

# McCain stays the course in Latin America

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Sen. John McCain's recent trip to Colombia displayed the candidate's shortcomings. He revealed he would be impelled by the same stubborn — and militarized — “stay the course” mantra that has driven the Bush administration's foreign policy blunders. And he failed to grasp that his support for a free trade agreement with Colombia may actually increase poverty and drug trafficking there.

The trade bill has stalled since congressional Democrats refused to vote on the agreement, citing concerns about U.S. jobs and labor rights in Colombia. Some 2,600 trade unionists have been murdered in Colombia since 1986 — mostly by illegal right-wing paramilitaries with ties to the military. So far this year, 31 unionists have been murdered.

McCain's response? Stay the course. The Arizona senator admitted the Colombian government's record had room for improvement but lauded its “progress” on protecting human rights.

He also wants to stay the course on Plan Colombia. The multibillion-dollar military aid package from Washington has clearly helped the Colombian government, as the recent successful rescue of the 15 rebel-held hostages underscored.

But Plan Colombia's central strategy was the reduction of illicit crop production — primarily coca, which can be used to make cocaine — through massive aerial fumigations. Yet Colombia's production jumped 27 percent over the last year, according to the United Nations.

McCain's response? Stay the course.

McCain argued that Colombia's cooperation and “success” in the drug war should be rewarded with passage of the pending free trade agreement. “If we turn down that free trade agreement,” said McCain, “it sends a signal throughout the region that it's not very beneficial to be a friend of the United States of America.”

But Colombian Sen. Gustavo Petro recently told me the proposed free trade agreement would actually be counterproductive to the fight against drugs and might even help the country's illegal armed groups.

He reasons that U.S. agricultural products, which are heavily subsidized and would enter tariff-free under the trade deal, would devastate the livelihood of peasant farmers by flooding Colombia with cheaper U.S. imports.

These farmers, said Petro, would logically turn to the only crop with which they have a comparative — and exclusive — advantage over U.S. farmers: coca plants. What's more, said the senator, "young and newly unemployed peasants would also fill the ranks of the illegal armed groups."

His conclusion: "The free trade agreement would actually make the U.S. drug problem worse."

McCain's response? Stay the course: "Free trade is an important issue, not only for Colombia but I believe for the economy of the world and, as you know, for the United States economy."

A lot of unemployed workers in the United States might disagree with him on that one. But McCain's visit was about more than drugs and trade deals. He was sending a clear signal to the rest of South America, where left-leaning presidents now govern almost every country on the continent, about where his allegiances lie.

"The stability of Colombia is more critical than ever as others in the region seek to turn Latin America away from democracy and away from our country," he said before leaving on his Latin America tour.

This is the same schoolyard logic of "with us or against us" used by the current administration in its relations with Latin America — and, indeed, the world.

If McCain becomes president, the trend began by the Bush administration of increasingly isolating the United States from its neighbors to the south will likely continue.

McCain's response? Stay the course.

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