

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**INVEST MORE, EXPECT LESS:  
THE HARD TRUTH ABOUT U.S. POLICY IN COLOMBIA**

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***“He who awaits much can expect little.” – Gabriel Garcia Marquez***

While many interpret Garcia Marquez’ statement as a call to action and a criticism of procrastination, an alternate reading of the Nobel laureate’s axiom is that if one expects too much from a situation or a course of action, he is certain to be disappointed. In assessing past U.S. policy towards Colombia and - more importantly - in attempting to chart its future, the strategist must be careful not to expect too much. Above all, he must resist the frequently self-imposed mandate of American policymaking “to fix” Colombia. Colombia’s internal political conflict, the endemic violence and grave humanitarian crises it has spawned, and the destabilizing narco-trafficking and terrorism that have emerged from it over the past fifty years cannot be definitively fixed or solved by U.S. policy.

However, the strategist cannot simply accept to contain Colombia, since the nature of the Colombian threat is neither the result of conflicting ideology nor of the Colombian state’s willful defiance or opposition to U.S. interests. In a more practical vein, many of the threats emanating from Colombia can be substantially mitigated by a strategy of sustained U.S. engagement. Moreover, it is in the national interest to do so, since Colombia’s internal woes have direct and devastating implications for U.S. domestic security. The following analysis will argue that current U.S. support for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe’s Defense and Democratic Security Strategy is the appropriate policy vehicle for making progress towards our long-term strategic goals in Colombia. However, like multi-generational conflicts in the Middle East, Northern Ireland and other regions, Colombia’s civil war, its illegal armed groups and their drug trafficking fellow travelers will not be pacified anytime soon. We should be mindful of Garcia Marquez’ injunction not to expect too much, while at the same time admitting to ourselves that we must spend more.

**Why Colombia? The Domestic and International Contexts of the Threat:** The Bush

administration's National Security Strategy<sup>1</sup> (NSS) mentions by name only 18 countries among the many in which the United States perceives its strategic interests at stake. Among these, and with good reason, is Colombia. But why? In a word, drugs. Former Assistant Secretary of State Paul Simons has testified,

*“Unfortunately, Colombia is also a center of the illicit narcotics industry. In recent years, Colombia has been responsible for over 70 percent of the world's coca cultivation. Ninety percent of the cocaine entering the United States is either produced in or passes through Colombia. Colombia is also a significant source of heroin for the U.S. market. ...The drug trade has a terrible impact on the United States. There are 50,000 drug-related deaths yearly in the United States -- with 19,000 directly attributable to drugs. This is six times the loss of life on September 11, and it happens every year. ...The narco-terrorist threat is among the greatest the United States and Colombia face, and success against the drug trade and terrorism in Colombia will improve security in both countries, and in the Andean region as a whole.”*<sup>2</sup>

The Office of National Drug Control Policy reports that among all federal prisoners, 22.4 percent were under the influence of drugs at the time they committed their crimes. Discrete figures for violent criminals and convicted murderers are 24.5% and 29.4%, respectively. State prison figures are even higher.<sup>3</sup> At a time when it has again become *au courant* to speak of our nation's “blood and treasure,” the direct social costs of illicit drug consumption are sufficiently grave to classify narco-trafficking from Colombia as a serious threat to national well-being.

Beyond the obvious deleterious effects of the drug trade in the United States, the assault on the Colombian state by internal narco-terrorist organizations represents a threat to the Andean region. Well known “spillover” effects on Colombia's neighbors place strains on those governments to deliver on the promises of democratic governance, leading populist voices in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela to call for authoritarian solutions to public security and crime issues. The October 17 resignation of Bolivian President Sanchez de Lozada following weeks of violent protests engineered by pro-coca growing, populist elements is only the latest example of this instability. Regional analyst Eduardo Gamarra quickly posited that the U.S. failure to provide sufficient funding for alternative

development in conjunction with its aggressive coca eradication support was at the core of Sanchez' failed presidency.<sup>4</sup> Beyond Bolivia and throughout the Andes, atavistic cries for non- or pseudo-democratic solutions to law and order problems are manifest and constitute a particularly worrisome trend in a region struggling to consolidate its nascent democracies.

A less tangible but no less important factor in crafting the U.S. approach to Colombia is the credibility of U.S. leadership and support for democracy in the region. In strict humanitarian terms, the crisis that Colombia has witnessed over many years justifies U.S. engagement. Two million internally displaced people, over 3,500 political killings per year, rampant human rights abuses perpetrated by both the government and guerrillas, the world's highest kidnapping rate<sup>5</sup> and what Colombian analyst Gonzalo Sanchez refers to as the "desacrilization of death and the banalization of life."<sup>6</sup> These conditions stubbornly persist in a friendly country just four hours from Miami and are frequently cited as evidence that the United States lacks the leadership or desire to promote secure and stable regional partners.

Finally, there is a compelling moral argument in favor of continued U.S. engagement in Colombia. Although realists might not accept it, Senator Joe Biden (D-DE) has stated, "*We have a duty to help out Andean neighbors because it's America's insatiable demand for narcotics that has helped fuel the drug trade.*"<sup>7</sup> While this paper will not discuss the demand reduction aspects of a comprehensive engagement strategy with Colombia, it is imperative to note that they are the domestic *sine qua non* upon which any international course of action must be predicated. It is also the seeming intractability of demand reduction that requires a realistic and limited iteration of national objectives in Colombia. As one former Colombian public official commented, "*We won't have peace in our country until you stop putting this stuff up your nose in your country.*"<sup>8</sup> The stark truth is that our Colombia policy has historically suffered a credibility gap in Colombia, where we are perceived as hard on foreign suppliers but soft on our domestic consumers.

**Old Threats Through a New Lens:** U.S. strategists studying Colombia have faced a depressingly familiar scenario in that country for much of the past two decades. Traditional elements of this landscape include the Colombian government's historic inability to exercise effective state control in much of the national territory and a Bogota-centric governing and economic elite capable of insulating itself from much of the violence and instability of the rural conflictive zones. In recent years an expanding narco-dollar nexus has emerged between drug traffickers and ideologically bereft yet militarily capable FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and ELN (Army of National Liberation) guerrillas. And yet despite this very complex mélange of political insurgency, social polarization, organized crime and economic underdevelopment at work in Colombia, U.S. policymakers defined their interests in Colombia in narrow counter narcotics terms. While regrettable, this may have been understandable given U.S. congressional and public opinion constraints. However, analyst Gabriel Marcella argues convincingly that two events – the World Trade Center attacks and the 2002 election of Alvaro Uribe as Colombian chief executive – have led us from “ambiguity to strategic clarity” in terms of how the U.S. is framing its engagement with Colombia.<sup>9</sup>

The psychological effects of September 11 on the American public and the Bush Administration's re-ordering of national security priorities to focus on homeland security and counter terrorism made possible a significant paradigm shift in U.S. thinking about Colombia. More than one Colombian has observed the irony that “*your own blood letting has finally given us both an opportunity to look at this threat in its real multidimensional setting.*”<sup>10</sup> After years of maintaining an artificial policy firewall between support for Colombian counter drug programs and a prohibition on aid to GOC counter insurgency efforts, even when evidence indicated that guerrillas had become integral to drug trafficking, the Bush Administration finally recognized the interwoven nature of this reality in its NSS.

*In Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state and drug trafficking activities that help to finance the operations of such groups. We are working to help Colombia defend its democratic institutions and defeat illegal armed groups of both the left and the right by extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and to provide basic security to the Colombian people.*<sup>11</sup>

Several months prior to the September 2002 publication of the NSS, Colombians scrapped a fitful and wholly unsuccessful three year-old peace process with the FARC and elected an energetic and charismatic new president. Under Alvaro Uribe's leadership, the GOC produced in June 2003 a strategic framework to provide ideological direction for the extant (but woefully under funded) Plan Colombia. Briefly, the objectives of the Defense and Democratic Security Strategy<sup>12</sup> are to:

- Guarantee the security, human rights and freedom of all Colombians
- Consolidate state control over national territory
- Eradicate drug trafficking
- Defend the rule of law and strengthen democratic order
- Promote economic prosperity and social equity
- Reconstruct the damaged social fabric

The Defense and Democratic Security Strategy provides a conceptual framework to justify U.S. counterinsurgency support precisely because it unambiguously admits that the state currently lacks the ability to effectively govern the nation. Within this governance vacuum the drug trade and associated terror groups have flourished. Therefore, providing U.S. military assistance to the GOC in its efforts to wrest territorial control from the FARC, ELN or paramilitaries – whether involved in trafficking at the moment of tactical contact or not – is fundamental to precluding those same groups from providing safe haven to coca growers, criminal cartels or from sponsoring their own drug activities. More importantly, by designating its priorities as the protection of the citizenry, the consolidation of legitimate government authority and the enhancement of the rule of law and democratic institutions, the Colombian strategy appropriately classifies the drug trade as just one of a number of dangerous symptoms that have emerged from deep-rooted societal dysfunctions. In other words, it is no longer just about drugs.

**Defining National Interests and the Danger of Unrealistic Expectations:** In recent months, Bush Administration spokespersons have characterized U.S. interests in Colombia in line with President Uribe's vision. In June, former Ass't. Secretary Simon stated,

*“U.S. policy toward Colombia supports the Colombian government's efforts to strengthen its democratic institutions, promote respect for human rights and the rule of law, intensify counternarcotics efforts, foster socio-economic development, address immediate humanitarian needs and end the threats to democracy posed by narcotics trafficking and terrorism.”*<sup>13</sup>

Senior National Security Director for Latin America Tom Shannon commented, *We do have a national interest in Colombia, ...a national interest in the government's ability to gain control of its territory, eliminate drug production and trafficking, consolidate democratic institutions and defend and ensure the protection of basic human rights for all Colombian citizens.”*<sup>14</sup>

The convergence between publicly voiced U.S. and Colombian interests and priorities is no serendipity, as U.S. authorities in both Washington and Bogota were instrumental developing the new Colombian strategy. However, it is unlikely this collaboration would have come to fruition absent changed U.S. perceptions about foreign terrorists' potential to strike domestically and the emergence of vigorous Colombian leadership committed to preserving and expanding democratic governance.

Although the Bush administration now has a clear definition of national interests articulated in the context of an broad engagement policy with Colombia, it is important to interject a note of caution before discussing the actual instruments of U.S. power and statecraft that will be employed. The terms of reference used to describe Colombia policy must continue to be cautious, qualified and always couched in the language of a long-term, protracted engagement. Successes must be cast relative to the enormity of the problem and failures must be both expected and openly recognized. An encouraging example of adherence to this “invest more; expect less” reality is found in a State-Defense Department joint report to Congress issued in February 2003.

*As Colombia's deep-seated internal conflict dates back almost 40 years, it would be misleading to attempt to provide an expected time schedule for full achievement of United States objectives in the country. In other regions of the world such as Angola, Central America, South Africa and Eastern Europe, the United States has shown that with sustained engagement, accompanied by political will and courage, we have been able to respond successfully to entrenched conflicts. Full realization of U.S. policy goals will require a concerted Colombian strategy and effort -- backed by sustained U.S.*

*assistance over a period of years -- to establish control over its national territory, eliminate narcotics cultivation and distribution, end terrorism, and promote human rights and the rule of law.*<sup>15</sup>

**The Instruments of Colombia Policy Statecraft:** Departing from the premise that there is no domestic support for direct military intervention in Colombia, and in view of the fact that the Government of Colombia is a friendly and willing partner in the execution of U.S. policy, our strategy of engagement will be primarily supported by mutually reinforcing sub-strategies of persuasion and cooperative diplomacy. This does not, however, rule out the use of coercive diplomacy in the application of U.S. instruments of power, as will be discussed in relationship to human rights issues.

Not surprisingly, the centerpiece of U.S. policy in Colombia, our third largest aid recipient, will continue to be **foreign assistance and military aid**. The 2003 budget indicates that \$433 million from the Andean Counterdrug Initiative account is for Colombia, with \$284 million destined for eradication/interdiction support and roughly \$150 million directed to alternative development and rule of law/democracy activities. Roughly \$130 million in Foreign Military Financing is focused on infrastructure security support for the Cano-Limon oil pipeline, an important source of state revenue frequently targeted by the guerrillas. Supplemental funding of \$37 million will support presidential security, bomb-squad training, support for internally displaced persons and aerial eradication programs. U.S. assistance also targets the surrounding Andean nations, providing approximately \$267 million to Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Brazil for similar eradication/interdiction efforts, as well as the essential governance, human rights and institution building activities of those governments.<sup>16</sup>

An important complement to U.S. funding in Colombia should be financial support by the international community. Former President Pastrana's Plan Colombia was conceived as a multi-year, \$7.5 billion dollar program, only one area of which included counternarcotics support provided by the United States. The Plan has never been fully funded and, apart from U.S contributions totaling \$1.8 billion from 2000-2002, the Europeans have provided only \$550-600m, well short of their initial

pledges.<sup>17</sup> The United States must renew overtures via **persuasive diplomacy to European allies** and international organizations, urging increased financial support for the Uribe administration's strategy. While remaining careful not to overstate FARC, ELN and AUC links to international terrorism, the fact that IRA operatives have been apprehended working with the FARC adds credence to the claim that the Colombian government's lack of effective sovereignty provides a measure of sanctuary for transnational criminals and terrorists.

**Favorable U.S. trade policy** can also play an important role in supporting Colombia. The Andean Trade Program, passed in August 2002 provides duty free access to U.S. markets for a wide range of Peruvian, Colombian, Bolivian and Ecuadorian exports. Previous similar legislation in effect from 1991 – 2001 was directly responsible for job creation – over 140,000 in Colombia alone - and export-driven growth in those nations.<sup>18</sup> The current legislation expires in 2007. Concurrent with the immediate provision of U.S. financial and military assistance, the Administration ought to seek Congressional approval to make this legislation permanent, both as a strategic building block towards an FTAA and as a tangible demonstration of our long-term commitment to regional prosperity.

An historic and significant constraint on American assistance to Colombia has been the atrocious human rights performance of the Colombian government, in particular the police and military charged with conducting the counter drug and counterinsurgency missions we seek to support. The State Department's 2002 Human Rights Report remained highly critical, qualifying the government's overall record as "poor," despite ongoing government and NGO attempts to address chronic abuses that result from a dysfunctional judicial system and weak institutions.<sup>19</sup>

The appalling human rights situation in Colombia has led to the growth of a well-organized, highly critical, non-governmental community in the United States and Europe which, linked with powerful congressional critics of U.S assistance to Colombia, has succeeded in placing restrictions on

U.S. aid. Since 1997, “Leahy Law” provisions in both Defense and State appropriations have prohibited U.S. security assistance to foreign military units that violate human rights with impunity.<sup>20</sup> While in practice this has imposed onerous vetting requirements on State and DoD, according to many observers, the law has been the most effective legal tool in leveraging U.S. assistance to improve recipients’ human rights performance. Accordingly, strict compliance with Leahy should be observed.

Additionally, legislation appropriating assistance to Colombia requires periodic human rights certifications from the Secretary of State before tranches of the aid are released. As part of the current U.S. strategy in Colombia, the Administration ought to use **coercive diplomacy** and the threat of an assistance cutoff to compel the GOC to more aggressively demonstrate its resolve to combat human rights impunity. Specifically, the Administration should use the certification requirement to insist on high profile, public trials of senior police and military officials accused of complicity with the paramilitaries. The recent designation by the United States of the AUC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization should make this somewhat more palatable within the defense establishment in Colombia and a steady string of successful prosecutions will serve to minimize U.S. domestic criticism of an engagement policy predicated on military and counter drug assistance. U.S. intelligence and law enforcement liaison officials, as well as military personnel implementing assistance efforts can be particularly effective in conveying to their Colombian counterparts the importance the Administration attaches to human rights concerns.

Reinvigorated U.S. policy in Colombia must continue to employ and expand the use of **public diplomacy and public affairs campaigns**. The Bush Administration has to date made excellent usage of its bully pulpit and image-making capability through the use of highly visible VIP visits. Since assuming office in August 2002, President Uribe has visited the White House twice, most recently in October of this year. The Secretaries of State and Defense traveled to Colombia in December 2002 and September 2003, respectively. Under Secretary Grossman and SouthCom Combatant Commander

Major General Hill have also recently traveled to Bogota. This steady stream of visible, executive, cabinet and sub-cabinet level contact is essential for maintaining both U.S. domestic and Colombian support for our continued engagement. The Administration ought to be even more pro-active in facilitating U.S. congressional travel and exposure to the Colombian problem, drawing upon both the terrorist and narcotics concerns in members' districts. Finally, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), State and other executive agencies should collaborate on a series of public service television and radio spots for broadcast in both countries that highlight the threats posed to U.S. society by Colombian narco-terrorists and the tangible results of U.S.-Colombian cooperation.

**Risks and Constraints:** The primary risk to a comprehensive engagement strategy with Colombia in support of its Defense and Democratic Security program is lack of sustained U.S. commitment. With North Korean weapons of mass destruction, Islamic fundamentalist terror and Iraq reconstruction currently on the table, it is possible that U.S. public concern about Colombia will wane or simply be edged off the radar screen by more headline grabbing international problems. For this reason, public affairs work among U.S. audiences, as well as public diplomacy outside the United States to underscore U.S.-Colombian cooperation must be an integral part of any strategy.

Policymaking is never conducted in a political vacuum, especially policies that are borne of such closely linked domestic dilemmas such as drug abuse and the international situations that supply those narcotics. For this reason, it is both understandable and indispensable that the U.S. Congress play a critical role in the formulation and oversight of Colombia policy. Although not within the scope of this brief analysis to address Congress' role in depth, the legislative branch will continue to serve as both the source of funding to underwrite any engagement policy, but also as a constraint on executive branch implementation. As it seeks to balance "main street" constituencies concerned about drug usage and a more focused, academic and NGO policy elite worried about human rights in Colombia, Congress must be fully factored into and consulted on any strategy regarding Colombia.

Another obvious risk to hands-on engagement is directly linked to a diminishing U.S. appetite to sustain current policy due to increasing U.S. casualties, both military and civilian in Colombia. Three contract pilots are currently being held hostage by the FARC. American NGO members working with indigenous groups in Colombia have been murdered in the past. Our embassy has been attacked with anti-tank weapons and attempts to kill or kidnap diplomats and other high profile Americans are routine. The increased exposure to danger of U.S. personnel involved in training must not be underestimated, and all efforts must be made to minimize the attendant risks associated with a larger U.S. footprint in Colombia. In this regard, the current congressional caps on military and contract personnel should be maintained as a prudent means of limiting deaths and injuries to U.S. personnel charged with executing this strategy.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the most insidious risk the Bush Administration confronts as it pursues its Colombia policy is that it becomes too inextricably linked with the person of President Alvaro Uribe. U.S. policymakers often single out among foreign leaders those we assess to be “our guys.” In the case of Uribe, it is not difficult to see why. A man of discipline and talent, a Colombian politician with no apparent history of corruption, and a patriot seemingly driven by a genuine desire for a better future for all Colombians, Uribe seems the perfect white knight with whom to partner. Yet U.S. strategists would be wise to recall that Colombia’s tortuous problems have germinated over 60 years of violence, corruption and governmental ineffectiveness. Hence the potential solutions to them will go well beyond one democrat’s four-year term of office. While we should certainly exploit the window of opportunity that Uribe’s presidency offers, the real key to long-term progress in achieving the objectives of our and Colombia’s common approach lies in developing Colombia’s democratic institutions. And that is not a task that can be accomplished quickly, nor absent a comprehensive and sustained engagement policy that will guarantee future generations of Colombians similar commitments of resources and political support – at least until we “stop putting the stuff up our nose.”

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- <sup>1</sup> The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States, 2002, (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/html>)
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Narcotics Control Initiatives in Colombia, Testimony before the Senate Drug Caucus of Acting Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Paul E. Simons, June 3, 2003. (<http://www.state.gov/g/inl/rm/21203/htm>)
- <sup>3</sup> All statistics from the Office of National Drug Control Policy, (<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/factsht/crime/index.html>)
- <sup>4</sup> Larry Rohter, “Bolivian Leader’s Ouster Seen as Warning on U.S. Drug Policy”, New York Times, October 22, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Colombia, March 2003, (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18325.htm>)
- <sup>6</sup> Gonzalo Sanchez, “Problems of Violence, Prospects for Peace”, in Charles Berquist, Ricardo Penaranda, Gonzalo Sanchez, Violence in Colombia, 1990-2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2001, p. 9.
- <sup>7</sup> Scott Miller, “U.S. Officials Discuss U.S. Policy Objectives in Andean Region”, Washington File, September 18, 2002 (<http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/ar/colombia/02091802.htm>)
- <sup>8</sup> Colombian Attorney General Gustavo DeGrieff, conversation with author, August 1993.
- <sup>9</sup> Gabriel Marcella, The United States and Colombia: The Journey from Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity, The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center Working Paper Series, University of Miami, March 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> *El Tiempo* newspaper editor Roberto Pombo, conversation with author, October 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States, 2002, (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/html>)
- <sup>12</sup> National Defense Information System, Defense and Democratic Security Policy, June 2003. [http://www.mindefensa.gov.co/politica/politica20030629lanzamiento\\_documento\\_politica\\_seguridad\\_democratica.html](http://www.mindefensa.gov.co/politica/politica20030629lanzamiento_documento_politica_seguridad_democratica.html)
- <sup>13</sup> U.S. Narcotics Control Initiatives in Colombia, Testimony before the Senate Drug Caucus of Acting Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Paul E. Simons, June 3, 2003. (<http://www.state.gov/g/inl/rm/21203/htm>)
- <sup>14</sup> Scott Miller, “State Department Official Examines Evolution of U.S. Policy Toward Colombia”, Washington File, October 9, 2002. (<http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/ar/colombia/02100904.htm>)
- <sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State, A Report to Congress on United States Policy Towards Colombia and Other Related Issues, February 3, 2003. (<http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/rpt/17140.htm>)
- <sup>16</sup> All statistics taken from U.S. Narcotics Control Initiatives in Colombia, Testimony before the Senate Drug Caucus of Acting Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Paul E. Simons, June 3, 2003. (<http://www.state.gov/g/inl/rm/21203/htm>)
- <sup>17</sup> Gabriel Marcella, The United States and Colombia: The Journey from Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity, The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center Working Paper Series, University of Miami, March 2003, p. 23.
- <sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of State, Fact Sheet: Andean Trade Program, August 2, 2002. (<http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/ar/colombia/02080201.htm>)

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<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Colombia, March 2003, (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18325.htm>)

<sup>20</sup> Center for International Policy, Just the Facts: A Civilian’s Guide to U.S. defense and security assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean. Limitation to Assistance to Security Forces (the “Leahy Law”), (<http://www.ciponline.org/facts/leahy.htm>)

<sup>21</sup> Due to concerns over proximity to the conflict, a provision in the 2000 “Plan Colombia” aid package law (Section 3204(b) of Public Law 106-246) prohibits the presence in Colombia of more than 300 U.S. contract personnel. The same provision sets a maximum of 500 U.S. military personnel.