

## Old Domino's New Clothes

By Conn Hallinan | March 15, 2004

There are moments in American foreign policy that run a déjà vu chill down one's spine. Just such a moment was the recent talk to a group of Cali businessmen by William Wood, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia. In his remarks, Wood endorsed efforts by the present government of President Alvaro Uribe to overturn that country's constitution to permit himself a second term. "The U.S. Constitution permits presidential re-elections," Wood argued, "that's why we don't see this proposal as anti-democratic."

Wood's remark harks back to the dark old days when the U.S. routinely intervened in Latin America, overthrowing governments and constitutions from Guatemala to Brazil.

In fact, the Uribe government's pursuit of a military victory in Colombia's four-decade-old civil war has spawned a host of undemocratic measures, a human rights crisis, and the threat that the war might spill over into neighboring Venezuela. While the Bush administration argues that respect for human rights has improved under Uribe, trade unionists and human rights advocates disagree. Two years ago, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights found "massive and systematic violations of (human) rights" and recommended 24 initiatives the Colombian government should take. According to human rights advocates, those steps have not been taken.

"The Uribe government has moved backwards on the UN recommendations," says Richard Howitt, a member of the European Parliament and foreign policy and human rights spokesperson for the European Labor Party. While mass murders and kidnappings have declined, 20% and 32% respectively, targeted killings and disappearances of unionists and left opposition supporters have increased. Disappearances have increased from 258 in the 1994-95 period, to more than 1,200 a year since 2001. In the past 10 years, more than 3,000 trade unionists have been

murdered, almost all at the hands of the Colombian Army or the right-wing paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). According to Human Rights watch, "There is detailed, abundant, and compelling evidence of continuing close ties" between the two.

The most controversial of the new anti-terror legislation is Uribe's plan to "demobilize" the AUC and allow the paramilitaries to buy their way out of trouble. "Rather than serving time in prison," says Colombian Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo, "there are alternative sentences and the individuals will be allowed to pay reparations." Human rights organizations contemptuously refer to the plan as "checkbook immunity."

The Bush administration has endorsed the process, even though AUC founder, Carlos Castano, has already been convicted in absentia for murder and drug dealing. The other AUC leader, Salvatore Mancuso, is a former associate of Medellin cocaine cartel chief, Pablo Escobar. Both are wanted by the U.S. and Interpol for shipping over 17 tons of cocaine to Europe between 1997 and 2002. This past November the government "demobilized" 856 members of a supposed AUC unit in Medellin. But according to Andy Webb-Vidal of the *Financial Times*, most of the "paras" were petty criminals and young unemployed men rounded up the night before in 28 government buses.



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Human rights groups were outraged. “Instead of handing these criminals a microphone, the government should be concentrating on arresting them and bringing them to justice,” said Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch.

### A Selective Focus on Terror

While the Bush administration officially considers the AUC a “terrorist organization,” in practice U.S. aid has targeted only the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN). FARC, and to a lesser extent the ELN, do engage in assassinations and kidnappings and levy “taxes” on the drug trade. But, according to human rights groups, 85% of the civilian deaths in Colombia occur at the hands of the armed forces or the paramilitaries.

Colombia is now the third-largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, after Israel and Egypt. With that aid the Colombian army has added 35,000 troops, becoming increasingly mobile with its fleet of U.S.-supplied helicopters. The U.S. has just helped deploy one Colombian combat battalion and is training another.

Colombia also has the largest U.S. embassy in the world, and more than 20 U.S.-based companies share \$178 million per year in contracts. All total, the U.S. has sent more than \$3 billion in aid since Plan Colombia began in 2000, the great bulk of it to the police and the military.

Much of the war has been privatized, with huge arms corporations like Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and TRW providing security forces, surveillance of insurgent movements, and drug interdiction. This privatization has allowed the companies to avoid having to answer to the U.S. Congress. “My complaint about the use of private contractors,” says U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) “is their ability to fly under the radar to avoid accountability.”

### The Root Causes of Conflict

Few observers think government forces can win a military victory, in large part because the conditions that ignited the war back in the late ‘60s have never been addressed by the Colombian government or the country’s elite. Between 65 and 68% of Colombia’s people live in poverty, and 30% of the landowners control 95% of the land. “The land problem is at the center of the armed conflict,” says refugee advocate Jorge Rojas.

But instead of urging land reform and solutions to growing economic inequality in the country, the U.S. has turned the conflict into a war against terrorism and drugs. A recent study by the Council on Foreign Relations, however, called U.S. policy in Colombia and the Andes region “myopic,” arguing that the U.S.’s focus on drugs in Colombia was “no longer sustainable.”

Rather than reconsidering policies that are increasingly under fire in the region, the Bush administration has ratcheted up the rhetoric.

U.S. Rep. Henry Hyde (R-IL), chair of the powerful House International Relations Committee, said of Colombia that “three hours by plane from Miami, we face a potential breeding ground for international terror equaled perhaps only by Afghanistan.”

Former U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, Curtis Kamman, told the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism, and Government that “The terrorists who operate in Colombia have not explicitly declared the United States to be their target. But their political and economic objectives are incompatible with our values, and they could ultimately represent a force of evil no less troublesome than al Qaeda.”

The possibility that war could spread into neighboring countries appears very real. The Bush administration has long hinted that populist Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is supporting FARC and the

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ELN. Chavez fell afoul of the White House when he thawed relations between Venezuela and Cuba. But the Bush administration declared virtual war on Chavez when he insisted on trying to renegotiate 60-year-old oil agreements with foreign oil producers. Venezuela has 77 billion barrels of oil and is the U.S.'s fourth-largest supplier. The Andes region as a whole supplies the U.S. with 20% of its energy needs.

Venezuela, like Colombia, is mired in poverty and economic inequality. Some 80% of its population live in poverty, and 2% of the population controls 60% of the land. Rising oil revenues would go a long way toward alleviating some of those conditions.

There are some recent ominous developments.

On Jan. 23, the U.S. State Department coordinator for counter terrorism, Cofer Black, warned Venezuela that it was not doing enough in the global campaign against terrorism.

The Uribe government recently sent three brigades of troops to the Venezuelan border, and one Colombian Defense Department official told the *Financial Times* that because of the tense domestic situation in Venezuela, Chavez will “look to a confrontation with Colombia.”

There is no evidence that Venezuela wants a fight with Colombia—Venezuela’s population is 24 million to Colombia’s 44 million—but there may be domestic reasons for Uribe to spread the war.

While the Colombian government has made gains on the battlefield, the rising cost of the war and the growing opposition to the loss of political freedoms have begun to sour the nation on Uribe’s “Democratic Security.”

While news polls—always suspect in a media dominated by the nation’s elite—indicate 80% support for Uribe, facts on the ground suggest his support is not all that deep. A recent nationwide government-sponsored referendum to increase the powers of the executive and raise military spending went down to defeat, and voters in Bogota elected a left-wing former union leader, Luis Garzon, Mayor. The mayoralty of the

country’s largest city has long been considered a springboard to the national presidency.

The worry is that Uribe, egged on by an aggressive Bush administration and his own military, might invade Venezuela on the pretext of attacking “guerilla havens” in the border region. If he did, it would lift a page from another war.

In April 1970, frustrated on the battlefield and chasing the illusion of military victory, the U.S. and South Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, plunging that country into a war that would eventually lead to the killing fields of Pol Pot. It also destabilized nations throughout the region.

Déjà vu all over again?

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#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Council on Foreign Relations, *Andes 2020: A New Strategy for the Challenges of Colombia and the Region* (January 2004)

<http://www.cfr.org/pdf/Andes2020.pdf>

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