

July 4, 2008 Friday

Free at Last; Colombia's dramatic hostage rescue strengthens the case for a trade agreement.

SUPERLATIVES FAIL in describing the Colombian army operation that rescued 15 hostages from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. Having painstakingly infiltrated the guerrilla organization's communications network, the Colombian forces apparently deceived the captors into handing the hostages over to Colombian troops disguised as guerrillas. The rescuers played their roles superbly, even adding a touch of the rebels' characteristic cruelty as they bound the hostages and shoved them aboard a helicopter. Once all were airborne, the soldiers subdued the rebels who had escorted the hostages, then removed the captives' restraints. Thus were the French-Colombian citizen Ingrid Betancourt, three American defense contractors, and 11 Colombians liberated from years of captivity -- without a shot being fired. Europe and the United States, as well as Colombia, owe these brave and skilled men, and their commander in chief, President Álvaro Uribe, a large debt of gratitude.

U.S. officials were quick to play down American help in this particular rescue. But there is no question that the deft Colombian military that we have just seen in action is far superior to the brutal, incompetent force of a decade ago. The transformation, in large part, was fostered by substantial U.S. aid, delivered first by President Bill Clinton and sustained by the Bush administration -- with appropriate human-rights strings attached. The success of this long-term commitment debunks the pessimistic conventional wisdom in Washington about the utility of military assistance to Colombia or other Latin American nations. That is all the more reason for Congress to carry out a liberation of its own. For months, the U.S.-Colombia free-trade agreement and the benefits it would bring to a host of American industries have been held hostage to politics -- specifically, to the Democratic Party's need to mollify the labor unions that fund it. The Democrats' only argument against the pact is that the Uribe administration has not done enough to prevent and punish the murders of Colombian trade unionists. But in view of the determination and competence the Colombian government has just demonstrated, Mr. Uribe's promises to satisfy legitimate concerns deserve the benefit of the doubt. Already, his policies have dramatically reduced overall violence and murder, including the killing of trade unionists. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has blocked a vote on the trade pact, citing supposed White House violations of standard legislative procedure. Those concerns, never very convincing, seem petty, indeed, in light of Colombia's latest achievement. It's time to set free trade free.