

The 'Bush Factor' in U.S. Colombia policy

by Dennis Small and Gretchen Small

Major responsibility for the devolution of the Colombian crisis lies with the George Bush policy apparatus in Washington. For 15 years, this crowd has insisted that the drug trade and terrorists are not the same animal, that *narco-terrorism* does not exist. In the heyday of Oliver North's Contras, they justified allying with drug cartels in order "to fight communist guerrillas." Today, they insist a deal can be struck with the "guerrillas," supposedly in order to concentrate on defeating the "drug trade." New bottles, old wine.

For example, on May 21, in the closing days of the Colombian election campaign, Bernard Aronson, Bush's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs during 1989-93 (now a member of the Inter-American Dialogue), laid out precisely such a strategy in the *Washington Post*. He argued that the U.S. government should "test seriously" an alleged offer from the FARC to the U.S. government, that the FARC would cooperate in eradicating the vast coca fields under their protection, in return for U.S. development aid and a share of power in Colombia. Aronson insisted that war should not be waged against the FARC and the ELN: "Widening the war will not reduce drug trafficking. Ending the war through negotiations would allow Colombians for the first time to isolate the drug cartels and their corrupt political allies."

Behind Aronson's "Bushspeak" arguments lies an intense policy debate which has been raging in Washington for months, over what policy to adopt toward Colombia. The roots of the fight go back to President Clinton's decision in March 1996 to decertify the Samper government as "non-cooperating" in the war on drugs. Clinton did this over the fierce opposition of the London Foreign Office, and its handmaidens inside the U.S. State Department, who urged "restraint," "understanding," and a "non-confrontational approach" with the narco-Samper government.

One of the most strident advocates of certifying Samper at the time, was then-U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette, who also argued that there was no evidence of any organic link between the FARC-ELN and the drug trade. These statements of Frechette's have been repeatedly cited by FARC spokesmen as "proof" that they are not linked to drugs. For example, in a recent "Open Letter to the American People" posted on the Internet, the FARC reminds its readers that "the former Washington ambassador in Bogotá, Myles Frechette, asserted that there is no evidence that the Colombian guerrillas are engaged in drug trafficking."

In the last few months, more responsible voices, such as U.S. Southern Command chief Gen. Charles Wilhelm and U.S. drug policy adviser Gen. Barry McCaffrey (ret.), have argued that the FARC-ELN insurgency is of one piece with the drug trade, and that together they constitute a "security emergency" for Colombia's neighbors and the United States. McCaffrey, as far back as 1996, was emphatic on the FARC-ELN: "They're guarding drugs, they're moving drugs, they're growing drugs. . . . They're a narco-guerrilla force, period."

As the following brief chronology from 1998 shows, up through early May, these saner voices were forcefully making themselves heard in Washington and elsewhere. But this was followed a major counteroffensive by London's human rights lobby and their allies in the media and official Washington, who are currently on a rampage against the beleaguered Colombian Armed Forces. This ongoing, unresolved policy brawl in the United States, will be a major factor in determining the fate of Colombia in the weeks and months ahead.

Recent developments

March 31: General Wilhelm told hearings of the House International Relations Committee that there is "an active, growing, and increasingly violent insurgency [and] an expanding narcotics industry" in Colombia, which together control about 40% of the country. He announced that the Southern Command was conducting a comparative study of Peru's relative success and Colombia's relative failure in combatting narco-terrorism (see *EIR*, May 8, 1998).

April 21: McCaffrey visited Peru, where President Alberto Fujimori decorated him with la Grand Cross of the Order of the Sun, for his help in the war on drugs. McCaffrey praised Peru's highly successful war against narco-terrorism.

April 24: General Nicolás Hermoza, the head of the Peruvian Armed Forces, was invited by General Wilhelm to be a featured speaker at a Miami conference of the U.S. Southern Command, attended by high-level military representatives of most nations of Central and South America. Wilhelm, referring to Peru's April 1997 retaking of the Japanese ambassador's residence from MRTA terrorists, said that the commando operation "was one of the few resounding victories against world terrorism in the last 20 or 30 years."

May 4: General Wilhelm visited Colombia, and travelled to the jungle Caguán region to gain first-hand knowledge of the Colombian military's battle against the FARC. The Caguán—which had been demilitarized in 1997 by the Samper government in exchange for the FARC's freeing of 60 military hostages—is the epicenter of Colombia's cocaine-processing region, and is today dominated by the FARC. According to local press accounts, Colombian military officers showed Wilhelm that the FARC has been able to obtain sophisticated heavy military equipment with funds they received from the drug trade. According to Colombian press accounts, Wilhelm expressed his "admiration and respect" for the Colombian military's uphill battle against the narco-terrorists.

May 10: The *Washington Post* ran an “exposé” on Colombia’s 20th Brigade, the military intelligence unit, citing an anonymous “knowledgeable source with access to intelligence reports” charging the brigade with human rights violations, including involvement in the recent assassinations of leftist leaders Eduardo Umaña and Marí Arango. The article also cited former Ambassador Frechette as having “assailed the brigade, accusing it of death squad activity.”

May 11: U.S. and Colombian media reported that José Miguel Vivanco, the director of the Americas division of George Soros’s infamous Human Rights Watch non-governmental organization, had also charged that the 20th Brigade was linked to right-wing death squads.

May 11: Colombian Defense Minister Gilberto Echeverri denounced the *Washington Post* for engaging in an unjustified campaign to discredit the Armed Forces. Army commander Gen. Hugo Galán attacked Vivanco and Human Rights Watch, by name, for their “unfounded and reckless” charges, and for “irresponsible and defamatory” remarks attempting to link the 20th Brigade institutionally with paramilitary death squads. Armed Forces chief José Bonett accused Vivanco and Human Rights Watch of trying to “destabilize” Colombia.

May 12: State Department spokesman James Rubin came to the defense of Vivanco and Soros’s Human Rights Watch: “We are deeply distressed by the Colombian Army commander’s May 11 statements criticizing Human Rights Watch director José Miguel Vivanco and the *Washington Post*.” Describing the human rights situation in Colombia as “extremely serious,” Rubin called on the government to “undertake such investigations promptly and fully.”

May 12: Colombian Gen. Fernando Landazábal (ret.), former Defense Minister and a supporter of the Presidential campaign of Gen. Harold Bedoya (ret.), was gunned down in broad daylight in front of his home in Bogotá, by a professional assassination squad.

May 13: An unnamed State Department spokesman told the Colombian daily *El Tiempo* that “there is absolutely no causal link between the criticisms made of the extremely serious human rights situation in Colombia and the continuing internal violence in that country. Any suggestion of such a link is irresponsible. . . . The efforts of the Colombian government should be focussed on investigating these deaths, whether of human rights activists or of retired generals.”

May 15: The State Department announced that it had withdrawn the U.S. entry visas of Gen. Iván Ramírez, the current Army Inspector General and a former head of the 20th Brigade, and of 12 other generals and colonels, for alleged human rights violations. General Ramírez responded: “They have made me a target of the country’s enemies, and they will assassinate me. . . . By branding me a terrorist, the United States has put up my gravestone.”

May 15-18: The U.S. Embassy in Colombia hosted a three-day “peace seminar” in Cartagena, Colombia, with the

presence of 35 U.S. government officials, headed by Deputy Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs Peter Romero, and guerrilla and military “veterans” of the Guatemalan and Salvadoran peace negotiation processes. The goal of the seminar was to pressure Colombia, and especially its military, into negotiating with the narco-terrorist insurgents, and to establish, as Romero reportedly put it, that *all* Colombia-U.S. contact must go through the “natural channel,” the State Department. Colombian observers viewed Romero’s remarks

“What kind of peace are they talking about? . . . [The FARC-ELN] want to be left free to run a region which is the heart of world cocaine production and trafficking. In this way, without guarantees of anything, and in pursuit of an illusory political effect, we would be allowing the physical dismemberment of the national territory.”—Gen. Harold Bedoya (ret.), former Presidential candidate

as a transparent attack on generals Wilhelm and McCafrey’s efforts.

May 19: The 20th Brigade was officially disbanded by the Colombian government, “under heavy U.S. pressure,” according to the *Washington Post*.

May 21: State Department spokesman James Rubin praised the dismantling of the 20th Brigade, but stated that further restructuring of the military was needed. Questioned about reported links of the FARC and the ELN to the drug trade, Rubin responded that although the FARC asserts that “they are not involved in drug trafficking or that they are prepared to disengage from trafficking . . . we have not seen any evidence of this to date.” Rubin then turned around and gave the idea credence, calling it “an issue for the guerrillas to discuss with the Colombian government. The United States stands ready to do whatever it can to encourage and support peace talks.”

May 21: Bush-leaguer Bernard Aronson wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* calling for the United States to back peace negotiations with the Colombian narco-terrorists, saying that “the guerrillas’ offer to cooperate in ending coca leaf production in their zones should be tested seriously.” Aronson added: “A successful peace process in Colombia will require active involvement of the United Nations under the Security Council, including, eventually, deployment of peacekeepers.”