



## THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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For Immediate Release  
Office of the Press Secretary  
March 7, 2007

### Interview of the President by Natalia Orozco, RCN TV of Colombia

The Map Room

#### [President's Trip to Latin America](#)

11:45 A.M. EST

Q Thank you, Mr. President, for this time with RCN TV Colombia.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. I'm really looking forward to going to Bogotá.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I have to start by asking you this. You're arriving to Bogotá when President Bush -- President Uribe is facing a deep crisis because of we've got a political scandal. Does this affect the support, the confidence that you have always expressed to him?

THE PRESIDENT: No. As a matter of fact, I've been very impressed by how he's handled this latest issue. President Uribe is a very strong leader; he's committed to justice; he believes in fairness; and he's a man who has proven he can get things done. And so my confidence in the President is very high. And I'm looking forward to expressing that confidence about -- to not only the people of Colombia, but also to the people in my Congress.

Q Mr. President, \$4 billion invested in Plan Colombia, but the drug keeps coming to the United States, and the leader of the guerrillas remains at large. Why do you support a second phase of the same Plan Colombia?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you for that question. First of all, we've had a lot of successes in working together. I recognize there's still a lot of drogas coming here. Part of that has to do with we still use drugs, and we've got to do a better job of convincing people to stop using drugs. But we've also stopped a lot of drugs from coming. And therefore, I can argue to the Congress and the people that there has been a lot of notable successes. And the truth of the matter is Colombia has changed to the better as a result of the Plan Colombia. There's still bad activities going on, but it's a lot less than it was before.

Q Mr. President, public opinion in Colombia, as well as in the U.S. Congress is divided about the free trade agreement. Will you be ready to reopen those negotiations in order to make it pass?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I don't think we want to reopen the negotiations. We've had good, strong negotiations between our respective parties. Obviously if there's some fine-tuning necessary -- but we've negotiated good agreements and I'm going to have to work hard with our Congress, and the

President is going to have to work hard to convince the people of Colombia that trade is fair. And if I were a farmer in Colombia, or a small business person in Colombia, I'd want to be in a position to be able to sell my products into a large market like the United States.

And these trade fights are always tough, and I want to make sure, though, that we work to have a world that trades freely and fairly, because it's the best way to eliminate poverty.

Q Are you concerned about the influence that President Chavez is gaining in the region? As many experts have said, is your trip also an answer to that?

THE PRESIDENT: No, my trip is a chance to tell the people of Colombia and Uruguay and Brazil and Guatemala and Mexico that the United States cares deeply about the human condition. My budget this year has got -- or last year has \$1.6 billion of bilateral assistance. Much of that money is spent on social justice programs -- programs like education and health care.

You know, oftentimes, people really don't understand the United States, and my trip is to really explain to people that we believe in education for all. We believe in human rights and human dignity. We believe in prosperity, and the people of this country have been very generous in their help and support to people.

Q But are you concerned about the influence of Mr. Chavez in the region?

THE PRESIDENT: Each country is going to have to make up their own mind about the systems of government. To the extent that people feel like they can nationalize companies I think is a mistake. I'm very much in favor of open systems, free press, the right for people to assemble and express their mind.

My trip, however, is all aimed at explaining to the people of South and Latin America that good foreign policy for the United States is to promote a prosperous and peaceful neighborhood.

Q Mr. President, today, have you the feeling that the policy applies to Cuba has done any good for the Cubans in the island?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the worse thing that's happened for the Cuban people on the island is the fact that they're not free. And my position is, it is important for people to be free, and that if there is a transition to a new way in Cuba, it's got to be decided by the Cuban people. They should be allowed to freely assemble, they should be allowed to speak their minds, there ought to be strong rule of law. My position has been, and will continue to be, that a free Cuba is what is necessary for the people of Cuba.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. There are three Americans held by the FARC now. Do you think President Uribe should achieve the humanitarian exchange, or should he insist in the military rescue?

THE PRESIDENT: I trust President Uribe's judgment, and my message isn't to President Uribe. My message is to the FARC, and that is to give up these hostages. You're making it clear to the world the kind of people you are when you take innocent life and hold them hostage. And it's very sad for the families here in America. I'm deeply concerned about their fate.

Q Mr. President, how long is the United States willing for the extradition of the narco para-military

terrorists that remains in Colombia, because they are part of the peace process?

THE PRESIDENT: How long will we wait for the extradition process?

Q Right.

THE PRESIDENT: I'll work with the President on that. That will be a subject matter in my private discussions with President Uribe.

Q Mr. President, do you think that with the military aid, President Uribe, with the help of United States, is going to be able to win the war against terrorism in Colombia?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that a war against terror can be won by firm resolve, plus a alternative to repression, kidnapping, murder, and drugs. And one thing that President Uribe has done is laid out a vision. A lot of people have come in from the jungles, as you know, because they realize there's a better way of life.

We all have a lot of work to do in our respective countries to make sure every person has a good education and good, decent health care. But when people realize there is a better tomorrow, it's much easier for a man of peace, like Uribe, to deal with a difficult problem that he inherited.

Q President Bush, what is the best memory that you have of all this time working with Colombia, so close, having Colombia as one of your main allies?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, I think it's the fact that I have a very honest relationship with President Uribe. He loves his country. He is a very strong proponent of Colombia, and the people of Colombia. We don't agree on ever single issue, of course, but I do respect his courage, and I respect the fact that he's done a good job in office. And I'm really looking forward to going back to Colombia. I've been, as President, once before. I can't wait to come back, this time to your beautiful capital city.

Q Thank you, Mr. President, for your time. We wish you a wonderful and successful trip.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

END 11:52 A.M. EST