

Georgetown welcomes Colombia's Uribe

John Dear | Sep. 7, 2010 On the Road to Peace

Last week some of us learned that Georgetown University has appointed the former president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe, to a teaching post at its Walsh School of Foreign Service. Uribe, who is linked to paramilitaries that slaughtered thousands of innocents and who befriended drug traffickers -- bringing them into the political mainstream -- has been named Georgetown's "Distinguished Scholar in the Practice of Global Leadership." He begins work tomorrow, Sept. 8.

Apparently neither the university president nor the faculty nor the Jesuits have been apprised that lawyers are working to bring charges against Uribe at The Hague for human rights violations. Georgetown might just as well have invited the Philippines' Marcos, Nicaragua's Somoza or Liberia's Charles Taylor to teach.

I shouldn't be surprised. Georgetown in particular has a long history of supporting U.S. war-making. It has taken millions from the Pentagon, trained thousands of young Catholics in its ROTC program, hired Henry Kissinger, welcomed the person who ordered the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and supported war-makers from the Shah of Iran to Ronald Reagan.

Georgetown's students and faculty have for years joined the campaign to close the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga., which these days predominantly trains Colombia's military officers and soldiers under the guise of fighting terrorism. Many of those soldiers then go back to their country and participate with paramilitary death squads in killing and torturing innocent people. I would expect the president, faculty, and Jesuits of Georgetown to know better than to welcome Uribe to join their ranks.

"We are looking forward to having President Uribe join our university community," Georgetown President John DeGioia said recently in a statement. "Having such a distinguished world leader at Georgetown will further the important work of students and faculty engaging in important global issues."

Is this his idea of a world leader? With so many heroes of peace and nonviolence to invite -- from Archbishop Tutu to Mairead Maguire, or leaders here at home such as Kathy Kelly and Jim Wallis -- I'm stunned that he can look forward to the arrival of one of the world's most notorious mass murderers. Is this the kind of global leadership Georgetown teaches?

"President Uribe will bring a truly unique perspective to discussions of global affairs at Georgetown," said Carol Lancaster, dean of the Walsh School of Foreign Service. "We are thrilled that he has identified Georgetown as a place where he will share his knowledge and interface with Washington, and I know that our students at the School of Foreign Service will benefit greatly from his presence."

Friends and I have urged Georgetown's leaders to disinvite Uribe and have also begun a campaign to protest his presence. I personally asked Dean Lancaster on the phone to do everything she can to prevent Uribe's arrival. To my chagrin, most everyone I speak with at Georgetown seems to know little about Colombia or Uribe and refers to the State Department's respect for him.

I say this without hyperbole. That should have been their first warning.

We all need to learn about Uribe's eight-year tenure in Colombia, his corruption, the human-rights violations he sponsored, and the widespread impunity. In June 2009 [Human Rights Watch issued an open letter](#) [1] to President Obama listing some of the human rights violations of the Uribe administration:

- More than 3 million Colombians (out of a population of about 40 million) have been forced to flee their homes, giving Colombia the second-largest population of internally displaced persons in the world after Sudan.
- More than 70 members of the Colombian Congress are under criminal investigation or have been convicted for allegedly collaborating with the paramilitaries. Nearly all these congresspersons are members of President Uribe's coalition in the Colombian Congress and the Uribe administration repeatedly undermined the investigations and discredited the Colombian Supreme Court justices who started them.
- Colombia has the highest rate of killings of trade unionists in the world.
- A clandestine gravesite of 2,000 non-identified bodies was recently discovered directly beside a military base in La Macarena in central Colombia. When the news became public, Uribe flew to the Macarena and said publicly that accusing the armed forces of human rights abuses was a tactic used by guerrillas. These comments put the lives of those victims who spoke at the event in grave danger.
- Starting in 2008 reports came out that the Colombian military was luring poor young men from their homes with promises of employment, then killing them and presenting them as combat casualties. The practice not only served to stack battle statistics, but also financially benefited the soldiers involved -- as Uribe's government had, since 2005, awarded monetary and vacation bonuses for each insurgent killed. Human rights groups cite 3,000 or more "false positives."

Georgetown's appointment of Uribe is "shameful," Jesuit theologian Fr. Jon Sobrino said last week in El Salvador. "Uribe is a symbol of the worst that has happened in the tragic conflict in Colombia. There is a great deal of blood involved here, a very great deal. "

"Does this appointment reflect the mission and the Catholic and Jesuit identity of Georgetown?" Fr. Dean Brackley, a Jesuit professor at the University of Central America in El Salvador, writes. He goes on:

"This will, literally, cause scandal. The U.S. Congress has held up passage of the trade agreement with Colombia because it is a place where the government, under Uribe, has consistently failed to defend labor unionists from death squads. Uribe is widely accused of having had direct links to the paramilitary groups who have massacred countless innocents. Whether or not those charges are true, he has irresponsibly and cruelly accused human rights activists in Colombia of collusion with 'Communist terrorists,' endangering their lives."

A few years ago, I traveled to Colombia to see for myself. There I learned about the U.S.-backed war against the

poor waged by Uribe under the guise of a "war on drugs." I learned how the repressive Colombian government, under the democratically elected but dictatorial President Uribe, killed some ten thousand people a year -- leaving 200,000 dead in the last twenty years. This war isn't about drugs but about expropriating Colombia's rich land and natural resources, from the indigenous people to the U.S. and multinational corporations.

In Bogota, Colombia, I met one of the world's leading voices for human rights: Fr. Javier Giraldo, a Jesuit priest whose Interchurch Commission for Justice and Peace has documented all the killings and massacres in Colombia. For his efforts he's suffered countless death threats, especially under the Uribe regime. Last week Giraldo wrote to me about the situation and I share his letter here so we can all learn about Colombia and the disgrace of Georgetown's hiring of Uribe:

"I write to you with great concern regarding the fact that Georgetown, our Jesuit University, has hired the outgoing president of Colombia, Álvaro Uribe, as a professor. I am constantly receiving messages from individuals and groups who have suffered enormously during his term as president. They are protesting and questioning the mind-set of our Society, or its lack of ethical judgment in making a decision of this kind.

It is possible that decision makers at Georgetown have received positive appraisals from Colombians in high political or economic positions, but it is difficult to ignore, at least, the intense moral disagreements aroused by his government and the investigations and sanctions imposed by international organizations that try to protect human dignity. The mere fact that, during his political career, while he was governor of Antioquia Province (1995-1997) he founded and protected so many paramilitary groups, known euphemistically as "Convivir" ("Live Together"), who murdered and "disappeared" thousands of people and displaced multitudes, committing many other atrocities, that alone would imply a need for moral censure before entrusting him with any responsibility in the future.

But not only did he continue to sponsor those paramilitary groups, but he defended them and he perfected them into a new pattern of legalized para-militarism, including networks of informants, networks of collaborators, and the new class of private security companies that involve some millions of civilians in military activities related to the internal armed conflict, while at the same time he was lying to the international community with a phony demobilization of the paramilitaries.

In addition, the scandalous practice of "false positives" took place during his administration. The practice consists in murdering civilians, usually farmers, and after killing them, dressing them as combatants in order to justify their deaths. That is the way he tried to demonstrate faked military victories over the rebels and also to eliminate the activists in social movements that work for justice.

The corruption during his administration was more than scandalous, not just because of the presence of drug traffickers in public positions but also because the Congress and many government offices were occupied by criminals. Today more than a hundred members of Congress are involved in criminal proceedings, all of them President Uribe's closest supporters.

The purchase of consciences in order to manipulate the judicial apparatus was disgraceful. It ended up destroying, at the deepest level, the moral conscience of the country. Another disgrace was the corrupt manner in which the Ministers closest to him manipulated agricultural policy in order to favor the very rich with public money, meanwhile impeding and stigmatizing social projects. The corruption of his sons, who enriched themselves by using the advantages of power, scandalized the whole country at one time.

In addition, he used the security agency that was directly under his control (the Department of Administrative Security) to spy on the courts, on opposition politicians, and on social and human rights

movements, by means of clandestine telephone tapping. The corrupt machinations he used to obtain his re-election as President in 2006 were sordid in the extreme, with the result that ministers and close collaborators have gone to jail.

He manipulated the coordination between the Army and the paramilitary groups that resulted in 14,000 extrajudicial executions during his term of office. His strategies of impunity for those who, through the government or the "para-government," committed crimes against humanity will go down in history for their brazenness.

The decision by the Jesuits at Georgetown to offer a professorship to Álvaro Uribe is not only deeply offensive to those Colombians who still maintain moral principles, but also places at high risk the ethical development of the young people who attend our university in Washington. Where are the ethics of the Society of Jesus?"

Javier's closing question leaves me trembling.

I urge people everywhere to call or write Georgetown University's president and protest Uribe's presence on campus -- and to push Georgetown to cut its ties with dictators, warmakers and the Pentagon. For further information, visit the School of the Americas Web site at www.soaw.org and the Colombia Support Network at www.colombiasupport.net.

I grieve that our struggle to end war and injustice is so often stymied by the church itself and, in this case, my own religious order. But I'm heartened by the reaction of so many people and the organizing that has sprung up around this scandal. I hope someday Georgetown University and every Jesuit and Catholic institution will become a school of justice, nonviolence, and human rights.

A week from today, on Sept. 14, thirteen friends and I will stand trial at the Nevada State Courthouse along the Las Vegas strip. Our infraction? Daring to walk on to Creech Air Force Base, headquartered in the Nevada desert, last year on Holy Thursday. We entered the premises to call prayerfully for an end to the U.S. drone bombers.

Alas, our call was rejected and -- after a tense stand-off with soldiers at the gate -- the police arrived and arrested, handcuffed, chained, booked and held us in the Las Vegas jail for the night. In March the government pressed charges against us, hoping to set an example of us and to stop others from protesting our "drones." So the struggle goes on.

To follow the trial of the Creech 14, visit Voices for Creative Nonviolence, at www.vcnv.org [2]

John Dear's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com [3]. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn> [4]. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat on Gospel Nonviolence, go to www.johndear.org [5].

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Links:

[1] <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/06/26/colombia-obama-should-press-uribe-rights>

[2] <http://www.vcnv.org>

[3] <http://www.amazon.com>

[4] <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>

[5] <http://www.johndear.org>