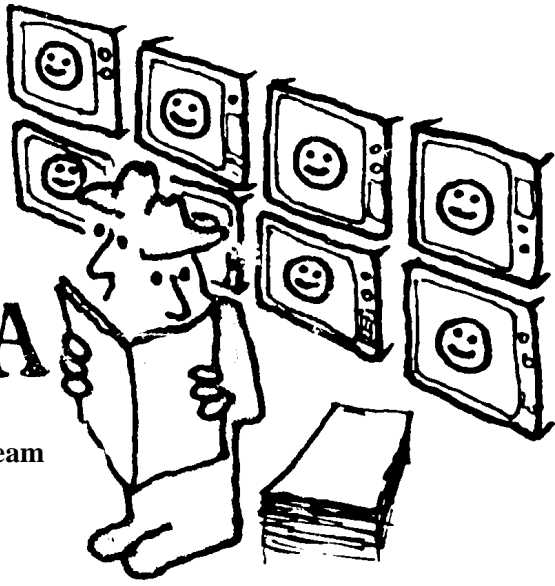


# EYE ON THE MEDIA



**Colombia Coverage in Mainstream Media Only Half the Story**

by Matt Robinson

Now that \$1.3 billion in military and law enforcement assistance to Colombia has been approved by Congress, and military advisory programs have been set up, the *News & Observer* has treated its readership to a discussion of the merits and aims of this huge aid package. In the July 30 "Q" section, the question "Colombia: Another Quagmire?" is posed. While more than one side of the issue was presented, the tenor of the article makes US involvement sound more like a moral crusade against the latest villain of the day -- international narcotics production and trafficking -- than the dubious adventure that risks intensifying an already horrific civil war, a far more likely outcome.

Quoting White House sources and Fort Bragg Special forces soldiers, we are told that the US is "doing the right thing" in the planned intervention programs, already an established (if under-reported) part of American foreign policy.

In fact, the US has already suffered casualties, most notably Army pilot Jennifer Odom, whose surveillance plane was shot down by combatants on July 23. With more American "advisers" being sent into the area, more such casualties are, sadly, quite foreseeable, as are civilian massacres that have characterized just about every US "assistance" effort in the past half century, and which are already far too common an occurrence in Colombia.

In a companion piece to the main article, our esteemed senior Senator Jesse Helms, in an inspired piece of '50s era commie-bashing, points out that the Colombian civil war is being waged by Communist narco-terrorists, and that we must do whatever it takes to resolve the conflict. It is obvious that the Senator's definition of "whatever" is limited to military aid and assistance, and not to negotiated peace. Meanwhile, best evidence shows massive army and paramilitary involvement in profiting from the drug trade, and in a recent interview paramilitary leader Carlos Castana claimed that the US has been trying to provide covert support and direction to his and other right-wing groups, universally agreed to have murdered by far the most civilians.

On the other hand, closer to the governmental party line, the main article states that

## Local Activists Arrested

In the IMF/World Bank demonstrations of April 16 and, more recently, the protests of the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, local activists were treated to organized police harassment and brutality.

In a Prison Industrial Complex march on April 15, over 500 marchers were arrested by DC police. Non-violent protesters were corralled into a narrow block and held captive for two hours before being carted off in school buses to be charged with minor offenses. Several Chapel Hill/Durham activists were among those arrested in this police action, which was a pre-emptive strike against the protests scheduled for the next day.

In Philadelphia, activists from around the state were arrested and subjected to police brutality -- safely out of the sight of cameras or independent observers -- and some are, at this writing, still in jail on ridiculously high bonds.

the weaponry and technical assistance will be helpful in bringing about a "negotiated peace" for the beleaguered nation.

The section omitted the fact that a peace process has already been established in the country, and that rebel and governmental leaders took an extended tour of Europe together in February in order to learn about civil peace from various other nations, was completely ignored in the *N&O* article. Colombian President Andres Pastrana, himself under investigation by the Colombian parliament for having been elected with massive funding from drug lords, has ceded territory to the rebels in the name of peace (and, true, because the rebels are powerful enough to hold and defend large tracts of land), and in the long view, a negotiated peace seems possible without foreign intervention.

But the "Q" section presented evidence only in support of US intervention assistance, such as the amounts of drugs produced in the region and ending up on a "table in Hilton Head". Nowhere is the question posed of "what do we do if this first 'Plan Colombia' package fails?", surely a question of concern to those familiar with that other conflict of repute from three decades ago, in which the US held little more than a commitment to do "whatever it takes" to ensure victory of non-communist forces.

As this "quagmire" develops, the *News & Observer* needs to take a close look at the situation, and ask questions that lead to a critical and public discussion of the merits of US involvement in the ongoing war.

The lives of 58,000 US military personnel may not be at risk in South America, but the lives of millions of Colombians will most surely be affected by an aid package that equals 5% of the total Colombian budget. Facts, not official or military rhetoric, is called for.

# Why Beg for Dereg?

Commentary by Dan Gerlach, Budget & Tax Center Director

In an increasingly stressful world, I think we should all be entitled to a few certainties. One of those certainties should be that when I turn on the light switch, the light goes on. Another should be that I know about how much my electric bill will be each month.

But there is a national trend to deregulate the electric industry. Deregulation means that individuals and businesses could select the company to provide their electricity, while at the moment electric companies have monopolies over specific geographic areas. Under deregulation, electric companies would compete for your business, hopefully resulting in lower prices and better service.

Ha, I say. Let's look at California -- one of the states that deregulated first. Residential consumers in San Diego are paying two to three times as much in their electric bills. While service during the California heat wave has been erratic, brownouts have been common. Several hundred people, all opposed to the new deregulation and its effects, testified before the utility commission recently.

In other areas of the country, it has become obvious that some power companies are manipulating prices as well. A Wall Street Journal article reported that the energy infrastructure is not ready for competition. Some companies are denied access to the power grid. Others are taking electricity at peak times and replacing it later, jeopardizing supply. Yet others are bidding up prices from small plants, knowing that high

summer demand will result in its use. The perfectly competitive world that the free-market pointy-heads envision does not exist in the energy realm.

Let's not forget that we've already had telephone deregulation. I'm not quite sure that my long-distance bills have decreased any. After all, how could they? Companies spend millions on TV commercials and mail advertisements to recruit you. They have to think of ingenious disclaimers -- "Yes, 2 cents a minute, anytime (after two a.m. and before three a.m. on the second Thursday of the week)." They've generated a mini boomlet in the economy by calling my house to convince me to switch over with wonderful promises: "Mr. Gerlach, we'll give you free minutes, a set of Ginsu knives, and...what the hey... a brand new car!"

Please. Leave me alone. Let me pay my bill in peace.

North Carolina policymakers were right to adopt a go-slow approach to deregulation. The California experience shows that there is a whole lot of risk and not a whole lot of gain to deregulation at this time.

There are some principles that North Carolina should adopt from these lessons. First, any move toward deregulation must contain protections, both in terms of quality and price, for residential consumers. Second, power companies should be able to explain their plans for furnishing power at times of peak demand, such as hot summer days. Third, any taxation of electricity should be based on usage, not price. Deregulation promises deeper price reductions for large power users, such as industrial plants. These large users shouldn't have all the benefit of lower taxes as well. Fourth, make it a requirement that electric providers don't call me. I'll call them.

Dan Gerlach is the director of the N.C. Budget and Tax Center, based in Raleigh. He can be reached at (919) 856-2158 or by email at dan@ncjustice.org. This article appeared on the web site of the NC Justice and Community Development Center, <http://www.ncjustice.org>.

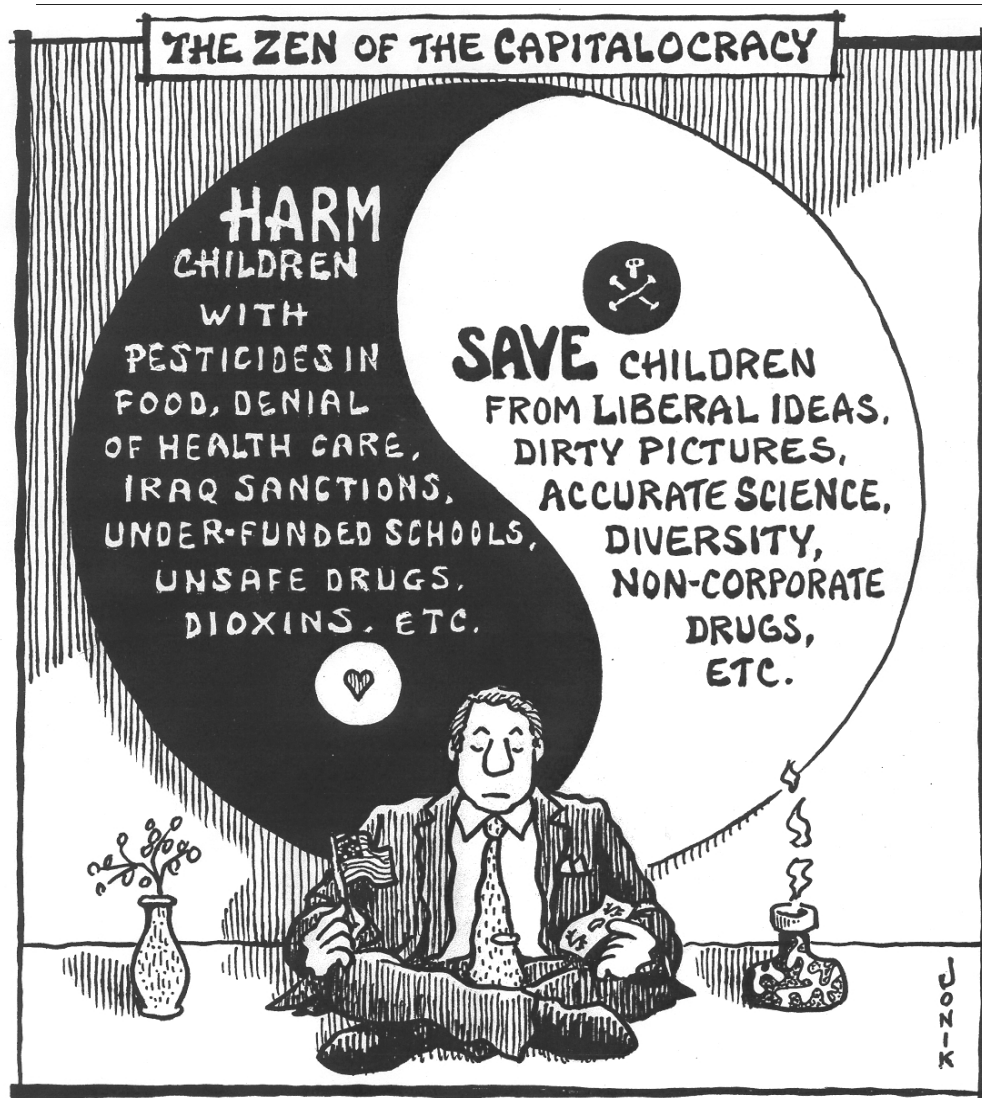
### CORRECTION

In your excellent article on Dianna Ortiz (July, 1996), you wrote that she is from Kentucky, whereas she is actually from New Mexico.

Thank you for writing articles about human rights.

Sincerely,  
Bruce Magnuson

(<http://www.prop1.org/protest/guatemala/guat96do.htm>)



*The Prism* is an independent, nonprofit newspaper providing a forum for grassroots approaches to social change. In printing news not covered by traditional media, we emphasize local issues and local perspectives on global issues. We are guided by principles of economic justice, ecological responsibility, nonviolence, democracy, support for reproductive rights, and respect for the rights, dignity and diversity of all people.

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