

Synchronicity between U.S. and Colombian government programmes is often striking, especially when it comes to counterintelligence. The day after Colombian president Álvaro Uribe took office 7 August 2002, for example, along with a Congress in which the right-wing narco-paramilitary bloc controlled about one third of the seats, he set up vast networks of paid government informants in cities and the countryside— networks that led to record levels of forced displacement among alleged guerrilla sympathisers. Over that same summer, in spite of Joe Lieberman’s best efforts, Operation TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention Systems)— designed to get U.S. citizens to inform on one another— died in the U.S. Senate after it emerged that the programme would give the FBI more informants per capita than the East German Stasi ever had.

Now, almost eight years later, the governments of both countries are upping the ante. On 27 January, bucking for a third term in spite of Washington’s objections, Uribe announced his goal of putting a thousand spies in college classrooms: “We need citizens to be the ones who commit to informing the police and armed forces, and if young people over 18 can help us in this by participating in networks of informants, it would help us a lot.” Uribe offered to pay students \$50 per month to report any suspicious ideas or behaviour to the Colombian police and armed forces.

The police and armed forces, of course, are institutions whose crimes have been many and varied on Uribe’s watch, as evidenced by the “false positives” scandal in 2008, in which it came to light that since 2002, the Colombian army has given officers and soldiers incentives and rewards to cause the disappearance and murder about 1,700 unemployed young men across the country and dress them up to look like guerrillas. In January, 46 officers and soldiers charged with these crimes were freed on a technicality and confined to a base just south of Bogotá, where they will remain awaiting trial. The army gave them a welcome-home party featuring therapeutic workshops and aromatherapy, massages and makeovers for their wives, and clowns for the kids. This is the army that has received the bulk of the \$7 billion that the U.S. government has dispensed through Plan Colombia and its successors under Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama.

As anthropologist-historian David Price reports for CounterPunch, Uribe’s drive to recruit informants among university students is similar to what is taking place in the United States, where Washington has served as a pilot project. With operations on 22 campuses set up since 2006, the so-called Intelligence Community Centers of Academic Excellence represent the largest recruitment drive on U.S. campuses since the early Cold War. Recruiting today, however, is open and a matter of public record, though not a matter of public protest, since the professoriate has thus far remained silent on the issue.

In Medellín, the public response from professors, the teachers' union, students, and youth groups was immediate, and sufficiently concerted to make Uribe backtrack in 24 hours. When his secretary touched on the issue from police headquarters on 28 January, he did not mention students in particular, but rather citizens in general: "Cooperation to combat crime is the duty of all citizens. We cannot remain indifferent in the face of murder." This is the same rhetoric Uribe has used since his first campaign in 2002, derived from Cold War counterinsurgency: The citizenry is seen either as an extension of the FARC guerrillas, organised crime, or the Colombian armed forces. Leading politicians, intellectuals, and media outlets have been quick to speak out against the measure, signaling the obvious, namely that student-informants will be in danger of incurring reprisals, and so will their families. The fate of informants in Colombia is frequently a gruesome one, and by involving university students in intelligence gathering, Uribe's proposed policy could help bring the war, now high up in the hillside neighbourhoods of Medellín, down into its city centre where universities are located.

Columnist Alfredo Molano thinks Uribe will try to extend the pilot programme nationwide, especially if he "wins" a third term in May (scare quotes apply to the winners of games that have been rigged), but if he does, he is likely to meet with more resistance from students and professors, especially from public universities. Nevertheless, Uribe might welcome the occasion as an opportunity to introduce further neoliberal, counterinsurgent measures into higher education. Of course it is too early to say where he will take the pilot programme or what he will do if faced with further resistance, but Defence Minister Gabriel Silva told the BBC, "There is no going back."

Back in the United States, as Price's report makes clear, Trinity Washington University has been an easy target because it is a cash-strapped school dependent on tuition; one assumes that the new climate of austerity in U.S. higher education will make many schools vulnerable, particularly state schools. In Medellín, the situation is considerably worse than in the United States because more than 65 per cent of inhabitants are poor, and many public university students come from humble backgrounds, which is to say that sheer necessity is much more pressing in Medellín than in the United States. Uribe's initiative is designed to help the police and the army fight organised crime and youth gangs in the president's home city, which witnessed 188 homicides in January alone, and after several years of relative peace, is back on track to recover its place as the world capital of homicide and youth crime.

Officially, there were over 1,800 homicides in 2009 (though the BBC reports 2,178), more than double the number for 2008. Some 60 per cent of the dead were under thirty. Mayor Alonso Salazar has set up mobile offices in some of the city's most dangerous hillside neighbourhoods, like Manrique and Santo Domingo No. 1, but his security detail has been accused of committing

abuses against neighbourhood youths, and those who have dared to speak out about crime are threatened, displaced, and/or murdered by neighbourhood gangsters. More than 2,000 people were forcibly displaced in Medellín between January and October 2009, and along with homicide and forced displacement, all forms of organised crime are on the rise following the extradition of Diego Fernando Murillo, alias Don Berna, the don of dons, to the United States in 2008.

Since Uribe sees universities, at least public ones, as warrens of crime, anarchy, disorder, and terrorist subversion, it is logical that he would try to recruit informants to strengthen the repressive state and para-state presence there. As usual, former minister of defence and current presidential candidate Juan Manuel Santos spelt it out: “What’s the problem? Why the drama? The policy of using informants has been pretty successful. It seems to me that the idea of involving young university students wherever there is a lot of crime could help to calm situations... like the one in Medellín.” Ironically, Bella Vista prison would be the obvious place to recruit informants, since organised crime on the outside is largely coordinated from the inside. But prisons will remain the nerve centres for the execution of youth crimes, while (public) universities may be criminalised, militarised, and subject to further budget cuts.

Though similarities between Colombia and the United States are alarming, there may be connections as well as parallels. According to the annual report that then minister of defence Santos presented to the Colombian Congress in 2008, Washington and Bogotá have coordinated intelligence efforts closely. Santos stated, “Between April 16 and April 27, advisers from the U.S. Embassy ran a seminar about running informants in which two officials, six sub-officials, and two civilians from U.S. Naval intelligence participated. This allowed us to re-train intelligence personnel, and update, strengthen, and complement the tactics used against the internal threat.” Indeed, Colombia is held up as a model of what successful counterinsurgency would look like in Afghanistan and Iraq, and in March 2009, Admiral Jim Stavridis from the U.S. Southern Command attended a two-day conference in Bogotá to study lessons from Colombia that could be applied elsewhere.

Along with luminaries of counterinsurgency like David Kilcullen— former chief adviser to generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal— Santos was a featured speaker at the conference. Reflecting on the progress made since Plan Colombia was implemented, Stavridis wrote, “This year, Bogotá is on the New York Times ‘must see’ tourist destinations, and the cruise ships are packing the gorgeous Caribbean port of Cartagena. Colombia has come a long, long way in controlling a deep-seated insurgency just over two hours flight from Miami— and we could learn a great deal from their success.” One can only hope that in the future, university student spies do not become part of the recipe for success in global counterinsurgency.

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