

## *Colombia: Recalling the Backyard Analogy*

By Tom Barry

Analogies rarely work in explaining the dynamics of foreign policy. No two situations or regions are identical, especially when separated in time by nearly two decades, as are the U.S. involvement in Central America and what's now occurring in the Andes. The fact that one of these interventionist forays in Latin America took place during the cold war and the other after the disintegration of the Soviet Union also complicates the comparison.

But in attempting to understand U.S. involvement in the Andes, the history of U.S. policy in Latin America remains instructive. The administration's new Andean Regional Initiative, coming on the heels of Plan Colombia, is about regional geopolitics. Like Central America, the Andean countries are in our backyard. As it did in Central America two decades ago, the U.S. is pouring military and economic aid into the region to stem leftist guerrilla movements and to reassert political stability while ignoring the root causes of popular discontent.

The similarities between Central America and the Andes abound. Now, as then, the U.S. policy seeks to "professionalize" security forces that work closely with self-defense paramilitary groups. While providing trainers and intelligence, the U.S. is committed to avoiding direct military involvement. A critical source of aid comes in the form of helicopters that take the war directly to the remote, rural bases of the guerrillas. As was the case in Central America, the U.S. recognizes that the military strategy must be accompanied by economic support to meet stabilization and counterinsurgency objectives. While Colombia is the clear focus, the stability of the entire region is Washington's overriding concern. If the leftist threat is not contained in Colombia, it could spill over into Ecuador, Panama, Bolivia, Panama, and Brazil. The country-specific Plan Colombia is, therefore, increasingly being assessed as inadequate.

Economic and military aid must also be extended to the entire region, as was also the case in Central America. In the 1980s the U.S. used bases in Honduras and Panama to support allied security forces, while today's counterinsurgency and stabilization strategy relies on new operating bases in Ecuador, Curacao, Aruba, and El Salvador.

Congress is currently considering the administration's Andean Regional Initiative, an \$830 million package of military and economic aid that comes on top of the \$1.3 billion Plan Colombia and diverse U.S. drug control programs. According to the State Department, there are three overarching goals: promote and support democracy, foster sustainable development and trade liberalization, and significantly reduce the supply of illegal drugs to the United States. It is eerily reminiscent of the Reagan administration's Central America Democracy, Peace, and Development Initiative in its emphasis on democracy building, economic development, concern for human rights, and concern for regional stabilization. Like the public diplomacy that spun the official story of U.S. involvement in Central America, the public diplomacy promoting U.S. involvement in the Andes tells a story of a U.S. committed to democracy, human rights, and peace. As in Central America, the main thrust of Washington's Andes policy is militarization, and its main allies are the economic elites and armed forces. This deception and intrigue will surely deepen once Reagan-era veterans Otto Reich, John Negroponte, Elliott Abrams (and scores of lower-level operatives) take their places in the U.S. foreign policy apparatus.

Officially, escalating U.S. involvement in the Andes is predicated not on stopping the spread of communism and leftist revolution in our backyard but on halting the production of drugs that are sold in our hometowns. It's not

the old Red Scare, but the Drug Scare that's at the heart of the official story. With the cold war over, the drug war has given the U.S. armed forces and intelligence community a new enemy and a new justification for budget increases and overseas meddling. There's no doubt that America's appetite for illegal drugs (and its unwillingness to consider legalization and treatment strategies) gave rise to the drug war, at home and abroad. But there is good reason to doubt that the deepening U.S. involvement in the Andean region is driven solely by drug control strategies.

When reading the Andean Regional Initiative or listening to administration officials, you get the distinct impression that this is another official hoodwink. Clearly, U.S. drug control is bankrupt (drug flows continue, with cheaper and better quality drugs; and drug production expands), but the official policy is that we are winning the war—although more money and guns are needed. Then there is this side issue of Colombia's guerrilla opposition—one which controls extensive areas of the countryside, has proven itself as a major military force, is well-funded, and is growing in numbers. During the Reagan era, the public diplomacy that tried to win U.S. and Central American support for the U.S.-

backed anti-leftist campaigns stressed that the guerrillas and Sandinistas were dupes of Cuba and the Soviet Union who fought for ideology—not the popular interests. With the cold war over, there is little public inclination to support overseas counterinsurgency missions against leftist threats in Latin America. Instead, we have a public diplomacy that sells massive military aid to the region under the guise that this aid is to allow the region's military to halt the flow of drugs to the United States. Yes there are guerrillas, it is acknowledged, but we are told that they would fade away without the narcodollars they get from the drug trade.

Although many policymakers and government officials may have fooled themselves with the narcoguerrilla theory, the deepening military commitment to the Andes cannot be explained alone by the links that do exist between the insurgents and the drug industry. One has to read between the official lines to discern the rising concern in Washington about the threats to regional economic and political stability. However, a new Rand study called the *Colombian Labyrinth*, which was sponsored by the Air Force's Strategy and Doctrine Program, gets right to the point. "If present trends continue," the study

notes, Colombia could confront the U.S. "with the most serious foreign and security policy crisis in the Western Hemisphere since the Central American wars of the 1980s."

Why does Colombia matter? According to the Rand study, "The situation in that South American country is a national security concern as much as a drug policy problem. Colombia is a strategically important country. It is South America's fourth largest country in area and the second largest in population. It is the only South American country with coastlines on both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and it is contiguous to the Caribbean basin, Central America, Venezuela and its oilfields, and Panama and the Canal. Colombia also has some of the largest untapped petroleum reserves in the Western Hemisphere. Colombia's trajectory will also influence the direction of broader trends in the unstable Andean region and beyond." This is the type of geopolitical and economic analysis that often preceded descriptions of why the U.S. was deepening its involvement in Central America—our other backyard.

*(Tom Barry <tom@irc-online.org> is codirector of Foreign Policy In Focus.)*

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