U.S. POLICY IN LATIN AMERICA:
MEXICO, COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA

SIXTH CONFERENCE

VOL. 20, NO. 1

JANUARY 9-14, 2005

DIRECTOR AND MODERATOR:
Dick Clark

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Washington, DC
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Rapporteur’s Summary

Julia E. Sweig, Ph.D.
Project Consultant and Rapporteur

From January 9 through January 14, 2005, the Aspen Institute’s Congressional Program convened a conference on U.S. Policy in Latin America in Punta Mita, Mexico. The conference focused on Mexico, immigration policy, Colombia, and Venezuela.

Professor Denise Dresser of the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM) launched the first discussion with an overview of contemporary politics, economy and society in Mexico. According to Dresser, Mexican democracy has reached a crossroads. Following the 2000 election of Vicente Fox, there were widespread expectations that his election would usher in a new era of democracy after seventy years of authoritarian rule. Fox campaigned on a promise to rid the country of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) party’s clutch, to prosecute human rights abuses under the PRI, and to modernize the country’s political system, all while creating one million new jobs per year and reinventing Mexico’s relationship with the United States.

In the first year following his election, Fox, instead of breaking the PRI at its moment of greatest historical, institutional, political and popular weakness, chose to give the party a seat at the table, to work with it, which had the effect of strengthening the PRI. His approach to “co-government” weakened his presidency as the PRI used the opportunity to regain its strength and to block Fox’s initiatives, particularly on economic reform, at every pass. Infighting within the Fox cabinet further diluted its effectiveness. Today, eighteen months before the 2006 presidential election, the PRI stands a significant chance of coming back to power under the leadership of Roberto Madrazo, who as governor of the state of Tabasco, ran his campaign using illegally-appropriated funds. Madrazo represents the old-school PRI—authoritarian, clientelistic, undemocratic—not the PRI of the 1980s and 1990s when, under Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo, a new generation of U.S.-trained technocrats helped usher in Mexico’s economic and political transition.

Madrazo’s long-time rival from Tabasco is now the mayor of Mexico City and stands to run as the candidate of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in the 2006 elections. Andrés Manuel Lopez Obreto, or AMLO is a left leaning populist with his most important base largely limited to the capital and its surrounding province. In 2003-2004, as his popularity increased, two initiatives to stop his candidacy for president have emerged. First, the Federal Election Commission of Mexico, which requires three seats per party be chosen democratically by the parties themselves, stacked its membership to keep out individuals from the PRD who are AMLO supporters. This means that if AMLO does run for President and wins in a tight election, the Commission may not certify his election. Second, a corruption case has been opened in Mexican courts against the
mayor. This case was widely understood to be politically motivated, in an effort to prevent him from representing the PRD as its presiden- tial candidate in the 2006 election.

There was concern expressed in the discus- sion that AMLO’s candidacy will be regarded by the Mexican left as a test of its hypothesis, adopt- ed in the 1990s, that electoral democracy indeed represents a legitimate path to political change. If AMLO is effectively frozen out of electoral competition, it was argued that quite apart from the merits of the man, the Mexican left, which represents a considerable political force in the country, may determine that elec- toral democracy cannot yield the political playing field as was hoped in the late 1990s and dur- ing Fox’s presidential campaign. If the PRI comes back to power and if AMLO is frozen out, there was a strong feeling that Mexican democ- racy will be set back, perhaps permanently, to the authoritarian structures of the past.

On the other hand, it was acknowledged that four years in a country’s history is a blip on the screen of time; a transition from authoritarian rule of 70 years cannot be expected to be com- pleted in a matter of four or six years. Mexico has made genuine progress on a number of fronts. Chiapas has largely ended, corruption at the highest levels of gov- ernment is a thing of the past, Mexico had a clean election in 2000, and made the transition without a financial or political crisis.

However, there are several factors that contin- ue to plague the Mexican democracy that are struc- tural in nature and would accompany the presi- dency of any party. Mexicans do not have a con- cept of what it means to be a citizen. The rule of law is widely flaunted. The middle class, while stronger in Latin America, remains weak. The press, while more open and con- frontational than under the PRI, does not yet perform the kind of vigilant check on govern- ment and power that a full democracy requires. Income inequality in Mexico remains profound: fifty percent of the country lives in poverty; twenty- five percent—or 40 million people—live in abject poverty. To put it starkly, there are more poor Mexicans than there are Canadians. And finally, there is no re-election for any holder of public office. This fact alone means that public accountability is not one of the first criteria that describes a Mexican politician’s tenure in office and remains a significant impediment to deep- ening Mexico’s nascent democracy.

The United States has less influence in Mexico than it has had in the past. The upcoming election period, while not a time to flex the American muscle, does offer an opportunity for all parties and candidates to hear one clear message: that the United States looks forward to deepening the path of economic and demo- cratic reform on which Mexicans set forth in the 1990s. There was a general consensus that free and fair elections means inclusive elec- tions, which means that no legitimate presiden- tial candidates are excluded by politically moti- vated legal or technical sleights of hand.

Ambassador Jeffrey Davidov, president of the Institute of the Americas and former U.S. ambassador in Mexico from 1998 to 2001, led the second discussion about immigration. Migration from Mexico helps the United States: Fifty percent of the new American jobs created in the 1990s were filled by migrants. This has a positive effect on inflation, by keeping wages down, but low wages remain politically divisive within the United States. These national bene- fits are offset by the burden placed on local gov- ernments of border states, and increasingly throughout the country, which are spending resources to accommodate new migrants in schools and with other social services. There are approximately 10 million undocumented migrants in the United States, over half of whom are Mexican. Some 500,000 to 500,000 Mexicans come and go each year. There are 1.5 million apprehensions annually, or some 5,000 each night. Roughly 500,000 Mexicans die each year attempting to cross the border. In addi- tion, there are approximately 5 million more Mexico-born individuals living in the United States with some form of legal documentation, ranging from permanent residency status,
migration challenge is the backdrop of applications for legal status. The waiting list to become eligible to apply for permanent residency or a green card is many years long and the quota for Mexicans on the list is smaller than the quota allotted annually to Canadians. It was proposed that within the context of NAFTA, the quota for Mexicans be raised to match the existing quota for Canadians applying for permanent residency status. Fourth, a proposal was discussed to make government funding widely available for citizenship programs. Such programs would foment the study of English, set forth basic guidelines on how to be a good citizen, and help Americans to perceive migrants as individuals who wish to set themselves on a path of legality, even if such programs have nominal effect on migration itself. Participants recognized that the Mexican government will need to take additional steps to police its own border with the United States, as well as its southern border with Guatemala.

Still, the push-pull dynamic of poverty and joblessness in Mexico combined with a proliferation of low-wage jobs in the United States will continue to drive migration, legal or illegal, as long as both conditions continue to reinforce one another. A fifth category proposed by some participants argued that a combination of enforced labor standards in Mexico and higher wages in Mexico will reduce the attraction of the U.S. job market, regarding trade agreements as one mechanism for improving labor standards in sending countries. It was observed that trade agreements are negotiated for America’s trade and investment benefits, not to affect the working conditions of countries with which the U.S. enters into agreement. Examples were offered, such as Cambodia, of trade agreements that contained incentives for Cambodian manufacturers to comply with international labor standards as a means to enhance access to the American market.

Hernando Gomez Buendia, an advisor to the United Nations Development Program, led the third session of the conference with a presentation on Colombia. In the last five years, Colombia has registered progress with respect to drugs, peace, and democracy. The number of hectares of drugs under cultivation has declined by forty percent in comparison to the year 2000. Extractions of drug dealers to the United States have increased under President Alvaro Uribe. On the peace front, the military balance has clearly changed in favor of the Armed Forces: the FARC are in tactical retreat, terrorist activity has declined, and citizen security, measured by declines in homicides and kidnappings, has also improved. Crime rates in Colombia remain high by world standards, and not all of the reduction in homicides is due to President Uribe’s “democratic security” plan. Concerning democracy, Colombia remains Latin America’s oldest and most resilient of democracies. It might be tempting to determine from a quick glance that the gains of recent years, under the American “Plan Colombia” and especially Uribe’s democratic security program, that Colombia has turned a corner. But the advances could be temporary and perhaps even misleading. The United States currently is well-situated to re-think the mix of strategy currently employed to carry out the war on drugs, to bring peace to the region, and to strengthen the country’s democratic institutions.

The current strategy of aerial fumigation has reduced cultivation in Colombia but the net area under cultivation in the Andean region remains at the same levels as in the year 2000, or approximately 200,000 hectares. Moreover, the principal objective of the strategy, to reduce price and purity on American streets, has not been reached. Despite the breakup in the 1980s of Colombia’s major cartels, there are now some 180 “baby” cartels that have absorbed the business. The profit margins offer a spread of one-to-twenty, meaning that the industry can easily adapt to and absorb the cost of lab seizures, aerial fumigation, and eradication. The United States has shown it can win the battle against drug cultivation and trafficking, but not the war. The social, legal, and environmental costs of aerial fumigation do not necessarily outweigh the benefits of the positive gains of reducing hectares under cultivation. Moreover, most coca and poppy is now grown on small plots, interspersed with legal crops: spraying does not discriminate, so peasant growers increasingly turn to the paramilitary and the FARC for protection, reinforcin the dynamic of violent conflict that accompanied the drug war.

With respect to armed conflict and the search for peace, Colombia has benefited from the military assistance that is part of Plan Colombia. The armed forces have grown stronger, but with the country’s public debt—approaching fifty percent of gross domestic product—and a growing structural and fiscal deficit, the Colombian military could not sustain, let alone intensify, its efforts on its own. Instead, there has been no major strike against the FARC, despite tactical advances. Colombia needs and will continue to need increased military assistance to this end.

If the last few years have witnessed a retreat of the FARC, the paramilitary forces have multiplied in strength—politically, numerically, financially, and geographically. Within the 20,000-odd forces that make up the paramilitary, there are traditional self-defense forces, a paramilitary army linked to the Armed Forces to carry out a paramilitary war, land speculators, drug dealers, and ordinary Mafioso-type organizations. At present, nearly seventy percent of Colombia’s best agricultural land is in the hands of individuals who obtained it through paramilitary violence. Paramilitary criminal organizations control entire regions of the country—9 of the 32 states in the country are fully controlled by the paramilitaries, who claim representation among approximately 35 percent of Colombia’s Congress.

Colombian democracy is increasingly besieged by the corruption bred by the drug industry, the violence of the guerrillas and paramilitary, and the increasing tolerance by the population of a gray area with respect to human rights. President Uribe’s quest for re-election, while popular and likely to succeed, implies the usurpation of the powers of Congress and the Supreme Court; it evokes the consolidation of power that was undertaken in Peru by former president Alberto Fujimori, and that is currently underway in Venezuela under President Hugo Chavez. Indeed, the statute allowing Uribe to run for re-election specifically prohibits individuals in local office—such as mayors and governors—from running within one year of having served. This prohibition will prevent the left-leaning mayor of Bogotá, Lucho Garzón, from opposing Uribe, in a similar dynamic to that in Mexico where the ruling parties appear to be conspiring to prevent the mayor of Mexico City from running in the 2006 presidential election.

The conventional wisdom with respect to American policy in Colombia has been that Colombia is moving toward a solution. But Colombia’s greatest enemy is a war in which civilians are the principal target of violence: Resolution to the multiple conflicts that plague the country will require major policy changes in both Colombia and the United States. The United States has focused on drug eradication and fighting the FARC. Both are critical, as are programs to address demand for drugs within the U.S. market. Likewise, the United States will need to engage in demobilization of the paramilitary, which is taking place without a process to give victims of massacres and theft some standard of justice and material compensation. Within Colombia, the upper classes have yet to take full responsibility for their own country’s war effort. The FARC never threatened to take state power—and remain interested in local power only for the purpose of avoiding prosecution or extradition. Income inequality in Colombia remains one of the most unequal in Latin America. Colombian civil society is immensely strong in the cities and within indigenous communities. But Colombia suffers from “too little state, and a lot of society,” with an historic deficit in adherence to the rule of law on the part of the Colombian collective body politic.

In 2005, Congress will undertake a review of Plan Colombia. The original rationale for that policy was to eradicate drugs. After the attacks
of September 2001 the Bush administration and Congress broadened the scope of American assistance to include counter-nar-cotics, counter-terror, and counter-insurgency. Participants concurred about the importance of the United States remaining actively engaged in Colombia. It was observed that forthcoming debates about the strategic objective of Plan Colombia would benefit from an honest exchange about the rationale for continued assistance to Colombia.

The final session of the conference began with a presentation on Venezuela by Jennifer McCoy, director of the Americas Program at the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Venezuela encapsulates a number of disturbing trends within Latin America as a whole. Social exclusion in Latin America continues to affect women, indigenous populations, individuals of African origin and the poor, limiting access by these groups to jobs, justice and state services. Poverty and inequality in Latin America are among the highest in the world. And "liberal democracy," a term to describe authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rule by democratically-elected governments, is increasingly present in the hemisphere. President Hugo Chavez's popularity continues among those Venezuelans historically excluded from the social contract. Poverty in Venezuela grew from 25 percent of the population in the 1970s to 65 percent in the 1990s, and may reach as much as 80 percent today. Chavez has stood for five elections in the last six years, completing them with substantial popular mandates. Yet he has increasingly concentrated power in his own authority and moved to constrain the independence of the Supreme Court, two new branches of government created by the 2000 constitution—the electoral and the citizen's branch—while appearing to muzzle the media (which has called for his assassination) under the guise of an effort to limit violent content.

The bilateral relationship with the United States has undergone significant strain in recent years. Although Venezuela continues to supply the United States with 12 to 15 percent of its oil imports, American leverage with Venezuela and the Chavez government has diminished since April 2002 when the U.S. govern-ment tacitly endorsed a brief, albeit popularly-supported, coup against the president. American and Venezuelan diplomats assigned to one another's capitals are increasingly isolat-ed and ostracized by the host governments. Although the Carter Center certified the legiti-macy of the August 2004 referendum in which President Chavez won the endorsement of 99 percent (vs. 41 percent) of Venezuelan voters, the United States government increasingly regards the Chavez government with suspicion for its association with the Cuban government, for its alleged tolerance of Colombia's FARC rebels on Venezuelan territory, for its cultiva-tion of ties with China, Libya, Iran and North Korea, and for its advocacy within OPEC of poli-cies that result in higher oil prices.

President Chavez was described as pragmatic, charismatic and eclectic in philosophical outlook. His rhetoric far exceeds his actions and often reflects a need to cultivate the political base within Venezuela that is far to his left. Chavez cares about international opinion and has been known to react from his heated rhetoric only after some occasion. The April 2002 coup left Chavez with distrust for the United States and for the political opposition that supported the coup, and for the media that has advocated his removal from power in recent years. Indeed, Venezuela's media was described as the single most important and power-ful political player in the country. Although Chavez has not shut down the media, he is trying to combat its political power with measures that have been widely condemned by international human rights organizations.

The Chavez government has begun to plow substantial revenues from high oil prices in recent years into programs designed to provide education, literacy training, health care, and other social services to the country's poor and historically disenfranchised. The 2000 consti-tution embodies the concept of "participatory democracy," enabling citizens to hold their elected representatives and individual laws accountable with referenda and recall votes. Venezuelans historically excluded from the body politic have been empowered by these social and political developments, and are not likely to recede as political actors in the fore-seable future. Moreover, recent land reform initiatives have been developed to convert (with compensation) idle private and publicly-owned land into productive agricultural land. The Chavez government is prepared to adopt initia-tives that are domestically and internationally polarizing, but that have obvious political and social content to them.

Against the backdrop of the Chavez government's efforts to expand political and social inclusion, the discussion turned to the question of what margins of independent social reform the United States is prepared to tolerate in Latin America. Some participants argued that the United States continues, as it did during the Cold War, to support repressors and elites who are the main beneficiaries of political and eco-nomic power in the region. It should come as no surprise, then, that a vast number of Latin Americans continue to believe that "yankee imperialism" uses free and fair elections as a tool to exploit, and to support the existing status quo, rather than to promote fundamental change.

Other participants sought to place current conditions in historical context, arguing that the state of affairs in Latin America and U.S.-Latin America relations is not so negative. Latin America with few exceptions has a free press, independent congresses, marked social improvements in literacy, primary and sec-ondary education, and infant mortality. Citizens no longer live in fear of repressive military regimes that once dominated the region. Latin America's main problem, it was argued, is that since 1980 the region has experienced exactly zero percent growth in per capita GDP. Social inequality cannot be expected to improve with-out growth. With growth, and a range of mea-sures to support the development of a middle class, Latin America does stand a chance for overcoming the current malaise that has its citi-zens increasingly disenfranchised with democracy. Still, there remains a fundamental difference between Latin American and American views of democracy. The latter regard democracy as pro-viding civil liberties for the protection of indi-vidual rights. In Latin America, democracy is regarded as a system that ought to be able to deliver tangible social goods.

Participants felt that American policy makers are increasingly isolated from the conditions, prior-ities, and experiences of the vast majority of Latin Americans. American embassies in the region, in some cases, are known to prohibit for-eign service officers from talking to individuals who oppose different aspects of U.S. policies on the ground. Latin Americans increasingly have the impression that Americans are uninterested in discussing agenda items that are not seen as serv-ing first and foremost U.S. interests, e.g., terror, drugs or trade. Contacts between political and economic elites in both countries, including elect-ed officials, have become standard operating pro-cedure, while NGOs and other groups represent-ing the region's socially and politically excluded sectors, the very groups most susceptible to pop-u list political leaders, remain largely off the American radar. Participants welcomed the prospect of meeting with a far more broad and diverse group of individuals on visits to the region.
Mexico: From Bad to Worse?

Denise Dresser, Ph.D.
Professor of Political Science
Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México

In Mexico today, people laugh at the country’s politicians because otherwise they would weep for them. Laughter has become a national antidote to tears and that explains why the country’s most popular political analyst up until several months ago was a red-nosed, green-haired clown named Brozo. As the host of a morning news show on Mexican prime-time television, Brozo poked fun at the country’s politicians, exposed their corrupt activities, and acted as a public watchdog because an inefficient judiciary seems unable to fulfill that role.

Over the past several months, Mexico has provided him with endless grist for his morning mill: the governor of the state of Oaxaca who stages an assassination attempt to bolster his party’s political fortunes in a local race, a senator from the Green Party who is videotaped negotiating a bribe from a businessman who wants to build a hotel on an ecological reserve, a city government official also caught on tape as he receives a bribe from a powerful contractor, and the man in charge of Mexico City’s finances gambling with them at a Las Vegas casino. Democratic Mexico hasn’t eliminated corruption: The country is producing a reality show with it. Democracy has inaugurated a political system that is freer but not necessarily cleaner. Mexico continues to be a country of crimes without punishment, of people who are identified as guilty on-screen but cannot be proven so in court, of politicians who enrich themselves because they still can.

This has become the greatest problem that the government of President Vicente Fox faces: Day after day, Mexican newspapers portray a paralyzed country in which very little has changed. Mexicans don’t talk about what has been accomplished, but about what could have been. Mexico seems to be speaking the vocabulary of disenchantment. The words “failure,” “disillusion,” “lack of leadership” have become a daily part of our national conversation. The prevailing consensus seems to be that Vicente Fox’s presidency is over, that he is no longer a lame duck but a dead duck.

Mexican politics is turning into a blood sport because so much is at stake. Political battles are not being fought between Congress and the President over pending structural reforms; they are being waged among the three political parties and their presidential hopefuls over who will occupy the presidential chair in 2006. Precisely because Vicente Fox is perceived as increasingly irrelevant as a decision maker, the presidential race has begun in earnest—and succession politics determine what every politician says and what party positions are taken. Because Vicente Fox’s presidency seems to have evaporated into thin air, both the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) believe that they could win the presidency two years from now and are using every weapon at their disposal. So hardball politics, mudslinging, character assassination and the use of the
Mexican judiciary as a political tool to undermine opponents have become a permanent fixture of Mexico's political landscape.

Over the next two years, Mexican politics will unfold in a context in which the PRI wields a growing degree of power; the left-wing Mayor of Mexico City, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, fights for his political life in increasingly hostile circumstances; and very little is accomplished in legislative terms because Vicente Fox's presidency, for all practical purposes, is over. The focus now and until 2006 is on the presidential race. In order to explore these themes, the following essay presents three main arguments:

1) The video-scandals that have embarrassed government officials in Mexico City over the last six months seem to have one purpose: to remove López Obrador from his position as frontrunner in the presidential race.

2) The concerted attacks on the Mexican left—coupled with Fox's failures—open a dangerous door in Mexican politics, one that could allow the return of the PRI, and its current party chair and presidential contender, Roberto Madrazo.

3) Whether or not the PRI returns will depend to a large extent on the position that both Vicente Fox and his National Action Party (PAN) adopt between 2005 and 2006. Two years away from 2006 it is possible to predict that we will be witnessing a two man race, between López Obrador and Roberto Madrazo, with a PAN candidate (probably Interior Minister Santiago Creel) running in third place. So the issue for the PAN becomes who it blocks and who it helps. Does the PAN allow the PRI to return by undermining the left—which it hates—and López Obrador at every turn? Does it cut off its nose to spite its face? Or does it do everything in its power to prevent the return of the PRI, knowing that if that happens, it will mean a setback for democratic consolidation in Mexico. This is the devilish dilemma that the PAN currently faces: a choice between bad and worse.

*A Frontrunner Fights for His Life*

Day in and day out, come rain or shine, López Obrador gives a public press conference in his office at 6 am, in an effort to show that he's a man of the people and working for them. He is widely perceived as one and therein his appeal. Despite a spate of scandals involving several of his close collaborators, he remains a political force to contend with, given his high approval ratings in Mexico City and, to a lesser extent, nationwide. That support has been gradually eroding but still places him ten points ahead of his rivals in the presidential race.

Due to a combination of a massive public works program, populist policies and savvy political positioning, López Obrador remains the most popular politician in Mexico. That is what makes him so dangerous to so many vested interests, and explains why he has many powerful enemies obsessed with bringing him down and bribing—and videotaping—those who could do so. As a result of the Fox government's deliberate attempts to sabotage López Obrador through the use of the judiciary, the Mayor faces a legal battle in Congress that could strip him of his immunity from prosecution, making it impossible for him to run in 2006.

López Obrador's political strategy since the beginning of the video scandals has been to argue that he is being set up, that it's all a plot hatched by the Fox government, former President Carlos Salinas, and a vast array of vested interests in the system, designed to bring him down. He has tried to center public attention on the alleged conspiracy and shift it away from undeniable corruption in his government. That strategy has worked with broad swaths of his political base in Mexico City—the poor, the less educated—for whom corruption is a relative issue, and what López Obrador's collaborators have done pales in comparison with the pillaging of the PRI under Salinas.

There seems to be some truth to López Obrador's claim about a plot. Evidence points to a series of behind the scenes activities carried out by Carlos Ahumada—the now jailed contractor—prominent members of the PAN, and members of the Attorney General's office to videotape city officials stuffing briefcases with money and then release those tapes on national television. Whether or not Fox knew about these activities and allowed them to happen remains an open question.

What is clear is Fox's approval of the politicization of the Attorney General's office and the Judiciary against the Mayor. López Obrador is currently caught in a legal battle wherein the Attorney General's office has accused him of ignoring a restraint order issued by the courts, and allowing the construction of a public road on a piece of land whose ownership has been contested. So Mexico's presidential race may be determined by a small plot of land, known as "El Ejecon." The attacks on López Obrador have led to his increasing radicalization. Two years ago, he was viewed as a potential Lula (the leftwing president of Brazil who has governed in a pragmatic and moderate fashion) and now he's feared as a possible Chávez (the populist and divisive president of Venezuela). Two years ago, businesses applauded his moderation and now they condemn his stridency. Before the videoscandals he seemed like the inevitable leader of a modern left, and now he seems like the desperate leader of a recalcitrant left. For many members of Mexico's middle class, López Obrador isn't a politician to support but a proto-populist to be afraid of. This wariness stems from López Obrador's public denunciations of Mexico's legal system and the politicization of its judicial system. In Mexico, although the rule of law is, in many areas, non-existent, Mexicans expect politicians to obey it. López Obrador questions its very existence and pays a political price. As a result, the Mayor has been losing political ground and supporters, particularly among business groups and the country's middle class.

In many ways, his enemies have achieved their objective. López Obrador spends more time dodging political blows than governing the city. His public outbursts against the judiciary have diminished his credibility, and led to the gradual weakening of the heterogeneous, multi-party coalition he attempted to build. The Mayor seems to govern with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. The angel whispers that he should govern for all Mexicans, and the devil tells him that only the poor deserve it. The angel says that he will need to build support among all social groups and the devil answers that the dispossessed are enough. The angel suggests that his "alternative project for the country" needs to be inclusive, and the devil advocates the contrary. The angel urges him to be conciliatory while the devil pushes him to be divisive.

López Obrador's divisiveness may allow him to mount a good defense but it could hamper his electoral prospects, given that he needs to construct a broad-based coalition to win. Although the left governs Mexico City, the PRD performs badly at the national level and has lost over half the congressional seats it was able to win in the late 1990s. The PRD is struggling with the personal popularity of López Obrador as a guiding political force. The question is whether the popularity of a single individual will be enough to assemble a winning electoral coalition on the back of a fractured and divided party, whether that individual will be allowed to compete, and whether he can bring political moderates back into the fold. Today the PRD is a collection of warring factions, united around the embattled presidential bid of a man who argues that his enemies tout "the rule of law" in Mexico as if it existed.

The PRI of the Past Gains Strength

Many Mexicans who voted for Vicente Fox are bewildered. Four years into his term, the man who promised to kick the PRI out of power forever seems to have been kidding. Politics can't tolerate vacuums and the PRI is filling the one created by Fox's failures. The PRI is coming
back, winning state election after state election, and Mexico's first democratically elected presi-
dent appears unperturbed. If the former ruling
party returns to office in the next presidential
election in 2006, the country's democracy will
have been short-lived. If the PRI is reelected, it
will be a disaster.

Four years ago millions of Mexicans voted for
change. They heard Vicente Fox's promises and
believed them. They elected a candidate who
would kill the dinosaurs and tame the dragons.
But he couldn't or didn't want to. Instead of
using his word, he tripped and fell on top of it.
Instead of confronting those who had
deployed Mexico, he ended curled up next to
them. Instead of weakening the PRI when he
could, he tried to collaborate with it in
Congress and refused to take on the vested
interests in the unions that the former ruling
party had created. By attempting to co-govern
with the PRI, Fox has breathed new life into it.
Unwittingly, the president has become the PRI's
secret weapon. The results of that mistaken pol-
icy of accommodation are there for all to see:
an emboldened PRI and a weakened govern-
ment, a cornered president and two more years
of politics of more of the same.

Because while Fox offers carrots instead of
sticks, the PRI has been organizing itself at
the state and local level, retaking ground in the
periphery as a way of regaining control of the
center. And as recent results in the states of
Oaxaca and Veracruz underscore, the party will
resort to fear and loathing on the campaign
trail if it has to. The PRI is pulling old tricks
out of the hat—intimidation, vote buying, patron-
age—and weak electoral institutions combined
with low turnout means they still work.

And work they did for the new Mayor of
Tijuana, Jorge Hank Rhon, elected despite
dooms of drug trafficking, an arrest for
smuggling, and the fact that two of his bodyguards
are in jail for the assassination of a prominent
journalist. Hank's victory sent a clear message:
in order to win, the PRI doesn't have to
modernize itself, it doesn't have to change. It can
remain the same and still orchestrate a come-
back. It can nominate political dinosaurs and
still win in Mexico's new fragile democracy.

Today the PRI's presidential hopeful,
Roberto Madrazo, is positioning himself as the
candidate of those who are disappointed with
democracy. Of those who believe that power
sharing has been a road to nowhere. Of those
who prefer the efficient corruption of the PRI
to the chronic ineptitude of Fox's National
Action Party. A vintage dinosaur with numerous
accusations of electoral fraud hidden under his
tail, Roberto Madrazo represents the old system
at its worst and is pushing for its revival. The
PRI is poised to take full advantage of the
government's paralysis, not because of what the
party offers but because of the vacuum it fills.
The PRI is coming back because there's noth-
ing to stop it. The former ruling party advances
by default, it does so with disciplined leaders, it
does so despite deep internal divisions, it does
so because it can.

PRI leader Roberto Madrazo is gambling on
those who miss the old system of clear rules and
predictable complexities. And he has found a
constituency among Mexicans who prefer a per-
fected dictatorship to a paralyzed democracy.
In the absence of presidential leadership, the PRI
is building a coalition of the disaffected. The
PRI is selling itself as the party that can get
things done, even if that means doing them in
the old way. Some argue that this may not nec-
essarily be a bad outcome given that in Mexico's
new circumstances, the PRI will be reined in
and Madrazo will be constrained by institutions
that now act as countervailing to the president.

What is so troubling about the current situa-
tion is that many members of Fox's own party
believe this. PAN leaders also think that if they
join hands with the PRI to strip López Obrador
of his immunity—and preempt the advance of
the Mexican left—that move will clear the way
for their own presidential hopeful, Santiago
Crescencio. The PAN, however, is probably mistaken.
Without a charismatic candidate like Vicente
Fox, the PAN will return to its traditional vote
levels. The issue for the PAN is not whether it
can retain control of the presidency, but to
which party it will hand it over. Will the PAN
offer the presidency on a silver platter to the
PRI by keeping the popular Mayor of Mexico
City out of the race, or will it run the risk of
empowering the left by allowing López
Obrador to run?

A Popular but Ineffective President

President Vicente Fox doesn't seem to realize
what is at stake. He proclaims that he's happy
all the time. He argues that the country is
marching forward, despite what his critics say.
He continues to spout numbers and data that
confirm his optimistic views, however politically
irrelevant they may be. He obsesses about his
approval in the polls, even though they reveal
that he's perceived as popular but ineffectual.
The prevailing view on Vicente Fox is that the
president knows how to be a good cheerleader,
but doesn't know how to make decisions; he
knows how to sell ideas but doesn't know how to
put them into practice; he knows how to charm
the media but doesn't know how to horse-trade
with Congress. The population, however, knows
this and forces him for it because he's per-
ceived as a good, well-intentioned man.

The reasons behind Fox's failures are com-
plex and varied: the appointment of a Cabinet
of strangers, the misuse of his political capital
during his first year in office, the lack of clear
priorities and concrete strategies, the decision
to negotiate with the PRI instead of dividing it
after the 2000 election, the use of the bully pul-
pit in a country with no congressional or presi-
dental re-election, the persistence of institu-
tions created for dominant party rule, the inter-
mittent sabotage of Vicente Fox by members of
his own party, the uncontrollable activism and
presidential ambitions of his wife, among oth-
ers. Vicente Fox painted himself into a corner
but also allowed others to do so.

Yet he remains popular because in the minds
of many Mexican voters, Fox is one thing and
his party is another. People don't expect much
from the President but like him anyway; people
de-link the president's image from his govern-
ment's performance. Electoral results proved
that people can love Fox and hate the PAN, sup-
port the person and distance themselves from
his party. In the mid-term election in 2003, Fox
supporters stayed home and abstentionism ben-
etified the PRI, which became the majority party
in Congress. This paradox will continue
throughout the remaining two years of his term.
Fox will continue to soar in the polls as the
PAN crashes everywhere else.

The PAN today is a party with its head in its
hands. Its inability to deliver better government
has paved the way for a PRI comeback; its con-
stant bickering with Vicente Fox over the past
four years has made it possible for the electorate
to punish the party at the polls while sparing the
president. Without the benefit of the multiplier
effect that Fox had on the party in the 2000
presidential race, the PAN is shrinking back
to its normal size of 25-27 percent of the elec-
torate. This is bad news for its potential presi-
dential contender and Minister of the Interior,
Santiago Crescencio. Instead of combating the PRI's
record of corruption he ignored it for the sake
of congressional votes that never materialized
anyway. Instead of condemning the PRI for past
misdemeanors, he instead collaborated with it.

As a result, policy paralysis in Mexico will pre-
vail and the PRI is poised to take full advantage
of it, not because of what the party offers but
because of the empty political space it fills. As
change fails to assume a concrete shape, the
past seeps through. The PAN is too busy wringing
its hands, the president is too busy boosting his
own popularity, and the Mexican left is too busy
worrying how it can gain more than 17 percent
of the national vote, where it stands today.

Roberto Madrazo will now use his party's
recent victories to unite disparate factions in
favor of a common cause: tripping Fox and sab-
otaging the PAN. The PRI has no incentive what-
soever to collaborate in Congress, because the
party isn't blamed for the stalemate there. The
PRI will continue to be intransigent about pend-
ing economic reforms because it has nothing to
lose and a lot to gain. Fox promised change and
the PRI capitalized on the legislative paralysis
The scenario for Mexico seems to be—in the absence of presidential leadership—PRI-driven marginal reform, designed to bolster the party’s electoral fortunes and build a coalition of those who have become disillusioned with the ineffectiveness of PAN rule. The PRI will try to position itself, in contrast with Fox and the PAN, as the party that can propel Mexico out of its current paralysis, even if it has to rely on traditional methods to do so. But Roberto Madrazo’s way is not only the old way. It’s the worst way. The PRI he has reassembled is not the modernizing, technocratic party that pushed forward Mexico’s much needed economic restructuring in the 1990s. Madrazo’s PRI is a group of ancil- lus who view the country as their personal fief-don and intend to govern it as such. Madrazo’s PRI is a party run by corrupt mafias who are itching to act freely, and will dismantle the country’s few democratic institutions to do so.

Ultimately, what’s at stake for Mexico with the PRI’s return is the viability, the longevity, the survival of Mexican democracy beyond 2006. Because if the PRI comes back, Mexico will slide back from an imperfect democracy to the government it lived with for 71 years. Only worse. And the one barrier against this outcome is a proto-populist politician who wants to govern Mexico by polarizing it. Perhaps Brozo the clown knew this when he resigned from his television show several months ago. He said that he just couldn’t be a clown anymore. His wife died and he just didn’t feel like laughing anymore. And many Mexicans who are viewing the choice for 2006 as a contest between bad and worse, feel the same way.

The United States and Mexico: Immigration

Jeffrey Davidow, M.A.
President, Institute of the Americas

Assumptions

Any discussion of the U.S.-Mexico illegal immigration scene should take into consideration certain basic assumptions:

- Outflow from Mexico to the U.S.—“the push”—will continue at high rates until the Mexican economy can provide sufficient work opportunities and decent standards of living to a far greater percentage of its population. The most optimistic assumptions hold that the outflow will continue for another generation.
- The attraction of the U.S.—“the pull”—as a society in which wages are well above those available in Mexico, and with a way of life that offers greater economic security, personal opportunities, and the rule of law will continue.
- The draconian measures necessary to “seal the border,” e.g., national identity documents for all, serious punishment for employers of undocumented aliens, use of military force on the border, 100 per cent inspection of all cargo, etc., is unlikely to be acceptable to the American public and important political and economic interests.
- The Mexican Government cannot and will not use force to prevent its citizens from leaving the country.
- The debates over how best to protect homeland security and how to stem illegal immigration are likely to become more intertwined (even when there may be little direct relationship).

Given the above, it is unlikely that the immigration problem can be “solved” in the near or medium term. The immigration debate in the United States may become more heated and less enlightened. This will make even more difficult the basic task for government of managing the issue of undocumented aliens in a way that serves U.S. national interests and provides for a level of humane and just treatment for those who are “pushed” or “pulled” northward. The U.S. and Mexico do a relatively good job of managing any number of potentially conflictive issues, but immigration is an issue that falls easy prey to ideological and emotional responses on both sides of the border that make management very complicated.

Opposing Views

Immigration is currently the most divisive issue in the U.S.-Mexican relationship. There is a fundamental disconnect between the way most Mexicans and most Americans look at the topic of illegal aliens. For most north of the border the question of who gets to come to the United States is, at base, a matter of law. There is legislation, rules, regulations, criteria, waiting periods, and bureaucracies that should be respected. Some can come. Most can’t. Too bad: immigration into the United States is a privilege not available to all.
Most Mexicans have a different view going to El Norte to work in an accepted part of life and local culture, in some cases generations old. There is clearly a need for Mexican labor in the United States—otherwise how would so many find employment there? And, if the U.S. Government by an act is generally seen as omnipotent—were truly serious about keeping illegal aliens out, it would only have to punish the employers who make the flow northwards so attractive. It does not do so, therefore, it is not serious.

Given the Mexican perspective, which comes close to seeing the northward migration as a right, recent efforts to harden the border that have made the crossing more dangerous are perceived as noxiously hypocritical. The tightening of controls around major ports of entry, beginning with El Paso and San Diego in the mid-1990s, has resulted in more undocumented aliens attempting to make the crossing in hazardous areas. The numbers who die in the attempt to cross the desert or mountains is between 300 and 400 a year. The message, from the perspective south of the border seems to be: "We will do everything we can to make it difficult—perhaps even deadly—to come to the United States. But if you can make it to Phoenix, Los Angeles or anywhere else, we will be pleased to look the other way and let you find work."

And the numbers who do cross keep growing. The growth of the Mexican population in the U.S. has been exponential in recent years. In 1970, about 800,000 natives of Mexico lived in the United States. Thirty-plus years later, there are ten million, about half in undocumented status. The surge in the 1990s, which continued past 2000, was particularly notable, with the total increasing to 2,000,000 per year; or, put differently, one million new Mexican-born residents of the U.S. every three years or less. (Note: This is the total of net "stayers." The total of temporary crossers is much higher. By definition, almost all figures relating to what is essentially a clandestine flow of people are estimates. The number of crossers decreased with the economic downturn of post-2000 and seems to be once again on the increase.)

Preidents Bush and Fox

The arrival of the two new presidents on the scene in late 2000 seemed to herald the possibility for change in the immigration scene. At their meeting in February 2001 at Fox's ranch in Guanajuato—Mr. Bush's first meeting as president with a foreign leader—they agreed that something had to be done. Both men, as governors, had witnessed the human cost of a system that, from their perspective, was clearly not working. A bi-national committee headed by Attorney General John Ashcroft and Secretary of State Colin Powell and by Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda and Interior Minister Santiago Creel was given the task of coming up with concrete ideas by July of that year.

The Mexicans placed five separate, but interrelated, issues on the table: legalization for undocumented aliens already in the U.S.; an expanded temporary workers program; revision of U.S. visa policies so that Mexicans eligible for legal permanent alien status could get their green cards faster; funds for economic development in Mexico that would provide alternatives to emigration; and, cooperation on safety issues at the border. The American side accepted all of the themes as worthy of discussion, but not in common action—like the one enacted in 1986, was out of the question. About two million Mexicans had taken advantage of that law, and rather than ending the illegal migration problem, it actually exacerbated it by increasing the number of the resident community in the U.S., better able to welcome new arrivals. But the prohibition on an amnesty did not rule out discussion of a process of legalization for some Mexicans already in the United States.

It is now conventional wisdom that the hope engendered by the Guanajuato meeting was terminated by the events of September 11, 2001. The facts, however, are that the discussions—the Mexicans preferred the term "negotiations"—made no real progress during the spring of 2001. They had run into the brick wall of domestic U.S. political concerns and intra-administration differences well before the September tragedy. The obvious became apparent: the immigration issue is not amenable to a quick fix. Moreover, the incessant pounding on the theme by Fox, and more insistently, by his Foreign Secretary, demanding agreement on all issues (Castaneda's famous "whole enchilada") raised huckles in Washington. Before September 11, progress on immigration was all but dead.

Out of necessity, America's attention focused elsewhere and the palpable euphoria in Mexico dissipated. Domestic criticism of Fox for not delivering on immigration became yet another element in a more generalized negative view that he was not complying with his promise to bring major change to the country.

Despite the lack of real progress on a new migration approach, bilateral cooperation on some migration matters did improve during President Bush's first term. The Mexican Government made a stronger effort to crack down on immigrant smugglers, tried harder to cut off the flow of Central Americans and other third country nationals using its territory as a transit point into the U.S., and offered consistent helpful behind-the-scenes support on issues relating to the war on terrorism. However, Mexico's vocal opposition in the UN Security Council to the Iraq war further soured the mood between the two presidents.

In early 2004, President Bush publicly offered ideas for an expanded temporary workers program, but the issue was not seriously developed in Congress. In their most recent meeting at the APEC conference in Chile in November 2004, President Bush publicly committed to reinitiate efforts on a temporary workers program. The Mexican Government, with Castaneda now out of the cabinet, now appears to understand that the "whole enchilada" approach is impossible and is, in the words of new Foreign Secretary Ernesto Derbez, looking for immigration menu selections—what he calls the Taco Bell approach.

The American Mood

Polling data and anecdotal information reveal that Americans continue to prize the openness of their society and do not wish to close their country to newcomers. But there are signs that the national consensus is under strain. The heavy focus on security after 9/11 that has made life more difficult for many undocumented aliens and their families has been accepted without much public criticism or knowledge. There is a greater desire to know who is living among us. The debate on outsourcing on occasion ironically translates into concern about foreigners coming to take jobs here rather than the export of jobs to other lands. The still sluggish economy makes the American people less generous.

Public opinion leaders—Lou Dobbs on CNN, Fox News, and even Harvard professor Samuel Huntington—are casting doubt on our ability to withstand the immigrant surge. Huntington's book Who Are We? posits a United States unable to maintain national unity in the face of a future crisis because of a large body of unassimilated Hispanics. The academic underpinnings of Huntington's work have been seriously questioned as weak, partial, overly anecdotal, and simply incorrect. But his elegant phrasing about the loss of Anglo-Protestant domination—yet another volley in the battle about multiculturality—is frequently echoed in less elegant tones by many Americans.

While important, the sense of cultural dislocation and challenge is not as important in promoting anti-immigrant sentiment as the economic pressure that many Americans, particularly in states along the border are feeling. They see communities bearing heavy financial pressure for more schools, clinics, and other public services necessitated by large numbers of undocumented Mexicans in residence. They feel their government is not doing enough to protect them and their families' budgets. The fact is that the benefits of illegal immigration—larger labor pool, lower inflation, higher levels of productivity—are felt at the national level and so dispersed as to be generally imperceptible.

On the other hand, the negatives of increased illegal immigration are frequently felt in real, budgetary terms at the local level. The
voters of Arizona, including, it is reported, a significant minority percentage of Hispanics, voted in favor of Proposition 200 in the November elections. A watered-down version of California's unconstitutional Proposition 187, the Arizona measure will deny some public services to undocumented aliens.

The public's concern about homeland security is frequently intertwined—sometimes positively and on occasion for political or nativist motives—with the debate about illegal immigration. For example, the ongoing legislative struggle in California about drivers' licenses for illegal aliens is frequently discussed in terms of national security and the need to protect against terrorism. In reality, the majority of support to deny licenses comes from those who see obtaining them—particularly in car-dominated California—as the key to living freely in this country and as the most important action, short of voting, that can distinguish a legal from an illegal resident. The California debate over drivers' licenses, like the similar confrontation in the U.S. Congress, might legitimately be about national security, but it is fueled in significant measure by anti-immigrant sentiment.

There is no reliable evidence to indicate that withdrawing public services from illegal immigrants reduces the flow from Mexico. It is inaccurate to believe that migrants come for the public services. They come essentially to work—to participate in what is increasingly a unified labor market—and, if the social benefits are not available or if applying for them poses too great a risk, the immigrants will abstain from their use. The net effect may be a lessening of educational levels and public health. Illegal aliens will drive without licenses. Similarly there is no indication that the current policy of strengthening the border at the more "hospitable" points has had any significant effect on the numbers of crossers. In fact, many observers argue that by making it more difficult to enter the United States, once in, aliens will not take the risk of leaving and re-entering, thus ending the "circularity" which once characterized the flow.

The bottom line is that U.S. immigration policy is not working well. If the criteria for success is to keep undocumented aliens out, it is clearly failing. If the criteria for success is an orderly, just, and humane flow, the policy is similarly a failure.

2004 in Congress

An election year is not the best moment for a serious discussion of immigration policy, and not surprisingly, the issue was not a significant topic, but it was not totally absent. President Bush outlined his ideas for a new guest worker program in January 2004. It would offer three-year visas, renewable once (for a total of 6 years of employment) to all nationalities. Once sponsored by a U.S. employer, the immigrant could apply for the temporary worker visa either in the U.S. (by paying a fee) or from overseas. The guest worker could bring his family, but a dependent could not work unless they got a guest worker permit as well. The temporary visa holder could apply for a "green card," but there is no guarantee that he could get it before his permission to stay as a temporary worker runs out. Opponents note that the risk inherent in coming out of the shadows, signing up for the program, and then facing possible deportation at the end of the time period, is likely to dissuade many from participating.

Wayne Cornelius, an expert on immigration policy at the University of California San Diego, questions whether employers would be willing to participate in the program. He notes that without strong employer sanctions for hiring illegal aliens, it is difficult to see what the incentive would be for the employers. For example, the existing H-2A temporary worker program for agricultural workers (which has no numerical cap) is widely perceived by employers as being too cumbersome and time-consuming. Only 15,628 visas were issued under this program in Fiscal Year 2002.

A Democratic congressional plan would offer a quicker path to earned legalization for illegal aliens who have been in the country for at least five years. Aliens with less than five years of residence could apply for a green card after two years as temporary workers. This plan would create a new temporary worker program for low-skilled workers and make it and the current underutilized program for temporary agricultural workers more attractive by offering paths to legal permanent residence.

Policy Considerations

The flow of migrants from Mexico to the United States is a long-term problem that will require constant management for some time to come. It is not an independent phenomenon, but rather the result of Mexico's lack of sufficient development and opportunities. Shorn of all complexities and nuances, the answer to the problem is greater prosperity in Mexico. As demonstrated in the poorer countries of the European Union, when opportunities and wealth increase, emigration diminishes.

The fundamental policy question, given this, is whether the United States could or should do more to promote Mexican economic development beyond the substantial advantage already enjoyed by Mexico with membership in NAFTA. And very much associated with what the United States might do, and indeed more important, is what steps the Mexican government should take to improve its economy, make itself more competitive, attract greater levels of foreign and domestic investment and produce the kind of opportunities that will reduce the outflow. Finally, what role should or could the United States play in encouraging the kinds of change necessary in Mexico?

In the short and medium-run there are undoubtedly steps that could be taken in the United States that would make life better for those already residing here in an undocumented status. A full amnesty, like that of 1986, is one such option, but, though well-received by the beneficiaries, it will do little to stop the flow of newcomers. Temporary worker programs for both agricultural and semi-skilled non-agricultural laborers might put some order into the flow of people and help to restore circularity by promoting "goings" as well as "comings." An expedited process of green card issuance for those already approved but waiting for their number to come up could seriously reduce the rolls of the undocumented.

Whatever programs that are devised should find ways of incentivizing undocumented aliens to participate, rather than offering them a new opportunity for deportation. And in constructing the programs, the heterogeneous nature of the undocumented Mexican community should be factored in: There is a big difference between the man who crossed yesterday to work in the fields and the family who has been here for 20 years, owns a business, and has children in college. They may all be lumped together as illegal aliens, but they certainly have different profiles that must be considered.

There are no easy ways out of the migration mess. And every suggestion for new policies or programs generates opposition, some unthinking and some thoughtful and legitimate. What is clear is that among many Americans there is a growing sentiment that "something should be done." The "something" however remains vague and contradictory when expressed. All of which offers policymakers no simple answers and only hard choices.
Colombia: War, Peace, the U.S., and the International Community

Hernando Gómez Buendía, Ph.D.
Advisor, United Nations Development Program

Conventional wisdom has it that Colombia’s key problems are the armed conflict and drug trafficking, that drugs are the engine of the conflict, and that President Uribe plus the U.S.-financed Plan Colombia at long last are winning the battle on both fronts. These notes are meant to contextualize those problems, and to expand on the wisdom—and some major limitations—of such a view, so that a more productive discussion can be held on the relations between Colombia, the U.S. and the international community.

Colombia’s homicide rate is one of the world’s highest. This is a result of ordinary crime, drug related violence, and the armed conflict. Though independent to a large extent, there are complex and shifting interactions among those different sources of violence.

The armed conflict is multi-sided. It involves two large guerrilla groups, the various paramilitary forces, and Colombia’s regular troops. The largest guerrilla force—FARC (Colombia’s Revolutionary Armed Forces)—is estimated to be some 20,000 people strong; ELN (National Liberation Army) may have 5,000 persons in arms; the paramilitary are anywhere between 8,000 and 20,000; and the army and police effectively total some 270,000.

The conflict is concentrated in the rural areas and in small to mid-sized cities (especially those located within the “enclave” economies of oil, coal, coca and poppy). It could be said that FARC “dominates” the southwestern belt of scantly populated jungle and flatlands, ELN is engaged in a deadly (and losing) battle over the Magdalena river basin to the northwest, and paramilitaries dominate the Caribbean region to the north, whereas the National Army and Police are in control of the urban corridor where most Colombians live.

The conflict is also old. The FARC appeared in 1964, as a spin-off from a bloody but non-ideological peasant insurrection that had begun in 1948. Closely linked to the Communist Party, FARC adopted the USSR line. Subsequent divisions within the socialist world were paralleled by dissident guerrillas; ELN was created in 1967 after Castro’s guerrilla model. Other groups, such as the pro-China EPL, and even “Bolivarian” M19, became important during the 1970s and 1980s, but have since demobilized.

The paramilitary have been growing—and diversifying—steadily since the mid-1980s. That long history has one key implication, namely, the inner complexity of each warring party. The FARC, in particular, has undergone a series of successive but partial transformations, so that today it continues to be an amalgam of several layers: (a) A traditional peasant “self-defence” army in the remote areas of the country; (b) An impoverished people in arms (women and children make up over half the FARC’s troops); (c) An orthodox communist guerrilla; (d) A military machine self absorbed by logistic and bureaucratic demands; (e) A para-State that collects taxes and administers “justice” in those remote and unpopular territories; (f) A sur-
plus-extracting machine, living off blackmail on cattle raisers, mining companies, town merchants, and local governments; (g) A temporary way of life (for many underemployed young peasants); (h) A drug cartel, variously involved in taxing growers, processing and distributing cocaine and heroin; (i) A paramilitary organization involved in terrorism (bombings, massacring of civilians, illegal executions) and ordinary delinquency; and (j) A set of regional bands with a certain degree of autonomy and in varying degrees of criminalization. There are thus inner tensions within FARC, different perceptions about its true character, different readings about its intentions, and different ways to conceive the "solution" by policymakers and analysts alike.

To a lesser extent, the same holds for ELN: (a) A more "truly" political guerrilla group, born out of the pro-Cuban student-union-Catholic left urban coalition in the 1960s; (b) Attacking oil imperialism but living off multinationals; (c) With somewhat more penetration in the urban unarmed left; (d) But also engaged in terrorism (against the electric infrastructure and the oil pipeline, and also involving spectacular kidnappings).

Paramilitarism has likewise evolved from several overlapping sources: (a) Originally, "self defence" groups, financed by landowners, which sometimes were (are) confined to preventive patrolling but may engage in vigilantism; (b) Private armies organized by extreme rightists, and often unofficially sponsored by army personnel, to carry out the dirty war; (c) Bands of mercenaries hired by the drug lords, which may or may not fight the guerrillas in their search for (excess) control or over revenue from drugs; and (d) A self-sustaining "industry" of buying cheap land, "cleaning up" the area, and reselling it at a huge profit. These four varieties overlap in complex ways. During the 1990s, several groups came together under AUC (Colombia's United Self-Defences), which claims to be an independent "politico-military actor" with apparent sympathy among the urban upper and middle classes.

The main implication of the above long history and complexity is that Colombia's conflict does not fit the pattern of an authoritarian/corrupt/racist or otherwise "illegitimate" government facing a (more or less) popularly based armed rebellion. To put it simply: Colombia's war is not political. Granted, FARC (and ELN, to a lesser extent) is a powerful military force. But both organizations remain utterly marginal to the political system: no significant sector of society feels voiced by their leaders or represented by their programs; on the contrary, support for the guerrillas—including that of unions and popular organizations—is almost nil, and polls overwhelmingly rank FARC and ELN, not as ideologues, but as unwanted "public enemies."

AUC and other paramilitaries are similarly non-political, i.e., purely reactive criminal responses to the guerrillas, not an alternative view or "project" of society. Which is not to deny that, by its very nature, paramilitarism imposes a "fascist"-like order in its areas of influence, or that their leaders demand "political recognition."

The non-political character of Colombia's armed conflict has a number of far-reaching consequences. To begin with, the armed forces have been traditionally called upon as practically the sole means to solve the problem. This has long blurred the police/army distinction, and worse, has voided the State's reaction from political direction. And, lacking direction or political "meaning" to their war, the military are easily demoralized, bureaucratically, and resentful of civilian "indulgence" and insistence on preserving what many officers regard as the "niceties" of law.

As a second important consequence, the underevaluation of politics in the armed conflict tends to worsen the lot of civilian populations: Civilian support is secondary, even nonexistent on military grounds. People are viewed—and labelled—as "informants" or "accomplices," rather than as potential political sympathizers. The result is war against civilians in lieu of civil war. Unarmed peasants, unions and social activists, local political leaders, journalists, and academics become the target and the safest means to hit an unreachable or too well-armed military enemy.

The non-political nature of the conflict also stands in the way of a negotiated solution. Not having popular support, to how many scared would the guerrillas be entitled at, for example, a constituent assembly? What is more, national leaders see no reason to negotiate any major reform with an adversary that does not seriously threaten to overthrow the government. Extortion, kidnapping and economic sabotage are certainly most disturbing; but they do not belong in the same category as the menace of political revolution, compared with such experiences as Cuba's, Nicaragua's, El Salvador's, or even Guatemala's.

Successful negotiations have taken place with several guerrilla groups (including M19 and a faction of ELN) but after military defeat and not involving major political reforms. Conversations with FARC and ELN have likewise been on and off during the past 20 years, with a high point under President Betancur (1982-1986) and a new one under President Pastrana (1998-2002). This last process was much more modest, as no substantive issues were really ever discussed; what in fact went on during those hectic years was a give and take on the abuses of FARC in the demilitarized zone.

All the same, the failure of Pastrana's pace process led national and international opinion to conclude that a negotiated solution was out of the question. Abaro Uribe won a record-breaking election because he was the only candidate not to indulge in the illusion, and his, no doubt, is the clearest mandate a president has ever got: beating FARC is Colombia's overriding priority.

"Democratic security" is thus the backbone of the current government. Its key elements are an increase in military expenditure (up to 5.2% of GDP), an expansion and redeployment of troops, new tactical units, citizens' cooperation with the authorities, and (questionable) legal changes to facilitate military operations.

The security results have been encouraging so far. Army patrolling is nowadays extended, infra-structure and major roads are safer; the police have returned to all municipalities, and guerrilla attacks on townships have sharply diminished. Homicide and kidnappings have declined significantly, even if not solely as a result of "democratic security," and even if not everywhere. What may be more important, most Colombians do believe that security is improved, and this goes a long way to explain the widespread popularity of Uribe—up to the call for his re-election.

The military balance is not as conclusive, however. FARC certainly is now on the defensive, its mobility curtailed, its income reduced (as far as coca growing and extortion are concerned), desertion on the rise, some battles and territories lost (such as Cundinamarca near Bogotá), some leaders dead or captured, and its commanders under heat from "Plan Patria." Still, no major defeat has been inflicted, FARC's core troops and resources seem untouched, and army operations are significant. Extension, however, is very difficult. Hence some analysts speak of a forced retreat while others see a tactical, temporary, withdraw of this guerrilla group.

Of particular concern is the fiscal sustainability of "democratic security." Public debt already amounts to over 50% of GDP and—with, at best, modest prospects for mid-term economic growth—a crisis seems bound to happen at some point. In addition to military expenditure, there are the costly and inflexible pressures of debt servicing, social security payments and regional transfers, so the margin for fiscal maneuvering gets thinner by the day. Short

Short sighted tax reforms are taking place more often, yet the fiscal deficit remains close to 3%, and most government operates operate under severe cash shortages. Air-based and other key combat operations thus depend and will continue to depend almost entirely on U.S. funds.

Meanwhile the prospects for renewed peace talks are at their lowest. Uribe naturally pays lip service to the idea, yet demands a cease fire (and "the end to terrorism") as preconditions to initiate talks; the conditions of FARC are no more realistic, and even the much weaker ELN keeps stopping short of sitting down to the table. Not to entirely give up hope, however, Mexico is pursuing contacts with ELN, the UN
goes on with its "good offices" in regards to FARC, and Switzerland is facilitating the so-called "humanitarian exchange" between imprisoned members of FARC and influential persons kidnapped by this group.

The treatment of paramilitarism is the most debatable aspect of "democratic security." In each one of its four already mentioned varieties this practice was most likely on the rise during the 1990s; yet, in spite of the ongoing negotiations with AUC, paramilitarism has continued to spread and has become more visible under the current government. The announced number of troops to be demobilized has multiplied three-to-five-fold since talks began, one-third of Congress as well as many local and state administrations are seemingly controlled by AUC, and paramilitary units have settled or are operating in practically any region or city in Colombia. Granted, armed encounters with the Army have become more frequent, but then there are simply more paramilitaries running around. At any rate, they and the Armed Forces have a common enemy in FARC and ELN, and the top priority of the current government is to defeat the guerrillas.

But not to second-guess the intentions of Uribe, negotiations with AUC began under the assumption that it was purely a "self-defense" organization, hence that the increase in military presence brought about by the new policy will render it unnecessary. This assumption at best was wishful thinking, as the guerrillas had not yet been defeated, nor were the Armed Forces by then in a position to completely protect the population. The timing was even less appropriate if one considers the three additional engines of paramilitarism: a parallel army does not add to the field when the decisive battle is about to begin, the drug-related wars were not about to conclude, nor was the business of land accumulation about to disappear.

More generally speaking, one expects the "self-defences" to demobilize after, not before, the guerrillas have demobilized, and such has been the case everywhere. Colombia is trying to be the exception, but this very fact points to the risk that some commanders and troops do leave the arms, only to be replaced by new armies. Self-defences or not, many members of AUC are guilty of serious ordinary and war crimes, which raises the (additional) issue of amnesty. Initially the government presented an all too lenient project, but was forced to step back; improved versions towards "truth, justice, and compensation" are now being considered, yet they need to pass the acid test of Congress.

Furthermore, as the door was open, many an ordinary drug trafficker took to disguise as a "paramilitary," and AUC was in fact taken over by ordinary criminals (Castaño, its politically minded founder, was assassinated in the process). The issue of extradition has thus become of paramount importance, even ahead of amnesty for crimes other than drug trafficking.

Even in the absence of a legal framework, and with hardly any logistical preparation, some 800 members of AUC demobilized already, and thousands more are scheduled to do so by the end of 2004. Uribe may want to show results, and the more "political" leaders of AUC may fear for their lives; but such rush originates a de facto situation for Congress ("grant amnesty, or else"), for the judges, and for Colombian society at large.

The military victory over FARC and the demobilization of AUC would of course go a long way toward solving Colombia's major problems. Yet drug trafficking and organized, paramilitary-like violence would be likely to outlive almost those two organizations. A full appraisal of the situation thus calls for some more comments on the issue of drugs in regard to the conflict.

Drugs have certainly become the war's "center of gravity." They catapulted the war of armed groups, criminalized their activities, eroded the legitimacy of the political system, and internationalized the confrontation. It follows, therefore, that weakening the drug trade is a necessary condition for overcoming the conflict. And yet it will not be enough, since the relationship between war and drugs is quite complex.

The dominant perception does not take into account such complexity and mistakes a correlation for a cause-effect link. This perception, which strongly conditions today's policies, erroneously assumes: a) that the illegal armed groups are only interested in money; b) that ending the conflict would put an end to drug trafficking; c) that the end of drug trafficking will bring the end of conflict; and d) that any strategy to neutralize drugs contributes to ameliorating the conflict, when it may worsen it, as when criminalization of small-scale coca growing peasants leads them to seek protection from guerrillas or paramilitaries.

Some historic background is necessary at this point. Colombia had long featured key "competitive advantages" for the narcotics industry: underpopulated and underdeveloped territories and coasts, a centennial tradition of two-way smuggling, world-class entrepreneurial creativity and skilled but underpaid manpower; networks of migrants who barely survive overseas (especially in the U.S.), widespread tolerance for informality and acceptance of legally gray practices, political corruption, and, above all, a "reserve army" of rural and slum dwellers able and willing to risk their lives and to exercise violence at its most brutal.

This last "input" is worth elaborating upon. On the one hand, it must be stressed that Colombia's army is considered by many and largely protects drug trafficking, so that the currently predominant reduction of the conflict to a "narco-war" is simplistic at best. But on the other hand, the possibility of enforcing contracts is essential to any business, so that an illegal industry can only thrive where illegal violence is readily available.

Data on drugs are of course unreliable and politically sensitive. Even so, Colombia is of course a leader in world cultivation, processing, and distribution of cocaine, and a growing producer of heroin. But the role of Colombia has been changing since the early 1970s. It first specialized in marijuana crops and exports to the U.S. (which subsequently moved to Mexico and then to the U.S.). Next came the processing and international distribution of cocaine, with the infamous Medellín cartel that escalated violence during the 1980s, only to be replaced by the wholesale corruption of the Cali cartel during the 1990s. Two decades and one generation were lost in the process. As the illegal activity became more multinational (with Mexicans and others joining or taking the lead) some Colombians moved into the more profitable and deadly business of growing poppy or heroin processing.

The above summarized dynamics are a clear reflection of two factors: the changing patterns of international demand (especially in the U.S.), and the comparative effectiveness of interdiction efforts in the different countries involved. Thus, rather than an overall reduction in consumption or in global damage, what is at stake is the location of specific crops or other value-adding activities in the chain.

During the second half of the 1990s, as eradication efforts succeeded in Peru and Bolivia, coca plantations in Colombia mushroomed from a few thousand to about 150,000 hectares. The tide however turned under Plan Colombia, so that the area under cultivation has declined by about one-third during the last two years, and poppy plantations likewise diminished some 10% during last year. Aerial interdiction has been reintroduced, and President Uribe has authorized many more extractions to the U.S., so most observers agree that the balance is encouraging.

One should note, however, that productivity or yield per acre has increased quite significantly, that crops are once again spreading in Peru, and that new "baby cartels" appear in Colombia almost daily—not to mention that fumigation is subject to diminishing returns and is, to say the least, controversial in its social and environmental effects.

More squarely to the point, the street price of cocaine in the U.S. has not changed, thus suggesting that the overall supply remains stable, and reinforcing the view that the current "war on drugs" may result in tactical victories but is strategically self-defeating. Squarely to a second point, coca is but a small part of cocaine, one that Colombian cartels may acquire from many sources. And since FARC is nowadays a cartel with the in-bred advantage of an army, cutting down on coca crops is not that effective a tool in the war against this organization.
The preceding analysis suggests four broad and tentative guidelines for the U.S. and the international community to help improve the situation in Colombia:

- First, there is the need for continued military and other security assistance (including justice and the due prevalence of law); U.S. financial aid needs to be sustained if not increased beyond 2005, and Europe should share more of the burden. At the same time, however, the Colombian upper class must face up to the strictures of a war economy and bring taxation in line with international standards for such economies.

- Second, it seems crucial to reconsider the strategy against narcotics, so that less drugs are produced in Colombia and current unintended incentives for war are removed. This reconsideration would not imply a radical (as well as questionable and unlikely) "paradigm shift" in U.S. domestic policies, but such specific steps in regard to Colombia as: (a) non-criminalization of coca growing peasants and demilitarization of the fight against drugs; (b) concentrating repression on the intermediaries in the drug chain; (c) an international alliance to reconstruct the social tissue among peasants involved in (or likely to become involved in) the economy of illicit crops.

- Third, adoption of a Colombia-based and internationally backed strategy to dismantle and prevent paramilitarism beyond the likely demobilization of AUC. Should FARC, ELN, and AUC itself disappear merely to be replaced by new armed bands, Colombians would have gained little in their quest for peace, and the international community would have advanced little in its quest for a drug-free world. An immediate step in this direction is to reframe the ongoing process with AUC so that it becomes fully effective against paramilitarism (a Commission of Truth to investigate accomplices, or the forced devolution of all land could be parts of such reframing).

- Fourth, the narrow military approach should give way to a more comprehensive and balanced strategy to deal with the conflict. There are two important grounds for this suggestion: one is the inner complexity or multidimensional nature of this "war;" another is the urgency to prevent its further extension, ameliorate the suffering, and correct the many damages it causes. This systemic strategy may rely on a series of specific tools and programs in such diverse areas as policing, delivering criminal justice, attention to victims, humanitarian agreements, preventing recruitment, encouraging desertion, cutting down on rents for the armed groups, strengthening municipalities, land reform, labor relations, handling of "enclave" economies, electoral reform, political party building, peace negotiations, education, improved media coverage, civil society involvement, etc.—a much broader international cooperation.

Venezuela After the Presidential Recall Referendum

Jennifer McCoy, Ph.D.
Director of the Americas Program
The Carter Center

Venezuela was a model democracy in the hemisphere for four decades prior to the election of L. Col. Hugo Chávez in 1998. Now Chávez opponents claim he is turning the country into a new Cuba, and his supporters respond that he is finally addressing the severe poverty and inequality ignored for too long in this oil-rich nation of 25 million people. The divisions in the country in the last few years have become so acute that many believe they are engaged in an "existential struggle" over core values and basic ways of life. Each side wants to eliminate the other, believing they can no longer coexist.

In the days before the August 15, 2004 presidential recall referendum, in which Venezuelans voted whether to recall President Hugo Chávez, each side hoped it would win a victory so clear and complete that it would silence foes and win world approval. The recall came as the culmination of two years of efforts by opponents of the "Bolivarian Revolution" to remove Hugo Chávez from power through any means, including multiple mass marches demanding resignation, a short-lived coup in April 2002, a constitutional amendment effort for early elections, a six-month military protest by active officers, a two-month national petroleum strike in late 2002, and finally, the August 15 recall referendum. None of these were successful, and the recall left the country as bitterly divided as before, as the opponents alleged fraud and the government moved forward with its agenda without concessions.

Roots of the Crisis

The current conflict goes back to the unraveling, beginning in the late 1970s, of the political and economic arrangement begun in 1958 with the elite pact forged at the town of Punto Fijo. Despite their country's massive oil reserves—it has the world's sixth-largest set, and the biggest outside the Middle East—Venezuelans for the last quarter-century have had to contend with growing poverty, the pains of adjusting to globalization, rising alienation from political parties, and issues raised by growing mobilization among those long left to society's margins. For decades, petroleum fueled growth and the middle class grew, with per-capita income peaking in 1978. Then came a sharp and persistent drop in real per-capita oil revenues, a poverty rate that shot up from 25 percent in the 1970s to 65 percent in the 1990s, and the massive disappointment of middle-class aspirations. Despite these harsh facts, many Venezuelans have continued to see oil wealth as a birthright whose failure to materialize can only be due to theft or incompetence. The traditional political class is a popular culprit.

Chávez rode a wave of disgust with this group into office in 1998, just six years after he had tried to stage a military coup while serving as a paratroop lieutenant-colonel. Those who had always been poor voted for a charismatic figure who seemed to be one of them. The recently impoverished hoped that Chávez would turn things around, while even the professional
classes and elites lent some support to change. During his first year in office, Chávez approval rating topped 80 percent.

This would not last. Over the next four years, he dropped to approval levels as low as 25 percent (by no means the lowest among Latin American presidents at the time), which suggests the minimum size of his core support group. Those in the top two out of five income brackets became solid Chávez foes, while those in the poorest three brackets (a much larger number of people) split as some in this group continued to believe in Chávez, while others began to feel disillusioned by the president’s approach to politics and the lack of material improvements in their own lives.

Opinion polls showed Venezuela to be one of the world’s most polarized nations, a split especially evident in the tension between the wealthier, anti-Chávez east side of Caracas, the capital, and the city’s poorer, pro-Chávez west side. Public discourse degenerated as public figures on all sides, led by the president himself, openly insulter their opponents. The state-run media and its privately owned competitors painted radically different portraits of the same events.

How a country that prided itself on consensus politics come to such a state? The answer lies in the trends described above, the struggle for control over the national oil company, the powerful role of the private media, and the personal style of the president himself. The new administration brought to the fore unresolved national questions about how to distribute oil revenues, how to manage their relative decline (and the parallel need for new taxes), how to grow industries outside the petroleum sector, and what to do about poverty, unemployment, and crime while giving voice to those who had been so long outside the system, whether by exclusion or choice?

The Bolivarian Revolution

Chávez sought to answer these questions by giving the government more direct control over the investment and spending of oil income, by asserting more partisan control over government institutions, and by providing more ways for citizens to participate directly in politics through referenda as well as local community organizations and social programs.

The goals of the Bolivarian Revolution were never articulated clearly, and it is difficult to classify it within traditional concepts such as socialists, populist, authoritarian, leftist or rightist. Nevertheless, the underlying goals seem to encompass the following fundamental elements:

- Creation of a new governing class to replace the post-1958 governing class in its control of the polity and economy.

- Creation of a new model of military participation in a civilian government. The military was given expanded mandates in subnational development and humanitarian efforts. Former military officers, from colonels to generals, many of them former comrades in arms during the 1992 coup attempts, gained important ministerial posts in the Chávez administration. In the October 31, 2004 regional elections, 9 of 23 states elected retired military officers as governors.

- Shift in the political balance of power to reflect the social balance of power, in which the poor are now the majority. The mechanisms to accomplish this goal include "participatory democracy" tools such as popular referenda to repeal legislation and recall elected officials, majoritarian (government party) control of political institutions, and centralization of decision-making in the hands of the president and the national government.

- Shift in economic resources to benefit the poor, reduce the income inequality, and help the socially excluded. Mechanisms to accomplish this goal include a transition from an autonomously-run national oil company seeking to increase market-share, to more direct government control over its investment and revenue-distribution decisions; use of oil revenues to fund populist social programs (the so-called "missions" to provide adult education, literacy, health clinics, food markets in poor neighborhoods previously without such services); and the creation of a new local entrepreneurial elite as well as the curtailing of foreign investment.

- A nationalist foreign policy that includes challenging the hegemony of the United States and the West; solidarity with the South; and championing the cause of other marginalized peoples; and maximizing oil revenues through OPEC policy.

Economic and Energy Policy

Chávez entered office with oil at rock bottom ($11 per barrel). He was extremely pragmatic and carried out a typical market austerity program while curtailing foreign investment. He also successfully negotiated cuts in oil production with OPEC and other oil exporters, and the price of oil eventually climbed to over $40 per barrel in 2004.

Despite opposition fears that Chávez is "Cubanizing" Venezuela, his economic policy is not radically different from the past. The new constitution of 1999 changed very little the traditional state market economic approach of Venezuela. The main resource of the economy—oil—has been nationalized since 1976, and Chávez continued other privatization programs in motion, such as telecommunications. He has opposed the Free Trade Area of the Americas, and champions more South American integration, recently signing energy and commercial deals with Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil.

Nevertheless, when he decreed some economic policies on land reform, oil rights, and fishing without consulting the private sector in late 2001, he unleashed a wave of opposition that culminated in the oil strike, mass march led by labor and business, and short-lived coup of April 2002. A second oil strike in December 2002 gave the restored Chávez administration the opportunity to finally take control of the oil company as it fired 18,000 striking workers, replaced the board of directors and reorganized the company.

The oil strike led to a devastating 15% drop in GDP in 2002 and 2003. Only in 2004 was the government able to massively fund its social programs to begin to combat poverty and inequality. Until then, it could show very little improvement in the lives of the poor. Nevertheless, the social programs, or so-called "missions," bringing literacy and adult education programs, health clinics, and subsidized food markets to the poorest neighborhoods have been extremely popular and seem to empower the people to take control of their lives for the first time.

U.S.-Venezuela Relations

Soon after Chávez' election in 1998, the U.S. adopted a wait-and-see attitude, aiming to work with the new administration and paying attention to its more pragmatic actions than the fiery rhetoric of its president. Nevertheless, early sore spots included Venezuela's rejection of a U.S. ship with military engineers to help rebuild roads following a devastating flood, and elimination of the U.S. rights for drug-surveillance planes to fly over Venezuelan airspace.

U.S. embrace of the April 2002 coup, in contrast to Latin and European government denunciation of it, soured U.S.-Venezuelan relations and severely weakened the U.S. ability to promote democracy in Venezuela after Chávez was restored to power. Diplomats from the two nations were ostracized in each other's capitals, and verbal insults (more strongly from the Venezuelan side) characterized communication between the two nations. Nevertheless, commercial relations continued, and Venezuela did not stop exporting oil to the U.S.

In 2005, the concerns of the United States toward Venezuela will focus in three areas:

1. **Security:** This includes cooperation in counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics; concerns over Chávez' alleged support of radical groups in South America, primarily the Colombian guerrilla group FARC; and Venezuela's recently announced intention to purchase Russian MiG jets. 
b) Oil: Venezuela is the fourth largest exporter to the U.S. with about 12% of U.S. oil imports coming from that nation. The U.S. is Venezuela’s largest customer, consuming more than half of its exports (dominated by oil). Oil continues to play a large role in the Venezuelan economy, currently about 80% of its exports and about 25% of its GDP. Oil provides the Venezuelan government with about half of its revenue.

c) Democracy: The U.S. supported the efforts of the Organization of American States and the Carter Center to mediate a solution to the Venezuelan crisis beginning in 2002 and to monitor the resulting 2004 recall referendum. The U.S. accepted the international observers’ endorsement of the recall results (defeating the recall by 59% to 41%). Nevertheless, the U.S. continues to be concerned about civil liberties, particularly with the impending expansion of the Supreme Court under government control, a new penal code making opposition to the government more difficult, a new media law that may inhibit press freedom, and a heavy-handed government reaction to the first political assassination in recent times—the Nov 18 car-bombing killing a federal prosecutor.

Looking Forward

After six years in power, the Bolivarian Revolution led by Hugo Chávez has consolidated its dominant position in key institutions—the national oil company, the military, the National Assembly, elected leaders at the local and regional governments, and potentially the Supreme Court (after new members are decided upon). How the government chooses to exercise this power will determine which political rules of the game will govern in Venezuela, whether the society can reconcile to find a new political and social consensus, and whether the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution will be institutionalized or will be ephemeral.

Now that the government has survived two years of attacks and faces a weakened opposition, it has the opportunity to become less defensive and to begin to govern for all Venezuelans. It also has the challenge to demonstrate that it can govern, without the distraction or excuse of internal and external enemies. The opposition, after running through a gamut of strategies to remove the government, must confront the reality that the majority of the population supports, at some level, the government’s program and message. The opposition has the opportunity to move from its short-term focus on ousting Chávez to organizing its supporters and refreshing its message for the long-term.

Continued polarization and zero-sum attitudes threaten the ability of the country to restore a collective identity and the interpersonal trust that seriously eroded over the past several years. To accept that coexistence is both indispensable and possible, both sides need mutual guarantees:

- The opposition needs guarantees for future electoral processes, and protection of due process and civil rights (protection from the tyranny of the majority). The former is particularly crucial given the defeats on Oct 31 and the upcoming opportunity in the 2005 National Assembly elections. Negotiations should begin now to seek reforms in the electoral system, including a new election commission that could generate more confidence in the entire electorate and a new voters’ list.
- Protection of civil rights would be helped by guaranteeing more independent accountability mechanisms: The additional appointments to the Supreme Court should be negotiated to produce a broad multipartisan consensus in order to avoid a “packed court,” similarly, the positions of Attorney General, Comptroller General, and Ombudsman could be renewed on the basis of multiparty negotiations to assure the greatest possible political independence of these crucial positions.
- The government needs guarantees that in the event of a future electoral loss, its supporters will be assured a political space and non-retribution. (Recall the witch-hunt against government deputies and governors in the wake of the April 2002 coup). The government needs recognition from the opposition that it is the legitimate government with repeated popular mandates. And the government needs a constructive opposition, committed to constitutional procedures to air its dissent, and a willingness to participate in developing a new national agenda to fight poverty, inequality, and crime.

U.S. Policy in Latin America: Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS
Punta Mita, Mexico
January 9-14, 2005

Members of Congress
Senator Barbara Boxer
and Stewart Boxer
Representative Tom Cole
and Ellen Cole
Representative Norm Dicks
and Suzanne Dicks
Representative Sam Farr
Representative Gene Green
and Helen Green
Representative Maurice Hinchey
and Allison Lee
Representative Rush Holt
and Margaret Lancefield
Representative Sander Levin
and Victoria Levin
Senator Richard Lugar
and Charlene Lugar
Representative George Miller
and Cynthia Miller
Senator Charles Schumer
and Iris Weinshall
Senator Craig Thomas
and Susan Thomas
Representative Tom Udall
and Jill Cooper Udall
Representative Henry Waxman
and Janet Waxman
Representative Roger Wicker
and Caroline Wicker

Scholars
Sergio Aguayo
El Colegio de Mexico
Jeffrey Davidow
Institute of the Americas
Denise Dresser
Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de Mexico
Hernando Gómez Bueno
UN Development Program
Peter Hakim
Inter-American Dialogue
Jennifer McCoy
The Carter Center
Mario Molina
University of California at San Diego

Project Consultant and Rapporteur
Julia Sweig
Council on Foreign Relations

Foundation Observers
Clemencia Muñoz-Tamayo
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Mario Bronfman
The Ford Foundation
U.S. Policy in Latin America:
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CONFERENCE AGENDA
Punta Mita, Mexico
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Mexico: Politics, Economy and U.S.-Mexico Relations
Denise Dresser, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de Mexico

Discussion Questions
• What has been the impact of recent corruption scandals on the election campaign now taking shape?
• What are the prospects for the PRD, PAN and PRI in national elections and how is each faring at the local level?
• What economic reforms has the Fox administration implemented, and what explains their limitations?
• How successful have Mexico’s efforts been to forge trade ties with Europe and Asia? Has NAFTA helped the Mexican economy as far as jobs, trade, and investment?
• What is the current status of U.S.-Mexico relations? What are the major issues each country brings to the table, and what are the prospects for deepening the bilateral agenda?

Mexico: Immigration Policy
Jeffrey Davidow, Institute of the Americas

Discussion Questions
• What is the status of Mexican and U.S. proposals to regularize migration from Mexico to the United States?
• How has border activity changed in the last four years and what explains the change?
• Who are the key domestic political actors in each country from whom consensus will be necessary in order for both governments to achieve a viable migration relationship? What are the prospects for reaching a consensus?
Mitigating Air Pollution in Latin American Cities
Remarks by Mario Molina, University of California at San Diego

Colombia: War, Peace, the U.S. and the International Community
Hernando Gómez Buendía, UN Development Program, Bogotá

Discussion Questions
- What progress has the Uribe government made with respect to interrupting the narcotics industry?
- What is the status of the government’s demobilization talks with the paramilitary forces? What role does the U.S. extradition request play in these talks and what incentives is the government offering for demobilization? What will the consequences be of demobilization on paramilitary violence in Colombia and on the illegal narcotics industry?
- What is the tactical and strategic impact of the government’s counterinsurgency efforts on the FARC and the ELN?
- How will the increase in U.S. military advisors in Colombia affect the progress of the government’s counterinsurgency efforts?
- Other than the United States, what countries or multilateral institutions represent the most important contributions to Colombia and why?

Venezuela: Politics, Economy, Energy and U.S. Policy
Jennifer McCoy, The Carter Center

Discussion Questions
- How is political life in Venezuela since the referendum of August 2004? How are the key actors in Venezuela comporting themselves, whether in the private sector, labor, the government and its institutions, the armed forces, other political parties or civil society?
- What is the Chavez government doing with all of the oil revenue that has come to the country in the last two years?
- How have U.S.-Venezuelan relations evolved since the referendum and what prospects exist for the bilateral agenda ahead?
- How important is Cuba to Venezuela and vice versa, and what is the impact of this relationship on U.S. policy?