

Drug legalization push takes off in Colombia

by Valerie Rush

The May 31 discovery by anti-narcotics police of a cache of marijuana in the briefcase of central bank co-director Carlos Ossa Escobar has served as the opening wedge for a renewed offensive by corrupted elements of Colombia's political, financial, and media circles for the legalization of narcotics. In the two weeks following Ossa Escobar's "coming out," there has been a flood of pro-legalization diatribes in the press, as well as statements by innumerable legislators and political figures insisting that the time is ripe for reopening the debate on "legalization versus repression."

This new campaign to legalize drugs is not accidentally timed to coincide with the launching in earnest of Colombia's presidential campaign, with four out of six declared candidates pronouncing openly in favor of decriminalization. It is also timed to coincide with a global drug-legalization offensive by the London-based Andes-Amazon Foundation, which has already chosen Colombia as the site for one of three international legalization conferences over the coming 12 months.

Pothead or pusher?

Dr. Ossa Escobar was on his way to a meeting of Ibero-American central bankers in Caracas when police at the Bogotá airport uncovered his stash of marijuana. Claiming it was a gift received at a party which he had forgotten about, Ossa admitted that he was an occasional user, and offered the lame explanation that he was just a product of the '60s generation! He at first offered to resign his post, even going before the Congress to issue a public *mea culpa*, but when the legalization lobby leapt to his defense, he withdrew the offer and decided to "leave his fate" in the hands of the attorney general's office.

Notwithstanding his insistence that he opposes drug legalization, Ossa Escobar's connections, especially in recent years, suggest that the impetus his case has given the legalization lobby may be more than incidental.

Carlos Ossa Escobar is not just a banker. For nearly a decade, he was head of Colombia's oligarchic Society of Agriculturists (SAC). He was also a "peace" adviser to the narco-terrorist-besieged Barco administration (1986-90), in whose name he undertook negotiations with the narco-terrorist M-19 guerrillas, which eventually led to their legalization and incorporation into the succeeding Gaviria government.

Not surprisingly, Ossa Escobar was elected in 1990 to the mafia-dominated Constituent Assembly as part of the M-19 delegate slate. The M-19 has been an emphatic advocate of drug legalization for years.

Many of the media mouthpieces of the old legalization lobby got a new lease on life with the surfacing of the Ossa case. *El Espectador* journalist María Jimena Duzán happily reported that legalization, no longer "taboo" in the consumer countries, was once again on the table. She and a fellow journalist conducted a televised poll of numerous presidential candidates, who came out overwhelmingly in favor of drug legalization.

El Tiempo editor Enrique Santos Calderón says that he too is "a product of the '60s" and was as immersed in marijuana as U.S. President Bill Clinton and Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González. Santos argues that humanity's search for "artificial paradises" and "self-stimulation" has gone on since time immemorial, and that treating drug consumption as a legal offense "on the eve of the 21st century" is an absurdity.

Leftist columnist Jorge Child, writing in *El Espectador*, acknowledges that the Ossa case helps to revive the legalization issue, and argues that legalizing drugs will enable the population to return to "a balanced discussion of the real social and cultural problems of the country. Obsession with the drug trade suspiciously tilted this public discussion," Child complains.

"Conservative" Sen. Alvaro Gómez Hurtado argues in favor of legalizing the drug trade, but not consumption, while M-19 Sen. Pedro Bonnet and several indigenous senators urge the Senate to express its gratitude to Ossa Escobar for courageously opening up the debate.

Global debate launched

The resurgence in Colombia of the same legalization campaign which failed so miserably in the 1970s is not an isolated occurrence. Calls for legalizing drugs are suddenly surfacing in Mexico, the United States, England, and elsewhere. Therefore, it is not surprising that the so-called Andes-Amazon Foundation, whose agenda is for global drug legalization, should appear on the scene. Founded and registered in London, England in 1990, the foundation claims to be committed to finding "lasting solutions to the serious and spreading social conflicts, old and new, of the Andean countries." It is sponsoring a series of three international conferences over the next 12 months for the purpose, in its words, of winning humanity's "universal blessing" for drug legalization.

The first forum will be in London in November, the second will be held in the United States next February, and the third in Bogotá next May. Invited to the forum will be such "prestigious" publications as the London *Economist*, Spain's *Cambio 16*, the French daily *Le Monde*, and the *Washington Post*. Panelists will reportedly include Milton Friedman and Henry Kissinger.