

Dan Rather Reports

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Episode Title: El Presidente

Description: Colombia, the recipient of billions of U.S. tax dollars in counter narcotic aid, is now daring to tell the United States that the drug war is not working. The country's president sits down with Dan Rather in an exclusive interview to say that it's time to put every option on the table, including the decriminalization of narcotics.

DAN RATHER (ON CAMERA)

GOOD EVENING. FOR YEARS, THE UNITED STATES HAS CONSIDERED COLOMBIA ONE OF ITS BEST FRIENDS IN LATIN AMERICA...PARTICULARLY WHEN IT CAME TO FIGHTING THE WAR ON DRUGS. COLOMBIA HAS RECEIVED BILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN AID FROM WASHINGTON TO GO AFTER DRUG TRAFFICKERS AND DESTROY ILLEGAL CROPS... DESPITE ALL THAT MONEY, COLOMBIA IS STILL ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP PRODUCERS OF COCAINE - MUCH OF IT CONSUMED, OF COURSE, HERE IN THE UNITED STATES.

AND NOW COLOMBIA'S PRESIDENT JUAN MANUEL SANTOS... HARVARD EDUCATED AND STAUNCHLY PRO-AMERICAN...IS TELLING ANYONE WHO'LL LISTEN THAT THE U.S.-LED DRUG STRATEGY SIMPLY ISN'T WORKING.

JUAN MANUEL SANTOS, PRESIDENT OF COLOMBIA

We have interdicted more drugs than any other country in the world. We have put in jail millions of—of drug dealers. 40 years-- 40 years we have been on this war on drugs. And you look to the right and you look to the left and sometimes say, my God, you're like on a static bicycle. You don't advance.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

PRESIDENT SANTOS KNOWS WHAT HE'S TALKING ABOUT. BEFORE TAKING OFFICE IN 2010, HE SERVED AS COLOMBIA'S DEFENSE MINISTER AND LED THE COUNTRY'S MILITARY IN AN AGGRESSIVE ASSAULT AGAINST DRUG TRAFFICKERS - WITH THE STRONG BACKING OF THE UNITED STATES. OVER THE LAST 12 YEARS, WASHINGTON HAS GIVEN COLOMBIA SOME 8 BILLION DOLLARS FOR ITS SIGNATURE ANTI-DRUG EFFORT, KNOWN AS "PLAN COLOMBIA."

DESPITE THIS, THE NATION STILL IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP PRODUCERS OF COCAINE...AND DRUG VIOLENCE HAS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE REGION. WARRING DRUG GANGS HAVE TURNED CENTRAL AMERICA INTO ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACES ON EARTH. THIS APRIL, PRESIDENT SANTOS HOSTED A SUMMIT OF WESTERN LEADERS IN THE COLONIAL CITY OF CARTAGENA TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM. THE CONFERENCE TURNED OUT TO BE A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN U.S.-LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS.

THAT'S BECAUSE PRESIDENT SANTOS AND OTHERS USED THE STAGE TO CHALLENGE PRESIDENT OBAMA AND THE UNITED STATES TO CONSIDER A RADICAL NEW APPROACH: DECRIMINALIZING DRUGS.

SANTOS (FROM CARTAGENA SUMMIT, IN SPANISH)

I believe the whole world has an obligation, not just individual countries, to analyze if we are doing the best we can.

SANTOS

I said let's sit down and without that passionate prejudice that-- this discussion-- sort of rises, let's think about this objectively with experts. Are we doing the best we can? Or should we-- have-- a new approach that would have better results? Because when you see the number of people in jail-- in the American jails, you have more people in jail because of the drugs than the whole-- jail population of Europe. We have reached a point where we have to say let's sit down and discuss.

RATHER

But it's very clear that with you some-- some other-- Latin American leaders... you favor some form of decriminalization along with-- a strong regulation of the drugs. That's fair to say, isn't it?

SANTOS

No. At this time, no. What is fair to say is you have sort of two extremes, what I call the Asian approach. You put every consumer in jail and you-- give the capital punishment to drug dealers. That's what the Asian approach. You have that in-- in one extreme. The other extreme is legalization. And in between you have many alternatives. Decriminalize-- approach this as a health problem. What I'm proposing is let's study these different scenarios and take the best -- scenario possible and let's get together because this is not a problem only of the U.S. or only of Colombia; it's a world problem.

RATHER

Well my question was whether you were prepared to move in saying, look, we-- yes, we should consider it, but are you prepared to say some form of decriminalization ought to be actively considered?

SANTOS

If the scientific evidence that-- this approach could bring-- bring better results in terms of-- the number of addicts, if we-- treat this as a health problem, yes.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

PRESIDENT SANTOS SAYS IT'S WORTH EXPLORING THE SCIENCE OF COMBATING DRUG ADDICTION AND FINDING NEW WAYS TO REDUCE DEMAND -- AND NOT RELYING ENTIRELY ON LAW ENFORCEMENT. IN COLOMBIA PEOPLE CAN NOW CARRY SMALL AMOUNTS OF COCAINE AND MARIJUANA WITHOUT FEAR OF ARREST.

BUT AT THE SUMMIT IN CARTAGENA, PRESIDENT OBAMA SAID THE UNITED STATES IS NOT ABOUT TO CHANGE COURSE.

BARACK OBAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES (CARTAGENA SUMMIT)

I personally, and my administration's position, is that legalization is not the answer.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

You had some direct conversations with President Obama. Did you have direct conversations with him about this?

SANTOS

Yes-- and he said very clearly—"I'm not-- I'm not-- going to-- to avoid the discussion, but be very clear that I am against legalization." And I said, you know, "fair enough." And that's-- a very valid and respectful position. I, myself, am not-- I'm not convinced that legalization is the-- is the-- the way out, but the discussion is what is important at this moment in time.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THE SUBTEXT FROM PRESIDENT SANTOS WAS CLEAR: THE U.S. WAR ON DRUGS IS FAILING. AS DEFENSE MINISTER, SANTOS HAD A REPUTATION AS A HARDLINER, AND HIS BOSS AT THE TIME, PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE, WAS AN UNABASHED SUPPORTER OF PLAN COLOMBIA. SO WHEN SANTOS ANNOUNCED THAT IT WAS TIME TO RETHINK THE WAR ON DRUGS, THOSE WHO WATCH THIS PART OF THE WORLD TOOK NOTICE.

MICHAEL SHIFTER, DIRECTOR OF THE INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE

The fact that the former Minister of Defense, a strong ally of the United States, says, hey wait a minute, this isn't working, let's try something else, I think is an important turning point.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MICHAEL SHIFTER IS DIRECTOR OF THE INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE...THAT'S A WASHINGTON-BASED THINK TANK FOCUSED ON POLICY ISSUES IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE...SHIFTER HAS KNOWN AND WORKED WITH PRESIDENT SANTOS FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS...HE SAYS HE'S NOT SURPRISED THE PRESIDENT IS NOW ASSERTING HIMSELF AS A STRONG VOICE.

SHIFTER

I think that he wanted to be president from a very, very young age. I think this was a lifelong ambition, and it was clear that when he became president, he would become his own person and shape his administration and move in a very different direction than Uribe. So for me, it really wasn't a surprise.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

URIBE WAS EXTREMELY POPULAR WHEN HE HANDED THE KEYS TO PRESIDENT SANTOS IN 2010. HE HAD MANAGED TO BRING CALM TO A COUNTRY THAT A DECADE BEFORE WAS BEING DESCRIBED AS A FAILED STATE. THE GUERRILLA GROUP, FARC, RESPONSIBLE FOR NEARLY 50 YEARS OF BLOODY CIVIL CONFLICT, WAS ON THE DEFENSIVE AFTER THAT AGGRESSIVE CAMPAIGN LED BY URIBE.

TODAY, COLOMBIA IS A DIFFERENT PLACE. ITS CITIES ARE NO LONGER THE WORLD CAPITALS OF MURDER AND KIDNAPPING... AND ITS ECONOMY IS GROWING FASTER THAN ALMOST ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE HEMISPHERE. WHEN PRESIDENT SANTOS TOOK OFFICE, HE FOUND HIMSELF IN A UNIQUE POSITION: FOR THE FIRST TIME IN DECADES, HE HAD THE LUXURY TO FOCUS ON ISSUES BEYOND SECURITY.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

Let's talk about Colombia today. In some people's mind It's a murderous-- chaotic place. Would you to compare that-- from your judgment and-- and your experience on what the reality is today compared to that.

SANTOS

You're completely right. Many people still have that-- vision that we are what-- what you just described because we were. We were a country where-- we had the highest kidnapping rate, highest murder rate, violations of all kinds of human rights. I mean that was a reality. Not anymore. And it's very difficult many times to change the perception of a country-- in a short period of time, but I think we're managing very well.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN RECENT YEARS, COLOMBIA HAS QUIETLY DEVELOPED INTO WHAT COULD BECOME ONE OF THE WORLD'S BRIGHTEST TURNAROUND STORIES.

RATHER

You did this interview with Time Magazine, which I think you must have been pleased with because it was complimentary--about not only your-- yourself, but-- perhaps more importantly about Colombia. But if you don't mind, I'll read you something-- from it. Complimenting Colombia on how far it has come from the really brutal and tragic realities of the '80s, '90s, and even into the 2000s, it says, "especially since many of Colombia's outsized problems, not just a guerrilla war, which continues, but also the epic wealth disparities and the human rights abuses that originally provoked the rebels to take up arms, all still exist." Do you argue with that?

SANTOS

No, I would not argue, but-- the size of those problems have shrunked dramatically-- with the exception of the inequality, and almost every policy that we have put in place addresses this problem of poverty and inequality.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AMONG THOSE POLICIES WAS A FREE TRADE DEAL SIGNED WITH THE UNITED STATES EARLIER THIS YEAR...IT'S PROVIDED A WELCOME BOOST TO COLOMBIA'S ECONOMY.

BUT SANTOS HASN'T SHIED AWAY FROM LOOKING ELSEWHERE AS WELL...EVEN TO AMERICA'S MAIN ECONOMIC COMPETITOR, CHINA. FOR A DECADE NOW, THAT COUNTRY'S SURGING ECONOMY HAS SENT CHINESE BUSINESSES SEARCHING FOR COMMODITIES IN THE WEST...FROM THE CARIBBEAN TO CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA. AND COLOMBIA EXPERTS, LIKE MICHAEL SHIFTER, SAY SANTOS DIDN'T WANT COLOMBIA TO MISS OUT ON THE POTENTIAL WINDFALL.

SHIFTER

Colombia was a little bit behind some of its other neighbors in relations with China and partly because it was so focused on the United States, and partly because the drug issue was such a important issue on the agenda. But now, Colombia is expanding its trade with China and China has a huge appetite for commodities in Latin America, and it's the biggest trading partner today with Brazil, with Chile and with Peru and it's increasing with Colombia.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

Are concerns about Chinese influence spreading in South America - is that something that we in the United States and those of you in Colombia should be worried about?

SANTOS

Well-- it's-- it's a matter of fact-- the Chinese are more and more present in Latin America. We

have what the world wants. We have energy, we have water, we have biodiversity. We have the possibility of increasing food production in the world that is-- is having a food crisis. We have a young population, so a growing market.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND PRESIDENT SANTOS SAYS THAT SHOULD BE A WAKE UP CALL FOR WASHINGTON.

RATHER

So it is natural for the Chinese, if they want to keep on growing at the rate they're growing, to look to Latin America. I have said to the-- the U.S., wake up -- look more towards the south.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FOR MANY YEARS, THE MIDDLE EAST HAS DOMINATED THE U.S. FOREIGN POLICY BANDWIDTH... BUT DURING THAT TIME, LATIN AMERICA UNDERWENT A MAJOR TRANSITION -- DIVIDING INTO TWO POLES: COUNTRIES LIKE COLOMBIA EMBRACING FREE TRADE WITH THE UNITED STATES, AND WELCOMING ITS ANTI-DRUG EFFORTS...AND A GROUP OF LEFTIST REGIMES, LED BY VENEZUELA'S HUGO CHAVEZ, WHO DEFINITELY REJECT U-S HEGEMONY PRESIDENT SANTOS' PREDECESSOR ALVARO URIBE FELL CLEARLY INTO THE PRO-US CAMP...AND TENSIONS WITH HUGO CHAVEZ GREW SO FIERCE AT ONE POINT THAT THE TWO COUNTRIES NEARLY WENT TO WAR.

BUT SANTOS SHOWED HE WOULD TAKE A DIFFERENT COURSE WHEN HE REACHED OUT TO CHAVEZ JUST DAYS AFTER TAKING OFFICE. IT'S ALL PART OF AN EFFORT TO POSITION COLOMBIA AS AN INDEPENDENT PLAYER ON THE WORLD STAGE AND A COUNTRY ABLE TO DO BUSINESS WITH EVERYONE.

SANTOS

I was very-- very-- what-- what would you call it, aggressive enemy of-- of Hu-- of Hugo Chávez, what he stood for, but when I was elected I said I have a responsibility as the head of state and the president of all Colombians. If we can sit down with hu-- Hugo Chávez like you and I are doing, and that's what I did, and tell him, "Listen, you have a duty to your people and I have a duty to my people. And I think it's for you and me to get along, even if we have completely different views on many, many issues. But if we respect our differences and you respect what I do and I respect what you do, we can get along for the benefit of the Venezuelans and the Colombians."

And he said, "Let's try it," and that's what we have been doing. And so I don't-- agree with him in many issues, he doesn't agree with me on many issues, but on those issues that we can work together, we do-- we do it. And that has been-- of a tremendous benefit not only for Venezuela and Colombia, but for the whole region.

RATHER

But keeping in mind in the past, that Hugo Chávez and his Venezuelan government, they were actively involved in the revolutionary movement inside Colombia to overthrow the Colombian government. Did he give you any indication that he will cease and desist with that?

SANTOS

Well he made a-- a firm commitment that he would not get involved in our internal politics, as I am not-- not getting involved in his internal politics. This is a-- a basic principle of non-intervention and he has so far respected that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND MICHAEL SHIFTER SAYS THIS TYPE OF PRAGMATIC APPROACH IS TYPICAL OF PRESIDENT SANTOS.

SHIFTER

He's not somebody who has strong ideological views, he's not confrontational. He wants to get along with everybody and to be a conciliator and to build consensus and that's his style. So I think he-- right from the outset he reduced tensions with Chavez. At the same time he pursued the free trade agreement with the United States. And that is what he's been trying to construct, is this range of countries that he has close relations with, but that are across the ideological and political spectrum.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THERE MAY COME A POINT WHERE PRESIDENT SANTOS HAS TO PICK A SIDE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE LEFTIST REGIMES OF LATIN AMERICA.

SHIFTER

There are a lot of people in Colombia and elsewhere that really raise the question whether he can succeed and I think it's too soon to know. Clearly if he does that will be a tremendous boost for him personally and for the country, but it's not going to be easy.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

All right, what's going to happen with the relations between the U.S. and Colombia?

SANTOS

I-- I hope, and this is my will, that they will become better and better. We managed to change the agenda. Before, our relations were all-- almost only exclusively on security issues. And-- and now we are discussing education-- science and technology, social progress. And-- we are doing that-- on a same level. And I think this is a true partnership and I value that very much. And-- in this difficult world that we're living through, if we work together we will achieve better results.

DAN RATHER

Mr. President, thank you very much.

SANTOS

Mr. Rather, thank you very much.

RATHER

I'm very appreciative of your time.

SANTOS

Thank you.

RATHER

Thank you.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

SHORTLY AFTER OUR INTERVIEW, PRESIDENT SANTOS ANNOUNCED UPCOMING PEACETALKS WITH LEADERS FROM THE GUERRILLA GROUP FARC. ENDING COLOMBIA'S NEARLY 50 YEARS OF BLOODY CONFLICT WOULD NOT ONLY RAISE PRESIDENT SANTOS' STATURE IN WORLD AFFAIRS...BUT IT WOULD ALSO PUSH

COLOMBIA INTO AN EVEN MORE PROMISING FUTURE.