

Colombia and America's War on Drugs

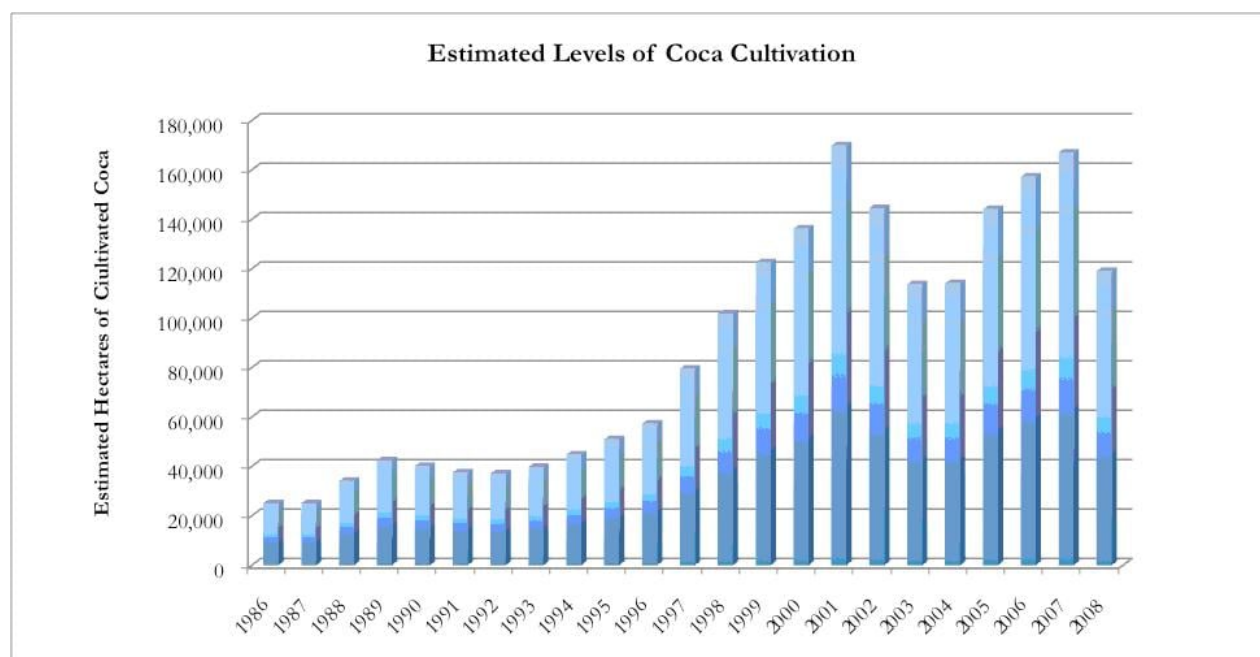
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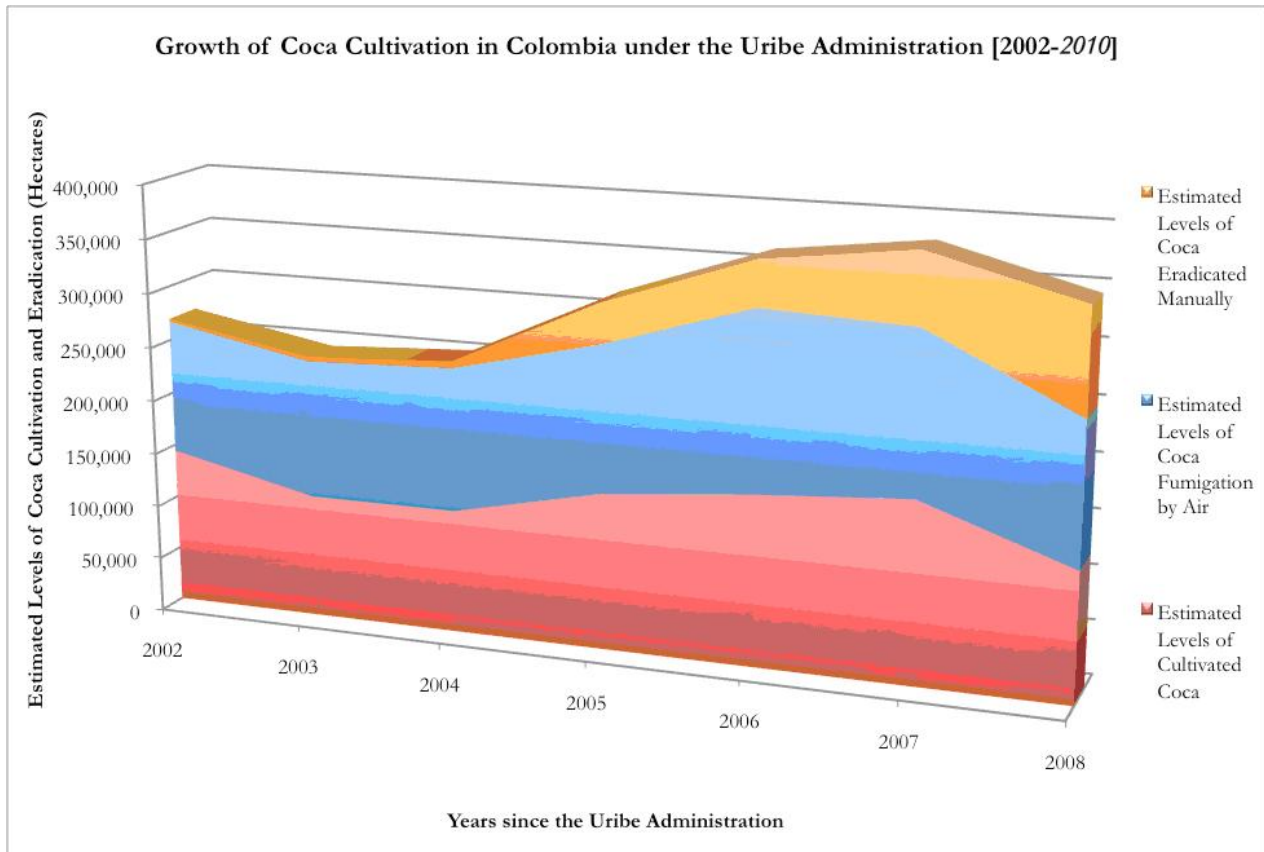
Since their systemic targeting of producer nations through militarized methods of eradication, state officials in Washington have regularly shown consistent inaccuracies when concerning the effectiveness and validity of its so-called 'war on drugs'. Dating back to the 1980s, Colombia became a figurative and literal battleground in this war, as the world's principal cultivator of coca (the primary ingredient in the production of cocaine). As liberalized economic policies debilitated Colombia's rural political economy hundreds of thousands of small and medium-sized producers, campesinos, and landless farmers gravitated toward the narcotic industry via cultivation as a way of life and survival. The United States, however, proclaimed such activities a threat, as drugs were proclaimed a risk to 'national security' (White House, 1986). In turn, Washington devoted a great deal of time, money, and military resources to curb coca 'at the source'. Yet this militarized approach toward eradication produced incredibly poor results. Rather than facilitating a decline the narcotic industry witnessed an enormous acceleration over the past two decades.



Sources: United States Embassy in Bogotá, 2009a: 2009b; ONDCP, 2008a, 2007, 2006, 2005; Latin American Working Group, 2003; United States Department of State, 2003; Abruzzese, 1989.

A fascinating shift related to this historic debacle was, however, reported in early November. The United States Embassy in Bogotá announced a miraculous 29% decrease in Colombian coca cultivation and an estimated 39% drop in cocaine production in 2008 alone (2009a; 2009b). Such figures are incredible, for rates of coca cultivation have, in actuality,

significantly risen since Washington embarked on its war on drugs in Colombia. Throughout the 1980s, when Colombia was identified as a threat to US national security, cultivation averaged 46,000 hectares. By the 1990s levels had reached 61,000 hectares, while the past decade saw median rates hovering at 140,000 hectares. Taking the subject a step further, when one situates rates of coca cultivation in conjunction with rates of coca eradicated via manual and aerial techniques it becomes glaringly apparent that growth rates have done anything but declined. To the contrary, coca accelerated – especially under the administration of Álvaro Uribe Vélez [2002-2010]. Such information provides a sobering second thought when concerning the ‘success’ Washington (and Bogotá) today claim.



Source: United States Embassy in Bogotá, 2009a.

An interesting component to consider when analyzing the sudden decline in cultivation is who drafted and released the information to the public. While formally released through the US Embassy in Bogotá, the report and findings came from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – specifically the US Director of Central Intelligence, Crime and Narcotics Center (CNC). What is unique about this is the unspoken absence of the White House’s Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). For the greater part of the last decade, the ONDCP has been the principal medium for formally releasing information related to coca cultivation levels within Colombia. Considering the CIA/CNC released this report and not the ONDCP should spark some question and debate.

Many, particularly state officials in Washington and Bogotá, have shown disdain and upset toward the ONDCP’s data over the past several years. Embarrassingly, the ONDCP has shown that coca levels have not decreased but rather climbed to heights never witnessed in Colombia’s history. When one compares levels of coca from the 1980s to those of today they recognize inclines averaging 350%. During the late 1990s and early-mid 2000s, as the US spent just under \$8 billion (USD) in counter-narcotic missions in Colombia, the ONDCP

illustrated that levels did the opposite of deteriorating. This unquestionably caused a great deal of stress for state officials within both the US and Colombia, as was shown in 2006 when that latter's former Interior Minister Sabas Pretelt chastised the ONDCP – going so far as to argue the office manipulated and systematically inflated levels of coca in Colombia (United Press International, 2006).

It should also be known that the United States has longed attempted to manipulate figures related to Colombia's coca levels. During the 1990s, Washington was quite vocal in its promotion of a clear decrease in Colombia's narcotic industry due to their involvement and approach toward drug eradication. However, upon further investigation – and to the embarrassment and discredit of Washington – research, external to state sources, found that cocaine productivity had greatly amplified. Figures showed cocaine levels to be 2½ times higher than the US had 'speculated' (see Scott, 2003: 83n.35).

Such inaccuracies have shown to be more than one-time occurrences. Both Washington and Bogotá have contradicted, miscalculated, or been openly incorrect when concerning 'mutual assured findings' of coca. When referring to levels of 'successful' eradication two separate state agencies in the United States reported vastly different figures over a span of several years. In 2008, two reports were produced related to levels of coca cultivation: one from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (2008) and the other from the Office of National Drug Control Policy (2008b). Perplexingly, the quantitative data between the two fluctuated in the thousands of hectares. Variations were so significant that between 2003 and 2007 rates of aerial fumigation differed by almost 27,000 hectares. Annual rates of inaccuracy towards aerial eradication averaged 5,400 hectares, while manual eradication was slightly 'better' at 3,330 hectares. All this is significant based on the fact that the findings came from the same state intelligence.

Inconsistencies in Coca Data from (multiple) US-based sources

Year

2003

2004

2005

2006

2007

2003-2007

Measure

Level of Annual Inaccuracy

Level of Annual Inaccuracy

Level of Annual Inaccuracy

Level of Annual Inaccuracy

Level of Annual Inaccuracy

Overall Level of Inaccuracy

Aerial Eradication

5,705

4,731

4,301

7,494

4,698

26,929

Manual Eradication

4,220

4,759

6,255

0

1,417

16,651

Source: Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2008; Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2008b.

Oversights persist today. While applauding their self-appointed success—even though current levels far exceed anything witnessed in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—the US Embassy in Bogotá, on two separate occasions, presented errors with their current figures. According to the Embassy’s (2009a) Fact Sheet: 2008 Cocaine Production and Cultivation: Colombia, 129,876 hectares of coca had been exposed to aerial fumigation practices while 95,731 hectares experienced some form of manual eradication. This equates to a total of 225,607 hectares. Yet, in the same document officials stipulate, “combined aerial spraying and manual eradication for 2008 was 227,605 ha”. Such information is further problematic when concerning the embassy’s (2009b) Official U.S. Colombia Survey Shows Sharp Drop in Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production press release that argued, “high levels of aerial eradication were sustained covering more than 133,000 hectares” – a difference well over 3,000 hectares or the size of roughly 1,400 football fields.

While such miscalculations, yet again, demonstrate the quantitative inadequacies of US intelligence they also fail to calculate the social costs of (a militarized approach toward)

eradication.

Under the guise that they are trying to encourage agricultural workers to engage in crop substitution Washington and Bogotá are, in fact, destabilizing the rural political economy. Let us contemplate a scenario where numerous peasants do deviate from coca after vast portions of their territory have been ecologically attacked. What, in reality, would transpire? First, numerous peasants would adopt (legal) production of non-coca crops leading to an immediate influx of a small handful of the most profitable crops in a particular geographic region, thus driving down the potential returns for said goods. This would subsequently cause a cyclical effect of poverty – one of the original causes that led to the original shift to coca in the beginning. More rural producers would then fall back to the coca-industry as a means of survival. A second dilemma that might—and has—been faced by small producers is a lack of guarantees by the state to ensure they are taken care of in a post-coca socioeconomic climate. It has been seen repeatedly that those who agreed to state-imposed crop substitution do not receive promised financial support or assistance from the state, development agencies, or NGOs. Suffering from a lack of capital, producers are then forced (again) to return to coca, as no other means of subsistence is available. The third consequence deals with the ecology of the area, which affects not only coca cultivators but also those peasants who long refrained from growing coca altogether. As a result of spraying poisonous defoliants via aerial fumigation many have had their lands destroyed – inhospitable to agriculture. A plethora of cases even revealed how such practices affected legal crops (i.e., plantain, lemons, yucca, maize, etc.) during US/Colombian counter-narcotic campaigns. This caused a rash of peasants having little option but leave for the city or ironically take up coca as a means to cover their losses. There have even been confirmed accounts of officials admitting the goal of fumigation was to structurally displace peasants in order to increase cheap labour in urban centres while privately centralizing rural resources in the hands of large-scale agro-business (Barstow and Driver, 2003). Lastly, it must be emphasized how eradication practices have indisputably damaged the lives of millions in Colombia and the environment in which they live. Aerial fumigation has forced many to abandon their homes and villages due to contamination of land and water. This has subsequently devastated present and future food production, economic stability, and precarious health defects and conditions in young and old. The destruction of crops, soil, and water tables has hampered the capacity for entire communities not only to sustain themselves but has led to further ecological destruction as more are forced to colonize forested regions. Not wanting to leave the sociocultural life they know, many are forced to cut down and inhabit long-time unpopulated territories.

While temporary declines may arise – albeit seldom – the underlining political-economic causes of coca cultivation have not been diminished. Ironically, militarization eradication through aerial spraying or manual displacement of crops is surly to augment conditions of deprivation. It is under these circumstances that the narcotic industry will not wane but rather be sustained (if not increased). Such positions are not simply the critique of a few but even those within the state apparatus itself. In October officials within Colombia expressed the failure of such policies.

Colombia's National Planning Council claimed ... the fight against drugs is lost and the current government's 'Democratic Security' policy in large part is responsible for the systematic increase in human rights violations in the country. The president of the council, Adolfo Atehortua, condemned the nation's anti-drug policy, saying that it had been a total failure. As proof, he said that neither the number of hectares planted with illicit crops nor

the net production of drugs had been significantly reduced. He also suggested that the spraying stop as it was increasing poverty in rural areas, reported newspaper El Espectador. "The general and indiscriminate aerial spraying of crops damages farmers who have no other options, the helpless producers, testers without life projects or jobs, but does not eliminate the persistency of the drug plantations," the Council President argued (Vanovac, 2009).

César Gaviria Trujillo, president of Colombia between 1990-1994, echoed his protest to the current approach of eliminating drugs in Colombia. In November, he (alongside Fernando Henrique Cardoso – former president of Brazil [1995-2003] and Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León – former president of Mexico [1994-2000]) stated:

The war on drugs has failed. And it's high time to replace an ineffective strategy with more humane and efficient drug policies ... Prohibitionist policies based on eradication, interdiction and criminalization of consumption simply haven't worked. Violence and the organized crime associated with the narcotics trade remain critical problems in our countries ... Over the last 30 years, Colombia implemented all conceivable measures to fight the drug trade in a massive effort where the benefits were not proportional to the resources invested (Cardoso, Gaviria and Zedillo, 2009: 1).

Even Colombia's current Foreign Minister, Rodrigo Pardo, has entered into the debate contradicting Washington's claim of success. Pardo expressed the people of Colombia are "tired of the drug strategy ... what we have done has not worked ... We have put so much money and effort into it yet the statistics remain the same" (as quoted in Hamer, 2009).

While applauding the successes those at the helm of power have clearly turned a blind eye to the cause and consequences of their actions. It is increasingly apparent when reflecting upon such conditions that Washington and Bogotá are not carrying out an attack against drugs but are rather waging a war on the poor.

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