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Circling the Wagons: Tomorrow's House Hearing on Plan Colombia

It has been five years since Congress approved Plan Colombia, a big package of "emergency" aid to Colombia. Since then, Colombia has been by far the biggest recipient of U.S. aid outside the Middle East: [\\$4 billion total, 80 percent of it military](#).

Plan Colombia, envisioned as a six-year effort, "ends" at the end of 2005. This year should be a time for Congress to pause and undergo a serious evaluation of the strategy's results, and to consider changes where the strategy is not working. "This would be the time to hear from a wide variety of voices – from those whose budgets depend on the current policy to those who think the emperor is wearing no clothes," says Adam Isacson of the Washington, DC-based Center for International Policy, who has been [monitoring U.S. policy toward Colombia](#) since 1997.

That is not happening. Tomorrow, the House of Representatives will perform its most thorough consideration this year of U.S. policy toward Colombia: a hearing in the House International Relations Committee. The hearing (2:00 in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building) is entitled ["Plan Colombia: Major Successes and New Challenges."](#)

As the title indicates, those who don't think that Plan Colombia has achieved "major successes" are not invited to testify. Instead, the first panelist will be House Speaker Rep. Dennis Hastert (R-Illinois). Hastert, a supporter of hard-line drug policies who traveled frequently to Colombia during his days as a backbencher, has not traveled to Colombia for some time, and will mainly be repeating information that others have told him second-hand. The Speaker's real message is directed at congressional Republicans, who may be losing their enthusiasm for Plan Colombia. "If you oppose the current policy," Hastert wants to make clear, "you are running afoul of the party leadership."

Hastert will be followed by Drug Czar John Walters, whose predictions about when the price of cocaine is expected to rise have been consistently wrong.

- [July 2003](#): "We expect to see in the next 6 to 9 months significant disruptions in the purity and availability of cocaine throughout the world."
- [August 2004](#): "These gains have allowed us to, for the first time, have intelligence estimates ... that in the next 12 months we will see changes in the availability of cocaine in the United States."

For the real story, look at the ["National Drug Threat Assessment,"](#) published in February by the Justice Department's National Drug Intelligence Center.

"Key indicators of domestic cocaine availability show stable or slightly increased availability in drug markets throughout the country... Heroin is readily available in most major metropolitan areas in the United States, and availability remains relatively stable... [H]eroin availability continues to increase in rural and suburban areas."

Walters will be followed by a panel of four representatives of agencies whose budgets and reputations depend on putting the best possible spin on events: USAID, the State

Department's Western Hemisphere and International Narcotics bureaus, and the Department of Homeland Security.

The only critical voices to be heard tomorrow will come from the Democratic representatives who choose to attend. "The hearing's design gives a false sense of bipartisanship, when in fact the Democratic Party has been quite unhappy with Plan Colombia for years," says Isacson. While Democratic votes were essential to the passage of the original Plan Colombia appropriation in 2000, since 2001 [three-quarters or more of House Democrats](#) (including more than 90 percent since 2003) have supported amendments to cut or limit military aid to Colombia.

Why has the Republican majority decided to make tomorrow's hearing such a one-sided affair? "**They appear to be circling the wagons after a streak of really bad news,**" says Isacson.

- A record level of herbicide fumigation [failed to reduce](#) Colombian coca-growing by even one acre in 2004.
- The [price, purity and availability](#) of Colombian cocaine and heroin haven't budged since Plan Colombia began five years ago.
- Colombia's guerrillas, who many had been saying were near defeat, have launched a series of brutal attacks this year, which is bound to reverse official statistics indicating dropping violence levels.
- Seven U.S. soldiers have been arrested in the last six weeks for trafficking arms and drugs.

"There's a lot of reason to ask whether the policy's wheels are coming off," adds Isacson. "But tomorrow's witnesses will be trying to downplay all of that bad news. They will be trying to keep criticisms of the mostly military strategy to a minimum. They will provide little space for calls to improve the balance between military and nonmilitary aid, and to make human rights a higher priority. Despite evidence of big trouble ahead, tomorrow's hearing promises to be an echo chamber of praise for the current strategy."

It will be up to the committee's Democrats to speak up and register their disapproval of the current course, and to propose changes. "The Democrats' dissenting voices will be the only thing keeping this hearing from being as unanimous as a debate in the Supreme Soviet during the Brezhnev years," says Isacson.

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For more information about problems with the current policy, and ten concrete proposals for a new approach, read "Blueprint for a New Colombia Policy," a March 2005 report from the Center for International Policy, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Latin America Working Group and the U.S. Office on Colombia:

<http://ciponline.org/colombia/0503blueprint.pdf>