

CIA COUP IN PERU OPENS DOOR TO PLAN COLOMBIA

In what has all the earmarks of a bloodless coup arranged by the US CIA, Peru's longtime president, Alberto Fujimori has been forced from office and his right hand man and Pentagon-trained CIA informant Vladimiro Montesinos is in hiding and faces criminal charges. Little known lifetime politician, Congressman Valentin Paniagua, after a series of resignations by several people in line for the post, has ascended to Peru's Presidency, albeit only on an interim basis until new elections can be held next April.

How and why the popular though dictatorial Fujimori so suddenly lost his autocratic grip on the government, and what will undoubtedly happen soon—as well as who will benefit—make for a scenario straight out of a spy novel or the CIA's history book on Central and South America.

In truth, Fujimori was forced from office by the CIA in a coup so smoothly arranged that no major Western press outlet has even hinted at it being such. The reason was because Fujimori was vocal in his dislike of the military components in US President Bill Clinton's Plan Colombia and refused to allow the US to use Peru as a staging post for the US troops needed to make Plan Colombia work.

The plot has roots that go back more than a year, to the time when Plan Colombia was first unveiled. That plan, a \$1.3 billion dollar effort by the US to rid the Andean nation of Colombia of its burgeoning coca-producing fields (conspiratorialists would say to wrest control of that trade from the Colombian rebels and return it to the known narco trafficantes who put their proceeds in American banks), centers on US Special Forces training Colombian military in jungle warfare and then arming them with more than half-a-billion dollars in US made helicopters and arms. At the time of the plan's unveiling, the US knew that Venezuela, with a socialist government, would not go along with it. Ecuador, which will, is neither strong enough nor stable enough to offer much in the way of assistance. Brazil, whose little-populated northwest corner is likely to see an influx of refugees from the fray, also dislikes the plan. Bolivia, under the leadership of newly-elected President General Hugo Banzer—a Pentagon-trained former cocaine baron and the man who protected Klaus Barbie, the nazi Butcher of Lyons for years—was all for the plan, and even volunteered to build a large airbase for US use in its Chapare district—but they were too far away from Colombia to be of much use. Which left Colombia's immediate neighbor to the south, Peru, as the anticipated ally of Plan Colombia. After all, with Fujimori dependent on the US and the International Monetary Fund to keep its loan-cycles floating, as well as with Peru's spy-chief and School of the Americas graduate Montesinos as Fujimori's closest advisor, the US expected Peru to herald the plan and volunteer its jungle city of Iquitos and environs as a staging ground. In fact, the US had helped build a large military post outside of Iquitos near Colombia's southern border—where much of the fighting produced from Plan Colombia is expected to take place—during 1998 and 1999. But Fujimori threw the US a curve when he said the new post would be for use by Peruvian military exclusively, and then further enraged the US when he decried Plan Colombia.

Which meant he had to go. But he was about to be elected to a third term in office (which, though illegal by Peruvian law, didn't seem to matter much to the Peruvian populace, which gave him a 42% approval rating, very high in that country) and any overt attempt to remove him would draw severe backlash.

Worse, last April, when Colombia's President Andres Pastrana was set to come to the US to push for emergency passage of the plan, many republicans, including Majority Leader Trent Lott, were decrying it. Others were pressing for a postponement of allocating emergency funds, instead suggesting that it ought to wait until 2001 and the normal budgetary timetable. But Clinton and his Drug Czar—and former head of the Southern Command General Barry McCaffrey, would have none of that, and so just days before Pastrana's visit, the State Department leaked a story to MSNBC that Russian planes were picking up used Kalishnikov's rifles in Aaman, Jordan which were being delivered to the FARC rebels in Colombia. Moreover, according to MSNBC, the planes were being refueled in Iquitos' airport, where they were also being filled with as much as 40 tons of FARC-made cocaine at a clip for distribution in Europe. The story was a fake on the face of it—the Iquitos airport is very public and borders on a Peruvian airforce base where several US DEA agents work, which means that not only would the Peruvian's know about the cocaine, but the US DEA agents would as well. Moreover, the FARC rebels have never been known to refine coca base into cocaine. Nonetheless, the story had its desired effect: Trent Lott and several other republicans—who just days earlier were saying “no” to Plan Colombia—quickly changed their positions in the face of looking soft on drugs and Clinton got his plan and the monies approved.

The first hope to remove Fujimori, having him simply lose his third election to previously unknown US Stanford-trained World Bank financial advisor and former Lima shoeshine boy Alejandro Toledo, failed, when Fujimori and Toledo wound up in an election runoff in which Toledo refused to participate, leaving Fujimori the winner of his third term. But the bitter election, with talk of Fujimori having stolen it through vote-rigging, left Fujimori vulnerable and there was talk he would be denounced at an August meeting of the heads of the South American countries. Instead of voluntarily stepping down, however, Fujimori cleverly resurrected the State Department story of the Russian guns making their way to the FARC rebels, claiming that his spy-chief Montesinos had busted a ring of arms dealers.

Subsequently, at the August meetings of the SA presidents he was lauded for his work against the rebels rather than ridiculed for stealing an election. Unfortunately that story shortly blew up in Fujimori's face when the Aaman arms dealers acknowledged the arms sales, but said they'd all occurred a

year earlier, and that the buyers were Peruvian Generals and all the paperwork was in order. Vulnerable again, Fujimori quickly announced that jailed American Lori Berenson would get a new trial, a story which the Western press jumped on, while all but dropping the fake FARC arms bust.

By early September, with Fujimori firmly in place for his third term, the US was getting desperate. The first US Special Forces-trained Colombian military forces were—and are—set to stage their first offensive into FARC territory around January 1, and Fujimori was still not going along with the idea of the US using the new military base near Colombia's southern border.

That is when the US CIA stepped in with a classic maneuver. In mid-September, a video, dated the previous April, was widely released throughout Peru—and subsequently through media outlets worldwide—showing Montesinos giving Peruvian Congressman Alberto Kouri US\$15,000. Shortly after the money exchanged hands Kouri, from Peru's opposition party, switched allegiances and joined Fujimori's party. What was most interesting about the tape was that it was made by Montesinos in his own offices. That someone could get into the incredibly well-protected offices of the head of Peru's secret police and locate a short segment of tape made months earlier among the thousands of other hours of tape that Montesinos—we have since learned—made of all his office doings—is fantastic. It is safe to say Montesinos did not release it himself, which means someone close to him did. And whomever did it knew it would bring the spy chief down, and with him, eventually Fujimori. Which means, though it is yet to be proven, that someone got to someone close to Montesinos and promised something big in the new administration that would take over after Fujimori fell. Who the promiser and promisee were we don't yet know. We do know that Alberto Kouri, the receiver of the alleged bribe, fled to Dallas, Texas, on October 27 where he was greeted with open arms by US officials who provided him with political asylum and a new house. He continues to live there today. That suggests that Kouri was aware that the tape was going to be released and offered himself up as a sacrificial lamb in exchange for asylum in the US. All of which points to US CIA involvement and arrangements.

As to the tape of the apparent bribe, it immediately disgraced Montesinos, who fled to Panama, where he has extensive landholdings, seeking political asylum. That bid failed, and he returned to Peru in late October, where he has been in hiding. He has subsequently disappeared, probably to Venezuela. Fujimori tried to ride out the tide of public opinion which rose against him after his advisor was caught bribing Kouri by publicly going after Montesinos. In the staged event, he couldn't locate him, and, embarrassed, he announced that he would hold new elections in April, 2001, in which he would not participate, and promised to step down when the new president took office on July 28, 2001.

Unfortunately, that timetable simply did not work with the US need for a military base near Colombia's southern border by January 1, 2001. By chance, Peruvian Congressional investigations were started into both Montesinos and Fujimori in early November and allegations of millions of dollars in secret bank accounts immediately surfaced.

Those allegations, coupled with the sudden instability of Peru's Presidential administration had an immediate and dire effect on Peru's economy when on November 3, Standard and Poor's downgraded Peru's sovereign long-term foreign currency rating to a level four notches below investment grade status, leaving the country in a position of not being able to make good on major international loans due at year's end.

Again trying to cleverly avoid the Peruvian public reaction to the burgeoning corruption scandal, Fujimori travelled to Brunei for a Pacific Rim summit meeting and then on to Japan to try to secure loans desperately needed by Peru by the end of the year to keep their loan-cycles floating. But while there, political opposition party leaders wrested control of the Congress from Fujimori's party, leading to Fujimori faxing in a resignation "for the good of the country."

The resignation was refused, with Peru's Congress instead choosing to oust Fujimori in late November on the grounds that he was "morally unfit" to lead the country. He is currently in Japan and is expected to seek political asylum there should he be indicted on criminal charges in Peru.

Beyond Fujimori, the next several players in Peru's Constitutional succession order for the vacated presidency resigned, and Valentin Paniagua, a political moderate was chosen by Congressional consensus to take over as interim president until the April elections. Paniagua, 64, is a lawyer with the Popular Action party who served as justice minister in the 1960s and as education minister in 1984 during the two administrations of former Peruvian President Fernando Belaunde. While Paniagua's accession to the presidency does not appear to immediately raise hopes in the US State Department that Peru will immediately change its position and sign on to Plan Colombia, the financial turmoil the country finds itself in, and the pressing obligations it has to fulfill make him vulnerable to fiscal pressure from the US. It is this author's belief that within two weeks Paniagua will be offered a way out of the impending financial crisis in exchange for the right of the US to utilize the American-built military base outside of Iquitos near the southern border of Colombia.

And if that does come to pass, then we might well have seen one of the most clever CIA-engineered coups in South America in some time. Bloodless and clean as bone.

About the Author

