

U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY IN
CENTRAL AMERICA

HON. EDOLPHUS TOWNS

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, October 7, 2004

Mr. TOWNS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to draw your attention to a shift in U.S. military strategy towards Latin America that has largely gone unnoticed. In the last few years the nation has been increasingly preoccupied with fighting terrorism, and defense and budgetary appropriations have overwhelmingly focused on the Middle East. Yet the U.S. Southern Command (SouthCom), encompassing the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and parts of the Atlantic Ocean and monitoring 33 countries to our south, has quietly expanded its traditional counter-narcotics mission to that of counter-terrorism operations. All of this is occurring in a region more or less devoid of the fundamentalist Islamic terrorists currently threatening America. This change in approach has gone so far as to redefine terrorism, with drug-runners being termed "narco-terrorists." As a result, the U.S. is subsequently increasing its assistance to Latin American militaries. Since many nations in the region are young and relatively fragile democracies, their strengthened armies have raised fears about a possible reemergence of limits on free speech, human rights violations or even a return to military governments.

The following research memorandum about Washington's post-transition political and economic strategy for the region was authored by Eleanor Thomas and Lindsay Thomas, research associates at the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs. The Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs, founded in 1975, is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan, tax-exempt research and information organization. It has been described on the Senate floor as being "one of the nation's most respected bodies of scholars and policy makers."

U.S. SOUTHERN COMMAND (SOUTHCOM) STRUGGLES TO JUSTIFY ITS ROLE IN THE WAR ON TERROR

This analysis was prepared by Eleanor Thomas and Lindsay Thomas, COHA Research Associates.

After decades of U.S. meddling in the Western hemisphere in the course of its Cold War crusade and subsequent War on Drugs, Washington has found a new justification for its heavy-handed intervention in the region. While there is little evidence that the rest of the hemisphere is a breeding ground for anti-American terrorist networks, the U.S. Southern Command (SouthCom) is attempting to promote such a misinterpretation to further its own self-serving agenda and above all, to guarantee its funding. Under its current commander, General James Hill, SouthCom has linked drug trafficking and armed leftist Latin American political movements to terrorist threats against U.S. national security. By extending the definition of terrorism to cover every bellicose act, the White House has rendered the term practically meaningless; it has become the definition du jour to provide Washington with an opportunity to continue its interventionist tactics based upon its antiterrorist crusade.

TERRORISM DISCOVERED

Two years ago, SouthCom received Congressional approval for a "mission expansion." Previously largely limited to counter-narcotics activities and the promotion of "regional cooperation," its duties are now increasingly being framed within the War on Terror. According to Lisa Haugaard, Executive Director of the Latin American Working Group, SouthCom is "clearly using rhetoric to justify [its] budgets." In November, General Hill will relinquish his command to Lieutenant General Bantz J. Craddock, but not before ensuring that SouthCom remains at the forefront of Washington's War on Terror. Through the distortion of the definition of terrorism, the term has become little more than a rhetorical device. By invoking the word "terrorism" on Capitol Hill, General Hill and his successor are pursuing additional resources for future expanded military initiatives that will likely strengthen Latin American military establishments, which are too often infamous for their long records of violent oppression during the 1970s and 1980s. This maneuvering can be seen as a purely self-interested tactic that will stress the importance of Latin American armed forces throughout the region.

A NEW TWIST TO A FAMILIAR MISSION

Since September 11, 2001, national defense priorities and budgetary appropriations have concentrated on U.S. concerns in the Middle East. SouthCom's area of responsibility—encompassing all of Central and South America and the Caribbean—has remained of secondary importance as Washington has increasingly defined its international strategy according to the War on Terror. With al Qaeda seen as the gravest threat to U.S. national security, and with Latin America seemingly not a major claimant to such terrorist cells, aside from the tri-border area, SouthCom's operations are not a priority for the Pentagon. Perhaps because of this reduced role, Congress in 2002 granted SouthCom approval to expand its mission priorities. Military aid and training in Latin America, which previously were focused on counter-narcotics operations, have now been re-tasked as counter-terrorism responsibilities. Preying on the terrorist fears that are currently dominating Washington's defense plan, SouthCom claims that it is now pursuing narcoterrorists to justify its expanded congressionally-approved budget.

REDEFINING TERRORISM

SouthCom's new shift towards terrorism is more ominous than it first appears. In March, General Hill gave his annual report on SouthCom's activities before the House Armed Services Committee. According to his testimony, the commander reported that the U.S. must be alert to two "growing threats" to national security: the "traditional" danger of "narcoterrorists and their ilk," and the "emerging" menace of "radical populism" that taps into the "deep-seated frustrations of the failure of democratic reforms." Hill's somewhat skewed assessment of the Latin American situation suggests that ultimately any political opposition, arguably a necessary element in any healthy democracy, can be seen as a threat to American national security. The Bush administration over the past years has instructed its ambassadors to Bolivia, Nicaragua and El Salvador to inform local authorities that although Washington respects free elections, it will not necessarily respect electoral results if the "wrong" people are elected. Former SouthCom commander General Charles Wilhelm told COHA that while "I don't think

any Latin American countries pose a specific threat... there is a threat to the U.S. if existing democracies are being undermined." However, by characterizing the region's struggles for social and economic equality as threats to U.S. security, SouthCom not only could be viewed as erroneously dismissing the importance of such movements, but could also divert attention away from the actual terrorist threats currently directed at the U.S.

SOUTHCOM'S HISTORY OF COUNTER OPERATIONS

SouthCom's official priorities have historically ranged from "counter-drug operations" and "engineering and medical exercises" to "security assistance" and "military-to-military contact." By aiming to strengthen militaries in the region, SouthCom under Hill has left behind a controversial legacy in Latin America. General Hill's recommendations to Congress and Lieutenant General Craddock's statements during his Senate confirmation hearing showed a firm commitment to "maintain and broaden our consistent military-to-military contacts as a means of irrevocably institutionalizing the professional nature of those militaries with which we have worked so closely over the past several decades."

Because U.S. law prohibits the direct training of foreign armed forces, the U.S. military's involvement in such matters is often classified as "security assistance." However, there are no safeguards in place to ensure that the Pentagon provides Congress with detailed information regarding its participation in current military-to-military interaction. Nor does Congress hold SouthCom closely accountable for its commitment to instruct Latin American militaries in the institutionalization of respect for human rights. It was this existing accountability loophole throughout the 1970s and 1980s that allowed the Pentagon, through the infamous School of the Americas as well as bilateral SouthCom missions, to both directly and covertly train the commanders of the death squads associated with Argentina's "dirty war" and the brutal contra campaigns that oppressed Nicaragua's civilian population during that country's unforgiving conflict.

The strengthening of Latin American armed forces to more effectively control drug trafficking, gang violence and so-called political insurgents has recently been used to justify SouthCom's new terrorism priorities. This could create a dangerous precedent for the reemergence of the de facto limits on free speech, human rights violations or even a return to the grim days of military rule that so traumatized the region in recent decades. Although violent crime plagues much of Latin America, defining it as a U.S. national security concern, and therefore justifiable as a valid SouthCom mission, will only continue the questionable trend of expanding U.S. military aid, cooperation and training throughout the hemisphere. While many Latin American militaries are still struggling to overcome the bitter effects and damaged reputations resulting from decades of human rights abuses and institutionalized corruption, it may be dangerous to instruct them in anti-terror tactics that could later be used to suppress their own citizens. Without a well-established commitment to protecting civil rights and proper limitations on the autonomy of military institutions, any renewed U.S. effort to fund and train rogue militaries could lead to an expansion of their power and an abuse of their authority, which could hinder the democratic process. Moreover, some Latin American nations have not

yet reached a level of political maturation nor have maintained a commitment to democratic principles that are necessary to ensure such abuse will not occur.

COLOMBIA—LATIN AMERICA'S SUPPOSED
TERRORIST HOTBED

According to General Hill, the "narcoterrorists in Colombia remain the largest and most well known threat in our region." However, Hill fails to support this claim that narcoterrorists pose such a direct security threat to the U.S. In fact, the term narcoterrorist, while full of threatening implications, is rarely clearly defined by the U.S. government and its military agencies. At his confirmation hearing, Lieutenant General Craddock did attempt to define the highly dubious concept: "the terms insurgents or guerrillas are less applicable today than in the past. I believe the term narcoterrorists is more appropriate, given the fact that the center of gravity for these groups is the incredible financial support they get from illicit drug trafficking." The lack of clarity in Craddock's explanation inadvertently reveals how SouthCom arbitrarily reclassified the country's leftist armed political opposition, denominated as guerrillas during the Cold War and drug traffickers in the 1990s, as a blanket terrorist threat. In an attempt to link the situation in Colombia to Washington's global mission, Craddock explained, "supporting the government of Colombia's efforts to defeat illicit narco-trafficking also directly supports the global War on Terror." This assertion is a convenient attempt to validate this new allusion without any supporting evidence. The government's arbitrary use of inflammatory language and its efforts to rationalize Washington's allocation of \$1.5 billion for Plan Colombia have failed to overcome its disappointing achievements in the War on Terror as Colombia had played no part in the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

For the past four years, the U.S. government has funded Plan Colombia as part of a patently ineffective War on Drugs. Even the head of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy John Walters, upon returning from a recent South American visit, reported that Washington's anti-drug strategy has failed.

Despite SouthCom's dubious reports of its strategy's success, Plan Colombia's failures are numerous. Colombia's supply and the U.S.' demand for drugs remain essentially unchanged. While U.S. armed forces are already overextended, SouthCom is now seeking to further involve U.S. military personnel in Colombia's protracted civil war by requesting an increase from 400 to 800 military officers and from 400 to 600 private contractors allowed to be present in the country. Critics contend that the now militarized Plan Colombia has failed to effectively address the country's armed forces' proclivity for human rights violations. Additionally, in its own annual human rights report, the State Department has maintained that the U.S.-trained Colombian military continues to associate with illegal rightwing paramilitary groups—Colombia's prime human rights violators. This subject is continually under-addressed in SouthCom's public statements. Following in the footsteps of the U.S. Patriot Act, the Colombian Congress has passed anti-terror legislation that allows the military to arbitrarily conduct searches and tap the telephones of citizens without a warrant. U.S. support, along with high funding for Colombia, has contributed to a flawed domestic policy in the South American country. The latest attempts to recast the na-

tion's perpetual unrest as a terrorism problem that threatens U.S. national security not only represents little regard for the facts and a twisting of reality, but is simply the latest stage in the repeating of a foreign policy project that has never worked.

GUANTANAMO BAY—SOUTHCOM'S CONTRIBUTION
TO THE WAR ON TERROR

SouthCom's insistence that it is engaged in responsible security practices and upholds human rights values awaits final judgment, especially considering its jurisdiction over the terrorist detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Since its creation as a prison facility in 2002, Camp X-ray has faced consistent criticism from groups such as Amnesty International (AI) which claim U.S. officials have sanctioned illegal practices at the facility. Prisoner testimony and photographs have established that suspected al Qaeda detainees have been held without trial or proper legal representation and may have suffered some of the same torture tactics that took place at the now infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. AI alleged in its report that "despite public commitments to the humane treatment of detainees, it subsequently has been revealed that the U.S. administration's decision not to apply provisions of the Geneva Conventions to those being held in Guantanamo may have been motivated by a desire to apply harsher interrogation techniques than it perceived would be allowed under the Geneva Conventions." Though SouthCom officers may be just one link in the chain of command, the detention facility is ultimately located within its region of responsibility. While SouthCom continues to lobby Congress for increased funding, Camp X-ray remains a glaring black mark that contrasts with SouthCom's professed support for legal procedures and human rights practices.

FINDING THE CAUSES, NOT JUST THE
TERRORISTS

In the tumultuous history of U.S.-Latin American relations, Washington has developed a strategy wherein various political and military means have been used to deal with a range of challenges and security threats posed by its southern neighbors. As the world leader in the war on Communism, the United States carried out regime change in Latin America with singular tenacity. This included the training of the Nicaraguan contras, the support of brutal dictatorships in Guatemala, the endorsement of General Augusto Pinochet's repressive regime in Chile, and the backing of the particularly savage Argentina military junta after it came to power in 1976.

In an attempt to adapt to its post-9/11 anti-terrorism focus, the U.S. has amalgamated drug trafficking and "radical populism" into its terrorist fighting tactics. This has been particularly evident in its policy formulations regarding Colombia, Bolivia and Venezuela. While the previous eras, inspired first by the Cold War and then by the War on Drugs, turned out to be based on a very sketchy rationale, they were more solidly rooted than the current War on Terror. Domestic conflicts throughout Latin America do not arise out of thin air. The urgent social conditions and volatile political environs that went unacknowledged by the U.S. in previous decades account for the instability that the region is currently experiencing. The causative agents behind the new threat of terrorism are no different. As the Latin American Working Group argues in its report on terrorism, "while law enforcement action against terrorists is essential, the

most sustainable way to combat broader support for terrorist activities is to address the conditions that foster it—poverty, lack of social and economic development, and undemocratic and repressive regimes that leave their citizens scant hope of bettering their lives, and hence open space for those offering extreme alternatives."

THE SITUATION IN SRI LANKA

HON. JAMES A. LEACH

OF IOWA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, October 7, 2004

Mr. LEACH. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to express my growing concern at the increasing levels of politically-motivated violence and the rising risks to peace in Sri Lanka.

As my colleagues may know, Sri Lanka (or Serendib, as it was known in older times) is a tear drop shaped island located about 20 miles off the southeastern coast of India. The population of about 20 million is roughly three-quarters Sinhalese and a little less than 20% Tamil. The island was occupied by the Portuguese in the 16th century, the Dutch in the 17th century, and then ceded to the British in 1802. Known as Ceylon it became independent in 1948; the name of the country was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972.

By way of background, tensions between the Sinhalese majority and minority Tamils, which had existed since independence, escalated dramatically in the early 1980s. Devastating anti-Tamil riots, as well as acts of repression and discrimination by the majority Sinhalese, led to the rise of an armed Tamil insurgency. By the mid-1980s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged as the strongest Tamil separatist force. In a grim harbinger of the Tiger's ruthless reliance on violence (which includes the use of "Black Tiger" suicide squads), the LTTE came to dominate the separatist movement by systematically eliminating all rivals for leadership. The LTTE is currently designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and several other countries.

Originally, LTTE sought an independent homeland for the Tamils, but it eventually dropped that demand and expressed a willingness to negotiate devolution of autonomy under a federal model of governance. Meanwhile, the human and financial toll of the rebellion has been enormous: some 64,000 people have been killed and roughly 800,000 displaced, with commensurate losses to the island's economic growth and development.

In 2002, Norway brokered a ceasefire, which is still in effect today and also acted as a mediator in stalled peace talks. In April 2003, however, the LTTE pulled out of the talks, claiming that it was being marginalized. In late 2003, the situation was further complicated by a political struggle between Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga and then Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe. In April 2004, Kumaratunga's party defeated Wickramasinghe in the general election and an ally of the President became the new prime minister. Although the new coalition government includes a hard-line party that is at best