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Hostage Rescue Major Blow to the FARC: U.S. Support for Colombia Increasingly Effective

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The safe rescue of Ingrid Betancourt and three Americans—Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell—together with 11 Colombian soldiers and police on July 2 is a stunning success for Colombia's armed forces and President Álvaro Uribe. It symbolizes the huge gains made under Uribe in partnership with the U.S.-funded *Plan Colombia* program and is a major black eye for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and their rogue insurgency. The liberation of these 15 hostages could not have been timelier, as the Bush Administration is seeking approval for a free trade agreement (FTA) between the U.S. and Colombia. Furthermore, presumptive Republican presidential candidate John McCain's decision to visit Colombia only a day earlier now highlights the Senator's recognition of the need for a strong relationship between Washington and Bogotá.

"We Are the Colombian Army, and You Are Free." On July 2, Colombian Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos triumphantly announced that Colombian military intelligence agents had freed the hostages from their FARC captors. Aided by U.S. intelligence and military support assets, Colombian agents infiltrated the FARC's senior ranks, convincing the leader charged with guarding these high-profile hostages—an individual identified as César—to assemble three dispersed groups of hostages. Once the hostages were together, César was to transport the group by helicopter from a location in south-central Colombia to the headquarters of the FARC's commander-in-chief, Alfonso Cano.

Additional Colombian personnel, also masquerading as guerrillas, landed a helicopter and boarded handcuffed hostages along with César and another guerilla. Once in the air, Colombian intelligence agents overpowered César and announced, "We are the Colombian Army, and you are free," before piloting the hostages to safety. The Colombian military chose not to attack the FARC guards left on the ground as a gesture of peace. Not a shot was fired; not a single life was lost.

Ms. Betancourt, age 46, was kidnapped by the FARC in 2002 while campaigning in a rural area for the presidency of Colombia. She remained the FARC's most visible hostage because of her upper-class Parisian education, challenging political trajectory, and dual Colombian-French citizenship, derived from marriage to a French diplomat. Because of her spirited efforts to escape, her FARC captors often kept her chained by the neck, forcing her to walk barefoot in the jungle in an effort to shatter her will to resist.

In 2007, a high-profile humanitarian effort, headed by French President Sarkozy and other diplomats, was launched to secure Ms. Betancourt's release. In exchange for Ms. Betancourt, the FARC hoped to gain status as a belligerent force, obtain

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removal from the EU's terrorism list, and procure a safety zone inside Colombia.

The three Americans rescued were government contractors engaged in aerial surveillance of coca fields at the time of their capture. The Cessna aircraft they were flying crashed into a hillside on February 13, 2002. Surrounded by FARC guerrillas, the aircraft's American pilot, Tom Janis, and a Colombian sergeant were executed immediately. The three remaining Americans were then transported to the FARC's jungle prisons, where they languished until Tuesday's intrepid operation.

The FARC certainly considered the three Americans, along with Ms. Betancourt, as the "four aces" in its game of international blackmail.¹ The organization sought to apply pressure on the U.S. government and Congress to release two FARC leaders—Ricardo Palmera (aka Simon Trinidad) and Anayibe Rojas Valderama (aka Sonia)—both of whom are serving sentences in U.S. prisons for drug trafficking.²

Another Setback for the FARC. Thus far, 2008 has been a terrible year for the FARC. Although it gained international attention when it released six hostages early in the year, the advantage swiftly faded.

The FARC's first major set back occurred on March 1, when a Colombian military strike killed the FARC's second-in-command, Raul Reyes, as he

slept in a FARC base-camp just inside the territory of neighboring Ecuador. The raid on Reyes's camp led to the recovery of computers that yielded mountains of information about the FARC, including material that possibly assisted the Colombians in executing this week's daring rescue operation.

In mid-March another member of the FARC leadership, Iván Rios, head of the FARC's Central Bloc, died at the hands of his personal bodyguard.

Additionally, the death of legendary 78-year-old Manuel Marulanda Vélez, presumably of natural causes, on March 27 ended the violent career of one of the FARC's founders and top strategists.

FARC and Friends Rapidly Losing Credibility. Tuesday's rescue is bad news for some of the FARC's closer friends. Individuals sympathetic to the FARC, such as left-leaning Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba, have little reason to celebrate the rescue. Senator Córdoba's triangular relationship with the FARC, President Hugo Chávez and the Colombian left routinely blurred the boundaries between acts of humanitarianism and political support for terrorism. According to recent information recovered from the computers of Raul Reyes, Senator Córdoba strenuously opposed releasing Ms. Betancourt last year.³ The Colombian judiciary is currently examining the legal propriety of the counsel she offered to the FARC.

Colombia's daring hostage rescue will also be of little cheer to President Hugo Chávez of Venezu-

1. Anastasia Moloney and Naomi Mapstone, "Few Willing to Declare FARC's Demise." *The Financial Times*, July 3, 2008, at http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/61ce0a0a-488f-11dd-a851-000077b07658.html?nclick_check=1 (July 3, 2008).

2. *Ibid.*

3. According to a file recovered from the computer of Raul Reyes, an e-mail exchange took place on December 11, 2007, between FARC's number two, Raul Reyes, and César (presumably the same guerrilla leader charged with guarding Ms. Betancourt). César reported the following summary of his conversation with Senator Córdoba to Reyes:

- "That Ingrid is thin, but that she's always been thin and it won't kill her.
- "That she [Córdoba] believes someone needs to be released and given to Chávez on the border and that it shouldn't be Ingrid. They don't give a f*** about the rest anymore.
- "That she had a fierce discussion with Yolanda Pulecio (Betancourt's mother) about the show she put up for her daughter.
- "That she [Córdoba] fully supports the political platform of the FARC. Not so much the armed struggle. She sees it is a Colombian right, but doesn't discard it as the right choice.
- "That there's high-level infiltrators that allowed the capture of comrades who brought the evidence of life.
- "She [Córdoba] will create a scandal so that they [the Colombian government] release the imprisoned [FARC] comrades.
- "That she [Córdoba] doesn't give a s*** about [French President] Sarkozy's proposal."

Ms. Cordoba denies ever making such statements. See Colombia Reports, "Cordoba advised FARC not to release Cordoba," June 8, 2008, at <http://colombiareports.com/2008/06/08/cordoba-advised-farc-not-to-release-betancourt> (July 2, 2008).

ela. A few months back, Chávez posed as a neutral, third-party negotiator attempting to obtain a humanitarian accord for the release of hostages. Chávez contended that the FARC's willingness to negotiate should entitle the group to be removed from the international community's terrorism list and upgraded to "belligerent" status. All the while, however, Chavez was conducting secret talks with FARC leaders, discussing with them the possibility of Venezuela providing the FARC with aid and arms.⁴

More recently, Chávez was forced to "disown" the terrorist organization—at least temporarily—after evidence was found on FARC laptops seized last March by the Colombian military, indicating Chavez's intention to fund future FARC operations. His announcement urging the FARC to enter into peace talks with the Colombian government, saying that "the day of the guerrilla is over in Latin America," caught the world by surprise. The Colombians' ability to achieve what Chávez could not—the release of the hostages—will surely have political, as well as populist, repercussions throughout Latin America.

The rescue of the 15 hostages will not end the FARC's reign of terror or its ongoing threats to Colombia's security. The FARC still fields an army estimated at 9,000 combatants, protects Colombia's coca fields and cocaine business, and continues holding hundreds of ordinary Colombians hostage for purposes of prisoner exchange and ransom. The support and sanctuary the FARC receives from Venezuela remains a major cause for concern. Nevertheless, the rescue leaves the FARC commander Cano and others worried about their command and control capabilities, their internal security, and, above all, their international image. Indeed, in the aftermath of Tuesday's successful raid, France's President Sarkozy called on the FARC to end its "absurd" and "medieval" struggle.

A Changing Latin American Military. The rescue is a powerful indicator that U.S. assistance and support for Colombia's military through *Plan Colombia* continues to yield results in the campaign

against the narco-terrorists of the FARC, stripping away their leaders and military cohesion, and now their ability to manipulate the headlines through exploitation of the plight of captives. It also strengthens the already popular President Uribe and undermines the arguments by Senator Barack Obama and other opponents of the U.S.-Colombia FTA in the U.S. Congress.

A distrust of Latin American militaries has long characterized the American government's attitude toward the Western Hemisphere. In the past, Latin American soldiers have often been stereotyped as right-wing, trigger-happy thugs. The international left has long condemned them—sometimes with justification—for their repressive mentality and lack of consideration for the subtleties of conflict against elusive and often more socially just foes on the left.

The success of the Colombian operation to free 15 hostages indicates the highest levels of professionalism, coordinated actions and sheer audacity and courage. A likely entry into the annals of notable special operations' successes, the raid also reflects credibly on the Colombian soldiers' readiness to fight—successfully—for freedom.

Pass the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. As Congress moves to debate continued funding for *Plan Colombia*, it should consider the rescue of Ms. Betancourt, Mr. Gonsalves, Mr. Howe, and Mr. Stansill as a demonstration of the effectiveness of Colombia's military forces. Well-trained, professional and under civilian guidance, Colombia's military is willing to partner with the U.S. to curb the depredations of kidnappers and narco-terrorists. The levels of trust and confidence established between officials of Colombia and the U.S. will benefit further by returning the Colombia Free Trade Agreement to the floor for passage.

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4. Ray Walser, "Terrorism, Insurgency, and Drugs Still Threaten America's Southern Flank," The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder No. 2152, June 30, 2008, at http://www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/upload/bg_2152.pdf.