WHEN RATIONAL POLICY MAKING FAILS: 
PLAN COLOMBIA AND THE APPROACHING 
"COMMITMENT TRAP"  

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INTRODUCTION

Today I am announcing an urgently needed, two-year funding package to assist Colombia in vital counter-drug efforts aimed at keeping illegal drugs off our shores.
— President Bill Clinton, January 11, 2000

In January 2000 the Clinton administration proposed an emergency aid package for Colombia, which Congress approved in June 2000. This $1.3 billion aid package would support Plan Colombia, a $7.5 billion initiative designed to address Colombia’s multiple problems.  

We find little evidence that Plan Colombia conforms to a rational decision making model of foreign policy, in terms of relating policy means to desired ends, and pursuing tactics most likely to yield the highest expected utility. Plan Colombia’s divergence from this policy making model, we argue, is the product of three factors: a misdiagnosis of the Colombian problem itself, the U.S. election cycle, and an unusual but influential pro-military domestic coalition.

To develop this argument, section one briefly reviews Colombia’s troubling political situation. Section two applies a Rational Actor Model of foreign policy making to Plan Colombia, noting the lack of fit between this model and U.S. policy output; it also suggests what an optimal policy mix would entail to achieve Plan Colombia’s stated goals. The third section reviews the central criticisms Plan Colombia engendered, while section four explains U.S. policy output on the basis of misdiagnosis, election cycles, and coalitions. The conclusion evaluates the Plan’s overall potential to create a “commitment trap” entailing long term, increasingly broad obligations in Colombia and throughout the Andean region.

COLOMBIA’S POLITICAL CONTEXT: DISTURBING TRENDS

Politically, Colombia faces the challenge of ending a 40 year-old civil war that has claimed 35,000 lives in the last decade, plus stemming coca and cocaine cultivation/production in the context of an unconsolidated state.  

Severe strictures on national sovereignty reflect the Colombian state’s weakness. Leftist guerrillas approximately control
50 percent of the national territory; their right-wing paramilitary counterparts protect rich landowners from the guerrillas, often by terrorizing peasant villages suspected of harboring guerrilla sympathizers. Both groups profit from the drug trade and both routinely employ force to advance their cause. Of the leftist insurgents, two groups are particularly important—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Army of National Liberation (ELN).

The FARC (whose membership numbers roughly 17,000) is the largest and oldest insurgent group in the Western Hemisphere. It formed in 1964 in response to government offensives against communist-led enclaves in rural Colombia, and has battled the government (often, quite successfully) for nearly 40 years. Its political program demands agrarian reform, increased social spending, eliminating paramilitary groups, and reform of the armed forces. As an agrarian movement, some of its demands are linked to the perceived needs of rural Colombians (basic infrastructure for agriculture and increased equality). By virtue of its military accomplishments the FARC achieved a political stature that compelled the government to engage it in direct peace negotiations and accept its demands for a demilitarized zone in southern Colombia to stage these talks (this same region functions as Colombia’s principal coca production zone). Between 30 and 50 percent of the FARC’s revenues derive from “taxing” the cultivation of coca in FARC-controlled territories. Consequently, Plan Colombia’s explicit focus on southern Colombia—the nucleus of FARC-controlled territory—poses a direct challenge to the guerrillas’ vested interests.

The ELN is the second largest insurgency in Colombia, with between 5,000–7,000 members. Obsessed with the nationalization of Colombia’s petroleum industry, the ELN exhibits a “single-issue” focus. Toward this end it sabotages pipelines, kidnaps civilians, and terrorizes the oil-industry. Ransom payments, “protection fees,” and drug profits constitute the bulk of its revenues. Though smaller than the FARC, the ELN insisted it be included in the peace negotiations, yet refused to negotiate alongside the FARC.

Right-wing paramilitary or self-defense forces comprise the conflict’s second set of actors. The paramilitaries emerged in the early 1980s—their formation instigated by cattle ranchers and the military in response to guerrilla activities. In confronting the guerrillas, however, the paramilitaries have perpetrated some of the most acute human rights violations in Colombia’s civil war, and according to Amnesty International, they were responsible for “80 percent” of such violations in 2000 alone. Though hardly a monolith, a significant portion of these groups belong to the United Self-Defense group (AUC), led by one of Colombia’s chief drug runners, Carlos Castaño. In a Washington Post interview, Castaño claimed the AUC earned about “half a million dollars each trimester” from illicit drugs.

The last actor, of course, is the Colombian state—a state that by most objective measures is clearly under siege. The government’s inability to fulfill even its most basic functions (maintain order, protect the citizenry, monopolize the use of force) has facilitated conflict, violence, and terror. These political dynamics also have destabilized the economy, creating a pressing need to re-establish legitimate authority and a political climate conducive to economic growth. Toward these ends the government began peace negotiations with the guerrillas in 1998 and sought external assistance via Plan Colombia.

Two points bear stressing regarding the discussion above. First, drugs permeate and complicate every aspect of the Colombian conflict. They have corrupted and weakened the state, yet strengthened and legitimized the guerrillas and paramilitaries. Drug money finances much of the conflict, and increasingly sustains guerrilla and paramilitary operations. Second,
the Colombian state is profoundly weak—politically, economically, and militarily. For decades the state ignored southern Colombia, a practice that set the stage for its current problems. One reason farmers began growing coca is because the state failed to establish basic infrastructure or an institutional presence in the region conducive to community development and the rule of law. The insurgent groups also emerged within the context of the state’s inability (or unwillingness) to perform its basic functions; and the paramilitaries, meanwhile, justify their existence because, again, the state failed to protect individual rights and property.

U.S. interests in Colombia include stability, trade (especially oil), democracy, and of course, drugs. To protect these interests, Washington pledged $1.3 billion to Colombia over two years in support of Plan Colombia, whose strategic thrust called for a “push into southern Colombia”—a FARC-controlled coca zone roughly the size of Switzerland. The Plan’s basic objectives were three-fold: to eradicate the coca fields (thereby reducing the supply of cocaine), reestablish the state’s legitimacy in southern Colombia, and strengthen its governing capacity. To achieve these objectives the aid package allocated substantial moneys for military assistance to defeat the guerrillas protecting the coca zones (or to coerce them into good-faith peace negotiations). Much of the criticism surrounding the Plan has stemmed from this realist, pro-military focus. Rather than add to the sizeable polemical discourse on Plan Colombia, we assess its merits through the lens of the Rational Actor Model.

**RATIONAL DECISION MAKING**

Rational decision making remains one of the most enduring notions of foreign policy making. To assess U.S. policy via Plan Colombia we employ the expected utility model advanced by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita. This model incorporates concepts of satisficing and bounded rationality, in which actors faced with incomplete information and time constraints in gathering and processing information choose to satisfice, rather than maximize, their utility. It posits that policymakers:

- can rationally relate means to ends,
- have transitive preferences (i.e., if they prefer A to B, and B to C, they also prefer A to C), and in pursuing policy objectives, they clarify and order their values, goals, and preferences accordingly,
- consider a limited range of alternative means to achieve preferred ends in terms of expected utility, and
- choose the strategy most likely to yield the highest expected utility.

This pattern of rational decision making would explain Plan Colombia as a process in which U.S. officials canvassed a range of options, weighed their perceived costs and benefits, then devised a policy suited to meet a minimal set of requirements. Given the Plan’s stated goals to decrease drug production by 50 percent within six years, achieve peace with Colombian guerrillas (and retake guerrilla-held territory), secure the rule of law, and establish alternative development strategies, these criteria would include:

- a military defeat of (or political settlement with) the guerrillas,
aerial crop eradication in guerrilla-held coca producing areas,
overhauling the judicial system and greatly increasing its budget, and
assisting small farmers to switch from coca to alternative, legal crops.

We operationalize this model with respect to Plan Colombia using two proxy indicators of expected utility: (1) the Plan’s distinct aid quantities, and (2) its basic implementation pattern. First, we take the quantity of U.S. aid apportioned to each policy component as one proxy for the expected utility Washington believed would accrue from that particular component. From a rational perspective, the greater the aid allocated to a given issue, the greater the expected utility. A second proxy of expected utility is Plan Colombia’s general implementation pattern: military engagement and resolution followed by economic, social, and legal reforms. The greater the number of policy components that turn on the success of any single component, the greater the utility expected from that component will be. As envisioned in Washington, only after Colombia’s guerrillas had been defeated—or punished so severely on the battlefield that they agreed to negotiate peace—would economic, social, or legal reforms kick in substantially to ameliorate the underlying conditions that gave rise to Colombia’s drug and guerrilla problems. As Thomas Pickering, President Clinton’s Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, explained, this linear approach (first military victory, then institutional/social/economic reforms) was “the thesis of all this.”

Applied to Plan Colombia (Table 1), these indicators strongly suggest that Washington expected high utility from its military approach. To begin, the Plan devoted nearly 75 percent of U.S. aid to military actions via the “push into southern Colombia” (training and equipping elite Colombian Army anti-narcotics battalions, providing helicopters to the Colombian National Police for aerial eradication), and increased interdiction (constructing and maintaining U.S. Forward Operating Locations across the greater Andean region). By contrast, it devoted just under 14 percent of aid to strengthening Colombia’s governing capacity (training in anti-corruption, money laundering, and kidnapping measures), and slightly more than 12 percent to financing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which implement aid and alternative development programs. Aid quantities provide some purchase on expected utility, but since activities like training, equipping, and maintaining elite anti-narcotics units are, by nature, expensive endeavors, some might argue this indicator actually tells us very little. We disagree. Washington’s decision to spend $630 million on military measures clearly reflects a belief that such measures were necessary, and governments do not invest over a half billion dollars on enterprises they expect to fail. Similarly, since the Plan’s overall success (stanching drug flows, resolving the civil war, instituting effective social, economic, and legal reforms) turns wholly upon the success of the initial military campaign, its implementation pattern confirms the high utility Washington expected from a strong military approach.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aid Component</th>
<th>Millions of U.S. Dollars</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
<th>Expected Utility</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Military Aid</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombian Military</td>
<td>516.7</td>
<td>60.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombian National Police</td>
<td>115.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
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<td>(military aid goes to the “Push into southern Colombia,” and increased interdiction)</td>
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<td><strong>Social Aid</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternative Development</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>Aid to the Displaced</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
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<td><strong>Governing Capacity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judicial reform</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rule of law</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Peace</strong></td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>&lt; 1 %</td>
<td>Very Low</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$860.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
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† This total reflects Colombia’s 65 percent share of the $1.3 billion allocated to Plan Colombia.

Several factors illustrate the irrationality of this policy mix. To begin, each component of Plan Colombia is mutually reinforcing and tightly interlinked. Yet nearly 75 percent of all aid is devoted to the military/police; the diminutive allocations to alternative development, judicial reform, and peace are not proportionate to these components’ importance to the Plan’s overall stated objectives (substantial judicial reform, securing the rule of law, advancing alternative development, achieving peace). If market forces and the absence of concrete alternatives draw farmers into coca production, while lawlessness and drug trafficking flourish amidst an unconsolidated state, and if peace between the government and guerrillas lies at the heart of Colombia’s potential turnaround, the relatively meager sums devoted to these enterprises seem hardly rational.

Moreover, the allocation of funds appears particularly irrational in light of readily available information. In terms of reducing drug consumption in the United States, a 1994 U.S. government-sponsored study determined that reducing demand via treatment is eleven times more cost-effective than interdiction, and twenty-three times more cost-effective than source-country control. Plan Colombia, however, devotes the lion’s share of resources to the least cost-effective approach to reducing U.S. drug consumption. Finally, Plan Colombia rests on a set of assumptions that, if not irrational, are highly dubious—i.e., that a military victory
over the guerrillas is possible, or that military pressure would ensure guerrilla pliability at the negotiating table. We will take up these issues and other critiques more fully a bit later. For now, we simply present a more optimal policy mix.

**Optimal Policy Mix**

To reduce the flow of drugs from Colombia into the United States (and by extension, U.S. drug consumption), policy must effectively address the web of mutually reinforcing economic, social, and political factors that spawned Colombia’s drug lords, coca farmers, guerrilla militias, and paramilitaries, plus weakened the Colombian state’s capacity to respond to these challenges. On this basis, a more optimal policy mix would include: (1) sustained peace negotiations, (2) strengthening military/police capacity, (3) advancing alternative development, (4) strengthening governing capacity, and (5) reducing demand.

The components of this mix, like the problems bedeviling Colombia itself, are mutually reinforcing. Because peace among combatants is necessary to eradicate coca production zones and reintegrate combatants into Colombia’s polity, negotiating peace with the guerrillas should have received stronger support, greater U.S. involvement, and greater aid. These ends, in turn, would require devoting at least some attention to guerrilla concerns regarding the paramilitaries who oppose them, and whose continued counter-guerrilla operations provide little incentive to disarm.

Strengthening military/police capacity is needed to eradicate coca crops that remain under the control of recalcitrant guerrilla forces; such strengthening is also needed to help the Colombian state reconsolidate control over the national territory and prevent the government’s collapse (with its various spillover effects throughout the region). Finally, military professionalization would bolster public confidence in the armed forces by curtailing violations of human rights.

An optimal policy mix would also advance significant alternative development strategies to wean small farmers off coca cultivation and preclude massive rural impoverization. Such efforts should entail economic aid to small farmers, including credit, technical, and input assistance. To facilitate crop substitution, ensure farmers can actually get their crops to market, and stimulate additional employment require significant resources to improve Colombia’s rural infrastructure. Finally, sustained anti-poverty assistance is needed to ameliorate revenue shortfalls stemming from the closure of the coca market. In short, an optimal policy mix would boost aid to alternative development substantially—both for humanitarian reasons and to reduce the probability that marginalized rural populations might seek relief by joining the guerrillas.

To help consolidate the state, strengthen its governing capacity, establish the rule of law, and reduce Colombia’s drug supplies, an optimal policy mix would also contain other elements. These include sustained measures to reform Colombia’s judicial system, expedite prosecutions and asset forfeitures from the drug trade, plus initiatives that target money laundering, promote extradition of alleged drug traffickers, and protect Colombian justice officials. Finally, in light of resilient market demand and supply forces, greater efforts toward reducing the demand for drugs in the United States should accompany actions toward supply reduction.
We do not presume to place a dollar value on the portion of aid the components above would require. We do suggest, however, that those facets of U.S. policy designed to address the root causes of Colombia’s guerrilla, paramilitary, and drug-trafficking woes (poverty and inequality, social/political marginalization, and a dysfunctional state) should receive a proportion of aid commensurate with their significance. The prospects of achieving Plan Colombia’s basic goals would be greater through these measures, we argue, than through those that Congress approved in 2000. As we detail below, for a variety of reasons, critics of U.S. policy agree; the general criticisms of Plan Colombia tend to reflect anti-realist sentiments, human rights and environmental concerns, and the abiding relevance of market forces—both supply and demand.\textsuperscript{14}

\section*{The Critiques}

The anti-realist criticisms are predicated on three observations. First, substantial political, economic, and social reforms hold higher prospects of pacifying the countryside and reducing coca production than a military, forced-eradication approach. As Robert White, President of the Center for International Policy notes: “Campesinos grow coca not just because it commands bonanza prices but because the traffickers’ planes land nearby”; hence, the “$1.3 billion . . . could be more constructively used to build farm-to-market highways,”\textsuperscript{15} especially given the current lack of transport infrastructure in rural areas. Second, given Colombia’s history of armed violence, if more weapons could truly solve its political problems, Colombia would have achieved peace long ago. The great fear is that Plan Colombia might widen the oldest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere by strengthening the capacity for violence—as well as the resolve—of “hard-liners” on all sides.\textsuperscript{16} Third, the history of forced-eradication programs elsewhere strongly suggests such efforts in Colombia will merely shift coca growing deeper into its Andean jungles or across the border into neighboring states (the so-called “balloon effect”).

Regarding human rights, some analysts fear that Plan Colombia’s military approach might actually aid the perpetrators of human rights atrocities. Human Rights Watch, for example, has extensively documented the Colombian military’s sorry human rights record,\textsuperscript{17} and because nearly 50 percent of all Colombian aid is destined for the army, Plan Colombia raises the specter of even greater human rights violations. Equally important, the Plan fails to address the paramilitaries, whose close links to Colombia’s regular army (and history of human rights abuses) could permit U.S. military aid to fall into the “wrong” hands. As Amnesty International explained: “mechanisms are [not] in place to ensure that future weapons transfers to the Colombian armed forces will not be transferred to illegal paramilitary organizations.”\textsuperscript{18}

In terms of environmental issues, observers like Ricardo Vargas (of the Colombian NGO, Acción Andina) have questioned the wisdom of Plan Colombia’s stress on aerial eradication—specifically, its impact on the fragile Amazonian ecosystem in southern Colombia.\textsuperscript{19} More recently, a series of independent studies conducted by investigators at the University of Michigan, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Earthjustice, the Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense, Institute for Science and Interdisciplinary Studies, and elsewhere, have underscored the inadequacy of environmental safeguards surrounding the Plan’s eradication efforts.\textsuperscript{20} And, on top of environmental
concerns, there remains a possibility that the indiscriminate destruction of all crops occasioned by spraying could simply stimulate greater peasant sympathy for the guerrillas, and thus, further imperil the state's legitimacy in guerrilla-held territory.

Finally, some take issue with Plan Colombia's preoccupation with stanching the supply of drugs at the expense of addressing demand. The issue here is the fundamental nature of market forces. As Ted Galen Carpenter, the Cato Institute's Vice President for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies, asserts, "Plan Colombia cannot repeal the economic laws of supply and demand"; consequently, so long as U.S. demand for drugs remains high, entrepreneurs will seek to meet it. One of Plan Colombia's critical flaws, then, is that it largely ignores the demonstrated "balloon effect" whereby supply reductions in one country merely shift cultivation to another.

In short, by downplaying peace negotiations and alternative development, and instead, attacking "drugs" and "guerrillas" (the symptoms of much deeper problems), and by ignoring the balloon effect and the demand side of drug-trafficking, the prospects that Plan Colombia could realize its fundamental goals seem remote. In these ways Plan Colombia does not conform to a rational, expected utility decision making process. How then, might we explain U.S. policy output? We suggest that three factors help account for the Plan's "irrational," realist policy mix: a misdiagnosis of the "Colombian problem," the U.S. election cycle, and an unusual, pro-military political coalition.

**EXPLAINING OUTCOMES**

**Misdiagnosis**

Despite its appearance as a comprehensive program designed to address Colombia's multiple woes, Plan Colombia views the country's problems principally in terms of drugs and guerrillas, and such reductionist views prevailed among some of Plan Colombia's staunchest supporters. In the executive branch, for example, President Clinton's drug czar, Barry McCaffrey, maintained there was "no question about what's happening down there [in Colombia]"; the so-called civil war was simply a "struggling over money out of drug production" (McCaffrey also routinely labeled the FARC as narco-insurgents, narco-guerrillas, or narco-terrorists). In Congress, meanwhile, Benjamin Gilman (R-New York), Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, urged support of Plan Colombia to combat the perceived "narco-based war" raging there; and for his part, then-Senate Majority leader Trent Lott argued a military approach was necessary because "this is a question of standing up for our children, of standing up and fighting these narco-terrorists in our part of the world..." (emphasis added).

It is true that the drug war and Colombia's civil war have common fronts, but they also have different causes and different long-term solutions. Colombia's guerrilla/civil war is symptomatic of much deeper problems. Though clearly aggravated by drugs, Colombia's civil war was caused by deep-seeded domestic political/economic problems, and will require substantial structural and political reforms to resolve. The drug problem, meanwhile, is the product of powerful demand and supply market forces that cannot be resolved by over-emphasizing supply. A diagnosis that lays more stress on treating symptoms than a
pathology’s root causes is unlikely to cure the disease; misdiagnosis of a policy problem will also lead to implausible policy assumptions.

As noted earlier, Plan Colombia’s assumption that a military solution to the conflict is possible remains a dubious proposition. In El Salvador and Vietnam neither massive U.S. aid nor direct U.S. military involvement proved sufficient to defeat guerrilla forces. In Colombia, meanwhile, the FARC has fought the government for decades without defeat, and well before the guerrillas gained access to drug money. Even should this source of funding collapse, there is little reason to believe the FARC could not survive to fight on, given its proven durability. Similarly, the assumption that military pressure alone will encourage guerrilla accommodation at the negotiating table is questionable. True, when faced with military stalemate, various guerrilla forces did eventually choose to negotiate rather than continue their armed struggle (i.e., the Palestinian Liberation Organization, guerrilla forces in Guatemala and El Salvador). However, these militias were nearly bankrupt when they finally began peace talks; by contrast, the FARC is rich and could continue fighting for years to come.

Finally, the implicit assumption that eliminating the guerrillas would sharply curtail the U.S. drug problem is highly debatable. On the one hand, drug eradication efforts in Peru and Bolivia in the 1980s only pushed coca growing into Colombia, and there is no reasonable basis to believe a similar balloon effect would not recur should the FARC be defeated and crop eradication foreclose coca growing in southern Colombia. On the other hand, Plan Colombia failed to address the paramilitaries who themselves are deeply involved in the drug trade. In short, one factor critical to the irrational formulation of Plan Colombia was a serious misdiagnosis of the policy problem itself; two additional factors, it seems, were the U.S. election cycle and a powerful, pro-military domestic coalition.

The U.S. Election Cycle

In terms of the electoral cycle, the Clinton administration (and the Democratic Party) hoped to retain the White House in 2000, and make gains in Congress. Accused by Republicans of being “soft” on drugs in the 1996 campaign, the administration sought to protect its flanks in the upcoming contest; its determination was bolstered considerably by a poll conducted by Democratic pollster Mark Mellman, showing a public concerned over rising drug use and inclined to blame Democrats. With the election approaching, Mellman reportedly cautioned the White House that drug use could be “an Achilles’ heel” issue for Democrats.27

Even so, faced with a Republican-dominated Congress ambivalent (if not hostile) to foreign aid, the Clinton administration backtracked from the original aid program Colombian president Andrés Pastrana proposed in 1998, which privileged economic development, poverty alleviation, and peace negotiations over military confrontation with the FARC.28 In meetings with U.S. lawmakers, however, Pastrana found Republican legislators had softened their traditional hard-core stance against foreign aid, and promised Colombia generous assistance provided the aid package gave a military approach pride of place. Indeed, the Congressional Quarterly Weekly reported that through these meetings House Speaker Dennis Hastert and other GOP legislators established direct ties with Colombian government officials (thereby effectively circumventing U.S. diplomats). The upshot was that Congress played a
crucial role in shaping U.S. policy toward Colombia and “force[d] Clinton to follow their lead.” Consequently, the administration’s final aid package reflected a key congressional demand, namely, a sharp spike in funding for Colombia’s military and narcotics police. As one State Department official explained, “The U.S. will sharply increase aid if [Pastrana] develops a comprehensive plan to strengthen the military, halt the nation’s economic free fall and fight drug trafficking” (emphasis added).

**Political Coalitions**

In the end, the constraints posed by the election cycle and an assertive Republican Congress helped forge a highly unusual pro-military coalition that directed U.S. policy away from a Rational Actor model of foreign policy making. Within the government this coalition brought the Clinton administration and Republican lawmakers together in “bipartisan” support of a military-oriented Plan Colombia. “No one wants to seem soft on drugs,” explained Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco). “The White House and Congress don’t ever want to be seen as not doing all they can to stop the flow of drugs—even if it’s the wrong policy.” Outside the government, meanwhile, the coalition included corporations who stood to gain from a military policy approach. This private sector component included the U.S.-Colombian Business Partnership consortium, Lockheed Martin, Occidental Petroleum, and other oil companies. In ways subtle and otherwise, these firms worked to ensure Plan Colombia fulfilled their interests.

For its part, Lockheed Martin—which manufactures P-3 radar planes used to track drug shipments—commissioned the very same Mellman poll (discussed above) which first sensitized the administration to the drug issue’s electoral consequences. Meanwhile, Occidental Petroleum (whose pipelines the ELN routinely sabotages) lobbied Congress directly for military aid. Finally, weapons manufacturers like Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. (Black Hawk helicopters), and Bell Helicopter Textron Inc. (Huey helicopters) helped round out the coalition’s private sector constituency. Both firms contributed to the Republican and Democratic parties’ campaign war chest and both received the backing of “home state” legislators to include their products in the aid package.

**Conclusion**

As initially envisioned by Washington, much of Plan Colombia’s success would hinge upon additional financial support from the international community and implementation of the Plan’s non-military aspects by non-governmental organizations. However, alarmed by the Plan’s military thrust and miffed by Washington’s failure to consult them during the project’s planning stages, European states disassociated themselves from Plan Colombia (pledging a mere $330 million to support “peace”); meanwhile, many U.S. and Colombian NGOs refused to take part. Thus, rather than a true multilateral effort, Plan Colombia quickly became very much a U.S. project—an outcome that raises the troubling specter of a “commitment trap.”
The Commitment Trap

One of the biggest fears critics harbored regarding Plan Colombia was the ease by which the Plan could lead the United States deeper into Colombia’s imbroglio, and the likelihood of mission creep over time. In the throes of the U.S. presidential campaign, the aid package passed Congress with only limited debate, and many questions that should have been asked and deliberated on, were not. For example, if U.S.-supplied helicopters are downed by guerrilla forces, will they be replaced? If so, how many and for how long? If the balloon effect ensues post-eradication in southern Colombia, would Washington press the “drug war” deeper into Colombian territory?

Plan Colombia’s potential to generate a commitment trap quickly proved more than idle speculation. As early as October 2000, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) reported serious implementation deficiencies regarding Plan Colombia that strongly suggest the United States could be forced to assume a broader, long term set of responsibilities. Among the GAO’s more troubling findings were that:

1. the Colombian government lacked both the detailed plans and management structure, plus the funding necessary to implement its programs effectively and achieve stated goals,
2. despite Washington’s $1.3 billion pledge, additional funds would be needed simply to ensure that equipment provided remained operable, and
3. finally, the total cost and activities required to meet the plan’s goals remained unknown.

GAO predictions regarding the need for additional U.S. aid were quickly borne out, when in February 2001, President Pastrana met with U.S. President George W. Bush, and requested exactly that. In response, Bush not only promised Colombia aid via greater access to the U.S. market, but also penciled into his 2002 budget a request for $400 million in new aid to Bogotá and nearly that amount to be dispersed among other Andean states. These developments moved Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) to ask the administration to provide a detailed analysis explaining exactly how long the U.S. commitment to Plan Colombia would last and how much it would cost. No doubt McCain could hardly have found Pastrana’s assessment reassuring. “We are a poor country,” the Colombian president explained, “but we are spending $1 billion a year of our money to keep drugs off the streets of Washington and New York. We need more help. This is a long-term plan, maybe 15 to 20 years.”

The balloon effect offers a second pathway into a commitment trap. Since forced eradication efforts began under Plan Colombia, Washington estimates that coca cultivation has actually increased 25 percent. Moreover, there is growing evidence of coca cultivation and cocaine processing shifting beyond Colombian borders into Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Should these dispersal patterns continue, pressure would mount to extend U.S. commitments accordingly.

A third factor that portends broader U.S. commitments throughout the Andean region is Plan Colombia’s potential spillover effects. Many of Colombia’s neighbors fear the Plan’s military thrust could widen Colombia’s internal conflict and generate increasing refugee flows, instability, and reprisals across borders. In Ecuador, for example, there is growing fear of guerrilla or paramilitary attacks against the Forward Operating Locations that Plan
Colombia establishes on Ecuadorian soil; moreover, both Colombian guerrilla and paramilitary personnel “on leave” in Ecuador have engaged in violent street battles.\footnote{The authors gratefully acknowledge the Rohatyn Center for International Affairs at Middlebury College for its institutional support, and the Middlebury Undergraduate Collaborative Research Fund for its financial assistance in support of this project.} Kidnappings and ransoms—problems endemic to Colombia—also have surged along the border. In Panama, meanwhile, both the FARC and paramilitaries are struggling to control the border region that serves as a key transit point for drugs and weapons shipments.\footnote{As proposed by Colombian president, Andrés Pastrana, the Colombian government would contribute $4 billion to the project, the United States would contribute $1.3 billion, and the international community (mainly Europe) would provide the remaining $2.2 billion.} Finally, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama all report a spike in refugees as Colombians seek shelter from the violence wracking their country. Financing the settlement camps and heightened border security required to address these outflows and maintain political stability is likely to constitute yet another responsibility Washington will be asked to shoulder as its Colombian policy plays out.

In short, there are compelling reasons to expect U.S. policy toward Colombia will require a much broader and extended commitment by the United States than Washington has heretofore acknowledged. Recent developments inside Colombia only bolster these prospects. In May 2002, Alvaro Uribe won a decisive victory in Colombia’s presidential elections. His entire campaign platform—based on opposition to peace talks, a frontal assault against the guerrillas, the doubling of men in police and military uniform, and the creation of a million-strong civilian militia—appealed to war-weary voters. As the new Colombian government unleashes its “war without quarter” against the guerrillas,\footnote{See Andrés Cala, “The Enigmatic Guerrilla,” Current History, vol. 99, no. 634 (February 2000): 56–59; and Jeremy McDermott, “Guerrillas Control Half of Colombia,” San Francisco Examiner, August 28, 2000, p. A1.} Bogotá will likely ask Washington to help finance, train, and equip these forces. This scenario holds enormous implications for the scope of U.S. policy obligations in Colombia and across the Andean region.

\section*{Notes}

1. The authors gratefully acknowledge the Rohatyn Center for International Affairs at Middlebury College for its institutional support, and the Middlebury Undergraduate Collaborative Research Fund for its financial assistance in support of this project.

2. As proposed by Colombian president, Andrés Pastrana, the Colombian government would contribute $4 billion to the project, the United States would contribute $1.3 billion, and the international community (mainly Europe) would provide the remaining $2.2 billion.


5. Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia and Ejército de Liberación Nacional, respectively.


7. Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia.


When Rational Policy Making Fails

22 The demand for cocaine has been such that despite a 775 percent jump in U.S. aid to Colombia from 1996–1999, coca cultivation and cocaine production grew 140 and 126 percent respectively, in the same period. See *Drug Control: U.S. Assistance to Colombia Will Take Years to Produce Results* (Washington, D.C.: GAO-01-26, October 2000); and *Drug Control: Narcotics threat from Colombia Continues to Grow* (Washington, D.C.: GAO/NSIAD-99-136, June 1999).
25 Press release by Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-New York), February 15, 2000. It is important to note that this interpretation is not shared by observers far more familiar with Colombia’s situation. For example, Jaime Ruíz, Colombia’s point-man in Plan Colombia’s implementation asserts that “In American terms they want to see the problems of Colombia . . . through the prism of drugs—that the guerrillas are narco-traffickers and the problem is drugs.” See DeYoung, “For Colombian Rebels, It’s Not a Drug War,” op. cit.
31 Vääcius and Isacson, “Plan Colombia,” op. cit., p. 2.
33 The U.S.-Colombian Business Partnership includes Occidental, Texaco, Amoco and British Petroleum, plus Bechtel, Pfizer, Colgate-Palmolive, Caterpillar, and the Enron corporations.
34 In congressional testimony Lawrence Meriage, Occidental’s Vice President, pressed the case for military aid: “If the [Colombian] police are to be effective in carrying out counter-narcotics activities,” he explained, “it is essential that they have the backing of Colombia’s armed forces. But Colombia’s military forces . . . lack mobility, equipment, and perhaps most serious, they lack the intelligence gathering capabilities . . . The counter-narcotics battle simply cannot be won without a stronger, better equipped, and highly disciplined military force.” Lawrence P. Meriage, Vice President, Occidental Oil and Gas Corporation, “Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources,” February 15, 2000.
35 Isikoff and Vistica, op. cit.
36 For example, Plan Colombia won the backing of Senator Christopher Dodd (D-Connecticut), whose state contains one of Sikorsky Aircraft’s aviation factories, while Bell Helicopter Textron (based in Fort Worth, Texas), enjoyed widespread support from that state’s federal representatives (as one company spokesman explained, “The entire Texas Delegation is working this issue”). See Sam Loewenberg, “Big Guns Back Aid to Colombia: Well-Financed U.S. Lobby Seeks Relief From Drug Wars,” Legal Times, February 21, 2000, available at on-line archives, http://www.law.com.
39 Drug Control: U.S. Assistance to Colombia will take Years to Produce Results, op. cit.