



Center for International Policy

1717 Massachusetts Ave, NW- Suite 801
Washington, D.C. 20036
PHONE: (202) 232-3317
FAX: (202) 232-3440
E-MAIL: cip@ciponline.org
WEB: www.ciponline.org

MEMORANDUM

March 16, 2004

To: Interested colleagues
From: Adam Isacson
Re: **Preserve the “cap” on the U.S. military presence in Colombia**

Several sources have indicated that the State and Defense Departments will soon ask Congress to increase the legal limit on the number of U.S. military personnel and contractors present in Colombia. The “troop cap” currently restricts the U.S. presence in Colombia to a maximum of 400 military personnel and 400 U.S. citizen contractors at any given time; sources tell us that the administration will seek to increase the cap to 800 and 600, respectively.

An increase in the cap will send a very strong signal that the United States is getting its overstretched military more deeply involved, with minimal debate, in another complex foreign conflict.

When Congress approved a \$1.3 billion outlay for Colombia and its neighbors in 2000 – a supplemental appropriation known as “Plan Colombia” – it included a safeguard limiting the number of U.S. military personnel and U.S. citizen contractors present in Colombia at any given time.* This “troop cap” currently limits the U.S. counter-drug presence in Colombia to **400 military personnel and 400 U.S. citizens working for private contractors**.

The “cap” was put in place because many concerned members of Congress – among them Sen. Robert Byrd (D-WV) and Reps. Gene Taylor (D-MS) and Ike Skelton (D-MO) – saw a lot of “growth potential” for the U.S. military commitment in Colombia. In this South American nation, a forty-year-old, drug-fueled conflict pits an underfunded military, often aided by abusive right-wing paramilitary groups, against two leftist guerrilla groups.

“Would I be willing as the Commander in Chief of the United States Southern Command to subscribe to a properly considered and developed troop cap for Colombia? I certainly would. Categorically yes.” – Gen. Charles Wilhelm, commander, U.S. Southern Command, March 23, 2000.^a

“[T]hat troop cap, sir, is well within the limits that I need to do the job that I’ve been given, and I support it.” – Gen. Peter Pace, commander, U.S. Southern Command, April 4, 2001.^b

“[W]e have a 400-person military cap in Colombia; we don’t envision that’s going to change. Typically we have, maybe, a couple hundred people in country at any given time.” – Brig. Gen. Galen Jackman, J-3 (operations) chief, U.S. Southern Command, October 4, 2002^c

“[T]here are, as you know, caps on the number of people, both contractors and American government officials, who can be in Colombia at any one time. And there is no one who is advocating the breaking of those caps.” – Marc Grossman, undersecretary of state for political affairs, March 7, 2003^d

“To my knowledge, nowhere else in the world do we work under such a legislated restriction. That said, we have been able to provide a great deal of assistance to the Colombian government while working within this cap.” – Marshall Billingslea, principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, June 3, 2003^e

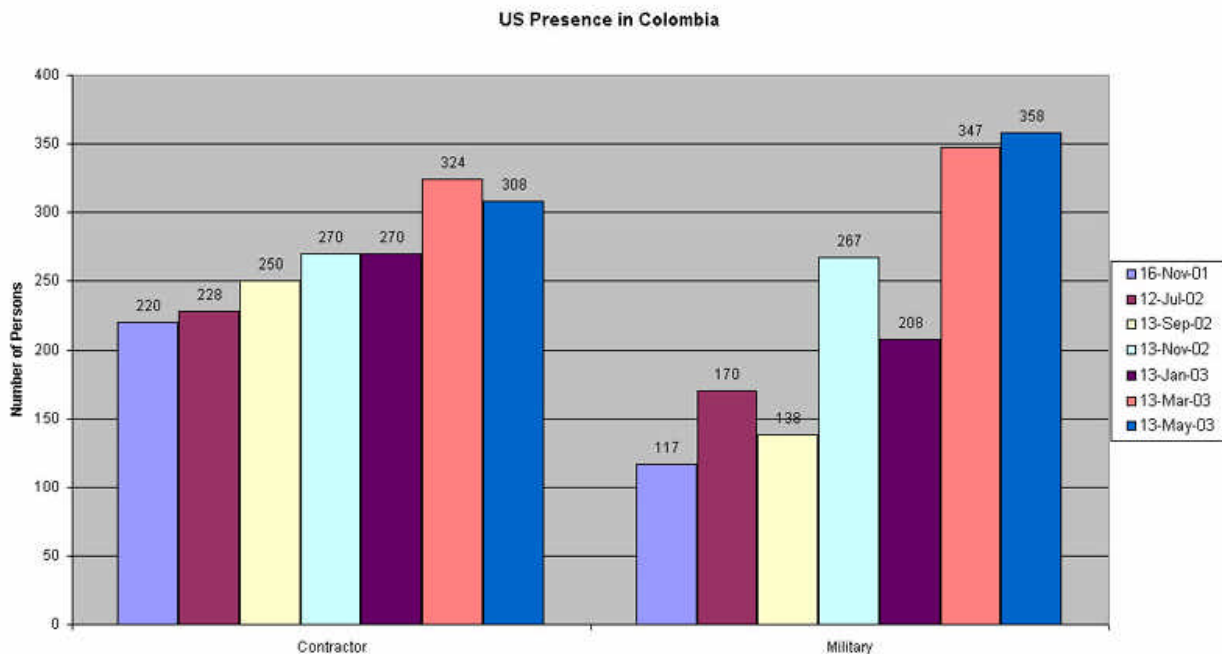
“[A]s progress is made the circumstances change, and the needs change, and the opportunities for us to be of assistance may evolve as well. At that point where something is appropriate to be announced we would announce it. But I think it would be unlikely to be anything that would break that cap.” – Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, August 19, 2003^f

* Section 3204(f), title III, chapter 2 of Public Law 106-246, as amended.

The U.S. aid mission bears some resemblance to Washington’s controversial participation in the civil war in El Salvador twenty years ago – but in a country 53 times larger than El Salvador. “We all know what happens once Americans are under fire, once they are challenged, it will be the response of this country that we will do whatever it takes to win that conflict. I think that question needs to be asked now rather than later,” Rep. Taylor argued in 2000. Sen. Byrd introduced the limit as “a prudent measure that Congress should endorse to ensure that U.S. involvement does not unwittingly spiral out of control in Colombia.”

For several years, Defense and State Department officials assured Congress that they were comfortable with the 400-man limit (see box). But last October, Gen. James Hill, the commander of the U.S. Southern Command, hinted that a reconsideration might be in the offing: “I have reorganized our personnel operating in Colombia to maximize the support we can provide and gain every possible efficiency while operating within the mandated cap on military and civilian personnel. We are actively involved in ... the Political Military Implementation Plan to support the near and long term progress being made in Colombia, to include reassessing the current military personnel limitation and dedicated resources.”¹

Indeed, the U.S. presence in Colombia has quietly grown. Congressionally mandated quarterly reports from the White House, which have not been publicly released since July 2003, indicated that the number of U.S. military personnel in Colombia tripled from November 2001 to May 2003, when 358 were present.



Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Daniel Christman, co-chair of a recent Council on Foreign Relations study of U.S. policy in the Andes, told an audience in January that the U.S. military presence is now consistently up against the cap: “When we send replacement personnel to train the Colombians, they stay on the ramp of the C-130 until those that they are replacing enter the aircraft -- before their jungle boots hit the tarmac. So it would count against the cap, they must stay on the plane.”²

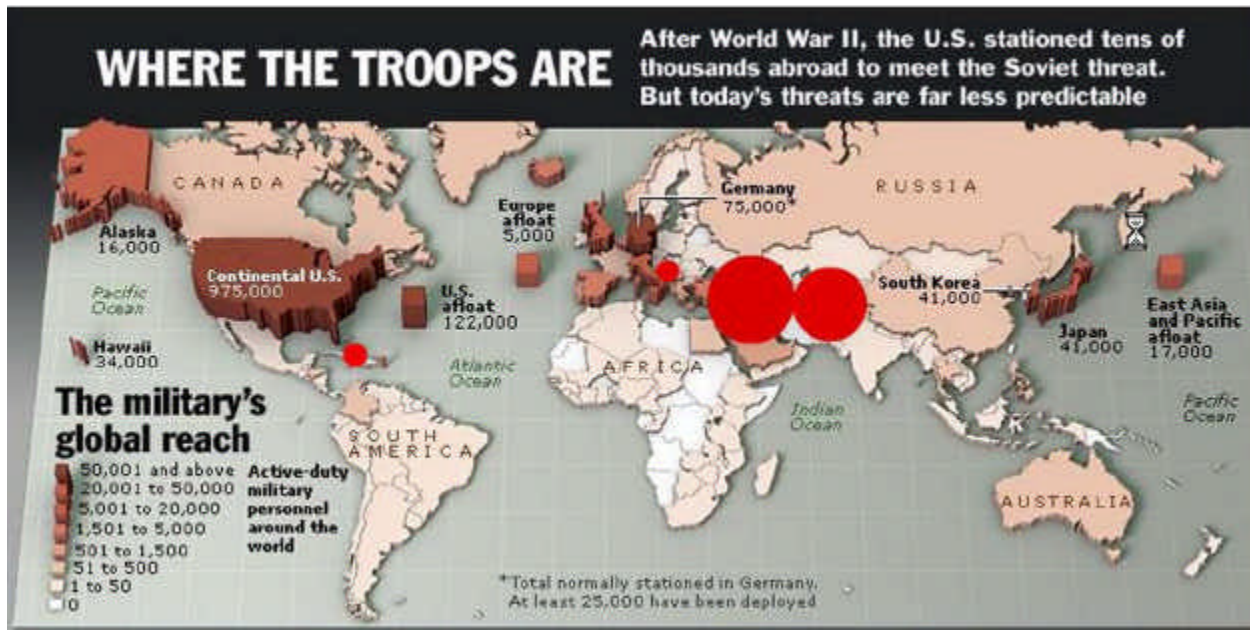
Four hundred troops may not appear to be much – even if the troop cap were doubled to 800, the

U.S. commitment in Colombia would still be smaller than, or similar to, the U.S. presence in many other states. But **the number in Colombia could grow very quickly** beyond this level, for several reasons that don't exist in places like Djibouti, Georgia, Uzbekistan, the Philippines or Yemen.

- New U.S. personnel in Colombia will be in harm's way. This is a dangerous mission, with a high probability of attack or other hostilities. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas have repeatedly declared their intention to target U.S. personnel. With little notice in Washington, U.S. personnel are already present in some of the most dangerous parts of Colombia, helping soldiers to protect pipelines, sharing real-time intelligence, advising "*Plan Patriota*," a Colombian government effort to re-take territory, and helping units capture guerrilla leaders.

The experience of U.S.-funded contractors is alarmingly illustrative: eleven have died in Colombia since 1998, five in 2003 alone. On February 13, three U.S. citizens, employees of Defense Department contractor California Microwave Systems, marked a full year as hostages of FARC.

- It is not just the number of troops that is growing rapidly in Colombia: the scope of the U.S. military mission is also increasing. In 2000, Clinton administration officials promised that Plan Colombia would fight drugs while keeping us out of Colombia's bitter, complicated war: "As a matter of administration policy, the United States will not support Colombian counterinsurgency efforts," Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey assured Congress.³ Less than two years later, though, the Bush administration asked Congress for – and received – permission to use billions in counter-drug military aid to help Colombia fight guerrillas.
- Close scrutiny of the situation in Colombia raises some red flags. Guerrillas, while off balance in the face of a military offensive, have not suffered major losses; no military analyst sees any imminent end to the violence. The price and availability of drugs on U.S. streets – and in Colombian coca and poppy markets – have not budged.⁴ Colombia's president, though popular, refers to human rights groups as "terrorist spokespeople" and has forced through reforms giving the military the power to search homes and offices, tap phones, and arrest and interrogate civilians. Negotiations underway with the paramilitaries may lead to amnesty for their leaders' past drug dealing and massive human-rights crimes.
- The real danger of getting bogged down in Colombia could create strong pressures to raise the troop cap again in the not-too-distant future. We cannot afford that at a time when the U.S. military is already overstretched. As of last September, the United States had 409,000 active-duty uniformed personnel present in over 140 countries and territories overseas (not counting those afloat U.S. vessels).⁵



This map appeared in the December 29, 2003 edition of *Time* magazine.

There has been almost no discussion of our expanding role in Colombia. **It would be irresponsible to increase the troop cap without a real consideration of where this policy is headed.** Until our policy gets some scrutiny – and ideally, some reconsideration – it is in our interest to limit the growth of the U.S. presence in Colombia. The troop cap remains a very effective tool for doing that. It must remain in place.

¹ Testimony of General James T. Hill, Commander, United States Southern Command before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Washington: October 29, 2003) <<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2003&m=October&x=20031030164403neerge0.8622553&t=usinfo/wf-latest.html>>.

² Transcript, “Roll-out of Andes 2020: A New Strategy for the Challenges of Colombia and the Region,” (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, January 8, 2004) <<http://www.cfr.org/publication.php?id=6643>>.

³ Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey, director, Office of National Drug Control Policy, “Remarks to the Atlantic Council of the United States” (Washington: November 28, 2000) <<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/112801.htm>>.

⁴ See, for instance, the White House Drug Czar’s latest “Pulse Check” study of U.S. drug price and availability data, covering January 2004, at <<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/drugfact/pulsechk/january04/index.html>>.

⁵ United States, Department of Defense, “Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country (309A)” (Washington: Department of Defense, September 30, 2003) <<http://web1.whs.osd.mil/mm/mid/M05/hst0309.pdf>>.

Text box:

a: Testimony of General James T. Hill, Commander, United States Southern Command before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Washington: October 29, 2003) <<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2003&m=October&x=20031030164403neerge0.8622553&t=usinfo/wf-latest.html>>.

b: United States Congress, House of Representatives, Armed Services Committee, Hearing Transcript HASC No. 106-37 (Washington: March 23, 2000) <http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/security/has083000.000/has083000_of.htm>.

c: United States Congress, House of Representatives, Armed Services Committee, Hearing Transcript (Washington: April 4, 2001) <<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/040407.htm>>.

d: Media roundtable with U.S. Southern Command J-3 (Operations) Chief Brig. Gen. Galen Jackman (Washington: October 4, 2002) <<http://ciponline.org/colombia/02100401.htm>>.

e: Press conference with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman (Bogota, March 5, 2003) <<http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/WO0303/S00095.htm>>.

f: Testimony of Marshall Billingslea, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense, before the Senate International Narcotics Caucus (Washington: June 3, 2003) <<http://drugcaucus.senate.gov/colombia03billingslea.html>>.