

## U.S. Southern Command Confronts Traditional and Emerging Threats

Tom Barry | July 2004

During the cold war, evaluations of U.S. national security in the Western Hemisphere were almost exclusively linked to assessments of the advance of leftist political and armed forces. In the 1990s, the U.S. Southern Command redefined its mission to include defense against what were described as “emerging” and “nontraditional” security threats, mainly drug trafficking. The 1990 Defense Authorization Act stated that the U.S. Defense Department should begin to play a major role in narcotics interdiction. By the latter half of President Clinton’s second term, the Pentagon and the executive branch began justifying the U.S. military mission in Latin America in more traditional terms, arguing that increased military aid and presence in the region was needed to support counterinsurgency programs against the narco-guerrillas.

In 2002 Congress approved a “mission expansion” for U.S. Southern Command (SouthCom) operations. Aid and training formerly limited to counternarcotics operations can now be used for counterterrorism. Subsequently SouthCom officers and congressional budget requests now frame military aid as part of the war on terrorism, which in this hemisphere is waged against what U.S. military strategists call “narco-terrorists.”

In his annual report to Congress, SouthCom commander Gen. James Hill alerted the House Armed Services Committee in March 2004 that the military’s assessment of national security threats in the Western Hemisphere had shifted again. According to Hill, the United States is facing two types of threats in the region: traditional and emerging. Leading the traditional threats are the “narcoterrorists and their ilk” followed by “a growing threat to law and order in partner nations from urban gangs and other illegal armed groups.”

### Radical Populism as U.S. Security Threat

The central emerging threat, said General Hill, is “radical populism in which the democratic process is undermined to decrease rather than protect individual rights.” According to Hill, the radical populists that are emerging throughout the hemisphere are “tapping into deep-seated frustrations of the failure of democratic reforms to deliver

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### Policy Recommendations

- International terrorist networks exist and they do threaten U.S. national security and the U.S. homeland. To be successful in preventing future terrorist attacks and capturing or eliminating anti-U.S. international terrorists, the U.S. government needs a more focused counterterrorism agenda. Just as the invasion of Iraq diverted attention away from the campaign against the al Qaeda terrorists, so too does the overly broad counterterrorism strategy of the U.S. Southern Command that merges three different issues: the threat of vigilante and guerrilla groups in Colombia, the problem of illegal drug consumption and trafficking, and international terrorism. SouthCom should not frame all operations in Latin America and the Caribbean as campaigns against terrorism and narcoterrorism. It does need to establish intelligence and security relations with Latin American governments to prevent international terrorists from using the region as a base to raise funds and organize operations against the United States. SouthCom’s commitment to fighting the “war on terrorism” should not extend to combating domestic insurgency and terrorism that does not represent a threat to U.S. national security. Aid and strategies to ensure the political and economic stability of the countries of the region should be coordinated regionally, not through SouthCom, but through the Organization of American States and the United Nations—multilateral forums that are responsible for collective security.

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expected goods and services. By tapping into these frustrations, which run concurrently with frustrations caused



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## Policy Recommendations

- The U.S. Southern Command should stop programs that aim to build and foster close “military-to-military contacts” with each country of the region. Instead of attempting to improve the image of the region’s armed forces and increase U.S. support, the U.S. government should encourage a demilitarization of Latin America and the Caribbean. At a time when SouthCom itself points to the increasing frailty of many Latin American states, encouraging the armed forces to take on new missions and responsibilities risks the return of military rule in the region, either directly through military regimes or through the election of military officers.
- Washington should finally admit that its drug control strategy is a bust at best, and counterproductive at worst. Coca eradication programs are not only environmentally destructive but they risk driving cocalers in Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador into armed resistance groups while at the same destroying the livelihood of the poorest of the poor without offering alternatives.
- Counternarcotics should be considered almost exclusively a demand issue, with the appropriate solutions being education and the consideration of some form of decriminalization combined with extensive treatment programs.
- SouthCom rightly regards leftist populist backlash as an emerging trend in Latin America and the Caribbean. But this should not be regarded as primarily a U.S. national security threat. Rather the U.S. needs to rectify any U.S. policies—such as support for neoliberal reforms, privatization programs that lead to widespread job losses, trade agreements, and austerity programs—that contribute to social, political, and economic disintegration.

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by social and economic inequality, the leaders are able to reinforce radical positions by inflaming anti-U.S. sentiment.”

What was especially striking—and alarming—about Hill’s description of emerging populism was that it was described not just as a new political phenomenon but as a U.S. national security threat. A similar description of populism by the U.S. Agency for International Development, Commerce Department, State Department, or Office of the U.S. Trade Representative might even be considered a positive sign that U.S. government was finally reflecting on the failure of its economic and political agendas in Latin America and the Caribbean. Instead, the rising leftist populism by grassroots and political party leaders is being used to justify the rising levels of U.S. military and police aid to the

region as well as the considerable presence of the U.S. military itself.

Few would disagree with Hill’s description of Latin American and the Caribbean as a region that is “generally marked by weak institutions and struggling economies,” and that “the resulting frailty of state control can lead to ungoverned or ill-governed spaces and people.” But there is good reason to question his conclusion that the U.S. Southern Command merits increased budgetary support to respond to the traditional and emerging threats. According to Hill, it is essential that the United States deepen “military to military contacts as a means of irrevocably institutionalizing the professional nature of those militaries with which we have worked so closely over the past several decades.” Given the lack of extraterritorial security threats to the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean and the absence of national security threats to the United States coming from the region, it would be more appropriate to call for the downsizing rather than expanding SouthCom operations.

There is little doubt that political stability and personal security in the region is threatened by the rise of criminal gangs and international criminal syndicates. Although counterterrorism offers a politically appealing framework for increased U.S. aid and presence in the region, the U.S. government is wrong to conflate crime prevention with the war on terrorism. Moreover, neither the armed forces of the United States or of the Latin American nations are the most appropriate institutions to address what are criminal, not war, issues. By contributing to the expansion of the mission of Latin American armed forces, the U.S. government is ensuring that the military remains a central institution in virtually all the nations of Latin America.

Although SouthCom deals mostly with Latin American militaries, it also aids, trains, and conducts civic action operation with some police forces, such as those in Costa Rica. When discussing the “narcoterrorist” threat, General Hill addresses the issue of responsibility and authority for operations against “narcoterrorists” and the “growingly sophisticated criminal gangs.” While Hill sees the armed forces as the appropriate responders to the so-called narcoterrorists, he believes that the rise of criminal syndicates and violent crime is closely related to the drug business. According to Hill, the threat presented by “criminal gangs” is “difficult and complex because it falls precisely on a seam between law enforcement and military operations. Latin American leaders need to resolve this jurisdictional responsibility issue to promote coopera-

## U.S. Southern Command Overview

Mission: SouthCom describes itself as a "model unified command" and states that its restructuring and the expansion of its "strategic architecture" "will allow us to prosecute the War on Terrorism in a more effective manner."

The U.S. military has the globe covered by its various geographical commands. The U.S. Southern Command flatly describes its "area of responsibility" as encompassing 32 countries, including 19 in Central and South America and 13 in the Caribbean. In 1997, SouthCom's area of responsibility expanded to include the "Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and a portion of the Atlantic Ocean," which previously had been the responsibility of the U.S. Atlantic Command.

The U.S. Southern Command through its Theater Security Cooperation Strategy, seeks to "build and/or improve defense relationships and partner-nation capabilities, including interoperability, and promote regional cooperation to meet the variety of transnational challenges that confront the region."

### U.S. Bases and Operations:

17 radar sites, mainly in Colombia and Peru

4 Cooperative Security Locations (CSLs) in Manta, Ecuador; Aruba; Curacao; and Comalapa, El Salvador

(Formerly known as Forward Operating Locations, the Pentagon recently renamed these leased facilities to reflect what it says is the "cooperative" aspect of the bases.)

U.S. military bases in Guantánamo Bay Naval Station, Cuba and Soto Cano (Palmerola) Honduras

### U.S. Troop Levels:

The number of U.S. troops stationed at U.S. bases and CSLs is approximately 8,500 to 10,500. This does not include the U.S. troops training Colombian units, which include some 400 military personnel and 400 contractors.

### U.S. Military Training:

1999 13,785

2003 22,831

The U.S. military provides training, both in the United States and in country of origin, to soldiers and officers to 33 nations throughout the region. In the 1999-2003 period, the U.S. military trained 72,495 members of the Latin American and Caribbean armed forces. The number of trainees jumped from 13,785 in 1999 to 22,831 in 2003.

Colombia is the country with the most U.S. trainees (12,947 in 2003). The only other country with more than one thousand trainees in 2003 was Bolivia (2,045). Intent on maintaining what SouthCom calls "military-to-military relations" throughout the hemisphere, the U.S. trains selected troops and police even in the smallest nations such as Dominica and Antigua. Training is provided to Mexico, all the nations of Central America (including Belize), and all South American nations except French Guiana. Although U.S. law prohibits the training of foreign military units, the Pentagon no longer provides Congress detailed information about where troops are trained or which particular foreign units receive training, making the human rights provision of the military training law virtually unenforceable. The Latin American and Caribbean region accounts for roughly 40% of the police and military trained by the United States.

### U.S. Security Assistance:

The levels of U.S. security assistance have increased rapidly since the mid-1990s. Economic and development aid, some of which is directly connected to the U.S. counternarcotics strategy, has also increased but at a slower

pace. Today, the levels of security assistance and economic aid are nearly the same—in contrast to most of the 1990s and during the cold war when economic aid was usually less than half of security aid levels.

1996 \$161 million

2004 \$862 million (estimated)

2005 \$867 million (requested)

### Joint Military Exercises and Peacekeeping:

SouthCom has a category of operations it calls "security cooperation," whose activities "expand U.S. influence, assure friends, and dissuade political adversaries." These security operations range from joint military exercises, to disaster relief and civic action programs. Some twenty nations participate, for example, in the annual Fuerzas Aliadas Humanitarias exercises aimed at instructing area armed forces how to respond to disasters. Another related type of operations the New Horizon exercises that "hone U.S. forces' engineering and medical skills in challenging environments nearly impossible to replicate in the United States." In 2003, New Horizon exercises included 31 engineering projects and 70 medical deployments of U.S. troops in the region. Joint military exercises include several naval operations hosted by Uruguay and Peru. SouthCom also sponsors a few annual trainings and joint exercises in peacekeeping intended "to strengthen the peacekeeping skills, cooperation, and capabilities" of the region's military forces.

Since 1996, SouthCom has assumed another responsibility as part of this "strategic architecture," namely, to teach the Latin American and Caribbean security forces to respect human rights. According to SouthCom's annual report to Congress, "The Human Rights Initiative is a major strategic enabler tool and is a key component of the Command's Theater Security Cooperation Plan." SouthCom claims that all units receiving U.S. security assistance are "vetted for human rights violations," but it provides no documentation about this vetting process nor does Congress question the ability and integrity of the U.S. military to perform this human rights vetting process. The credibility of SouthCom as a model for human rights has long been questioned by critics of U.S. military intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean. Recent military human rights violations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the Guantanamo-base detention center supervised by SouthCom, have raised new questions concerning the U.S. military's commitment to human rights in the context of the global war on terrorism.

As a joint report by the Center for International Policy, Latin American Working Group, and the Washington Office on Latin America warns: "Humanitarian and Civic Assistance programs send an inappropriate message that turning to the military is the best way to 'get things done' in your community."

tion among their police and military forces while simultaneously restructuring their states' security forces."

Hill is certainly right that it is mainly the job of the Latin American countries to assign the proper roles to their police and armed forces. However, the U.S. itself contributes largely to this merging of war and criminal

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issues by its framing of most security aid and training as related to the “war on terrorism.”

The view of SouthCom’s commander on country and subregional issues that he sees as related to U.S. national security is instructive. With respect to Colombia, Hill concludes that the “enormous investment” that the U.S. government made 3 1/2 years ago with Plan Colombia is “beginning to pay dividends” as the Colombian government “is making impressive progress in defeating the narcoterrorists and rejoining the ranks of peaceful, safe, and secure states.” Concerning Venezuela, Hill says “Venezuelan society is deeply polarized” and “will continue to be so as long as the Government of Venezuela continues along an authoritarian path.” But while economic polarization is stark in Venezuela and the Chavez government has contributed to political polarization, Hill and other U.S. government officials make a dangerous mistake when they attribute the polarization only to authoritarianism, rather than to the deep-seated class conflict and inequality that has long characterized Venezuela.

According to Hill the third country threatened by “radical populism” is Bolivia. He states that “If radicals continue to hijack the indigenous movement, we could find ourselves faced with a narco-state that supports the uncontrolled cultivation of coca.” Hill tells Congress that Bolivia “bears very close scrutiny.” Indeed, congressional members would be well-advised to scrutinize any future claims by the U.S. government and military for aid and intervention under the grounds that Bolivia is a stronghold of narcoterrorists. Although the largely indigenous cocaceros do produce for more than local consumption, the popular movement includes citizens from many sectors and its demands focus on domestic policy reform. Its “radical” elements should not be lumped into the misleading and inaccurate category of narcoterrorists.

## War on Terror: Highest Priority

SouthCom will soon have a change of commander. The new designee, Lieutenant General Bantz J. Craddock told the Senate Armed Services Committee on July 21, 2004, his highest priority will be to “prosecute the war on terrorism in the SouthCom’s Area of Responsibility.” Other priorities include to “enhance regional security cooperation to counter transnational threats,” and to “closely coordinate in assisting partner nations’ efforts to address the threats they face in maintaining effective democracies.”

With regard to Colombia, and the neighboring “spill-over” countries of Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, the next SouthCom commander told Congress that the terms “insurgents” and “guerrillas” are less applicable than they were a few years ago. He said he believes the “term narcoterrorists is more appropriate” given “the incredible financial support they get from illicit drug trafficking.” Never, however, does the SouthCom leadership provide evidence for its claims that the two major guerrilla groups in Colombia are either international terrorists that threaten U.S. national security, or that they are involved in the “entire process of growing, processing, and trafficking illegal drugs.” Although there is no doubt that the guerrilla organizations do benefit from the illegal drug production, mainly from taxing the production and domestic transport of illicit drugs, there is little evidence that their activities have been absorbed by the major cartels involved in the transit and sale of cocaine on the international market. Although some guerrilla groups, like all armed forces in Colombia (legal and illegal), conduct terrorist operations in pursuit of political objectives, neither SouthCom nor the U.S. government itself has ever made a case that they are international terrorists who threaten U.S. national security and the U.S. homeland.

## Drug Threat: Hypocrisy and Failure

Latin American and Caribbean nations, mainly the Andean countries, have been the targets of the vast majority of funding for drug eradication and interdiction.

All the involved U.S. actors—Defense Department, State Department, National Guard, Agency for International Development, FBI, and other government agencies—have boasted year after year of their achievements. Traffickers have been extradited, thousands of hectares of coca production have been eradicated, and the region’s military and police are each year said to be improving their cooperation with the U.S. antidrug program. However, measured by drug use, supply, and prices, U.S. antidrug policy has been a dismal failure.

The Congressional Research Service in May 2004 concluded, “Efforts to significantly reduce the flow of illicit drugs from abroad into the United States have so far not succeeded.” According to the report, coca production has tripled in the past decade, and opium production has roughly doubled. Moreover, “Street prices of cocaine and heroin have fallen significantly in the past 20 years, reflecting increased availability.” Hard-core heroin users in the United States increased by more than 350,000

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between 1992 and 2002, and an estimated 56% of the heroin on the U.S. market is of Colombian origin. In the Andean region, which supplies cocaine to the U.S. market, U.S. eradication programs have succeeded in reducing coca production in most source countries, but as production drops in one country or one area of a targeted country, it increases in other countries or other areas. Washington's supply-control strategy is further complicated as coca producers are increasing the productivity of their farming methods even as production areas drop while also planting coca on smaller and more remote plots to avoid detection.

Like the neoliberalism that has shaped U.S. economic policy over the past quarter-century, the U.S. antidrug strategy is largely based on supply-side theories. The underlying theory of the U.S. drug control program is this: if drugs are removed from the street markets, then drug use would correspondingly decrease. Although the availability of illicit drugs is undoubtedly a factor contributing to widespread drug use in the United States, U.S. drug policy has mistakenly assumed that supply eradication and interdiction would diminish demand. However, persistent demand for illicit drugs has consistently foiled supply-side drug control programs.

The failure of U.S. drug control programs is indisputable. U.S. demand is growing, not diminishing. Supplies of almost all illicit drugs are also growing, in some cases dramatically. Although Washington boasts that U.S.-Mexican antidrug cooperation "has never been better," the production of marijuana and opium poppy has dramatically increased in recent years.

Emblematic of the bankrupt U.S. drug policy is the State Department's annual narcotics control report, which specifies which trafficking- or producing-nations are meeting the goals of the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Those countries deemed not to be cooperating with the United States in its own efforts to meet the goals of the convention are restricted from receiving U.S. economic and military aid.

The hypocrisy of having the United States—whose appetite for illegal drugs surpasses \$60 billion annually—pass annual judgment on other countries has long been criticized by source and transit countries. They complain that the U.S. voracious demand and U.S. consumer ability to pay high prices for illicit drugs have resulted in the rise of international criminal cartels and corruption in their countries, where consumption is at relatively low levels. Compounding the hypocrisy of the yearly certifica-

tion/decertification process is the Bush administration's foreign policy of ignoring, dismantling, and violating international treaties and international law, while selectively upholding the sanctity of a small number of treaties that can be used for its own political objectives.

The State Department's 2004 report was especially notable for its lack of impact. Only one country—Burma—was restricted from receiving U.S. aid because of its noncooperation with U.S. antinarcotics initiatives. However, Burma is already blacklisted for U.S. aid and trade because of its human rights violations.

Although Afghanistan was listed, along with 22 other countries, as being a major drug producer or transit nation, it was not sanctioned despite the boom in opium poppy production since the U.S. invasion and occupation. Under the fundamentalist Taliban regime, the production of opium poppies dramatically declined. However, it has climbed to record levels in the past three years. In 2003 the area cultivated for opium poppy production nearly doubled over 2002 levels. Afghanistan, which in effect is a U.S. protectorate, is the source of three-quarters of the world's opium poppy, according to the State Department.

The utter failure of U.S. drug policy to stem supply and demand is reason enough for a complete policy overhaul. Not only does U.S. drug policy, which is largely focused on Latin America, fail to meet its stated objectives. It also has proved counterproductive to other broad U.S. foreign policy objectives in the region. The policy has become an obstacle to political stability in Latin America and has led to a deterioration of U.S.-Latin American relations in the following ways:

- U.S. interdiction and eradication strategy has contributed to the militarization of U.S.-Latin American relations, and in doing so has bolstered the power and influence of the region's armed forces.
- Eradication programs have left peasant farmers without a source of income, damaged public health and the environment, and sparked political opposition.
- Framing drug flows as a top national security concern, the U.S. government has failed to formulate hemispheric policies that directly address the structural obstacles to political and economic development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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