

# Carlos Lehder Rivas: the fall of an 'untouchable'

by Valerie Rush

A scan of the last five years' writings and interviews given by Colombia's flamboyant dope czar, **Carlos Lehder Rivas**, provides a striking view of his kaleidoscope of ideological attachments. Lehder's professed admiration for Adolf Hitler, his association with the Colombian MAS death squad that murdered leftist students and labor leaders, his oft-published denunciations of "Marxism-Leninism," all stand in seemingly stark contrast to his adoration of the Beatles' "peace-loving" John Lennon, his political movement's emulation of the "flower-children" of West Germany's Green Party, his lucrative business arrangements with the Cuban and Nicaraguan governments, and his declaration of common cause with the leftist M-19 guerrillas in Colombia.

Schizophrenic? Not at all. As *EIR* noted more than two years ago in its best-selling second edition of *Dope, Inc., Boston Bankers and Soviet Commissars*: "There is more than just a marriage of convenience between the old Nazi networks and the Bulgarian-Soviet and Cuban networks which provide the arms and infrastructure to the narco-terrorists." The career of Carlos Lehder offers a clinical view of the phenomenon of *Nazi-communism*, a joining of two not-so-irreconcilable worlds in the underground of Dope, Inc.

## 'Rags to riches'

When Lehder, a pot-dealing, car-thieving hoodlum in his early twenties, was deported back to Colombia after doing two years in a Connecticut penitentiary, he had learned a thing or two from his juvenile stint in the United States. In possession of significant profits from his earlier criminal activities, Lehder moved to the Bahamas around 1976, purchasing an airplane, and soon thereafter, setting up an airplane rental service for the burgeoning drug trade moving through those islands.

Although Lehder's car- and dope-smuggling links to the Detroit mob in the early 1970s may have brought the Colombian delinquent into contact with the circles of fugitive embezzler **Robert Vesco** then, it is more likely that the two criminals first crossed paths in the Bahamas, sometime between 1977 and 1978. This was when the Costa Rican government was pressured into withdrawing the highly profitable

refuge it had provided the underworld financier, thereby forcing Vesco into Caribbean island-hopping. Using the good offices of a Dutch Antilles shell company undoubtedly created for the occasion by Vesco, Lehder and his new friend purchased the private island known as Norman's Cay, a mere 200 miles from the tip of Florida and a first-class smugglers' paradise, where Lehder was to live for the next several years.

Under the pretext of turning the island into a tourist resort, Vesco and Lehder converted it into a high-class "pit stop" for the dope trade. Providing refrigerated warehouses for the cocaine, airplane hangars for repair and refueling, comfortable accommodations for weary pilots, and the best in electronic surveillance and killer Dobermans as security, Lehder rapidly earned a fortune for his services.

In a June 1983 interview with the Colombian radio station Caracol, Lehder asserted: "Part of my great fortune is due to the large investments I made in the Bahamas some six years ago. Hundreds of Colombians have had access to these territories, to conduct transactions they found necessary to carry out. . . . I don't deny for a moment the great fortunes emerging today in Colombia, carrying out social acts and bringing the dollars back into Colombia."

Norman's Cay had the misfortune to be shut down by U.S. anti-drug forces around 1981, but—reportedly due to the influence of Vesco, as well as the hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes paid to the **Lynden Pindling** government in Nassau—Lehder himself was able to escape arrest, returning to his hometown in Quindío, Colombia, where he was to build himself a feudal empire and link fortunes with the so-called Medellín Cartel of **Pablo Escobar** and the **Ochoa clan**.

## The Cuba connection

Far from ending his lucrative business association with Vesco, Norman's Cay proved to be just the beginning. One year later, Vesco had found a bigger and better Norman's Cay in the form of Cuba, where **Fidel Castro** welcomed the harassed fugitive with open arms—in return for a piece of the action. Key to that "action" was Carlos Lehder. According to investigative journalist Ernest Volkman, writing in

April 1984 for the magazine *Family Weekly*:

"The Cubans needed Lehder; they were trying to run guns to leftist M-19 guerrillas in the Colombian countryside. Lehder, with his extensive smuggling operation, was perfect for the job, and a deal was struck: Lehder would aid Cuban arms smuggling into Colombia, while the Cubans would provide protection, anchorage, and other help for his drug-smuggling operations into the United States."

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Lehder handled logistics, and Vesco the finances, for what rapidly grew into a cocaine trade supplying nearly 80% of the U.S. cocaine market. As Volkmann described it: "Castro and Vesco sit at the center of a huge drug-smuggling operation that is responsible for a significant portion of the illegal narcotics coming into the United States. . . . According to admittedly imprecise estimates, believed to be on the conservative side, the operation has generated nearly \$20 billion in profits during the past four years alone." Another source, *Forbes* magazine of Sept. 4, 1984, wrote, "The Castro government is said to get payments of \$500,000 or more per large boatload of drugs."

Cuba was not Vesco and Lehder's only Communist ally. In July of 1984, Lehder was named for the first time by a federal grand jury in Miami as one of eleven sought for trafficking Colombian cocaine into the United States—through Nicaragua. Escobar and Lehder put the operation together, assisted by one **Federico Vaughan**, identified by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration then as a top aide to the Sandinistas' interior minister, Tomás Borge.

The role of Colombia's most prominent financial institutions in laundering Lehder's drug profits came to light following the 1984 raid on Lehder's luxurious villa, where a

December 1981 letter from the drug trafficker to top Colombian banker **Jaime Michelsen Uribe** was discovered. Michelsen, at the time president of the Banco de Colombia as well as head of the powerful Grancolombiano financial group, was also first cousin to former President **Alfonso López Michelsen**. The text of the letter, published by *El Espectador* on July 5, 1985, read in part:

"In accord with the conversations held in the past few days, I attach here the following documentation . . . of the already constituted companies and projects to be developed by your organization. . . . We want to ratify our interest in the Grancolombiano Group's being the intermediary for channeling our foreign exchange resources, a product of our companies abroad, which equal the sum of some \$20 million a year and which we would be prepared to transfer to the country through your correspondent banks under conditions stipulated by you.

"It would not be too much to add, Dr. Michelsen, our sincerest gratefulness for your interest and the magnificent attention lent our representatives. . . ."

On New Year's Eve 1985, Jaime Michelsen Uribe was forced by President Belisario Betancur to resign all of his positions with the Grancolombiano Group in the face of overwhelming evidence of his corrupt business practices. Michelsen fled the next morning to Miami, and later from there to Panama, where he has remained as a fugitive from Colombian justice.

### **A green Nazi**

Back in Colombia, Lehder continued to expand the movement he had launched under the name of "National Latin Movement (MLN)." Lehder bought himself a 4,000-man army of fanatic youth, a national presence through expensive full-page newspaper ads, and his own weekly newspaper, *Quindío Libre*. Lehder's rag, printed in green ink on green newsprint, mixed diatribes against extradition, Zionism, and U.S. imperialism with advocacy of drug legalization, breeding a taller, heavier, and healthier "race" of Colombians, and praise of Adolf Hitler. His self-defense of drug traffickers as Colombian patriots seeking to bring the "bonanza" back home was a constant theme in his writings. At one point, Lehder sent a blank check to Cuba for the release of Colombian drug traffickers held in Castro's prisons.

Lehder's rallies were held with giant posters of Hitler and Mussolini for backdrops. In several 1983 interviews, Lehder described Hitler as "one of the great men of our history, whom the Jews and the imperialists distorted." In a January 1985 interview, he declared, "Adolf eliminated 21 million Communists and 6 million allied enemies. He is the greatest warrior mankind has ever had."

Lehder was a fanatic environmentalist, financing ecology movements inside Colombia and denouncing the pollution brought by "oligarchic" technology. He regularly compared

his movement to the **West German Green Party**, itself a classic Nazi-communist creation in the service of Soviet destabilization aims. One issue of Lehder's newspaper carried the following chilling caption to a full page of matching photos of long-hairs in the Green Party and in his own MLN:

"With their long and unkempt hair, the new 'Green' parliamentarians of Germany enter the Bundestag. A fresh breeze, with the odor of naturalness. . . . Headed by their leader, the hyperactive Petra Kelly, the 29 Green parliamentarians immediately took the microphone while the fat, old congressmen—accustomed to the odor of cologne, jackets, and ties—just smiled. *Perhaps with time the smiles of the traditionalists will disappear before the immense and growing power of the environmentalists* [emphasis added]."

At the time of Lehder's 1984 escape into clandestineness, it was rumored that Lehder's movement had a mutual admiration pact with the Greens, and that **Petra Kelly** had been invited by the MLN to tour Colombia.

Lehder also had an obsession with the "indigenous races" of Latin America, an obsession shared with his equally murderous Maoist colleagues in neighboring Peru, the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*). He wrote of the "humble Indians . . . the latent expression of our proud race which one day not long ago was a race of kings," and altered the logo of his newspaper to read *quINDIO LIBRE* (free Indian). Over a recent period, Lehder financed the creation of a narco-terrorist "indigenist" force called the Quintín Lame Brigade, and threatened to forge a half-million-strong army to capture the Colombian government.

## Going underground

By 1984, his "movement" had spread to three provinces and he had run, albeit unsuccessfully, for the Colombian Senate. Although based in the tiny province of Quindío, Lehder coordinated his drug operations nationally through Pablo Escobar in the city of Medellín, and through **Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela** in Cali. He began to hold large and well-financed rallies in the capital city of Bogota as well. The probability of his movement electing one or more federal congressmen was increasing along with his vast fortune.

Despite his admissions of drug-trafficking in public interviews, Lehder operated with impunity throughout the country, due to the web of corruption he and his ilk had succeeded in weaving around Colombia's leading national institutions. Not a single charge was ever proffered against him, despite the overwhelming evidence of his criminal activities.

Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla ended Lehder's dreams of an easy ascent to power. Minister Lara, a patriot committed to rescuing the country's institutions from the likes of Lehder, took up a defense of the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty and—despite the reluctance of President Betancur at the time—was hopeful of winning its enforce-

ment. In March of 1984, Lara coordinated a raid on the traffickers' jungle hideout of Tranquilandia, the world's largest cocaine production complex, and named, among others, elected Congressman Pablo Escobar as a co-owner. That raid marked the beginning of the end of mafia "untouchability."

On April 30, 1984, Lara Bonilla was assassinated by hirelings of the Medellín Cartel. Lehder was publicly cited as under suspicion for the murder, and was forced to flee, along with the majority of the top traffickers in the country. The only "capo" seized—and later released—in the government's post-assassination dragnet was **Evaristo Porras**, co-owner of Tranquilandia. Ironically, it was Porras who had accused Lara in 1983 of being on the mafia payroll, presenting his own falsified checks made out to Lara as "proof." Porras was also the first important drug trafficker captured in the Barco government's December 1986 raids, and is now in jail facing military justice.

Lara Bonilla's assassination was intended to be just the first of a series of murders of prominent anti-drug figures in Ibero-America. Not long after Lara's murder, the Venezuelan magazine *Auténtico* carried the story that a plot to assassinate Venezuelan Justice Minister José Manzo González had been exposed and prevented. The murder, according to the magazine's sources, was to have been carried out by Lehder's thugs, but was planned in Havana. Among those named as responsible for coordinating the murder were **Nelida Allare**, Fidel Castro's live-in lover, **Dr. Ana Pla**, Allare's sister and a close friend of Lehder's wife, Jemel Nasser, and two representatives of Cuba at the United Nations.

Denied a respectable place in Colombian society, Lehder went regional with a vengeance. He traveled to Peru, Brazil, and elsewhere, where he expanded trafficking operations with those countries' mafias. At the same time, he became the mafia coordinator of Dope, Inc.'s "irregular warfare" forces against the continent's sovereign governments, the narco-terrorist "Americas Battalion" just taking shape under the leadership of the Colombian M-19 and Peruvian Shining Path. His Quintín Lame Brigade officially enlisted in the Battalion.

In a Jan. 28, 1985 interview "somewhere in the Colombian jungle," Lehder described the leftist M-19 as "revolutionary" and "nationalist." Lehder told journalists, "The M-19 . . . is the only movement that has declared itself against extradition. The M-19 plays a key role with the masses. . . . The call of [then M-19 leader] **Ivan [Marino Ospina]** in Mexico is a call for the guerrilla movements to join in the bonanza."

Lehder was referring to a Mexico City press conference given by Marino Ospina one month earlier, in which the M-19 leader not only urged a total amnesty for drug traffickers so that drug money could be repatriated to "benefit the people," but enthusiastically endorsed the Colombian mafia's threat to assassinate U.S. diplomats and citizens worldwide.