

Colombia is a land of extraordinary beauty, richly endowed with natural resources & blessed with a hard-working, enterprising people of great cultural diversity and cultural achievement. Colombians have a long-standing commitment to the ideals of democratic governance, electoral participation, freedom of expression & the subordination of military to civilian authority. They should by rights be a healthy, prosperous & peaceable country & a leader in the community of nations.

But during the past half-century Colombia has been plagued by many evils: an entrenched land-holding oligarchy; an untaxed, unregulated & rapacious business elite; an incomplete separation of Church from State; the tripling of her population in a single generation; a huge and hungry landless peasantry; an out-of-control urbanization process with teeming slums, chronic unemployment and high crime rates; a corrupt state apparatus that at best serves the rich & the middle class, while neglecting the majority.

The result was for decades a steadily escalating political opposition. Grassroots civic organizations, a vigorous trade union movement, often demagogic political party leaders & guerrilla armies alike demanded social justice & denounced the abuses of state power. This opposition was met by and large, less with meaningful reforms than with a brutal & systematic repression which in turn fueled resistance & facilitated recruitment into armed insurgent groups, leading to further repression and in the end to a widespread discouragement and disaffection from the political process itself. The insurgency and repression have at the same time depopulated the countryside, allowing a new

concentration of land ownership and transforming two or three million shell-shocked peasants into internal refugees.

Since the 1980's, the Colombian police & armed forces have been assisted in the work of repression by fast-growing right-wing paramilitary combat teams. Their special role has been to spread terror by assassinating opposition leaders & massacring peasants suspected of collaborating with the guerrillas. Guerrilla leaders who abandon the armed struggle to stand as opposition candidates for public office have by & large been murdered, as have several thousand local & national political and trade union leaders. No country now has a worse record in the defense of the most basic human rights.

The US has involved itself deeply in Colombian affairs since the Second World War; and the Colombian government has grown chronically dependent on US assistance. But on balance we have not proved to be good neighbors. Always at pains to buy cheap & sell dear & to promote & protect US investments in Colombia, we have contributed quite a bit off and on to the development of civil institutions and an economic infrastructure. But above all we have assisted the Colombian military in attempting unsuccessfully to destroy the country's once Marxist insurgency. The main object of US policy, from the Alliance for Progress to Plan Colombia, has been to train & equip the Colombian police & armed forces, and in so doing – Cold War ideology aside -- to subsidize American defense contractors by guaranteeing their sales in Colombia. This in turn has exacerbated rather than helping to ameliorate the social and political conflicts that have torn Colombian society apart since the 1950's.

Then around 1980 the growing and insatiable US demand for illegal drugs provided Colombia with a new export market; and Colombian farmers, processors & exporters inevitably rose to the occasion. Thanks to the self-defeating hypocrisy of a new Prohibition in the US, & a much-touted “war on drugs” here & abroad, cocaine prices soared & the resulting opportunities for enrichment pervaded virtually every institution in Colombian society: the police & military, the paramilitaries, the judiciary, the civil service, the business sector, the guerrilla forces themselves.

Rather than confront and diminish the demand for cocaine products at home, US policy has looked to the “supply side” and enrolled the corrupt Colombian government into its “war on drugs.” In the process our policy has helped transform an already war-torn society into a nightmare scenario of civic breakdown and institutionalized violence. That situation has been made even graver by the ecological & public health catastrophe that results from the massive aerial spraying of coca-growing regions and their inhabitants with an extra-strong, death-dealing form of glyphosate, known commercially as Roundup.

The Colombian people have recently responded in despair by electing in a landslide a charismatic autocrat who promises to smite their domestic enemies with increased military force, and with the help of a million informers restore peace and justice to the land, while at the same time addressing the most pressing social needs of the people. “A firm hand,” he says, “and an open heart.” Millions of Colombians have high hopes for

President Alvaro Uribe Vélez; and it is perhaps an encouraging sign that one of his first measures has been to raise taxes on the rich in order to pay for the expanded military presence, while at the same time holding the door slightly ajar for an eventual return to negotiation with the sworn enemies of the Colombian state. We have to wish him well in the quest for peace.

But bitter experience shows that there is no primarily military solution to Colombia's problems. In the face of every discouragement, that country must still find its way by means of political negotiation combined with massive investments in infrastructure, social welfare and job creation to a viable and sustainable social and political order. The US can and should assist Colombians in their efforts to achieve that objective by every peaceable means available.

Before that collaboration can even hope to be successful, we Americans must face two inescapable responsibilities to the Colombian people: first we have to figure out how to desist from throwing fuel into the fire that consumes them, by reducing or suspending our decades-old, always counterproductive military assistance programs; and second, we must concentrate our energies on putting an end to the costly and fraudulent "war on drugs" here at home. If we can find our way to confronting the consumption of mind-altering drugs in this country as the monumental public health problem it is, rather than as a problem for the criminal justice system, then we may hope to reduce the demand for Colombian drugs, to dry up the occasion for narco-terrorism, and to help carve out for

Colombia the breathing-space it needs to put its own house in order as the Colombian people see fit.