If you are an avid reader of the news, there are five things “you know” about Colombia:

? It is a violent place, one of the most violent countries in the world, where killings and kidnappings are rampant. Its “failed state” is incapable of doing anything to curb the bloodshed.

? The country is suffering from a “forty year long civil war” brought about by widespread poverty and the exclusion of the popular majority from power by a small minority with Spanish heritage and inherited wealth.

? The only good news is that Colombia is far away. What goes on there affects life in the United States very little.

? The one exception to that generalization is narcotics. Colombia is the source of most of the hard drugs consumed in the United States, but it is a problem that has no practical solution, unless the United States would ever come to its senses and “legalize” drug use.
? The only logical conclusion is that the massive “militarized” U.S. assistance designed to stop narcotics production in Colombia is woefully misdirected. The United States should concentrate its efforts – to the degree any effort is necessary – on seeking to alleviate poverty in Colombia, the underlying cause of the violence.

There are strong arguments for all five of these propositions; otherwise they would not be asserted so often. Many observers of Latin America are just tired of the seemingly un-winnable “war on drugs” and its emphasis on force and repression. Others are passionate activists who long for a U.S. policy infused with idealism and dedicated to the search for peace and the end of human rights violations.

Without seeking to refute each point separately, this paper offers a more “complicated” interpretation of the Colombian reality, accepting some of what “we know” but adding more background and a sense of current developments. These additions will, it is hoped, provide tools for interpreting the response of the international community to Colombia’s plight.

**History and Society**

Like its Andean neighbors, Colombia is large (more than 1.1 million square kilometers, nearly equivalent to the northeastern United States from the Mississippi to the Atlantic). In a region of daunting geography, Colombia’s is perhaps the most complex with coasts on the Pacific and the Caribbean, three separate *cordilleras* of the Andean range, multiple climatic zones: from coastal forests and swamps, to upland
valleys and savannah, to sharp mountain slopes and volcanic ridges, to the huge Amazon jungle and plain.

With more than 43 million people, Colombia is the third most populous country in Latin America. And like its geography, Colombia’s people are complex, seemingly contradictory at times. There is a strong national spirit but historically a weak state. Institutions can in certain periods be innovative and participatory (e.g., in the 1950s, the National Coffee Federation and the government of the city of Medellin) but in other times and places chaotic or absent (e.g., the national justice system for much of the last two decades and the emerald mines in Boyaca). Often praised for their entrepreneurial talents and sensible business practices, Colombians can also be protectionist and self-defeating. Unlike most other countries in Latin America, Colombia, arguing the sanctity of contracts, did not default on its accumulating foreign debt during the tumultuous 1980s and held inflation in check. Yet in the same period, it imposed distorting import quotas, export subsidies and detailed foreign exchange allocations.

It is a country that should be known for enterprise (believed to be near the “take off stage” in the 1970s) and for literature (Nobel Prize winner Garcia Marques), art (Botero), music (Shakira and Juanes) or sports (international Formula One and bicycling champions). Colombia is instead most frequently mentioned in the world media for its record of violence. Commonly, the press prefaxes mention of Colombia with references to “its forty year long civil war.” And indeed, the country’s two most significant violent movements of the left - the Revolutionary Armed Forces of
Colombia (known as FARC by its initial in Spanish) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) - have been operating in the countryside for more than forty years.

The history of violence in Colombia is, however, longer and more interwoven in the fabric of society than just the story of these two “revolutionary” groups. Before they existed, competition between Liberals and Conservatives, the leading political parties, deteriorated into widespread communal violence at the beginning of the twentieth century and again then in the 1950s. The bloodletting of that decade was followed in the next fifty years not only by the rise of the FARC and ELN but also by the appearance of other less durable guerrilla movements and of paramilitary bands that frequently try to cloak their criminal operations in grab of right-wing politics. All the violent groups began to grow when they learned to profit from narcotics trafficking and had developed a range of new extortion techniques.

It may be useful to review the political themes of Colombian history. A declaration of independence by the criollo (native born, Hispanic origin) elites in 1810 was followed by 15 years of struggle with the Spanish crown. At the head of the revolution was Simon Bolivar, an inspired man-on-horse-back but a poor governor. He left the country with a government with only a small claim on legitimacy and without having resolved the major issues of that period and of times to come: the social status of indigenous and African origin people (now 5 percent and 20 percent of the population respectively), the role of the Roman Catholic Church, the balance between central and regional political power, and the country’s economic place in the world. The nation’s capital was Bogota, at the very center of the country – in early times, days from the coast
and still an hour by air – with little transportation infrastructure to connect it to the rest of
the country or to promote trade within and without the country.

Colombia was accordingly inward looking from the start. The Conservative
Party favored rural life, the Church, a strong central government and Indian rights. The
Liberal Party favored the least possible government, even to the point of objecting to
government issued paper money. Liberal principles dictated that all had equal legal
rights (i.e., no one, including indigenous people, should have any special status or
protections). Colombian liberals were not radically anti-Catholic, but they were more
secular in outlook, and the church-state debate was a major excuse for community level
strife for a century between the middle of the 19th and 20th centuries. As can easily be
imagined, local bloodletting arising from local disputes and family antagonism was often
given a partisan explanation.

For all that local violence, Colombia was able to put together “a nation in spite
of itself,” as one author has subtitled his book.1 Although divided by distance and
mountains, Colombia is one country, a people with different accents and varying folklore
traditions still paying allegiance to one flag and feeling pride in a common nationality.
Virtually all Colombians speak one language, Spanish, and take pride in saying they
speak it better than the Spanish. A Spaniard in the past acknowledge that possibility
when he called Bogota “the Athens of South America.” Unlike other countries listed as
“failed states,” Colombia is not divided by regional or race hatred. Race is clearly a
factor in the make up of the social and economic pyramids, which are generally darker at
the base and lighter at the top, but all races are found in all strata of society from
commercial banks to guerrilla leadership councils. And the racial make up of the country

1 Bushnell, David, Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself, UC Press 1993
is changing, especially as *metizo* (mix race) enterprise seekers migrate from rural small towns and gain wealth. In the last 50 years the country has gone from being 60 percent rural to just 20 percent today. And that new urban majority is located in or around six cities of more than a million inhabitants (Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga and Cucuta) and not just one dominant city as in so many Latin American countries.

A key point in the debate about Colombia is the role of the “elites.” It is a commonplace that Colombia has long been governed by a closed group with a common leadership culture. Whenever and wherever they gather, whether in evenings at the club or weekends at golf courses or *fincas* in the countryside, well-off Colombians will inevitably spend the first quarter of an hour sorting out family relationships and friendship connections. To some that seems to be because they come from a few “families,” as indicated by the repetition of certain surnames. Yet, it is clear that all Restrepo, Echevarria, Lopez, etc. in the country are not closely related. The image of a few patriarchal clans dominating a country of 44 million people is not accurate, though one must admit that it is strange so many at the top of heap have less than the proverbial “six degrees of separation.” Colombia does not have a tradition of major rural landholders dominating urban life. It does have a practice of measuring candidates for social promotion, as it were, by their manners, culture and education. An entry question is “is he/she from a good family?” - not necessarily, a rich ones. Until recently, the richest Colombians owned beer and soft drink franchises, not land.

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The Economy

The goal of Colombian economic policy has been steady, not spectacular growth. The country never experienced a boom of commodity exports. It is modestly endowed with minerals (gold, nickel, emeralds), but for 150 years its main export was coffee. It has energy resources, but there is evidence that policymakers have at times held down the development of petroleum in order to avoid the effects of an appreciating exchange rate that would snuff out the competitiveness of its coffee and nascent manufacturing exports. (See below.) The idea of a carefully managed mixed economy, in contrast to either a state directed or a completely free-trade development model, has evolved over the last century. The city of Medellin led the way with the creation of municipal enterprises that include manufacturing investment as well as the provision of public utilities. A corps of well trained economists has generally been left in control of the economic policy levers of power.

By the end of the 1970s the country was thought by many to be near an “economic take-off.” U.S. economist Walter W. Rostow had predicted that countries following “non-communist” growth models would eventually reach a point of self-sustaining growth. After a decade and a half of reform during the U.S. sponsored Alliance for Progress, Colombians, seeing their non-traditional exports increase and domestic growth improving, thought they were near that point. The government asked the United States to close its aid mission and began to investigate the possibility of becoming members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Paris-based club for developed countries.

3 WW Rostow, Stages of Economic Growth, 1960
One shadow on that glowing picture was petroleum. Beginning in the mid-1970s the country became a net importer of oil, a major drain on both the nation’s fiscal and trade accounts. The policy of avoiding a commodity boom had overshot. National production was declining and consumption rising. Since that time the country has gone through two periods of changed rules to encourage exploration by foreign investors: first in the 1980s when Occidental and BP responded with large discoveries that returned the country to net shipper to international oil markets that peaked in 1999; and second in the early 2000s when rapidly falling production once again set off deep changes in the way the country handled energy policy.

Now Colombia is engaged in a rush to turn the curve showing its current production up so that it will continue to have excess for export. The country is also determined to be a leader in coal exports and even to become a regional supplier of electric and gas following national reforms of public utilities. The national distributor of electricity ISA, for example, is 60 percent owned by the Colombian government but is
also the largest energy carrier in Latin America with investments in several countries, including Peru and Brazil.

What is interesting to note is that Colombia has avoided becoming tied up with the kind of arguments over public-private, or national-international ownership that have so distracted other countries in the region. In the 1920s there were major strikes in the oil industry and among banana workers, but the country does not have strong union movement, nor is the protection of national natural resources part of the nationalistic ideology.

The Constant Threat of Violence and Lawlessness

After the period of economic growth and relative social peace, violence began to rise dangerously in Colombia during the 1980s. The cause was the surge of narcotics trafficking, not tensions over the exploitation of natural resources. Under the stimulus of the narcotics trade, law and order nearly collapsed. Illegal groups proliferated. Violence rose, investment declined, and social capital – that hard to define but palpable glue holding society together – evaporated. To demonstrate that, the World Bank has found a close correlation between the growth of the narcotics business and the steep rise in the rate of violent deaths from 1980 through the next two decades as well as between drugs and the formation of illegally armed groups.
But there is one well known exception to the generalization that tension over natural resources did not cause violence. In 1976 the Colombian military had come close to completely defeating the ELN (the National Liberation Army). The smaller of the two left-wing guerrilla groups, the ELN was at that time animated by a mix of admiration for the Cuban revolution and Liberation Theology, and unlike the larger FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), which begun as a peasant self-defense group, the ELN had attracted to its rural bands disproportionately more college students plus on occasion even several Catholic priests. The government of the day restrained the military’s final push and let the ELN exist to fight another day.

The rising curve of violence through much of the 1980s and 1990s, principally narcotics driven, had an effect on the business climate. Confidence in the rule of law was
weakened. And how could that not have happened? In 1985 an urban-centered guerrilla
group, the M-19, most probably acting at the behest of the Medellin drug cartel, occupied
the premises of the Supreme Court. The resulting shoot-out killed most members of the
court. Thereafter, there were waves of assassinations of judges throughout the country.
Narcotics money began to find its way into legitimate businesses as well into funding of
ever larger outlaw groups. The FARC tripled in size; the ELN doubled (roughly 18,000
and 5,000 respectively at their highest points). A new class of right-wing criminal gangs
rose up to oppose them. These “paramilitaries” (when loosely allied, incorrectly labeled
the “United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia” or AUC) were linear descendants of the
drug cartels and were thus able to fund well equipped militarized units.

No where has the breakdown of law and order of the last 25 years been felt more
than in labor-management relations. Colombia’s tradition of weak unions has made those
do exist vulnerable to threats and exploitation. They are often caught in the cross fire
between implacable managers and radical activists. The cost in lives lost has been high.
In its 2006 report on Colombia the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that
“only” 34 labor unionist had been killed, a significant improvement from the previous
year!

The Union Sindical Obera (USO), the petroleum workers’ union, traces its roots
back to strikes of the 1920s. It has accordingly a more enduring tradition than others and,
as representative of better paid workers, has a more solid financial base. Nonetheless,
following the ELN’s return to life, the USO became entangled in that guerrilla group’s
political program and therefore its violence. The ELN gave its attacks on pipelines an
ideological twist and began to proclaim an anti-big oil agenda. Violence rose rapidly in
Barrancabermeja near the country’s largest refinery in the 1980s as the ELN struggled with the newly aggressive paramilitary forces. Its neighborhoods where workers lived had been heavily influenced by the ELN, but in 2001 the paramilitaries swept into the city and asserted their control at the cost of nearly 200 dead.

The problem for outside observers is most often to figure out who is shooting whom and why. International labor organizations and human rights non-governmental organizations are quick to take sides and make accusations, but the facts can be illusive. A particularly sad set of allegations is being brought against Drummond, a company that from all visible indicators has striven to good business citizenship. In 2001 the leader of its union was pulled from a bus and shoot. That was quickly followed by the murder of his successor. The families of the slain leaders backed by international labor activists have made very serious charges and brought damage suits against Drummond in U.S. federal court under the Alien Torts Claims Act. That law was adopted by the first U.S. congress at the end of the 18th century to apply to cases of piracy, but it has been used in recent years by human rights organizations to draw attention to alleged abuses by U.S. companies abroad. No such case has ever been pursued to a successful conclusion for the plaintiffs.

**Constitutional Reform and the Reform Agenda**

In the midst of rising violence of the last quarter century Colombian leaders were constantly and characteristically looking for a way to negotiate some kind of peace. They even made several attempts to make deals with the narcotics cartels. The ELN from time to time showed some interest; the FARC little. At the end of the 1980s the administration
of President Virgilio Barco did manage to get talks going with the M-19, the urban based guerrillas responsible for the attack against the Supreme Court. Out of those negotiations came a proposal for a complete re-writing of the country’s century old constitution. There was hope that a new basic law of the land might convince other groups to lay down their arms.

The new constitution of 1991 tried to please everyone. It adopted what was believed to be a new more open and conciliatory approach to governance. It was called “el estado social de derecho,” which might be translated as “a state that serves people’s needs within a legal regime.” The meaning of these words may seem obscure to foreigners, but for Colombians it seems clear that their constituent assembly wanted to the state to give rights to all with special accommodation to the less privileged. The nearly 250 page document spelled out multiple forums for citizen appeal and minimum outcomes all could demand. It recognized that for equity some will need subsidies but, while economic activity should have a social purpose, it should accomplish that without direct state intervention but through a legal framework. (Ironically in view of the “legal” emphasis of the new constitution, one of its special “micos” (i.e., hidden provisions), much desired by the narcotics cartels, was a bar to the extradition of Colombian citizens.)

Improvement – but Much Remains to Done

The new constitution, the economic reform that followed it, and increased oil production did not cure Colombia’s ills. Though even the chief of the Medellin drug cartel was finally run down and killed, matters in general got worse, not better. The president elected in 1994, Ernesto Samper, was found to have received large campaign
contributions from the Cali drug cartel. Responding to calls from the U.S. congress the Clinton administration “de-certificated” Colombia, in effect giving the country, despite Samper’s gestures (especially renewing extraditions), a failing grade for drug control. His successor, Andres Pastrana, elected in 1998 was determined, on the one hand, to make peace with the FARC, and, on the other, to improve relations with the United States. His peace initiative utterly failed, dispiriting the Colombian nation but convincing all but the most Pollyannaish that the FARC did not want peace. Pastrana’s offer of closer cooperation with the United States, on the other hand, was highly successful.

Washington by 1999 was becoming concerned about Colombia. It was not a far away land, but a traditional regional ally just two hours from Miami. Whether the “failed state” label was deserved or not (see above for why not), it had stuck. There were more than 2,000 kidnappings annually and the rate of murder was above 400 per 100,000. People in both Colombia and the United States were beginning – finally – to see the connection between narcotics trafficking and illegal groups generally. Formerly, U.S. commentators could only talk about drugs, which Colombians believed was a U.S. problem they could do nothing about. Pastrana and Clinton reached agreement on U.S. support for a “Plan Colombia,” a five year, $4.5 billion package of U.S. assistance with the prospect that Colombia itself and European states would contribute equal amounts to that they were already spending. The U.S. part of the deal was crucial but was criticized since two thirds of the total would be military type equipment and training. The entire package was justified solely as counter narcotics tools with little mention of the country’s social needs.
In many ways, Plan Colombia has had dramatic successes. The U.S. assistance, while aimed at narcotics control, helped strengthen military and police morale and readiness, even before Pastrana left office in 2002. He was succeeded by Alvaro Uribe, a very focused, goal-oriented former governor and mayor, with a “hard-line” reputation. Uribe in turn was able to convince Clinton’s successor George W. Bush to widen the scope of the U.S. program so that aid could be used for anti-guerrilla training to supplement the increased national security budget. He upped the rate of extraditions (more than 400 in his first four year term), but asked U.S. forbearance as he dealt with the leaders of the “paramilitaries” (i.e., wanted by the United States for their drug dealings). He managed as a consequent to get more than 20,000 “para” outlaws to de-mobilize there bandit units. With less violence and a new sense of national direction, the economy began to grow at rates not seen since the 1970s (5.1 percent in 2005) and unemployment fell. Pleased with the results of Uribe’s leadership, the country re-elected him to an unprecedented second term in May 2006.

The one thing that Plan Colombia has not done – or at least available statistics do not show it – is lower the amount of drugs come to the United States, the first objective of the plan. Every year the joint U.S.-Colombian anti-narcotics program sprays nearly 150,000 hectares of coca bushes and every year experts report that the same amount of cocaine is being produced. Persistence may pay off eventually, if as supporters of the Plan believe, the operations are weakening the power of outlaw groups and strengthening the government.

Much that Colombia is doing to re-establish the government’s presence throughout the nation and increase social benefits may also be helpful. The United States
as part of its assistance has had a preferential trade arrangement that has helped create
hundreds of thousands of good jobs. But it is doubtful that direct economic development
assistance has much more than an ameliorating effect. The real effect of aid is to
courage Colombians to do what is necessary to save their own country.

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