Colombian Security Forces, the United States’ New Proxy in Latin America

By: Alexandra De Camps

The U.S. has a long history of training Latin American soldiers and has encouraged the development of aggressive and militarized law enforcement forces throughout Latin America.

Despite restrictions under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 as amended, and the Leahy Law, the U.S. is now using Colombian security forces as a proxy to maintain their hegemony in the region.

In 2007, the United States Department of Defense began using militarized Colombian security forces to train police and military in Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru under "[Plan Colombia](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11g9637)."

Between 2009 and 2013, the Colombian National Police [trained](https://www.wola.org/analysis/colombia-the-united-states-and-security-cooperation-by-proxy/) 21,949 troops from 47 different countries in ground, air, maritime, and intelligence operations; they provided instruction in psychological operations, and [in Comando JUNGLA](https://www.policia.gov.co/especializados/jungla) techniques. By 2011, 7,000 Mexicans had [received](https://kavilando.org/lineas-kavilando/conflicto-social-y-paz/8049-desde-el-inicio-hasta-el-final-estados-unidos-en-el-conflicto-armado-colombiano) training by Colombians through U.S. funding as part of the Mérida Initiative.

It is not by chance that Colombia was chosen as a proxy.

The Colombian National Police is among the world’s most experienced in counternarcotics and counterinsurgency, largely due to prolonged local U.S. police training that has focused on professionalization and militarization of those forces. The police force operates as an army infantry unit, equipped with helicopters and powerful ammunition to take on heavily armed gangs.

It’s not a surprise that the police and military have an exceedingly poor human rights [record](https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Case-Studies/Human-Rights-Accountability-in-the-Colombian-Military-Armed-Forces) in Colombia. It is this same militarized policing model that the U.S. is exporting in Latin America.

The reason the United States is deputizing Colombian instructors has a lot to do with congressional concern and foreign assistance legislation following the School of the Americas controversy.

The U.S. funded School of the Americas (SOA), often labeled “School of the Assassins,” had the [objective](https://fas.org/irp/crs/soa.htm) of improving ties with Latin American militaries and educating them in the virtues of democracy. However, training manuals [released](https://www.lawg.org/declassified-army-and-cia-manuals/) by the Pentagon point to a different agenda. The training emphasis focused less on the promotion of a liberal agenda and more use of techniques such as torture, execution, blackmail and coercion.

Despite this dark legacy, the SOA continues to exist today through another name--The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). And not surprisingly [more than](https://kavilando.org/lineas-kavilando/conflicto-social-y-paz/8049-desde-el-inicio-hasta-el-final-estados-unidos-en-el-conflicto-armado-colombiano) 18,000 Colombian military and units of the Colombian National Police have been trained by this institution, and many have become instructors.

One such example is [General Jaime Lasprilla Villamizar,](https://soaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/InformeCEV.pdf) an instructor of SOA-WHINSEC. Even though the general led a brigade that allegedly killed at least 75 civilians, he was later promoted to commander of the Colombian army.

In the wake of these crimes, a number of laws were passed. [Section 660 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961](https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/2420), as amended, “prohibited the use of foreign assistance funds to provide advice, training, or any financial support for police, prisons, or other law enforcement forces of a foreign government.” However Congress has clearly authorized several exemptions that allow police assistance and training in certain narrowly deﬁned areas--such as in the case of Colombia.

[The Leahy Law](https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/human-rights/leahy-law-fact-sheet/) applied to the State Department’s counter-narcotics aid in 1997 also imposes restrictions on who can be trained by the U.S. and prohibits assisting units that have been believed to have been singled out for violating human rights.

Recently, through the Plan Colombia initiative and the use of Colombian instructors to train Latin American military and police forces, the U.S found a way around these restrictions.

Despite the serious human rights violations [committed](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/colombia) by Colombian security forces, the U.S. continues to fund them in order to help train military units in Latin America.

The United States is bound by section [656 of the Foreign Aid Act](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/foreign-assistance-act-1961) to provide its nationals with military training reports from the country. The Department of Defense [argues](http://defenseassistance.org/primarydocs/150401_colombia_trainers_dod.pdf) that it does not apply to training from Colombia, even though it is funded by the U.S. The section allows the U.S. Department of Defense and State Department to [avoid](https://soaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/InformeCEV.pdf) publishing information about this training.

Without access to this information on who is being trained or what unit is being funded, it is impossible to know whether instructors have a history of human rights violations, nor can the impact of training in other countries be documented.

An example of the lack of transparency can be seen in the [case](https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/human-rights/leahy-law-fact-sheet/) of the training of Mexican troops funded by the Regional Helicopter Training Center (RHTC**)**. Neither the United States or Mexico monitored which units were trained, nor the graduates that took part in the instruction.

It is also clear that using Colombia’s facilities and trainers as a proxy can be up to [four times](https://www.wola.org/analysis/colombia-the-united-states-and-security-cooperation-by-proxy/) more economical than the use of U.S. troops.

The U.S. uses Colombian security forces to train third countries precisely to avoid human rights restrictions. This reality, combined with a long history of serious human rights violations, extrajudicial executions by Colombian security forces, and the lack of transparency regarding training in other countries--opens space to human rights violations.

While the recently inauguratedBiden administration appears committed to stopping police abuses in the United States, it must also reevaluate U.S. policy in Latin America, specifically how it uses Colombian instructors to export its policing model to Latin America.

In order to promote meaningful progress in Latin America, the United States must put an end to the policies that support the militarization of the police and end the U.S. training of Latin American security forces, as well as halt U.S. financing of such training through initiatives such as Plan Colombia.