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Why the end of the Cold War doesn't matter: the US war of terror in Colombia

DOUG STOKES*

Abstract. Orthodox narratives of US foreign policy have been employed as uncontested modes of historical interpretation with US post-Cold War foreign policy in the Third World characterised by discontinuity from its earlier Cold War objectives. Chomsky's work adopts an alternative revisionist historiography that views US post-Cold War foreign policy as characterised by continuity with its earlier Cold War objectives. This article examines the continuities of US post-Cold War policy in Colombia, and explains this in terms of the maintenance of US access to South American oil, the preservation of regional (in)stability and the continued need to destroy challenges to US-led neoliberalism.

Both conservative and liberal mainstream foreign policy analysts, and the majority of International Relations (IR) scholars, interpret US foreign policy as benign and democratic.¹ The Cold War is commonly viewed in bipolar terms with a fundamentally hostile and expansionist East *versus* a defensive, if over-reactive West. With the end of the Cold War, and although some critical IR theorists challenge the benign image of US foreign policy,² there has emerged an overwhelming orthodox interpretation of US post-Cold War policy as characterised by discontinuities from the earlier Cold War period.³ Within IR there thus exists a prevailing discontinuity thesis which unites the majority of both mainstream and critically inclined IR scholars when examining post-Cold War US foreign policy.

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¹ For a small, but representative sample see Michael Cox, Takashi Inoguchi and G. John Ikenberry (eds.), *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, Steven E. Miller (eds.), *America's Strategic Choices: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

² See for example the self proclaimed dissident IR theorist David Campbell, 'Political Prosaics, Transversal Politics, and the Anarchical World', in Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker, *Challenging Boundaries* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 7–32.

³ See, for example, Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (eds.), *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). There are a much smaller number of mainstream IR theorists and analysts who examine continuities between the Cold War and post-Cold War period. However, they still accept as unproblematic the contestable claim that US foreign policy is essentially benign and was defensively driven during the Cold War. For a selection of IR theorists who outline a number of continuities see Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', in *International Security*, 18:2 (1993), pp. 44–79; Colin Gray, 'Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future is the Past—with GPS', in *Review of International Studies*, 25 (Special Issue, 1999), pp. 161–82.

The work of Noam Chomsky rejects both the benign and democratic image of US foreign policy and the prevailing post-Cold War discontinuity thesis.⁴ For Chomsky, post-Cold War US foreign policy is characterised by overwhelming continuities with its earlier Cold War concerns, and continues to be malign and anti-democratic when US elite demands are opposed. He employs a revisionist historiography which traces the basis of these post-Cold War continuities to the interests and institutions that have remained in place to preserve a world order conducive for US capital and that largely dictate the direction and forms that US foreign policy takes.⁵ For Chomsky, the orthodox interpretation of US foreign policy provides the conditions of possibility for the claim of discontinuity in the post-Cold War era through its emphasis on the alleged centrality that Cold War bipolar tensions had upon US foreign policy in the developing world. The revisionist position rejects the subordination of North-South relations to an East-West framework and instead adopts a view of world order characterised by long-term structural inequalities and the differential distribution of power between the developed capitalist North and the underdeveloped South. Chomsky's work thus goes against the prevailing consensus within IR as a discipline and provides a radically different interpretation of post-Cold War US foreign policy than that of both mainstream and some of the more critical IR theorists. Chomsky's continuity thesis also offers an alternative normative framework for understanding international relations through its explicit focus on issues of exploitation between the developed industrialised North and the underdeveloped global South. His work moves away from an overly Eurocentric East *versus* West interpretation of the Cold War and is sensitive to the ways in which Western policies continue to lead to human rights violations in underdeveloped nations in the post-Cold War era. This makes his work valuable both through its challenge to the prevailing conventional wisdom within IR, and because it is an interesting and often neglected perspective on the underlying objectives of US foreign policy.

In this article, I seek to test both the prevailing discontinuity thesis within IR and Chomsky's alternative continuity thesis on post-Cold War US foreign policy using a case study of contemporary US foreign policy in Colombia. Colombia is the third largest recipient of US military aid. This aid is said to be for a war on drugs and, after 11 September, for a war on terror. Concomitantly, these orientations purport to demonstrate a major discontinuity from the US's Cold War concerns of anti-communist counter-insurgency warfare in Colombia. The levels of US military aid, combined with the stated justifications for this aid, thus represent a good test for the competing discontinuity and continuity positions. Also, the continued abuse of human rights in Colombia and the role that US policy has played in either stemming or exacerbating these abuses also allows a testing of the allegedly benign or malign images of US foreign policy that sit at the heart of the two competing positions. If the discontinuity thesis is correct, we can expect to see US policy aimed at the primary narco-traffickers and terrorists in Colombia. US policy should also be helping to strengthen democracy and human rights. Conversely, if Chomsky's continuity thesis is correct we can expect to see a continued counter-insurgency war

⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues* (London: Verso Press, 1993).

⁵ Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Verso, 1992).

against groups and sectors of Colombian society that threaten the interests of US capital. In my empirical examination of US policy in Colombia, I use primary source documentation from US government agencies, human rights reports, and declassified information. I conclude that US policy is indeed characterised by continuities with its earlier Cold War concerns. This then raises the question of why such continuity exists. I explain this in terms of the significant US oil interests in the South American region, combined with the desire to support a pro-US government. Moreover, US policy in Colombia continues to lead to significant and widespread human rights abuses. US objectives and policy in contemporary Colombia thus demonstrate significant continuity with the US's Cold War preoccupations, confirming Chomsky's continuity thesis.

Mainstream views of US foreign policy during the Cold War: East versus West

Liberal and conservative views on US foreign policy during and after the Cold War have a great deal in common. Both tend to view the Cold War in bipolar terms and work with an orthodox historical interpretation of its origins and operation.⁶ They also emphasise the discontinuity characteristic of US foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. An orthodox historiography views the Soviet Union as having had expansionist tendencies throughout the Cold War, and as fundamentally hostile to Western security. Conversely, US foreign policy is viewed as principally driven by a defensive reaction against Soviet expansionism.⁷ US foreign policy is thus seen as being formulated in response to the inherently hostile nature of the bipolar competition.⁸

Ostensibly to resist Soviet expansionism, the US instituted the central Cold War doctrine of containment.⁹ George Kennan, the architect of containment policy, argues that the immediate task of US containment after the Second World War was to use economic aid to insulate the shattered Western European capitalist

⁶ See for example, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, 'The Origins of the Cold War', in *Foreign Affairs*, 46 (1967), pp. 22–52; Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969); Hugh Seton-Watson, *Neither War Nor Peace: the Struggle for Power in the Postwar World* (New York: Praeger, 1960). Although there has emerged a 'post-revisionist' historiography it has been argued convincingly that post-revisionism acts as a form of 'rearguard' neo-orthodoxy masquerading as a synthesis of both the orthodox and revisionist positions. For examples of post-revisionism, see John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); John Lewis Gaddis, 'The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War', in *Diplomatic History*, 7:3 (1983), pp. 171–204; For an interesting critique of post-revisionism see Bruce Cummings, 'Revising Post-Revisionism or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History', in *Diplomatic History*, 17:4 (1993), pp. 539–69.

⁷ George Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954).

⁸ Lynn Eden, 'The End of US Cold War History? A Review Essay: *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*, by Melvyn P. Leffler', in *International Security*, 18:1 (1993), pp. 174–207.

⁹ See Terry L. Deibel and John Lewis Gaddis (eds.), *Containing the Soviet Union: A Critique of US Policy* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defence Publishers, 1987) for a useful overview of containment doctrine.

economies from the threat posed by the Soviet Union.¹⁰ As Western Europe was rebuilt and incorporated within a US-led international order, US containment strategies increasingly shifted to the third world and primarily took the form of military campaigns. The campaigns were justified using a Cold War discourse of anti-communism and sought to stem alleged Soviet expansionism within the periphery and to support pro-US governments in their counter-insurgency campaigns.¹¹ The third world was characterised by US planners as particularly susceptible to Soviet subversion due to its socioeconomic instability, chronic inequality, and the internally fragile nature of many developing world states. The domino theory provided a succinct visual metaphor for the potential spread of regional pro-Soviet subversion. It was argued that if this were to happen, US credibility would be weakened in the eyes of its allies, and its resolve to resist Soviet aggression would be questioned.¹²

In resisting and rolling back alleged Soviet aggression in the Third World, the US sometimes carried out covert warfare and government destabilisation. The US also installed and backed a number of pro-US dictatorships throughout the periphery as a bulwark against what were characterised as Soviet-backed insurgencies. Although these regimes' practices were frequently anti-democratic, and they often carried out human rights abuses, these policies were deemed necessary to resist the alleged negative consequences for both US and global security should a pro-Soviet regime assume power. Conservative scholars argue that this was an unfortunate but necessary policy consequence in resisting the global spread of Soviet communism.¹³ Liberal scholars tend to argue that sometimes US fears were overstated, and have examined the role that Cold War belief systems have played in exaggerating US perceptions of Soviet expansion in the periphery, the influence that domestic power groups have exerted on US foreign policy, and the effect that bureaucratic rivalry has had upon US foreign policy formation.¹⁴ However, the divergence between conservative and liberal opinion over policy means during the Cold War tends not to extend to divergence over the ends, the US's innate right to pursue these ends, or the essentially benign character of US foreign policy.

¹⁰ George Kennan, 'Reflections on Containment', in Terry L. Deibel and John Lewis Gaddis (eds.), *Containing the Soviet Union*, p. 16.

¹¹ Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: US Guerrilla Warfare, Counter-Insurgency, and Counter Terrorism, 1940–1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992).

¹² See Paul H. Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Centre of Decision—A Memoir* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1989), pp. 214–55.

¹³ For the classic conservative articulation of this perspective, see Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics* (New York: American Enterprise Institute, 1982); see also Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1984).

¹⁴ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Lars Schoultz, *National Security and United States Policy Towards Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, 1947–1950: The Roaring of the Cataract* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State 1945–1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Discontinuities in post-Cold War world order

With the end of the Cold War a discontinuity thesis has emerged when analysing US foreign policy that portrays a radically altered world. Pessimistic commentators argue that the post-Cold War world is potentially more dangerous for the US. The primary themes to have emerged range from new threats to US security from increased intercapitalist competition, the emergence of expansionist and belligerent ethnic nationalisms, the dangerous absence of any overarching US grand strategy in the post-Cold War world, and new and more deadly forms of 'post-modern' identity warfare.¹⁵ Analysts have pointed to the ordering effect that bipolarity had on international relations and the increased potentiality for new political tensions emerging in a multipolar world.¹⁶ More optimistically inclined interpretations of the post-Cold War period have emphasised the end of ideological struggle with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global triumph of liberal capitalism.¹⁷ A number of commentators have argued that with the end of bipolarity, and the lessening of global tensions, the promotion of liberal democracy can now form the cornerstone of post-Cold War US foreign policy. Ikenberry, for example, argues that US foreign policy has always contained a Wilsonian liberalism premised on human rights, the promotion of democracy and free trade, and the development of international institutions to constrain interstate conflict. With the end of the Cold War, Ikenberry berates the pessimists and argues that for 'all the talk about drift and confusion in American foreign policy, the United States is seized by a robust and distinctive grand strategy' of post-Cold War liberalism.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Tony Smith argues for the mutually beneficial role that a 'national security liberalism' can have for the US's national interests because a democratic and stable world is more conducive for long term US interests.¹⁹

These arguments all share a number of broad assumptions. First, they project an image of US foreign policy as an essentially benign force in international relations. Second, they share a common orthodox interpretation of the Cold War that constructs it in bipolar terms with a profound global competition between the capitalist West and the communist East. Third, US policy is viewed as defensively reactive to Soviet expansionism in Third World nations during the Cold War. And lastly, they perceive US foreign policy as characterised by (albeit differently inter-

¹⁵ Samuel Huntington, 'America's Changing Strategic Interests', in *Survival*, 23:1 (1991), pp. 3–17; Stanley Hoffmann, *World Disorders: Troubled Peace in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); John Mearsheimer and Robert A. Pape 'The Answer: A Partition Plan for Bosnia', *The New Republic*, 14 June 1993; Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *America's Strategic Choices: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Robert Skidelsky, *The World After Communism: A Polemic For Our Times* (London: Macmillan, 1995); John Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', in *International Security*, 15 (1990), pp. 5–56.

¹⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End Of History And The Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

¹⁸ G. John Ikenberry, 'America's Liberal Grand Strategy: Democracy and National Security in the Post-War Era', in Michael Cox, Takashi Inoguchi and G. John Ikenberry (eds.), *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 104.

¹⁹ Tony Smith, 'National Security Liberalism and American Foreign Policy', in Cox, Inoguchi, Ikenberry, *American Democracy Promotion*, pp. 85–102.

preted) discontinuities and changes in the post-Cold War period. All of these assumptions have been rejected in the work of Noam Chomsky, who employs an alternative revisionist historiography of the Cold War to rethink such conventional assumptions. His rethinking also guides his interpretation of the post-Cold War period which he sees as characterised by continuities with the Cold War and, indeed, pre-Cold War periods.

Chomsky's view of US foreign policy during the Cold War: North versus South

Chomsky employs a revisionist historical interpretation of the Cold War which challenges the presupposition that the USSR was *inherently* aggressive and threatening to Western security during the Cold War and that US foreign policy was *primarily* driven in relation to these threats. Instead, revisionist historians contend that US foreign policy is overwhelmingly driven by the geoeconomic interests of US capital and the construction of a world order conducive to those interests.²⁰ Revisionists argue that in the immediate post-War period the US's main concern was 'not the containment of Communism, but rather more directly the extension and expansion of American capitalism, according to its new economic power and needs'.²¹ American capitalism required the structural domination of the developing South by the developed North. Chomsky argues that the Cold War, whilst unique in its intensity, was but a part of a much longer period of exploitative North/South relations that spans approximately 500 years.²² He thus subordinates the Cold War as a structural feature of a much longer period of exploitative relations between the developed capitalist economies and the poorer, underdeveloped nations.

For Chomsky, the mainstream understanding of the Cold War has a particular ideological effect. The Soviet threat, and the US's need to contain it, was overstated during the Cold War to serve two primary purposes. First, the creation of the Cold War military-industrial complex provided a public justification for massive state interventionism in the US economy. Chomsky quotes John Lewis Gaddis, who argued that containment 'has been the product, not so much of what the Russians have done, or of what has happened elsewhere in the world, but of internal forces operating within the United States . . . What is surprising is the primacy that has been accorded economic considerations in shaping strategies of containment, *to the exclusion of other considerations*'.²³ This economic interventionism laid the foundations for postwar US economic growth and served US capital in so far as it provided massive levels of protectionism for crucial high-tech industries (for example, the

²⁰ Chomsky uses the revisionist historian Gabriel Kolko extensively throughout his work. For the classic text see Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943–1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1990). See also Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945–1980* (New York: Wiley, 1980); William Appleman Williams, *History as a Way of Learning* (New York: Norton, 1988).

²¹ Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 23.

²² Noam Chomsky, *Year 501*, pp. 65–98.

²³ John Lewis Gaddis quoted in Noam Chomsky, *World Orders, Old and New* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 34. Gaddis's emphasis.

capital-intensive computing and automation industries). It also socialised private investment risks and guaranteed vast, state-subsidised profits.²⁴ Former US Deputy Under Secretary of Defence, Charles Duncan Jr., summarised the position clearly when he stated 'Why, you may ask, do some have the view that the Soviet Union has become the world's number one military power? The answer is that, to a large extent, we have created that image ourselves . . . in the understandable desire to reverse the anti-defence mood and propensity for reduced defence budgets . . .'.²⁵ US military spending also stimulated the economies of key US allies deemed crucial for the postwar political economy. These allies included Western Europe through the US purchase of strategic raw materials from European colonies, Japan during the Korean War and South Korea during the Vietnam War.²⁶

Second, and more importantly for this article, the Soviet threat served as a convenient pretext for justifying US military interventionism in the Third World, which, according to the logic of North–South relations, was necessary to maintain access to raw materials and markets and ensure cheap labour, to maintain regimes favourable to US interests, and to stifle or overthrow movements considered inimical to US interests.²⁷ Kennan summarised the private objectives of US policy clearly in 1948:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.3% of its population. . . . Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships that will permit us to maintain this position of disparity. . . . To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and daydreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. . . . We should cease to talk about vague and...unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratisation. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.²⁸

When understood in this context, Chomsky argues that the primary threat to US interests within the third world was any movement or political party that threatened to end its country's position of disparity and use its national resources for the majority of its people.²⁹ As the US's postwar reliance on Third World resources increased, US interests were inevitably increasingly pitted against the forces that

²⁴ For more on this see Winfred Ruigrock and Rob Van Tulder, *The Logic of International Restructuring* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 221; Kenneth Flamm, *Targeting the Computer: Government Support and International Competition* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1987); Laura D'Andrea Tyson, *Who's Bashing Whom? Trade Conflict in High-Technology Industries* (Washington: Institute for International Economics, 1992); David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Knopf, 1984); Elizabeth Corcoran, 'Computing's Controversial Patron', *Science*, 2 April 1993, p. 20.

²⁵ Duncan Jr. quote taken from Stephen Roskamm Shalom, *Imperial Alibis: Rationalizing US Intervention After the Cold War* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993), p. 28.

²⁶ Chomsky, *Detering Democracy*, p. 49.

²⁷ Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot*. Introduction: Contours and Context. <<http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/rc/rc-intro-s06.html>>

²⁸ George Kennan, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948* (Washington, DC: General Printing Office, 1976), pp. 9–29; See Noam Chomsky, *What Uncle Sam Really Wants: The Liberal Extreme*. <<http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/sam/sam-1-2.html>> for Chomsky's analysis of Kennan's position.

²⁹ Noam Chomsky, *World Orders, Old and New* (London: Pluto Press, 1997). See also William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Intervention Since World War II* (Maine: Common Courage Press, 1986).

sought more egalitarian forms of socioeconomic reform, and which therefore threatened US interests. The agents of change took many forms, but were overwhelmingly nationalist in orientation throughout the third world.³⁰

There was thus an overriding geoeconomic rationale guiding US foreign policy during the Cold War, which sought to construct a capitalist world order conducive to its interests. These interests were primarily economic in orientation with concomitant strategic rationales and reality constraints that guided policy orientation. Any serious attempt to exit from US control was invariably constructed as a manifestation of communism to manufacture consent for US foreign policy regardless of the actual orientation of the forces of change.³¹ Chomsky argues that the structural domination of the developing South by the developed North forms an overarching continuity in the post-Cold War era.

Chomsky and the post-Cold War era: continuities in world order

As outlined above, mainstream analysis tends to emphasise or presuppose the changed nature of the post-Cold War era. This is a logical position given the fact that the Cold War is understood in East-West terms, and US foreign policy is understood as reacting to the international structure that changed with the end of the Cold War. Chomsky's use of a revisionist perspective, however, traces the continuities in the post-Cold War world order. This is again logical given the fact that he locates foreign policy decision-making within the strategic and geoeconomic rationales of US capital, and the institutions that have arisen to protect it, all of which have largely remained in the post-Cold War era. For Chomsky, the primary discontinuities have been the reasons given for US intervention. The discourse of anti-communism no longer provides a public justification for US intervention so new reasons must now be found. In the next section I test both the mainstream and Chomsky's positions on the alleged continuities or discontinuities in the post-Cold War era using the case study of US intervention in relation to Colombia.

Throughout the Cold War, the primary justification for US military training and funding of developing world armies was the stated need to contain Soviet expansionism.³² In the post-Cold War era, the US has continued to fund and train developing world militaries, but the central reasons now given for this training have switched from a Cold War containment discourse, to new rationales and justifications. This shift in the centrality of these threats to US security, and the alleged

³⁰ Thomas G. Patterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³¹ Chomsky is careful not to provide a materialist monocausal analysis of US foreign policy (i.e. relating it solely to economic considerations). He also examines ideological factors in US foreign policy but accords them secondary importance and argues that any 'close analysis of policy will generally unearth a structure of rational calculation based on perceived interests at its core but in the complex world of decision-making and political planning, many other elements may also intervene...including the system of self-serving beliefs that is regularly constructed to disguise – to others, and to oneself – what is really happening in the world'. Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: US Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), p. 56.

³² Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh (eds.), *Low Intensity Warfare* (New York: Random House, 1988).

reorientation of pro-US militaries to concentrate their efforts against these threats, signals a major discontinuity in US foreign security policy.

During the Cold War, Colombia was one of the largest Latin American recipients of US military aid. For Example, 'Plan Lazo' was the first major US reorganisation of the Colombian military for anti-communist counter-insurgency during the 1960s, and was the biggest US military aid package for any Latin American military until the Reagan administration's counter-insurgency assistance for the El Salvadoran government in the 1980s.³³ US military aid to Colombia throughout the Cold War was primarily for anti-communist counter-insurgency.³⁴ In the post-Cold War era US funding of the Colombian military has continued with Colombia now the world's third largest recipient of US military aid with over \$2 bn given between 2000 and 2002 alone. The US has argued that this money will be now be used for the fight against narco-traffickers and international terrorists. The volume of money given by the US, combined with the stated reasons for this money, makes Colombia a good test as to whether US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has changed or not. I take the stated justifications for US post-Cold War policy – a war on drugs and a war on terror – and then examine primary source documentation such as official US agencies reports and human rights reports to assess whether these justifications stand up to scrutiny.

The US's discontinuity thesis: the war on drugs

Between 2000 and 2001, the Clinton administration committed itself to Plan Colombia; a 1.3 bn dollar military aid package given by the US to the Colombian military. The stated objective of this military aid was the eradication of coca plantations and what the US called left-wing 'narco-guerrillas' who were explicitly said to be involved in the coca trade. Democrat Senator Joseph Biden stated in 2000 that never 'before in recent history has there been such an opportunity to strike at all aspects of the drug trade at the source . . . Helping Colombia is squarely in America's national interest. It is the source of many of the drugs that are poisoning our people.'³⁵ Former US President Bill Clinton argued that Plan Colombia would 'increase incentives for the peaceful resolution of the civil war, while helping the government staunch the flow of drugs to our shores'.³⁶

To allegedly strike drugs at their source, a number of joint US and Colombian military initiatives have taken place including the formation of two 950-man counter-narcotics divisions and additional funding for another division. The counter-

³³ See Paul Wolf's *Plan Lazo and the Alliance for Progress* for an excellent series of recently declassified documents on Plan Lazo and US policy during the Cold War. <<http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/colombia/planlazo.htm>>

³⁴ Americas Watch, *The Central-Americanization of Colombia? Human Rights and the Peace Process* (New York: Americas Watch Report, 1986), pp. 141–4.

³⁵ Joseph Biden, *Aid to 'Plan Colombia': The Time for US Assistance is Now*, Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, May 2000.

³⁶ Bill Clinton, *Statement by President Bill Clinton* (Washington, DC: The White House), 13 July 2000.

narcotic units equipped by the US have been trained for a 'southern push' into the Putumayo region of Colombia where the 20,000 member, left-wing guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), are concentrated. The US argues that the FARC are criminal narco-guerrillas who traffic in cocaine to fund their war against the Colombian state. As part of the \$1.3 bn package, the US has provided a \$341 m upgrade to radar facilities in Colombia and shares intelligence on guerrilla activity in the southern areas. A riverine programme has been deployed along the rivers on the Ecuadorian border to the south.³⁷ The US Department of Defence states that there are approximately 250–300 US military personnel and 400–500 US mercenaries contracted to work in Colombia.

Chomsky's continuity thesis: counter-insurgency against left-wing rebels

In existence throughout Colombia, but primarily concentrated in Colombia's north, are well-armed right-wing paramilitary groups, the largest of which is the umbrella organisation, the AUC (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) that has approximately 10,000 combatants and is headed by Carlos Castano. James Milford, the former Deputy Administrator with the US's central drug eradication body, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), stated that Carlos Castano is a 'major cocaine trafficker in his own right' and has close links to the North Valle drug syndicate which is 'among the most powerful drug trafficking groups in Colombia'.³⁸ Donnie Marshall, the current Administrator of the DEA, stated the right-wing paramilitary groups 'raise funds through extortion, or by protecting laboratory operations in northern and central Colombia. The Carlos Castano organization, and possibly other paramilitary groups, appear to be directly involved in processing cocaine. At least one of these paramilitary groups appears to be involved in exporting cocaine from Colombia.'³⁹ Unlike the AUC, however, the FARC 'tax' coca cultivation but are not involved in drug trafficking to US markets. Milford argued 'there is little to indicate the insurgent groups are trafficking in cocaine themselves, either by producing cocaine . . . and selling it to Mexican syndicates, or by establishing their own distribution networks in the United States'.⁴⁰ Marshall stated 'the FARC controls certain areas of Colombia and the FARC in those regions generate revenue by "taxing" local drug-related activities'. He goes on to argue however, 'at present, there is no corroborated information that the FARC are involved directly in the shipment of drugs from Colombia to international markets' or have 'established

³⁷ Rand Beers, US Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Remarks before the Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics and Terrorism Subcommittee*, Washington, DC, 25 February 2000, <http://www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/2000/000225_beers_sfrc.html>

³⁸ James Milford, *DEA Congressional testimony*. House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, 16 July 1997, <<http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct970716.htm>>

³⁹ DEA Congressional Testimony. *Statement of Donnie R. Marshall*. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 28 February 2001. <<http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct022801.htm>>

⁴⁰ Milford, *DEA Congressional testimony*.

international transportation, wholesale distribution, or drug money laundering networks in the United States or Europe.⁴¹

Klaus Nyholm, the Director of the UN's drug control agency in Colombia, the UNDCP, argued, 'The guerrillas are something different than the traffickers, the local fronts are quite autonomous. But in some areas, they're not involved at all. And in others, they actively tell the farmers not to grow coca'. In the rebels' former Demilitarised Zone, Nyholm stated that 'drug cultivation has not increased or decreased' once the 'FARC took control'.⁴² Indeed, Nyholm pointed out that in 1999, the FARC were cooperating with a \$6 m UN project to replace coca crops with new forms of legal alternative development.⁴³

In sum, although in some areas some FARC fronts are involved in coca taxation, both the US's own agencies and the UN have consistently reported over a number of years that the paramilitaries are far more heavily involved than the FARC in drug cultivation, refinement and transshipment to the US. Castano has admitted as much when he stated that drug trafficking and drug traffickers financed 70 per cent of his organisation's operations.⁴⁴ Instead of the term 'narco-guerrilla' a more suitable phrase would be 'narco-paramilitary'. However this is a term conspicuous by its absence and the US has geared Colombian military strategy, and supplied the arms, exclusively for a Southern push and counter-insurgency war against the FARC. In short, the 'war on drugs' is actually a 'war on drugs that some FARC fronts tax' that totally ignores the paramilitaries' deep involvement in drug trafficking to US markets. It seems logical to conclude then, that the US military aid is not actually for a war on drugs as they are ignoring the biggest drug traffickers.⁴⁵

The US's discontinuity thesis: a war on terror

With the election of President George W. Bush, and in the aftermath of 11 September, a counter-terror orientation has developed within US policy. This has led to a blending of the war on drugs with an alleged 'war on terror'. In Colombia the US Attorney General John Ashcroft stated; 'the State Department has called the FARC the most dangerous international terrorist group based in the Western Hemisphere' who have 'engaged in a campaign of terror against Colombians and US citizens'.⁴⁶ The US Assistant Secretary of State, Otto Reich, argued that the '40 million people of Colombia deserve freedom from terror and an opportunity to participate fully in the new democratic community of American states. It is in our self-interest to see that they get it.'⁴⁷ The Bush administration's aid package for the Colombian military

⁴¹ Marshal. *Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control*.

⁴² *Washington Post*, 10 April 2000.

⁴³ *Associated Press*, 6 August 1999.

⁴⁴ *Reuters*, 6 September 2000.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed analysis of Plan Colombia see Doug Stokes, 'Better Lead Than Bread? A Critical Analysis of the US's Plan Colombia', in *Civil Wars*, 4:2 (2001), pp. 59–78.

⁴⁶ John Ashcroft, *Prepared Remarks of Attorney General John Ashcroft*, Drug Enforcement Administration, 19 March 2002. <<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/02031903.htm>>

⁴⁷ *The Washington Times*, 19 July 2002.

is called the Andean Regional Initiative (ARI). This provides funds for various countries surrounding Colombia, although Colombia still gets the largest share. The Bush administration has committed \$514 m to Colombia for the year 2002, with 71 per cent of the grant in the form of military aid, and looks set to commit approximately \$700 m for 2003 for what it argues is an extension of its international 'war on terror'.⁴⁸

Chomsky's continuity thesis: a war of terror

Whilst all the armed actors within Colombia carry out human rights abuses, the paramilitaries are consistently responsible for the vast majority: leading human rights organisations attribute over 80 per cent of all abuses to them.⁴⁹ The paramilitaries have also been shown to have significant and consistent ties with the Colombian military, the primary beneficiaries of US military aid. Human Rights Watch (HRW) together with Colombian human rights investigators conducted a study that concluded that half of Colombia's eighteen brigade-level army units have extensive links to the narco-paramilitaries. This collusion is national in scope and the units include those receiving or scheduled to receive US military aid.⁵⁰ In its 1999 Human Rights Report on Colombia the US State Department concluded 'Paramilitary forces find a ready support base within the military and police, as well as local civilian elites in many areas'.⁵¹ The latest HRW report states that there has been an almost complete failure on the part of the Colombian government to effectively address 'the problem of continuing collaboration between its forces and abusive paramilitaries and military impunity has contributed to a continuing, serious deterioration in human rights guarantees'.⁵² They add that 'the US has violated the spirit of its own laws and in some cases downplayed or ignored evidence of continuing ties between the Colombian military and paramilitary groups in order to fund Colombia's military and lobby for more aid'.⁵³

The role of the US in Colombia's paramilitary terror against the Colombian civilian population is made even clearer considering the fact that US military advisors travelled to Colombia in 1991 to reshape Colombian military intelligence networks. This secret restructuring was supposedly designed to aid the Colombian military in their counter-narcotics efforts. However, Human Rights Watch obtained

⁴⁸ The Center for International Policy, *Why We Oppose the Andean Regional Initiative*, September 2001. <<http://www.ciponline.org.nxlkhost.com/colombia/092401.htm>>

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, *The Ties that Bind* <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/colombia/>> To date, nobody has refuted or seriously challenged the HRW reports, which are generally regarded as authoritative. Human Rights Watch is the largest human rights monitoring organisation in the United States. For more on human rights in Colombia, see Amnesty International's website <<http://www.amnesty.org/>> and the US State Department's human rights documents <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/>>

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia 2000* <<http://www.hrw.org/hrw/wr2k/americas-03.htm>>

⁵¹ US Department of State, 1999 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*. Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. 25 February 2000.

⁵² Human Rights Watch, *The 'Sixth Division': Military-Paramilitary Ties and US Policy in Colombia*. September, 2001. <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/colombia/>>

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, *The 'Sixth Division'*.

a copy of the order. Nowhere within the order is any mention made of drugs. Instead, the secret reorganisation focused solely on combating what was called 'escalating terrorism by armed subversion'.⁵⁴ The reorganisation solidified linkages between the Colombian military and narco-paramilitary networks that in effect further consolidated a 'secret network that relied on paramilitaries not only for intelligence, but to carry out murder'.⁵⁵ Once the reorganisation was complete, all 'written material was to be removed' with 'open contacts and interaction with military installations' to be avoided by paramilitaries. This allows the Colombian government to plausibly deny links or responsibility for paramilitary human rights abuses which 'dramatically increased' after the US reorganisation.⁵⁶

In effect then, US military aid is going directly to the major terrorist networks throughout Colombia, who traffic cocaine into US markets to fund their activities. Moreover, the US has been instrumental in helping make more effective what Human Rights Watch termed a 'sophisticated mechanism . . . that allows the Colombian military to fight a dirty war and Colombian officialdom to deny it'.⁵⁷ Whilst the so-called 'war on drugs' and now a 'war on terror' are being waged in Colombia, it is an element of a much wider and more significant war against the FARC, the largest leftist insurgency in Latin America and Colombian civil society. Targeting the coca plantations within FARC territory serves a dual purpose. It allows Washington to continue to claim that Plan Colombia was an anti-drug plan whilst pursuing counter-insurgency. But more importantly, by concentrating all of its efforts towards coca plantations within FARC territory, it cuts off significant tax revenue for the FARC, thereby making the insurgency harder to fund and thus sustain. In short, Washington has chosen to ally itself with the terrorist narco-paramilitaries that share Washington's common objectives. The 'war on terror' is in fact a 'war of terror' reliant upon the Colombian military and paramilitary networks who carry out the vast majority of abuses against Colombia's civilian population.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch / Americas Human Rights Watch Arms Project, *Colombia's Killer Networks: the Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States* (London: Human Rights Watch, 1996), p. 28. In the same report Human Rights Watch have provided the original documents of the order in both Spanish and English. See pp. 105–50.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks*, p. 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, William Robinson argues that whilst post-Cold War US objectives have remained the same as its earlier Cold War objectives (the maintenance of an unequal international system) its tactical considerations have shifted from the maintenance of authoritarian regimes to the promotion of polyarchic democracies throughout Latin America. Robinson defines polyarchy as elite-based democracies where popular participation in the electoral process is confined to leadership choices managed by competing elites. These polyarchic systems continue to maintain highly unequal socio-economic systems. Polyarchic democracies primarily rely on consensual mechanisms (as opposed to violence). Alongside the promotion of polyarchy, however, resides the credible threat of repression should social forces committed to fundamental change threaten the social order, as is the case in Colombia. That is, polyarchy is the velvet glove of democracy wrapped around the iron fist of repression. Polyarchic democracy promotion thus remains consistent with long-term US foreign policy objectives and tactics. See the excellent William Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalisation, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); William Robinson, 'Promoting Capitalist Polyarchy: The Case of Latin America', in Michael Cox, Takashi Inoguchi, G. John Ikenberry (eds.), *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora and Richard Wilson (eds.), *Low Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

Accounting for the continuity

In the case of Colombia, Chomsky's continuity thesis is clearly correct, as there is an unambiguous continuity between Cold War and post-Cold War US foreign policy. I have argued that the alleged discontinuities serve as pretexts for US intervention. Although there are always multiple factors feeding into the formulation of US policy, it is possible to delineate primary causal factors based on official statements and the declassified record. How then do we account for this policy continuity in the post-Cold War era?

The US has substantial economic interests within Latin America in general and Colombia more specifically. Colombia is the US's seventh largest oil supplier and has discovered vast oil reserves within its territory.⁵⁹ The US has sought to decrease its post-Gulf War reliance on Middle East oil and diversify its oil supply purchasing to Latin America. Anne Paterson, the US ambassador to Colombia, explained that the September 11th attacks have made the 'traditional oil sources for the United States' in the Middle East even 'less secure'. Sourcing US energy needs from Colombia which 'after Mexico and Venezuela' is 'the most important oil country in the region' would allow 'a small margin to work with' and means the US can 'avoid price speculation'.⁶⁰ Paul D. Coverdell, a Republican Senator, explained the wider regional focus of US policy with the 'destabilization of Colombia' directly affecting 'bordering Venezuela, now generally regarded as our largest oil supplier. In fact, the oil picture in Latin America is strikingly similar to that of the Middle East, except that Colombia provides us more oil today than Kuwait did then. This crisis, like the one in Kuwait, threatens to spill over into many nations, all of which are allies.'⁶¹ This in turn necessitates the elimination of any threat to US oil interests. This has been illustrated clearly with the Bush administration's request for \$98 m for a specially trained Colombian military counter-insurgency brigade devoted solely to protecting the US multinational Occidental Petroleum's 500-mile long Cano Limon oil pipeline in Colombia.⁶² If approved by Congress, the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell explained that the money will be used to 'train and equip two brigades of the Colombian armed forces to protect the pipeline' to prevent rebel attacks which are 'depriving us of a source of petroleum'.⁶³ Ambassador Patterson went on to explain that although this money was not provided under the pretext of a war on drugs 'it is something that we must do' because it is 'important for the future of the country, for our oil sources and for the confidence of our investors'.⁶⁴

Colombia's war also fits into the classic mode of counter-insurgency that emerged under President Kennedy's reorganisation of Latin American militaries. Counter-insurgency involved looking toward an internal enemy which, during the Cold War,

⁵⁹ Donald E. Schulz, *The United States and Latin America: Shaping an Elusive Future* (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000), p. 3.

⁶⁰ *El Tiempo*, 10 February 2002. <http://www.amazonwatch.org/newsroom/medioclips02/col/020210_col_et.html>

⁶¹ *Washington Post*, 10 April 2000.

⁶² *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 March 2002.

⁶³ House Appropriations Committee. *Secretary of State Colin Powell before the Foreign Operations Subcommittee*, 13 February 2002.

⁶⁴ *El Tiempo*, 10 February 2002.

became alleged communist subversives. For US counter-insurgency experts, communism was typically manifested through political demands for reforms or popular organisations that sought a more egalitarian distribution of national resources. Civil society became the primary barometer of the level and potentiality of 'subversion' with paramilitarism integral to counter-insurgency from its inception. An early US counter-insurgency field manual explained 'paramilitary units can support the national army in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations when the latter are being conducted in their own province or political subdivision'.⁶⁵ Terrorism directed against civil society was deemed acceptable as part of the prevailing counter-insurgent strategy:

Civilians in the operational area may be supporting their own government or collaborating with an enemy occupation force. An isolation program designed to instill doubt and fear may be carried out, and a positive political action program designed to elicit active support of the guerrillas also may be effected. If these programs fail, it may become necessary to take more aggressive action in the form of harsh treatment or even abductions. The abduction and harsh treatment of key enemy civilians can weaken the collaborators' belief in the strength and power of their military forces.⁶⁶

General William Yarborough headed the original US Special Forces team sent to Colombia in 1962 to organise the Colombian military for counter-insurgency. He argued that a 'concerted country team effort should now be made to select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training in resistance operations in case they are needed'. These teams were to be used to perform 'counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents' and were to be 'backed by the United States'.⁶⁷

In a manual produced by the US training academy for Latin America, the then-named School of the Americas, intelligence required identifying 'the nature of the labour organizations' the potential establishment of 'legal political organizations that serve as fronts' for insurgents. Counter-insurgents must monitor the 'system of public education', and the influence of 'politics on teachers, texts, and students' and 'the relations between religious leaders (domestic or missionaries), the established government and the insurgents'. The manual went on to explain that counter-insurgents must carefully watch for any 'refusal of peasants to pay rent, taxes, or loan payments or unusual difficulty in their collection', an increase 'in the number of entertainers with a political message', or the intensification of 'religious unrest'. Strikes, demonstrations or 'campaigns for trade union organisation of recruitment' were similarly considered subversive.⁶⁸ After an extensive investigation of the SOA's training programs the US's Intelligence Oversight Board stated in 1996 that the 'School of the Americas and Southern Command had used improper instruction

⁶⁵ US Department of the Army, *US Army Counterinsurgency Forces*. FM31-22, (1963), p.84.

⁶⁶ US Department of the Army, *Psychological Operations*. FM33-5 (1962), p. 115.

⁶⁷ General William P. Yarborough quote from Michael McClintock, *The American Connection. State Terror and Popular Resistance in El Salvador* (London: Zed Books, 1985), p.23.

⁶⁸ Department of Defense, US Army School of the Americas, *Inteligencia de Combate*, p. 168 quoted in Michael McClintock, *The United States and Operation Condor: Military Doctrine in an Unconventional War*. Paper delivered at Latin American Studies Association, Washington DC, September 2001, p.11.

materials in training Latin American officers' from '1982 to 1991'. Passages from these training materials condoned 'practices such as executions of guerrillas, extortion, physical abuse, coercion, and false imprisonment'.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In the case of Colombia, civil society organisations, especially those that seek to challenge prevailing socioeconomic conditions, are constructed by the US government as potentially subversive to the social and political order, and in the context of counter-insurgency, legitimate targets for 'paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist' attack. As outlined above, the 1991 post-Cold War US reorganisation of Colombia military and paramilitary networks and the massive levels of post-Cold War US funding of the Colombian military serves to underline the continued relevance of counter-insurgency for destroying movements that may threaten a stability geared towards US interests. The primary means for what has been called 'counter-terror' in US sponsored counter-insurgency, but what can be more accurately described as 'terror', has been the use of paramilitaries. As I have shown, in the Colombian context, the link between the paramilitaries, the Colombian military and the US is clear. In the last fifteen years, an entire democratic leftist political party was eliminated by right-wing paramilitaries; 4,000 activists were murdered in the 1980s; 151 journalists have been shot; in 2002 over 8,000 political assassinations were committed in Colombia with 80 per cent of these murders committed by paramilitary groups; three out of four trade union activists murdered worldwide are killed by the Colombian paramilitaries whilst 2.7 m people have been forcibly displaced from their homes. According to the UN, lecturers and teachers are 'among the workers most often affected by killings, threats and violence-related displacement'.⁷⁰ Paramilitary groups also regularly target human rights activists, indigenous leaders, and community activists.⁷¹ This repression serves to criminalise any form of civil society resistance to US-led neoliberal restructuring of Colombia's economy and stifle political and economic challenges to the Colombian *status quo* with Castano arguing that his paramilitaries 'have always proclaimed that we are the defenders of business freedom and of the national and international industrial sectors'.⁷² Amidst this repression over half of Colombia's population live in poverty according to the World Bank, with those most vulnerable being 'children of all ages'.⁷³

⁶⁹ Intelligence Oversight Board, *Report on the Guatemala Review*. 28 June 1996. <<http://www.us.net/cip/iob.htm>>

⁷⁰ UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Report 2000*, 8 February 2001.

⁷¹ State Department, *Human Rights Report 2000*. Colombia, 26 February 2001.

⁷² *CNN.com*. 6 September, 2000. <<http://www.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/americas/09/06/colombia.paramilitary.reut/>>

⁷³ Christopher Neal, *Sustained Growth and Improved Social Safety Nets to Fight Poverty, Says World Bank* (Bogata: The World Bank Group, 2002). <<http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/external/lac/lac.nsf/Countries/Colombia/CC081B1813AF278985256BA300824DE6?OpenDocument>>

During the Cold War anti-communism served as the ideological vehicle to justify the repression of any attempt to change the prevailing socioeconomic structure of Colombian society. In the post-Cold War era anti-drugs and the 'war on terror' serve as the latest justifications for the continued US backing of a terror war in Colombia. There has thus been a major continuity in US Colombian policy that has crossed from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period. Furthermore, this policy continues to have terrible human rights implications and leads to the death of significant numbers of Colombia's civilian population whilst maintaining structural inequalities and destroying any democratic alternatives. In the case of Colombia, these facts overwhelmingly support Chomsky's continuity thesis.