



Rethinking U.S.–Colombia Policy

*The U.S. and Colombia Can Break
Cycles of Violence and Repression*

Aldo Civico
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Introduction

The United States has again reached a crossroads in its relationship with Colombia. Faced with the decision of how best to direct its significant levels of assistance, it is essential that the United States not turn its back on its commitment to Colombia. Yet it is also crucial that Washington formulate policy with a clear understanding of the current situation in Colombia and the historical underpinnings of those circumstances. Comprehending where Colombia stands today and how it ended up there sheds a great deal of light on how the United States can most effectively remain engaged in Colombia and advance U.S. and Colombian interests going forward.

Every time a new scandal emerges in Colombia, such as the “para-politics” scandal currently gripping the country and grabbing international headlines, people react by throwing up their hands and labeling Colombia’s conflict as intractable. There is the need today, however, for a more complex analysis that recognizes the cultural, social, and political roots of Colombia’s internal conflict. The decades-long existence of guerrillas and paramilitary groups underscores the existence of a crisis and tension within Colombia. To frame Colombia’s conflicts as mere problems of terrorism, the illicit drug trade, or both is to wear the wrong set of lenses. Such a view misses the root causes of these conflicts. Such an attitude, when it comes to policy formulation, is a prescription for failure.

To bring lasting stability to Colombia, increase regional security, and more effectively stem the flow of narcotics, the United States needs to support those Colombian institutions pursuing justice and promoting social and economic development. It must do so while encouraging Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to pursue a new political agenda for peace, one that broadens political participation and favors human development. Promoting a lasting peace should be at the center of U.S. policy toward Colombia. Only a lasting peace will signify the ultimate success in the war on drugs in the Colombian context.

The Paramilitary Connection

A recent wave of revelations regarding long-standing connections between Colombia’s governing class and its paramilitary organizations has captured a great deal of attention both inside and outside Colombia. Despite the intensity of the attention paid to these revelations, it is important to recognize that paramilitaries in various shapes and forms have been a fixture in the Colombian landscape for generations. Beyond the swirling, breathless headlines, a proper understanding of both the current “para-politics” scandal and of the paramilitary movement that spawned it is essential to formulating appropriate policy responses.

As was on display during his early May visit to Washington, D.C., the rapidly unfolding para-politics scandal is undermining President Uribe's political capital, at least outside Colombia. This effect is not surprising in light of recent revelations. Colombia finds itself in the middle of one of its most severe political crises in decades. Several prominent politicians have been found to have long-standing, intimate relations with the drug-trafficking Colombian paramilitary. And close ties between politics and the paramilitary have been at the very core of power politics in Colombia for some time, contributing to systemic corruption and greed.

Although the penetration of the paramilitary into politics was well known to those closely following and analyzing Colombia,¹ the official revelations of this public secret of ties between politicians and the paramilitaries is a potential watershed moment in Colombia. Yet the "para-politics" scandal presents an opportunity to break with Colombia's impunity-riddled past because of who is conducting the investigations and what is being uncovered.

The revelations at the core of the "para-politics" scandal have arisen from the investigative efforts of the Colombian Supreme Court and the country's independent prosecutor general. The Colombian Supreme Court, for example, has been investigating the links between several legislators in President Uribe's governing coalition and the paramilitary organization United Self-Defense of Colombia, or AUC, the group's Spanish acronym. As a result, numerous members of the Colombian House and Senate—to date totaling more than 5 percent of those bodies' total number of members—have been ordered arrested by the Supreme Court for alleged ties to the paramilitaries.

In January the Colombian media published a document signed by approximately 40 politicians (including 11 legislators, two governors, and three mayors) and paramilitary leaders, following a meeting with the AUC in 2001 in Ralito, Córdoba, during the height of paramilitary activity. The document marked the formation of a clandestine political movement with the aim of severely undermining the influence of the country's largest guerrilla group, the

Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC. There is evidence that similar meetings were held across Colombia and judicial authorities are investigating a further 60 politicians.

Allegations of cooperation and complicity with the paramilitaries have also reached the highest levels of Colombia's executive branch. Foreign Minister Maria Consuelo Araujo had to resign her post in early 2007 after revelations regarding her family's ties to the AUC. Also earlier this year, allegations regarding ties to paramilitaries led to the arrest of the former head of Colombia's domestic intelligence agency, the DAS.

In more recent days, Salvatore Mancuso, a senior paramilitary leader, testified to having had several meetings in 1997 with current Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos and current Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos. After all these revelations, President Uribe stood by his cabinet members, declaring that he has no doubts about the morality of the two Santos. The Santos, in turn, have called for investigations into Mancuso's allegations.

A recent proposal by President Uribe to free the politicians jailed in the para-politics scandal if they fully confess regarding the ties between politicians and paramilitary agents has caused deep criticism and political strife in Colombia.

Colombia needs a thorough investigation into the para-politics scandal to cut the links between shadowy organizations and corrupt political leaders who have been resorting to violence to forward their agenda and interests. This is a pattern that for decades has been undermining free and democratic political participation in Colombia and that needs to come to an end.

Root Causes of Paramilitary Groups

The paramilitary structures at the heart of the current scandal have their roots in the early 1980s, when converging interests of a group of local politicians, businessmen, executives of international companies, senior military personnel, and narco-traffickers (such as Carlos Lehder and Pablo Escobar), supported and financed the formation of the Magdalena Valley paramilitary self-defense group.²

In the mid-1990s, in the regions of Córdoba and Urabá, the brothers Fidel and Carlos Castaño initiated a pilot project aimed at providing the paramilitary with a social and political dimension. Some years later, in 1997, Carlos Castaño established the AUC with the intent of expanding the pilot project to the national level, creating a common umbrella for the different paramilitary groups in the country.

As evidenced by recent disclosures—such as the one regarding the 2001 clandestine summit in Ralito, Córdoba—Carlos Castaño wanted to transform the paramilitary into a clandestine political movement capable of shaping the regional and national politics of Colombia. The AUC were not simply a bundle of illegal armed groups. Rather, the AUC represented a broader political project, supported by strategies of terror, with deep ramifications for the politics, economy, and military in Colombia.

Carlos Castaño's project was embraced by compliant emerging regional elites and financed by drug kingpins who were eager to give a political dimension to their illicit activity in order to protect their interests and advance their agenda. The mafia bosses of the Cali and the Norte del Valle drug cartels, for example, embraced Carlos Castaño's vision, and over time turned the AUC into their private army. Some drug lords went to so far as to buy entire paramilitary groups from Carlos Castaño.

That's how the paramilitary efforts, which were initially presented and perceived as a counterinsurgency war against Colombia's guerrillas, became a war for drugs and control of narco-trafficking networks. This struggle, in turn, contributed to a spike in paramilitary-related human rights violations. In fact, the percentage of human rights violations committed by the paramilitary climbed from about 65 percent to 80 percent of the total perpetrated during the period between 2000 and 2005 covered by the original U.S.-sponsored Plan Colombia.³

In 2003, Carlos Castaño announced the demobilization of the AUC. Paramilitary leaders later explained that their unilateral decision was made possible by the security framework created by President Uribe's democratic security policy, also unveiled

in 2003. Since then, more than 32,000 paramilitary members have demobilized under President Uribe's Law 975, which has been criticized for failing to dismantle paramilitary power. The process has been marked by ambiguities and by moments of great tension between the Colombian government and former AUC leaders. The effectiveness of the demobilization and reintegration process is still hotly debated in Colombia in large measure because of its perceived failure to adequately demobilize the paramilitary's narco-trafficking infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the country in recent months has witnessed the formation of new criminal groups linked to both old and emerging cocaine drug kingpins. These newly formed organizations are replicating the modus operandi of former self-defense groups and in many cases are recruiting demobilized paramilitary. In December 2006, the Colombian think tank INDEPAZ published a list of 62 newly formed criminal bands linked to narco-trafficking.⁴ Last year, the Organization of American States' monitoring mission in Colombia pointed to the emergence of dozens of new paramilitary gangs.⁵

Moreover, recent wiretapping revelations in Colombia seem to confirm that at least mid-level paramilitary leaders are still ordering killings and continuing to traffic drugs from the high-security prison in which they are currently jailed under the terms of the demobilization process. The formation of these new criminal groups, some with links to the old paramilitaries reveals the persistence of these types of organizations in Colombia regardless of the demobilization and reintegration process.

The Role of Cocaine

What's more, the fuel for these new organizations is endemic in Colombia: cocaine. When U.S. policymakers think of Colombia, they naturally gravitate toward trying to stem the flow of illegal narcotics from Colombia to the United States. Narco-trafficking is often framed as a mere problem of organized crime to be resolved mainly through enforcement and repression. This analysis, however, ignores the historical and social causes of cocaine's development in Colombia.

Colombia became one of the main Andean region countries producing and exporting cocaine primarily to the United States and Europe only in the past three decades—a development that occurred within a complex socioeconomic and sociopolitical context.

The cultivation of coca and the production of cocaine in Colombia began in the 1970s in the northern region of Guaviare and in the southern region of Caguán. Over time cocaine superseded the production and commercialization of marijuana, which until then was the leading illicit crop in Colombia. As a source of power, cocaine's potential flowed from its ability to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few drug lords. As a result, in Colombia cocaine has allowed for the emergence of new regional elites eager to overcome a system of exclusion and determined to shape the destiny of their regions and their country.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the FARC turned to cocaine to finance its war against the Colombian government and struck deals in Southern Colombia with the mafia bosses of the Cali and the Norte del Valle cartels. When President Andres Pastrana decided, at the end of the 1990s, to give peace a chance and entered into dialogues with the FARC, the drug lords realized that a possible peace agreement between the parties would grant them neither amnesty nor a judicial privilege.

This realization brought them to establish not only a strategic alliance with AUC, but to penetrate the organization itself. Carlos Castaño's need for vast amounts of money to finance his organization and the drug kingpins' need to cover their illicit activity with a political discourse in order to strike a deal with the state at the opportune moment were a perfect match.

Over time the AUC mutated into the private army of drug kingpins who became feudal lords, imposing law and order over the regions under their domination and overtaking the functions traditionally belonging to the state. In Colombia, regions ruled by cocaine became countries within a country.⁶ As a result of the para-politics revelations, we now also know that those feuds, formed at the periphery, had their representa-

tives at the center nurturing a thick system of corruption, resting, until now, on systemic impunity.

In sum, narco-trafficking is the expression, via the formation of alternative forms of power financed by cocaine, of emerging regional elites in the forgotten periphery of the country facing dynamics of exclusion at the center rooted in Colombia's enduring party structures. Although systemic violence in Colombia predates the rise of cocaine as a source of power and influence, the dynamics and the sociopolitical power produced by cocaine means that Colombia's internal conflict revolves not around conflicting ideologies but rather around the dynamics and the interests rooted in narco-trafficking.

Case in point: the 2006 United Nations report on the intensity of coca cultivation in Colombia shows that the size of illegal armed groups is larger and their presence is thicker in municipalities where there are coca fields.⁷ To recognize the existence of a cocaine-financed internal conflict in Colombia is key to addressing its root causes and also to making progress in stemming the flow of drugs from Colombia to the United States.

Peace with the Guerrillas?

Although counterinsurgency has seldom been the explicit goal of U.S. policy toward Colombia, the seemingly perpetual struggle by the Colombian government against guerrillas has profoundly colored U.S. policy. Guerrilla groups, including the National Liberation Army, or ELN, and FARC, have been active for more than four decades in Colombia, and numerous attempts to reach peace agreements with them have ended in failure. Understanding why that has been so and how that could be changed is vital for formulating U.S. policy moving forward.

The origins of both the FARC and the ELN trace back to the immediate aftermath of the period of sectarian violence in Colombia known simply as La Violencia, between 1948 and 1954. After the short-lived military regime of General Rojas Pinilla a political arrangement between the traditional conservative and liberal parties was established, creating the National Front. The National Front

provided for an alternation in government between the two parties, creating the consequence of political exclusion for all but National Front members.

Simultaneous to this systematic political exclusion in the 1950s, Colombia underwent significant urbanization and economic transformation, with an increase in industry and commerce, that left rural areas behind and feeling abandoned.⁸ This, too, nourished resentment and helped create the conditions that gave rise to Colombia's two enduring guerrilla movements.

The consequences of these developments remain on display in Colombia today. When sitting around the same table, for example, the Colombian government, FARC, and ELN speak two different languages and have profoundly different expectations. In negotiations with the guerrillas, the state is primarily worried about the military aspects of the confrontation and therefore looks for agreements that focus on creating a ceasefire and an end to the kidnappings. Any follow-up pursuits entail efforts to disarm and demobilize the insurgent groups.

In contrast, the guerrilla groups demand a structural change of the state addressing the root causes of the conflict and the grievances justifying the existence of the insurgency. Specifically, they demand a reform of the constitution that envisions decentralization, political processes that reinforce communitarian participation, and a politics for peace not subject to change in governments. Moreover, they demand economic and infrastructure development to empower rural areas and a policy that tackles the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict and that has resulted in more than 3.5 million people being internally displaced during the past 10 years.

A narrow definition of the insurgents as mere criminal and terrorist groups, as President Uribe has adopted,⁹ allows for the strengthening of a merely military approach to the conflict. The experience in the field of conflict resolution, however, suggests that when issues of inclusion and identity are involved, a merely military approach to security and peace prolongs the conflict. In fact, an exclusive military approach by the state justifies the insurgents' use of violence and

bolsters their anti-state rhetoric, further escalating the conflict and rendering it more intractable.

At a practical level, more than 40 years of insurgent violence in Colombia shows that a strictly military solution is not conducive to the resolution of the conflict. Military interventions in Colombia have always backfired and prolonged the internal conflict, making negotiations more difficult and giving reasons to the insurgents to keep fighting and expanding.

A negotiation, instead, favors an environment in which possible alternative and political solutions are explored. Colombia, of course, would not be unique in this regard. Northern Ireland has celebrated the achievement of peace that came only after a long and serious search for a political solution to the conflict. In South Africa, insurgent organizations gave up the use of violence only after they were included in the political process.

A proper understanding of the conflict dynamics in Colombia involving the ELN and the FARC clearly demonstrates the need for a political solution to its more than four decades of struggle. A mere military and repressive approach does not lead to a lasting peace.

The Peace Process with the ELN

For the past year and a half, the Colombian government and the ELN have been engaged in an exploratory dialogue. Though the slowness of the progress is frustrating many in Colombia, the mere fact that the two parties have been engaging each other is positive. In the weeks to come, this effort could take a decisive turn. The United States should follow with great attention and interest the evolution of this process. To do so, it is important to understand the nature of this guerrilla group and its current negotiation strategy.

Some scholars trace the beginning of the ELN back to the time of the so-called Colombian "Bolshevik insurrection" in 1929, when artisans and peasants directed simultaneous attacks in different parts of the country, most notably in San Vicente de Chucurí. The event

revealed the readiness of Colombian peasants and workers to resort to violence as a means of resistance. The state crushed the 1929 rebellion attempt with brutal repression, reinforcing the perception that the state manifests itself exclusively through coercion.

While the state interpreted the insurrection as a mere security problem—one that repression could take care of—the left in Colombia (especially the now-defunct Socialist Revolutionary Party) declared that only socioeconomic and political reforms would effectively address the root causes of the rebellion.¹⁰ These two different perceptions find an echo today in the talks between the Colombian government and the ELN.

Propelled by the Cuban revolution, a group of people on July 4, 1964 founded the ELN in San Vicente de Chucurí. In its first phase, the newly formed insurgent group aimed to achieve a radical social, political, and economic transformation of Colombia. To this day, the ELN views itself as a force of transformation.

The current strategy of the ELN is characterized by the search for a political (not military) solution to Colombia's internal conflict. In other words, political and social transformation for the ELN will be the result of dialogue, consensus, and negotiation. In a 2004 document, the National Direction of the ELN affirmed the importance of “authentic dialogue” and of a “political solution” to the conflict, and the need to work with “different social and political forces” to reach “a large national consensus.”¹¹ In the last about 15 years, the ELN shifted its emphasis from military to political activities and is now far less militarily strong than the FARC or the paramilitary. Moreover, today, for the first time in its history as part of its ongoing talks with the Colombian government, the ELN is close to signing an agreement for a cessation of hostilities.

In the fall of 2005, an agreement was reached between the Colombian government and the ELN. A House of Peace was established by a group of facilitators as an open space in Medellín where representatives of Colombian society could meet with spokespersons of the ELN. Within the House

of Peace, ideas for a political solution to the internal conflict have been explored in an experiment that has emphasized the positive role of society as a third party in supporting official talks.

Since the opening of the House of Peace, there have been five meetings in Cuba between the ELN and the Colombian government. Currently the ELN has generally agreed to a temporary and exploratory ceasefire that is now being negotiated in Havana. Though the talks are going through a difficult moment, for the first time in years there is reasonable hope for the emergence of an agreement.

Both the Colombian government and the ELN need to show progress and results in this dialogue effort. The government, shuttered by the current scandal and surrounded in the region by left-leaning governments, needs to be successful in advancing the chance for peace through the negotiation with a guerrilla organization. The ELN, a guerrilla group that is far less involved in narcotrafficking than the FARC, is facing economic hardship and sustains itself mainly by kidnapping and protection money. In recent months the ELN has also faced off militarily against FARC in some regions of the country.

If the ELN is unable to make significant progress in its exploratory dialogue with the Colombian government, it risks being forcibly incorporated by the FARC or facing the choice to enter more heavily into narcotrafficking—a temptation that the ELN as a whole has so far resisted, with the exception of some of its military fronts. Moreover, because of the ongoing investigation severing the ties between corrupt political elites and the paramilitary, the ELN sees the opportunity for a more free political space that allows for democratic participation. Moreover, a successful peace process with the ELN will serve as a model for a process with the FARC in the future.

A Humanitarian Accord with the FARC Guerrilla

In contrast to his current approach with the ELN, President Uribe has been consistent in using tough language and an iron fist against the FARC. That

strategy, however, appears not to have been entirely successful. In recent months, the FARC, the oldest and biggest Colombian guerrilla group, has increased the numbers of attacks against police stations and the civilian population in areas controlled by the military. Although President Uribe has begun to show some openness to a humanitarian agreement, centered on a “prisoner” exchange with the FARC, the conditions he has set appear to remain unacceptable to the FARC.

The inability of the Colombian state and the FARC to come to terms is nothing new. In fact, the FARC arose in the context of Colombia’s traditional resort to violence in the political sphere. The leader of the FARC, Manuel Marulanda Velez, was born on May 12, 1930 into a peasant family that was deeply involved in the sectarian civil war between the Liberal and the Conservatives known as La Violencia (1948-54). Predating the Castro revolution in Cuba, Marulanda formed the first liberal guerrilla group in 1948, fighting against the Conservative military government of Mariano Ospina. Later, on May 27, 1964, he formed the FARC, pushing for an agrarian reform program mirroring the peasant movements of the Mexican revolution and the Sandino insurrection in Nicaragua.

Since then, the FARC has resisted many attempts to crush it militarily and by 1984 boasted a force of 27 battalions. In the mid-1980s, under President Belisario Bentacurt, peace dialogues were conducted and were abruptly terminated when the Colombian army conducted a major surprise attack against the FARC. In the late 1990s, President Pastrana again attempted to pursue peace talks. After those talks faltered despite the concession of a broad swath of territory to the FARC as a condition for the talks, there have been no renewed attempts at a peace process with the FARC. Today, conditions do not exist for a peace process as the confrontation remains a purely military one.

Through the years, the FARC has shifted its ideological discourse. It abandoned the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and embraced a nationalistic socialism,

demanding social reforms and showing tolerance of small-scale capitalism. According to its leadership, the FARC perceives itself as a credible “good government” alternative. Since President Uribe came to office, however, the FARC leadership has refused any dialogue with the Colombian government and in recent months the FARC has increased its attacks against the Colombian police and armed forces.

These attacks have called into question the perception that President Uribe’s democratic security policy has weakened the group. Together with the politically charged nature of any possible humanitarian agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government allowing the exchange of “prisoners,” the obstacles to a deal are significant even though there is some reason for hope. The FARC is looking for the kind of political recognition that a humanitarian agreement would almost necessarily imply.

In contrast, the government might need to resuscitate its legitimacy, in part, through a humanitarian agreement—especially if the present para-politics scandal continues to deepen. Above all, there is the need to free 56 people (police officers, soldiers, and lawmakers) who have been in the hands of the FARC for several years; some up to nine years, and among them three U.S. citizens. France, Spain, and Switzerland have made a proposal to the Colombian government and to the FARC that a geographical area of the Valle del Cauca department comprising the municipalities of Florida and Pradera be designated as a meeting point for negotiation of a humanitarian agreement. The proposal has been endorsed by members of the U.S. Congress and now President Uribe needs to show the political will to reach an agreement that will provide for the release of 56 hostages and serve as a confidence-building exercise for a future peace process with the FARC. In recent days, President Uribe said that rebels held by the Colombian government would “in the national interest” be released by June 7, but gave no further details. Such a unilateral decision, without a humanitarian agreement, gives no guarantee that the 56 FARC hostages will be freed.

Looking for a New Paradigm

The United States needs a comprehensive policy for Colombia that understands and recognizes the complexity of Colombia's internal conflict and does not see it exclusively through the lenses of narcotrafficking or terrorism. Promoting freedom, security, and opportunity is in the national interest of the United States throughout Latin America, but especially in Colombia.

In the past two years, Latin America has witnessed a wave of important democratic elections mirroring people's eagerness for better and more just lives. In an increasingly interdependent world there is a growing need for shared values, opportunities, goals, and wealth across national borders. Satisfying these needs also would make the United States safer. That is why the United States and Colombia need a new set of policies rooted in the principle of "interdependent fraternity" that would allow for a unity of purpose between the two nations that is respectful of diversity. As part of a broader policy for Latin America, the United States in Colombia has to promote a policy that makes peace the overarching goal of its support to the country, but this can be achieved only if President Uribe recognizes that Colombia is affected by an internal conflict that has long-standing social and political roots.

From cocaine to the perpetuation of the armed conflict, any solution to Colombia's multiple conflicts cannot be found through repression and military aid alone. The history of Colombia is replete with examples of violent response to a governing system based on repression and exclusion. Peace in Colombia means inclusion, human development, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Peace will permit Colombia to shift from a merely formal democracy to a deep and substantial one.

To be successful in that part of the war on drugs that can be successfully prosecuted in Colombia, the United States needs to strengthen and invest in the promotion of a culture of lawfulness and human rights. That is the way to be effective in fighting a system of corruption and strengthening the rule of law and democracy. To these ends the United States should:

1. Revise its funding of Plan Colombia to allocate far more resources to strengthen the rule of law and promote human development.
 - The work of prosecutors unmasking the connections between the paramilitary, lawmakers, and senior military officials is sending the important message that impunity is no longer guaranteed. The United States should strongly support the rule of law and strengthen the support for a strong and independent judiciary. The United States

should use its leverage to support and encourage the work of these prosecutors. Congress should increase the financing of the training, security, and infrastructure essential to Colombian judges and prosecutors in carrying on their investigations of the para-politics scandal.

2. Support an enhanced role for victims of the internal conflict who are currently helping Colombia unveil inconvenient truths in order to promote a culture of human rights.

- The United States should finance Colombia's under-funded National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation, which allows victims of political violence to come forward and give their testimony.
- The United States should press President Uribe to guarantee protection for the victims and their families of those who are voluntarily giving their deposition to prosecutors. The United States should also ask President Uribe to guarantee protection to those politicians who are speaking out against the connections between the paramilitary and politics.

3. Promote sustainable and human development as part of a peace strategy for Colombia by:

- Increasing assistance for programs that empower internally displaced people through participatory processes that protect and promote their rights as citizens, facilitate their inclusion, and develop skills providing economic independence. The United States should seek to especially encourage and support civic initiatives and community-based economic programs at a regional and municipal level.
- Suspending the aid for aerial fumigation of coca fields, while supporting programs for the manual eradication of fields owned by peasants.

4. Support efforts aimed at the demobilization and reintegration of former combatants by:

- Supporting with training and financial resources the office of the High Counselor for the Reintegration of Former Combatants, led today by Frank Pearle, and the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs of municipalities such as Medellín.
 - Supporting sustainable development projects and promoting governance that benefits the communities where former combatants are concentrated, promoting a culture of citizenship and human rights.
 - Pressing President Uribe to extradite drug lords who were also paramilitary leaders of the AUC, particularly in light of recent revelations of transcripts of secret conversations in which jailed paramilitary members ordered murders and ran drug-trafficking operations.
5. Understand the connection between the successful conclusion of peace processes with the ELN and the FARC and possible success in the war on drugs in the Colombian context.
- Colombia's long-standing internal conflicts will find a solution only through a political settlement, a product of a negotiation that will tackle both military and humanitarian issues.
 - To help promote successful peace processes, the United States should encourage the current dialogue efforts between the Colombian government and the ELN, facilitating a dialogue when requested by the parties.
 - Considering that there is no request of extradition for any of the ELN leaders, the United States should consider the possibility of conditionally suspending the ELN from the list of terrorist organizations if a cessation of hostilities (including an end to the kidnappings and a release of those kidnapped and still held) is declared and verifiably implemented. A similar proposal was recently presented by a group of European parliamentarians in Brussels. Such

a move might mirror the very significant role the United States played when it facilitated the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland. When President Clinton granted to Gerry Adams a visa to travel to the United States, the peace process made a significant leap forward.

- The United States should support and welcome any initiatives that may result in facilitating a humanitarian agreement with the FARC. The agreement would allow the liberation of 56 individuals, including three U.S. citizens and numerous Colombian regional and national congress members. A recent letter signed by members of the U.S. Congress was well-received in Colombia by the parties in conflict and represents an opportunity to create the

conditions for a humanitarian agreement that in turn might be an exercise in confidence-building for a possible negotiation, especially if the dialogue with the ELN is successful. At this hour, the U.S. government needs to encourage President Uribe to find a solution allowing for such an exchange of hostages and prisoners.

The governments of the United States and Colombia, acting together in a true spirit of interdependent fraternity, can strengthen the democratic institutions of Colombia and end decades of conflict there through sustained efforts at peace and regional reconciliation across Colombia. Military force and repression alone simply do not work, nor does paying lip service to peace talks. Only a unified push for peace and reconciliation will do the trick.

About the Author

Aldo Civico is the director of the Center for International Conflict Resolution at Columbia University in New York City and a senior adviser to the Project on Justice in Times of Transition. Civico is also an Affiliated Scholar with the Center for American Progress. Since 2001, he has been conducting fieldwork in Colombia and is currently writing a book about the paramilitary. In the 1990s, he was a senior advisor to the anti-mafia mayor of Palermo Leoluca Orlando. He is author of *La Scelta* (1993), the biography of anti-mafia pioneer Ennio Pintacuda, and of "Portrait of a Paramilitary," a chapter in *Engaged Observer* edited by Victoria Sanford and Angel-Ajani (Rutgers University Press 2006).

About The Americas Project

The Americas Project at the Center for American Progress is focused on the United States' relationship with and place in the Americas. The United States is in the midst of dramatic changes that will profoundly affect its future, which are manifest both in the rapid growth of its Latino population and the ever-increasing interconnections with its neighbors throughout the Americas. Through rigorous research and open collaboration, The Americas Project seeks to more fully explore and understand those changes, the relationships among them, and their implications for progressive policy abroad and at home. The Americas Project endeavors to formulate innovative policy recommendations to address those changing realities and, through active engagement of all forms of media, effectively communicate its proposals to a wide range of audiences.

Endnotes

- 1 Many reports had hinted to the connection. In 2003, for instance, the United Nations Development Report highlighted that “certain officials, some military commandos, a few politicians and even some large businessmen...sponsor (or cohabit with) the activities of paramilitary groups. Support from above helps explain why regional self-defense groups gain a certain degree of articulation and visibility on a national scale, or why paramilitarism grew as a response to peace dialogues with the guerrillas and the attempts to reform or opening-up of the political system in the past twenty years.” United National Development Program, El Conflicto, callejón con salida, 23 (Bogota, Colombia, 2003).
- 2 Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, Las verdaderas intenciones de los paramilitares, (Bogota, Colombia 2002); Carlos Medina Gallego, Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico en Colombia: origen, desarrollo y consolidación: el caso “Puerto Boyaca,” (Bogota, Colombia 1990).
- 3 Hylton 2006:3
- 4 A list can be retrieved at: <http://www.cipcol.org/archives/000369.htm>
- 5 Organization of American States, Septimo Informe Trimestral del Secretario General al Consejo Permanente sobre la Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (2006).
- 6 Moises Naím, Illicit: How smugglers, traffickers, and copycats are hijacking the global economy, (New York 2005).
- 7 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Colombia: Coca Cultivation Survey, (New York 2006).
- 8 Gustavo Duncan, Los señores de la Guerra. De Paramilitares, mafiosos y autodefensas en Colombia, (Bogota, Colombia 2006).
- 9 Before being elected for the first time as president of Colombia, Uribe vowed to confront and defeat the guerrillas militarily.
- 10 Alejo Vargas, Guerra o solución negociada. ELN: origen, evolución y procesos de paz, (Bogota, Colombia 2006).
- 11 Alejo Vargas, Guerra o solución negociada. ELN: origen, evolución y procesos de paz, 223 (Bogota, Colombia 2006).

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1333 H Street, NW, 10th Floor
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202.682.1611 • Fax: 202.682.1867
www.americanprogress.org