

What happened to the War on Drugs?

Ricardo Martín and Carlos Méndez trace the process that led to the apotheosis of two of the world's most savage criminals in the business press of the United States.

Sometimes, developments in the lower depths of the underworld are reflected in certain "upper" circles dominated by the white collar and the diamond necklace.

On Nov. 16, 1986, the Southern District Federal Court in Miami, Florida unsealed an indictment against nine leaders of the "international drug-trafficking criminal enterprise" known as the Medellín Cartel. Among the accused are mentioned Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Jorge Luis Ochoa. Eleven months later, in an unusual media "coincidence," both *Forbes* (Oct. 5, 1987) and *Fortune* (Oct. 12, 1987) magazines mentioned, in their respective reports on "the richest men in the world," none other than Escobar and Ochoa.

Thus, in a very short space of time, two of the world's most wanted criminals went from the police pages to the social pages of the international financial "jet set."

But the deeper problem is not one of social identities. It is rather that the whitewash of Escobar and Ochoa's images is an expression of the serious steps backward that have been taken in 1987 in the war against drugs, to the detriment of the achievements of 1986. In 1987, with the exception of the spectacular capture of Colombian cocaine king Carlos Lehder, not only has there not been another important trafficker arrested, but many of those who had been jailed earlier either "escaped," or were acquitted, absolved, or pardoned. One is left with the impression that a strong, if invisible hand, had intervened in their favor. Further, many military officials, soldiers, police officers, honest judges, and anti-drug reporters have been mowed down by mafia assassins.

Worse still, despite the efforts of the Peruvian and Panamanian governments to shut down narco-banking operations in their respective countries, they have not only *not* received the necessary backup from the United States, but many U.S. officials and congressmen have exercised various forms and degrees of pressure, even direct attack, on these governments for their anti-drug efforts. Such is the case, for example, with "Operation Pisces," carried out jointly by Panamanian and U.S. anti-drug authorities. Such, too, is the case of the bank

nationalization in Peru, directed at such leading drug-laundering centers as the Banco de Crédito and others.

And while the war on drugs has suffered these many reverses, tons of cocaine and other drugs have continued to flood the United States, destroying millions of youth.

Reagan: 'We are speaking seriously!'

On Aug. 4, 1986, in a speech to the nation, President Ronald Reagan announced a long-term offensive, a "national crusade against drugs, a sustained, inflexible effort to rescue the United States from this scourge." Two days later, at a national conference on drug addiction and alcoholism, President Reagan said that he would call 15 to 20 U.S. ambassadors together to instruct them in this new offensive, and to begin collaboration in the war on drugs with other countries. "Together," said Reagan, "all countries should know that no drug network will survive. We propose to have a drug-free nation, and the world must know that we are speaking seriously."

The six-point program that the President proposed included energetic measures against the laundering of "dirty" (drug) money. This point was of special relevance, since eliminating the ability to launder profits from the drug trade is the key to winning the war on drugs. It is no accident that the reason Escobar and Ochoa were invited to join the financial jet set is precisely their immense ill-gotten fortunes.

Some months earlier, when Vice President George Bush announced that President Reagan had signed an April 8, 1986 national security directive for combating the drug trade, he emphasized that the directive described this crime as an urgent problem of national security, and added that it stipulated the use of both U.S. and Ibero-American military force in the fight against drugs.

President Reagan's Aug. 4 pledge was met with tremendous enthusiasm on the part of Ibero-America's besieged anti-drug forces, above all because between April 8 and Aug. 4 of 1986, nothing significant in the way of the promised

U.S.-Ibero-American collaboration against drugs had come to pass. Further, at the specialized conference on drugs, sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS) and held in Río de Janeiro, Brazil on April 24-26 of that same year, the U.S. delegate had actually opposed the creation of an anti-drug fund favored by nearly the entirety of the participating nations.

The primary document presented at that OAS conference says: "One of the important new dimensions of the drug trade is the legitimization of the ill-gotten gains. It is not clear where the drug traffickers invest their profits, but it is believed that the majority of the laundered money is invested in stocks and bonds, real estate, and in other assets of the more developed countries. . . . Until the profits are controlled and the demand reduced, it is highly doubtful that any effective action will reduce production."

Another point insisted upon by the delegates to the OAS conference was the creation of a continental force to battle the drug traffickers. The enthusiasm with which President Reagan's announcement was met is, therefore, understandable.

A major step backward

However, as we have stated, not only did this collaborative war on drugs never become reality, but the existing anti-drug campaigns took a major step backward. The most palpable example of this retreat is the case of the Colombia-U.S. Extradition Treaty, overturned in December 1986 by the Colombian courts, without a word or hint or protest from the U.S. authorities. Even such "serious" anti-drug figures as former U.S. Sen. Paula Hawkins (R-Fla.), in this regard.

As is universally acknowledged, that which the Colombian drug traffickers most feared is that extradition treaty, so much so that on April 30, 1984 they murdered Colombian Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla for his insistence that the treaty be implemented. And, on Nov. 6, 1985, the M-19 narco-terrorist gang assaulted the Colombian Justice Palace, burning the dossiers of extradition petitions against drug traffickers and assassinating a dozen Supreme Court judges handling drug-trafficking cases.

On May 9, 1986, the Colombian mafia under Pablo Escobar's command published an ad in the Bogota daily *El Tiempo*, which lamented that "in a moment of anger" (the assassination of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla), then President Belisario Betancur had signed "the first extradition requests" submitted by the United States. In the ad, the mafia signers said that if the treaty were overturned, they would commit themselves to the "formal, real, and material surrender of all the elements and raw materials used for the production of cocaine."

Among the signers were the recognized billionaires Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Carlos Lehder, who included in the

communiqué an expression of "solidarity with our companions, friends, and compatriots . . . Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela and Jorge Luis Ochoa, who are currently in different jails in . . . Spain, all because of the misnamed extradition treaty."

On Nov. 15, 1986, mafia thugs toppled a memorial bust of the assassinated Minister Lara Bonilla, leaving a message signed by "the extraditables" which promised to suspend the assassination of Colombian judges in return for a suspension of the extradition treaty.

Two days later, mafia assassins murdered Col. Jaime Ramírez Gómez, former head of the anti-narcotics department of Colombia's national police, the F-2, who had been Lara Bonilla's right-hand man and who had served as one of the most critical liaisons among the anti-drug forces throughout the region. Just before his death, Colonel Ramírez had told the daily *El Espectador*, "On this extradition matter, no one can claim not to have known, since it is nothing less than the key factor in the fight against drugs. . . . The day it is annulled, they will have won the war."

And on Nov. 12-13, only days earlier, the White House had called its ambassadors in 19 capitals, including Bogota, to inform them personally of President Reagan's plan to wage an international war against drugs. The response was less than overwhelming. In an interview published Dec. 3, the president of Colombia's Council of State, Samuel Buitrago Hurtado, called for the legalization of the drug trade and the overturning of the extradition treaty.

The retreat began to snowball. On July 3, 1987, Colombia's justice ministry revoked the arrest warrants pending against all the heads of the Medellín Cartel, including Escobar Gaviria, warrants that had been based on extradition requests made by the United States. Two days later, the Colombian Supreme Court annulled the Extradition Treaty. The United States was deadly silent. Days later, a judge in the city of Cali exonerated and released from jail Escobar's "companion, friend, and compatriot" Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, who was sought for extradition to the United States. The same "luck" followed in due course for Escobar's co-billionaire Jorge Luis Ochoa, who was given his "provisional freedom" on an animal contraband charge . . . and disappeared into the woodwork.

Colombian justice had capitulated to the blackmail and the assassinations and, above all, to the lack of back-up from those who should have provided it. And through it all, the United States government said nothing.

Rout

Across Ibero-America, the same pattern could be seen. Throughout 1987, not a single important drug trafficker has been arrested, while many have either fled or been freed from jail. The business of drug money laundering has never been better, with the exception of Peru, where the fight against the

drug banks continues, and of Panama, which is under the combined fire of the State Department, the U.S. Congress, and others. It is no accident that the opposition forces in Panama have attacked Panamanian Defense Forces chief General Noriega for having lifted bank secrecy to assist "Operation Pisces" investigations into drug traffickers' bank accounts.

In Honduras, the widely sought drug trafficker and murderer Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros, linked to Colombia's Medellín Cartel, "escaped" from a Colombian jail in November 1986, and today spends his days in Honduras handing out 100-lempira notes and making investments like any other respectable businessman.

In Venezuela, whose President Jaime Lusinchi proposed that the United Nations declare the drug trade a "crime against humanity," not a single important drug trafficker is currently behind bars, since seven Colombian cocaine traffickers linked to Pablo Escobar, were released from a Caracas jail a few weeks ago by a corrupt judge. Venezuela's anti-drug Justice Minister José Manzo González had responded to the incident by warning of the growth of a "parallel state" of drug traffickers, which could become impossible to control. He later released a memorandum to the President, outlining 500 similar cases of judicial corruption by the drug trade.

In Bolivia, abandoned to its fate, the drug trade continues to reign.

Despite the anti-drug efforts of certain sectors of the Mexican government—although the financial aspect of the drug trade has never been touched—the mafia has dared to move from bribery to assassination. On Sept. 20 of this year, the drug mafia murdered Federal Judge Pedro Villafuerte Gallegos, who had sentenced "marijuana czar" Pedro Díaz Parada to 40 years in prison. He escaped jail just two days before the assassination. Villafuerte Gallegos is the only Mexican judge to have been assassinated in the past 50 years.

We could, unfortunately, go on. It is enough to point out the case of Carlos Lehder's pending trial in Jacksonville, Florida, which his lawyers are seeking to annul with the argument that the extradition treaty which enabling his transfer to the United States has been overturned. His lawyers also argue that the jury being chosen for the Lehder trial is necessarily biased—because its members are against drugs!

The press is contributing more than its share. Both the *Miami Herald* and the Spanish-language *El Diario La Prensa* in New York have recently run series on the Lehder case, presenting the confessed drug trafficker and terrorist as a "Robin Hood" and "philosopher."

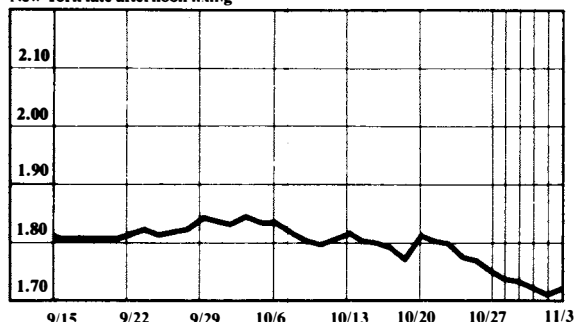
One question

One question stands out. Since Vice President George Bush is the nominal chief of the U.S. war on drugs, with the presumed obligation to observe this developing crisis situation, why hasn't he explained to the American people why his war on drugs has collapsed?

Currency Rates

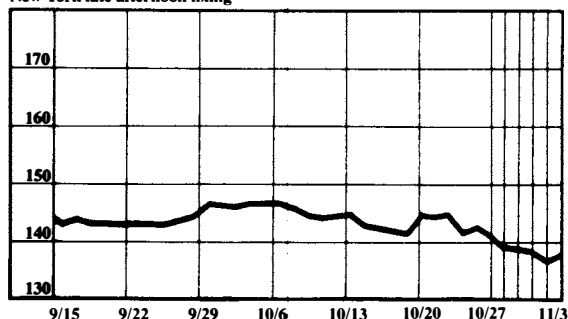
The dollar in deutschemarks

New York late afternoon fixing



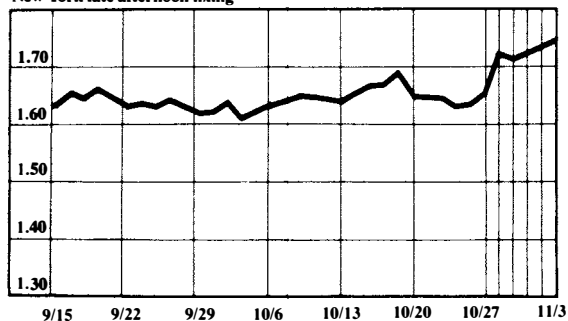
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing

