

GOOD TIMES IN MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA

"NOTHING HAPPENS UNLESS FIRST A DREAM." - CARL SANDBURG.

The Rise of a New Latin America - NEWS

LATIN AMERICA - The Sunset of U.S. Empire Building: The Rise of a New Latin America
- By Michael Hogan

THE COLOMBIAN EXCEPTION

Colombia has gone from a war-ravaged, drug-infested, insecure country in the 90s to one of the most prosperous and mostly safe regions in Latin America. I spent a month and a half there last year and was impressed by the cosmopolitan excitement of Bogotá which compares favorably with Boston in term of cultural activities, music, museums, documentary film-making, fine universities, and continental cuisine. The young people are stylish, educated, and multilingual. It has a strong middle class and, while it has its poor, there is little evidence of homelessness and beggars which one can see any day in Washington or San Francisco.

Medellín, once considered the "murder capital" of the world, is now one of the most attractive cities in the Americas. It has the feel of an Austrian metropolis surround by pristine farms, lushly wooded hills, and crisp mountain air. It has a well-maintained infrastructure, with clean streets, excellent public transportation, and one of the most prestigious medical universities in the Americas. Medellín is, in fact, so safe that it was the city Secretary of State Rice chose to visit last spring on her visit to the region.

Much of Colombia's success is due to its president, Alvaro Uribe, whose family was a victim of violence; he has since been committed to its eradication. But, in fairness, it is more than that. There also has been a genuine effort by the U.S. Department of State to work in a cooperative way with local officials in the country, not only to help contain the violence and eradicate drug cultivation, but also to eliminate corruption in the police and armed forces, and to secure the already-strong educational system. U.S. representatives in the region have also exhibited respect for the culture while engaged in these activities. There have been virtually no negative incidents involving U.S. personnel.

Colombian universities are now attracting new students from all over the world; secondary schools are involved in the Advanced Placement program; the president has implemented a plan to stop the brain-drain of the best and brightest and is also offering financial incentives for the 4,000 or so Colombians with masters and doctorate degrees now living abroad to return to their native country.

While I was there last spring a local newspaper conducted a survey asking whether the readers felt more secure now than a decade ago, whether they trusted the police, and whether the president was doing a good job. Affirmative responses were in the 70th percentile. This fall I went down again to visit a school in Barranquilla and I continue to be impressed by the quality of education, the determination of young people to get ahead, and the enthusiasm of those who attend the (sometimes free) concerts offered by Juanes and Shakira, two Colombians whose international acclaim and wealth have not distracted them from their obligations to their homeland, and who have made significant financial and moral commitments to building peace and aiding Colombian youth. Shakira's Pies Descalzos (Barefoot) Foundation has given aid to thousands of children displaced by civil wars and violence; Juanes has brought global attention to landmine removal, and has turned paramilitary rifles into guitars to highlight the disarmament process.

I have read (and have myself written) a great deal of criticism of the U.S. in Latin America, most of it justified. However, for those who criticize our cooperative efforts of the past decade with Colombians to work for a safer and more prosperous country, I would say come to Medellín, come to Bogotá. You will see what can be accomplished.

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