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Plan Colombia Revisited

by Stuart Lippe

It perhaps seems a stretch to suggest FY2000's Plan Colombia and its "lessons learned" are still relevant over a quarter-century later. Nevertheless, in these troubled times they may warrant another look, particularly as Colombia's two presidential candidates differed radically in their proposed agendas. The author also hopes to remind readers of what a rational approach to foreign policy, process, and purpose can be. The August 7, 2026 announcement by the State Department of a proposed $1 billion program to coincide with the inauguration of Abelardo de la Espriella also gives cause to look back at experience with the earlier Plan Colombia.[1] State's brief proposal also appears to raise questions that could require further attention.

The two candidates to emerge from Colombia's primary electoral contest represented the right and left poles of voters' choices. An independent, Espriella's campaign proposed renewed aerial spraying and a strong approach to the country's growing illegal armed groups and coca cultivation. His opponent, the Liberal Party's Ivan Cepeda, supported a continuation of President Petro's policies emphasizing social development, but not coca elimination or confrontation with those narcotics trafficking groups, and other criminal activities.[2]

Espriella's mandate was only one percent more than that of Cepeda, which was forty-nine percent to forty-eight percent. In addition to the extremely thin winning margin, Colombia's Congress is also deeply fragmented. In the one-hundred-eight member Senate and the one-hundred-eighty-eight member House, neither Espriella nor Cepeda (who command the two largest voting blocs) have anywhere a workable majority. Moreover, Colombia's two historically traditional parties (Liberal and Conservative) have lost their dominance. This fragmentation could force constant negotiation and jockeying between the disparate blocs to legislate and implement programs.

Stuart Lippe was a senior advisor at the Department of State helping to implement U.S. support to "Plan Colombia" from 2000 to 2013. He has also been a consultant at the World Bank and Director of the Research Department at Radio Marti. Before this, Lippe was a foreign service officer for 25 years during which he served in Washington D.C., Latin America, Europe and Africa, as well as attending the National Defense University.

How the United States (U.S.) and Colombia relate will depend on common concerns, historical shared experience and today's new challenges

Looking back, in essence, Plan Colombia, which formally lasted from 2000 to 2006 and continues with programs even today, was an all-of-government effort to avoid Colombia becoming a failed state. It did so by providing programs and funding with clearly defined goals and strong interagency coordination at the operational and tactical levels. There were over one hundred specific budget line items including Blackhawk and Huey-2 helicopters, glyphosate for aerial spraying of coca, military and police training, rule of law, social and economic development projects, and extensive judicial system reforms, additional staff to help with an increased workload and direct support to the Colombia Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). These programs were implemented by the U.S. and Colombian Governments with significant additional support from "willing" international partners and organizations.[3] The full title "Plan Colombia: Colombia's Plan for Peace, Prosperity and Strengthening of the State" better reflects its Colombian authors' goals. The specter of a failed state is long gone. Considering the poor results from many others of our foreign initiatives, Plan Colombia was a welcome change. It worked, and for that reason alone, it merits attention.

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Personally, it cannot be overstated how rewarding it was to be a part of this. Our recent "excursion" into Iran has shown what the lack of a functioning interagency process, failure to consult with friends and allies, confusion over defined purpose, and ignoring all other "lessons learned" in Colombia and elsewhere has wrought. Indeed, all the Simons Center has worked towards seems forgotten.

Although Plan Colombia was a broad effort to address Colombia's problems, clearly its major impetus began with a "hard side" seeking to reduce coca cultivation and help the country confront the rebel Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN), albeit there was also significant attention to "soft side" social and economic development programs from the start. By the formal end of Plan Colombia in 2006, Congress had mandated a fifty-fifty split between the two.

Coca cultivation had risen from 50,000 hectares in 1995 (one hectare equals about 2.4 acres) to over 165,000 in 1999 and 2000, triggering Plan Colombia. By 2013, it was back down to 1995 levels, in a fairly stable decline with only a few spikes along the way, representing thirteen or fourteen years of genuine progress. That de minimis level only lasted a couple of years before starting to grow again, first to nearly 150,000 hectares in 2016 and then to 253,000 hectares by 2023 and reportedly continuing to 261,000 hectares in 2024.[4] There has apparently been no slowing of growth during 2025 nor so far in 2026, although figures are not yet available. Moreover, cocaine yields from the plants have increased significantly.

Apart from aerial spraying, which was suspended in 2015 for domestic Colombian political reasons, other Plan Colombia programs continued even as coca cultivation was already going up again. Implementation issues with the 2016 FARC peace accords also contributed to this growth as did a decision to de-emphasize coca eradication by the present Petro government and spurred by growing illegal and violent armed groups. Although today's numbers are approaching twice that which triggered Plan Colombia, this has not evoked nearly the same

concerns, at least not yet.

Historical Perspective

Six unique conditions allowed the U.S. to prevent Colombia from obtaining control.

1. The Colombian Army lost battalion-sized battles to the FARC and the loss of a major country to narcotics traffickers was increasingly considered possible.
2. Coca cultivation was about three times that of previous years.
3. There was a serious crack cocaine epidemic in the U.S.
4. An election year in the U.S. ensured both political parties would respond seriously.
5. The discredited Ernesto Samper was replaced by Andres Pastrana, who quickly asked the U.S. for improved relations
6. The collapse of the USSR allowed the U.S. to focus on other regions. Colombia was almost the only game in town.

As early as 1964, a U.S. Embassy report to Washington titled, *Violence in Colombia: A Case Study*, analyzed that country's challenges and described ungoverned areas, rural poverty, pervasive violence and lack of government authority. In its Plan Lazo that year, Colombia made efforts to address these issues and suggested that the U.S. could best assist by providing intelligence, mobility (helicopters), and training.[5]

Thirty-six years later Plan Colombia did the same on a larger and broader scale. And funding has not seriously faltered. FY 2000's $932.7 million was reduced to $630 million by FY 2010. Since then and today it has varied between $293.1 million and $453.1 million (estimate) for FY 2023. This was reduced in the first year of the second Trump administration.[6]

Lessons Learned

While the conditions that allowed the U.S. to fully focus on Colombia were unique, the experience gained there continues applicable. These include widespread agreement on policy by both governments and among all agencies, generous funding by the U.S., Colombia and the international community, an effective U.S. interagency process, broad Congressional and public support, and perhaps most importantly, an ally who wanted our goals as much or more than we did. Also useful was the fact that State had the lead with its number three, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Tom Pickering, as well as critical support from "Drug Czar" General Barry McCaffrey. His broad experience and leadership contributed to allaying possible concerns from military and drug control advocates over our human rights and other "soft side" programs, as well as his effective support with Congress. Other agencies were free to challenge Pickering's decisions and there was a formal process to do so, but it was never invoked.

As early as 1964, a U.S. Embassy report to Washington…analyzed [Colombia's] challenges

Of the eleven lessons learned identified by Plan Colombia,[7] two seem especially relevant when exploring why Colombian coca cultivation nevertheless reached and then far exceeded earlier records: "Plan Colombia proved that while development and social inclusion programs require secure environments, security gains can only be sustained and institutionalized through the success of programs;" and "Social and economic development programs require continuing support over many years for what is a slow process, even under the best circumstances. Active participation by the beneficiaries, security and state presence are keys to success. Partners must have a strategic vision to illuminate the long haul."

In plain English both the "hard side" and the "soft side" are necessary. This was demonstrated by Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) when he introduced the Democratic Security Strategy and its success. It is also clear that a stronger approach to narcotics

trafficking and armed gang violence was an important element of Espriella's victory.

Progress did not come overnight. President Pastrana's quest for peace with the FARC vexed U.S. policymakers, but he was elected on that platform. His failed attempt can now be seen as necessary to convince Colombian voters and the political elites to try a more confrontational and vigorous approach. When Pastrana finally accepted that peace talks with the FARC were not working and ended them, U.S. "hard side" programs with the Colombian military and police, as well as "soft side" programs, were already beginning to take hold.

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President Pastrana laid the groundwork and Plan Colombia accelerated during Uribe's presidency. Most importantly, Uribe and his advisors developed a coherent counterinsurgency strategy based on taking and holding territory, protecting local populations, and controlling key geographic corridors essential to drug trafficking. This strategy of Democratic Security correctly identified the sovereignty gap as the central problem in Colombia. Developing legitimate state control was the antidote. Uribe's hard-line approach generated criticism, but it was widely supported by Colombians tired of the FARC's depredations. Nor did it overlook human rights, rule of law, and economic and social development programs.

In spite of Colombia's extraordinary progress since 2000, it still faces serious challenges from violence, corruption, social inequities, and a continued urban-rural split in the benefits of economic growth. Colombia has yet to resolve its serious challenges and it seems apparent now that recent Colombian governments have reduced their efforts at coca cultivation control and pursuit of illegal armed groups leading to their reinvigorated growth.

Colombia's problems were more deeply rooted than was perhaps recognized earlier. While Plan Colombia brought respite and real progress, it now seems apparent that even that was not robust enough to resolve the country's problems. As has been noted, Colombia "... still faces serious challenges from violence, corruption, social inequities, and a continued urban-rural split in the benefits of economic growth..." and "...whether the resources dedicated to these efforts are sufficient is still an open question."

It is difficult to prophesize, especially about the future (*Danish proverb*)

Managing developments will require an understanding of where Colombia is now, and this would have been true with either Espriella or Cepeda. How this works out in practice may become clearer as events unfold. State has proposed a number of programs under the broad headings of dismantling transnational narco-terrorism networks and unlocking economic opportunity. Most of these proposals appear reasonable, but four in particular raise some questions:

First, $1 billion in 2026 is worth about $517 million in 2000 dollars. Even so, there is some question as to whether the U.S. Congress is ready to appropriate this amount; second, "building interoperability and executing coordinated operations with U.S. forces" is problematic if it means American combat troops on the ground. Columbia did not become a U.S. war because (a) Congress prohibited this and (b) Colombia's financial commitment to Plan Colombia exceeded those of the U.S. by a significant amount. Colombian military capacity, greatly improved during Plan Colombia, may also mean that U.S. combat troops would not be required.

Third, significantly expand coca eradication and coca interdiction programs. No viable alternatives have been offered to the use of glyphosate. Its use was suspended by the Santos government in 2015 because of domestic opposition and health concerns. Moreover, Colombia's Constitutional Court has established environmental rules and consultation requirement for resumption of any spraying operations.

Finally, "reclaim, hold, and build state presence in territory once controlled by armed groups, with efforts ranging from humanitarian demining to coordinated security, justice and economic investments in high-threat regions." This sounds very similar to Plan Colombia's "soft side" programs. Adam Isacson, one of the most astute and knowledgeable Colombia watcher, and often a critic of Plan Colombia, has called this last proposal "a worthy objective," but has also described that the government's "...striking absence from rural areas (and even some urban neighborhoods) has been a vexing and persistent problem for a long time."

Twenty years ago, U.S. Southern Command and USAID linked up to support Álvaro Uribe's government in a phased, sequenced effort, called the *National Territorial Consolidation Plan* (note: also known as Democratic Security), sought to bring state presence to several priority areas. It ultimately fell apart because the civilian part of Colombia's state never really established itself—frequently leaving the soldiers on their own and soldiers can't govern on their own—and because subsequent governments did not continue the effort.

Later, Chapter 1 of Colombia's 2016 peace accord established a somewhat similar, more civilian and consultative effort to bring state presence to 170 conflict-affected municipalities. But ten years later, we are still waiting for the "rural reform" chapter and its "Territorially Focused Development Plans (PDET)" to be properly implemented.[8] Once again Colombia's urban-rural challenges and geography may have thwarted its efforts to become a whole country and fully worthy of its history and people. Nevertheless, neither the U.S. nor Colombia should give up. ***IAJ***

Notes

1 Department of State, *A New Era in US-Colombia Relations*, August 7, 2026.

2 Clare Seelke, *Colombia's 2026 Presidential Election*, Congressional Research Service, May 6, 2026

3 Stuart Lippe, "There is No Silver Bullet and Other Lessons from Colombia," *Interagency Journal Vol. 5, Issue* 3 (Fall 2014), 23-35.

4 Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Drogay el Delito (UNODC)-Sistema Integrado deMonitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos (SIMCI), *Monitoreo de territorios con presencia de cultivos de coca 2024* (Bogotá: UNODC-SIMCI, 2026).

5 Lippe, 23

6 The Congressional Research Service (CRS) continues to be invaluable in providing accurate and non-partisan discussion of Colombia issues and budgetary numbers to Congress and the public. For these numbers the following reports were consulted. June Beittel, *Colombia: Issues for Congress* (March 18, 2011), Table 3; *U.S. Assistance for Plan Colombia, FY 2000-FY2012*, 32; June Beittel, "Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations," (December 16, 2021), Table 1; U.S. Assistance to Colombia, 38; Seelke, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Table 1; *U.S. Foreign Assistance to Colombia by Account: FY2020-FY2025*, 17.

7 Lippe. 3-34. For convenience, the nine remaining "Lessons Learned" are briefly noted below and addressed with greater detail in the full 12-page IAJ article: (a) The U.S. had a clear overall purpose (strategy) and an organized process to achieve this; (b) People do matter. The U.S benefitted from effective leadership at the highest levels especially State Under Secretary Tom Pickering and "Drug Czar" General Barry McCaffrey, mid-level coordination by Assistant Secretaries among State, DOD, ONDCP, USAID and Justice, as well as SOUTHCOM and JCS. and dedicated working level staff. In Colombia, exceptional Ambassadors coordinated a large country team and worked closely with strong Colombian partners. Congressional leaders including the Speaker and staffers from both sides of the aisle provided oversight and strong support; (c) U.S. agencies had military, civilian, and contractor personnel with cultural understanding, language ability and a persistent long-term presence; (d) Congressional interest was critical and maintained. Even the seeming restrictions of human rights and reporting requirements, a personnel ceiling and a no U.S. combat role turned out to be positive; (e) the U.S. did not take ownership of Colombia's war. Funding was preponderantly Colombian; (f) Colombian public support was strong. Colombian political will and leadership were critical as was buy-in from the general public; (g) the Washington interagency process was clear; (h) plans must evolve to confront changes, often quickly; (i) and finally, as Ambassador Patterson noted, there is no silver bullet, just a lot of hard work.

8 Adam Isaacson, *$1 Billion for Colombia, More Questions Than Facts*, August 8, 1926, https://adamisacson.com/1-billion-for-colombia-more-questions-than-facts/