

Republicans, Clinton White House back funding for US military intervention in Colombia

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The US House of Representatives voted March 30 to approve \$1.7 billion in funding for counterinsurgency warfare in Colombia which will include a Vietnam-style deployment of US advisers and military helicopters against peasant guerrillas. The 263 to 146 vote came after a two-day debate in which there were frequent comparisons between the early stages of the US intervention in Vietnam and the present conditions in the Andean region of South America (Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador as well as Colombia).

The center of the aid package is the provision of 30 Blackhawk and 33 Huey helicopters for the Colombian Army and police forces, together with hundreds of US advisers and technicians to keep the equipment in order and instruct Colombian soldiers in its use. In addition, some \$470 million in training and equipment will go directly to the Colombian army and \$115.5 million to the police, including the establishment of two new specialized anti-drug battalions.

Majorities in both parties voted to support the huge increase in military spending in Colombia, which came as part of a \$12.6 billion emergency appropriations bill providing for additional funds for US military operations in Kosovo, as well as disaster relief in North Carolina and other states. The margin among Republicans was 143-61, while Democrats gave their support by a vote of 119-84. Both the Republican leadership, headed by House Speaker Dennis Hastert, and the Clinton White House supported the bill.

The immediate prospects for final passage of the bill are unclear because of a procedural dispute between Senate and House Republican leaders over how much of the additional spending contained in the House bill should be loaded onto emergency legislation and how much should be included in normal appropriations bills, which will go through Congress much more slowly. But all of the funding for operations in Colombia and neighboring countries is certain of final passage and approval by the White House.

The congressional Republicans more than doubled the

Colombia funding requested by the White House Office of Drug Policy. The House Appropriations Committee added \$500 million to the program's budget, for assistance to Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, and \$282.5 million for a high-tech communications surveillance system for federal drug enforcement officials. At the same time they blocked proposals to increase funding for drug rehabilitation efforts at home as well as a proposed reduction in the crippling debt burdens of the countries in the Andean region.

Bipartisan majorities voted down amendments aimed at reducing the scale of the US role in the fighting in Colombia, a civil war which has raged for four decades. Only one such limitation was approved, an amendment offered by conservative Mississippi Democrat Gene Taylor to place a ceiling of 300 on the number of US advisers who could be deployed at any one time in the South American country. There is no limitation, however, on the total number of US military personnel active in the region, including those engaged in electronic surveillance and aerial attacks on guerrillas, most of whom operate from bases outside Colombia.

The extent of the US involvement in the Andean region is largely unknown to the American public, and the debate over US policy there has been confined to elite circles in Washington. The issue did not arise in the presidential nomination campaigns in either party, and neither Bush nor Gore has made any recent statement on the subject.

But for nearly a year the Pentagon has been preoccupied with the strategic and logistical problems created by the hand-over of Howard Air Base in Panama, part of the return of the Canal Zone to Panamanian sovereignty. Most US surveillance flights over the Andes originated from Howard Air Base, and only a series of makeshift substitutes have been found, including the Dutch-controlled islands of Aruba and Curacao in the Caribbean.

The US military had expected to develop an airfield at Manta, a Pacific Ocean port in Ecuador within easy range of

both Colombia to the north and Peru to the south, but the political and economic crisis in Ecuador delayed negotiations to obtain base rights and a long-term deal was only reached at the end of 1999. The Air Force expects to complete installation of navigation and safety equipment by mid-May, in what will be the first major US air base on the South American mainland.

Passage of the Colombia aid package was hailed by Barry R. McCaffrey, the White House drug policy director. The retired general declared, "This program will strengthen democratic government, the rule of law, economic stability and human rights in that beleaguered country." If history is any guide, however, McCaffrey is wrong on every count.

The huge influx of US aid will intensify the social inequality in the South American country, as a narrow stratum at the top of Colombian society enriches itself and the masses of poor peasants face a rain of destruction from the newly mobile armed forces. The Colombian economy, already mired in debt and facing a drastic decline in earnings for commodity exports other than cocaine, will not be able to withstand the shock of increasing US penetration. As for human rights and the rule of law, these simply do not exist in a country where right-wing death squads act with virtual impunity against opponents of the financial oligarchy which controls the two parties, Conservatives and Liberals, that have alternated in power since World War II.

The major rebel group in Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, has conducted guerrilla operations in the rural areas, with greater or lesser success, since the 1960s. The politics of FARC is an eclectic mixture of nationalism, Castroism and peasant radicalism, and the group's leaders have engaged in a constant search for bourgeois allies, from narcotics traffickers to officials of the New York Stock Exchange, who at one point traveled to Colombia to give the guerrillas lessons in capitalism.

After an attempt at rapprochement with the political establishment in the 1980s, in which it established a legal political party whose elected officials and leaders were systematically murdered by the death squads, FARC returned to guerrilla warfare and has won significant support in the past four years. Entire provinces of the country, including much of the south and the trans-Andean region, where most peasant coca farmers live, are controlled by the group.

For a period the US government seemed inclined to approve an agreement between FARC and the government in Bogota, along the lines of similar settlements with peasant-based guerrilla groups in El Salvador and Guatemala. But in the past year the Clinton administration, under heavy pressure from congressional Republicans, has shifted towards a policy of seeking the military destruction of the

FARC, in the name of fighting the war on drugs.

It is indicative of the politics of official Washington that both parties embrace the notion that the problem of drug abuse in the United States, a byproduct of the social decay of American capitalism, can be dealt with by bombing and strafing impoverished peasants thousands of miles away.

Behind the rhetoric of fighting drug abuse, long-time operatives for American imperialism are casting a more cold-eyed look at the military, economic and political significance of northwestern South America. According to one analysis published last month in the *Washington Post*, "The greatest difference between Colombia and Vietnam is, paradoxically, that Colombia matters strategically and immediately to the United States. It is the keystone in an arch of troubled countries in the Western hemisphere, from the turmoil of Venezuela on one end, through the Panama Canal, the fragile Central American states and lawless Mexico on the other. It is at the forefront of northern Latin America's backward plunge into caudillo politics, institutional decay, resurgent corruption and murder as a business tactic. Drugs that originate in or pass through Colombia have done far more harm to Americans and our society than the Vietnam War. Oil from Venezuela and Colombia is crucial to our economic welfare."

This column, written by Ralph Peters, a retired army counterinsurgency specialist, acknowledges, "The current Bogota government lacks any moral weight beyond a drab incumbency. Its 'democracy' is little more than a tool of the rich and empowered." He suggests that US policy be directed towards producing a regional consensus for intervention which would avert the stigma of unilateral US military action if the Colombian regime collapses.

In other words, the "drug war" is rapidly becoming a real war, not only in Colombia, but throughout the Andean region, a territory far larger than Vietnam in area and with jungles and mountains even more forbidding, and at the same time vital to the profits of American multinational corporations and to the wider strategic interests of American imperialism.



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