

Final Remarks

This analysis shows that isolationism has represented a recurrent component of US foreign policy rhetoric. It also conveys that such an isolationist brand of US foreign policy has often competed with a more interventionist one. As a result of successive confrontations, however, the supporters of isolationism have generally ended up on the losing side.

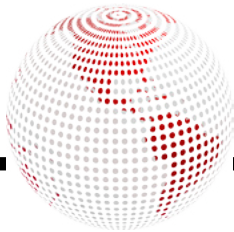
Thus, going back to our original question, is it sensible to define past US foreign policy as isolationist? After this assessment, the answer should be no. In fact, it is reasonable to argue that calls for an isolationist foreign policy had and still have an important place in US public rhetoric. But in the past, as for today, these calls were not the main and more potent driver of US foreign policy.

Endnotes

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Photos courtesy of:
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:American_troops_leap_forward_to_storm_a_North_African_beach.jpg
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Militarization of Aid and its Implications for Colombia

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The US has increasingly turned to using the military to administer humanitarian aid in recent years. This process has come under attack from many academics and foreign officials. Using action in Colombia from 1999 to present as a case study, this article evaluates the use of military vice civilian and NGO agencies to administer humanitarian aid. The article includes a suggested model of response to situations such as that found in Colombia today, where the military first has to maintain security, then transition over to civilian and NGO aid.

In recent years, both academics and officials have grown increasingly critical of the militarization of humanitarian aid, as witnessed in Colombia since 1999. This article considers the various organizations and politics underpinning US foreign policy and aims to clarify the reasoning behind the militarization of aid, focusing primarily on official reports from government agencies, as well as differing angles of criticism and support for the militarization of humanitarian aid.

In 1999, the United States bolstered its humanitarian aid commitment to Colombia by participating in President Andrés Pastrana’s “Plan Colombia.”¹ Although this plan rose and fell with the State Department’s Andean

Critics of the militarization of aid, such as Chalmers Johnson and Amnesty International, often point to its potentially negative consequences as reasons to avoid it for humanitarian purposes. However, the actual decision to use the military is usually a short-term reaction to crisis with the aim of providing security and stability in the affected country. The real, longer-term problem stems from the lack of planning for the transition to aid from civilian agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).³

The Practical Need for Military Action

The involvement of any military force in response to crisis is viewed as a dramatic event and raises suspicions. However, according to a report from the RAND Corporation:

“The United States has historically provided assistance to the security forces of repressive, non-democratic countries that do not share its political ideals. This assistance is intended to improve their ability to deal with threats such as terrorism and perhaps to improve human rights. The security forces in these countries are not accountable to the public, and their activities and approaches are not transparent.”⁴



Fmr. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld Meeting with Fmr. Colombian President Andres Pastrana

Counterdrug Initiative, it left behind a significant military presence for security and training purposes.²

The US military’s ample resources and constant level of readiness give it greater capabilities for rapid deployment than any

other entity in the government. Within hours of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, US Department of Defense (DOD) aircraft were in the area performing evacuations and delivering supplies, while the US Coast Guard Cutter *Forward*, arrived in Port-au-Prince to provide additional support.⁵ The military provided more medical care in Haiti than even the deployable teams from the Department of Health and Human Services. Military personnel performed over 1,000 surgeries in the two months following the earthquake, while the Health and Human Services deployable times performed 167. Military aircraft handled nearly every MEDEVAC case. Coast Guard and Navy teams worked around the clock to restore the port facilities, and the Air Force reopened the local airport to allow more humanitarian flights to enter and leave the country.⁶ A month and a half later, an earthquake in Chile also prompted an immediate response from the US Air Force.

Bringing a peaceful solution to internal conflict requires a significant reduction in the threat of armed conflict.

Flying 17 humanitarian flights in one day with only two planes, the Air Force demonstrated a level of efficiency that no civilian agency or NGO is able to match.⁷

When providing humanitarian aid in an underdeveloped country, internal security naturally becomes a concern, and sometimes foreign forces are necessary to provide “emergency justice” until the true process of nation-building can begin.⁸ In the case of Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a leftist guerrilla organization, has become increasingly known for its kidnapping of key personnel. Just recently, FARC released Corporal Josué Calvo, of the Colombian Army, in a deal brokered by the Red Cross and Brazilian military after Calvo had been in captivity for almost a year.⁹ In 2002, FARC captured Ingrid Betancourt, a presidential candidate. She was released

along with several members of the Colombian military and police forces in 2008, as well as three US defense contractors whose plan had been shot down in 2003.¹⁰

Bringing a peaceful solution to internal conflict requires a significant reduction in the threat of armed conflict. The mere presence of US forces in Colombia has made FARC and the right-wing paramilitaries such as the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) much more complicit in negotiations.¹¹

In addition to providing immediate security, one of the primary functions of the US military in Colombia has been to train the Colombian National Police and the Colombian Armed Forces. In accordance with various congressional authorizations, the “DOD provides counternarcotics foreign assistance to train, equip, and improve the counternarcotics capacity and capabilities of relevant agencies of foreign governments with its Counternarcotics Central Transfer account appropriations.”¹² This assistance often involves transfer of equipment, including several aircraft sold and loaned to the Colombian National Police and the Colombian Armed Forces in support of counterdrug missions, evacuations, and the recovery of displaced persons.¹³ This advance in Colombian knowledge can only come from the US military, as no other part of the US government has the ability to provide these resources or advanced training techniques to forces that need them.

Military training can include lessons on human rights practices as well as teaching respect for international law, both of which typically yield positive results.¹⁴ The US government can also provide incentives to follow its message of promoting democratic ideals by refusing assistance to governments known to engage in corruption. In 2005, the State Department denounced certain parts of the Colombian Armed Forces because of its known cooperation with corrupt right-wing paramilitary forces.¹⁵ This incentive to promote human rights stems from the Leahy Amendment, which prohibits the

US government from working with known human rights violators without the expressed permission of the Secretary of State, who would only allow such actions when a clear effort is being made to correct the problem.¹⁶

Military action is not without detractors and critics. One such critic is Bruce Michael Bagley, whose writings decry the first Bush administration’s policy in Colombia. Although his writings are from several years ago, his ideas are still valid today. Bagley raised concerns over President George H.W. Bush’s plans to emphasize the military aspects of his plan to develop Colombia because of “evidence of [Colombian] military complicity in the drug trade and the trafficker-funded paramilitary groups.”¹⁷ In an official statement, Amnesty International echoed the same position for the



Fmr. Secretary of State Colin Powell greeting Colombian Military personnel.

current operations in Colombia, citing possible human rights violations due to the heavy military and counterdrug emphasis of Plan Colombia.¹⁸

Bagley also expresses concern about the legitimacy of former Columbian president Barco if the United States were to get too involved in supporting him. Instead he argues, “US policy should seek to strengthen the Colombian state’s institutional capacity to govern its national territory, to enforce the law, and to promote economic development.”¹⁹ Bagley is right to make this assertion, but these goals do not have to be exclusive or the antithesis of military action. Bagley’s plan for the ideal policy includes the majority of the

goals for civilian and NGO aid but it does not account for the necessary security for those civilian and NGO workers to even do their job of promoting the transition back to Colombian control and bolstering the legitimacy of the Colombian government.

Another critic of militarization of humanitarian aid is Chalmers Johnson, who accuses the military of lacking accountability to the public and calls its presence in other countries a sign of imperialism. Johnson also takes issue with the military’s constant request for more technology and—funding, even when DOD’s budget is already the largest in the federal government and the US military boasts most cutting-edge technology in the world.²⁰ However, with the advent of irregular warfare, the constant increase in technology is paramount to overcoming the threat of non-state actors that otherwise would never give up. Without the military to provide security and training, civilian and NGO workers continue in vain. There must be some sort of force in the country, and the US military is capable of being that force.

The Parallel Need for Transition and Planning

Ultimately, the goal of any humanitarian mission is to return a country’s government to a point at which it can effectively govern its own people. As Roy Godson of Georgetown University, said before the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere:

“Unless foreign police organizations recognize and internalize what the rule of law means, what its key characteristics are, and why the rule of law is necessary to accomplish their mission, no amount of aid will get the job done.”²¹

The emphasis in Colombia and elsewhere should be placed on the restoration of legitimacy and authority rather than attempts to wipe out armed resistance groups. The people of Colombia need to know that their

government can protect and provide for them. To do this requires economic development and governmental reform. In countries like Colombia, military involvement does not inherently hinder economic development. Rather, the problem lies in the planning and the process of administering aid via the military. As Flournoy and Pan of the Center for Strategic and International Studies argue, “the international community must take a much more comprehensive approach to justice and reconciliation for the intervention to succeed” in places like Colombia.²²

To start, any sort of military action, humanitarian or combat, needs planning and forethought that allow for some flexibility. There must be some sort of contingency plan to deal with the unforeseen circumstances of working against what is essentially an insurgency. As Philip Zelikow argues, “the ‘engineering’ task [of foreign policy] has seven parts: national interest, objectives, strategy, design, implementation, maintenance, and review.”²³ Many contemporary policies, such as the current policy in Colombia, lack maintenance and review altogether. Instead, the standard operating procedures continue rigid and unchanged, regardless of the situation’s dynamic nature.

To even make a policy decision requires quite a process in and of itself, which is where Graham Allison’s bureaucratic politics and organizational process models are useful for explaining some of the undesirable effects. The possibility of human rights violations and the prospect of working with corrupt officials are not unique to military action. Because of the existing political system in the United States, these unintended consequences are always a possibility when trying to work with officials in a country like Colombia where rule of law is not always guaranteed. Although standard operating procedures provide guidelines on how to conduct foreign policy, they do not allow the flexibility that situations like Colombia require. “Since procedures are ‘standard,’ they do not change quickly or

easily...but because of standard procedures, organizational behavior in particular instances often appears unduly formalized, sluggish, or inappropriate.”²⁴ As a result of the different political interests at the heart of every foreign policy issue, the result ends up to be nothing like any party involved desired, leading to overall disappointment with the process as well as the outcome. One example of bureaucratic politics is policy dictated by those who will ultimately not be involved in the implementation of the policy, such as the State Department’s directive calling for military action in Plan Colombia, instead of the decision being in the hands of DOD.²⁵

In addition, actions are often beyond the control of any US official. For example, there is a long-standing belief among many members of the Colombian military that the right-wing paramilitaries can be an ally against

When the transition from military to civilian development fails to occur, the problems of insurgency only worsens.

the leftist guerrillas.²⁶ Local officials may also carry out their own policies that get in the way of US policy, such as President Uribe’s 2007 plan to manually eradicate even more coca plantations, although the US emphasis had already begun to shift away from eradication as a way to combat production.²⁷ Uribe’s actions in spite of US intentions are just one example of how the US development efforts never occur in a vacuum. There are always other stakeholders, including the country being developed.

Neither civilian workers nor the military can legitimize the government. The US government has learned this lesson countless times, such as in Vietnam and Honduras. Although the level of action and violence in Honduras never reached that of Vietnam, many officials, including Air Force Major Bernard Harvey, draw comparisons between the two scenarios. In a report, Harvey says

that “the US military could not win the hearts and minds of the Honduran people for their government...to think otherwise would be a grave strategic mistake.”²⁸ However, economic development can aid the government of any country with legitimacy problems by helping the government provide for its people, and civilian agencies and NGOs are much better suited to carry out that development.

When the transition from military to civilian development fails to occur, the problems of insurgency only worsens. Certain U.N. officials in Afghanistan have recently expressed displeasure with NATO military actions, including the use of the military to provide healthcare and build schools. When the military gets too involved in the economic development of an area, the local people start to see no difference between the civilian and military aid workers. Because armed resistance or insurgency is almost always directed at



Colombian Special Forces soldiers training for combat.

the military, schools and hospitals are also targeted.²⁹ An insurgency directed at schools and hospitals would certainly be one of the most horrible outcomes of humanitarian aid imaginable, but can be easily avoided by creating a distinction between the different forces administering the aid.

The amount governmental reform needed in Colombia is enormous, and it cannot come from the military. Prior to US involvement, the Colombian judicial system was not very conducive to prosecuting high profile and high publicity cases, such as drug traffickers or armed resistance groups. However, with USAID and Department of Justice employees

working with the Colombian government to educate and train the judges, attorneys, and clerks in the Colombian judicial system, conviction rates for these types of cases have increased steadily.³⁰ In addition, Colombia has begun to extradite some of its drug traffickers to the United States and other countries with more established justice systems. Under this system, criminals are guaranteed a fair trial without the risk of criminal organizations pressuring witnesses or jurors.³¹

The mission of the US military is clearly not one of economic development. This should fall to the Treasury and State Departments through programs like USAID. Now that the military has secured certain parts of Colombia from the paramilitaries and guerrillas, the poor farmers, known as *campesinos*, no longer feel as if they are being forced to grow coca. With the help of agronomists and developmental economists, communities once known for coca production have shifted towards the production of rice and sugar cane. In these areas, the standard of living and the price of land have also increased significantly thanks to crop substitution and infrastructure improvements.³² Although the military is necessary to provide security in Colombia, no branch of the military can carry out the intricate plans required to rebuild areas like those plagued by coca production in Colombia.

Defining the Right Track

Despite some of the poor outcomes of US policy, Colombia in 2010 is a much better place than Colombia in 1998 in terms of security, human rights, and economic opportunity. The membership of the major armed resistance groups, while still rather high, is considerably lower than at the outset of Plan Colombia. In 2001, two years after the initiation of Plan Colombia, a report estimated that FARC’s membership numbered around 18,000, while AUC had roughly 8,500 troops.³³ In 2009, FARC was down to about 9,000, and AUC had as few as 3,000 in its ranks.³⁴ These figures show that the work is not over. However, with all of

its flaws, US policy is certainly working. The reductions are just one example that progress is being made. Another such example is the March 2010 conviction in US courts and 20-year sentence given to Jorge Rodriguez, a top FARC commander.³⁵

In 2009, the US and Colombia signed a bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement, which provides guidelines for US military assistance in the case of disaster or other need for military action in Colombia. Although the US military will receive guaranteed access to a select number of bases in Colombia, no actual US bases will be constructed on Colombian soil. No increase in civilian or military personnel is expected, even though US legislation permits the presence of several hundred more people to serve in Colombia on behalf of the United States government.³⁶ Clearly, the United States has grown sensitive to appearing imperialistic and now seeks to avoid this perception by transferring more responsibility to the local government.

Current procedures must become more adaptable and case-specific before the situation can be put onto a strategy board in Washington. Although there is something to be said for having all members of a service function together, the rigidity of standard operating procedures treats every insurgency in a cookie-cutter fashion, perpetuating the notion that US officials do not consider the culture and values of other countries. Once legislation and manuals change to allow the field commanders more flexibility to avoid supporting corrupt officials in another country, the planning must begin by incorporating methods to review and amend policy as needed.

In the unconventional warfare generated by today's insurgencies and terrorist groups, officials must be prepared for any imaginable contingency. However, this does not require a rigidly planned response to every particular situation that may arise. Instead, policy makers should explore multiple options in responding to complications while still

remaining open to new ideas. Nobody will be able to gauge the real situation from behind a desk, but the thought process must be there, as well as a plan to move the primary focus from security to development.

Once that shift does happen—and it should happen gradually—the military should play only a limited role, maintaining security and providing police and military training to the local agencies. At the same time, civilian workers from USAID and similar agencies should start to work to reform the existing institutions and educate local authorities on human rights, anti-corruption practice, and other democratic values. As the legitimacy of the government solidifies, NGO workers should begin to replace the civilian government workers as the primary administrators of aid. Because the NGO workers do not officially represent the US government, US control begins to diminish significantly at this time, but this should not be a concern if the economic and governmental reforms have been effective. However, before the US turns complete control back over to the NGOs and the local government, there must be verifiable checkpoints of key values, such as human rights, democratic practices, and transparency in the government. Once the aid operations cease, the US military, as the forerunner in most new military technology, still should share its techniques and continue working with the local military and police forces of what would presumably be a new ally.

This ideal timeline depends entirely on the situation. Either way, militarization of aid is not inherently the enemy. It is necessary to provide other forms of aid and reform crucial to the recovery of a country that is neither secure nor stable. Militarization only becomes a problem when it when it interferes with other forms of aid.

Note: The views here are solely those of the author and not those of the Coast Guard Academy or other branches of the US government.

Endnotes

1 Initially, President Pastrana asked foreign leaders such as Bill Clinton for aid to help Colombia end its cycle of underdevelopment and become more in line with the industrialized economies of the world. The plan also provided for some security forces, but Clinton ultimately decided to direct US focus almost exclusively towards security and counterdrug missions. For the full text of Pastrana's Plan Colombia, see "Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity and Strengthening of the State," Republic of Colombia, (October 1999).

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23 Zelikow, Philip. "Foreign Policy Engineering: From Theory to Practice and Back Again." *International Security*, 18.4 (Spring 1994), p. 144. The entire article runs on pp. 143-71, and is useful in analyzing the lack of foresight in today's foreign policy.

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