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Drugged or Old Drugs in New Bottles: United States Drug Policy and Colombia

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Title: Drugged or Old Drugs in New Bottles: United States Drug Policy and Colombia

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Abstract. This article describes a psychology that seems to pertain to United States (US) policy towards decreasing the export of illicit drugs from Colombia.

US President Clinton's visit to Colombia was intended to provide impetus for a grand new initiative, "Plan Colombia," that among other things is to successfully confront and attenuate many of the components of the festering illicit drug problem. However, a close look at the goals of the Plan and US support for it suggests that nothing is grand or new.

One aspect of the Plan and US support is to effect local elections in the southern provinces as well as judicial reform nation-wide. Both might possibly reinforce a pro forma perspective that the Colombian government is increasingly in control of these provinces. However, elections and judicial reform--as has been the case with past elections--seem destined to have little salient effect on de facto rebel and trafficker operations. Most often, the positive potential of elections and reform in such situations has been and can be too easily subverted by facts on the ground.

Another aspect is to improve the human rights record of the armed forces. This improvement has instrumental weaknesses against an adversary with no such restraints even as it might secure the ethical and moral high ground from the point of view of human rights organizations. Moreover, human rights requirements and hopes are being waived in the service of the instrumental by the US executive branch.

An additional aspect is to significantly increase military and police efforts against rebels and traffickers. However, the commitment of treasure, political will, and loss of life to emerge victorious is just not there and, perhaps, could not be because of the fungible nature of illicit drug production and trafficking.

Yet another aspect is to provide jobs for refugees and promote alternative development projects for coca-growing peasants. This is a reasonable idea in the abstract that runs to ground on the shoals of concrete fact. The point is that there does not seem to be an economically sustainable or viable process to develop and maintain attractive (from the point of view of the poor) economic alternatives to directly and indirectly supporting the rebels and engaging in coca growing.

A psychopolitical analysis suggests that the most likely consequences of the Plan will comprise enrichment of Plan contractors, short-term political benefits for some political supporters, political cover for many allied with the rebels and traffickers, little if any effect on the amount and price (but, perhaps, an effect on the source) of illicit drugs hitting the streets of the US, and prolonging and possible exacerbation of a shooting war. Although a multi-modal approach including eradication, interdiction, and socioeconomic and political intervention continues to have significant policy appeal, as long as there is significant drug demand from the same rich country that purports to be the primary, illicit drug scourge, Plan Colombia is a plan only for failure. (See Cheurprakobkit, S. (2000). The drug situation in Thailand: The role of government and the police. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 19, 17-26; Jarkik, M.E. (1990). The drug dilemma: Manipulating the demand. *Science*, 250, 387-392; Krauss, C. (August 29, 2000). Clinton's Colombia trip said to herald new era in ties. *The New York Times*, p. A9; Morgan, P.,

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