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# Crime and Politics in Colombia: Considerations for US Involvement

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Very early, the state gave birth to twins--politics, the means of influencing the state, and crime, the means of avoiding the state. The three have always been related. Those with great influence on the state may not need much crime; they get their way chiefly by politics. Those with no influence are naturally drawn to state-avoidance options. For what Latin Americans call *los marginados* (the marginals), crime may be a rational economic choice. When it suits them, groups may combine politics and crime, using some of one and some of the other. The combination of all three, the interface of the state with politics and crime, is called corruption.

Politics and crime grow from the same impulse, namely, the drive to quickly obtain money and power. Neither are wedded to violence--it's inefficient and costly--but when pushed or threatened, both quickly turn violent. Politics and crime know and understand each other quite well, forming an almost symbiotic relationship. Politics needs money to win elections and influence and pays little attention to the sources of this money (e.g., Japanese Liberal Democratic politicians and *yakuza* gangsters). And crime needs the protection of politics to continue its enterprises (e.g., the inability of Russian security police to solve a single assassination). At times, politics and crime semipublicly fuse into a single corrupt state, as in Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia. There the fatal shooting of Arkan, a state-protected bank robber (in Sweden) and mass murderer (in Bosnia), removed one of the props of Milosevic's rule and paved the way to his electoral defeat.

## Country Without a State

Imagine a country where the state is so weak it cannot do the minimum things a state must do--exercise sovereignty, the quality of being boss on its own turf, able to control unruly elements--and offer citizens a modicum of security and order.

In such a country, politics, because it is unrestrained, easily turns violent. Crime, because it has little to fear from the state, ignores state power, intermingles with politics, and eats into state power. We need not look far for such a country.

Colombia is a feast for Hobbesians[1] in the rawness of its connections between crime and politics, a rawness that long antedates Colombia's massive drug industry and the way it feeds the massive US drug appetite. Drugs may be the ultimate product of globalization. *Narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) are among the greatest free-traders; they really believe in a world without borders and practice what they preach. Thanks in large part to them, crime, by dollar value, is now humankind's biggest single economic activity.

Historically, Colombia has never been fully tamed. Its three Andean chains, running north-south and covering its west, are hard to transit and isolate its seacoasts (both Atlantic and Pacific) from Bogota, which lies deep in the Andes. This geographical split between seaboard and mountains was the basis of the US-sponsored breakaway of Panama in 1903 and of Conrad's 1904 novel *Nostramo*. [2] The volcanic soil of the Andes is rich and the upland climate is healthful, so the mountains became the coffee-growing region and most populated area. The jungled mountains also provide excellent hiding places. Slightly more than half of Colombia is lowland to the east of the Andes--the *llanos*, tropical, sparsely inhabited, and hard to reach. In Colombia, ground transportation is poor; you get around mostly by air.

The Colombian state has never been able to rule wide areas of the country. Spain was interested only in extracting gold

and silver. Creole families with *latifundios* (big estates) ran them as isolated mini-kingdoms. The "crisis of penetration," the ability of the state to enforce its laws over all its territory, has never been overcome.[3] If you don't like the state in Colombia, you have some of the earth's best terrain to avoid it.

And many dislike the Colombian state, which, in its present form, is not that old. Spain ruled all of northwest Latin America as one big "New Granada." After independence from Spain, this entity took the name "Gran Colombia," but Ecuador and Venezuela broke away. Only in 1863 did Colombia take its present name. Nineteenth-century Colombia developed a fake two-party system typical of Latin America at the time. The Conservatives sought a centralized Colombian state with a major role for the Catholic Church, the Liberals a reformist and anticlerical federal system. Neither of them were democratic in our sense of the word; they practiced "democracy for the few," rule by the educated and better-off. Typically, such "Whig democracies" break down when parties start pitching their messages to newly enfranchised masses. The more radical parties promise economic rewards that conservatives detest, and the grab for state power turns deadly.

In such circumstances the Colombian state collapsed in 1948 with the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the only politician with a mass following. Liberals and Conservatives then went at each other and drenched Bogota in blood, creating thirsts for revenge that have lasted to this day. Bands of various political hues fled to the mountains to continue their wars. Hobbes's *bellum omnem contra omnes* (war of each against all) became real. The bands' original political motives faded, and they turned to banditry and indiscriminate killing. As Hobbes explained, rebels literally *rebellare*, go back to war (*bellum*) and recreate the condition of murderous anarchy that preceded the state. What Colombians call *La Violencia* lasted a decade and killed between 100,000 and 200,000, most of them innocent country dwellers. Politics turned into crime.

After a series of military coups and the corrupt rule of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, in 1958 a contrived stability was restored with the rigged alternation in power of Conservative and Liberal parties, a device earlier used in Spain and other Latin American lands. In the 1960s, however, this was undermined from two directions: from the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65 and its concern for the poor, and from Marxists practicing armed revolution. Some of these latter trace their roots back to Liberal factions in *La Violencia*. The Church joined politics; radical clerics imbibed of the trendy mixture of Vatican II and Marxism to preach and sometimes practice revolution. Banditry, also rooted in *La Violencia*, continued.[4] Bandit chiefs, many of whom started as Liberal opponents of the Conservative government, formed county-sized redoubts that defied the Colombian army for years.[5] During the 1960s, some 120 such guerrilla-bandit groups were active.[6] Crime stalked the countryside, and planters carried automatic weapons to oversee their farms. The violence never really stopped. In the past 15 years, more than 300,000 Colombians have been killed, making Colombia by far the bloodiest country of our hemisphere.

At a certain point, Colombia ceased to have a state. Maybe it never really had one. At best, it was a weak state. With nominal borders on maps, diplomatic recognition, and too many bureaucrats and laws, Colombia only looked like a state, and such is its present condition.

## **The Drug State**

For centuries, Andean *indigenas* (indigenous people, the preferred Latin American term for Indians) chewed coca leaf to kill the pain of hunger and cold. In the 19th century, the leaf was refined into cocaine and used as a local anesthetic but soon found favor as a stimulant. Cocaine was an ingredient of the original Coca-Cola, concocted in 1886 by an Atlanta pharmacist who called it "the intellectual beverage." Cocaine was removed from Coke in 1905.

The industrial cultivation of coca came to Colombia only in the late 1970s but expanded greatly in the 1990s.[7] Coca's earlier heartland was Bolivia and Peru, but Colombia, which already supplied much of the US marijuana market, had the perfect location and conditions to move into coca. In Bolivia and Peru, vigorous US-supervised eradication programs--aerial spraying, crop burning, destruction of rural labs--cut production there by some two-thirds, so Colombian producers took over the main market share. There the product is proving harder to eradicate, because it is firmly embedded in politics, first with the official politics of the state, second with the left-wing guerrillas, and third with the right-wing paramilitaries. All three protect the drug traffic, which has recently moved into heroin as well. Poppies also grow well in Colombia.

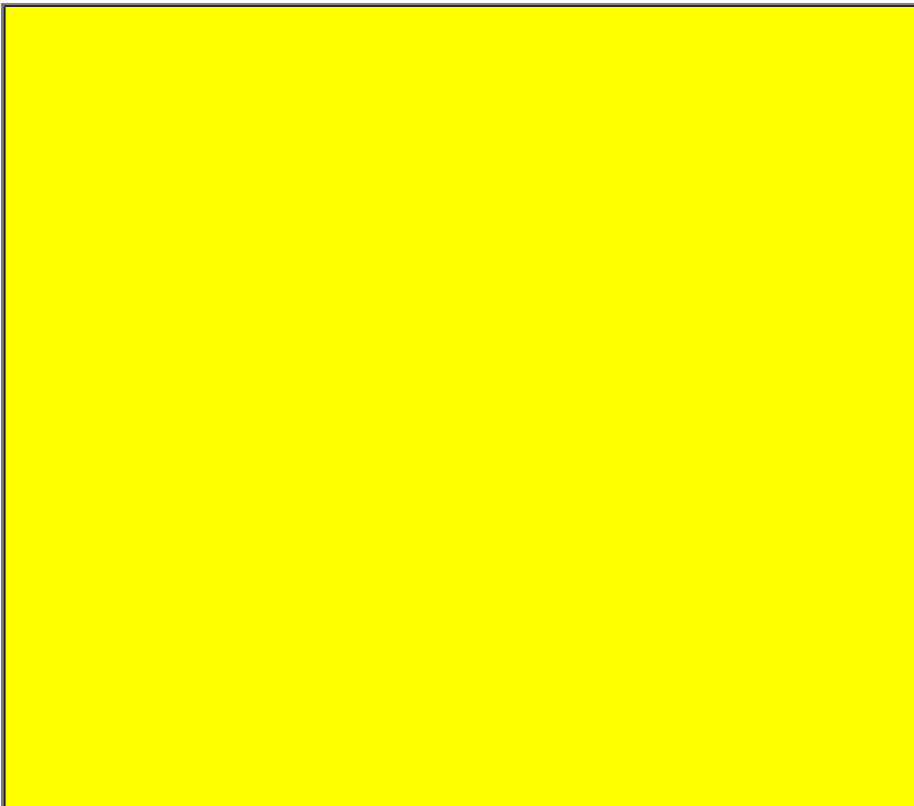
By most estimates, drugs contribute more to Colombia's economy than coffee, of which there is now a global glut. The same rich Andean soil that grows coffee grows the coca shrub, the leaf of which fetches \$1.50 a kilo, far more than coffee or any other crop. *Cocaleros* (coca farmers), given free seeds and technical advice by *narcotraficantes*, just strip off the leaves every two to three months; they quickly grow back. Ten acres of coca, often dispersed among food crops, provides a decent living for a rural family. The standard anti-coca action--crop-duster spraying of glyphosate, a commercial weedkiller--also kills food crops, leaving peasants destitute. Their fastest and possibly only way to raise money is then to plant more coca. Unsurprisingly, Colombia's coca production has continued to grow.

Crime has major lines into the Colombian state, as it has in Mexico. In the 1993 presidential elections, all Colombian parties took drug money; Ernesto Samper won but later resigned under heavy US pressure. What do the *narcotraficantes* get for their generosity? For years, the chiefs of the Medellin cartel lived openly and unafraid of arrest. After police, under US prodding, picked off some of the top Medellin people, the chiefs of the Cali cartel lived without fear. Colombian police, either on the take or just plain scared, look the other way. At a cost of \$2,000 a hit, some 1,200 Colombian policemen have been murdered. There are no more cartels; instead, there are thousands of newly rich businessmen and guerrillas who supply more drugs than ever.

### **FARC versus AUC**

Crime is closely connected to Colombia's leftist guerrillas, who form two main armies (plus a few smaller ones). The largest, the Communist-led FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), in 1964 grouped together old guerrilla bands and peasant self-defense forces and now has an estimated 18,000 fighters, many of them better trained, equipped, paid, and motivated than the 140,000 soldiers of the Colombian army, which, after defeats in a series of ambushes, for a while kept its distance from FARC. The smaller ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*), was founded in 1965 by a radical Spanish priest and now has about 5,000 adherents.

In Colombia, crime eats up the state. As a gesture to get peace talks going, in 1998 Colombian President Andrés Pastrana granted FARC a Switzerland-sized "demilitarized zone" in the center of the country and promised not to invade. Many Colombians believe Pastrana conceded too much to FARC. The talks have improved the atmosphere some, but have led nowhere concrete, as FARC still adheres to its revolutionary line of replacing the capitalist and gringo-dominated state. Elections in which an offshoot of FARC participated, plus public-opinion polls, indicate that few Colombians support revolution. Politics is effectively closed to them, so FARC and ELN turn to crime.





Colombia

In its San Vicente redoubt, FARC can get whatever it wants in equipment and consumer goods, thanks in part to Colombia's well-developed air services. In 2000, FARC reportedly purchased 10,000 Kalashnikovs, delivered through Peru with the connivance of Peru's crooked security services. With perhaps a third of a billion (that's with a "b") dollars a year in "taxes" (protection money) from *narcotraficantes* and its own drug operations, FARC has a better tax base than Bogotá. More than half of Colombia's cocaine is produced under FARC protection, much of it in the southern province of Putumayo, bordering Ecuador. FARC administers its zone as if it were a state, complete with municipal services and rough justice.

Farther north, ELN has sought a similar but smaller demilitarized zone. ELN funds itself partly by kidnapping. Colombia is the world's leader in kidnapping, and the rate is rising. A record 3,707 were abducted in 2000 alone.[8] ELN also gets protection money from oil companies by threatening to blow up their oil pipeline, which it has done some 700 times.

The right-wing paramilitaries also gain much of their revenue from the drug trade. Initially formed locally by landowners to protect themselves from robbery and kidnapping, they have coalesced at the national level into the rapidly growing AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*), with some 11,000 members. AUC fights guerrillas and also sells its protective services to *narcotraficantes*, many of whom now have rural estates and the same personal-security concerns as older landowning families. In the absence of a Colombian state that can provide security, says AUC, we do it. AUC, headed by a man whose rancher father was kidnapped and killed by FARC, ferociously engages

guerrillas. Actually, AUC kills anybody suspicious and with impunity. AUC is gaining approval from Colombia's frightened middle class, some 1.1 million of whom have fled Colombia (many for the United States) since 1996.[9]

Among the paramilitaries' targets are judges and journalists concerned with human rights. Colombia has the world's highest murder rate, about half of it by the paramilitaries.[10] Although hotly denied, AUC is ratlined into the Colombian army. Few are caught and even fewer convicted. Overall, only about 40 percent of Colombia's murders are even investigated. A mere seven percent of Colombia's murders lead to convictions, and the average time served is four and a half years.[11] Colombia's police and courts know what's healthy for them. As the Colombian state erodes, crime and politics merge.

### **The US Role**

Officially, the US effort is aimed only at curbing the drug trade, not at the guerrillas. But with the guerrillas protecting the drug trade, the only way to crush the latter is to defeat the former. Although denied, the main purpose of US training, helicopters, and dollars seems to be to get the Colombian army to overcome its fear and engage the FARC. In recent years, the army has done so, and in 2000 it claimed it inflicted some 1,200 combat deaths on the guerrillas compared to 600 dead of their own.[12] US military advisors are training three Colombian battalions, around 2,500 soldiers, including how to use Black Hawk and Huey helicopters to go after the drug trade deep in the mountains, where they are bound to encounter FARC on their own turf. This could send hundreds of Colombian soldiers to their deaths in the jungle. In October 2000, for the first time, FARC downed a Black Hawk, killing the 22 Colombian soldiers aboard.

The militarization of the US drug policy dates from 1989, when President Bush decreed an all-out effort to stanch the flow from our south. With the Cold War winding down, he called upon the US armed forces to contribute their expertise and equipment to the fight, which was likened to a war. President Clinton inherited the Bush policy and increased funding for it. In 2000, Congress tacked into other legislation \$1 billion in military aid for Plan Colombia and passed it with little discussion or doubt. President George W. Bush continues this policy, naming as "drug czar" John P. Walters, who has long advocated military-type programs to eradicate drugs in the Andes.[13]

Many US officers, however, are wary. One 1999 poll found that only ten percent of military officers believe the military should be used to combat drug trafficking, compared to 20 percent of civilians.[14] Most officers recognize that soldiers and police are not interchangeable and that "operations other than war" detract from their warfighting mission. But some are persuadable. With no more Soviet Union and tight defense budgets, some have seen the war on drugs as a way to keep units intact and ready. Said one reluctant Marine colonel after discussions in the Pentagon: "You get fuel for the helicopters." That rationalization may be superfluous, of course, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist strikes and the subsequent funding for the war on terrorism.

The problem in Colombia goes deeper than fighting an enemy. In August 1999, US Army Colonel James Hiatt, in charge of our military's counterdrug efforts in Colombia, was implicated in the smuggling of cocaine back to the United States. His wife had been addicted for years and used our Bogota embassy's post office to ship parcels of drugs to US traffickers. Subsequently Hiatt pleaded to money-laundering for his wife and was dismissed from the Army. He had served 24 years but received no retirement pay and did some jail time. Drugs reach high and everywhere. Instead of the incident giving us pause to reflect, we redoubled our efforts with more of the same. In the words of Walt Kelly's Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

### **Another Vietnam?**

The jungled mountains of western Colombia, where the drugs are produced and guerrillas operate, look an awful lot like Vietnam's Central Highlands. With their ample hiding places, both are hard to control. Bogota probably controls no more of Colombia than Saigon did of South Vietnam. Like Saigon was, Bogota is weak and corrupt, little capable of rallying its citizens. Like the Vietcong, FARC has a peasant base.

The Colombian army used to shy away from engaging the enemy, a lot like ARVN. With US-sponsored training and modernization, the army has for some years inflicted reverses on FARC. FARC and ELN still enjoy the equivalent of the "leopard spots" in the mountains granted to the North Vietnamese army in 1972, from which they emerged

victorious in 1975. Both insurgencies were or are amply supplied from neighboring countries, in Vietnam by the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia, and in Colombia through the long, porous borders with Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela. The anti-US and pro-Castro populist president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, likes the Colombian guerrillas. Secure base areas and access to outside supplies are among the main factors for successful guerrilla warfare. Colombia's guerrillas have secure base areas, and the borders are unsealable.

Perhaps the most worrisome point of comparison is the casual ignorance with which Congress went along with presidential policies to involve American soldiers. Our basic commitments to Vietnam and Colombia sailed through Congress with little debate or scrutiny. The President leads in foreign policy. If that's what he wants--the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964 and Plan Colombia in 2000--who are we to second-guess him? Both seemed like measured, sensible policies at the time.

Yet the elements of disanalogy outweigh the elements of analogy. There are major differences between the two situations. We know more about Colombia than we did about Vietnam, and we have many Spanish speakers. In Vietnam, we started from total ignorance and learned the real situation far too late. Colombia's guerrillas have no big outside country to support them the way the Vietcong and North Vietnamese army (NVA) had the Soviet Union and China. Indeed, Colombia's guerrillas have no equivalent of the NVA to sweep in with heavy weapons. FARC and ELN will have to do it by themselves, and at this point are neither beating the Colombian army nor winning hearts and minds. In Colombia there will be neither a Tet nor a final push as in 1975.

Unfortunately, the drug trade is so lucrative that guerrillas can fund themselves indefinitely and even grow richer. The war could last decades. Remember, some Colombians have already been guerrillas for decades. For some Colombians, joining FARC is a step up in earnings potential. Some Brazilians have joined. A for-profit war gives the guerrillas few incentives for peace talks, a point also true of the right-wing paramilitaries.

The guerrillas and paramilitaries have a vested interest in continuing the impasse. The only thing that could upset their calculations is the relocation of the drug trade to other countries. It would end their cash flow. And we may be able to do it; we did it in Bolivia and Peru. Ferocious eradication and interdiction efforts can damage both the drug business and its protectors. With sufficient US money and training for the Colombian army, it could eventually beat FARC in the field.

That would be good for Colombia but do nothing for us. It would give the Colombian state a chance to reestablish itself before it is totally taken over by crime. In terms of America's interests, however, the drug trade is already moving to neighboring countries (some back to Peru) and to Africa, where states are even weaker. Victory over drugs in any given country does not curb domestic US drug consumption. Crime is opportunistic, decentralized, and flexible; it signs no surrender agreements. It just moves.

The street price of drugs in America allows us to check progress. The "successful" eradication programs in Bolivia and Peru resulted in no price increases on America's streets, indicating supply met demand. Indeed, drugs now available on America's streets have gotten cheaper and purer, indicating excess of supply over demand. Figures from the Office of National Drug Control Policy show that from 1989 to 2000 hardcore users' median weekly cocaine and heroin expenditures declined by half.[15] Who says the free market doesn't work?

Colombia is becoming a hollow shell of a state as much of its inner workings are taken over by crime. Analogies are always inexact; perhaps the closest is our 1805 mission against pirates in Tripoli. There we were fighting a state that was a thin cover for crime. The results were messy but tilted our way--after we paid \$60,000 to ransom back Tripoli's American prisoners.[16] And piracy in the region did not cease.

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## NOTES

1. This analysis is broadly Hobbesian in that it asks what human behavior is like in the absence of a state that limits and controls what its citizens may do. The answer: extremely unpretty. While most consider Hobbes's "state of nature" a purely theoretical construct, under certain circumstances it appears on earth, precisely where state power has severely weakened. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968). *Leviathan* was first

published in 1651.

2. Joseph Conrad, *Nostramo; A Tale of the Seaboard* (New York: Doubleday, 1925). Robert D. Kaplan still considers it one of the best guides for how to operate in developing lands. See Kaplan, "Conrad's *Nostramo* and the Third World," *National Interest*, 51 (Spring 1998).
3. The "crisis of penetration" is posited as one of several problems a political system must solve if it is to survive and prosper. Leonard Binder et al., *Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971).
4. For an overview, see James L. Payne, *Patterns of Conflict in Colombia* (Sandpoint, Ida.: Lytton, 1998).
5. For the life and 1968 death of one of them, Dumar Aljure, see Richard L. Maullin, "The Private War of a Guerrilla," *Transaction* (March 1970), 5. For another, see Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2001).
6. Maullin, p. 47.
7. For the best recent description, written with insight and anguish, see Rafael Pardo, "Colombia's Two-Front War," *Foreign Affairs*, 79 (July/August 2000), 4.
8. "The Colombian Diaspora: Miami Nice," *The Economist*, 5 May 2001, p. 26.
9. Juan Forero, "Prosperous Colombians Flee, Many to U.S., to Escape War," *The New York Times*, 10 April 2001, p. A1.
10. Michael Reid, "Colombia: Drugs, War and Democracy," *The Economist*, 21 April 2001, Colombia Survey, p. 3.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
12. Colombian Defense Ministry, as reported in *The Economist*, Colombia Survey, p. 10.
13. Michael Massing, "There's a Wrong Way to Fight the Drug War . . . Bush's Choice as Policy Czar Would be a Giant Step Backward," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 28 May 2001, p. 22. Massing is author of a detailed study of drug trafficking, *The Fix* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000).
14. Triangle Research Institute for Security Studies interview of 4,000 military leaders and prominent civilians. See Adam Clymer, "Sharp Divergence Found in Views of Military and Civilians," *The New York Times*, 9 September 1999, p. A15.
15. "What America's Users Spend on Illegal Drugs," Office of Nation Drug Control Policy, May 2001, internet, <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/>.
16. Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (9th ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 101.

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