COLOMBIA IS COMPLICATED

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COLOMBIANS DON'T FIND IT EASY TO DEFINE WHAT WENT WRONG IN THEIR COUNTRY, OR HOW AMERICA CAN HELP THEM RECTIFY IT.

BY PHILLIP MCLEAN

Es complicado," is the common Colombian reply to a foreigner's question, "why is your country so violent?" Without a doubt, the country remains both violent and complicated.

Nonetheless, as 2006 came around, both President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, encouraged by recent positive signs in Colombia, have taken to holding it up as an example of what can be done in other trouble spots around the world. There may indeed be lessons to be learned from the last five years of heavy U.S.

involvement there, but Colombians themselves don't find it easy to define what went wrong or how to rectify it — or how America can help.

Helping a country with the history and size of Colombia is a formidable task, even under the best of circumstances.

Thirty years ago, Colombia was a star graduate of the Alliance for Progress, the initiative launched by President John F. Kennedy to promote growth and democracy in Latin America. It had put together more than a decade of healthy economic expansion, new export opportunities and had even, according to United Nations figures at the time, achieved a modest closing of the income gap between rich and poor. Competitive, if still elite-dominated, politics had become the rule, and the two main leftist rebel groups — the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army (known respectively, in English, as the FARC and ELN) — were seen as diminishing threats. Colombia was so sure of itself that in 1976, the talented economic minister Rodrigo Botero called in the U.S. ambassador to tell him his country no longer needed the still-substantial assistance Washington was providing, and ordered the closure of the USAID mission.

But the picture had seriously darkened by 1999. The Colombian economy was in the middle of its first recession since the 1930s. Per-capita income dropped several years in a row, and half the population was classified as poor. As the majority saw their access to health care and education shrinking, the better-off found their security threatened. The country recorded 2,500 kidnappings that year and murder rates climbed: more than 400 per 100,000 inhabitants were killed in each of the country's two largest cities, Bogota and Medellin. Extortion became common, especially in small towns, on farms and along the highways, where outlaws set up roadblocks, armed not just with threatening weapons, but also laptop computers loaded with purloined official tax and financial records, to determine the ability of passers-by to pay tribute.

Violence from the Left and Right

Worst of all, the central government's ability to protect citizens, never strong, seemed to be collapsing in the face of a two-pronged attack. By the late 1990s, the FARC, an old-line communist guerrilla band, had grown from a force of 7,000 to 18,000. For the first time in its four decades of existence, it was not just overrunning police and military outposts and ambushing government patrols, but began defeating the army in set-piece battles. For its part, the ELN — a product of 1960s-era university students' enthusiasm for Fidel Castro and liberation theology — was said to have as many as 5,000 fighters in the field. The group had come close to annihilation in the late 1970s but was revived by pipeline-related extortion, making headlines with regular bombings of the Cañon-Covenas pipeline, important for the country's oil exports. In 2000 the government lost a third of its expected revenues from petroleum exports.

While these leftist rebels were showing off their prowess and the government its vulnerability, a new form of violence was emerging: organized rural militias to counter the guerrillas. These "paramilitaries," as they were called, soon came to be responsible for some of the bloodiest massacres in Colombia's long history of civil conflict. Teams of these "paras" would enter small villages, call out those they suspected of guerrilla sympathies and assassinate them on the spot. It was unadulterated terror, the most brutish form of counter-guerrilla tactics.

Most local and international human rights organizations have long believed that the paramilitaries were closely associated with the army. Many saw the events in Colombia as a direct replay of the depredations of death squads in El Salvador a decade earlier. Evidence does exist that a number of attacks received official aid, evi-

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dence that has been used in protracted but still inconclusive legal actions against cashiered officers. As the light of publicity has shone on these cases and international pressure, especially from the United States, was brought to bear, allegations of paramilitary-army complicity have sharply dropped, but the underlying problem of paramilitarism remains.

In 1976, Colombia told the U.S. that it no longer needed its assistance and ordered the closure of the USAID mission.

Yet consistently drawing a bright line between official law enforcement and citizen self-defense is difficult, because Colombians themselves so often mix the two. Colombia has a long tradition of allowing, and at times promoting, private security arrangements. The Colombian Ministry of Defense estimated in the mid-1990s that what citizens were spending for their own protection (on bodyguards, property protection, security companies and vigilante bands) amounted to 3.4 percent of the country's gross domestic product, equivalent to what the government was then spending on the police and armed forces combined. It was often remarked that for a country supposedly in the midst of a nationwide civil conflict, Colombia had a ridiculously small defense budget. But if police and private security expenditures were included, that total was about average for Latin America.

Back in the mid-1980s, regional military commanders freely admitted that local cattlemen were helping equip their underfunded units, boots and all. Colombians also recall that the FARC began at the end of the turbulent period of the 1950s called "La Violencia" as a self-protection force set up by middle-class campesinos in the southern department of Huila. But the current version of paramilitarism is heavily influ-

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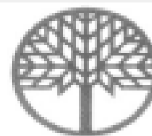

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The current version of paramilitarism is heavily influenced by its close connection with narcotics trafficking, making it a special concern to the U.S.

The Narco Connection

Some trace that connection back to the first such group, MAS (Muerto a Secuestradores, Death to Kidnappers), set up in December 1981 by the Medellin cartel to hunt down the M-19, an urban guerrilla group that had kidnapped a sister of the cartel's Ochoa clan. But most recent paramilitary leaders are products of the time when that cartel collapsed following the hunt for and killing of its most notorious leader, Pablo Escobar, in 1993. Several members set up their own drug operations in the corners of his crumbling empire. Prominent among these was Diego Murillo (better known as Don Berna), who was for a time Escobar's chief bodyguard; now in prison, he remains one of the most influential figures in the country's drug trade and Medellin's poor barrios.

The Castaño brothers, Fidel and Carlos, broke from Escobar's gang early on and participated in the effort to run him down. By most accounts, they are now dead, but in their last years of life sought to paint a picture of themselves as valiant guerrilla fighters who protected honest rural people and only incidentally got involved in the narcotics trade. After Fidel's mysterious disappearance in 1996, Carlos announced the formation of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) and gained wide public attention as a leader who linked private self-defense units around the country into a significant national counter-guerrilla force. These groups were indeed proliferating and gaining strength, often able to afford high-quality armaments and hire retired police and military officers to do the training.

But despite its name, the AUC was far from united. While some of its leaders were obtaining political power in some localities, their main activity was crime: not just drug-running, but kidnapping, extortion and theft of gasoline supplies, a particular specialty of gangs along the Magdelena River Valley. With all the competing paramilitary interests, few were surprised when Carlos Castaño also "disappeared" in 2003.

The narcotraffickers have been careful to spread the wealth across the political spectrum. According to a recent estimate by a local journalist, traffickers affiliated with the various paramilitaries account for 40 percent of the drug trade and the FARC accounts for another 40 percent. In fact, the business is of such importance to both sides that there have been frequent reports of their operatives cooperating on specific drug deals. That would work out to roughly $1 billion for each side.

But in general, the two sets of armed groups fight to protect their respective spheres of influence, such as prime coca cultivation zones. The Catatumbo, a former jungle reserve of the Montilliones Indians along the border with Venezuela, for instance, has become a vast coca plantation that was fought over by various paramilitary groups, the FARC and even the ELN. Eventually, one of the best-organized paramilitary organizations, led by Salvatore Mancuso, became the main enforcer of a kind of rough peace among the coca growers there. In that and other cases, there was always the suspicion that Mancuso's well-equipped units won with at least indirect help from the army, which was actively fighting the guerrillas. Human-rights activists have frequently observed that until they raised their voices in protest, instances of Colombian Army clashes with the paramilitaries were rare.

The fiercest battles between the paramilitaries and the guerrillas have been over control of the best supply routes to ship narcotics out of the country and bring armaments in. In 2002, the FARC dealt successive, serious defeats to the paramilitaries at Campamento in northern Antioquia and Bojaya in the Choco region. In the latter fight, 200 innocent civilians lost their lives in the crossfire.

Unveiling Plan Colombia

Colombia's president during this period (1998-2002), Andres Pastrana, tried to negotiate with the guerrillas, but also took steps to strengthen his demoralized army and reached out for foreign assistance. Put off by accusations of human rights violations, Europeans were at first slow to respond and, when they did, made clear that they would emphasize the needs of the country's poor and not its security problem. But by 1999, the Clinton

administration was becoming alarmed at the prospect that a country so close to the United States and so large might fail, and sought ways to stabilize it, whatever the complications.

Helping a country with the history and size of Colombia is a formidable task, even under the best of circumstances. It is as large as the southern United States minus Florida, with three distinct Andean ranges and the vast, lightly-populated Amazon plains. It was often incorrectly said during this period that the guerrillas controlled half the country. Perhaps the more accurate assertion is that to this day no one controls large stretches of the countryside, in part because of the long tradition of weak government.

President Alvaro Uribe's approach, "democratic security," means all citizens have a right to be free from violence — and a duty to help make their communities safer.

Complicating matters, the weakest instrument of the government is the judiciary, reflecting a sad national record of lawlessness. Smuggling has a long history, with the emerald trade, for example, being a law unto itself. Colombia has long been known to law enforcement officials around the globe not just for various forms of narcotics trafficking (first marijuana, then cocaine and heroin) but also as one of the world's major currency counterfeiting centers.

Some analysts contend that Colombia is violent and lawless because it is poor, and point to economic assistance as the key. Sadly, nearly a quarter of the population falls below the $2-a-day poverty line. But there is solid evidence that the strongest explanatory factor for poverty in Colombia is the level of violence. The World Bank estimates that if Colombia had just the rate of violence that is average for Latin America as a whole, it would be 50 percent richer. Two-and-a-half-million Colombians are refugees in their own country. The Bank's studies also point to a close correlation between the rise of the narcotics trade, the rise of violence and the decline of economic growth.

While its goal was stabilizing a country just two hours by air from Miami, the Clinton administration bought the narcotics explanation of the country's plight. Pragmatically, it also calculated that it could only gain congressional support for massive assistance to Colombia by anchoring its assistance in counternarcotics programs. Thus, "Plan Colombia" was born in 1999 as a multilateral aid package worth $7 billion over five years. Of this, $2.5 billion came from the United States, $1 billion from other countries and the rest from Bogota. A third of the U.S. money, all of the European funds and most of the Colombian component went to improve the efficiency of government and expand social programs. But from the beginning it was understood that two-thirds of U.S. funding would be directed to the police and armed forces, with much of that used for helicopters and other aircraft to support a large-scale aerial fumigation effort against coca and heroin poppies.

While some in the U.S. Congress were happy that "the Clinton administration was finally getting serious about narcotics," most critics in the United States and Europe believed Plan Colombia was wrong-headed because it focused on drugs and not poverty and it gave aid to military and police institutions accused of human rights violations. In fact, the plan's early efforts were largely dedicated to vetting the units that would be trained and supported for human rights violations. Colombians, for their part, were grateful for the assistance but anxious to get started.

A New Sheriff Comes to Town

In 2002, Alvaro Uribe ran for president to succeed Andres Pastrana. An ambitious, highly goal-oriented former governor of the Antioquia department, he had twice taken time out of his political career to study at Oxford and Harvard. His father had been murdered by the guerrillas, and as governor he promoted the then-legal community-protection organizations. Many deduced from that background that he was a conservative, though the views he exhibited in his rise through various elected and appointed government positions seemed to reflect the Liberal Party's views.

Colombians have historically chosen weak government over strong and, perhaps for that reason, have consistently sought negotiations rather than confrontation. Following that tradition, the other candidates in the race followed in Pastrana's footsteps and continued to pro-

mote peace talks with guerrillas and the AUC. But Uribe sensed that the country had changed, and was ready to take a hard line against violent groups. Seeing his opening, he took it, winning by a healthy margin in 2002.

To Washington's applause, Uribe quickly labeled his approach "democratic security," meaning all citizens have a right to be free from violence — and a duty to help make their communities safer. He levied new taxes on the rich to pay for a stronger armed forces and police, and he promoted programs to encourage citizen cooperation with authorities to better stop illegal armed groups. Both initiatives were controversial, but they have produced results. When the original Plan Colombia expired in 2004, President Bush continued to provide U.S. assistance on a year-to-year basis totaling about $750 million annually, with some support given directly for military equipment, training and intelligence. It is only fair to note that the percentage of the total U.S. aid package has shifted more toward economic and social assistance, and the United States has successively improved the unilateral trade preferences that have helped stimulate Colombia's non-traditional exports from flowers to manufacturing. But the central justification for U.S. assistance is still as it was in 1999: that constraining the narcotics trade will weaken Colombia's illegal armed bands and strengthen the country in every respect. It is a logic Uribe accepts, perhaps even more than most Americans.

Uribe's government can claim some remarkable achievements. In the first year of his presidency, violence dropped sharply. Today kidnappings are a fraction of what they were in 2002. The murder rates in Bogota and Medellin are now lower than in Washington, D.C. Health, education and pension programs still mostly favor the middle class, but are reaching more of the poor. The economy has grown by more than 4 percent for three years. Backed by foreign assistance, the judicial system is reforming. The military is putting more pressure on all of the illegal armed groups. The major paramilitary groups are disbanding, a process unfolding under the loose supervision of the Organization of American States. The surrender of FARC and ELN soldiers seems to have shrunk both organizations by a third.

While President Bush and Secretary Rice rightly admire Colombia's achievements, the root causes of violence have not yet been overcome.

It is no wonder that Uribe is highly favored to win re-election in May. Colombia has a strong tradition, and until last year a constitutional prohibition, against allowing a sitting president to run for re-election. But with Uribe garnering approval ratings of 70 percent or better ever since his election, the Congress and the courts bowed to reality and let him run again.

Still on the Brink

Yet for all that success, Colombia remains a country on the brink of crisis. The FARC may have shed some members and lost some to capture by the government, but is still capable of taking on and defeating government forces in isolated skirmishes. Perhaps even more serious is the continuation of the underlying criminality that has haunted the country for so many years. Many paramilitary soldiers may have turned in their arms, but the rural authoritarians who were at the heart of the phenomenon still hold sway in many parts of the country — and their urban counterparts are the alternative government in many poor neighborhoods. They aspire, as Pablo Escobar did before them, to a political role, and that aspiration threatens Colombian democracy.

A second Uribe administration (or that of his successor) will have to make much more progress on government reform, including the always-difficult job of increasing the tax burden (now just 15 percent of GDP). The rule of law urgently needs to be further strengthened to give citizens faith in the justice system. While narcotics control efforts have been impressive in scope — 120,000 hectares eradicated each year, more than 200 tons of cocaine seized, more than 350 cartel leaders extradited to the United States — the impact of those efforts on the availability of drugs in the United States has been small, as has been the effect on the criminals themselves. And while President Bush and Secretary Rice rightly admire Colombia's achievements, the causes of violence — the flush demand for narcotics trade from abroad and the enduring tradition of impunity at home — have not yet been overcome. ■