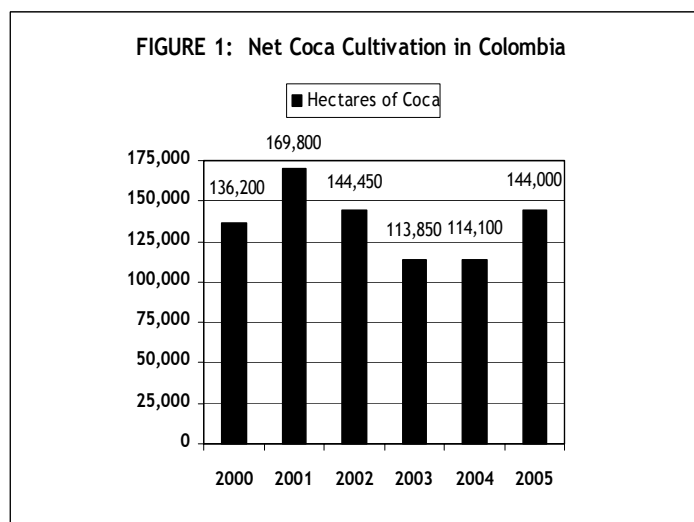




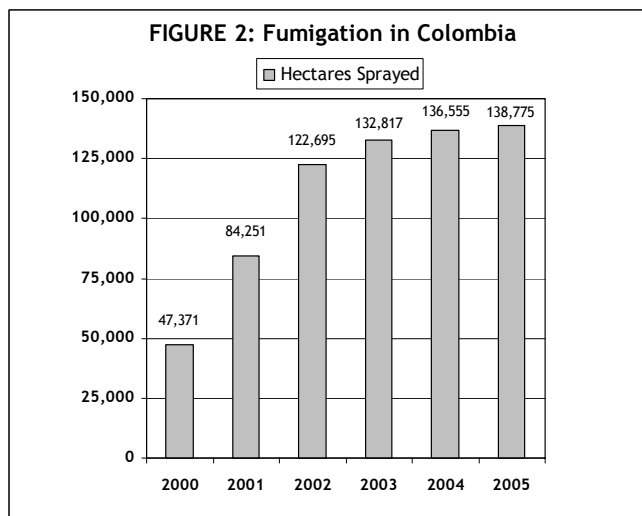
IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

FUMIGATION AND THE U.S. WAR ON DRUGS IN COLOMBIA

Plan Colombia envisioned reducing Colombia's cultivation, processing and distribution of drugs by 50 percent. Aerial herbicide spraying (fumigation) of coca bushes has been the centerpiece of the strategy. But six years and \$4.7 billion later, the drug control results are meager indeed, as there appears to be at least as much coca being grown in Colombia now as there was in the year 2000 (see figure 1).



Source: State Department and Office of National Drug Control Policy



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These results come despite the sizable U.S. investment in fumigation and the Colombian government's aggressive implementation of the program. Backed strongly by Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, the pace of spraying has increased every year since 2000 (see figure 2).

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: COCA ESTIMATE ON THE RISE

The White House Office on National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) revealed in April that the estimated area under coca cultivation in Colombia in 2005 was 26 percent higher than the 2004 figure. ONDCP sought to downplay the sharp increase by attributing it to expanded surveillance, and maintains that direct comparisons to estimates from 2004 and earlier year are therefore impossible.

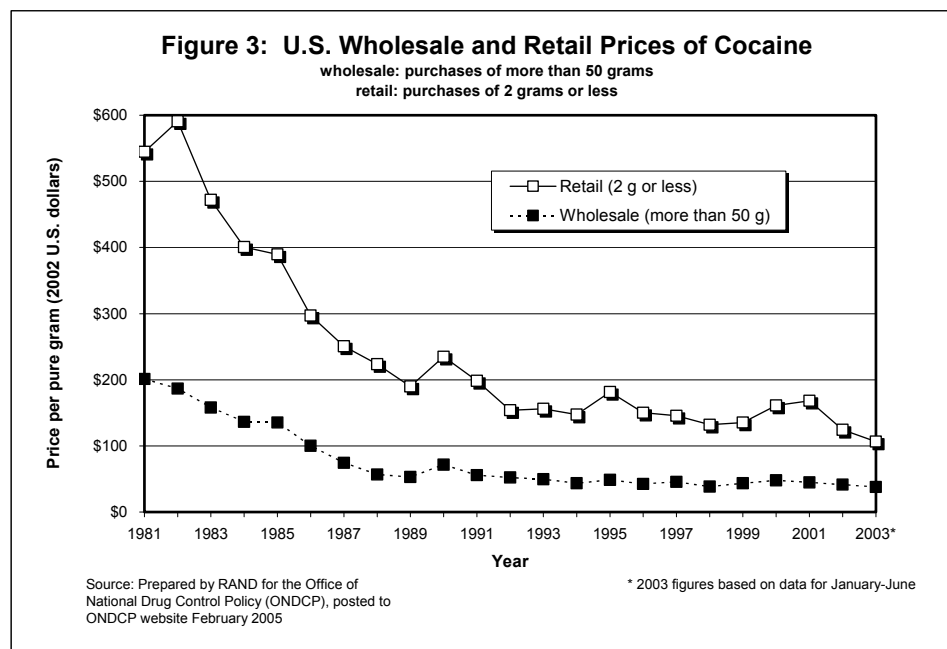
As ONDCP now acknowledges, earlier estimates did not account for significant areas of Colombia where coca may have existed. If, as ONDCP maintains, an unknown but perhaps significant amount of coca went undetected in previous years' estimates, then *the Administration's claims that fumigation achieved substantial reductions in coca cultivation in 2002 and 2003 must now be recognized as doubtful.* Indeed, ONDCP has explicitly stated that "It is likely that much of the newly-surveyed coca was already present in past years, and better intelligence led to its recent observation."

ONDCP's 2005 coca estimate also belies the Executive's standard assurances that Congress can have confidence in the annual drug crop cultivation figures. For more than a decade, the State Department's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (INCSR) – which includes the cultivation figures and other drug production estimates – has placed cultivation estimates in the category of “What We Know With Reasonable Certainty.” From 1998-2003, the INCSR stated that the “most reliable information we have on illicit drugs is how many hectares are under cultivation during any given year.” Since 2004, the claim has been that the “number of hectares under [drug crop] cultivation during any given year is our most solid statistic.” Each report, including the INCSR released in March 2006, concludes that the government can “estimate the extent of cultivation with reasonable accuracy.”

But as WOLA and other observers have long maintained, the coca estimates published over the years have in all likelihood been serious understatements of the true extent of coca cultivation, especially as new plantings have become more dispersed. Belatedly, ONDCP seems to have reached the same conclusion. ***The Administration should at last drop the pretense of “reasonable accuracy” when it comes to illicit drug production estimates, and Congress should view the numbers with caution, especially when year-to-year fluctuations are presented as evidence of success.***

WORD ON THE STREET: “COCAINE IS WIDELY AVAILABLE”

Nor is there any credible evidence that Plan Colombia has helped drive up cocaine's U.S. retail price, which is the ultimate goal of supply-control efforts such as fumigation. In February 2005, ONDCP posted a report showing illicit drug price and purity trends from 1981-2003. ***Cocaine's retail price in the 2nd quarter of 2003 was the lowest quarterly price recorded since 1981 (see figure 3).*** Produced for ONDCP by the RAND Corporation, the report includes an exhaustive description of the data and methods used to derive the estimates. In ONDCP's own words, the report “extends, improves, and augments” previously published price and purity estimates.



In November 2005, ONDCP claimed in a press release that cocaine prices were on the rise due to Plan Colombia. In stark contrast to the RAND report that ONDCP had posted just months before, ONDCP's press release offered no explanation of the methods used to come up with the new estimates, despite obvious discrepancies with the well-documented RAND estimates. In response, ***Senator Charles***

Grassley (R-Iowa), co-chairman of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, has challenged ONDCP to come clean about its methods, expressing concern that “ONDCP manipulates data to suit their own interests.”

Recent reporting by the Justice Department’s National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) suggests that cocaine supplies remain robust. NDIC’s most recent *National Drug Threat Assessment* reports offer no reason to suppose that availability has been squeezed.

- *April 2004:* “Both powder and crack cocaine are readily available throughout the country and overall availability appears to be stable.”
- *January 2005:* “Key indicators of domestic cocaine availability show stable or slightly increased availability in drug markets throughout the country...”
- *January 2006:* “Cocaine is widely available throughout most of the nation, and cocaine supplies are relatively stable at levels sufficient to meet current user demand.”

According to the school-based *Monitoring the Future* survey, the best that can be said of youth cocaine use rates is that they have remained relatively stable. Other government figures are less encouraging. ***The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) shows a 33 percent increase between 2000 and 2004 in the number of first-time cocaine users under the age of 18.***

Plan Colombia having run its course, the U.S. government’s own data indicate that coca cultivation is expanding in Colombia, cocaine remains readily available in the United States, and cocaine use is steady, if not rising, including among youth. A prominent proponent of Plan Colombia within the House recently stated that “the streets of America are awash in drugs.” While he was arguing to augment U.S. military aid to Colombia, his statement actually serves as a pithy summary of the drug control results achieved through Plan Colombia and its fumigation centerpiece.

“THE TIPPING POINT”? TIME TO THINK AGAIN

As the disappointing results of supply-control efforts such as Plan Colombia have accumulated over the years, proponents have urged patience and more money. We used to be “turning the corner,” then there was “light at the end of the tunnel,” and now we’re said to be at “the tipping point.” But is there good reason to suppose that further escalation and intensification of fumigation will deliver substantially better results in the future?

Wishful thinking has tended to crowd out realistic assessment of this question. Both history and theory suggest that the prospects are not bright, because the principal flaws are inherent in the strategy itself. The inflated expectations about what can be achieved by supply control policies – and by forced eradication in particular – stem from two false premises at the heart of the strategy.

- ***Is coca an easy drug enforcement target?*** The coca bush is a hardy and adaptable plant that flourishes on steep slopes and in acidic soils unfriendly to other crops. The leaves are lightweight and durable, and well suited to low-cost, long-range transport that does not depend on access to good roads. Moreover, land and labor are cheap and abundant. These advantages have ensured that, in the face of enforcement pressure, coca production will persist. Fumigation does not even pretend to address any of these factors. ***At great cost, from 2000-2005 the U.S.-backed fumigation operations sprayed a cumulative area somewhat greater than the state of Delaware. Colombia’s land area, however, is more than 50 percent larger than that of Texas. At what scale – and at what cost – is it supposed that the spraying would begin to make a difference?***

- ***Is coca a valuable drug enforcement target?*** Eradicating coca actually inflicts very little damage on drug trafficking organizations and their capacity to produce and smuggle cocaine. This is due to its relatively low value; coca leaves constitute a minute fraction of cocaine's ultimate U.S. retail price. Traffickers can purchase \$1,000 worth of coca leaf to produce a kilogram of cocaine that retails for about \$150,000. ***Even if the cost of coca leaf were to triple or quadruple, the impact on the ultimate U.S. retail price of cocaine would be negligible. It follows that attacking the drug trade at this point costs drug-trafficking organizations precious little.***

Despite the obvious mismatch between lavish spending and meager results, proponents of fumigation continue to tout crop eradication as one of the most cost-effective drug control strategies available. ***But as the U.S. government's own data demonstrate, fumigation is costing more and more and accomplishing less and less.*** Time and again, Congress has thrown good money after bad in pursuit of the fundamentally flawed strategy of fumigation. It is well past the moment when the burden of proof must shift to those who would do more of the same.