Students, faculty and members of the broader Cornell community filled Hollis Cornell Auditorium in Goldwin Smith Hall on November 15, 2010 to hear Colombia’s former ambassador to the United States Carolina Barco Isakson give a talk entitled, “The United States and Colombia: an Important Partnership.” The talk was given as a part of the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

Barco spoke on 3 general themes; the origins of Colombia's well documented problems with narco-trafficking, the steps Colombia took to recover from them and how the United States assisted, and how a new partnership between Colombia and the United States could help in forming the future of the South American region.
As Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Colombia from 2002-2006, one of Barco's most important roles was to get information out to change the public perception of Colombia abroad. She began her discussion of Colombia's recovery by saying, "I always felt like I needed to talk about the drugs, because this is a challenge to our country and our democracy," said Barco, but she joked that she would rather talk about literary great Gabriel García Márquez, international musical giants Shakira and Juanes or the biodiversity that was making Colombia more popular as a tourist destination.

In the 1980's, she said, Colombia began to experience a rise in cocaine production and usage. Initially, she said, cocaine was grown in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador and refined in Colombia to be exported to the US and sold to "middlemen" there. During the 1990's however, Barco said that the Colombian cartels had perfected the "vertical integration" of the cocaine export market to the United States.

This rise in cocaine production aided the rise of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. The organization started with the merging of several illegal Marxist groups that had grown out of the "export" of the Cuban revolution. Although FARC was urban and intellectual in its origins, it was pushed into rural areas where it became involved in cocaine production and trafficking as a means of funding itself. With the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, most South American leftist guerrilla groups collapsed as their primary source of funding dried up. FARC, Barco said, was a "...left wing group that morphed into a narco-trafficking group." She continued, "Much of what you see today in Mexico, Colombia lived in the 1980s."

Barco continued her talk by discussing the means by which Colombia confronted this crisis. By the year 2000, she said, Colombia was reaching a critical point. The economy had been fairly orthodox and had suffered no hyperinflation, however, with very little investment in new ventures the overall size of the economy shrank and with it came a decline in social indicators. It was at this point that the Clinton Administration began working with the government of President Andres Pastrana on "Plan Colombia." In one last effort at a peace process, a 3 year amnesty was declared for FARC who were allowed full control, of a "Free Zone" in the interior of Colombia roughly the size of Switzerland. FARC showed no interest in negotiating peace and used the "Free Zone" to increase their strength in these 3 years, so in some ways the plan was a failure. However, said Barco, "The world now saw that Colombia wanted peace."

According to Barco, upon the election of Pastrana's successor President Alvaro Uribe, Colombia gained a strong leader who took steps to restore public confidence. His offensive against the FARC was built on 3 pillars; a program of exfoliant spraying to send the message the cultivation of coca was unacceptable, a widespread program of development spending to provide economic alternatives for the campesinos who were active in the production of cocaine and finally a strengthening of the justice system to make it less corrupt and harder to intimidate judges, prosecutors and witnesses alike.

The fight against drug traffickers is a challenging one, said Barco, because the cartels are always changing tactics to stay on top of their quite lucrative business. However, the first 8 years of Plan Colombia have seen a 40% decrease in cultivation of coca, the street price of cocaine in the United States has increased 50% in the past 2 years due to its scarcity, and the cocaine being seized in the United States is less pure as it is diluted by traffickers as a way to make up for decreasing supply. Better intelligence networks and less money flowing
to the guerillas has weakened the FARC. Defections and lack of safe havens have led to several high profile hostage rescues such as that of Ingrid Betancourt. Barco shared her hope that this loss of influence would gain momentum as FARC’s means of funding itself are eliminated.

To capitalize on this momentum, said Barco, Colombia has undertaken a “Consolidation Program”. The government works with the campesinos to give them alternatives to coca production, planting alternative crops and supporting them while these replacement crops are established. This direct aid is buttressed by the establishment of a strong government presence in these areas, with institutions like the police and human services agencies filling the void left by FARC’s retreat.

Another program called “Invest Colombia” has brought 9-10 companies per year and $6 billion in direct investment to Colombia and has matched them with local resources. This has helped to increase the quality of life in rural areas in particular, with basic education and health care being extended to all of Colombia’s people. “It’s important for long term success to not only invest in security but also health care and human services,” said Barco.

Additionally, the criminal justice system has been changed from the Spanish-style inquisitorial system to one of oral arguments in court, causing cases to go faster and resulting in more successful sentencing, said Barco. Colombia now spends $42 million per year on its witness protection program, and human rights related cases are now tried in the civil courts rather than before a military tribunal. The net result, Barco said, is a judicial system that is more responsive, more transparent, and ultimately stronger and more able to face the challenges imposed upon it.

The combined impact of these reforms, claimed Barco, has enabled Colombia to climb to the top of the list of tourist destinations in the New York Times, with a 400% increase in tourism over the past 8 years. Disney cruises are back in Colombia, and quipped Barco, “If Minnie and Mickey can go to Colombia, so can you!”

Colombia has also placed in the top 10 for environmental performance indicators. She said that this is in part due to Colombia’s renowned biodiversity, with more species of flora and fauna than the U.S. and Canada combined. Public funds spent on education and health have moved Colombia up 5 spots in the human development index. “Colombia is one of the oldest democracies in Latin America, with a very strong institutional and civil society,” she said. “I think that is what has allowed us to address and be successful in moving away from the challenges posed by drugs and drug trafficking.

Finally, Barco discussed the future of the relationship between the United States and Colombia, and how she thought it might best evolve. According to Barco, now is the moment for the two partners to work together to bring more stability and economic growth to the entire region. The drug trafficking problem, she argued, is a regional problem. Colombia has already begun helping Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti implement police reforms to counter endemic corruption in those countries, “…sharing expertise that we unfortunately had to gain,” said Barco. She added that in all of these cases, aid was being given not only in security-related matters, but also in education and risk prevention through social programs.

Crucial to the growth of the new regional cooperation, Barco said, was passage to the Free Trade Agreement between the U.S and Colombia which is stalled in Congress despite
being ratified twice in Colombia. Barco believes this agreement is ultimately to the benefit of the U.S., since 98% of the goods exported from Colombia to the US are currently tariff-free and the agreement would do the same for US goods being exported to Colombia. "We are a large agricultural importer ... and we [currently] have free-trade agreements with Argentina, Brazil, Canada," Barco said. "Half of what we use to import from the U.S. is now coming from these countries ... and a free-trade agreement would only work for the benefit of all of us." Moving beyond bilateral cooperation to multilateral collaboration, she reasoned, will strengthen the entire region.

In conclusion, Barco pointed out that the United States and Colombia have had a very long and mutually beneficial relationship. She said it was time to work together from a new regional perspective where Colombia can play an important leadership role in helping to strengthen US ties to South America, an area of great growth and even more potential.

Carolina Barco was appointed Ambassador of Colombia to the United States in August 2006 by President Alvaro Uribe. As Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carolina Barco focused her objectives in three specific areas: to strengthen the ministry's diplomacy in order to get more efficient actions, mainly towards a direct support for the Colombian community living abroad; to develop an strong communication policy in order to improve the image of Colombia in foreign countries and contribute to a real understanding of what is happening in the national life; and to promote trade and international cooperation specially for development programs.

She has also worked as advisor for international cooperation to the United Nations Development Program, as researcher at Los Andes University, as well as a member of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's Board of Directors. She is well known in the fields of formulation and adoption of public policies.

Carolina Barco has a Bachelor Degree in Social and Economic Sciences and a Masters Degree in Business Administration and Urban and Regional Planning. She has always worked in the public sector, as Director of the City Planning Department in Bogotá, and as adviser to the ministries of Development, Culture, and the Environment, as well as to the National Planning Department and the Office of the Mayor of Bogotá.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.