Phillip McLean

Colombia: Failed, Failing, or Just Weak?

If failed states on the other side of the globe threaten U.S. interests, then Colombia, a country just two hours by air from Miami, merits priority attention as well. A failed Colombia is truly a scary prospect. Colombia is not a traditional, small, dictator-dominated country, but rather a large, mostly modern nation with a long history of electoral politics and intimate links with the United States. Forty-two million Colombians inhabit a land as large as the northeastern United States. They look to their northern neighbor for trade and, now faced with multiple forms of domestic turmoil, for assistance. The administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have replied to those appeals with promises of aid. Yet, how does one assist a country destabilized more by crime than insurgency, which at times apparently is losing the ability to govern itself?

From a Weak Beginning to Success

Simon Bolivar might have called his creation a failed state when he turned his back on Bogotá and trudged off to a sad and lonely death on the coast near Santa Marta in 1830. He had led the northwest corner of South America to independence but failed to bring it order or effective government.[1] At the beginning of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt condemned Colombia, just then emerging from the chaotic "war of a thousand days," for its lack of governmental authority. Roosevelt finally gave up trying to negotiate a canal treaty with Bogotá and simply, as he put it with some exaggeration, "took Panama."[2] In the 1950s, Colombia again descended into bloody internal warfare—the *violencia* that left 200,000 dead and resulted in

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one of its few periods of military rule. From the beginning, governments in Colombia have been weak, and periods of intense, mutual bloodletting have punctuated the country's history.

Now at the turn of another century, the world once again stands aghast at tales of Colombians killing Colombians and wonders what to do. The principal blame for this state of affairs lies, of course, with the country's leaders, whose task it is to find solutions. In this case, however, the world, specifically the United States and Europe, bears special responsibility because their citizens' appetite for the narcotics Colombia produces is a major factor undermining Colombia's law and order, economy, and democratic institutions.

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Notably, between the time of Bolivar and drug kingpin Pablo Escobar's reign of terror, Colombia did have long periods of relative calm, if not quiet domestic peace. Compared to the rest of Latin America, Colombia has been a moderately successful nation. With rare exceptions, civilians, not generals, have run the country. Elections occur regularly and their results are respected. For much of the twentieth century, the coffee culture not only supported the country's international accounts but also sustained the growth of a comfortable bourgeois urban society and a stable small-farmer economy. Colombia's entrepreneurial class, based in five separate urban manufacturing centers of a million inhabitants or more each, has long been known throughout Latin America for its dynamism.

At the end of a decade of hemispheric social and economic reform, launched by President John F. Kennedy in 1960 as the Alliance for Progress, Colombia distinguished itself as something of a star.[3] It had made significant advances in education and health services, and its social indicators compared well with Chile and other Latin American leaders. It had educated a generation of financial managers who kept the economy growing without recession for some 40 years. As a result of this ingrained conservative style, Colombia tends to pay its debts. In the "lost decade" of the 1980s, it was one of the few major Latin American countries not to default on its foreign loans.

'A Nation in Spite of Itself'

One question has undoubtedly never been fully answered: What keeps Colombia together?[4] The expanse of Colombia's geography is not just vast but daunting, divided by three distinct mountain ranges with half its land lying

behind the easternmost ridge. In that space, the plains and jungles, part of the immense Amazon basin, are lightly populated. Four-fifths of the population lives to the west on the plateaus and in the valleys between the mountains and along the Caribbean coast. With transportation always a challenge—the government never fully addressed this deficiency even in the best years of economic growth—cultural differences naturally emerging from such widely dispersed habitats have surprisingly not split Colombians apart. Rather, despite two centuries of factionalism and fighting, tens of millions of Colombians remain one nation.

A common Colombian culture is unmistakable. With great self-confidence, Colombians claim to speak better Spanish than the Spanish. Regional differences certainly exist. Folklore, song, and dance styles differ by region but are honored widely. The screechy rhythms of *vallenato*, country music from the northeast (think bluegrass), now lead the national charts. Novelist and Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez and world-renowned painter and sculptor Fernando Botero are national unifiers. Recent Grammy winner Shakira is a great source of national pride.

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Ethnic or communal differences do not explain Colombia's current failings. Race is definitely a factor shaping the country's social structure. Someone coming from the United States immediately notices that darker complexions generally mean poorer people, but race is not a rigid divide. Most every organization, from prestigious banks to guerrilla bands, has a mixture of racial backgrounds in both leader and follower positions. In the distant past, the ideology of conflict was voiced in terms of degrees of loyalty to church or party. Communism was supposedly an important threat during the 1950s, though it was never a strong intellectual or mass movement. Perhaps the most basic explanation for the high levels of violence in Colombia is the struggle for status, often over land, and economic advantage (or for the poorest, survival).

With all their successes, Colombia's political leaders have had an almost casual concern for glaring national problems. Although they adopted large parts of the Alliance for Progress reform agenda, they ignored calls for agrarian reform. Land tenure questions remain; often hidden from those unable to follow the details of local interaction, they are the underlying cause of many of the bloodiest incidents. "Self-defense forces," a name adopted by the guerrillas in the 1960s and applied to locally formed paramilitary units in the 1980s, have fought for control of land. As newly rich narcotics bar-

ons, they entered the fray 30 years ago seeking to establish themselves as a new landed class along the middle Magdalena valley and the eastern llanos. The government seems frequently to have treated these local conflicts over ownership rights as private feuds rather than fundamental threats to public sovereignty.

A hands-off policy that refused to quash lawlessness seems strange in retrospect, but it has precedents. Western Boyaca, the site of the world's richest emerald mines, has long been the hellish scene of a commercial life dominated by the most ruthless inhabitants.[5] The government made little effort to keep the business or the brutal life around it within legal bounds. Colombians indeed have long found many forms of smuggling easy to forgive. They satisfy their nicotine craving with cigarettes, up to 60 percent of which may be illegally imported. Until recent trade liberalization and governmental crackdowns, every city had a commercial center that grew rich from the importation of contraband goods. Named San Andrecitos after the Caribbean island San Andres, these roughly built shopping centers flourished by selling illegally imported household appliances and luxury goods. These "little San Andreses" have also served as channels for laundering dirty drug-dollars into clean Colombia pesos.

Narcotics and the Decline of Colombian Institutions

The narcotics trade would eventually deal the comfortable Colombian sense of itself the most devastating blows. That realization came slowly. During the 1970s, the belief that marijuana could do no harm united Colombians with a generation of U.S. baby boomers. Production and transport of "Colombian gold" created new millionaires and injected riches into towns on the Caribbean coast. By the 1980s, cocaine was seen as obviously more sinister, even in the eyes of the most amoral Colombians. Yet, people still tended to downplay the growing power and economic importance of the nefarious business.

For too long—until just the last few years, actually—most Colombians found solace in a firm belief that, because the narcotics scourge has an origin in the United States, Colombia could do little to curb it. Responsible Colombians to this day tend to perceive drug legalization—in the United States, of course—as the only possible remedy for the damages narcotics are doing to their society. Those few who had the courage to stand openly and call for governmental action became the targets of assassination. The roll call of tragic heroes includes Minister of Justice Lara Bonilla in 1984; police colonel Jaime Ramirez in 1985; and Luis Carlos Galan, the man who seemed destined to become Colombia's president, in 1989. Shortly before his death,

Galan lamented privately that his country had not moved against the drug mafias when the state still had the power to dominate them.

Fear of death and the lure of money served to undo Colombia. The choice was often put starkly: *plata o plomo*, that is, accept a bribe or face death. The deterioration of Colombian institutions correlates closely with the growth of the narcotics trade from the late 1970s onward. Most obviously affected was the justice system. The country's legal instruments were weak and not prepared for the organized assault by the drug mafias. Colombians had become too accustomed to resolving matters with private arrangements that favored the well-connected parties and avoided objective adjudication.

When threatened by the U.S. demand for their extradition, the ruthless Medellin cartel struck at the top. In November 1985, a team of guerrillas—almost certainly working on the cartel's behalf—stormed the offices of the Supreme Court in central Bogotá and began to burn court records needed to justify the extradition orders. Half of the court's justices were killed in the ensuing botched rescue attempt. The shock traumatized the country. The cartel began a widespread campaign, assassinating lower-level judges and police officers they believed might move against them. For a time, Colombia lacked a working prosecutorial system. In fairness, most of Colombia's elite sought to avoid being touched by the violence and corruption, but neither government nor private groups emerged to serve as effective countervailing forces against the deterioration.

The Colombian state is not providing the security its citizens have a right to expect.

For all of the largely passive resistance displayed by the country's upper classes, investments of narcotics money began to emerge in numerous sectors of the economy and national life. The first sign of its presence was often a localized outbreak of arsons and murder—standard mafia business tactics. Suspected narcotics traffickers started buying and "fixing up" the small farms characteristic of the coffee region. Similar to other businesses blessed with the intrusion of dirty money, the farms soon stopped turning a profit.

One of the most visible effects of the new corruption has been on the national pastime, *futbol* (i.e., soccer). The owners of many of the best-known clubs have had narcotics connections, and key players too often seem drawn to friendship with the narcotics dons. Drawing the causality with precision is difficult, but—whether through threats to the players, drug use, point shaving, or other effects of association with criminal syndicates—the quality of Colombian play has clearly suffered. For the first time since 1986, the national team did not qualify for the World Cup, a major blow to the pride of the work-a-day Colombian.

Both military and police commanders struggled against the constant efforts of the drug barons to co-opt their forces. A telling if bizarre tale occurred in 1989, when the Medellin cartel, in effect, "hired" a military unit. The unit was a hostage rescue team trained in precision intervention and capable of avoiding a repeat of the Palace of Justice tragedy. The cartel used the unit to stage an attack on an apartment in one of Bogotá's finer residential districts. Under the pretext of an operation to arrest "subversives," the team wiped out a group of the cartel's competitors from the emerald region. The revelation that the gangsters from the emerald zone had, for their part, been in close contact with a senior police officer was another sign of the jeopardy in which law enforcement found itself. Rumors that the military was linked to these and other assassinations undermined the public's confidence in the forces supposedly protecting them.

Solving the crisis through force alone could lead to a spiral of bloodshed.

For too long, Colombians stuck to the belief that narcotics corruption could affect but not fundamentally damage their country's democracy. Some prominent elected officials appeared to be the kingpins' paladins in congress, but they were a small minority. Some, such as Galan, fought back.

Galan personally threw Pablo Escobar out of his New Liberal movement and thereby kept him out of congress. As the 1990 presidential campaign got under way, Escobar went on a rampage with the clear intent to bend the political process to his will. His minions not only killed Galan but three other presidential candidates as well and brought down a fully loaded 727 airliner, likely as an attempt to kill one of the last credible presidential contenders. He blew apart the building housing *El Espectador*, a newspaper that had opposed him, with a huge truck bomb using anhydrous fertilizer (the type later used in Oklahoma City). After the presidential election, with the country preparing for the election of a constituent assembly, he set out to kidnap a selection of wives and children of the country's most elite families so he could bring maximum pressure on the new president, Cesar Gaviria, and other leaders.[6] Escobar wanted to influence the assembly's drafting of the new constitution to forever bar extradition of Colombian citizens and arrange special plea-bargaining rights for criminals such as himself. For a time, the president apparently felt he had no choice but to deal with this threatening monster. Escobar "surrendered" in June 1991 but then turned the special "prison" he was granted into the luxury headquarters of his continuing criminal enterprise. A year later, when the government sought to curb his privileges, he fled even that stronghold. At that juncture, the president requested U.S. help. For 18

months, the ensuing search and eventual killing of Escobar in 1993 became the singular focus of U.S.-Colombian relations.[7]

U.S. Pressure

From the time Colombia first emerged as the major foreign source of the U.S. drug supply, Washington applied great pressure. A large majority of Colombians desperately wanted the narcotics problem just to disappear. As a poor country, it had other priorities. Despite the evidence of the damage of narcotics on their own institutions, presidents in this period took office saying they wanted to "de-narcotize" relations with the United States.

Ernesto Samper, who took office in 1994, was perhaps prototypical. Although he had received warnings well before his election that the United States suspected he was soft on traffickers or even had connections with them, he either purposely allowed or at least did not prevent his campaign organization from taking donations from the Cali mobsters, the cartel that had supplanted the Medellin syndicate as the major international drug supplier. The scandal broke even before he was sworn into office, and his administration never recovered. Although he, like previous presidents, gave way to U.S. pressure to implement specific antinarcotics programs, Washington was convinced that he was allowing the drug trade to flourish. The Clinton administration decertified Colombia as a "cooperating country" under applicable U.S. law and then revoked Samper's U.S. visa in July 1996. Both measures struck directly at the legitimacy of Samper as president and of his government. Many Colombians thought and some hoped that the United States was trying to remove Samper from office.

A Recipe for State Failure

At that low point, Colombia was clearly failing as a state, and it continues to fail in many important respects. The country has an incredibly high rate of violent deaths (73.3 per 1,000 people annually compared with 8.2 in the United States).[8] To live in Colombia is to know many good people who have been deliberately murdered. Some die in fights with or among guerrillas or narcotics organizations. The paramilitary forces that have organized themselves on a national basis and engage in operations to "cleanse" guerrilla sympathizers in contested areas have massacred many more. The largest number, however, are murdered by "common criminals," which include criminal gangs not linked with the guerrillas or the traffickers and who have terrorized the poor barrios of cities such as Medellin.

Stating that kidnapping has become a Colombian national industry is not an exaggeration. By one authoritative count, an average of 3,250 people per year have been kidnapped since 1998,[9] certainly the highest rate in the world. No other aspect of the country's disorder has so terrified the middle and upper classes. The mere threat of being stopped by guerrillas or other brigands has made commercial or private travel on rural highways a risky adventure. Occasionally, the purpose is to kidnap passersby or sometimes merely to extort from them. Anecdotes abound of blockades manned by men with laptop computers who question travelers about their wealth and even the number of payments due on their vehicles so they can calculate the benefit of taking the victim or extracting a payment on the spot. These gun-toting computer nerds are then able to check the veracity of replies against downloaded tax and bank data, indicating they have access to secret bank and tax records. Testimony indicates that similar shakedowns occur in business offices across the country.

Colombians usually do not know who is carrying out the crimes that afflict them, heightening anxiety and discouraging community solidarity even further. When the archbishop of Cali was gunned down in March outside a church in the poor Agua Blanca neighborhood, everyone had a theory. He had excommunicated guerrillas of the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) for kidnapping an entire congregation attending Sunday Mass. He had negotiated with the paramilitaries last year. Recently, he had criticized the government for not revealing the names of profiteers from the drug business. He had many potential enemies. The only certain thing is that he is dead. The murders are even more disconcerting to many Colombians because of the unknown and uncertain motives as well as the identity of perpetrators of similar shocking assassinations of honored public figures.

Simply put, the guerrillas and their enemies, the paramilitaries, are all outlaws. Romanticizing the guerrillas or giving them some degree of forgiveness is useless. The U.S. ambassador in 1984 called members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) "narco-guerrillas" because he saw evidence that they were making money from narcotics production in the zones where they dominated. The president at the time and most Colombians, who still thought of guerrillas as young idealists fighting for a political cause, expressed outrage.

Now, most accept the FARC as a significant part of the drug economy and the kidnapping and extortion industry. The FARC is a highly decentralized network. Its fronts operate separately and seem to have several different "business plans." A new front, one ex-governor observed, moves into a new territory with little effort given to making converts. The goal is finding ways to make money. When President Andres Pastrana came to office three-

and-a-half years ago, he courageously sought to find a reasonable and good-faith basis for negotiation over the FARC's anachronistic communist agenda. Yet, no one asked or answered the question, How would the organization survive without a constant stream of criminal income?

The much smaller ELN has found ways to profit, especially from attacks against the Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline. It is also involved in kidnapping and narcotics. The ELN has, to a greater degree, kept to a revolutionary faith (with ties to Cuba, at least for leadership rest and recreation), but it also stated in negotiations this March that it could not lay down its arms without a large subvention to support its troops. The Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the umbrella paramilitary organization, collects much of its support—some forced, some voluntary—from middle-income farmers and businesspeople, amid unproven allegations that it serves as a paid enforcer for larger business interests. The AUC is also a significant factor in the drug trade and other criminal activities, such as robbing from gasoline pipelines.

What keeps Colombia together?

These outlaw groups together do not hold much land. They do not control half of Colombia, as often incorrectly reported. No one does. The guerrillas have made their presence felt throughout much of the country, but no sharp lines delineate the areas they can call their own.[10] Guerrilla attacks have driven police out of many rural areas, incidentally then giving rise to local squads of new paramilitaries. Like any modern country, most Colombians—70 percent—live in large towns and cities. Sadly, the horrors of the countryside have forced that move to urban living on many people. A reverse flow of workers from around the country to formerly forested and mountain zones that are now devoted to coca and opium poppy cultivation has occurred. Where indigenous families lived until recently in peace in the Putumayo near the Ecuadorian border and the Catatumbo in Norte de Santander, cultivators under the sway of the FARC, ELN, or paramilitaries now fight over coca growing rights.

Much about Colombia is tattered and dysfunctional. In addition to violent forces working against the state, democratic politics itself seem out of kilter. The well-intentioned constitutional reform of 1991 has had some positive effects (the *tutela*, a private-rights appeal mechanism; more opportunity for minority representation) but also some unfortunate, unintended consequences. The constitution weakened political parties. New election rules are producing less workable outcomes in the congress. Decentralization—a favorite reform of the World Bank—put large budget authority into the hands of newly elected officials but did not provide sufficient checks on

expenditures. Massive fiscal deficits are one result; allegations of corruption, another. Indeed, a miasma of corruption, which some say has seeped out of the underground narcotics culture, may be affecting business, the government bureaucracy, and particularly the congress.

Colombia does not, however, fit the commonly understood profile of a failed state. Life in the cities for most people could be described as "normal." The economy, experiencing faltering investment and faced with the need to spend more on security, is troubled but far from prostrate. Colombia is a unified country—undoubtedly conflicted but not experiencing what could be correctly classified as a civil war. Because it has one language, one culture, and no pressing racial struggle, the kind of historical enmity that drags down so many other candidates for failure does not constrain Colombia. Moreover, its electoral democracy produces alternation in power and at least offers the possibility that the political system can design solutions to the poverty and violence at the heart of so many of the country's challenging problems.[11]

Colombia could certainly assume more characteristics of state failure if the current level of bloody disorder continues. Despite important reforms, the justice system, a necessary tool for building domestic tranquility, remains grossly incapable of dominating the multiple forms of illegality that challenge it.[12] Although the government dismantled the major drug cartels 10 years ago, the narcotics industry still fuels widespread criminality with many hundreds of millions of dollars repatriated from its profits abroad.[13] In wide swaths of the country, the Colombian state is not providing the security its citizens have a right to expect, which is a fundamental failure. The rate of kidnapping remains intolerably high. Guerrillas regularly bomb an oil pipeline responsible for a significant portion of the country's export revenues; seem more intent than ever on destroying highways, bridges, and electrical grids; and are now threatening reservoirs and other crucial infrastructure. Paramilitary groups have grown—now estimated to include some 15,000 "soldiers," a number rivaling the FARC—to fill the vacuum left by the absence of government. Following the guerrillas' example, they also began making money from criminal enterprises.

Saving Colombia

Most people do not think of Colombia when they discuss the global war on terrorism, and in the near term Colombia will not become a major platform for international terrorism. Colombian outlaw elements are motivated not by world-spanning ideologies or resentments but by practical concerns. Three members of the Irish Republican Army recently arrested by Colom-

bian police had stayed with the FARC to teach the guerrillas bombmaking for urban warfare. Narcotics trafficking has involved Colombians in international business conspiracies, which could develop into something more sinister if not understood now. After September 11, the United States will naturally be less tolerant of chaos in its neighborhood.

The future of Colombia lies in the hands of the person to be elected on May 26 as president for the next four years. The three major candidates have similar, positive-sounding programs: combat lawlessness, establish a stronger government presence in rural areas, reform institutions, and stimulate the economy. The sensitive topic of land tenure is rarely mentioned. None of the candidates is convincing about how they would finance the military reform and social expenditures they promise. Clearly, strengthening the armed forces and the police further is an essential part of restoring citizens' lives to safety. The most dangerous scenario would be for the ultimate election winner to seek to solve the crisis with force alone, neglecting needed social measures and justice reform. That course could lead to a spiral of bloodshed. An unanticipated event that polarized Colombians into distinct camps could lead to a real civil war, which seems inconceivable at this point. Some Colombians fear that clumsy management of foreign military involvement by the new government could be that kind of polarizing event.

With the help of foreign aid, Colombia can halt the descent toward failure.

The United States says it wants to help. Whether or not it has a role in the struggle against international terrorism, a collapsing Colombia would bring to the United States' nearby shores more drugs and more violent criminality, as well as more and poorer immigrants. The Colombian labyrinth holds many dangers for the United States. The Clinton administration promised two years ago a large but narrowly defined aid program of $1.3 billion. Two-thirds of the money was intended for military purchases used only for narcotics control in support of Pastrana's Plan Colombia. That aid is arriving now and having a good effect. The Bush administration decided to do even more, adding aid for antiterrorism training and support for infrastructure, such as pipeline protection. To move the country back toward healthy economic growth, the administration is also pushing the U.S. Congress to reauthorize the Andean Trade Preferences Act, which has created many new jobs in the country. Whatever assistance the United States provides must be as tightly focused as Plan Colombia's aid, with credible human rights standards, clear objectives, and well-defined methods of judging suc-

cess. Colombia can halt its descent toward failure with the help of much-needed foreign aid, but only if the newly elected leaders taking office next August show the skill and determination to address the fundamental problems too long ignored by the country's traditionally weak state.

Notes

1. See Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *El General en su Laberinto* (Bogota: Editorial Oveja Negra, 1989) (novelized version of Bolivar's final days that closely parallels the historical record).
2. Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. 270–294; David McCulloch, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870–1914* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1977), p. 385 (explaining the "take Panama" phrase).
3. See U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Survey of the Alliance for Progress: Colombia, a Case History*, March 1969.
4. David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993).
5. This little-noted, chaotic hellhole was depicted in the 1954 adventure movie "Greenfire," starring Stewart Granger and Grace Kelly.
6. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *News of a Kidnapping* (New York: Penguin, 1994). Marquez tells the story as if it were a mystery novel.
7. See Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo* (New York: Penguin, 2000).
8. Charles Bergquist et al., *Violence in Colombia, 1990–2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace* (Wilmington, N.C.: SR Books, 2001).
9. Fundacion Pais Libre, www.paislibre.org.co (accessed April 7, 2002).
10. During the three years of negotiation, Pastrana gave the FARC a 15,000-square-mile, scarcely peopled expanse east of the mountains as a safe haven. When Pastrana called an end to "peace" talks in February, he ordered the military to reoccupy the zone.
11. The quality of Colombian democracy can be and is debated. See, on alternation, Michael Coppedge, "Latin American Parties: Political Darwinism in the Lost Decade," in *Political Parties and Democracy*, eds. Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2001), p. 175. Note, however, Freedom House's ranking of Colombia as a "nonliberal democracy." Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1999), p. 280.
12. In 1995 the U.S. Department of State reported that 97 percent of all crimes in Colombia went unpunished. In 2001 Colombian authorities were holding almost half of all prisoners in pretrial detention. See www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/rppt (accessed April 7, 2002).
13. For a succinct but careful discussion of the economic impact of the narcotics trade, see Patrick Clawson and Rensselaer Lee, *The Andean Cocaine Industry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 200–205.