



President-elect Barack Obama campaigning in 2008.

Southern Exposure

by Daniel Coronell

It happened in the last debate between Barack Obama and John McCain. In a moment as sudden as it was fleeting, a South American issue surfaced in the U.S. presidential campaign. The Republican candidate — in yet another attempt to blindside his opponent, portraying him as soft on enemies and ungrateful to allies — pulled the Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) out of his sleeve.

“Let me give you another example of a free trade agreement that Senator Obama opposes,” began Senator

McCain, “...the goods and products that we send to Colombia, which is our largest agricultural importer of our products... Senator Obama, who has never traveled south of our border, opposes the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. The same country that’s helping us try to stop the flow of drugs into our country that’s killing young Americans.”

Obama, more informed about Colombia than his adversary expected, countered with the following: “The history in Colombia right now is that labor leaders have been targeted for assassination on a fairly consistent basis, and there have not been prosecutions.” He added: “...we have to stand for human rights, and we have to make sure that violence isn’t being perpetrated against workers who are just trying to organize for their rights...”

[continued on page 39 >>](#)

Southern Exposure (continued from page 37)

Anxious to have the last word on the matter, McCain insisted: “Senator Obama doesn’t want a free trade agreement with our best ally in the region but wants to sit down across the table without precondition with Hugo Chávez, the guy who has been helping FARC, the terrorist organization.”

It was no surprise that the issue of Colombia — a matter of little or no interest to the average American voter — didn’t make the front page of the U.S. newspapers. There was just a tiny flutter about McCain’s statistical mistake: Canada is actually the largest importer of U.S. agricultural products; Colombia is much lower down the list, at number 12.

But in Colombia after the debate, various sectors of public opinion encouraged the notion that McCain was Colombia’s champion while presenting Obama as the adversary of the Colombian people and their government.

Practically no one in the Colombian press mentioned the statistics on murders of unionized workers, which totaled 41 in the first months of 2008 according to research by the Escuela Nacional Sindical, an independent nongovernmental organization that tracks labor statistics in Colombia. Reality eloquently chalks up one point for Obama.

Just days before the U.S. elections, Latinobarómetro, a research group based in Chile, took a public opinion poll in South America to measure sympathy for the U.S. presidential candidates. Barack Obama was the favorite across the board, but Colombia was the place where John McCain had the most support.

The tremendous popularity of Colombian president, Álvaro Uribe, is also clearly evident in the perceptions of the country’s citizens on international issues.

Uribe has visited the United States 11 times in an effort to win approval for the free trade agreement. He has met with President Bush, members of Congress and leaders in the business community. To satisfy the influential Black Caucus — and Congressman Charles Rangel, in particular — Uribe named an Afro-Colombian woman as cabinet minister. Every week, the president visits the rural areas of the country to defend the need for the FTA, an agreement which some claim will spell certain doom for the nation’s weak agricultural sector.

At the same time, the United States’ military support, through Plan Colombia, has been the basis for Uribe’s popularity and his success in the fight against the FARC. Inherited from the previous president, Andrés Pastrana, the plan proposed to cut Colombian coca production by half.

Eight years into Plan Colombia, the reality is quite different. According to the Government Accountability

Office (GAO), the research agency of the U.S. Congress, the areas of coca cultivation in Colombia have actually increased by 15 percent. Presented in the kindest possible fashion, the GAO study documents the failure of this strategy, which has already cost some US\$12 billion, half of which came out of the pockets of U.S. taxpayers.

As if that weren’t enough, investigations into human rights violations in Colombia continue to multiply. The same day that Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, the commander of the Colombian Army resigned.

General Mario Montoya — a long-time friend of President Uribe and commander of “Operación Jaque,” which without firing a single shot rescued 15 hostages kidnapped by the guerrillas, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three U.S. citizens — left his post in the midst of the scandal surrounding what are being called “false positives” in Colombia. Under pressure to show “results,” military units assassinated dozens of civilians from poor neighborhoods, presenting them as guerrillas killed in combat.

Supporters of President Uribe, as well as his detractors, know that with a Democrat in the White House, many things are going to change. Under the Bush administration, the United States’ sole priority in the Andean region was to contain Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Perhaps that’s why the U.S. government has looked the other way when reports surfaced about its ally’s human rights violations and government interference with judges investigating the relationships among politicians and members of the paramilitary.

On the morning of November 5, while the United States continued to celebrate the victory of President-elect Obama, there were long faces in Colombia.

Luis Carlos Villegas, president of the National Association of Industrialists (Asociación Nacional de Industriales, ANDI), the country’s leading private enterprise association and one of the most fervent promoters of the FTA with the United States, made this declaration: “We will have greater difficulties in the discussion about our FTA, not because of Obama’s election, but as the result of the extremely painful, complicated and shameful acts that we have endured in this country in recent weeks.”

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