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War in Colombia

Guerrillas, Drugs and Human Rights in U.S.-Colombia Policy, 1988-2002

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The Andean Strategy "Attacking drugs by hitting the insurgency"

The assassination of Colombian presidential hopeful Luis Carlos Galán by the Medellín drug cartel in August 1989 led Colombian president Virgilio Barco to impose emergency security measures on the country, and the U.S. to announce that it might consider the deployment of military forces to assist Colombia in the war on drugs.⁽⁹⁾ While this act is still considered by many to have been the catalyst for the first Bush administration’s Andean Initiative, it is clear that even before the Galán killing the U.S. was preparing to augment its military commitment to the Andean region.

There was no shortage of reasons why Congress wanted to get the military more involved in the Andean drug war, but the primary justification was that the U.S.-supported counterdrug programs then in operation were not only ineffective, but also increasingly dangerous. In July 1986, under pressure to meet U.S.-imposed counternarcotics targets, Bolivia hosted the first major U.S. military commitment to the drug war. That operation – dubbed “Blast Furnace” – involved the use of six U.S. Black Hawk helicopters and their support personnel to ferry Bolivian police during raids on cocaine processing laboratories.⁽¹⁰⁾ Later, a similar mission, “Operation Snowcap,” deployed U.S. Army Special Forces and DEA personnel to provide paramilitary training, law enforcement planning, intelligence and advisory support for counterdrug raids on cocaine processing labs and airstrips in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. U.S. military personnel were confined to their bases, however, where they trained host country forces to take on joint operations with DEA agents.

Operation Snowcap was suspended in February 1989 after the House Foreign Affairs Committee found that the DEA was dramatically unprepared for its frequent and violent encounters with Peru’s Shining Path guerrillas, who often overwhelmed the lightly armed law enforcement agents.⁽¹¹⁾ The State Department’s inspector general issued a scathing critique of the agency’s counterdrug programs, finding that these programs had “not resulted in significant reductions of coca cultivation or the disruption of cocaine trafficking in the host countries,” and that DEA, “an agency which does not have military expertise,” was being asked to execute “paramilitary operations.” DEA officials found themselves coordinating “military air assault operations” in Peru’s Upper

Huallaga Valley, a task for which its agents had no expertise, and in any case were not authorized to be doing.

To some, the answer was to get military forces to take over from DEA agents the more combat-oriented aspects of the counterdrug mission. As a State Department counterdrug strategy paper put it in June 1989: “Our goal should be a steady withdrawal of DEA from such a role as military and economic assistance allows local [military] forces to take up these tasks.”⁽¹²⁾ The debate over whether to rely primarily on police or military forces in the war on drugs continued throughout the 1990s but in recent years U.S. policymakers have increasingly come to favor the participation of regular military units.

This process whereby U.S. military advisors would prepare host nation security forces to take over the most dangerous of drug war operations got a boost with the issuance of National Security Directive 13 on June 7, 1989. Among other things, the directive resulted in the deployment of approximately 20 U.S. Army Special Forces troops to Peru to train the police in paramilitary tactics for use against guerrillas and drug traffickers.⁽¹³⁾

But while Peru and Bolivia were the central focus in the early days of the drug war, the Andean Strategy developed largely in response to events on the ground in Colombia. An influential March 1988 cable from U.S. Ambassador Charles Gillespie set off alarm bells in Washington, warning of escalating levels of violence from guerrilla groups and drug cartels, and the seeming inability of the Colombian security forces to do anything about it.⁽¹⁴⁾ These concerns about the internal threat to Colombian stability triggered an interagency review of Colombia policy, coordinated by the National Security Council.⁽¹⁵⁾

The result of this process – President Bush’s Andean Strategy – was already set to go by the time Galán was killed on August 18, 1989. Three days later, the president ordered dramatically escalated levels of military, intelligence, law enforcement and economic assistance for Colombia, Peru and Bolivia with the promulgation of National Security Directive 18, “International Counternarcotics Strategy.” Bush also ordered a special \$65 million drawdown⁽¹⁶⁾ of Department of Defense articles and other assistance to support the Colombian military even while the details of the Andean Initiative were still being hammered out. At the same time, it was announced that up to 100 U.S. troops would be dispatched to Colombia to advise and assist Colombian security forces in counternarcotics techniques, and that DEA agents would resume counterdrug operations in Peru that had been suspended in February.⁽¹⁷⁾

The documents included in this package offer useful insight into how far the first Bush administration was willing to go to address the priorities of its drug war allies, even when it meant offering implicit support for their counterinsurgency programs. Indeed, these documents – which at times read like the statements of current Bush administration officials – illustrate conclusively that the militarization of the drug war that gained momentum in 1989 was spurred as much by concerns over the guerrillas as it was by U.S. counternarcotics objectives. U.S. officials – unwilling to devote significant numbers of American soldiers to the fight – were well aware that Colombia and other Andean governments would commit their military forces to the drug war only to the extent that such aid might also help them suppress insurgent groups. Now more than a decade later, the United States is poised to commit itself to this arrangement without reservation.

Note: The following documents are in PDF format.
You will need to download and install the free [Adobe Acrobat Reader](#) to view.

Document 1



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, "Government Reacts to Continued Guerrilla Violence," February 22, 1988, Confidential, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Ambassador Charles Gillespie's concerns about escalating guerrilla violence in Colombia are reflected in this cable, reporting the death of "the highest ranking officer to have fallen in counterinsurgency operations" and "an extraordinary meeting of the [Colombian] National Security Council to discuss guerrilla violence." Despite their efforts, Colombian government sources report "little success in arresting guerrilla violence" and are increasingly concerned that political parties sympathetic to the guerrillas will do well in upcoming municipal elections and thus "legitimize de facto guerrilla control of large tracts of border territory." Summing up, Gillespie laments that the Colombian armed forces are "stuck in a reactive mode in their counterinsurgency operations ... reflecting the absence of a national strategy or framework." Ambassador Myles Frechette voiced similar complaints about Colombia's lack of a coherent anti-guerrilla strategy in 1997 (See [Document 51](#)).

Document 2



Document 2: Frank E. White, Chief, OTDS, "Operation Snowcap," March 8, 1988, Classification Unknown, 12 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

In this impassioned report, the DEA's Frank White warns that agents deployed in the Andes as part of Operation Snowcap "are going to agonize along through an excruciating death on an isolated jungle floor" unless the agency radically alters its "tactical approach" to the mission – primarily the destruction of clandestine drug labs and airstrips in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador.

DEA "crossed the line," he argues, "when Snowcap agents stated to wear camouflage jungle uniforms, and jump out of Huey helicopters, carrying M-16 rifles." Its agents, "with almost no training themselves," are leading foreign troops on paramilitary style assault missions. White recommends a variety of measures including more powerful and sophisticated weaponry, and advanced training for raids, airmobile operations and in counter-ambush techniques.

Document 3



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, "Murtha and Marsh Visit Concentrates on Narco Power and Insurgency," May 24, 1988, Confidential, 10 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

During meetings with U.S. Congressman John P. Murtha

and Army Secretary John O. Marsh, the Colombian president, defense minister and other officials emphasize the difficulties involved in battling “a virile narco-insurgency” with their currently “undersourced” security forces. The objective of the visit reported in this cable is to determine “how the United States might be able to help.”

Rep. Murtha tells President Barco that the U.S. public is frustrated by the lack of progress in the drug war, urging him to stress narcotics issues in his upcoming meetings with U.S. congressional leaders. Barco agrees, adding that “the guerrilla issue is too complicated to explain.” U.S. Ambassador Gillespie then offers to share with Barco “the embassy’s analysis of the connections between the insurgency and the traffickers.” Barco later promises to stress to U.S. officials how the narcotics trade “is aided and abetted by the guerrillas and what the military/police capability is to confront both.”

In a separate meeting, Colombian defense minister Gen. Rafael Samudio emphasizes that “the guerrilla is the traditional enemy of the military,” but says that resources for the struggle are limited by counterdrug obligations. Colombia, he adds, cannot afford to neglect either problem. But he is perplexed by the inability of the U.S. to provide financing for equipment that would be used to fight insurgents and traffickers alike “since the former are a part of the narcotics industry” in Colombia.

In reference to the development of the Andean Initiative, Murtha and Marsh tell the Colombians that they expect Congress to approve as much as \$600 million to “bring the U.S. military into the anti-narcotics fight.”

Document 4



U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, “Report of Audit: International Narcotics Control Programs in Peru and Bolivia,” March 1989, Unclassified, 35 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

State Department Inspector General Sherman Funk’s assessment “addresses the potentially dangerous paramilitary operations” funded by State Department anti-narcotics programs in Peru and Bolivia (Colombia was excluded from the study for “security reasons”).

Like the DEA’s Frank White (See [Document 2](#)) Funk finds that the DEA, “an agency which does not have military expertise, is charged with conducting INM-funded(18) paramilitary operations.” In Peru and Bolivia these operations occur in “dangerous, high-risk areas,” where DEA and contractor personnel are subject to “frequent attacks by drug traffickers, violent resistance by growers whose coca crops were threatened with eradication, and terrorist activity by insurgents.” Funk also finds that DEA agents are “coordinating the military air assault operations” of Peruvian troops.

Although Congress may want DOD to become more closely engaged in the drug war, Funk warns that the Pentagon “is extremely reluctant” to do so, adding that a U.S. military advisory and training mission “will be reminiscent to many of the early U.S. involvement in Vietnam.”

Document 5



John R. Hamilton, Assistant Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy Peru, Memorandum to the Files, “Summary of Meetings with Study Commission from the Office of National Drug Control Policy,” March 31, 1989, Confidential, 7 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This document is a record of meetings between embassy staffers in Peru and a special commission of foreign affairs experts designated by “Drug Czar” William Bennett to issue recommendations to the National Security Council on counterdrug programs in the Andean region.

The embassy’s Narcotics Affairs Unit (NAU) briefs the team on the increasing power of the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) guerrilla group in Peru’s Upper Huallaga Valley (UHV), describing their “growing involvement in narcotics trade.” The NAU director explains that State Department helicopters “do not engage in counter-insurgency operations,” but do periodically “evacuate dead and wounded members of the Peruvian security forces.”

The embassy’s defense attaché and military advisor then brief the team on the state of the Peruvian security forces. The Peruvian military, they note, views counternarcotics operations “as a subset of the larger subversion problem,” but are increasingly unable and unwilling to take on either threat. The two U.S. military officials stress that the armed forces lack resources and are “not aggressive in counterinsurgency.”

Document 6



State Department draft report, “Cocaine: A Supply Side Problem,” April 25, 1989, Confidential, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Written by Edward Vazquez of the State Department’s Office of Andean Affairs, this document is draft copy of the State Department’s input to a senior-level interagency process – coordinated by the National Security Council – on a supply-side approach to international drug control. Many of these ideas were later incorporated into National Security Directives 13 and 18, issued later that year (See Documents [8](#) and [13](#)).

Recognizing that Andean governments, for political reasons, were unlikely to permit the direct participation of

U.S. military forces in counterdrug operations, Vazquez suggests that, “The challenge is to move Andean governments to attack drug trafficking as a direct threat to the integrity of their countries ... to place traffickers on a collision course with local forces, and ensure that the local forces have the wherewithal to prevail.”

With respect to military assistance, Vazquez holds that aid should be distributed without restrictions. “Segregation and earmarking of assistance funds into smaller lots with greater strings attached impedes influencing the Andean military.” To support this position, Vazquez cites the “well-documented” links between traffickers and insurgents in Peru and Colombia, adding that in Colombia “it often means attacking drugs by hitting the insurgency.”

Document 7



State Department cable, “NSC Review of Counter-Narcotics Operations in Peru,” May 28, 1989, Secret, 3 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Document 8



National Security Council, National Security Directive 13, “Cocaine Trafficking,” June 7, 1989, Secret, 2 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

The May 28 cable (Document 7) notifies the U.S. Embassy in Peru of the substance of a presidential National Security Directive to be issued the following week on U.S. counterdrug programs in the Andes – the result of a May 25 meeting of the National Security Council chaired by President Bush. Getting the U.S.-supported interdiction and eradication programs that had been suspended in February back on track was a key U.S. objective, and it is clear from a summary of the NSC meeting that the president was willing to be flexible. The embassy is asked to “ascertain, without making concrete commitments,” whether Peru would be willing to employ its military forces against narcotics-related targets in the Upper Huallaga Valley.

While it is understood that the military is primarily engaged with the guerrillas, embassy officials are asked to determine whether “they see their role as one of operating exclusively against [Sendero Luminoso]” or if they might consider going after traffickers and also “assist the police and the U.S. in securing anti-drug operations ... from guerrilla attack.” If so, “the U.S. would consider providing additional military assistance.”

The directive itself (Document 8), addressed to heads of multiple government agencies, contains essentially the same information as the May 28 cable but does not include any specific reference to counterinsurgency operations.

Document 9



State Department draft report, "NSC Options for Narcotics Control in the Andes," June 2, 1989, Secret, 6 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

By early June, the State Department had moved beyond the scope of earlier drafts and had developed a list of policy options for consideration by the National Security Council interagency group charged with devising the president's supply-side counternarcotics strategy for the Andes.

The document makes a number of concrete proposals for crop eradication, narcotics interdiction and other programs, including three options for military involvement, varying in the degree to which each would permit the use of U.S. military assistance for counterinsurgency operations. One option would, "Recognize the interlinked nature of narcotics trafficking and insurgent groups ... to allow the Andean military to devote significant personnel and equipment toward counter-insurgency operations." Another possibility would be to limit such assistance to counternarcotics programs, while the middle option would, "Encourage the inter-operability of regional counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics forces."

Document 10



State Department draft report, "Cocaine: A Supply Side Strategy," June 15, 1989, Secret, 7 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This document is similar in substance to the April 25 draft report of the same name ([Document 6](#)). Like the April document, this report lists a number of indicators that will be used to gauge the success of counternarcotics programs, including "the relative prices of the raw materials of the industry, hectareage eradicated, and ultimately the availability of cocaine in the United States." Policymakers envision an economic component that would "adopt the model of the Structural Adjustment Program" in which money would be disbursed "as targets (e.g. hectareage eradicated) were met." It is believed that such a scheme would "encourage serious action" and be "powerful spurs for desperately poor countries to mobilize the political will necessary to confront drug traffickers."

The document notes that Colombian and Peruvian guerrillas are directly involved in the narcotics trade, protecting crops and otherwise threatening to undermine counterdrug operations. Increased military assistance is to be a key component of the program, but "will have to be carefully monitored to ensure that it is used consistent with anti-narcotics goals, and that it does not contribute to increased human rights violations." DEA forces, previously engaged in "para-military conflict," are to be withdrawn from this role "as military and economic assistance allows

local forces to take up these tasks.”

Document 11



National Security Council, Interagency Working Group Draft, “Strategy for Narcotics Control in the Andean Region,” June 30, 1989, Secret, 19 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

On June 30, 1989, an interagency working group of the National Security Council met to draft a paper proposing specific options for the president concerning the proposed enhancement of supply-side counternarcotics strategy in the Andes, building on earlier drafts from the State Department and including input from other government agencies.

By way of background, the paper notes that the narcotics trade, economic instability and insurgency movements all threaten to weaken democracy in the Andes, concluding that to ignore any one of these problems is to invite failure:

Better counternarcotics operations require the military to deal with insurgents; better law enforcement and counterinsurgency efforts require better intelligence; successful counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operations require economic assistance to offset lost narcotics dollars...

The remainder of the paper presents the pros and cons of alternative aid package proposals, ranging from enhancements in a single country only (Colombia, Peru or Bolivia) to a comprehensive regional strategy that would also include “potential coca producing countries.” According to the paper, Option III, the “Comprehensive Anti-Cocaine Strategy for the Andean Region” – the option that most closely resembles the one approved by the president – “has the corollary benefit of helping democratic governments fight growing insurgent movements,” but “could have human rights implications.”

Another decision addressed by the paper, whether to authorize the deployment of U.S. military personnel in an “active operational support role for host country counternarcotics and counterinsurgency efforts” was apparently not approved by the president. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that among the pros cited for this option is that it would help “link our interests (CN) [counternarcotics] with theirs (CI) [counterinsurgency],” leaving little doubt as to what U.S. policymakers expected Andean military forces would most like to do with the training and equipment provided by the U.S.

Indeed, the country summaries included as Annex III to this paper state clearly that in the cases of Colombia and Peru the armed forces see their primary mission as counterinsurgency. At best, it seems, the NSC working group expects Colombia to conduct combined “narco-insurgent operations,” and hopes that support for the

Peruvian military will, “Encourage the inter-operability of counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics forces.”

Document 12



State Department briefing memorandum, Melvyn Levitsky, Bureau of International Narcotics Matters (INM) to Robert Kimmitt, Under Secretary for Political Affairs (P), “NSC Deputies Committee Meeting on Enhancing Anti-Narcotics Efforts in the Andean Region,” July 7, 1989, White House Situation Room, 10:00 AM, Secret, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

According to this short strategy paper for the State Department’s Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Robert Kimmitt, it is the State Department’s preference that supply-side counterdrug programs in the Andes “should be regional” rather than country-by-country to ensure that traffickers do not simply relocate their operations. With respect to military assistance, Kimmitt is to stress to the other NSC deputies that “military assistance will go toward two uses: narco-insurgents and traffickers.”

Document 13



National Security Council, National Security Directive 18, “International Counternarcotics Strategy,” August 21, 1989, Secret, 6 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

The program finally approved by President Bush was outlined in National Security Directive 18, a strategy focused primarily on Colombia but also including significant allocations for Peru and Bolivia. “These programs,” according to the document, “will involve expanded assistance to indigenous police, military, and intelligence officials ... for the purpose of assisting them to regain control of their countries from an insidious combination of insurgents and drug traffickers.”

The president orders the Secretary of Defense to revise directives and procedures to “expand DOD support of U.S. counternarcotics efforts and to conduct training for host government personnel and operational support activities anywhere in the Andean region” short of conducting “actual field operations.” According to the directive’s secret annex, “common features” of counterdrug programs in each country should include, “Increased military assistance to neutralize guerrilla support for trafficking.”

Document 14



U.S. Embassy Peru cable, “Washington Interagency Comments on Narcotics Implementation Plan for Peru,” October 21, 1989, Secret, 8 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This cable is, according to its author, “a reader’s guide” to the Peruvian embassy’s plan to implement the Andean

Strategy – outlined in National Security Directive 18 (See [Document 13](#)) – highlighting changes suggested by a Washington interagency team. The text provides a candid summary of how embassy officials expect resources provided under the counternarcotics initiative will be used by Peruvian security forces.

The cable declares in no uncertain terms that the lion's share of aid provided to the Peruvian armed forces will support counterinsurgency operations. The embassy characterizes the counterdrug program as a “deal” struck with the Peruvian government to “help them solve their number one problem, which is subversion,” in exchange for their efforts in support of U.S. counternarcotics goals. “The program *is* repeat *is* an anti-subversive program” [emphasis added].

With respect to human rights and end-use limitations, embassy officials are confident they can keep tabs on military operations, “in spite of restrictions on the presence of U.S. personnel in combat zones.” However, the embassy adds that enforcing violations by Peruvian security forces may be problematic, warning that “as soon as the money for Peruvian high priority [i.e. counterterrorism] programs stops so do the counter-narcotics efforts.”

Document 15



National Security Council discussion paper, “Andean Drug Summit,” November 1, 1989, Secret, 8 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This discussion paper was circulated in preparation for a meeting of the Deputies Committee of the National Security Council in which participants were to discuss U.S. objectives at the proposed Andean drug summit, involving the presidents of Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and the United States.

With respect to guerrilla groups, the paper notes that successful counterdrug operations will require host governments “to provide security against the ability of insurgent movements to disrupt their efforts.” Colombia and Peru in particular “will want to use our assistance, at least in part, to deal with such threats.” Support for counterinsurgency operations raises other issues, however, and the NSC “will need to discuss the guidelines for such cooperation, particularly in the area of human rights.”

Document 16



State Department cable, “Discussion with President Garcia on the Andean Summit,” December 8, 1989, Confidential, 8 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

In this cable the State Department lists a number of issues it

would like Ambassador Anthony Quainton to raise with President Alan Garcia of Peru. Among other things, Quainton is to tell Garcia that the Andean aid package and the upcoming summit offer “a unique chance ... to fundamentally restructure” the U.S.-Peru relationship.

While the U.S. recognizes that Peru’s “highest priority” is to defeat the Sendero Luminoso guerrillas and “not narcotics trafficking,” the U.S. feels “there is significant overlap” in the two objectives. The ambassador is to explain to Garcia that, “In coca producing areas where Sendero Luminoso is active, we can provide assistance to both the police and the military.”

However, Washington is also wary of links between narcotics traffickers and the very security forces they propose to fund. Quainton is asked to tell Garcia that the U.S. finds “very disturbing” reports of “military cooperation with narcotics traffickers, together with widely reported human rights violations.” Adding that, “We cannot support the military if the military is aiding traffickers.”

Notes

9. Ethan Bronner, “US aide talks of troop help for Colombia,” *The Baltimore Sun*, August 21, 1989, p. 1.
10. CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “Beyond Operation Blast Furnace: Bolivia’s Struggle Against Narcotics,” February 1988, FOIA release to the National Security Archive.
11. United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, “U.S. Narcotics Control Programs in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Mexico: An Update,” February 1989, p. 4.
12. State Department paper, “Cocaine: A Supply Side Strategy,” June 15, 1989, see [Document 10](#).
13. Kevin Noble, “U.S. Troop Presence Small but Growing in South America's Cocaine Wars,” Associated Press, September 14, 1989.
14. The author does not possess a copy of this cable, but would be pleased to learn about the existence of a declassified version.
15. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, “The Andean Strategy – Its Development and Implementation: Where We are Now and Where We Should be Going,” September 15, 1991.
16. Under the authority of Section 506(A) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.
17. Michael Isikoff, “Up to 100 Military Advisers To Be Sent to Colombia; DEA Agents to Resume Attacks in Peru,” *The Washington Post*, September 1, 1989, p. A1; An agreement on a military assistance package for Peru was not reached until May 1991, largely because of Peruvian domestic concerns about militarizing the drug war. But the aid was also held up by the newly inaugurated President Alberto Fujimori in 1990 who called the narrow focus on combating drug trafficking “inconvenient for our interests.”

See Eugene Robinson, "U.S. Drug Effort Runs Into Latin Resistance," *The Washington Post*, September 14, 1990.

18. INM is the State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics Matters, now called the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Matters (INL).

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