

# Comparing plan columbia and the merida initiative



The purpose of this paper will be to make a comparison between the Colombian drug cartels at the turn of the century with the Mexican cartels today. The object of this comparison will be to determine the effectiveness of large scale military intervention against drug cartels. I will assess whether this comparison is not only justified but in any way useful in understanding how to fight a well funded well armed non-state enemy.

This is a response to public comments by high ranking United States officials making this comparison (most notably secretary of state Hillary Clinton) while pledging a significant amount of American resources to such an effort. I will also attempt to answer all of the various questions that are begged by this nature of action. Most people do not realize the sheer lucrativeness of the drug trafficking business especially on an industrial scale. " The (Mexican) cartels have built a network of dealers in 231 U. S. cities from coast to coast, taking in about \$39 billion in sales annually, according to the U. S. Justice Department. " (\*1)

To put that into perspective, In 2009 Canada's total annual military expenditure was just over half (21 billion USD) of the total annual profit of the Mexican drug cartels in the United States. (\*2) Comparing Columbia and Mexico The 1st thing that is obvious when making this comparison is the fact that Mexico is over twice the size of Columbia both in land mass and in population. In terms of governance Columbia was in a state of profound political instability from as early as the 1940's while Mexico enjoyed a relatively stable PRI government following the Mexican civil war.

Geographically the two countries have nothing in common but their proximity to each other. Mexico is a largely flat terrain that poses no real problems to transportation and offers little in the way of cover. By Contrast Columbia has a large mountainous area covered in tropical forests, the majority of the drug production takes place in these remote areas. From a governmental standpoint, the Colombian government is largely decentralized compared to the federal structure in Mexico.

Due to the federal government and the larger tax base the Mexican government has some extra capacity when it comes to overall resources available before assistance. As far as the method in which the governments of these two countries approach dealing with traffickers is quite different, Mexico has up until very recently preferred to use its police forces to deal with drug traffickers while Colombian governments have preferred to use their military as a police force, which is more common in most Latin American countries. The Mexican Cartels

There are essentially two major Cartel groups within Mexico that fight each other for a large piece of the drug trade. The first is made up of the Tijuana cartel and the Gulf cartel make up the first major group and operates primarily out of North of East Mexico. A group known as "The Federation" is made up of many smaller cartels and "is led by representatives of the Sinaloa, Juarez and Valencia cartels". (\*3 p. 4) members of this group are scattered all throughout the rest of Mexico. Even though these groups are concentrated in certain areas there isn't a place in Mexico that is off limits to any of these groups.

All of these groups operate independently and it is not uncommon for alliances to be fickle between drug traffickers. None of the Mexican drug trafficking organizations are known to have any political allegiances or stated long term goal other than to make money and control as much turf as possible in order to achieve that end while minimizing the damage to the people of their own groups. The Mexican cartels were not always as violent as they are today, the fall of the PRI along with a strengthening of the Mexican police force is said to have resulted in the upswing in violence.

Another contributing factor to the recent escalation in violence is that since the fall of Major Columbian cartels (replaced mostly by smaller scale operations) Mexico and its drug trade began to have to fill the void that was left in the US market for a period of time, greatly strengthening their financial base and ability to purchase weapons and to employ a larger number of foot soldiers from poor communities (usually with family ties to promote increased loyalty to said group and a deeper anchor within the local community).

Florida was actually the main entry point for drugs during the early 80's but the strengthening of the American navy and coastguard geared towards stopping smuggling led to Mexico becoming the transit point it is today. It is most important that though Mexican troops have been used largely due to the ineffective and corruption of the police department I would not classify it as a war. The army is simply there to do carry out the actions of a police force because the regular police force cannot be trusted. There is no way for either side to declare a complete victory. It is my opinion that even if every drug trafficker in Mexico dropped dead this morning there would be a new group forming to take its place by nightfall and it wouldn't take them long to <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-plan-columbia-and-the-merida-initiative/>

gain momentum capital and weapons. Likewise a drug gang can never truly triumph against the state without any political agenda.

The majority of the murders are between rival gangs, though there have been many police officers and politicians killed the battle is essentially between the cartel groups and each other not with the state. The increased military strength is simply a self defence response. I would argue that if the Mexican cartels were 1 hegemonic group you would probably see at least a 10 fold drop in violent crime. Columbia at the hight of the culumbian drug trade You cant tell the story of the Columbia drug trade without talking about Pablo Escobar.

In 1989 Forbes magazine estimated that was the 7th richest man the world with personal assets estimated at over 25 Billion dollars. This however is not what made him a unique, he was known as an extremely charitable man by many of the poor people in Columbia giving them land, housing, employment and even building football fields, building a lot of good will among the people something that you find little evidence of on the side of the Mexican cartels.

The Medellin cartel he was a part of is thought to have controlled about 80% of the cocaine market in the early 1990's and was the most prominent of the Colombian cartels at the turn of the century. This cartel was rivalled by the Cali cartel who emerged largely due to weakening of their rivals the Medellin cartel. The biggest difference between Columbia at the turn of the century and the situation in Mexico today is the existence of the various guerrilla groups that existed in Columbia, many of which are still in existence.

The lines are often blurred between these guerrilla groups and the drug traffickers themselves. The standard arrangement between these guerrillas and drug traffickers was essentially protection of traffickers' production and processing areas in exchange for a handsome percentage of the profits. The profitability on investment on cocaine grown in Columbia being about 200\$ for every 1\$ invested, there was more than enough capital to go around. The wars between these various guerrilla groups enveloped Columbia in a civil war since beginning in the 1960's, this was far before Columbia drug trafficking organizations began to collaborate with the leftist guerrillas. By comparison Mexican cartels have no real political allegiances, their allegiance is to the dollar and the dollar alone. The fact that the terrain in Columbia is so difficult and access to remote areas is much more easy to control, these various groups are able to hold territory much more effectively than the Drug Cartels in Mexico.

The aspect of some of these guerrilla groups that really begins to attract the United State's attention for obvious reasons is their leftist/socialist ideology. The oldest and most notable of these groups is FARC or "The revolutionary armed forces of Columbia". This group has been fighting the Colombian national army as well as "right wing paramilitaries". At first glance the conflict between these two groups seems to be one for control over the Colombian drug trade and various areas of Columbia where drugs are produced.

A closer look reveals a much more sinister reality. There are a number of noticeable irregularities in the accounts of the violence. Over the course of my reasearch I kept hearing certain terms to describe the columbian drug

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war that you don't hear when you read on the Mexican drug war. Many mentions of human rights abuses as well as massacres with large numbers of innocent people being killed, you hear of much violence in Mexico but are always termed "drug related murders" implying that those killed were affiliated in organized crime.

When you take a closer look at the 'right wing guerrillas', first of all it's just about impossible to find a video of any of their leaders with any kind of mission statement or anything of the sort, second you cannot find any documentation anywhere of any known ally. Now, you tell me how does a heavily armed paramilitary group, even with drug money, take part in over 30 years of civil war including alleged armed conflict against the US military, without any support from any government or even any other criminal organization?

If everything were as it appears at 1st glance it results in a paradox, how does major international drug trafficking organization not even have ONE known ally/accomplice? It just doesn't make any sense purely on a business level. If you look up any of the Mexican cartels as well as FARC you can find known allies. Additionally, why is there a right wing guerrilla group for decades with a right wing government in power? Finally, Why is one side of the guerrillas (FARC) involved in negotiations with the Colombian government and not the other?

Even if they were to sign a peace treaty they would still be at war. The conclusion that asking these questions leads you to is that the Paramilitary groups were actually an unofficial extension of the Colombian armed forces

that traces its roots back to its formation during the cold war where they were trained by US army officers in 'tactics of counterinsurgency' at the School of the Americas, these tactics are said to specifically target the civilian population without the support of which the guerrillas cannot continue to function.

This group's true purpose is to combat communist guerrillas by whatever means necessary. Statistics show that these right wing paramilitaries are responsible for 80% of the 'political killings' in Colombia, which upon closer examination seem more like acts of widespread political repression of the Colombian people during almost a half a century and crossing the line of human rights abuse with regularity virtually without any opposition from anyone internationally, opposed only domestically by FARC.

Accounts from former Colombian army officers allege that the national Colombian armed forces maintained contact regularly with right wing paramilitary groups and directed them to many of the areas where they are accused of committing human rights atrocities. (\*9) It has been alleged that the right wing paramilitaries acting in concert with the Colombian national army tried to remove the rural population from certain areas altogether forcing them to become urban refugees and further isolating the FARC forces. In 2005 Colombia had the 3rd largest internal refugee population in the world.

Not only that but the paramilitaries are responsible for just as much if not more of the Colombian drug trade than FARC making 'Plan Colombia' truly appear to be a futile action according to its officially stated goals.

Assessment of " Plan Columbia" 1998-2010 (lessons learned) Assessing the



success of plan Columbia really depends on what you consider to be a success. If you consider the primary objective of the operation to be to simply return control of certain areas of Columbia back to the Colombian government then it would be considered a success.

However, if the primary objective was to irradiate the drug trade recent statistics show that though production of cocaine in Columbia did take a severe hit in the early 2000's it has been on the Rise again since 2006. What this confirms is that the drug trade there has not ceased but in fact evolved to meet the challenges of a changed environment. Drug trafficking organizations today are still operating but simply doing it in a more discrete manner their predecessors. Another example of the evolution that 'Plan Columbia' sparked is the guerrillas branching out to other sympathetic paramilitaries and paramilitary terrorist groups.

Members of FARC have reportedly instituted the help of various allies IRA including the since the increased military pressure. An article in British newspaper The Telegraph (\*8) highlights how the increased military presence in the countryside as well as an increase in the Colombian urban population has forced FARC forces to urbanize the way in which they conduct warfare. The article highlights significant advancements made by FARC in both explosives as well as counter intelligence and urban warfare.

FARC is currently considered the most well armed well trained and well funded guerrilla group in the world. The destruction of crops which was on paper, the primary objective of 'Plan Columbia' is something that is very temporary, unless you were to actually salt the earth there is nothing to

prevent anybody from planting a new crop in the same place. The united states has increased the amount of toxic defoliant that is spays on Colombia and it's citizens every year of 'Plan Columbia'. Many have made the comparison to agent orange in Vietnam.

Many health problems have already been reported with relationship to the defoliant chemical and there are concerns that this chemical is starting to poison some the amazon basin and subsequently effecting other Latin American countries to the south. This defoliant kills all crops including the ones, many of the poorest peasants who grow bananas simply for subsistence have their whole crops destroyed on a regular basis. Some have raised the issue that perhaps this alone constitutes a grave human rights violation. A foreign power spraying toxic chemicals on the population of another is something that is unheard of in the past.

The most inditing fact to the type of military action undertaken is most obviously that it has been a commitment that the United States has not been able pull back on after over 6 years no decrease in spending in this area is expected. Not only that but now that the Colombian drug traffickers have evolved we're seeing a resurgence in drug activity in the country. No matter how you look at it 'Plan Colombia' was almost a complete failure, Colombian left wing guerrillas persist, drug use in the US has never been higher, cocaine production in Columbia is increasing.

The only ay in which this operation is a success is that the overall violence seems to have died down and that in the paramilitary groups, which the US created in the 1st place have been disbanded and are no longer committing

horrendous atrocities against innocent people for the sole purpose of turning public opinion against FARC. It might be viewed in that instance as a success, I was about half way into my research before I heard/read anything to do with FARC's side of the story. Venezuela, Ecuador and Cuba are the only countries to formally voice support for FARC. (\*10) Evaluating the Merida Initiative

One the important things to know about the Merida initiative is that the entirety of the money (400 million to start) approved by the US congress all went to American companies, to train police, to build helicopters, not one dollar of the funding of this operation ends up in non-American hands. It is expected, as was the case with 'Plan Columbia' that the United states will exclusively employ private American defence contractors to do all the work on the ground. The reason for this is not strong enough to justify the use and possible loss of American soldiers.

Also use of American soldiers to fight an urban drug war such as the one in Mexico and might cause a PR nightmare if US Soldiers are viewed as firing on Mexican population, which the drug members of the cartels can hide in plain sight, unlike the Colombian guerrillas they are not in uniform. My investigation into 'Plan Colombia' led me to the conclusion that the comparison made by the US secretary of defence between Colombia at the turn of the century and the Mexican drug war today to be a very poor and unjustified one.

As previously stated I contend that the situation in Colombia was actually a war where as the Mexican situation is simply a police ineffectiveness issue.

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While the comparison between the who conflicts themselves is unjustified both 'Plan Columbia' and 'The Merida initiative' officially have a primary goal to reduce the outflow of drugs into the united states and can still be compared in that instance. The comparison is one that mostly highlights the extreme ineffectiveness not only in terms of result but in terms of cost of this kind of policy. It essentially doesn't solve any of the problems of drug trafficking.

The demand in the US for drugs is the real source of this problem. Persistent Problems (police, penal system, banking) A continuing problem that has been acknowledged but not dealt with in any meaningful way in the fact that poor farmers who have been driven into poverty by the international agricultural business (and it's dominance by the west) have no better feasible options then to grow the plants that are converted into drugs. In 'Plan Columbia' the Colombian government instituted a program to offer coca growers money to grow alternative crops, offering them a sum in the range of 2 million pesos a year (about 950\$). \*7)

Many coca farmers argue is not enough to live. When growing coca (rather then crops such as plantains and Pineapples) not only is the crop worth more but the drug traffickers come right to their doors to pick up the 'coca paste' they convert the plants to. When growing the crops they are being encouraged to grow they have to transport these tons of produce on “ vehicles they don't have, on roads that don't exist to sell to markets both internal and external” that they don't have access to and to compete with an international aggro business . ” (\*7- 5: 51)

It's simply not a sound development plan. (Less than 20% of the Plan Columbia budget is allocated towards this end) instead the budget is spent on air fumigation spraying defoliant on coca cultures. Secondly the way that the penal system is set up just about everywhere in the world makes the incarceration of major drug lords almost completely futile, they still maintain control over their organization and administer it from prison. The leaders of the Tijuana and Gulf cartels made the agreement to unite while they were both in prison (\*3 p. 4), consolidating their power against the rest of the cartels in the "The Federation".

There is also a persistent (though easily remedied) problem that the Mexican prisons themselves are not able to keep powerful people in there. In the last year alone over 250 prison inmates have been broken out of prison by cartels, most recently 191 were released from a prison in Tamaulipas by the Los Zetas cartel. This creates even more problems on other fronts, it makes it a lot harder to extract information from prisoners than it is in the United States. If an inmate believes it's only a matter of time before he gets out he has no reasons to co-operate in any way, no real threat to guard against.

Finally, probably the most important continuing problem is money laundering, this allows for drug operations to run smoothly by giving it a seemingly legitimate flow of cash to use for bribes, buying up legitimate real estate and other things. Without being able to access the real money of drug kingpins makes it hard to do them any real damage that won't easily be recovered from in a very short time. Many large US banks are complicit in this activity and it is a massive source of capital for them. An article from the <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-plan-columbia-and-the-merida-initiative/>

Bloomberg press highlights the involvement of American banks such as Wachovia Corp.

Bank of America and Wells Fargo's direct complicity in money laundering operations for the Mexican cartels. "Wachovia admitted it didn't do enough to spot illicit funds in handling 378.4 billion for Mexican-currency-exchange houses from 2004 to 2007." (\*1) To say they didn't "do enough to spot" 378 billion dollars entering their bank is laughable. There have reportedly been some efforts to pass more stringent anti-money laundering laws which have met some opposition from the banking lobby for obvious reasons.

The police force continues to be a significant problem, all the training in the world still isn't going to stop corruption, even if a relative victory is achieved and the army pulls out it would seem to me only to be a matter of time before things return to their previous state. Possible solutions In order to fix the problems associated with prisons I think a simple solution would be to transfer people associated to drug cartels to offshore or even just send them to the other side of the world somewhere a pay country X to keep them in isolation. Reducing their ability to communicate is key.

Something that I think the world may sooner or later move towards provided the proper technology be available is to curb the drug trade is simply an irradiation of hand held currency. Cash is what funds all of these organizations. This is why they have to launder drug money, it's dirty, you can't buy jet planes and like with cash. If you eliminate cash, how can anyone buy drugs illegally? You can't have a large illegal operation which risks lives daily if people can only barter for your drugs and every legitimate product

is purchased through some form of debit entirely controlled by the government.

In conclusion I believe that the Merida initiative will probably succeed to a small degree in curbing violence but not the drug trade itself. I think it will be a costly (perhaps everlasting) failure as long as people are beating a dead horse with tactics that are proven not work. The more troubling aspect of this whole research paper for me is the notion that gets brought up by several in various documentaries I watched in doing research of the American government attempted to make security policy which violates many individual freedoms with respect to terrorism all encompassing.

If you can keep enforcing the notion that the drug is on the same wavelength as terrorism it gives you the right to treat all people involved in drugs (about 80% of Americans at least once in a lifetime) as people involved in terrorism and produce a progressive erosion of civil liberties which some already believe has gone too far with legislation such as The Patriot Act.

Operations in Mexico and Colombia set a precedent for the United States intervening (without request in the case of Mexico) in domestic affairs of its neighbours using military force. I would also argue that much of this action could be perceived as just another extension of the US military industrial complex in action.

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