

Colombian war on drugs: Communists, U.S. liberal press take mafia's side

by Valerie Rush

Colombia's military war against the drug cartel, declared by President Virgilio Barco on Aug. 25, continues unabated, with new raids, new arrests, and new confiscations taking place in the cities of Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cali, Pasto, and in the departments of Meta and Arauca. Houses, airplanes, yachts, motorcycles, cars, weapons and munitions caches, communications equipment, and drugs have been seized, and clandestine airstrips discovered and destroyed, as the multibillion-dollar infrastructure of Colombia's criminal world is slowly dismantled.

Government forces used documents seized in one raid to track down one of the Medellín Cartel's computerized financial centers, in the very heart of Bogotá. Located in a luxurious seventh-floor suite of the building of the Savings and Housing Corporation (Davivienda), the cartel's "Coordinadora Comercial Limitada" possessed seven computers and an auditing and accounting department to keep track of 65 business enterprises created by Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, one of the Medellín Cartel's five chieftains, for managing his properties, which range from apartment buildings to ranches to Colombia's leading soccer team, the Millionaires. Gacha's office is under military occupation, as accounting experts begin to follow the paper trail which could reveal many of the "citizens above suspicion" who protect Colombia's drug trade.

The cartel has escalated terrorism in retaliation. After a first bombing spree in the city of Medellín was countered with imposition of a strict 10 p.m.-6 a.m. curfew, the traffickers announced they would strike in broad daylight, and choose civilian targets. Dynamite attacks were carried out against banks, liquor stores, travel agencies, and factories, followed by a rocket attack on a government oil storage facility, a grenade assault on a prestigious social club, a 33-pound dynamite bombing of a downtown Medellín street, and so on. Death threats against judges, journalists, government officials, and others continue to pour in.

Dialogue and legalization

Although the Colombian people are standing firm behind the government's anti-drug efforts, quite a few politicians have begun to display the cowardice and corruption which

enabled the cocaine cartel to get a stranglehold. The arguments being advanced against the military war against the drug mafia come in many stripes, but all center around 1) the need to "dialogue" with the traffickers and 2) the need to legalize drugs.

The dialogue option was first publicly raised by the Medellín Cartel itself, through Fabio Ochoa, father of three of the cartel leaders. The elder Ochoa, an obese horse breeder whose clients include heads of state, sent an open letter to President Barco urging an amnesty for his sons in exchange for "a clean slate." From his hiding place, Gacha Rodríguez reportedly offered to give up his properties (already seized!) and to stop trafficking drugs in exchange for calling off the war.

Cartel czar Pablo Escobar, however, showed the iron fist inside the velvet glove. In an interview with the French daily *Libération*, Escobar reportedly stated: "We will leave all the confiscated properties and airplanes with the State. Our only desire is to be integrated into society, into legal society, but it is the government that doesn't want this. . . . If war must be waged, we will wage it until the end. . . . There will be deaths and more deaths. I will give the orders. Journalists and judges will pay."

Prominent Colombians have openly called on the government to seek a negotiated solution with the mob. Medellín mayor Juan Gómez Martínez, a former newspaper editor who narrowly escaped a mafia assassination just before his election, sent the President an open letter insisting that the road to peace in Colombia was dialogue with both guerrillas and drug traffickers. Gómez stopped just short of advocating drug legalization.

Chamber of Deputies president Norberto Morales Ballesteros argued that one must dialogue with even one's worst enemies. "I never close the door because I believe the country belongs to all Colombians." Calling the cocaine kings "Colombians" really goes to the heart of the fight. It was the mafia murder of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán on Aug. 18 that finally provoked the Colombian government into action after years of retreat; Galán's son had stated at his father's burial the enemy was not Colombian, but a criminal multinational.

Ernesto Samper Pizano, a long-standing advocate of drug

legalization and himself a contender for the Liberal Party presidential nomination, called for a national referendum on whether to dialogue with the drug traffickers, arguing that “if the government doesn’t have sufficient means to pursue the fight, this shouldn’t continue.” Instead of declaring war on the drug mafia, Samper is more interested in targeting Galán’s successor, candidate César Gaviria Trujillo, with whom Samper claims to have “diverging ideologies.”

The daily *El Espectador*, mouthpiece for the country’s committed anti-drug forces, editorialized Aug. 30 in response: “Dialogue is between counterposed ideologies in search of practical affinities and political solutions. It cannot be extended, and such extension would be a capitulation of the State, to crime and criminals.” A second editorial commentary, by the son of *El Espectador*’s murdered director, Guillermo Cano, argued that the drug traffickers, like the guerrillas, are “common criminals” and that the government therefore “has the duty to capture, pursue, judge and sentence. . . .” Cano went further, to insist that just as dialogue is morally and legally impossible with the mafia, so too is any kind of “commercial, professional, or social relations” with them.

The legalization argument goes hand-in-glove with the dialogue proposal. Since a military war on drugs “is doomed to failure,” according to legalization advocates like journalists Jorge Child and Antonio Caballero, a political accommodation with the mafia is necessary. That arrangement would leave the drug trade in the hands of the state, which could then impose price controls and a “controlled and educational legalization of its consumption and derivatives,” writes Child.

Project Democracy intervenes

Colombian opponents to an all-out military war against the drug mafia are playing out a scenario orchestrated by the “Project Democracy” forces in the U.S., the grouping sometimes called the secret or invisible government, which became notorious in the Iran-Contra scandal. Project Democracy’s assets and cothinkers have consistently argued that Ibero-American militaries are inherently corrupt and therefore cannot fight an anti-drug war. The solution, according to the 1986 annual report of the bankers’ club called the Inter-American Dialogue, is “selective legalization of drugs.” One of the Dialogue’s vice-chairmen is Rodrigo Botero Montoya, the finance minister under ex-President Alfonso López Michelsen, who helped legalize drug money laundering.

Such mouthpieces of Project Democracy as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Washington Times*, have devoted most of their coverage of the Colombia crisis to the alleged “unwinnability” of a military war on drugs, while playing up Ochoa’s dialogue offer. Writes the *New York Times* on Aug. 27, “Some Colombian as well as American experts on Latin America have raised doubts about the potential effectiveness of an essentially military campaign against drug traffickers.”

These newspapers use the arguments of Colombian Communist Party leaders, without identifying them as such. For example, the *Washington Times* of Aug. 28 interviews Antonio Suárez, leader of Colombia’s national judges’ union, who attacks the government’s anti-drug decrees as “increasing the climate of insecurity.” The judges’ union in Colombia is controlled by the Communist Party there.

On Aug. 30, the *Times* cites Clara López Obregón, who counterposes to military repression of the drug cartels her demand that the government “purge its own ranks—both the government and the military—of those who have been corrupted by the drug barons.” López is identified by the *Times* as a former Bogotá city council member and political activist. They neglect to note that she is an active Communist and the niece of former President and mafia ally Alfonso López Michelsen. López’s dirty relations to the mob are also covered up by the *New York Times*, which reports that secret talks with the drug mafia had been attempted in Colombia back in 1984, but never mentions that it was López who had met with the mob and had tried to sell the Betancur government on an amnesty for the traffickers.

The *Washington Post* interviews “labor leader” Gustavo Osorio, who suggests the murder of Galán was carried out by the military-allied “extreme right,” and not the drug traffickers, in order to “impede the democratic changes the country so urgently needs.” Osorio happens to be an executive member of the Colombian Communist Party.

What next?

Of immediate concern to those prosecuting the anti-drug war in Colombia is how to guarantee that the war will continue and expand. Although the extradition and expropriation measures, the raids, arrests, and confiscations were all decreed by the President as state of siege orders, the Supreme Court in Colombia has ultimate say-so over the constitutionality of the decrees. This is the same Supreme Court which, terrorized by the drug cartels in 1987, overturned the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty. A public debate has begun on how to prevent a possible Supreme Court nullification of the decrees from halting the war. Suggestions have ranged from holding a nationwide referendum to submitting the measures to Congress as legislation.

The daily *El Espectador* of Aug. 31 argues against a plebiscite, pointing out that by the time it is held the drug traffickers will have won. “Unofficially . . . it is said that the Congress would not dare to give approval to such [anti-drug] laws. They would rule, it is said, out of fear or cowardice, or because of evident links and economic dependence on the owners of ill-gotten monies. . . . We Colombians are at such a point in the war unleashed by the drug trade that it is of utmost and indispensable importance to know which side everyone is on. And in this way the nation could learn who is with it in the fight and who has defected to the other side of the barricades. This is the hour of decision.”

Pres. Virgilio Barco: 'Colombia is at war'

What follows is the abridged text of a televised address delivered on Aug. 25 by President Virgilio Barco to the Colombian nation:

Compatriots: One week after the vile assassination of Luis Carlos Galán, I want to share some words with you. . . . Galán was without doubt one of the most popular, youthful, and charismatic leaders of Colombia. He dedicated his life to public service and to political activity, understood in the best sense of the term. He dignified politics, honored his generation, and served his country with devotion. The truncating of his life has magnified the ideals which he represented.

A criminal act has certainly frustrated a hope. But it has renewed the strength and courage of all of Colombia to confront the enemies of the country. Galán spoke words at the burial of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, his companion in battle against the drug trade and for the country's renewal, which now with his death take on renewed force. Galán said at that time: "True homage to Rodrigo Lara's memory should be the continuation of his efforts. The fight against the drug trade cannot be pursued as if it were the task of a handful of idealists who die, while the others remain silent out of cowardice, lack of feeling, or complicity."

I want to make Galán's warnings at that time my own: He saw that Colombia, hear me well, is at war. This is not a simple rhetorical expression. Without a doubt, the country is at war against the drug traffickers and the terrorists. It is not only the government's war, but that of every Colombian. As Juan Manuel Galán said before the grave of his father, "The drug traffickers are not Colombian."

This is a fight that we must wage within and beyond our borders, with the cooperation of other countries. The common enemy is an international criminal organization, without country and without law, dedicated to drug trafficking in different parts of the world. Colombia is not the cause of the problem, but its worst victim.

Every drug consumer, in Colombia or abroad, and all those who aid and abet at any of the multiple levels of this business, should remember that they are aiding the assassins of Luis Carlos Galán and of all the others who have refused to capitulate. Silence about crime, and tolerance of the drug traffickers, is complicity, is opening the door to this foreign enemy which seeks to invade society, weaken democracy, corrupt the youth, usurp territory, and impose its regime of

terror and barbarity.

Let it be very clear that every Colombian must be a combatant for morality and for the fatherland.

Colombia wants concrete results. And we have obtained concrete results. Thousands of persons have been arrested, property of the narco-terrorists has been seized, including airplanes, helicopters. . . . Several suspects in the assassination of Luis Carlos Galán were captured. We will find the top leaders and bring them to justice. We are dismantling the support networks of the drug traffickers. Today we have received an offer of \$65 million in U.S. aid. These resources will go for equipment and weapons, indispensable for this fight.

[This is] a crusade which doubtless will produce still more blood, pain, and suffering but from which, I am certain, we will emerge victorious. . . . I say this because I see that the associations, the unions, the universities and the majority of the political forces are also committed to this fight. That is why we are getting concrete results.

There is something that the enemies of Colombia must get clear. I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to finish off that plague and to defend the rights of the millions of Colombians of good will, who wish to live in peace in our democracy. I am planning to speak before the General Assembly of the United Nations, at the end of September, to carry our message to the world community. Because only through concerted international action, and only if the use of narcotics is reduced in the consuming nations, can we definitively win this war.

Every one of us has a role to play, and a responsibility to fulfill in this national crusade. No Colombian can sit it out to await results, nor delegate his responsibility to others. Every one of us has the moral duty to give the authorities information and provide the aid the authorities require. I am inspired by the support that the government's actions have received. This is not a moment for disputes or political maneuvers. It is the hour for national unity. . . .

Let those who have declared war on Colombia take note that the Colombian people has taken on the challenge. Let them know that we will not retreat before any danger. . . . However effective may be their actions, the reaction to them will be greater. But we are ready to suffer adverse situations in a prolonged battle that began many years ago, and that can only end in one way: with the definitive defeat of the drug traffickers, who, with their punishable conduct, seek to destroy Colombia. . . .

The millions of outraged compatriots . . . who accompanied Luis Carlos Galán to his final resting place; the thousands of youth and students who marched to protest drug trafficking. . . . That is a an insurmountable barrier for the enemies of Colombia. . . . For our children, for our families, for Colombia, let us go forward. Solidarity expressed in deeds and actions is unbeatable.

All of us, united for Colombia, shall go onward!

Gaviria Trujillo: No dialogue with drug traffickers

On Aug. 24, the news director of Caracol television interviewed César Gaviria Trujillo, the presidential candidate of the Galán forces.

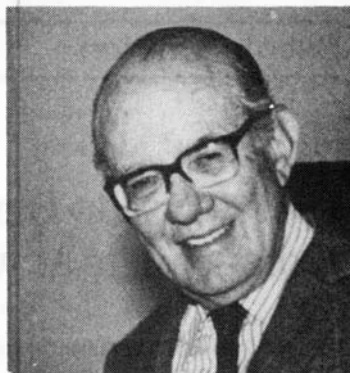
Q: What is your position on the issue of public order?

A: That violence cannot be tolerated. Regarding the guerrillas, we shouldn't even speak or negotiate with them without getting something in return, without their clear assumption of commitments to peace, to reconciliation, and to reintegration into civilian life. . . . I believe in political solutions and I believe that a society should preserve the possibility of finding political solutions. But an attitude of weakness with the guerrillas . . . is to give the guerrillas political breathing space. . . .

I think the worst error that could be committed in the country is to give the impression that political changes are undertaken here because they are demanded by violent means. I would say it is very important to stay within these principles, and if then the government, at any point, decides to speak with the guerrillas, it is because it has imposed conditions. Because talking with the guerrillas is a concession that civil society grants the guerrillas, and not vice versa. I, for example, have great reservations about those initiatives . . . to hold talks and think about negotiations which are not preceded by certain completely clear conditions on what is sought. The guerrillas should not be given political breathing space in exchange for nothing. That is an error that society is committing. If I were President, I would not commit such an error in any way.

Q: Is César Gaviria prepared to back the thesis of dialogue with the drug traffickers?

A: I will answer in a general way. In civilized society and in a democracy, there can be no dialogue except with respect to political crimes. Regarding organized crime, common crimes, there can be no dialogue. Because that would be to cheapen the concept of justice. We cannot continue to de-institutionalize justice. And the proposal that anyone who commits a crime, no matter how serious, has the right to evade application of the laws and the Constitution, and instead to establish a political dialogue with the government, is just a way of doing away with the institutions. That is the de-institutionalization of the country. It is to completely shatter the administration of justice along with any grounds for co-existence. . . . The path we must follow is to guarantee that the state has a monopoly on force. The path we must take is to achieve solidarity with the authorities. That the authorities recover respect, acceptance, so that they can fight against criminal activities.



Alfonso López Michelsen:
He made sure that
Colombia was "friendly
terrain" for the drug
traffickers.

Cui bono? The case of López Michelsen

by Valerie Rush

The drug mafia's assassination of favored presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán on Aug. 19 not only sent a bloody warning to Colombia's political classes to submit to the drug cartels "or else." It also boosted the political fortunes of its longstanding political asset and ally, former President Alfonso López Michelsen. Specifically, it helped to clear the decks for Lopez Michelsen's chosen presidential candidate, Liberal Party senator and drug legalization lobbyist Ernesto Samper Pizano.

López's 1974-78 presidency in Colombia oversaw the mushrooming of the drug trade, which quickly supplanted the traditional role of coffee as Colombia's principal export. These were the years of soaring drug consumption inside the United States, given impetus by the pro-drug policies of the Carter administration and by the successful government/army crackdown against drugs in Mexico which spurred traffickers to move their operations to friendlier terrain.

López made sure Colombia was that "friendly terrain" by:

- reforming the Colombian banking and financial system to allow for an orgy of drug-laundering and related speculative operations. By the early 1980s, the *financieras* set up by the López Michelsen reforms provided "a link between the classically conservative Colombian establishment and the subterranean parallel economy, drawing funds from contraband and drug smuggling. They flourish in an atmosphere of high interest rates, lax controls, and feverish speculation." This evaluation, according to the London-based *Latin America Weekly Reports*, July 9, 1982 issue.

- directing then Finance Minister Rodrigo Botero Montoya (currently, a vice chairman of the Inter-American Dia-