

# Realpolitik or Imperial Hubris: The Latin American Drug War and U.S. Foreign Policy in Iraq

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by Kenneth Sharpe

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***Abstract:** Robert Kaplan has suggested that America employ elsewhere the same “stealth imperialism” tactics as are being used to combat drugs and guerrillas in Colombia. In fact, decades of U.S. efforts there have achieved little. The real lessons to be learned from Colombia are the perils of relying on flawed assumptions about the threat presented; the difficulties of creating and training a military capable of achieving U.S. objectives; and the risk of mistaking symbols, signals, and credibility for core U.S. interests. Moreover, in both regions, policymakers often fail to understand the fundamental sources of the conflict, particularly class, ethnicity, and nationalism. They incorrectly believe that U.S. policy has nothing to do with the continuation of the conflict and presume U.S. omnipotence.*

The United States has been fighting a drug war in Latin America for almost four decades, and counternarcotics concerns continue to shape U.S. policy there, especially regarding the Andean countries—Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia—where much of the coca that ends up as cocaine on United States streets is grown. Publicly this concern has been muted since 9/11, but the policy continues unchanged, and events occasionally remind us of the ongoing tensions there. The December 2005 election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia, for example, triggered consternation in the Bush administration. Morales is not only a socialist and a vocal critic of U.S. economic policies, but also a leader of the country’s coca farmers, who struggled for years to block U.S. efforts to eradicate their long-time traditional indigenous crop. In his January 22 inaugural address, he warned that “the fight against drug trafficking cannot be an excuse for the U.S. government to dominate our nations.”

Since the late 1990s, the frontline of the drug war has been in Colombia, where the Andean Initiative begun under the presidency of George H. W. Bush was repackaged and reinvigorated by President Bill Clinton into

Plan Colombia and then intensified and deepened by President George W. Bush. But progress achieving the strategic goals of the drug war—diminishing drug abuse and addiction in the United States by cutting the supply and raising the price—has eluded years of counternarcotics efforts. More recent U.S. initiatives to defeat or seriously weaken the powerful leftist guerrillas in Colombia have also failed to break the stalemate in the insurgency there. These failures are rooted in the deep and problematic assumptions that drive the policies. These assumptions are important to understand because they undergird much of the United States' global strategic thinking, most importantly the flawed policy in Iraq.

At first blush it might not appear that the drug war in Colombia and the U.S. intervention in the Middle East can be usefully compared. The nature of the problems and the history of U.S. interests in these regions seem fundamentally different: oil, terrorism, fundamentalist movements, and ethnic clashes were never the major U.S. concerns in Latin America; nor are protection of U.S. trade and investments, keeping out foreign powers, and battling communism central U.S. concerns in the Middle East. But beneath these differences, there is a lot to learn.

### **Supremacy by Stealth**

In his cover story in the July-August 2003 *Atlantic* magazine, "Supremacy by Stealth," Robert Kaplan laid out an alternative strategy to the one the United States is following in Iraq and suggested that Colombia might be a place to look for a model. Kaplan begins: "Even as America's leaders deny that the United States has true imperial intentions, Colombia—still so remote from public consciousness—illustrates the imperial reality of America's global situation." Not only do our own economic and security interests depend upon such imperial power, but "a modicum of order and stability" in the world depends upon us.

In Kaplan's Hobbesian view of a war of all against all, multilateralism will not work. Only the absolute and unchecked power of a U.S. Leviathan can hold things together. Kaplan admits that liberal empires (Venice, Great Britain, the United States) create the conditions for their own demise. But his conclusion from this is that we "must be especially devious. . . . We will have to operate nimbly, in the shadows and behind closed doors, using means far less obvious than the august array of power displayed in the air and ground war against Iraq." Covert operations by "groups of quiet professionals" which can "stabilize or destabilize a regime." Targeted assassinations. "Super-clandestine . . . rules of engagement" for Special Forces units, as well as a larger uniformed military wing for the CIA. "Security-consulting firms and defense contractors . . . to train local armies and to help struggling friendly regimes." "Avoid attention-getting confrontations in the first place. . . . Keep the public's attention as divided as possible. We can dominate the world only quietly: off camera, so to speak." Such war by stealth, says Kaplan, can "help to circumvent the UN Security Council"

with its “antiquated power arrangement.” This is important because the “unconventional,” “undeclared” quick-response wars we must fight will leave “less and less time for democratic consultation, whether with Congress or the UN.”

It is not surprising that Kaplan is drawn to the U.S.-sponsored war in Colombia. Although he emphasizes the counterinsurgency, not the drug war, the two are integrally intertwined in a U.S. intervention that has many of the characteristics he applauds. The intervention was unilateral: no consultation with allies, no vote in the Security Council. Training, supply, logistics, intelligence, and fumigation of coca and opium plants are routinely carried out by former U.S. soldiers—private contractors, or, more traditionally, mercenaries. Further, since Bush was elected, U.S. Special Forces have played an increasing role in training and advising Colombian forces. Kaplan describes his days with them in a combat-zone training camp in the oil-rich province of Arauca, where leftist guerrillas routinely blow up the pipeline carrying oil jointly owned by the U.S. giant Occidental Petroleum and the Colombian government.<sup>1</sup> Kaplan praises the training given the Colombian military by these Special Forces, far from the eyes of the U.S. Congress and the U.S. public. His only complaint, and theirs: Congressional restrictions prohibit them from fighting alongside their Colombian counterparts; officially, they are only on a training mission.



Alba Criollo walks through a fumigated coca field in Santa Rosa del Guamez, in the southern Colombian state of Putumayo, 2001. The U.S. has assisted a massive aerial eradication campaign to wipe out coca in Colombia. (AP Images)

<sup>1</sup> Kaplan’s description is most detailed in his book *Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground* (Random House, 2005), Chapter 2.

Kaplan presents himself as a realist, and he is brutally honest about U.S. imperial intentions and requirements. But the power the United States *actually* has in Colombia and the actual consequences of its imperial exercise raise serious questions about the realism of such supremacy by stealth, as well as the deeper presumptions that inform the world view of the more blatant, neo-conservative interventionists that Kaplan is criticizing. There are at least two wars going on in Colombia: a drug war and a guerrilla war.

### **The First War: the Drug War**

The logic for this decades-old war seems simple. Coca grown in Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia has long been the major source for cocaine sold in the United States. It seems to make sense that drug abuse could be tamed by cutting supply coming into the country: the less the supply, the higher the price, the fewer the people that can afford drugs. Interdicting shipments before they arrive is one way to cut supply. But a central emphasis in the war on supply has long been “going to the source”: cutting production and processing in the Andean region.

The drug war in the Andes began in the early 1980s. Peru and Bolivia were the major coca leaf producers, and the partially processed coca paste was shipped to Colombia. There it was processed in hundreds of “laboratories,” and then packaged and shipped or flown or trucked to the United States through or over the Caribbean, through Central America and Mexico, or up the Pacific Coast. Although there were continual efforts to eradicate coca leaf production, the major aim of U.S. policy was to break the Medellín and Cali cartels that controlled the purchasing, processing, shipment and sales of most of the cocaine. The United States successfully pressured the Colombian government to move vigorously against the cartels, providing arms, training, logistical support, and advisors. The ensuing, bloody war against the cartels cost many lives, but in the early 1990s the cartels were disbanded. Many of their top leaders were killed or arrested, and others surrendered in return for reduced sentences.

But the success was ephemeral: it failed to raise the price, or reduce drug abuse in the United States. Classical economics predicts just this: break up an oligopoly, and the result will be a freer market. In this case, dozens of new trafficking groups replaced the cartels. They processed and shipped cocaine (and increasingly heroin) to the United States. They kept a low profile. They did not challenge the Colombian state as the big cartels once did. They bought off the military and the police. And they continue to thrive today, often closely connected with the military-backed paramilitary forces.

In the early 1990s, under Clinton, the United States changed its drug-war strategy. With the cartels gone, it began to focus on the small peasant growers instead of the traffickers. Fumigation and forced eradication

was the means, and tens of thousands of acres were eradicated throughout the Andes. In 2000, the Clinton administration escalated the drug war and began Plan Colombia, the biggest drug offensive ever undertaken in a single country, a \$1.5 billion plan to eradicate coca in the southern Colombian provinces of Putamayo and Caqueta. The money created, armed, and trained a 2,300-man counternarcotics brigade and supplied the military with 54 attack helicopters. When Bush came to office, he escalated the war further. Between FY 2000 and FY 2005, the United States invested \$4 billion in Plan Colombia and its successor programs. But successful eradication produced a pyrrhic victory. About 630,000 acres were sprayed with herbicide in Colombia between 2000–2002. The result: there was 6 percent *more* land in coca at the end of the period.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, a record number of hectares was sprayed, but the net coca cultivation was unchanged from 2003. The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) emphasizes the decline in hectares cultivated since a recent peak in 2001. But despite some ups and downs in cultivation, the long-term trend has been a relatively stable supply of coca—certainly more than enough to meet demand and keep prices low. Since 1988, the total amount of land planted in coca in the Andean region has fluctuated between 166,000 and 198,000 hectares. Coca cultivation in 2004 (114,000 hectares) was only 7 percent lower than in 1999 (122,500 hectares), before Plan Colombia began.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for the failure is that peasants planted new land as fast as the eradication took land out of production. Even John P. Walters, director of the ONDCP, pointed this out in congressional testimony lauding recent successes: “Eradication forces in 2004 sprayed about 120,000 hectares of coca . . . responding in 2004, coca growers re-planted and reconstituted their crops faster than we have seen them do in the past. . . . Coca cultivation held steady for the first time since heavy fumigation began.”<sup>4</sup> Local successes in crop eradication do, however, affect the location of production. Success at eradication and interdiction efforts in Peru and Bolivia in the 1990s led production to shift to Colombia (57,000 hectares net coca cultivation in 1996; 114,000 in 2004),<sup>5</sup> providing tens of thousands of jobs for poor peasants on marginal lands, and windfall tax revenues to the guerrillas operating in the new production zones.

A key measure of the success of the war against supply is the price of cocaine, which has changed, but unfortunately, in the wrong direction. The U.S. street price for cocaine (for 2 grams or less) fell from about \$161 a gram in

<sup>2</sup> U.S. State Department, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (Washington: Department of State, March 2003).

<sup>3</sup> State Department *INCSR*, 1996–2004.

<sup>4</sup> Statement by John Walters before the House Committee on International Relations, May 11, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> *INCSR*. For the causes of this switch see Patrick L. Clawson and Rensselaer W. Lee, *The Andean Cocaine Industry* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1996), p. 18.

the first half of 2000 to about \$107 a gram in the first half of 2003,<sup>6</sup> and the price continued to fall through early 2005.<sup>7</sup> From time to time there are slight reversals in this pattern, but overall, despite decades of fighting the war on drugs, despite record high seizures and successes at crop eradication, the price of cocaine has fallen steadily even as the drug war has escalated—a sure sign that something is not working: in 1981 the retail price was about \$555 a gram.<sup>8</sup> Although the fumigation does not have a major long-term effect on the total acreage planted in coca, it has driven thousands of peasants from their lands—some planted more coca elsewhere, some joined the almost 2 million internal refugees created by the civil war, some flooded into Ecuador, some joined the guerrillas. Coca production itself moved deeper into the Colombian jungles, and has begun to shift back to Bolivia.

The war on supply thus seems tough and realistic, but the evidence shows the deep irrationality of the policy. It is exactly the kind of war Clausewitz would warn against: there is no center of gravity. Indeed, there is no enemy to defeat. The enemy is an economic market, and as long as there is demand in the United States, the only thing the drug war does is to artificially hike the price high enough to ensure that there will always be people willing to take the risks to grow, process, ship, and sell drugs. Coca leaf is easy and cheap to grow; cocaine is easy to hide and ship; there is a steady demand; and there are millions of acres of potential crop land. And the profits are very attractive. When pharmaceutical companies legally, and profitably, produce cocaine, it costs about \$10–15 a gram; prohibition inflates the street price to about \$150. Prohibition thus artificially creates profits that attract an unlimited supply of people willing to go into business, take the risks, and engage in the crime needed to protect their businesses.

One of the most serious flaws in the war on supply is the presumption that cutting production in Latin America will significantly affect the price in the United States. But most of the markup on drugs occurs *after* they enter the United States. This means that even if the United States could triple the price of coca leaf with an incredibly successful crop eradication program, that would barely raise retail prices. Claims about the number of hectares eradicated, the number of tons seized, and the number of traffickers arrested are mere diversions. As one U.S. intelligence officer put it, “I don’t think we can make any progress on the drug issue by escalating our military presence in Colombia. As in Vietnam, the policy is designed to fail. All we’re doing is making body counts, although instead of bodies, we’re counting seizures—tons of cocaine, kilos of heroin.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> ONDCP, *The Price and Purity of Illicit Drugs: 1981 Through the Second Quarter of 2003*, November 2004.

<sup>7</sup> ONDCP, *National Drug Control Strategy*, White House, February 2006, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> ONDCP, *Price and Purity of Illicit Drugs*, November 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Ret. Lt. Cmdr. Sylvester L. Salcedo, quoted in Michael Massing, “A Veteran of the Drug War Fires at U.S. Policy,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 6, 2000.



The drug war is fatally flawed. There is no way to reduce supply enough to significantly cut abuse.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the punitive prohibition at the heart of war perpetuates the very drug trade, crime, and violence which the policy is designed to ameliorate. Yet, for decades, the response to failure has been escalation, not reevaluation.

The irrationality of the policy deepened after 9/11. Many Democrats had long opposed counternarcotics aid to the Colombian military, fearing it would drag the United States into an unwinnable civil war and a prolonged counterinsurgency effort. In fact, President Clinton sold Plan Colombia to Congress by insisting that the aid was *only* for the drug war, *not* for counterinsurgency. But 9/11 provided an opportunity for a broader intervention, just as it provided an opportunity for neoconservatives who wanted to forcefully overthrow Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration turned the Colombian guerrillas into “narcoterrorists,” and in August 2002 Congress approved a counterterrorism bill which had buried within it the removal of restrictions on the U.S.-backed Counter-Narcotics Brigade, allowing it to use its equipment and training for counterterrorism (i.e. counterinsurgency) as well as anti-drug missions. That bill and further legislation in early 2003 provided \$104 million to send U.S. troops to help the Colombian Army protect the 480-mile long Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline (jointly owned by the government and Occidental). In January 2003, 70 U.S. Special Forces troops—the troops that Kaplan observed—were deployed to two military bases in Arauca<sup>11</sup>.

## The Second War: The Guerrilla War

The guerrilla war the United States has committed itself to fight is an old, deeply rooted, and intractable conflict. Its origins date to the assassination of reformist Liberal party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948, which snuffed out efforts at land reform, worker rights, and the inclusion of the peasantry in Colombia’s closed, elite-dominated political system. Gaitán’s assassination triggered a violent civil war between liberals and conservatives that went on for a decade and took over 200,000 lives. *La Violencia* was ameliorated by a pact between them called the National Front. The military and the central government, however, exercised only very weak authority in the remote countryside, which made the establishment of law and order difficult. In the absence of central authority, armed self-defense groups of various ideological stripes arose. These same factors, along with the added fuel

<sup>10</sup> For more on this argument, see Eva Bertram, Morris Blachman, Kenneth Sharpe, and Peter Andreas, *Drug War Politics, The Price of Denial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), especially Chapters 1–3.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Isacson, “Washington’s ‘New War’ in Colombia,” North American Congress on Latin America, March/April 2003.

provided by revenue from the drug trade, remain central to understanding Colombia's contemporary violence.

Further, the 1958 bargain took serious social and economic reforms off the political agenda. Reformist political parties and movements were effectively excluded from politics, and often repressed. The armed forces, formally subordinate to civilian rule, enjoyed near autonomy on national security issues and impunity despite persistent and serious human-rights violations. The National Front formally ended in 1974, but the two traditional parties continued to divide government offices between them into the mid-1980s, and maintained electoral hegemony until 2002.

*The Guerrillas.* Colombia's guerrilla movements arose in resistance to the National Front. The largest movement today, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), was founded in 1966. The FARC grew out of rural self-defense groups organized by the Colombian Communist Party during *la Violencia*.<sup>12</sup> It sought to protect, or regain, land that was being taken by wealthy landowners or drug lords, often with the help of local political officials, military and police. It has had a Marxist, redistributive agenda ever since. Its leader, Manuel "Tirofijo" (Sureshot) Marulanda, took up arms in 1949 at the age of 19.

For decades this war dominated much of rural Colombia. Peasants were driven off their lands by an expansion of commercialized agriculture that worsened land distribution and deepened peasant frustration, providing the FARC with a rural support base. (Today about 1 percent of the population holds about 55 percent of the arable land.<sup>13</sup>) With a weak state unable to control the country, the guerrillas sustained a steady offensive and were powerful enough, in 1985, to enter peace negotiations with the government. These ultimately failed when the government was unable, or unwilling, to halt the paramilitary violence that cost the lives of 3,000 activists, candidates, and elected officials in the party formed by the FARC to pursue the electoral route, the Unión Patriótica.

A detailed analysis of the war and later negotiations is beyond our scope here,<sup>14</sup> but it is important to note how U.S. drug-war policy helped to fund the major protagonists to the current civil conflict in Colombia: the guerrillas, paramilitaries, and military. The drug war, like the drug trade, has thus deepened and intensified the conflict.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Prologue.

<sup>13</sup> "Andes 2020: A New Strategy for the Challenges of Colombia and the Region," Council on Foreign Relations, January 2004, pp. 110, 112.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, Gonzalo Sánchez, *Violence in Colombia 1900–2000, Waging War and Negotiating Peace* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1996); Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*; Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002); Marc Chernick, "Negotiating Peace Amid Multiple Forms of Violence," in Cynthia J. Arnson, ed., *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America* (Stanford University Press, 1999).



In the 1980s and 1990s, FARC began to expand its economic base and power, financing its operations through kidnappings for ransom and extortion, and by levying war taxes on multinational corporations, large landowners, and cattle ranchers. The wealthy protected themselves with private security forces, but middle-class travelers who ventured out of urban zones ran a high risk of being robbed or kidnapped for ransom. Then, in the late 1990s, U.S. drug-war policy unintentionally helped provide a major new source of revenue for the FARC.

When the United States pushed drug production out of Peru and Bolivia and into Colombia, poor peasants in the FARC zones of control began to plant coca leaf to meet market demand. FARC allowed traffickers into these zones to buy from the producers, offering the small growers protection and price guarantees. It also reaped a bonanza from taxes (about 10 percent of the market value of coca and poppy paste) on both the small peasant growers and the traffickers. Estimates have put FARC's revenue from drugs as high as \$500 million a year.<sup>15</sup> In recent years, FARC has become more involved in drug trafficking itself, and in March 2006 the U.S. Department of Justice got a federal grand jury in Washington to indict 50 FARC commanders on cocaine trafficking charges.<sup>16</sup> Administration claims about the extent of such trafficking are hard to confirm and questionable, because of the political considerations that have long driven efforts to gain domestic support for the drug war there. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations have long emphasized the guerrilla links (and downplayed the paramilitary links) to the drug trade in an effort to build Congressional support for aid. But this emphasis on guerrilla involvement in the drug trade ("narco-guerrillas" was the favored term before "narco-terrorists") misses the more important role of taxation, a revenue source that U.S. policy made possible when it pushed coca cultivation into Colombia.<sup>17</sup>

FARC's war taxes and drug taxes financed its expansion between the mid-1980s and 2003 (from 9,000 combatants in 1986 to an estimated 20,000–25,000) and allowed it to increase its firepower and extend its operations from 27 fronts to more than 60 fronts, active in 40 percent of Colombia's municipalities. In the 1990s it took the initiative, inflicting a series of embarrassing defeats on the army.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, p. 175.

<sup>16</sup> Juan Forero, "U.S. Indicts 50 Leaders of Colombian Rebels in Cocaine Trafficking," *New York Times*, Mar. 23, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Clawson and Lee, *The Andean Cocaine Industry*, pp. 178–80; and Ricardo Vargas, "Drug Cultivation, Fumigation and the Conflict in Colombia," Executive summary, October 1999, Transnational Institute and Accion Andina Colombia, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> David C. Becker, State Department, "Morphing War: Counter-Narcotics, Counter-Insurgency, and Counter-Terrorism Doctrine in Colombia," National Defense University, National War College, 2004, [www.dtic.mil/ndia/2004solic/beck.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/ndia/2004solic/beck.pdf), p. 7; William M. LeoGrande and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Two Wars or One? Drugs, Guerrillas, and Colombia's New *Violencia*," *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2000.

*The Paramilitaries.* U.S. policy has also encouraged and indirectly helped fund a second major actor in the current civil war: the rightwing paramilitary groups. For many years the United States put up with the growth of these groups, ignoring evidence that the Colombian military was sometimes encouraging the paramilitaries by providing aid, logistical support, and intelligence.

These paramilitary groups were originally organized and funded in the 1980s by large ranchers and drug traffickers as private armies to protect themselves from guerrilla kidnapping and extortion. But the landowners and local military officers also used the *paras* as private security forces to eliminate grassroots activists, labor leaders, and leftist politicians. In the late 1990s, the paramilitary forces unified into the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and doubled their size from the early 1990s to more than 13,000 by 2003.<sup>19</sup> Their expansion was made possible by a number of criminal activities, collusion with local authorities, and the political power the central government has allowed them at many local levels, where they supplant the state and charge taxes for “security.”<sup>20</sup> But much of the *paras*’ economic base was created as an unintended consequence of the drug war. When the United States helped break up the cartels and encouraged coca-growing to shift to Colombia, this provided the paramilitaries the opportunity to become even more powerful and autonomous. The paramilitary leaders moved into the trafficking operations once controlled by the cartels and are much more deeply involved than FARC in the actual production, transport, and marketing of the drugs to the United States. Paramilitary commanders now control about 40 percent of Colombia’s drug trafficking.<sup>21</sup> For example, Diego Fernando Murillo (aka “Don Berna”) is a former security chief for the Galeano family, associates of Pablo Escobar, and members of the Medellín Cartel. Authorities have linked him to Medellín gangs used to carry out high-profile assassinations. Murillo became the commander of several paramilitary “blocs” in 2000 or 2001. Medellín’s main newspaper, *El Colombiano*, reported that these *paras* receive up to \$500,000 per month to guard Diego Montoya Sánchez, a top leader of the North Valle drug cartel (and one of the FBI’s ten most-wanted fugitives). A federal prosecutor in New York has requested Murillo’s extradition for drug trafficking.<sup>22</sup> And the federal government has requested the extradition of other top AUC leaders on drug-trafficking charges.

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Colombia’s Checkbook Impunity,” Briefing Paper, Sept. 22, 2003, at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org). David Becker estimates their numbers at 18,000. Becker, “Morphing War,” p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., HRW, “Smoke and Mirrors: Colombia’s Demobilization of Paramilitary Groups,” August 2005, at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Ambassador William Wood quoted in *El Tiempo*, Feb. 8, 2004. Former AUC leader Carlos Castaño admitted in an interview that “drug trafficking and drug traffickers probably finance 70 percent” of his total operations (Reuters, Mar. 2, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> HRW, “Smoke and Mirrors”; and Adam Isacson, “Peace—or ‘Paramilitarization?’” *International Policy Report* (Washington, D.C.: Center for International Policy, July 2005), p. 5.

*The Military.* The third major actor in the conflict, the Colombian military, has also been dependent on the drug war to fund its counter-insurgency efforts. In fact, the drug war has never been the military's real priority. It is a way to get military aid from the U.S. Congress, which was reluctant until recently to fund another counterinsurgency. The drug war has also proved lucrative for many officers, who have historically taken bribes from the traffickers.

The military, in turn, has a symbiotic relationship with the paramilitaries. This is one of the reasons that civilian governments, at least until recently, have regarded the paramilitaries as criminals but have never been able to bring them under control. The military has a long, well-documented history of condoning and cooperating with paramilitary operations. In recent years, as the military has come under pressure from human rights groups, abuses by the armed forces have fallen dramatically but abuses by the paramilitary right have risen, leading some analysts to conclude that state-sponsored violence is being privatized rather than reduced. In September 2002, the U.S. Congress even funded a special Colombian unit to go after the paramilitaries. But the military has yet to act vigorously to control the *paras*. Coordination between the *paras* and the military continues, and heavily armed *paras* regularly pass through army checkpoints. Some military officers share intelligence with them, provide them ammunition, and even join their ranks while off duty. Even when local mayors, governors, or police inform the military about threats or planned massacres by the *paras*, the military forces rarely take effective action. In his book, Kaplan explains why:

Tactically speaking, it made sense for the Colombian government to align itself with the right against the left; then, after the left had been defeated, or forced to negotiate, to roll the paramilitaries into the regular army, where they could be professionalized. The strategy had worked to a degree in El Salvador. "The paramilitaries are bad guys, but they're *good* bad guys," one Green Beret explained. "That's why Espinal is safe. It's why you can go to the restaurants and stay at a local hotel rather than be restricted to the base: because the town is run by the AUC."<sup>23</sup>

*The War System.* The conflict in Colombia has evolved into a "war system"<sup>24</sup>: none of the actors have the power to win, but all of them find it in their interests to continue the war. One of the central reasons for this is that U.S. drug-war policy has provided them with the means or the incentives to keep up the fight: funds for the military; high profits created by prohibition, which spur the drug trade and provide revenues for the *paras* and FARC; the eradication strategy, which spread coca production to Colombia; and the breakup of the cartels, which provided the opening for the *paras* to take over the trade.

It is no wonder that the repeated attempts since the mid-1980s at negotiating a solution to the civil war have failed. In fact, the previous

<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts*, p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> Richani, *Systems of Violence*.

president, Andrés Pastrana, came to office on a peace platform arguing that the only solution to the civil war was a negotiated solution. He granted the guerrillas a huge demilitarized zone and began peace talks in 1998. The generals were opposed to serious negotiations from the very beginning and did everything they could to undermine them.<sup>25</sup> When Plan Colombia was proposed in 1999, the guerrillas saw it as an intensification of the war against their strongholds in southern Colombia, and this escalation may have contributed to the lack of progress at the talks. But the FARC intransigence probably ran much deeper. Their demands were not easy to meet: social and economic reforms, like land reform, demanded a serious redistribution of wealth and power that the Colombian agribusiness elites were not willing to countenance. Moreover, the military was unwilling to dismantle the paramilitaries or incorporate FARC commanders and forces into the military structure. Indeed, FARC, confident of revenues from kidnappings, robberies, and drug taxes, was even unwilling to negotiate small, interim confidence-building measures (an end to kidnapping or human rights violations, or a cease-fire). As it continued its attacks, Pastrana, faced with strong U.S. and military opposition to the negotiations, ended the talks in early 2002. In February, the guerrillas gave him good reason to do so: they hijacked a civilian airliner, landed it on a remote highway, and kidnapped a Colombian senator.

When the peace talks foundered, many Colombians turned against a negotiated solution and gave their support to hardliner Álvaro Uribe, who was elected president in May 2002. Backed by Washington, Uribe designed a new “national security strategy” to break the war system and end the stalemated civil conflicts. It had two major elements: demilitarizing the paramilitaries through negotiations and significantly weakening or defeating the guerrillas.

The strategy with the AUC was to negotiate a cease-fire, offer members amnesty (or pardons), and help reintegrate them back into civilian life, offering economic, health, and educational benefits in return for their demobilization. If such demobilization were successful, it would indeed remove one of the major forces that perpetuate the war system. By late 2005, about 5,000 paramilitaries had participated in “collective demobilizations,” a great success in the eyes of the Uribe administration. But the character of the demobilization might not, in fact, disrupt the power of the paramilitaries.

Persons who have committed atrocities are supposedly barred from receiving pardons, but the government’s lack of serious investigation indicates a willingness to turn a blind eye. Relatedly, the government has no adequate way to monitor the demobilized *paras* or to prevent new recruitments. With the high salaries the drug trade enables the *paras* to offer, there is a danger that new recruits will simply cycle in as older ones take advantage of the amnesty program. The cease-fire itself has often been honored in the breach: the Office

<sup>25</sup> Nazih Richani, “The Politics of Negotiating Peace in Colombia,” NACLA Report on the Americas, May/June 2005, pp. 17–22.

of the Public Advocate of Colombia has reported hundreds of breaches, including massacres, forced disappearances, and kidnappings. International groups monitoring the cease-fire have repeatedly pointed out that the demobilization process has failed to “touch the massive wealth that fuels paramilitary groups’ activities” or “to interfere with paramilitaries’ illegal businesses.” Indeed, one of the obstacles to continued demobilization is Washington’s concern that major paramilitary drug traffickers, some wanted for extradition to the United States, will use the amnesty offered by the government to avoid extradition. Until some of the top AUC leaders are assured that they will not be subject to the long hand of Washington, they will resist full demobilization.

There is evidence that in some regions of the country paramilitary groups are morphing into Italian-style mafia organizations, draining money from public coffers and running their candidates for local and national offices.<sup>26</sup> Given the nature of this “demobilization,” then, there is good reason to doubt whether it will help break the war system.

Uribe offered the guerrillas a stick, not a carrot. He argued that severe force was all the guerrillas would understand—an argument made by hard-line presidents before. But this time Uribe had strong backing from the United States. Between 1999 and August 2002, when Uribe took office, Colombia had received almost \$2 billion in aid for its military and police as a result of Plan Colombia, and by 2005 that total had reached \$3.5 billion, with an estimated \$600 million more for 2006.<sup>27</sup> Uribe had available newly acquired Black Hawk helicopters, troop-transport aircraft, silent planes with night vision equipment, reconnaissance planes, elite anti-narcotics units trained by the United States in counterinsurgency, and U.S. advisors and trainers. Even before he came to office, this assistance had helped the military shift from a defensive to an offensive posture. Uribe has pressed forward with this offensive, for example with the Patriot Plan operations in Southern Colombia in 2004 and 2005. By 2004, he had at his disposal about 55,000 professional (volunteer) soldiers, 100,000 regular soldiers, and 100,000 professional police. After 9/11, when Washington upgraded its intelligence-sharing with the Colombian military, Uribe removed constitutional restraints on the military and on his own power: he used emergency-decree powers to suspend civil liberties, fired or sidelined government prosecutors who were too vigorously prosecuting military officers for human-rights violations, and created special “rehabilitation” zones—like the one in Arauca that Kaplan visited—where the military has unrestricted powers.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Isacson, “Peace—or ‘Paramilitarization?’” pp. 4–8. For a range of views on the demobilization see Cynthia J. Arnson, editor, *The Peace Process in Colombia with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia–AUC* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> “Aid Table,” Center for International Policy website, [www.ciponline.org](http://www.ciponline.org).

U.S. support and Uribe's crackdown have improved security in some areas. In response to the military's increased airpower and helicopter mobility, the guerrillas have changed their methods, returning to guerrilla tactics, operating in smaller units, relying on hit-and-run tactics and ambushes, and destroying infrastructure.<sup>28</sup> The military has not dealt the guerrillas any serious blows, and a resurgence of guerrilla attacks in 2005 killed about 600 members of the uniformed security forces. Security forces that have taken control of once-forgotten towns have been unable to introduce services like education and health care that would consolidate government presence, and these towns remain vulnerable to guerrilla attacks.<sup>29</sup> The respected Colombian research institute Seguridad y Democracia concluded that the guerrillas have preserved their forces in many regions, with the major part of FARC's armed fronts practically intact and capable of striking against the military, police, and the economic infrastructure.<sup>30</sup> There is no reason to believe that U.S. equipment, aid, training, or Special Forces will turn the tide in the drug war that is helping to fuel the civil conflict. The most likely scenario is continuation of the war system as the stalemate fluctuates but continues.

### **From Latin America to the Middle East**

Kaplan's hope is that stealth imperialism in Colombia, led by Special Forces, will be a model for the United States' exercising control in the world with neither the kind of commitment it has made in Iraq nor the attendant negative publicity and international opposition. But his analysis, like that of many imperial advocates and neoconservatives, often ignores prior questions about U.S. interests and power. In Colombia, he presumes there is a threat of a certain kind without ever asking tough questions about the nature and intensity of that threat.

The United States could not, at this moment in history, fail to rise to the challenge that Colombia presented. Not only was Colombia so much closer to the United States than the Middle East, but cocaine and other illegal drugs even in the post-September 11 era arguably constituted a greater risk to American society than Islamic extremism, barring a truly catastrophic terrorist attack.<sup>31</sup>

Drug abuse is a serious problem in the United States. But is it a public health problem or a national security threat? Is the cause of this abuse the drug

<sup>28</sup> Becker, "Morphing War," p. 8, and Nazih Richani, "The Politics of Negotiating Peace in Colombia," NACLA Report on the Americas, May/June 2005, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Juan Forero, "Increase in Guerrilla Attacks Tests Colombia's Popular President," *New York Times*, July 3, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Foundation for Security and Democracy, Bulletin No. 11: Security Conjunction: Security Perspectives 2006, Security Balance 2005, Bogotá, Colombia, Jan. 2006, at [www.seguridady-democracia.org](http://www.seguridady-democracia.org).

<sup>31</sup> Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts*, p. 68.



production in Colombia? And would eliminating that production do anything to solve the problem? These are contested issues, and Kaplan might reasonably argue against my conclusions. But he does not even ask these questions. This is not the way to run an empire, let alone figure out whether we need one.

The failure to think realistically about U.S. interests is compounded by the failure to think realistically about U.S. power to achieve desired outcomes on the ground. An unstated assumption in Kaplan's analysis—one broadly shared by Democratic and Republican policy elites—is that the United States not only has the right and the responsibility to act as global policeman, but it has the *power* to do so. For Kaplan, the question is simply how to use that power skillfully. Kaplan's strategy, shared by many, is indirect intervention, to avoid another Iraq: support or undermine friends and foes by covert action, by the quiet use of Special Forces, by providing aid and training to third-world militaries, by the use of contract workers, and all this, whenever possible, behind the cloak of secrecy.

But even if that power is shrewdly employed by stealth imperialists, what power the United States actually has depends on what the objective is. The United States has great power when it comes to destabilizing or overthrowing governments. The list includes Moussedeq in Iran, Arbenz in Guatemala, Lumumba in the Congo, Allende in Chile, and more recently the governments of Panama, Grenada, Serbia, and Iraq. However, creating and sustaining stable political institutions—even stable dictatorships—is another thing. Nation-building, whether aimed at creating autocracies or democracies, is a complex affair. In places like Colombia, supporting one side in an ongoing civil war will not settle the conflict, especially when an unwinnable drug war creates the extraordinary profits that help finance the protagonists.

Kaplan's analysis seems more woolly-headed and idealist than hardnosed and realistic. He ignores five flawed assumptions that have undergirded U.S. counterinsurgency and counternarcotics policies in Latin America for years. They are the same flawed assumptions that undergird not only the current full-scale war in Iraq that he hopes to avoid in the future, but the stealth imperialism he recommends as an alternative.

In Colombia and in Iraq, it is presumed *that the United States can create and train a military that can achieve our objectives for us*. In Colombia, the United States assumes it can train counternarcotics and counterinsurgency battalions that will win the drug war and defeat the guerrillas without the need for U.S. combat troops. In Iraq, this presumption *is* our exit strategy. This same presumption dominated U.S. strategic thinking in the early part of the last century. Max Boot (*The Savage Wars of Peace*) points to the success of Marine expeditionary forces in occupying Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti and to the constabulary or National Guard forces they trained to maintain order when the Marines exited. These forces did maintain order for decades: they threw out the civilian governments, after which the officers we trained to be professional, apolitical soldiers (Batista, Trujillo, Somoza) ruled

with iron hands. For decades, the United States supported such autocrats with military aid, training, and economic assistance. But when they were assassinated or driven out of power, they often left in their wake turmoil, revolution, and governments we did not like. This led the United States to again intervene in the above countries (twice in Haiti) in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of this one.

The claim that U.S.-trained local forces can accomplish our objectives rests on how U.S. objectives and interests are defined. Kaplan, for example, sees El Salvador as a success story.<sup>32</sup> It is certainly true that U.S. arms, training, logistical support, along with billions in aid, enabled El Salvador's military to prevent a guerrilla victory. But the military could not break the stalemate and defeat the guerrillas. That war was settled only when serious negotiations were begun, when the first Bush administration reversed eight years of opposition by the Reagan administration to a negotiated settlement and the El Salvadoran military, facing a cut off of aid by Congress, was willing to bargain seriously. In the Iraqi case it is reasonable to ask whether success in training the Iraqi military will be defined by the creation of a "decent interval" to allow us to declare victory and exit with our pride intact or as the creation of a stable, pro-U.S. democracy?

A second similarity is that the drug war in Latin America and the Iraqi war are not really about what they are advertised to be about; and they are certainly not about core U.S. interests. They are about *symbols, signals, and credibility*; they seek to create an image, not to accomplish a concrete goal. The drug war is not really about stopping drug abuse: it is a political symbol at home that allows both Democrats and Republicans to show they can be tough on crime and drugs, an important credential to have in any election. In Iraq, the war is no longer about winning or creating democracy; it's no longer (and may never have been) about WMD: it's about staying the course, credibility, teaching terrorists a lesson, and making a stand.

Wars for credibility are terrible traps, difficult to win or end. That was a lesson the U.S. army learned after Vietnam and why it became part of military doctrine (the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine) to avoid another war over credibility. The U.S. military wanted clearly specified and winnable objectives, public support to accomplish those objectives, and an exit strategy. An interminable war, fought for a symbol, without public support, with no clear victory, was to be avoided. When General Powell became secretary of state, he remembered this and warned his colleagues of the dangers of going into Iraq—although he finally supported the war.

'You are going to be the proud owner of 25 million people,' he told the president. 'You will own all their hopes, aspirations and problems. You'll own it all.' Privately, Powell and [Deputy Secretary of State Richard] Armitage called this the Pottery Barn rule: You break it, you own it. . . . Powell was unusually blunt. 'If you think it's just a matter of picking up the phone and blowing a whistle and it goes—no, you need allies, you

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 68–9.

need access, you need whatnot. You need to understand not just a military timeline but the other things that are going to be facing you.<sup>33</sup>

There is a third similarity in both regions: *policymakers' failure to understand some of the fundamental sources of conflicts, particularly class, ethnicity, and nationalism*. Instead, they too often yield to a very American tendency to frame most conflicts in highly moral terms—good guys vs. bad guys, white hats vs. black hats. Such misframing erroneously locates the major source of conflict in bad or corrupt individuals, or in the leaders we vilify, like Castro, Chavez, Qaddafi, Bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein. If we get the drug lords like Pablo Escobar (hunted down and killed by a U.S.-backed team), we can break the cartels and that will help solve the drug problem. If we can “break up the leadership networks of the guerrilla groups through assassination and other means,” which Kaplan says is the goal of U.S. policy in Colombia, they can be reduced “to an even lower level of banditry.” Or if we can remove evil leaders like Saddam and end their dictatorships, the people in these countries will want to be like us. They will embrace open, pluralistic, representative, democratic political institutions with checks and balances, compromise, tolerance for minorities, some participation for everyone—all bound together by the rule of law under a constitution. What many U.S. policymakers do not see is that class, ethnic, and nationalist conflicts may make such solutions impossible, especially when the United States is imposing them.

In Colombia, the cause of the conflict is not narcoterrorists any more than the cause of the drug trade was the cartel kingpins. Labeling the guerrillas as “bandits” misses the deep roots of the conflict—in the historically weak Colombian state; in the anarchic rural conditions that have long bred violent, autonomous anti-state groups across the political spectrum; and in the deeply rooted inequalities and upward redistribution of land and wealth brought about by the commercialization of agriculture in recent decades.

In Iraq, the neoconservatives who first designed the policy did not understand that Iraq was never a country or a nation-state; that it was three countries, forced together by the British and held together by authoritarian rule. They missed what regional specialists said for years: if you remove the central force that holds together these three countries, things will fly apart. Creating an open, pluralistic, tolerant, democratic government to hold these pieces together is not going to work; and even creating a pro-American Leviathan under U.S. tutelage is not likely to work either.

Failure to see the class, ethnic, and nationalist sources of conflicts leads policymakers to misperceive the particular situations in the countries they want to control. Even if they are smart and shrewd, this does not compensate for a lack of wisdom. Often arrogance fills the vacuum created by ignorance. This hubris gives them confidence: although they know little about the regions they aim to control—no field experience, no language skills, no diplomatic service there, no

<sup>33</sup> Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 150.

historical knowledge—they nevertheless believe they can carry out imperial designs.

A fourth similarity is this: policymakers regularly presume that U.S. *policy has nothing to do with the continuation of such conflicts*. But in both Colombia and Iraq, U.S. policy is often part of the problem, not the solution. The United States did not cause the decades-long guerrilla war in Colombia. However, it is the prohibitionary drug strategy—the very war on drugs—that creates the profits that finance paramilitary and guerrilla violence and make continued conflict economically and politically rational for the major actors (a pattern not unlike the impact of alcohol prohibition on the rise of organized crime in the United States after World War I). Further, it was the very success we had in breaking up the cartels and in moving drug production out of Bolivia and Peru (and into Colombia) that has dramatically increased the revenues available to the AUC and the FARC. In Iraq, the U.S. presence fuels the insurgency. As conservative, and originally pro-war Congressman (and former Marine colonel) John Murtha (D-Pa.) put it in November 2005:

I said two years ago, the key to progress in Iraq is to Iraqitize, Internationalize and Energize. I believe the same today. But I have concluded that the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq is impeding this progress. Our troops have become the primary target of the insurgency. They are united against U.S. forces and we have become a catalyst for violence. U.S. troops are the common enemy of the Sunnis, Saddamists and foreign jihadists. I believe with a U.S. troop redeployment, the Iraqi security forces will be incentivized to take control.<sup>34</sup>

As our policies in both Colombia and Iraq deepen the ongoing conflict, the worsening situation then justifies an escalation of force to “solve” these problems, effectively throwing gasoline on the fires to put them out.

Embedded in all of these unquestioned presumptions is the most profound and distorting one of all: *the presumption of U.S. omnipotence*. There seems to be little question in Kaplan’s mind, or in the minds of neoconservatives or interventionist liberals like *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, that the United States *does have the power* to get the outcomes we want, especially in weak third-world countries. The only debate is over how: should it be direct unilateral intervention, direct multilateral intervention, covert stealth imperialism, or overt stealth imperialism? It is a question of getting the right mix, of finding the right techniques, of being more skillful. When force fails, then the presumption is that we need more or different force. For example, William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard* and an early advocate for the Iraq war, points to the failure in Iraq as vindicating his earlier calls for vast increases in U.S. defense spending.<sup>35</sup> What is almost never considered is whether a situation is intractable, one that the United States cannot fix.

<sup>34</sup> Press Statement, Nov. 17, 2005, The Hon. John P. Murtha, *War in Iraq*, at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov).

<sup>35</sup> Walt, “The Blame Game,” *Foreign Policy*, Nov./Dec. 2005, p. 45.

Thus few policymakers examining problems in Latin America or the Middle East ever ask whether we have the power to make things better. The very asking of that question is dangerous in contemporary policy circles: it challenges an almost sacred presumption of U.S. omnipotence. It is a suggestion of weakness, or—worse—disloyalty. One telling example is Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor for Bush Sr. and still one of his close friends. He was Richard Nixon's military assistant in the last years of the Vietnam War, and his protégés include Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley. He had successfully advised Bush Sr. not to occupy Iraq in 1991. Had we entered Baghdad then, he explained, "We'd be an occupier in a hostile land. . . . Our forces would be sniped at by guerrillas, and once we were there, how would we get out? . . . What do you do with Iraq once you own it?" In August 2002 Scowcroft did stand up and say his piece. In a *Wall Street Journal* article headlined "DON'T ATTACK SADDAM," he argued that invading Iraq would deflect American attention from the war on terrorism and do nothing to solve the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, which he thought was the primary source of conflict in the region. He argued that defeating Saddam's military was possible, but it would be very expensive, with serious consequences for the United States and global economy, and could be bloody. Most importantly, it was unnecessary. The consequence? Scowcroft was frozen out of the White House. When his op-ed appeared, then-National Security Advisor Rice telephoned him. "She said, 'How could you do this to us?'" a Scowcroft friend recalled. "What bothered Brent more than Condi yelling at him was the fact that here she is, the national security advisor, and she's not interested in hearing what a former national security advisor had to say."<sup>36</sup>

Stealth imperialism as it is practiced in Latin American countries like Colombia turns out to rest on assumptions that are very similar, and equally as shaky, as those behind the policy of invading and occupying Iraq. In fact, in taking Colombia as a paradigm case of cunning imperialism, Kaplan has closed his eyes to a paradigm case of imperial failure. This failure is rooted in imperial arrogance and hubris: the inability or unwillingness to understand the limits of U.S. power and the confusion of our overwhelming power to destroy with our very limited power to create. Ironically, the very guidelines Kaplan puts forward to protect policy from public scrutiny and debate—the supremacy of stealth, which relies on mercenaries, covert operations, circumventing the UN, spinning stories in the press—limits the kind of debate, intelligence, and analysis needed to challenge these failed assumptions. The stealth that Kaplan advocates to protect the American empire could end up protecting our naïve imperial rulers—protecting them from the very critics that might save the United States from its dangerous and unrealistic imperial adventures.



<sup>36</sup>Jeffrey Goldberg, "Breaking Ranks: What Turned Brent Scowcroft Against the Bush Administration?" *The New Yorker*, Oct. 31, 2005, p. 59.