

“Cocaine, Girls, and *Bebidas*.”

A View of Colombia Through the Lens of American Foreign Policy and Popular Media

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INTRODUCTION

The popular media is a crucial channel through which the general public learns about places and cultures they are unfamiliar with. Because television and streaming services have become staples in American society, they hold much of the power in depicting occurrences and swaying public opinion. Although complex, there exists a causal relationship among mass media, foreign actors, foreign policy, decision makers, events, and public opinion where these agents influence each other ([Baum and Potter 2007, 40](#)). More specifically, mass media and foreign policy are able to work simultaneously to formulate an idea across a large audience. In our case study, we look at whether the media portrayal of Colombia in the US changes along with developing US-Colombian relations and consequently, US policy goals.

Colombia is one of many Latin American countries that, over the course of several decades, has been the target of US policies. This project focuses on the Clinton through Trump administrations to capture varying policy goals and the changes in the relationship between the two countries. In 1971, Colombia rose to international attention with the official declaration of the War on Drugs (["A Brief" 2021](#)). Since then, US policymakers have approached Colombian negotiations with a strong reference to this and other related issues. Not lagging behind, the media has reflected this interest. As a renowned national source, the *New York Times* features news headlines that reflect policy goals and sentiments towards Colombia. For example, headlines under Clinton and Bush heavily targeted issues of narcotics and terrorism, such as "60 Seized in 2 U.S. Cities and Colombia, Dismantling Drug Ring" and "2 Arms Dealers Convicted of Plot to Aid Terrorists," respectively. Conversely, under Obama and Trump, headlines shifted to peace conversations and everyday culture, such as "In Colombia, Turning a Peace Deal Into Reality" and "How We Followed a 1,500-Mile Migration Journey," respectively. Taking note of varying US-Colombian international goals, this project researches the depiction of policy trends from 1993 to 2020 within American-made films and television series. The films

and television series¹ were analyzed and grouped into 5 overarching themes that explain US-Colombian relations: US Intervention and Sense of Superiority, Colombian Ties to Drugs, Shift From War on Drugs to War on Terror, Poverty and Regional Effects, and Economic and Government Corruption. Outside of these themes, further concepts not directly related to US policy were discovered that shed light on the perceptions of Colombia and Colombians by the United States. Overall, the popular media reflected not only the policy decisions made by the US government, but the changes seen between the different administrations. Anticipating the affiliation to the narcotics industry, our research uncovers an assortment of commonalities among popular media when referring to Colombia and Colombians.

POLICY OVERVIEW

Clinton Administration (1993-2001)

At the beginning of Clinton's presidency, relations between Colombian President César Gaviria and United States President Bill Clinton were strained. During a time of high tensions, as the chase for Pablo Escobar and Colombian drug cartels continued, the United States sought control over the Colombian government. Escobar is known as one of the world's most notorious drug lords that reformed how governments and police forces regulate the drug trade (["Colombia" 1993](#)). Under President Bush Sr., the Andean Initiative was one financial approach taken by the US government in an attempt to reduce the production and trafficking of narcotics. Originally, this initiative was meant to support the Andean drug eradication and gave up to \$387 billion to Colombia ([Crandall 2001](#)). However, there was great scepticism over the effectiveness of the aid. Under this impression, Clinton's entrance into the White House with a Democratic Congress brought a reduction to the fiscal aid in its 1993 renewal to \$174 billion ([Crandall 2001](#)). The cut in funding of this anti-drug policy demonstrated a less direct manner of reprimanding Colombia for its political and economic ties to the drug industry. In 1994, Clinton

¹ See appendix for full media list.

and the US Republican Congress maintained this strategy towards US-Colombian negotiations, ultimately leading to an increase in US-Colombian programs.

Prior to entering his presidency in 1994, Ernesto Samper Pizano was forced to closely cooperate with President Clinton after a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officer leaked tapes, incriminating him of accepting bribes from narcotic groups ([Crandall 2001](#)). Understanding that the US had the power and evidence to remove him from running for office, Samper decided to listen to Clinton and the US government to secure his position as President of Colombia. In this new partnership, the US leveraged its power over Colombia by appointing US supporters to run the National Police of Colombia ([Crandall 2001](#)). As a result, most US-Colombian policies during the time of President Samper organically faced opposition from narcotic groups. These groups controlled much of Colombia, from its presidential elections to its local authorities. To combat the control of the Colombian government by these cartels, several political moves occurred. One included Clinton's Executive Order 12978 in 1995, declaring a national emergency with respect to skilled narcotics traffickers and the threat they posed to the United States's national security, foreign policy, and economy ([The White House 2016](#)). This declaration further justified the United States's continuous involvement in Colombia. Another initiative brought forth was decertification. Supported by Clinton in 1996, decertification withdrew "U.S. economic and military assistance except for humanitarian aid and counter-drug support" from Colombia ([Farah 1996](#)). Similar to the funding cuts during his early years as president, Clinton utilized the US's financial power to keep control over the Colombian government's decisions.

When Colombian President Pastrana took office in 1998, the Clinton administration aimed to solidify its relationship with Colombia through proactive policy measures. Receiving numerous invitations to the White House, Pastrana was clear about his anti-drug efforts and support of US intervention. Whether or not this was for the continuation of US aid to Colombia, it is evident that policies and programs focused on drugs, trade, and militarization multiplied. In

particular, US Customs developed counternarcotics training and assistance programs in Cartagena, Colombia ([US Department of State 1999](#)). Similarly, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs funded a Seaport Contraband Enforcement Team training program, giving the US control over ports and drug exchanges in Colombia ([US Department of State 1999](#)). These programs included sending American troops into Colombia for proper regulation and management. As a culmination of ambitious bilateral cooperative efforts, Plan Colombia was passed in 2000. Unlike previous legislation and negotiations, Plan Colombia targeted not only the issue of narcotics trafficking, but also the issues of economic development, organized crime, demobilization, and regional security ([Biden 2000](#)). Although supported by Clinton with initially \$1.6 billion and a 6-year guarantee, the plan extended to over \$7 billion and lasted 15 years ([Hobson 2000](#)). US involvement expanded in Colombia through this comprehensive plan, leveraging its power over Colombia's humanitarian, economic, and domestic security matters.

Bush Administration (2001-2009)

Under President Bush, many important shifts took place due to the rise of a Republican administration and because of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. While under Clinton and the Democratic Party, Republicans in Congress felt wary about only providing aid to Colombia and neglecting the surrounding region. To address this, a few months after Bush came into office, the \$882 million Andean Regional Initiative was passed, recognizing that there are underlying issues when it comes to the trafficking of cocaine and that neighboring countries are as involved as Colombia in the trade ([Beers 2001](#)). Just when they thought that their counterdrug efforts were enough to address the region, 9/11 occurred and the infamous War on Drugs morphed into the War on Terror. In March of 2002, the Senate passed a resolution declaring 3 groups in Colombia "terrorist organizations" ([Graham 2002](#)). From that moment on, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the United Self-Defense Forces of

Colombia (AUC), and the National Liberation Army (ELN) became tangible targets and the War on Terror was declared in Colombia by the US.

As the attack on terror continued, Colombia saw a rise in militarization. If there had seemed to be a large number of US military personnel before, this number only grew in the next few years as fear of terrorism increased. In 2004, Plan Colombia was expanded and two main results came about: Colombian armed forces were trained and given supplies to better handle FARC and Congress doubled the limit on US troops in Colombia to 800 military advisors and 600 private contractors ([Isacson 2004](#)). This signified the shift in focus from the containment of the drug trade to a broader focus on the preservation of democracy and protection against terrorist entities. Then, as 2005 approached, the question of whether Plan Colombia would be renewed loomed over the executive and legislative branches. Ultimately, Bush decided to renew Plan Colombia since he was worried that an end to the plan would mean an end in aid to the country and because "you don't stop in midstream on something that has been very effective" ([Noriega 2005](#)).

The renewal of Plan Colombia was also influenced by the amicable relationship between Bush and Colombian President at the time, Álvaro Uribe. They considered each other friends and had many similarities between them, including right-wing ideology, focus on Plan Colombia, and hope to preserve democracy in their countries. Their friendliness could be seen in the two joint press conferences that occurred in 2004 in Cartagena and in 2007 in Bogotá. These press conferences were filled with banter and it was not hard to piece together that the two got along outside of the political sphere as well ([The White House 2004](#) and [The White House 2007](#)). Bush and Uribe's relationship was very notable since not only was it much better than that of Clinton and the previous presidents', but it signified that the two countries got along and stood in a favorable position to pass policy that was in the interest of both sides.

Obama Administration (2009-2017)

Broadening the field of collaboration between the two countries, Barack Obama's presidency introduced a variety of cultural and daily matters into foreign policy. In 2009, Obama began his work alongside Uribe's last years of presidency. Notably short, their cooperative efforts focused extensively on security matters. The US-Colombian Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), introduced in 2009, permitted the US to access three Colombian air force bases ([US-Colombia 2009](#)). Although the agreement affirmed that Colombia had control over US activities in the area and prohibited the establishment of a US base, the policy negotiation gave the US further entry into Colombian domestic affairs. Targeting issues such as "narcotics production and trafficking, terrorism, illicit smuggling of all types, and humanitarian and natural disasters," the DCA highlighted the US's role as an interventionist leader in Colombia's development ([Weisrbrot 2011](#)). Fueled by military ties, the US-Colombian relationship remained contingent on the stability of security.

In addition to militarization, foreign policy under Obama ventures into Colombia's economy, trade, and education. With Juan Manuel Santos as Colombia's president in 2010, Obama's negotiations coincide with a liberal agenda abroad. Under their administrations, the Colombian Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) was set out to build on the progress of Plan Colombia to respond to matters of rural poverty, human rights, violence, and indigenous groups (["The Colombia" 2011](#)). Modifying Colombia's National Consolidation Plan, the initiative depicts an awareness of the US towards domestic humanitarian issues that affects Colombia's international performance (["Strengthen" 2021](#)). As a part of the US's goal to reform Colombia, trade was also a key factor in the economic standing of the country and internal development. The approach brought forth the US-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA), which eliminated tariffs and removed barriers to US services and labor movement (["Labor" 2011](#)). This trade policy also centered Colombia's economy as a crucial player in the success of a US-Colombian partnership. Surpassing previous measures of aid for the Colombian people, Obama included education in his reformation plan with Santos. The US funded \$1 million for the

100,000 Strong in the Americas initiative for the growth of international study from Colombia, as well as other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, to the US ([“Fact Sheet” 2013](#)). With this, the diverse interests between the US and Colombia normalized alliances that propagated domestic agenda abroad, such as the movement for education.

A pivotal moment during Obama’s presidency was the approval of Paz Colombia in 2016. Renovating the previous Plan Colombia, the US supported Santos’s new framework with \$450 million ([“Remarks” 2016](#)). Paz Colombia was introduced as a three-step process aimed at reintegrating previous armed group members into society in an attempt to establish peace after many years of internal conflict and governing division ([Miranda 2016](#)). Bringing internal terrorism to the forefront of the policy rationale, the new plan reflected explicit evidence of US participation in Colombia’s armed group conflict. Throughout Obama’s presidency, US policy shifted from issues of international affairs to issues of state management. Overall, the policy largely demonstrated the US’s influence over decisions pertaining to the Colombian state government, producing Colombia’s dependency on and submissiveness to the US.

Trump Administration (2017-2021)

While laissez-faire in certain aspects, Trump’s presidency had a complex relationship with the Colombian government due to the COVID-19 pandemic and tense relations with President Duque. Unlike his predecessors, he did not maintain a friendly relationship with the country and avoided visiting. Clinton, Bush, and Obama all travelled at least once to Colombia, but Trump sent Pence in his place every single time and Argentina was the only Latin American country he visited while in office ([“Travels” 2021](#)). This did not mean that he did not host former Colombian presidents, however. In 2017, he invited Uribe and Pastrana to his Mar-a-Lago estate where they had a “secret” meeting and discussed their concerns over Colombia’s current state and its future under incoming President Duque ([Ordoñez and Kumar 2017](#)). This made many people in both administrations uncomfortable, and set the scene for tensions with the incoming president. It later gave the impression that Trump was avoiding meeting Duque until it

was inevitable and that is when they crossed paths at the UN General Assembly in 2018 ([Alsema 2018](#)). At this assembly, Trump brought up the War on Drugs and introduced a non-negotiable document on the strategy to address the worldwide drug problem. Countries were either on the side of the US or against them, but most people that signed onto the document only did so out of fear of Trump and his sanctions ([United Nations 2016](#) and [Walsch and Heltzer 2018](#)).

At the beginning of his presidency, Trump made it clear that he was unhappy with how Colombia was addressing the drug problem. While Santos was still in office, he not only threatened decertification, but proposed to cut aid to Colombia by 36% to a number that was lower than it had been in 32 years ([Gaudín 2017](#) and [Norman 2017](#)). Although never going through with decertification or getting his budget approved, his concern over Colombia's ability to contain their drug problem was clear and this sentiment came through in some of his later policies as well. For one, he pushed for the building of a wall along the US-Mexico border to aid in the stunting of drug trade (["Remarks" 2017](#)). He then demanded that Colombia resume the aerial spraying of coca fields even though this practice had been stopped because of its harm to human health and to the environment ([Lekhteman 2020](#) and [Nayar 2020](#)). Finally, because of COVID-19, Trump called for an increase in militarized presence in Colombia out of fear that drug traffickers would use the pandemic as an opportunity to expand their business. He ordered the U.S. Security Force Assistance Brigade and U.S. Southern Command to enter Colombia and begin counternarcotics operations ([US Embassy Bogotá 2020](#) and ["Southcom" 2020](#)).

Aside from this, humanitarian efforts were seen under this administration. For example, due to the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis, which pushed Venezuelans into Colombia, the US provided over \$344 million in aid (["Colombia and the United States" 2020](#)). They considered this a demonstration of allyship in a time of crisis. Similarly, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US provided around \$20.6 million in aid to help with health efforts in Colombia and to support those communities most vulnerable to the virus (["US Relations with Colombia" 2020](#)). Other

efforts were also made to help the people of Colombia, such as the Memorandum of Understanding on Higher Education and Colombia Crece. The former was passed in an effort to promote the exchange of culture and education among institutions primarily serving Black students ([“Memorandum” 2019](#)). This continued the education efforts that Obama had set in motion. The latter was proposed to provide the most vulnerable communities with new opportunities and to invest in their futures ([“Colombia and the United States Launch” 2020](#)). For the most part, not much attention was given by Trump to Latin America, which increased tensions, but his administration still passed enough policy to maintain the paternalistic relationship between the US and Colombia.

MEDIA THEMES

The popular media reflects the relationship between the US and Colombia to the public in a manner that not only resembles the policy and negotiations enacted within these presidential administrations, but also the commonalities across each administration. After careful analysis of our media samples, the following themes were uncovered.

US Intervention and Sense of Superiority

As an apparent trend in the policy implementations put forth, US intervention in Colombia surfaces as a recurring theme in the media within our study. Although released prior to Plan Colombia, the film *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) depicts the tense relationship between the US and Colombia due to the ongoing War on Drugs. In this film, the US Coast Guard stops a ship in the Caribbean for drugs and the US president dismisses Colombian anti-drug efforts for having “accomplished nothing” (Noyce 1994). Given this information, the Senate did not want to appropriate more money towards the anti-drug effort because they felt it was similar to Vietnam. As a result, the US intrusively takes matters into their own hands and American troops invade Colombia through a secret military operation: Operation Reciprocity. Throughout this film, comments made by US characters, such as “how stupid are these people,” “they think they can do anything,” and “challenging the power of the US,” evoke a sense of US

superiority over the Colombian state and, more specifically, the Colombian people (Noyce 1994). In a similar manner, the plot of the film *Proof of Life* (2000) builds upon the initial entrance of an American company into the fictitious Colombian-resembling country of Tecala. The film then unfolds into an employee rescue mission from the guerrilla group ELT and the US hesitates to involve itself in a situation that is not beneficial to them (Hackford 2000). The US's power to decide what form of infiltration to use and on what grounds further speaks to their sense of superiority. Throughout the timeline of the films, the themes of US intervention and diplomatic dominance are maintained.

More broadly, the films illustrate the power of the US through American-led activities within Colombia. Explicitly mentioned for the first time, the FBI and DEA arrive in Colombia, in the film *Blow* (2001), with the intentions to capture drug traffickers and assume leadership in the War on Drugs. The lens through which Americans see themselves as dominant is also applied in the film *Collateral Damage* (2002). An American man enters the jungles of Colombia seeking to avenge his late wife and son by killing the man who took their lives (Davis 2002). With a hero complex, the American man places his own personal problems of loss in front of the rest of the people involved. There is a lack of acknowledgement of the Colombian casualties from civil wars and the narcotics industry. Additionally, the American characters in the film only associate Colombians joining guerrilla groups to obtain revenge on the US, neglecting arguments focused on the betterment of their country. The ignorant and egocentric outlook of these American characters carries the sentiment of US superiority and Colombia's inferiority through the years. Corresponding with the release dates of these films, US-Colombian programs Plan Colombia and the Andean Counterdrug Initiative both aimed towards Colombia's reformation and development. With US interventionist policies in place, the media narrates stories of the same nature as the US's actual partnership with Colombia.

As time went on, popular media continued to include American agencies intervening with American interests in mind. In the film *Behind Enemy Lines: Colombia* (2009), Navy SEALs are

sent on an unauthorized mission to Colombia to intercept a meeting between the Colombian government and FARC. Without any significant role in this meeting, the US still felt a sense of responsibility in the matter and sent a military branch (Matheson 2009). Maintaining previous efforts, government agencies sustained their role in popular media as interventionist bodies. *Sicario* (2015), for instance, includes the FBI and the CIA chasing after drug lords in an attempt to capture them. While the plot takes place in Mexico, actions are made with the future in mind to aid Colombian cartels (Villeneuve 2015). Other media made within the same year follow this example. In the series *Narcos* (2015-2017), DEA agents narrate the episodes and follow Colombian cartels to take them down. Yet again, the US is set on winning the War on Drugs and involves one of their agencies that works closely with the American embassy and ambassador (*Narcos* 2015-2017). The following year, *The Infiltrator* (2016) focuses on an undercover operation run by the FBI: Operation C-Chase. The FBI hopes that by sending undercover agents into Colombia, who befriend a cartel family, they will be able to arrest them and everyone else in that cartel (Furman 2016). Once more, an investigatory department enters Colombia with the intention of fixing the drug trafficking problem. This is seen repeatedly throughout the time frame we studied and reflects how interventionist policies helped frame film and series scripts at the time.

Nearing the end of our media and policy timeline, US intervention appears only when suited for US interests. For example, in *American Made* (2017), US authority officials utilize individuals with essential skills, such as pilots, to catch participants within the drug trafficking business. To advance US political agenda abroad, it mirrors the earlier operations focused on narcotic and economic control. Two years later, *Triple Frontier* (2019) focuses on yet another unauthorized special mission into Colombia to gain such control. Given that *American Made* is based on real-life events from the 1980s, while *Triple Frontier* is from a contemporary time period, the continuity of unauthorized involvement when the US deems it fit speaks to the power dynamics of US-Colombian negotiations. Throughout the four administrations, threats of

decertification have repeatedly been used by the US to tighten the Colombian government in its efforts towards issues such as narcotics. The popular media clearly depicts the unbalanced bargaining power between both countries and seems to leave it unquestioned.

Colombian Ties to Drugs

It is not required to do much in-depth analysis to uncover the prominent component of drugs in American representations of Colombia. After Reagan's presidency, the media's focus on the narcotics industry has become a recurring and sensationalized theme when describing Colombia and Colombians. In 15 out of the 16 media samples analyzed, Colombia is affiliated with drugs and drug trafficking at least once. For instance, *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) associates Colombians as uniformly having a role in the drug industry, which is framed as directly threatening to US security. Not to mention the film's lack of distinction among Latinx groups and countries, the US assumes the position of a morally superior actor and dismisses Colombia's own domestic issues as a result of narcotics production and trafficking (Noyce 1994). One year after this film's release, Clinton's 1995 Executive Order 12978 once again publicly grouped Colombia with drugs. The negative and harmful effects of the drug industry throughout those years is consequentially joined to Colombia's international image. The comedic film *Bedazzled* (2000) overtly illustrates the normalization of Colombian-drug talks after Plan Colombia. As a manner of incorporating extreme riches into the plot, the devil grants the main character's wish for power and wealth and transforms him into a drug dealer in the jungles of Colombia (Ramis 2000). The connection between drugs, wealth, and Colombia corroborates the American narrative of Colombia and its culture.

Colombia continues being advertised to the public in an unfavorable light as the popular media sets foot into real life events and individuals infamous to the drug industry. From the title to the characters, *Blow* (2001) is candid of Colombian cartels and Pablo Escobar's legacy. Noting the implementation of the 1999 network of drug prevention and counternarcotics training and assistance programs, drugs was the pressing topic surrounding US-Colombian policy. After

Escobar's death and the further pursuit of capturing key cartel leaders, this film reveals the life of a drug smuggler under Escobar (Demme 2001). More specifically, the film sheds light on the familial and life-threatening struggles of those involved in the drug trade to support the optimal anti-drug perspective for the wellbeing of American society. Mirroring Clinton's speech at the Miami Summit of the Organization of American States (OAS), the anti-drug sentiment in *Blow* creates a mold for the American public's development of views on the issue (["Summary Table" 2000](#)). In contingency with actual narcotic accounts, *Maria Full of Grace* (2004) dives into the life of a poor young woman who gets involved in the drug smuggling business. Unlike previous media, this film introduces the methods of drug smuggling, such as swallowing cocaine pellets for undetected inspection at airport security (Marsten 2004). Colombia is juxtaposed to New York City, with the former having relation to the use of women as drug mules and the abysmal health repercussions of drug trafficking, while the latter is presented as the city of opportunities and economic freedom. As a result, the Colombian image is built around the narcotics industry and its detrimental effects on those involved.

Throughout time, popular media standardized a connection between the US, Colombia, and the drug trade. The main plots of all three media samples, *Sicario* (2015), *Narcos* (2015-2017), and *The Infiltrator* (2016), focus on the description of US operations into Colombia with the aim to bring down critical Colombian drug figures. Although *Sicario* factors in Mexican drug cartels, its principle scheme is centered around Colombia's narcotic dominance and the US's intentions to act against narcotic success (Villeneuve 2015). Incorporating events of the actual Colombian drug empire, *Narcos* explains the life of Pablo Escobar and the complex operations of Colombian drug groups, such as the Medellin, Cali, and Norte del Valle cartels (*Narcos* 2015-2017). A few months later, *The Infiltrator* reveals the true story of the 1980s Operation C-Chase in Colombia involving the FBI and DEA's undercover mission against notorious drug leaders (Furman 2016). The media's transmission of significant details surrounding the drug trafficking business in Colombia creates a perpetuating fascination with the dark history of the country. In

particular, the factual evidence within these films and series, such as names, dates, and locations, permits the ongoing issue of narcotics to define what Colombia represents in international negotiations. After the 2016 extension of Executive Order 12978 under the Obama administration, it is clear that the presence of narcotics in relation to Colombia endured way past the War on Drugs.

Trump's entrance into the White House did not change the media's drug-focused approach when depicting the US-Colombian partnership. The Colombian-narcotic trend extended to similar, yet fictional, plots of capturing drug smugglers and drug lords. *All About the Money* (2017) takes on a comedic technique to transmit violence of entering the drug trafficking business, while praising the financial benefits. Distinct to the more factual drug narratives, this film ends with a positive view of drug cartel leaders as one American character moves to Colombia to lead a drug trafficking ring and donates his wealth to underprivileged Colombian and Mexican schools (Freeman 2017). This fictional spin on drug production and trade is at odds with the typical American anti-drug perspective. After this movie was released, another real-life story was promoted in American media. *American Made* (2017) depicts the story of Barry Seal, CIA employee and pilot who worked for the Colombian cartels and the US. The focus throughout the film culminates into praise for the DEA and sheds light on the US's increased efforts in fighting the War on Drugs and how these efforts were perceived by those transporting drugs (Liman 2017). Somewhat contradictory to the movement away from drugs in regards to policy, the media continues to expand upon the dangerous drug narratives of the past Escobar era. *Triple Frontier* (2019) is another great example of American knowledge of Colombia in relation to drugs. The subject of coca production and fields is touched upon in more depth, similarly to *Narcos* (Chandor 2019). The relevance of coca in this modern media can be linked to Trump's demand for aerial coca spraying in Colombia from 2019-2020. As a last observation, the series *Modern Family* (2017-2020) captures varying topics in relation to Colombia. However, for the purpose of this section, it is important to highlight the Colombian

character Gloria Delgado-Prichett, played by Colombian actress Sofia Vergara. More commonly including racial remarks, stereotypes and American misconceptions, the show on several occasions has Gloria allude to her “village roots” and the many deaths and dangers surrounding the drug industry (*Modern Family* 2017-2020). The popular media more often than not will continue to refer to Colombia’s drug history and sensationalize past events and figures for the future American media consumer.

Shift From War on Drugs to War on Terror

After President Bush declared the War on Terror in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, policy shifted to adjust for this change in focus and popular media scripts followed suit. Even before the formal declaration though, it is important to note the rise of guerrilla groups in Colombia and their role in perpetuating violence in the state. Groups like FARC, AUC, and ELN were notorious for inciting violence, especially by kidnapping people. This is captured perfectly in *Proof of Life* (2000) where an American employee is kidnapped by a guerrilla group hoping to acquire cash from his ransom. The group goes by the name Ejército de Liberación de Tecala (ELT), which is uncannily similar to the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) of Colombia, and exposes one of the many details that shows how Tecala is based off of Colombia (Hackford 2000). Even though this film was released before the War on Terror, it still comments on guerrilla groups, which became a target in the fight against terrorism, especially because of their relationship with the US and Americans.

While there was never a complete shift of focus where concerns over drugs were left in the past, there was a definite increase in militarization. Beginning with the Andean Regional Initiative in 2001, funds were allocated to Colombia and neighboring countries specifically for defense against terrorism. The following year, the Secretary of State declared FARC, AUC, and ELN terrorist organizations, essentially putting a target on their backs. This declaration would make its way into popular media that same year. In *Collateral Damage* (2002), the main character calls the inciter of violence a terrorist, making it the first film in our study to do so. This

marked the official recognition of Colombians who provoke violence against the US as terrorists, and the commencement of the War on Terror in Colombia in popular media. Additionally, the film is extremely violent and action-packed, adding to the narrative of the increase in militarization post-9/11 (Davis 2002). This was increased more in 2004 with Bush's military expansions to Plan Colombia.

The Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) under Obama in 2009 continued this focus of attention on terrorism and, as expected, popular media advanced with this path of policy. That same year, *Behind Enemy Lines: Colombia* (2009) had a plot with hardly any mention of drugs. Instead, it consisted of a high-risk military intervention into Colombia against FARC. Yet again, this guerrilla group is mentioned, except this time, the US enters with Navy SEALs and FARC is formally recognized as a terrorist threat (Matheson 2009). Just two years later, another film was released where drugs were no longer the focus as much as violence was. In *Colombiana* (2011), the main character chooses a life of violence where she becomes a tag killer to avenge her parents and send a message to the man who killed them. There is no mention of drugs and cartels, but instead of revenge and killing. Terrorism is never explicitly named, but the violence and lack of drugs can be associated with the rise of the War on Terror and its changes to the political atmosphere between the US and Colombia (Megaton 2011). Before, Colombia and Colombians were associated with drugs and needed help to overcome this hurdle; now, the problem of terrorism is added which modifies American's perceptions of this state and its people.

Poverty and Regional Effects

Among the many reasons for involvement in the drug industry, poverty and the desire to overcome it are prominent. The large sums of money offered as rewards attract people into the business and as others hear about this opportunity, more and more people join. Popular media does not brush this occurrence to the side and instead features it in many story plots, which we saw in our research. Beginning with *Contagious* (1997), Colombian shrimp farmers are shown

working long hours to earn a living. When a cholera outbreak spreads shortly after in the film, the origin is searched for extensively until landing on Colombia (Napolitano 1997). This raises the question of why Colombia was chosen as the country of origin of a cholera epidemic, and why poor shrimp farmers were the root cause. There were hundreds of countries from where the disease could have spread from, and choosing to make it Colombia advanced the narrative of it being a country plagued by poverty and infectious diseases. Shortly after, when *Proof of Life* (2000) was released, the issue of exploiting natural resources from developing countries arose. In the film, an American man travels to Colombia because of his new engineering job at an oil company (Hackford 2000). It becomes clear fairly quickly that many are upset by the company's actions and this results in his kidnapping by guerrillas. This sheds light on how developed nations take advantage of raw resources, like oil, from developing countries and create conflict within those regions.

The change in party when Bush came into office in 2001 allowed Republicans to expand their aid to the general Andean region as opposed to just Colombia. The Andean Regional Initiative was one of the first policies that acknowledged not only the regional impacts of the drug industry, but the cause for involvement as economic instability and poverty. Another great example of this is *Maria Full of Grace* (2004) where a young girl becomes a drug mule out of necessity. Her mother and sister continuously push her to contribute to the household income to the point that she follows a man on a motorcycle and finds herself signing up to be a drug mule. Although extremely dangerous and illegal, this job proves to be the only opportunity to obtain provision for her and her family, as opposed to the minimal paying jobs she qualified for in Colombia. If not for her precarious financial situation, she would not have needed to lie about her age and involve herself in the narcotics industry (Marsten 2004). Another view of this is seen in the *Narcos* series (2015-2017). The show highlights how Escobar would aid the most rural communities in Colombia to the point of earning the nickname "the Paisa Robin Hood" (*Narcos* 2015-2017). He had so much money that the only thing left for him to do was give it to

those who needed it the most. In fact, those people never forgot this and this is why they supported Escobar to the very end even though he was proven to be a murderer. Additionally, he hired impoverished children and others who wanted to do him favors in exchange for cash. Escobar had an extensive network of messengers and reporters who were extremely loyal to him just because they were in dire need of money and he had plenty to give them (*Narcos* 2015-2017). It was not difficult to get washed up in the narcotics industry if one was desperate for financial stability.

Under the Obama administration, many humanitarian efforts were passed, which suggests that the US was realizing how detrimental poverty was to Colombia. The Colombian Strategic Development Initiative and 100,000 Strong in the Americas came about in 2011 to bring the focus back to the people. In 2012, the Trade Promotion Agreement recognized the economic struggles of the country and attempted to alleviate some of them by removing trade barriers. Even Trump continued this humanitarian streak in 2020 with Colombia Crece and the Back to the Americas Initiative. As years passed, popular media continued to bring attention to poverty in Colombia and its effects on the greater region. *Triple Frontier* (2019), for instance, includes farmers in Peru growing coca out of necessity and fear. This plant is the main ingredient in cocaine and for this reason is significantly more profitable than other crops. Poor farmers, therefore, will choose to grow coca because it pays them more money and keeps them out of trouble with drug lords who are looking for this raw product. The farmers shown in this film are fearful of the armed main characters when they make an emergency landing on their fields and this suggests that they live in fear of armed groups as well (Chandor 2019). Around the same time, in *Modern Family* Seasons 9-11 (2017-2020), Gloria speaks about how she comes from a village where surviving everyday life is a mission. Her stories from Colombia seem unbelievable to her family and one specific scene sheds light on the financial need of her family back home. She tells her son, “Joe, you should be thankful that you live in this country. I spent half of my childhood in a Banana Republic. It was the only store in my village with air

conditioning” (*Modern Family* 2017-2020). This presentation of poverty in Colombia as a uniform experience gives grounds for the necessity of US aid and further involvement.

Economic and Government Corruption

In comparison to the US, the depiction of Colombia through the media is more often than not founded upon the narcotic narrative and extracts characteristics from those governing such illicit activities. With this, economic and government corruption are at the forefront of what the media describes to be the Colombian state. In our media samples, Colombia’s narcotic activity is frequently associated with wealth and power. Additionally, the media with a setting in Colombia include scenes where the distrust in the Colombian police and government are more than evident. This distrust of Colombian state actors has been seen through US drug policies and later exacerbated through media representations, adding to Colombia’s corrupt reputation. For instance, *Proof of Life* (2000) presents this as a dilemma, to trust either the Tecalan (fictionalized Colombian) national police or the US police. As two women seek to rescue a man kidnapped by an armed group, they require the aid of reliable authority expertise. However, the Colombian detective is soon discovered to be corrupt and solely interested in stealing the women’s money, meanwhile the American detective is honest. Although not explicitly stating Colombia’s lack of accountable policing, the film portrays the Colombian government and police authorities in an inferior light to those of the US (Hackford 2000). Prior to the release of *Proof of Life*, there were several scandals tying the Colombian Samper administration to narcotics trafficking. In 1994, the DEA leaked tapes incriminating Samper of accepting narcotic bribes for his campaign ([Crandall 2001](#)). Adding to this affair, Clinton removed Samper’s visa for lack of cooperation in the War on Drugs effort ([Crandall 2001](#)). This policy, much like the media, reflects Colombia as a state without government accountability and the Colombian people lacking just intentions, consequently beneath the US.

The popular media’s inclusion of Colombian government corruption extends beyond Clinton’s administration. In the film *Behind Enemy Lines: Colombia* (2009), the US Navy SEALs

intervene in Colombian peace talks with armed groups and the Colombian president publicly denounces US intervention. Yet, the Colombian president's disagreement with the US's actions is followed by the revelation of his alliance with the armed groups (Matheson 2009). This lack of loyalty to the justice system of Colombia and secretive negotiations leaves a disdainful image of the governing authorities of Colombia. The film draws details from the real-life Parapolítica scandal of 2005, which proved that key Uribe supporters had ongoing agreements with paramilitary groups in Colombia ([Bustamante and Chaskel 2008](#)). Similarly, *Sicario* (2015) involves a Colombian narcotic professional partnering with the FBI and CIA to bring down a Mexican drug lord. In the beginning, there are blurred lines when it comes to the motives behind the FBI taking on the case. However, the ending discloses the reason to maintain Colombian dominance over the drug trade, which once again retells a story of Colombia's untrustworthy authorities. Furthermore, the distrust in the police is highlighted as the main FBI character remains wary of supporting her US and Colombian partners (Villeneuve 2015). Although *Proof of Life* and *Sicario* were fictional, the *Narcos* Series (2015-2017) takes an actual approach of the 1980s when narcotic groups controlled much of Colombia's political sphere. In this series, American detective Peña ends up helping the Cali Cartel while pursuing Escobar's downfall. Unlike the previous media and the theme of distrust in the police, the series demonstrates corruption in both Colombian and US authorities. Much more transparent in underscoring the flaws of government operations, *Narcos* explicitly mentions names and previous officials, such as Colombia's minister of defense, to expose unlawful acts of the state (*Narcos* 2015-2017). Economic corruption is intertwined as officials, both US and Colombian, were bought by narcotic groups with drug trafficking revenue.

The media exaggerates the lavish and extravagant lifestyle of Colombian drug lords, which is yet another factor playing into the economic and government corruption in Colombia. *The Infiltrator* (2016) and *All About the Money* (2017) both illustrate drug lords in mansions with immense backyards, luxury clothing, and servants. The material benefits of the narcotic lifestyle

are emphasized in numerous scenes. Through the juxtaposition of poor and rural towns and safeguarded residences, the films point to the economic injustice and unequal economic distribution of Colombia. Making note of the illicit manner of acquiring this wealth, the narcotic cycle in *The Infiltrator* continues thanks to money laundering in the US and secret agreements with banks, such as the Bank of Panama (Furman 2016). Throughout this illegal process, police officers and heads of security are involved and compliant with the Colombian drug dealers in return for large sums of money. Susceptible to bribes, the upholders of the law seem to be subjected to the power of narcotic lords and a complete dismissal of justice is credited to Colombia and its leaders. This connection to the culture and familiarity of bribes is also evidently demonstrated in *Modern Family* (2017-2020). Distinct from the rest of the American family, Gloria frequently alludes to the mannerisms of her people and the tendency to bribe others in order to achieve a desired result (*Modern Family* 2017-2020). Over the years, economic and government corruption are attributes that the media utilizes for plots involving Colombia and Colombians.

ADDITIONAL THEMES SHAPING PERCEPTION

After analyzing the evolution of the media content with relation to Colombia and Colombian culture, there were several recurring topics that do not necessarily relate to US-Colombian policy, but continue to shape Colombian perception in the US. These topics lend themselves to the formation of the American perception of Colombia and Colombians by American media directors.

True Stories

The demand of American audiences across cultures for true stories becomes evident upon considering that 4 out of the 16 of the materials analyzed within our study group are based on true stories. This method of introducing historical and political Colombian figures to the American public produces greater interest in their personal decisions and the thought-process behind their lifestyles. Notably, the Colombian figures in all four cases are connected to the drug

industry and linked to Pablo Escobar. The time frame chosen for our case study begins shortly after Escobar's capture and death, explaining why years later, the popular media would focus on recounting his story from different perspectives. Beginning with *Blow* (2000), the main character, Carl Jung, is presented as a US cocaine smuggler working for Escobar, who appears and is mentioned multiple times throughout the film (Demme 2001). Later, when the *Narcos* Series (2015-2017) aired, Escobar became the focus of the Colombian narrative. The show revolves around his notoriety as one of the most infamous drug lords and retells his story as well as that of the rest of the Medellin, Cali, and Valle del Norte cartels (*Narcos* 2015-2017). Within this two-year period, more focus remained on Escobar as two additional films were released relating to him. In *The Infiltrator* (2016), although covering the story of Operation C-Chase, Escobar appears for a brief moment and stuns the main characters. This speaks on his reputation and how even a few seconds of screen time can capture his importance in the cocaine industry (Furman 2016). The following year, *American Made* (2017) depicts Barry Seal's involvement in the US government and the Colombian drug industry. He gets hired by Escobar and his men, and then the film covers the US's plan to take down Escobar (Liman 2017). Turning true stories like these into films humanizes the people behind the stories. They are no longer seen by audiences as just drug lords, but as humans with complex emotions and families to take care of. Along these lines, the importance of family structures and the causal effects on innocent lives are also brought to light.

Overall, the average true-story media dealing with Colombia is a two-sided coin. On one hand, humanization brings a holistic and complex view rather than the traditional clear-cut outlook between the "good" and the "bad." On the other hand, the "true story" cements the idea that this sensationalized drug life is the real Colombia. It appears that there is no additional material other than narcotics in Colombia, framing it to be a country solely built upon this history. If other true stories of the majority of townspeople not involved in the narcotic history were published and referenced by the media, there would be more international awareness of

Colombia's cultural aspects. The lack of variety of true stories about Colombia makes the Colombian image less likely to diverge from the narcotic narrative.

Colombian Gender Roles

As a consequence of reusing specific traits for character portrayal, the popular media has attributed certain stereotypes to Colombian men and women. Largely present within the observed media, Colombian women are often sexualized by their clothing, profession, mannerisms, or male treatment. This, in part, later reveals the objectification of women and a patriarchal Colombian society. For instance, the film *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) includes a scene where the Colombian men working for Escobedo, a Colombian drug lord, use an American woman for sex and information, later killing her after obtaining what they were after. In *Blow* (2001), there is greater insight to the treatment and mindset of Colombian women through Mirtha's prominent role as wife to an American drug smuggler. Her sense of fashion is extravagant, with numerous jewels and vivid colors, and she is depicted as loud and caring more for money than her daughter (Demme 2001). This similar fashion sense carries into the portrayal of Gloria from *Modern Family* (2017-2020) as well. The housewife role is heavily praised meanwhile the husband is the financial provider. Gloria is described as "exotic" and "spicy," which creates an objectifying view of Colombian women in general (*Modern Family* 2015-2017). Along these lines, the *Narcos* Series (2015-2017) reveals Colombian men's possession over the female characters. The term "machismo" references the strong masculine pride of Latino men ([Merriam-Webster 2021](#)). Throughout the media's depiction of Colombian men, Colombian "machismo" is sustained as money and power justify the men's abusive treatment of women. The only exception to this commonality was the film *Colombiana* (2011), whose main character is a Colombian woman who is dominant and independent from men. Nevertheless, this singular film is not as popular or repeated as the media that surrounds the narcotic peak and normalizes Colombian women as submissive to and dependent on men. Colombian gender roles are viewed as outdated and immoral in comparison to American gender

roles. For this reason, the stereotypical manner in which both genders are categorized in popular media serves as justification for US interventionist policy and superiority complex.

Humor

When featuring Colombia in popular media, differences are exaggerated, ensuring that Colombian characters are not to be confused with American ones. This can take many forms, including making Colombian characters always have accents when speaking English and giving them different apparel. Many times, these differences are then used as an opportunity to bring humor into the script and other characters will point out traits of Colombian characters to be funny, usually in a discriminatory way. In the first few films, little attention was given to the level of Spanish proficiency of the “Colombian” characters. The butchering of Colombian accents was evident and this was eventually used comically in one of the films. In *Bedazzled* (2000), once the main character turns into a wealthy drug lord by the devil, as per one of his wishes, he begins to speak Spanish and catches himself by surprise. The words flow naturally out of his mouth, but with a very “gringo” accent, and he makes a comment about how he only learned high school-level Spanish. His bad Spanish is used as a humor mechanism to emphasize the absurdity of him turning into a Colombian drug lord and how it is so different from an average American who works a 9-to-5 job (Ramis 2000). Although masked in humor, these portrayal choices affect the degree to which Colombians are seen as intelligent, at least based on American standards. Because this ranks one group lower than another, it can be interpreted as racism in popular media. Years later, humor is still utilized in regard to Colombian characters, like in *All About the Money* (2017). In this film, the main characters mock the Spanish language multiple times and refer to Colombians as “Mexicans.” They claim that “they all look alike” on more than one occasion and the film uses this ignorance to make their encounters with Colombian characters comical (Freeman 2017). This same technique is seen in the three seasons that we watched of *Modern Family* (2017-2020). Sofia Vergara’s character, Gloria, faces numerous jabs from her family due to her being from a different culture. These range from

them mocking her accent behind her back, to them commenting on her methods of raising her sons. It is obvious that her family cares for her and sees her as part of the family, but they constantly bring up her differences to make her the laughing stock of the family (*Modern Family* 2017-2020). Occurrences like these usually fly over audience's heads since humor adds to plot, but when they happen on a normal basis, they can affect the American perception of those "different" people. Colombians, like other Latinx people, then become victims to the constant stereotyping that popular media perpetuates of them, and this can promote racism, as well as other adverse effects on how others view them. This is why paying attention to how groups--in this case, Colombian people--are depicted, is so important, whether by using US foreign policy or other information.

CONCLUSION

The findings from analyzing US-Colombian policy alongside popular media offer insight on the influence of policy when forming cultural representations. In this case study, the depiction of Colombians through the media heightens cultural misconceptions and stereotypes of the Colombian nationality in the US. The recurring themes present include US Intervention and Superiority, Colombian Ties to Drugs, Shift from War on Drugs to War on Terror, Poverty and Regional Effects, and Economic and Government Corruption, which highlight the submission, drugs, violence, and poverty repeatedly attributed to Colombians. The correlations between the policy and media that described US-Colombian relations at various points in time imply the fluidity of cultural conceptualization and how it is susceptible to political objectives. This formulates an image of Colombia that remains stagnant in people's minds and cannot divert from these themes due to lack of cultural knowledge. This research did not intend on measuring the magnitude of the impact of stereotyping or the success of its intended effect on the American public. However, it captures the impact's existence as a consequence of utilizing policy in American-made popular media to frame foreign countries. To further this finding, three additional steps can be taken: (1) tracing US international policy with respect to other countries,

(2) analyzing non-American made media, and (3) measuring the previous knowledge among Americans on the US-Colombian relationship and Colombia. With the Biden administration just a few months into term, the US-Colombian policy direction is yet to be fully developed. The US-Colombian relationship continues to evolve alongside international and domestic agendas, leaving the American media new methods and content to address Colombia in the coming years.

APPENDIX

Films/TV series:Clinton Administration (1993-2001):

- Clear and Present Danger (Aug. 3, 1994)
- Contagious (Jan. 22, 1997)
- Bedazzled (Oct. 20, 2000)
- Proof of Life (Dec. 8, 2000)

Bush Administration (2001-2009):

- Blow (Mar. 29, 2001)
- Collateral Damage (Feb. 8, 2002)
- Maria Full of Grace (Jan. 18, 2004)
- Behind Enemy Lines: Colombia (Jan. 6, 2009)

Obama Administration (2009-2017):

- Colombiana (Aug. 26, 2011)
- Sicario (Oct. 2, 2015)
- Narcos series (Aug. 28, 2015 - Sep. 1, 2017)
- The Infiltrator (Jul. 13, 2016)

Trump Administration (2017-2021):

- All About the Money (Jun. 2, 2017)
- American Made (Sep. 29, 2017)
- Triple Frontier (Mar. 6, 2019)
- Modern Family Seasons 9-11 (Sep. 27, 2017 - Apr. 8, 2020)

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