed with a mix of DOS, military, and contracted personnel, NAS handled the counter-drug (CD) logistics and all coordination with the Colombian government, from the national government down to equipping and advising police and military units. The largest monetary part of the American contribution came as equipment support, primarily helicopters. UH-60 Black Hawks and refurbished UH-1 “Huey” helicopters gave the Colombian National Police and newly designated and trained Army



Map of despeje area.



Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango (left) meets with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (right) at the Pentagon on 26 February 2001, to discuss a range of regional issues. Pastrana was accompanied by the Colombian Minister of National Defense Luis Ramírez (center).



A Colombian Black Hawk lands in a jungle clearing. The helicopters provide a rapid deployment capability.

CD battalions the mobility to attack the narco-trafficking labs and the cocaine transit sites.⁷

The level of U.S. military involvement increased significantly. Because Colombia is a huge and largely roadless country, counterinsurgency operations (COIN) in Colombia depended heavily on air movement. Helicopters were key and were the largest part of the U.S. commitment. The U.S. support provided fifty-nine helicopters: fourteen UH-60 Black Hawks, thirty single-engine UH-1H "Huey II" models, and fifteen twin-engine UH-1Ns.⁸ Flight training of the Colombian Black Hawk pilots took place at Fort Rucker, Alabama. U.S. contractors trained the UH-1 pilots and crews in Colombia. A contract maintenance package was to keep the helicopters flying. Despite the enhanced mobility, a specially-trained counter-drug force was needed to fight on the ground.⁹

In 1999, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) commander, Marine General Charles Wilhelm, working in concert with the National Drug Policy Coordinator, retired Army General Barry McCaffrey, proposed that a Colombian Army unit be trained, equipped, and dedi-



View through the jungle to a FARC base camp area. The camouflage and locations of most base camps require soldiers on the ground and extensive intelligence gathering to find them. PSYOP product-induced FARC surrenders provided guides to the hidden camp locations.



Secretary of Defense William Cohen (third from left) and Minister of Defense José Florencio Guzmán (second from right) conduct a bilateral meeting on 2 December 1998. The defense ministers are in Cartagena, Colombia, attending the Third Defense Ministerial of the Americas. Cohen is accompanied by General Charles Wilhelm (on his right), U.S. Marine Corps, commander, U.S. Southern Command; and Peter Romero (on his left), Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs.

cated only to counter-drug operations. The 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) was to train the counter-drug battalion. The 900-man CD battalion had a headquarters company and three line infantry companies and was almost three times the size of a typical Colombian battalion. The new unit was designed to be highly mobile with organic helicopter support. The first CD battalion was deemed operationally ready on 15 December 1999.¹⁰ At Fort Bragg, the 7th SFG assistant operations officer, Chief Warrant Officer 4 Solomon Delaney*, coordinated the movement of units and supplies from Fort Bragg to Colombia.¹¹

Tied to U.S. funding were Congressional oversight and certain restrictions that added to the training burden for the 7th SFG. The six-month training program grew to nine months. Before training could begin, each Colombian soldier was vetted for possible human rights accusations, a problem in some parts of the Army (the



Members of A Company, 2/7th SFG in Tres Equinas take a break from training during a command visit by the Commanding General U.S. Army Special Forces Command, Major General Geoffrey Lambert.

vetting was similar to a criminal background check in the United States). Once the soldiers had been vetted by the State Department, three Special Forces companies (A/1/7th, A/3/7th, and A/2/7th respectively) rotated through the *Tres Equinas* base to train the new battalion.¹² A U.S. infantry battalion program of instruction stressed marksmanship and light infantry techniques. The unit, unlike other Colombian Army elements, was armed with U.S. equipment, including M16A2 rifles. The Gailil is the standard Colombian Army rifle.¹³ A programmed expansion of the counter-drug capability led to the fielding of two more CD battalions and the formation of a CD brigade headquarters for command and control in 2003.¹⁴

Congressional oversight constrained operations. The CD battalion and the U.S.-supplied helicopters could be used only for counter-drug operations and for emergency humanitarian activities—if NAS and the U.S. Embassy cleared requests. The CD unit could not be used to fight guerrillas even if the insurgents were supporting drug traffickers. This meant the soldiers and their organic helicopters were not available to assist conventional Colombian divisions on COIN operations. This situation changed after 11 September 2001.

The 9/11 terrorists attacks on the United States expanded the scope of U.S. involvement in Colombia from a strictly counter-drug mission to a combined strategy of counter narco-terrorism (CNT). The shift, caused by an “expanded authority,” increased U.S. military involvement in the war on narcotics traffickers and terrorists. Prior to the shift in policy, U.S. State Department-funded national police and counter-drug military units could not target nor assist in the engagement of guerrilla organizations, even though they were providing security for the drug producers and traffickers. Under the auspices of National Security Presidential Directive 18 (November 2002), the U.S. military was allowed greater coordination authority with the Colombian military, including the sharing of intelligence and training support.¹⁵ Under “expanded authority,” Special Forces could now assist Colombian Army Special Operations Forces with training to fight the narco-terrorists.¹⁶

There is a natural tendency of American military personnel to use familiar U.S. Rules of Engagement (ROE) for Afghanistan and Iraq as a measuring stick to gauge the willingness of Colombian military and police to take the fight to the narco-terrorists in their country. The ROE for the Colombian armed forces (military and police) is the National Legal Code. Similar restrictions apply to U.S. forces employed at home (to restore order during riots or in the event of an internal insurgency) without a Congressional declaration of martial law or being granted exemption to civil prosecution (*posse comitatus*).

The importance of the war in Colombia is revealed in the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States*. President George W. Bush said,

In Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the



President Alvaro Uribe Vélez (second from left) with U.S. military and Embassy staff during a tour of the Tres Equinas Air Force base.

state and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups. We are working to help Colombia defend its democratic institutions and defeat illegal armed groups of both the left and the right by extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and provide basic security to the Colombian people.¹⁷

U.S. support for *Plan Colombia* continued with a change of presidents in Colombia in 2002.

The new president, Alvaro Uribe Vélez, took office after the failed peace talks with the FARC. Determined to end the insurgency and seeing that negotiations were futile, President Uribe launched a new campaign against the FARC. The “expanded authority” provided for more U.S. aid and support. The Colombian Army had to break contact with the paramilitaries and abide by human rights accords. Uribe’s offensive was divided into two parts. One was a general security strategy known as “democratic security,” which dramatically increased the number of police in the municipalities across the country. The second part was a new joint military operation called *Plan Patriota*, which dedicated at least 18,000 soldiers to attack the *despeje* (sometimes called “FARClandia” by the Special Forces soldiers). It was meant to kill or capture its main leaders.

The operational aspects of *Plan Patriota* are similar to those of the old *Plan Lazo* and prior counter-drug operations. In Phase 1, the military attacks and temporarily secures a guerrilla-con-



Colombian soldiers inspect an open air FARC IED classroom. The propane cylinders are used to make IEDs (see Charles Briscoe’s article on page 107).



Colombian police and military tearing down a FARC despeje welcome sign.

trolled area. As part of the operation, the Colombian units conduct extensive civic action and psychological operations to demonstrate the capacity of the government to look after the people. Highly trained Colombian National Police (CNP) *Jungla* units accompany the military in order to make arrests and secure evidence. In Phase 2, CNP *Carabiniero* units are brought in the area to reestablish law and order. They build a fortified police station in case of a guerrilla counterattack and to actively establish their presence. In Phase 3, additional assets, primarily public services, are added in order to consolidate the government control of the area. Once an area is secured, the Army moves the operation to another FARC-controlled sector. Piece by piece the government retakes the FARC-controlled areas. Throughout all phases, the Colombian military uses psychological operations. At the tactical level, each division and brigade has a *Grupo Especial de Operaciones Sicológicas* (GEOS—Psychological Operations Special Group) detachment assigned.¹⁸

Plan Colombia expired at the end of 2005. The successes achieved by the plan were such that the U.S. Congress has continued funding at essentially the same level. The



The FARC built extensively throughout the despeje (sometimes called "FARClandia" by the Special Forces). This is a house used by one of the higher FARC leaders.

flow of funds was simply moved through the Andean Counterdrug Initiative (ACI) that attacks narcotics operations in countries of the Andean ridge where coca growing is prevalent. Colombia receives the largest share of the ACI funding.¹⁹ A unique exercise in international cooperation and coordination, *Plan Colombia* and *Plan Patriota* are fundamental parts of the complex relationship between the United States and Colombia. ♣

*Pseudonyms have been used for all military personnel with a rank lower than lieutenant colonel.

Endnotes

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- 4 U.S. Department of State, *Is Plan Colombia a Colombian Plan?*, <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2001/1039.htm>; Gabriel Marcella, *Plan Colombia: The Strategic and Operational Imperatives* (Carlisle, PA; Strategic Studies Institute, April 2001), 5–7.
- 5 Gabriel Marcella, *Plan Colombia: The Strategic and Operational Imperatives* (Carlisle, PA; Strategic Studies Institute, April 2001), 5–6.
- 6 Marcella, *Plan Colombia*, 5–6.
- 7 Colonel (Retired) Kevin Higgins, Narcotics Affairs Section, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 2 October 2006, Bogotá, Colombia, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 U.S. Department of State, *Plan Colombia*, 14 March 2001, <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2001/1042.htm>.
- 9 Higgins interview.
- 10 General Charles Wilhelm, U.S. Southern Command, testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources, 15 February 2000, Washington, DC, transcript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
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- 12 Major Ricardo Ramírez*, Headquarters Commandant, U.S. Special Operations Command South, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 19 May 2005, Homestead Air Reserve Base, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 Ramírez* interview.
- 14 U.S. Department of State, U.S. Narcotics Control Initiatives in Colombia, 3 June 2003, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/21203.htm>
- 15 National Security Council, The White House, National Security Presidential Directive 18, "Supporting Democracy in Colombia," November 2002. NSPD 18 is a classified document (Secret), however the title and intent are not classified; Lieutenant Colonel David Naber, Chief Andean Ridge Surface Operations, J-33, U.S. Southern Command, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 24 May 2005, Miami, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 16 Naber interview; Major Mark Roberts*, Andean Ridge Operations Officer, J-5, U.S. Southern Command, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 24 May 2005, Miami, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Captain Hector Baca-Ibarra*, 1st Psychological Operations Battalion, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 20 November 2004, Raleigh, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 17 George W. Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (The White House: Washington DC: September 2002), 10.
- 18 Higgins interview; Military History of the FARC-EP, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_History_of_the_FARC-EP, accessed 6 December 2006.
- 19 Connie Veillette, Congressional Research Service, "Plan Colombia: A Progress Report," 22 June 2005, CRS Report for Congress, RL 32774, Washington DC, copy, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.