



## Event Report

### **The United States & Colombia: What comes next?**

Despite the sometimes daunting nature of the task, the United States and Colombia remain dedicated toward working to end Colombia's long and vicious cycle of violence and improving already strong relations between the two countries. Those were the overarching themes discussed by the distinguished group of experts convened on Tuesday, July 18, 2006 by *The Americas Project* at the Center for American Progress to discuss *The United States & Colombia: What comes next?*

The event, held less than one month prior to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's second inauguration on August 7, was headlined by Andrés Pastrana, former President of the Republic of Colombia and out-going Colombian Ambassador to the United States. Panelists included U.S. Representative Sam Farr (D-CA); Russell Crandall, Associate Professor of Political Science at Davidson College; Nelson Cunningham, Managing Partner at Kissinger McLarty Associates; and Isaac Lee, Editor-in-Chief of Page One Media and former Editor-in-Chief of Colombia's *Semana* magazine.

The discussion centered on the impact and future of *Plan Colombia* and the prospects for the free trade agreement between the two countries. The panelists discussed the significant challenges that remain in Colombia, but were hopeful that an end to the violence could finally be realized. Among the issues highlighted during the 90-minute discussion were the following:

- The nature of the U.S.-Colombia relationship;
- The need for continued support of *Plan Colombia*, albeit in a modified form;
- The need to address more fully the social and economic aspects of the Colombian conflict; and
- The importance of vigilance with respect to human rights and alternative development.

### ***Keynote Address: The Success of Plan Colombia and the Need for its Continued Support***

Andrés Pastrana gave the keynote address in which he focused on the successes of *Plan Colombia*, the nature of the U.S.-Colombian relationship, and the obstacles ahead.

Pastrana discussed the progress that had been made in Colombia during the past eight years and the prospects for its continuation. According to Pastrana, significant strides have been made in increasing the credibility of institutions and people's confidence in them, the willingness of political leaders to curb drug trafficking, and the possibility of reaching a consensus between citizens and the government on a strategy with which to decrease "drug trafficking and violence, improving living standards, and [with which to build] a strong economy and society." These changes, he stated, have been made possible by U.S. support for *Plan Colombia*.

*Plan Colombia* has shaped the U.S.-Colombian relationship this decade. With *Plan Colombia*, Colombia and the United States have been able to agree on a core strategy for reaching their goals of peace, democracy, institutional reconstruction, and economic growth. *Plan Colombia*, Pastrana contended, has also acted as a road map for Colombian progress and provided a continuity of policies and priorities between the United States and Colombia.

*Plan Colombia* has also led to many accomplishments, including a marked increase in the number of combat-ready troops, permanent government and police presence in all municipalities, the establishment of national air sovereignty, and increased poppy and coca field eradication. Furthermore, Pastrana asserted that *Plan Colombia* has also increased the interdiction of drugs and the extradition of individuals on drug trafficking charges, professionalized the military and the police, and promoted respect for human rights and international humanitarian law.

Pastrana emphasized, however, that *Plan Colombia* can be made more effective through increased spending and investment in the social and economic sectors. Colombia would be able to increase spending in these sectors if there were more flexibility in the implementation of *Plan Colombia*. In that regard, Pastrana lauded the U.S. Congress' decision to increase the amount of economic support funds in this year's *Plan Colombia* package.

Pastrana then moved on to the nature of the U.S.-Colombian relationship. He stated that economically the relationship is dynamic and promising due to increased trade in the past year. The recently concluded free trade agreement between Colombia and the United States will increase reciprocity, transparency, predictability, and confidence in Colombia. If the agreement is approved by the U.S. Congress it will advance bilateral trade and solidify the partnership in democracy, security, and stability. Another benefit of increased trade is that it would bring thousands of new jobs to Colombia and prospectively decrease unemployment from 10% to 5%.

Pastrana identified several keys to the future of the U.S.-Colombian relationship: the continuity of policy goals between Bogotá and Washington, the progress of demobilization and disarmament of illegal actors in Colombia, the strengthening of Colombian security forces, and the success of the Colombian economy. All of these factors, Pastrana noted, require U.S. support to ensure success.

Pastrana concluded that with U.S. support and the benefits of the trade agreement, Colombia would be able to pursue long-lasting peace, alleviate poverty, fight for democracy, free markets, and human rights, and thus serve as an example in Latin America that “Colombia [was] on a solid path to peace and progress.”

### ***The Panel: The Struggle, the Strategies and the Future Outlooks and Implications of Plan Colombia***

Representative Sam Farr began the panel discussion by describing the shift in U.S. policy toward Colombia that has occurred during the course of the past ten years and what Colombia must do to more effectively battle the conflict.

He began by describing how at the moment Congress has a short-term agenda due to the November elections and the importance of addressing constituents’ needs. He stated that constituents are not currently concerned with the southern hemisphere and that this is bothersome to him. The reason that the Colombia issue was addressed by Congress, Farr asserted, was because “it was seen as a problem on Main Street at home with all the law enforcement talking about coca addiction and cocaine trafficking,,” which led them to attempt to deal with the root cause in Colombia.

Farr further noted that a shift has begun in Congress with regard to *Plan Colombia* because of a belief that not enough has been done to address economic and social aspects of the Colombian situation. Congress is now looking to address poverty, the legitimacy of alternative crops, and infrastructure.

Farr emphasized that there needed to be a greater effort to secure the displaced and to bring profit back to alternative crops for rural farmers. He added that Colombia needs to show the world that they are prosecuting corruption and increasing the accountability of the military and paramilitaries. The U.S. Congress, he said, needs proof that Colombia is in fact stepping up to the plate when it comes to implementing alternative solutions and focusing on domestic issues such as human rights.

He advised Colombia to attack the AUC and the guerrillas vigorously and to get tougher with those that had been demobilized. He acknowledged that the army and police force had already been professionalized and that now the focus should turn to domestic issues. Overall, he concluded, *Plan Colombia* should place greater emphasis on the social and economic agenda.

Isaac Lee began his presentation with a brief discussion of the historical background of the U.S.-Colombia relationship leading up to *Plan Colombia* and President Uribe’s initial electoral triumph. Lee noted the depths to which the U.S.-Colombia relationship fell during the administration of President Ernesto Samper, whose visa to the United States was ultimately revoked. He then described the success of President Pastrana in turning the relationship around, culminating with the August 2000 signing of *Plan Colombia* by Presidents Clinton and Pastrana.

Lee observed that a central theme of President Uribe's initial presidential campaign was a rejection of the peace process President Pastrana had initiated with the FARC and ELN, coupled with a promise to pursue a military option. In a savvy adjustment to a post-9/11 world, Uribe changed the vocabulary of the Colombian conflict, labeling the FARC and the ELN as terrorist organizations. Lee noted that after 9/11 this was a smart move by Uribe which garnered the Bush Administration's sympathy.

Although the guerrillas are now contained, the war is not over Lee asserted. Noting the recent disturbing episode in which an elite anti-narcotics Colombian police unit was ambushed and murdered by a Colombian army unit, Lee emphasized the need to work on protecting human rights. He further added that there would be a need for short-term solutions so that peasants would be able to survive a free trade agreement with the United States since they would not be able to compete with U.S.-subsidized agriculture products.

Nelson Cunningham spoke to the trade and economic aspects of the conflict. He believes that both trade and economic improvement are the crux of what needs to happen for the situation in Colombia to improve. According to Cunningham, we are not where we should be with the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Now that a trade agreement has negotiated between the United States and Colombia, and disputes regarding discrepancies between the English and Spanish versions finally have been sorted out, congressional action is required to keep the process moving.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Congress is bogged down with other matters and we will probably not see this issue come to the forefront this year, he said. Cunningham believes that U.S. politics are obstructing the development of a better Colombia deal: "I hope that in the new Congress we can find that bipartisan spirit, [so] that we can deal with the Colombian FTA in a straight-forward fashion, deal with the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDA) extensions...and move forward with the goals of *Plan Colombia* even as we work to improve its execution."

Russell Crandall addressed the dynamics of the U.S.-Colombia relationship and how they have been shaped, in part, by U.S. domestic political considerations. He began by observing that although the initial impetus for *Plan Colombia* was to save what appeared to be a faltering democracy, the approach taken by President Clinton was to emphasize that "this [was] about drugs...and [secondarily] about saving Colombia." In 2002, following the events of September 11, there was both a symbolic and strategic shift to more directly tackle counterinsurgency efforts in Colombia in the name of counter-terrorism. Crandall observed that the Clinton Administration built the foundation for the Bush administration in policy towards Colombia, and that Bush has continued with this policy. Crandall found that an engaged United States can make a difference but that there are still major concerns regarding the "incestuous relationships with the government and the military." Crandall ended by stating that "the United States needs to make it overwhelmingly clear to the Colombian that this is their struggle... that is it for Colombia and if they want to save their own country, they're going to have to do it themselves."

The question and answer session began with the observation that there had been little mention of the paramilitary demobilization process in the various discussions and the question regarding how real a threat it was that paramilitaries would be able to integrate themselves into the formal power structures of the country. President Pastrana observed that there is a need for greater transparency in the demobilization process and more needs to be done to ensure that those who committed serious crimes would be held accountable.

To that end, Pastrana noted the importance of the software support and other assistance the United States was providing to help to identify and jail those who had committed crimes against humanity. He also noted his long-held support for the creation of an international commission to verify the peace process with the paramilitaries.

The central issue, Pastrana emphasized, remains drug trafficking. Although the United States has provided assistance in battling drug trafficking, he argued that the U.S. needs to redistribute its aid. What Colombia needs, Pastrana said, is not the U.S. arrangement of 70% of aid towards military efforts and 30% of aid towards social programs, but instead that the majority of resources be invested in social programs. Current Colombian President Uribe has made strides in this direction and has continued to support social programs which are made possible by *Plan Colombia*. What is also needed is approval of the free trade agreement between the United States and Colombia.

President Pastrana was asked for his views regarding the prospects for the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement in light of the congressional calendar and mounting congressional concerns regarding human rights in Colombia. Pastrana responded that he was more optimistic than most regarding the possibility of getting the free trade agreement considered during a potential lame duck session of the U.S. Congress later this year. With regard to the human rights violations, he responded that there is violence in all of Colombia and that Colombia is committed to achieve a peace process to end the violence.

In closing remarks, responding to a question from the audience on the topic, Professor Crandall and President Pastrana each noted the importance of having greater civil government presence throughout rural areas in Colombia. They also noted that initial *Plan Colombia* emphasis on security had made this long-held goal more possible than ever. Professor Crandall also emphasized that the Clinton Administration's unwavering (if also controversial) support for Colombia should serve as a prime example for those progressives who advocate a "robust, assertive, internationalist foreign policy" and who wish to deny assertions that progressives do not stand up to defend democracy.

***Conclusion: Plan Colombia has had some Success but needs to be Revised***

Although *Plan Colombia* has met with considerable success, there needs to be increased accountability of those involved in human rights violations, feasible alternative development strategies, more support for social and economic development, and continued support from the United States if Colombia is going to be able to break its long cycle of violence

According to the experts gathered by *The Americas Project* at the Center for American Progress, the future nature of the U.S.-Colombia relationship will depend on Colombia's ability to manage the conflict, including protecting human rights, increasing accountability, achieving meaningful progress on paramilitary demobilization, and placing greater emphasis on social and economic components of *Plan Colombia*. Despite concerns with its impact on rural farmers, the future of the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement was also identified as a linchpin in the relationship moving forward.

*The Americas Project* will continue to remain engaged to track and analyze developments in Colombia and in the U.S.-Colombia relationship and will continue expanding its efforts to examine issues affecting the United States and the Americas and to propose practical, progressive policy recommendations to promote strong democracies and economies throughout the Americas.

Click [here](#) for a full transcript of *The United States and Colombia: What comes next?* or to watch a video of the event.

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*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.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values, and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems, and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people."