

A jungle peace

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 10, 2000](#) issue

The U.S. Congress is debating President Clinton's request for a \$1.6 billion aid package for Colombia, our troubled South American neighbor. The money would be used to fight those whom White House drug policy adviser Barry McCaffrey calls "narco-guerrillas." Four-fifths of the aid money is earmarked for "fighting drugs," while a smaller amount is designed to help Colombian farmers shift from the production of coca (the plant from which cocaine is derived) to legal agricultural products.

Robert E. White, who has served as U.S. ambassador to El Salvador and Paraguay, argues that the proportions in the aid package are out of balance. Rather than furnishing Colombia's army with military attack vehicles such as 30 Blackhawk and 33 Huey attack helicopters, the money should be used to help Colombian farmers plant alternative crops such as rubber and palm oil, and to pay for construction of "farm-to-market highways" that would "peacefully carry the government's authority" into the southern area of the country. (Drug traffickers don't need highways; they fly in to jungle airstrips where they pick up illegal cocaine raw material.)

Writing in the *Washington Post*, White warns that if U.S. funds are used by the Colombian government to wage war against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—the major rebel force—the U.S. will again be intervening in "another country's civil war." He claims that the president and the secretary of state have not given the American people a coherent explanation of what is at stake in Colombia, or of how massive military assistance can do anything but make matters worse.

Colombia's President Andrés Pastrana, who is currently engaged in intensive peace talks with FARC, has said that there will be no foreign military intervention in Colombia as long as he is president. Pastrana was elected in a runoff in a 1998 campaign in which both major parties promised to end Colombia's 40-year civil war. In a recent *New York Review* article, Alma Guillermoprieto described a Pastrana

campaign tactic that revealed the voters' strong preference for a negotiated peace settlement.

Five days before the runoff vote, Colombia newspapers pictured Pastrana's peace adviser somewhere in the wilderness talking with "Sureshot," the nickname for Manuel Marulanda, the aging leader of the FARC guerrillas. Sureshot was wearing a Pastrana campaign watch. "As Marulanda must have known when he allowed the photo-op," says Guillermoprieto, "the meeting established Pastrana as the peace candidate."

Pastrana was elected, but even more significant was a referendum vote the same day, when 10 million Colombians voted in favor of "peace." In October 1999, over 5 million citizens from a national population of 48 million turned out for marches held in larger cities and in over 600 smaller communities. This growing public support for ending the civil war was a signal to Pastrana to step up his peace efforts.

According to former ambassador White, Pastrana rejects the characterization of the FARC as narco-guerrillas, and sees his opponents as revolutionaries who, although they seek political power through force of arms, are "open to negotiations and compromise." If this is true, then U.S. military involvement will damage Pastrana's strategy of peace and reconciliation. Of course it is also possible, as Guillermoprieto believes, that Pastrana has requested U.S. funds to use as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations. If so, he should make sure he uses the funds for peaceful purposes.

Pastrana has appointed Victor G. Ricardo, the man who met with Marulanda in the jungle, as a "peace commissioner," and sent Ricardo and a delegation of FARC leaders on a tour of European capitals. According to Guillermoprieto, these leaders "have spent all their adult lives in the cocoon of isolation and paranoia that clandestinity generates." Their trip was a true education, for they were seeing versions of socialism and capitalism that differed markedly from what they'd read in their Marxist textbooks.

Ricardo speaks of the need for a spiritual transformation in Colombian society and insists that the peace efforts are "about building trust." He also maintains that Colombia must tell the countries where their cocaine is consumed that "we have a cocaine problem . . . but it is also true that you provide the market for it. Why don't you help us to solve something that is a problem for everyone?"

After Pastrana assumed office, he followed up on a campaign pledge and withdrew government military units from a demilitarized zone in the southern region of Colombia, an area of 42,000 square kilometers that is the center of the coca-growing region of the Amazon jungle. It is also an area dominated by FARC. If he follows this peaceful step with a move to use U.S. funds to try for a military defeat of FARC, the peace that Colombians so earnestly seek may slip away.

In referendum and peace demonstration, the Colombian people have asked for peace. Our aid funds should be used to *peacefully* negotiate an end to Colombia's civil war. We learned in Vietnam and more recently in Central America that rebels who fight and live in jungles can shoot down our helicopters. Colombia needs our \$1.6 billion for peace, not war.