

Uribe to the Rescue

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When Álvaro Uribe was sworn in as President of Colombia in August 2002, the question in the minds of US policymakers was when, not whether, the Colombian government would fall into the hands of Marxist terrorists or right-wing paramilitaries. Some wondered if a military coup would come first. Terrorists operated with so little constraint that Uribe took the oath of office with bombs and rockets detonating outside the building he stood in, killing 19 civilians and injuring 60 more.

In 2002, large swathes of the country were controlled by two Marxist armies: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army (known by their Spanish abbreviations, FARC and ELN), which were estimated by US intelligence agencies to total nearly 30,000 armed rebels between them. Detachments of these guerrillas, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, overran towns, military installations, and police posts, killing pitilessly; survivors faced kidnapping and torture. The guerrillas regularly sabotaged vulnerable economic targets: Oil pipelines and storage facilities were attacked hundreds of times, spilling an amount of petroleum equivalent to two *Exxon Valdez* disasters. Bombings and assassinations terrorized the major Colombian cities, whose citizens retreated to the relative security of their shuttered homes after dark.

Colombians could not travel safely overland between most cities for fear of kidnapping or worse at the hands of either the Communist guerrillas or the dreaded paramilitaries. The “paras,” as they were known, began as privately financed security patrols, organized in reaction to the inability of the Colombian armed forces to defend the population from guerrilla violence. Well-to-do farmers, landowners, and likeminded citizens created mirror images of the guerrillas to defend themselves. In 2002, these groups were thought to include between 12,000 and 20,000 gunmen, though the actual number would turn out to be significantly higher. Constituted to fight terrorists, they would soon become a terror in their own right.

These developments grew out of a bleak security situation. In the late 1990s, the central government was so weak that Uribe’s predecessor, Andrés Pastrana, ceded to FARC a demilitarized zone the size of Switzerland. Pastrana viewed the DMZ, or *despeje* in Spanish, as a goodwill offering that would lure the guerrillas into serious peace talks. Like many well-meaning democrats before him, Pastrana committed the mistake of projecting his good intentions onto a deceitful adversary. Instead of welcoming Pastrana’s initiative and reciprocating in kind, FARC took it as a sign of weakness and turned the *despeje* into a sprawling military base. In the safety of the *despeje*, guerrillas rested and recuperated, tended their wounded, developed their strategies, and rehearsed plans for military operations. The *despeje* also provided cover for common criminal operations,

from ransom kidnapping to warehousing illicit cash. Moreover, foreign terrorists, including operatives from the Irish Republican Army, came to the safe haven to teach FARC how to make more effective munitions, such as the rockets that exploded as Uribe was inaugurated. Many IRA bomb-makers and other internationalist revolutionaries traveled to Colombia through Cuba, where the Castro government gave them safe passage and operational support while pretending to serve as an honest intermediary between the Colombian government and the guerrillas. Castro's ideological heir, Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, would later imitate this technique.

Yet for the American and European Left, the legitimate government of Colombia, not the terrorists conducting raids from the jungle, was the enemy. European governments, American progressives, and likeminded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) conducted a relentless campaign of propaganda against successive administrations in Colombia, portraying them not as the victims of terror but as the main perpetrators of violence in the beleaguered country. This was intended to pressure Colombia into ceding even more sovereignty to the guerrillas—not just territory, but the institutions of government, through “power sharing” accords with Marxists who had no intention of sharing power with anybody.

This chaotic security picture was coupled with an equally dire economic outlook. Investment in Colombia—both foreign and domestic—had nearly vanished, unemployment was growing, and there were nearly two million refugees, most of them destitute civilians fleeing the countryside and putting heavy pressure on social services in towns and cities. (For a sense of the scale relative to the size of Colombia's population, imagine 15 million US residents suddenly reduced to homelessness and seeking assistance in the cities.) As the Colombian state was sinking, the population was deserting ship: In 2001, the US Embassy in Bogotá had a waiting list of 180,000 Colombians seeking permanent-resident visas. It would have taken a year and a half to process these applications if US consular officers had done nothing else during that period. These were not aspiring tourists, but desperate people prepared never to return to their homeland. The applicants were precisely the kind a developing country most needs in order to prosper: managers, professionals, business executives—the educated middle class, who feared violence and kidnapping but did not have the money needed for personal security in the form of bodyguards, armored vehicles and surveillance systems.

Enter Uribe

Pastrana took a long time getting the message, but in January 2002, with renewed support from Washington following the 9/11 attacks, he recognized the failure of his strategy. He closed the *despeje* by sending US-trained troops into the DMZ and proceeded to drive the guerrillas deep into the jungle. But the voters were not convinced by these late-game efforts, and in May they elected Alvaro Uribe. A former governor of the province of Antioquia, Uribe is a slight man whose father was killed in a botched FARC kidnapping attempt in 1983. Uribe made confronting FARC the centerpiece of his campaign. Colombians today look at 2002 as the year their country was reborn. That year the government started to take control of its territory and to take the war to the guerrillas.

In 2002, the government began to disband the paramilitaries and turn the economy around. Colombia has achieved a measure of success: The numbers of civilian and military deaths, kidnappings, acts of sabotage, and other indicators of insurgent activity have dropped dramatically.

Between 2002 and 2004, violence and terrorist attacks in Colombia decreased by as much as 50 percent, to the lowest levels in almost 20 years. Kidnappings declined 88 percent between 1999 and 2006. By April 2004, for the first time in decades, the government had established a permanent security presence in every Colombian municipality. Making the most of this newfound security, Colombia's economy has recovered remarkably since 2002. After a long decline, it has enjoyed five years of consistent growth. In 2007, GDP grew by 7.52 percent, among the highest rates in Latin America, and five times the growth rate of 2002. The pre-2002 capital flight and brain drain were reversed, with total investment climbing by 22 percent in 2007. Colombia is now the fourth-largest market for US goods in South America. (It would probably be a much larger market for US exports if Democrats in the US Congress allowed passage of the stalled US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.)

Progress of this magnitude in such a short time is rare: In six years, Colombia has gone from being something very close to a failed state to being a relatively stable, prosperous democracy—one whose armed forces are defeating three subversive armies simultaneously. The turnaround can be attributed to both good luck and good choices: Colombia had the right leader at the right time, and executed a multifaceted national security plan that restored the population's confidence in the central government. The drive for security was complemented by a balanced economic strategy. And, not least, Colombia enjoyed the mostly bipartisan support of the United States.

Presidents Bush and Uribe have worked to solidify the US-Colombia partnership, but much of the credit goes to their predecessors, Clinton and Pastrana. In 1998, concerned about Colombia's deteriorating security situation, Clinton asked Pastrana to develop a wide-ranging strategy to reverse the decline of the Colombian state. The result was "Plan Colombia," a joint undertaking through which the United States has provided billions of dollars in military and economic assistance since 2000. This is one foreign-aid program of which Americans can be proud—it prevented the collapse of an ally and headed off a catastrophe that would have destabilized South and Central America.

Had Colombia fallen into the hands of Marxists, or even a non-ideological narco-terrorist force, US security would have been undermined. This country of more than 40 million is the strategic keystone of South America. It straddles the Andes, the backbone of the continent; it reaches from Brazil, the Amazon Basin, and Venezuela in the east to the Caribbean, Panama and Central America in the north and to the Pacific Ocean on the west. Colombia is rich in oil, coal, minerals, agriculture and industry, and boasts one of the most highly educated populations in the Western Hemisphere. Its geostrategic value has made it a target for Marxist subversion for decades. Fidel Castro has trained, armed, and supported Colombian guerrillas since the 1960s, and his acolyte Hugo Chávez has taken up the task

in the last decade. Thousands of documents captured in March of this year from laptops of FARC's second-in-command (and validated by Interpol) document that fact.

Plan Colombia provided the training, equipment, intelligence, and other resources that transformed the struggling Colombian military into a fighting force capable of conducting operations on multiple fronts, protecting vital economic infrastructure, and, in July of this year, rescuing 15 hostages held by FARC, including three US citizens and a former Colombian presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt. This operation was cunning and bloodless, substituting finesse and intelligence for brute force.

The transformation of the military as well as the civilian administration in Colombia has not been easy. From Day One, Uribe confronted official corruption, human rights violations, and government inefficiency by firing ministers and commanders alike, including some who had been close to him. For the first time, military officers were turned over for prosecution in civilian courts. This was proof of sincerity and devotion to duty rarely seen in Latin American governments. More than 30,000 paramilitary members have voluntarily surrendered their weapons, and their leaders have begun to testify about past activities. (Note that this figure represents at least twice the number of paras originally estimated in 2002.) Because of the large number of former fighters surrendering, 35 prosecutors in the Colombian attorney general's office have been dedicated to trying paramilitary cases. The Colombian justice system, once secretive and inquisitorial, has seen US-inspired reforms making trials more open and courts more independent.

On the socioeconomic front, Uribe gave the neglected working classes further reason to support the government by investing heavily in health care, education and poverty eradication. Today, more than 60 percent of Colombians have access to health care—a record high. According to Colombian statistics, nearly 90 percent of children under age 15 are enrolled in school, and the CIA World Factbook puts the country's literacy rate at 92 percent.

Immediately on taking office, the Uribe administration went after the narcotics trade, which had financed so much violence. Uribe took a hard line against the drug traffickers by spraying illegal coca crops, seizing illegal drugs, and destroying the infrastructure of the drug trade. Extradition to the United States, prosecution, and sentencing of major drug traffickers increased fivefold between 2002 and 2005, and included the heads of major cartels. It is estimated that 70 percent of key narco-traffickers have been extradited (a fate they fear mightily, because they know that in the United States they will serve their full sentences without being able to purchase escape, or at least creature comforts, from corrupt officials).

In sum, since 2002, Colombia has experienced an unprecedented period of economic expansion, social stability, and relative peace. Through a series of bold reforms, the government has fostered growth in the Colombian economy, increased government transparency, invested in social-welfare programs, and achieved a significant reduction in the level of violence.

Freer Trade, Stronger Ally

Colombia's is the kind of success story that the US Congress should be supporting, not undermining. Yet for partisan reasons, Democrats have blocked a vote on a top foreign- and economic-policy priority of both governments: the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Because the agreement is so clearly beneficial to both nations, Democratic leaders in Congress have had to invent bogus excuses for preventing a vote. Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi are stalling because they know that, if they allowed a vote, many of their own party members would likely support the initiative. Democrats claim that they are acting in solidarity with Colombian labor leaders who have been victims of political violence. But this is pretty flimsy stuff: The data coming out of Colombia for the past six years show political violence on the wane, especially violence directed at labor leaders. The Colombian government provides protection to at-risk union organizers and other activists, and has been active in prosecuting violence directed against them. No labor leader under its protection program has been killed.

In 2002, 196 labor leaders were murdered (by all sides) in the conflict. By 2007, the last year for which there are figures, that number had declined to 25. The fact is that activists and labor leaders are killed all over the world, including in the United States, and we do not always know who is behind these crimes (recall Jimmy Hoffa). Even one political murder is too many but, considering the situation Uribe inherited, and his success in mitigating violence, he deserves credit, not reproach.

Opponents of the Bush administration claim to be articulating a different approach to US foreign policy, one that will simultaneously bring about more freedom and democracy, fight terrorism, expand the economy, create jobs (here and abroad), reduce poverty, improve human rights, provide for basic human needs, reduce drug trafficking, and, on top of all that, make the United States even more respected and admired than it already is. This is quite a bit to ask for. But if these idealists are sincere, the example of Colombia shows what the United States can do when we make the most of an opportunity.