

The United States and Colombia: the next plan

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"You are my personal friend and your country is a strategic partner of the United States", George W Bush told Colombian President Álvaro Uribe on 11 March 2007, during a seven-hour [visit](#) [1] to Bogotá.

Behind the two presidents' mutual [backslapping](#) [2], the intended message was that all is going very well in Colombia, and that relations between the two countries are to continue smoothly on a course set as long ago as 2000.

It was then that Plan Colombia - an aid package proposed by a Democratic president and approved by a Republican Congress - established Colombia as the largest US aid recipient outside the middle east. Between 2000 and 2007, Washington will have [given](#) [3] Bogotá \$5.4 billion; \$4.4 billion of that has gone to Colombia's armed forces and police.

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During this period Colombians elected Uribe, their most conservative president in decades, who has proven to be one of the United States's only remaining allies in a [region](#) [5] where critics of US foreign policy have done well at the polls. Uribe has gone so far as to support several policies favoured by Washington but controversial at home: the anti-drug fumigation of herbicides over nearly a million rural hectares; a free-trade agreement that preserves many US agricultural subsidies and quotas; even the Iraq war. [Uribe's](#) [6] tough security policies, meanwhile, have reduced common crime and pushed guerrilla groups out of cities, leading some in the Bush administration to view him as Colombia's answer to Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill.

Today, though, [cracks](#) [7] are showing in the edifice built in 2000. Things are not, in fact, going that well in Colombia, and the years of uncritical support for Bogotá may be over. The hardline consensus that for so long reigned over US-Colombian relations has been shaken by a series of events, a "perfect storm" into which George W Bush waded, briefly, on Sunday.

A new wind in Washington

It began in mid-2006, when the US government was forced to announce that despite so much investment in drug eradication, its satellites had detected [more](#) [8] coca - the plant used to grow cocaine - in Colombia than they had in 2000.

Meanwhile, Colombia's US-aided army was battered by a series of damaging revelations. Young recruits were viciously tortured. An army patrol, apparently working at the service of drug lords, massacred an elite police anti-drug unit. Civilians were killed in dozens of

incidents, their bodies dressed in camouflage and presented as guerrillas killed in combat. A series of car-bombs - all but one heroically "discovered" and defused in time - were planted [9] in Bogotá by soldiers and blamed on guerrillas.

Then, in late 2006, reports in Colombia's media began to snowball into a huge scandal. A steady trickle of information - including a laptop computer that ended up in investigators' hands - has revealed the shocking degree to which drug-running rightwing paramilitary death-squads have infiltrated [10] Colombia's government, at all levels. Those currently in custody or on the run include ten members of Colombia's congress - all of them supporters of President Uribe - and other officials close to the president, including the head of the presidential intelligence service. The scandal has badly tarnished [11] Uribe's international image.

The arrival of a new Congress in the United States in November's mid-term elections, with a Democratic Party majority in both houses, added to the momentum. Suddenly, long-term critics of the US strategy in Colombia - among them senator Patrick Leahy, representative David Obey, and speaker Nancy Pelosi - were in control both of aid and trade policy.

This new Congress has two important Colombia initiatives before it. The first is a free-trade agreement, reached [12] by both governments in February 2006, but whose ratification is far from assured. In July 2005, a similar trade pact with central America passed the Republican-run House of Representatives by the narrow margin of 217-215, with only fifteen Democrats voting in favour. This year, the House has over thirty more Democrats than it did before, and many are concerned by Colombia's human-rights violations, including the frequent killing with impunity of Colombian trade unionists [13].

The second issue Congress will address is to consider what US aid to Colombia will look like [14] in 2008 and beyond. The Colombian government is selling what many are calling "Plan Colombia 2", a new framework to guide foreign aid until 2013. Bogotá's proposal calls for more social investment and a somewhat less militarised approach. But President Bush has asked Congress for yet another \$750 million aid package (80% of which is military aid), just as in previous years.

He might not get it. "Everything in our Colombia aid is under review", say key Congressional Democrats. But how far will they go? Will the Democrats eviscerate Plan Colombia, cutting aid to Colombia across the board? Probably not, but some members of Congress may be tempted to reduce aid to Colombia in order to undo deep cuts that the Bush administration foresees for the rest of Latin America.

The congressional Democrats are more likely to keep aid at "Plan Colombia" levels, but to shift priorities. Expect some cuts from bloated, wasteful programmes like aerial fumigation or maintenance [14] of aircraft granted in previous years (these two items alone cost about \$300 million each year). Expect more investment in badly needed efforts like rural development, aid to Colombia's 3 million internally-displaced [15] people, and the strengthening of beleaguered civilian institutions, particularly the judicial system.

A Plan Colombia for victims?

The needs are bottomless in Colombia today, especially for the conflict's millions of victims. Hundreds of thousands of displaced [16] families live in flimsy homes in the slums ringing the cities, surviving off what they can sell at intersections. Mothers, wives, sons and daughters are trying to find out what happened to their loved ones, or in which of some 4,000 mass graves they might be buried. A few thousand have dared to exercise their right to reparations, or to recover land and property stolen by the paramilitaries. A few Colombians, at great personal risk

and despite constant verbal attacks from President Uribe and his men, continue to work to defend the victims, denounce new abuses [17], and uncover the truth about what has happened and who was responsible.

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Some Democratic members of Congress are touting a "Plan Colombia for victims", putting their needs above the hardliners' failed priorities. Instead of more helicopters, they are calling for more prosecutors and investigators. Instead of more army brigades, they are calling for

battalions of lawyers to represent and defend victims. They want more security and protection for all of them. They want more forensics expertise, more databases and archives, more efforts to untangle land tenure issues and return property, more DNA and crime labs, more and better transport to remote sites, a more credible early-warning system to prevent new abuses, and a redoubled campaign to root out the paramilitaries' infiltration of institutions.

President Bush, sadly, doesn't appear to share these priorities. Probably out of a reluctance to undermine one of his only allies in the region - Hugo Chávez's next-door neighbour, in fact - he is simply calling for more of the same [23] in US-Colombian relations.

This kind of denial is nothing new. Many observers of and specialists on Colombia have been living with the Bush administration for too long even to be surprised by it. But in Colombia, as elsewhere where denial has proven too costly, the storm has arrived and the levees are breaking.

The present crisis in Colombia could be an opportunity - the biggest chance the country has had in a generation to move decidedly toward being a modern democracy. But the role of the United States is decisive. If Washington does not aid Colombia with its eyes wide open - if it remains wilfully blind out of a desire to counterbalance a perceived threat from Caracas - the consequences will be severe.

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