

Book Review

Coleman, B.L. (2008). *Colombia and the United States: The Making of an Inter-American Alliance, 1939–1960*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, xxii+303 pp., \$45.95.

In the year 2000, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana and American president Bill Clinton signed an agreement by which the United States would provide an unprecedented amount of military aid to Colombia for its war against the illegal narcotics trade. With this aid package, known as *Plan Colombia*, Colombia became the world's second largest recipient of military aid from the United States after Israel (a status that changed after the Al-Qaeda September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States). In 2002, the George W. Bush administration authorized the American military aid package to be used not only in anti-narcotics operations (as had been restricted by Clinton), but also for the Colombian government's counter-insurgency war. *Plan Colombia* was highly controversial since its creation. While human rights groups claim it has been used to repress the Colombian opposition, the U.S. and Colombian governments argue that it has strengthened the country's democratic institutions by providing means to fight against left-wing guerrillas and drug trade. In the context of this debate, the work of Bradley Coleman is particularly useful.

In a very well-written, straightforward, and clear monograph, Coleman studies the evolution of United States–Colombia military relations between 1938 and 1960. The author, who is a historian at the U.S. Southern Command, shows how after years of limited diplomatic relations resulting from the U.S. support to the separation of the province of Panama from Colombia in 1903, the two countries built a lasting military alliance which started in the Second World War and consolidated during the Korean War. Coleman shows how the evolution of this alliance responded to different goals the Colombian government had at different times. During the Second World War, Colombia gave almost unconditional support to the United States, seeking to improve its relationships with that country and also looking for a stronger position in inter-American affairs. The Colombian elite believed that this could translate into economic benefits for the country. However, the weakness of the Colombian military made it unattractive for the U.S. government to request direct Colombian participation in the war (chapter 1). Colombia, however, benefited from this support by emerging as one of the strongest allies of the

United States in the Americas (chapter 2). After the Second World War, the Colombian government enthusiastically joined the United States in its global fight against communism, and the Korean War provided a perfect opportunity for Colombia to show this strong support and benefit from it.

The Korean War had long-standing consequences for Colombian internal politics and U.S.–Colombia diplomatic relations. Coleman dedicates a significant part of his book to the Colombian participation in the Korean War (the only Latin American country who sent troops to Korea). He shows that the Colombian government used the war as an opportunity to modernize its armed forces and strengthen its relationship with the United States. The Colombian military fighting in Korea were trained and fought alongside the American military. This experience not only provided them with very valuable knowledge on fighting techniques and modern weaponry, but also developed among them strong anti-communist and pro-American feelings (chapters 3 and 4). Once back in Colombia, many Korea veterans considered themselves guardians of Colombian institutions against the evils of atheist communism. One important veteran of the Korean War was Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who in 1953 led a military coup against a government he accused of promoting the bi-partisan violence plaguing Colombia at the time. During his rule (1953–1957), Rojas Pinilla continued the modernization of the Colombian military (a process in which the Korea veterans played a major role) and Colombia's alignment with the US. By the end of his rule, Rojas Pinilla committed Colombian military to a new foreign operation by sending troops to the Middle East as part of the United Nations peace-keeping mission in the Sinai Desert (chapter 5).

The civilian governments that came after Rojas Pinilla's short dictatorship kept the alliance with the U.S. solidly stable, but created a new set of priorities. Although these governments kept the Colombian battalion in Egypt for the decades to come, they argued to the Eisenhower administration that fighting the counter-insurgency war in Colombia was more beneficial to the long-term goals of the U.S. than maintaining Colombian forces abroad. Coleman shows how Colombian diplomats convinced the U.S. government to shift the alliance from participation in foreign wars to U.S. direct aid to Colombia in its fight against left-wing guerrillas, which became the pattern of U.S.–Colombia military relationships in the years to come (chapter 6).

Although Coleman's book provides an original account of the evolution of U.S.–Colombian military relationships, the book could have made a better contribution to the historiography if he had written a final chapter showing the implications of his findings for our understanding of Colombian history or history of U.S. foreign policy. Instead of a concluding chapter developing this kind of discussion, Coleman wrote an "Epilogue" chapter, which, while a good summary of the history he narrates in the rest of the book, does not contextualize his findings in wider historiographical terms. On the other hand, Coleman provides the book with a very useful appendix in which he

discusses his primary sources, something that is usually absent in most history monographs.

The timely publication of Coleman's book, in a moment in which U.S. military aid to Colombia is part of political debate in both countries, can provide those discussing these issues with deeply researched scholarly material. The book shows how *Plan Colombia* is the continuation of a long and complex process in which the development of the Colombian armed forces in the last six decades has been a direct result of their relationship with U.S. global political goals. This study will also benefit scholars interested in wider issues of U.S. foreign policy and the development of Latin American military forces as political actors.

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