The Colombia Plan

April 2000

Noam Chomsky

June 2000

In 1999, Colombia became the leading recipient of U.S. military and police assistance, replacing Turkey (Israel and Egypt are in a separate category). The figure is scheduled to increase sharply with the anticipated passage of Clinton's Colombia Plan, a $1.6 billion "emergency aid" package for two years. Through the 1990s, Colombia has been the leading recipient of U.S. military aid in Latin America, and has also compiled the worst human rights record, in conformity with a well-established correlation.

We can often learn from systematic patterns, so let us focus for a moment on the previous champion, Turkey. As a major U.S. military ally and strategic outpost, Turkey has received substantial military aid from the origins of the Cold War. But arms deliveries began to increase sharply in 1984 with no Cold War connection at all. Rather, that was the year when Turkey initiated a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign in the Kurdish southeast, which also is the site of major U.S. air bases and the locus of regional surveillance, so that everything that happens there is well known in Washington. Arms deliveries peaked in 1997, exceeding the total from the entire period 1950–1983. U.S. arms amounted to about 80 percent of Turkish military equipment, including heavy armaments (jet planes, tanks, etc.).

By 1999, Turkey had largely suppressed Kurdish resistance by terror and ethnic cleansing, leaving some 2–3 million refugees, 3,500 villages destroyed (7 times Kosovo under NATO bombs), and tens of thousands killed. A huge flow of arms from the Clinton administration was no longer needed to accomplish these objectives. Turkey can therefore be singled out for praise for its "positive experiences" in showing how "tough counterterrorism measures plus political dialogue with non-terrorist opposition groups" can overcome the plague of violence and atrocities, so we learn from the lead article in the *New York Times* on the State Department's "latest annual report describing the administration's efforts to combat terrorism."

Nevertheless, despite the great success achieved by some of the most extreme state terror of the 1990s, military operations continue while Kurds are still deprived of elementary rights. On April 1, 10,000 Turkish troops began new ground sweeps in the regions that had been most devastated by the U.S.-Turkish terror campaigns of the preceding years, also launching another offensive into northern Iraq to attack Kurdish guerrilla forces—in a no-fly zone where Kurds are protected by the U.S. airforce from the (temporarily) wrong oppressor. As these new campaigns were beginning, Secretary of Defense William Cohen addressed the American-Turkish Council,

a festive occasion with much laughter and applause, according to the government report. He praised Turkey for taking part in the humanitarian bombing of Yugoslavia, apparently without embarrassment, and announced that Turkey had been invited to join in co-production of the new Joint Strike Aircraft, just as it has been co-producing the F-16s that it used to such good effect in approved varieties of ethnic cleansing and atrocities within its own territory, as a loyal member of NATO.

In Colombia, however, the military armed and trained by the United States has not crushed domestic resistance, though it continues to produce its regular annual toll of atrocities. Each year, some 300,000 new refugees are driven from their homes, with a death toll of about 3,000 and many horrible massacres. The great majority of atrocities are attributed to the paramilitary forces that are closely linked to the military, as documented in detail once again in February 2000 by Human Rights Watch, and in April 2000 by a UN study which reported that the Colombian security forces that are to be greatly strengthened by the Colombia Plan maintain an intimate relationship with death-squads, organize paramilitary forces, and either participate in their massacres directly or, by failing to take action, have "undoubtedly enabled the paramilitary groups to achieve their exterminating objectives." The Colombian Commission of Jurists reported in September 1999 that the rate of killings had increased by almost 20 percent over the preceding year, and that the proportion attributable to the paramilitaries had risen from 46 percent in 1995 to almost 80 percent in 1998, continuing through 1999. The Colombian government's Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (De- fensoria del Pueblo) reported a 68 percent increase in massacres in the first half of 1999 as compared to the same period of 1998, reaching more than one a day, overwhelmingly attributed to paramilitaries.

We may recall that in the early months of 1999, while massacres were proceeding at over one a day in Colombia, there was also a large increase in atrocities (including many massacres) in East Timor carried out by Indonesian commandoes armed and trained by the U.S. In both cases, the conclusion drawn was exactly as in Turkey: support the killers. There was also one reported massacre in Kosovo, at Racak on January 15, the event that allegedly inspired such horror among Western humanitarians that it was necessary to bomb Yugoslavia 10 weeks later with the expectation, quickly fulfilled, that the consequence would be a sharp escalation of atrocities. The accompanying torrent of self-congratulation, which has few if any counterparts, heralded a "new era" in human affairs in which the "enlightened states" will selflessly dedicate themselves to the defense of human rights. Putting aside the actual facts about Kosovo, the performance was greatly facilitated by silence or deceit about the participation of the same powers in comparable or worse atrocities at the very same time.

R eturning to Colombia, prominent human rights activists continue to flee abroad under death threats, including now the courageous head of the Church-based human rights group Justice and Peace, Fr. Javier Giraldo, who has played an outstanding role in defending human rights. The AFL-CIO reports that several trade unionists are murdered every week, mostly by paramilitaries supported by the government security forces. Forced displacement in 1998 was 20 percent above 1997, and increased in 1999 in some regions according to Human Rights Watch. Colombia now has the largest displaced population in the world, after Sudan and Angola.

Hailed as a leading democracy by Clinton and other U.S. leaders and political commentators, Colombia did at last permit an independent party (UP, Patriotic Union) to challenge the elite system of power-sharing. The UP party, drawing in part from constituencies of the FARC guerril-

las, faced certain difficulties, however, including the rapid assassination of about 3,000 activists, including presidential candidates, mayors, and legislators. The results taught lessons to the guerrillas about the prospects for entering the political system. Washington also drew lessons from these and other events of the same period. The Clinton administration was particularly impressed with the performance of President Cesar Gaviria, who presided over the escalation of state terror, and induced (some say compelled) the Organization of American States to accept him as secretary general on grounds that "He has been very forward looking in building democratic institutions in a country where it was sometimes dangerous to do so"—which is surely true, in large measure because of the actions of his government. A more significant reason, perhaps, is that he was also "forward looking…on economic reform in Colombia and on economic integration in the hemisphere," code words that are readily interpreted.

Meanwhile, shameful socioeconomic conditions persist, leaving much of the population in misery in a rich country with concentration of wealth and land-ownership that is high even by Latin American standards. The situation became worse in the 1990s as a result of the "neoliberal reforms" formalized in the 1991 constitution. The constitution reduced still further "the effective participation of civil society" in policy-formation, while, as in Latin America generally, the "neoliberal reforms have also given rise to alarming levels of poverty and inequality; approximately 55 percent of Colombia's population lives below the poverty level" and "this situation has been aggravated by an acute crisis in agriculture, itself a result of the neoliberal program" (Arlene Tickner, *Current History*, February 1998).

The respected president of the Colombian Permanent Committee for Human Rights, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfredo Vasquez Carrizosa, writes that it is "poverty and insufficient land reform" that "have made Colombia one of the most tragic countries of Latin America," though as elsewhere, "violence has been exacerbated by external factors," primarily the initiatives of the Kennedy administration, which "took great pains to transform our regular armies into counterinsurgency brigades." These initiatives ushered in "what is known in Latin America as the National Security Doctrine," which is not concerned with "defense against an external enemy" but rather "the internal enemy." The new "strategy of the death squads" accords the military "the right to fight and to exterminate social workers, trade unionists, men and women who are not supportive of the establishment, and who are assumed to be communist extremists."

As part of its strategy of converting the Latin American military from "hemispheric defense" to "internal security"—meaning war against the domestic population—Kennedy dispatched a military mission to Colombia in 1962 headed by Special Forces General William Yarborough. He proposed "reforms" to enable the security forces to "as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents"—the "communist extremists" to whom Vasquez Carrizosa alludes.

Again the broader patterns are worth noting. Shortly after, Lyndon Johnson escalated Kennedy's war against South Vietnam—what is called here "the defense of South Vietnam," just as Russia called its war against Afghanistan "the defense of Afghanistan." In January 1965, U.S. special forces in South Vietnam were issued standing orders "to conduct operations to dislodge VC-controlled officials, to include assassination," and more generally to use such "pacification" techniques as "ambushing, raiding, sabotaging and committing acts of terrorism against known VC personnel," the counterparts of the "known Communist proponents" in Colombia.

A Colombian governmental commission concluded that "the criminalization of social protest" is one of the "principal factors which permit and encourage violations of human rights" by the

military and police authorities and their paramilitary collaborators. Ten years ago, as U.S.-backed state terror was increasing sharply, the Minister of Defense called for "total war in the political, economic, and social arenas," while another high military official explained that guerrillas were of secondary importance: "the real danger" is "what the insurgents have called the political and psychological war," the war "to control the popular elements" and "to manipulate the masses." The "subversives" hope to influence unions, universities, media, and so on. "Every individual who in one or another manner supports the goals of the enemy must be considered a traitor and treated in that manner," a 1963 military manual prescribed, as the Kennedy initiatives were moving into high gear. Since the official goals of the guerrillas are social democratic, the circle of treachery targeted for terror operations is wide.

In the years that followed, the Kennedy- Yarborough strategy was developed and applied broadly in "our little region over here," as it was described by FDR's Secretary of War Henry Stimson when he was explaining why the U.S. was entitled to control its own regional system while all others were dismantled. Violent repression spread throughout the hemisphere, beginning in the southern cone and reaching its awesome peak in Central America in the 1980s as the ruler of the hemisphere reacted with extreme violence to efforts by the Church and other "subversives" to confront a terrible legacy of misery and repression. Colombia's advance to first-rank among the criminal states in "our little region" is in part the result of the decline in Central American state terror, which achieved its primary aims as in Turkey ten years later, leaving in its wake a "culture of terror" that "domesticates the expectations of the majority" and undermines aspirations towards "alternatives that differ from those of the powerful," in the words of Salvadoran Jesuits, who learned the lessons from bitter experience; those who survived the U.S. assault, that is. In Colombia, however, the problem of establishing approved forms of democracy and stability remains, and is even becoming more severe. One approach would be to address the needs and concerns of the poor majority. Another is to send arms to keep things as they are.

Quite predictably, the announcement of the Colombia Plan led to countermeasures by the guerrillas, in particular, a demand that everyone with assets of more than $1 million pay a "revolutionary tax" or face the threat of kidnapping (as the FARC puts it, jailing for non-payment of taxes). The motivation is explained by the London *Financial Times*: "In the Farc's eyes, financing is required to fight fire with fire. The government is seeking $1.3 billion in military aid from the US, ostensibly for counter-drugs operations: the Farc believe the new weapons will be trained on them. They appear ready to arm themselves for battle," which will lead to military escalation and undermining of the fragile but ongoing peace negotiations.

According to *New York Times* reporter Larry Rohter, "ordinary Colombians" are "angered" by the government's peace negotiations, which ceded control to FARC of a large region that they already controlled, and the "embittered residents" of the region also oppose the guerrillas. No evidence is cited. The leading Colombian military analyst Alfredo Rangel sees matters differently. He "makes a point of reminding interviewers that the FARC has significant support in the regions where it operates," Alma Guillermoprieto reports. Rangel cites "FARC's ability to launch surprise attacks" in different parts of the country, a fact that is "politically significant" because "in each case, a single warning by the civilian population would be enough to alert the army, and it doesn't happen."

On the same day that Rohter reported the anger of "ordinary Colombians," the *Financial Times* reported an "innovative forum" in the FARC-controlled region, one of many held there to allow "members of the public to participate in the current peace talks." They come from all parts

of Colombia, speaking before TV cameras and meeting with senior FARC leaders. Included are union and business leaders, farmers, and others. A trade union leader from Colombia's second largest city, Cali, "gave heart to those who believe that talking will end the country's long-running conflict," addressing both the government and FARC leaders. He directed his remarks specifically to "Senor Marulanda," the long-time FARC peasant leader "who minutes earlier had entered to a rousing ovation," telling him that "unemployment is not a problem caused by the violence," but "by the national government and the businessmen of this country." Business leaders also spoke, but "were heckled by the large body of trade union representatives who had also come to speak." Against a background of "union cheers," a FARC spokesperson "put forward one of the clearest visions yet of his organisation's economic program," calling for freezing of privatization, subsidizing energy and agriculture as is done in the rich countries, and stimulation of the economy by protecting local enterprises. The government representative, who "emphasized export-led growth and private participation," nevertheless described the FARC statement as "raw material for the negotiations," though FARC, "bolstered by evident popular discontent with 'neoliberal' government policies," argues that those who "have monopolised power" must yield in the negotations."

Of course, no one can say what "ordinary Colombians" (or "ordinary Americans") think, even under peaceful conditions, let alone when extreme violence and terror prevail, and much of the population seeks to survive under conditions of misery and repression.

The Colombia Plan is officially justified in terms of the "drug war," a claim taken seriously by few competent analysts. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports that "all branches of government" in Colombia are involved in "drug-related corruption." In November 1998, U.S. Customs and DEA inspectors found 415 kg of cocaine and 6 kg of heroin in a Colombian Air Force plane that had landed in Florida, leading to the arrest of several Air Force officers and enlisted personnel. Other observers have also reported the heavy involvement of the military in narcotrafficking, and the U.S. military has also been drawn in. The wife of Colonel James Hiett pleaded guilty to conspiracy to smuggle heroin from Colombia to New York, and shortly after it was reported that Colonel Hiett, who is in charge of U.S. troops "that trained Colombian security forces in counternarcotics operations," is "expected to plead guilty" to charges of complicity.

The paramilitaries openly proclaim their reliance on the drug business. However, the U.S. and Latin American press report, "the US-financed attack stays clear of the areas controlled by paramilitary forces," though "the leader of the paramilitaries [Carlos Castano] acknowledged last week in a television interview that the drug trade provided 70 percent of the group's funding." The targets of the Colombia Plan are guerrilla forces based on the peasantry and calling for internal social change, which would interfere with integration of Colombia into the global system on the terms that the U.S. demands; that is, dominated by elites linked to U.S. power interests that are accorded free access to Colombia's valuable resources, including oil.

In standard U.S. terminology, the FARC forces are "narco-guerrillas," a useful concept as a cover for counterinsurgency, but one that has been sharply criticized on factual grounds. It is agreed—and FARC leaders say—that they rely for funding on coca production, which they tax, as they tax other businesses. But "'The guerrillas are something different from the traffickers,' says Klaus Nyholm, who runs the UN Drug Control Program," which has agents throughout the drug producing regions. He describes the local FARC fronts as "quite autonomous." In some areas "they are not involved at all" in coca production and in others "they actively tell the farmers not to grow [coca]." Andean drug specialist Ricardo Vargas describes the role of the guerrillas as

"primarily focused on taxation of illicit crops." They have called for "a development plan for the peasants" that would "allow eradication of coca on the basis of alternative crops." "That's all we want," their leader Marulanda has publicly announced, as have other spokespersons.

B ut let us put these matters aside and consider a few other questions. Why do peasants in Colombia grow cocaine, not other crops? The reasons are well known. "Peasants grow coca and poppies," Vargas observes, "because of the crisis in the agricultural sector of Latin American countries, escalated by the general economic crisis in the region." He writes that peasants began colonizing the Colombian Amazon in the 1950s, "following the violent displacement of peasants by large landholders," and they found that coca was "the only product that was both profitable and easy to market." Pressures on the peasantry substantially increased as "ranchers, investors and legal commercial farmers have created and strengthened private armies"—the paramilitaries—that "serve as a means to violently expropriate land from indigenous people, peasants and settlers," with the result that "traffickers now control much of Colombia's valuable land." The counterinsurgency battalions armed and trained by the U.S. do not attack traffickers, Vargas reports, but "have as their target the weakest and most socially fragile link of the drug chain: the production by peasants, settlers and indigenous people." The same is true of the chemical and biological weapons that Washington employs, used experimentally in violation of manufacturer's specifications. These measures multiply the "dangers to the civilian population, the environment, and legal agriculture." They destroy "legal food crops like yucca and bananas, water sources, pastures, livestock, and all the crops included in crop substitution programs," including those of well-established Church-run development projects that have sought to develop alternatives to coca production. There are also uncertain but potentially severe effects "on the fragile tropical rainforest environment."

Traditional U.S. programs, and the current Colombia Plan as well, primarily support the social forces that control the government and the military/paramilitary forces, and that have largely created the problems by their rapacity and violence. The targets are the usual victims.

There are other factors that operate to increase coca production. Colombia was once a major wheat producer. That was undermined in the 1950s by Food for Peace aid, a program that provided taxpayer subsidies to U.S. agribusiness and counterpart funds for U.S. client states, which they commonly used for military spending and counterinsurgency. A year before President Bush announced the "drug war" with great fanfare (once again), the international coffee agreement was suspended under U.S. pressure, on grounds of "fair trade violations." The result was a fall of prices of more than 40 percent within two months for Colombia's leading legal export.

Other factors are discussed by political economist Susan Strange in her last book. In the 1960s, the G77 governments (now 133, accounting for 80 percent of the world's population) initiated a call for a "new international economic order" in which the needs of the large majority of people of the world would be a prominent concern. Specific proposals were formulated by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which was established in 1964 "to create an international trading system consistent with the promotion of economic and social development." The UNCTAD proposals were summarily dismissed by the great powers, along with the call for a "new international order" generally; the U.S., in particular, insists that "development is not a right," and that it is "preposterous" and a "dangerous incitement" to hold otherwise in accord with the socioeconomic provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the U.S. rejects. The world did move—or more accurately, was moved—towards a new international eco-

nomic order, but along a different course, catering to the needs of a different sector, namely its designers—hardly a surprise, any more than one should be surprised that in standard doctrine the instituted form of "globalization" should be depicted as an inexorable process to which "there is no alternative," in Margaret Thatcher's cruel phrase.

One early UNCTAD proposal was a program for stabilizing commodity prices, a practice that is standard within the industrial countries by means of one or another form of subsidy, though it was threatened briefly in the U.S. when Congress was taken over in 1994 by ultra-rightists who seemed to believe their own rhetoric, much to the consternation of business leaders who understand that market discipline is for the defenseless. The upstart free-market ideologues were soon taught better manners or dispatched back home, but not before Congress passed the 1996 Freedom to Farm Act to liberate American agriculture from the "East German socialist programs of the New Deal," as Newt Gingrich put it, ending market-distorting subsidies—which quickly tripled, reaching a record $23 billion in 1999, and scheduled to increase. The market has worked its magic, however: the taxpayer subsidies go disproportionately to large agribusiness and the "corporate oligopolies" that dominate the input and output side, Nicholas Kristof correctly observed. Those with market power in the food chain (from energy corporations to retailers) are enjoying great profits while the agricultural crisis, which is real, is concentrated in the middle of the chain, among smaller farmers, who produce the food.

One of the leading principles of modern economic history is that the devices used by the rich and powerful to ensure that they are protected by the nanny state are not to be available to the poor. Accordingly, the UNCTAD initiative to stabilize commodity prices was quickly shot down; the organization has been largely marginalized and tamed, along with others that reflect, to some extent at least, the interests of the global majority. Reviewing these events, Strange observes that farmers were therefore compelled to turn to crops for which there is a stable market. Large-scale agribusiness can tolerate fluctuation of commodity prices, compensating for temporary losses elsewhere. Poor peasants cannot tell their children: "don't worry, maybe you'll have something to eat next year." The result, Strange continues, was that drug entrepreneurs could easily "find farmers eager to grow coca, cannabis or opium," for which there is always a ready market in the rich societies.

O ther programs of the U.S. and the global institutions it dominates magnify these effects. The current Clinton plan for Colombia includes only token funding for alternative crops, and none at all for areas under guerrilla control, though FARC leaders have repeatedly expressed their hope that alternatives will be provided so that peasants will not be compelled to grow coca. "By the end of 1999, the United States had spent a grand total of $750,000 on alternative development programs," the Center for International Policy reports, "all of it in heroin poppy-growing areas far from the southern plains" that are targeted in the Colombia Plan, which does, however, call for "assistance to civilians to be displaced by the push into southern Colombia," a section of the Plan that the Center rightly finds "especially disturbing." The Clinton administration also insists—over the objections of the Colombian government—that any peace agreement must permit crop destruction measures and other U.S. counternarcotics operations in Colombia. Constructive approaches are not barred, but they are someone else's business. The U.S. will concentrate on military operations—which, incidentally, happen to benefit the high-tech industries that produce military equipment and are engaged in "extensive lobbying" for the Colombia Plan, along with Occidental Petroleum, which has large investments in Colombia, and other corporations.

Furthermore, IMF-World Bank programs demand that countries open their borders to a flood of (heavily subsidized) agricultural products from the rich countries, with the obvious effect of undermining local production. Those displaced are either driven to urban slums (thus lowering wage rates for foreign investors) or instructed to become "rational peasants," producing for the export market and seeking the highest prices—which translates as "coca, cannibis, opium." Having learned their lessons properly, they are rewarded by attack by military gunships while their fields are destroyed by chemical and biological warfare, courtesy of Washington.

Much the same is true throughout the Andean region. The issues broke through briefly to the public eye just as the Colombia Plan was being debated in Washington. On April 8, the government of Bolivia declared a state of emergency after widespread protests closed down the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia's third largest. The protests were over the privatization of the public water system and the sharp increase in water rates to a level beyond the reach of much of the population. In the background is an economic crisis attributed in part to the neoliberal policies that culminate in the drug war, which has destroyed more than half of the country's coca-leaf production, leaving the "rational peasants" destitute. A week later, farmers blockaded a highway near the capital city of La Paz to protest the eradication of coca leaf, the only mode of survival left to them under the "reforms," as actually implemented.

Reporting on the protests over water prices and the eradication programs, the *Financial Times* observes that "The World Bank and the IMF saw Bolivia as something of a model," one of the great success stories of the "Washington consensus." But after the April protests we can see that "the success of eradication programmes in Peru and Bolivia has carried a high social cost." The journal quotes a European diplomat in Bolivia who says that "Until a couple of weeks ago, Bolivia was regarded as a success story"—by some, at least; by those who "regard" a country while disregarding its people. But now, he continues, "the international community has to recognise that the economic reforms have not really done anything to solve the growing problems of poverty"; a bit euphemistic. The secretary of the Bolivian bishops' conference, which mediated an agreement to end the crisis, described the protest movement as "the result of dire poverty. The demands of the rural population must be listened to if we want lasting peace."

The Cochabamba protests were aimed at the World Bank and the San Francisco/London-based Bechtel corporation, the main financial power behind the transnational conglomerate that bought the public water system amidst serious charges of corruption and give-away, and then immediately doubled rates for many poor customers. Under Bank pressure, Bolivia has sold major assets to private (almost always foreign) corporations. The sale of the public water system and rate increases set off months of protest culminating in the demonstration that paralyzed the city. Government policies adhered to World Bank recommendations that "No subsidies should be given to ameliorate the increase in water tariffs in Cochabamba"; all users, including the very poor, must pay full costs. Using the Internet, activists in Bolivia called for international protests, which had a significant impact, presumably amplified by the Washington protests over World Bank-IMF policies then underway. Bechtel backed off and the government rescinded the sale. But a long and difficult struggle lies ahead.

As martial law was declared in Bolivia, a press report from southern Colombia described the spreading fears that fumigation planes were coming to "drop their poison on the coca fields, which would also kill the farmers' subsistence crops, cause massive social disruption, and stir up the ever-present threat of violence." The pervasive fear and anger reflect "the level of dread

and confusion in this part of Colombia" as the U.S. carries out chemical and biological warfare to destroy coca production.

Another question lurks not too far in the background. Just what right does the U.S. have to carry out military operations and chemical-biological warfare in other countries to destroy a crop it doesn't like? We can put aside the cynical response that the governments requested this "assistance"; or else. We therefore must ask whether others have the same extraterritorial right to violence and destruction that the U.S. demands.

The number of Colombians who die from U.S.-produced lethal drugs exceeds the number of North Americans who die from cocaine, and is far greater relative to population. In East Asia, U.S.-produced lethal drugs contribute to millions of deaths. These countries are compelled not only to accept the products but also advertising for them, under threat of trade sanctions. The effects of "aggressive marketing and advertising by American firms is, in a good measure, responsible for…a sizeable increase in smoking rates for women and youth in Asian countries where doors were forced open by threat of severe U.S. trade sanctions," public health researchers conclude. The Colombian cartels, in contrast, are not permitted to run huge advertising campaigns in which a Joe Camel-counterpart extols the wonders of cocaine.

We are therefore entitled, indeed morally obligated, to ask whether Colombia, Thailand, China, and other targets of U.S. trade policies and lethal-export promotion have the right to conduct military, chemical and biological warfare in North Carolina. And if not, why not?

We might also ask why there are no Delta Force raids on U.S. banks and chemical corporations, though it is no secret that they too are engaged in the narcotrafficking business. And why the Pentagon is not gearing up to attack Canada, now replacing Colombia and Mexico with high potency marijuana that has already become British Colombia's most valuable agricultural product and one of the most important sectors of the economy, joined by Quebec and closely followed by Manitoba, with a tenfold increase in just the past 2 years. Or to attack the United States, a major producer of marijuana with production rapidly expanding, including hydroponic groweries, and long the center of illicit manufacture of high-tech illicit drugs (ATS, amphetamine-type stimulants), the fastest growing sector of drug abuse, with 30 million users worldwide, probably surpassing heroin and cocaine.

There is no need to review in detail the lethal effects of U.S. drugs. The Supreme Court recently concluded that it has been "amply demonstrated" that tobacco use is "perhaps the single most significant threat to public health in the United States," responsible for more than 400,000 deaths a year, more than AIDS, car accidents, alcohol, homicides, illegal drugs, suicides, and fires combined; the Court virtually called on Congress to legislate regulation. As use of this lethal substance has declined in the U.S., and producers have been compelled to pay substantial indemnities to victims, they have shifted to markets abroad, another standard practice. The death toll is incalculable. Oxford University epidemiologist Richard Peto estimated that in China alone, among children under 20 today 50 million will die of cigarette-related diseases, a substantial number because of highly selective U.S. "free trade" doctrine.

In comparison to the 400,000 deaths caused by tobacco every year in the United States, drug-related deaths reached a record 16,000 in 1997. Furthermore, only 4 out of 10 addicts who needed treatment received it, according to a White House report. These facts raise further questions about the motives for the drug war. The seriousness of concern over use of drugs was illustrated again when a House Committee was considering the Clinton Colombia Plan. It rejected an amendment proposed by California Democrat Nancy Pelosi calling for funding of drug demand reduction

services. It is well known that these are far more effective than forceful measures. A widely-cited Rand corporation study funded by the U.S. Army and Office of National Drug Control Policy found that funds spent on domestic drug treatment were 23 times as effective as "source country control" (Clinton's Colombia Plan), 11 times as effective as interdiction, and 7 times as effective as domestic law enforcement. But the inexpensive and effective path will not be followed. Rather, the drug war targets poor peasants abroad and poor people at home; by the use of force, not constructive measures to alleviate problems at a fraction of the cost.

While Clinton's Colombia Plan was being formulated, senior administration officials discussed a proposal by the Office of Budget and Management to take $100 million from the $1.3 billion then planned for Colombia, to be used for treatment of U.S. addicts. There was near-unanimous opposition, particularly from "drug czar" Barry McCaffrey, and the proposal was dropped. In contrast, when Richard Nixon—in many respects the last liberal president—declared a drug war in 1971, two-thirds of the funding went to treatment, which reached record numbers of addicts; there was a sharp drop in drug-related arrests and number of federal prison inmates, as well as crime rates. Since 1980, however, "the war on drugs has shifted to punishing offenders, border surveillance, and fighting production at the source countries," John Donnelly reports in the *Boston Globe*. One consequence is the enormous increase in drug-related (often victimless) crimes and an explosion in the prison population, reaching levels far beyond any industrial country and possibly a world record, with no detectable effect on availability or price of drugs.

Such observations, hardly obscure, raise the question of what the drug war is all about. It is recognized widely that it fails to achieve its stated ends, and the failed methods are then pursued more vigorously while effective ways to reach the stated goals are rejected. It is therefore natural to conclude that the drug war, cast in the harshly punitive form implemented since 1980, is achieving its goals, not failing. What are these goals? A plausible answer is implicit in a comment by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, one of the few senators to pay close attention to social statistics. By adopting these measures, he observed, "we are choosing to have an intense crime problem concentrated among minorities." Criminologist Michael Tonry concludes that "the war's planners knew exactly what they were doing." What they were doing is, first, getting rid of the "superfluous population," the "disposable people" ("desechables"), as they are called in Colombia, where they are eliminated by "social cleansing"; and second, frightening everyone else, not an unimportant task in a period when a domestic form of "structural adjustment" is being imposed, with significant costs for the majority of the population.

"While the War on Drugs only occasionally serves and more often degrades public health and safety," a well-informed and insightful review by Partners in Health researchers concludes, "it regularly serves the interests of private wealth: interests revealed by the pattern of winners and losers, targets and non-targets, well-funded and underfunded," in accord with "the main interests of U.S. foreign and domestic policy generally" and the private sector that "has overriding influence on policy."

One may debate the motivations, but the consequences in the U.S. and abroad seem reasonably clear.

Noam Chomsky
The Colombia Plan
April 2000
June 2000