

## Andean Report by Javier Almario

### Before Samper there was Bush

*Colombia's narco-President-elect has George Bush and Oliver North to thank for his rise to power.*

**E**rnesto Samper Pizano would never have won the June 19 presidential elections in Colombia if George Bush hadn't sabotaged the capture of the Colombian drug lords, including Cali Cartel kingpin Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, back in 1985. It is Rodríguez Orejuela, a.k.a. "The Chessplayer," who, according to recently surfaced tape recordings, gave several million dollars to Samper's presidential campaign, enabling him to defeat rival Andrés Pastrana by less than 2% of the vote.

In fact, it was George Bush, elect U.S. vice president in 1980, who together with Lt. Col. Oliver North, assumed control of the United States' official—and unofficial—policy toward Central America. Part of that policy was to organize and finance the Nicaraguan Contra rebels.

Given that it was illegal to use official government funds to finance the Contras, Bush and North determined to arm them by clandestine means. They organized a group of CIA pilots to transport the weapons, and made a pact with the Colombian drug traffickers to provide the financing.

But one of the pilots, Barry Seal, who used his craft to transport weapons from the United States to Nicaragua, and drugs from Colombia to the United States, was also an informant for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). In 1985, the DEA had organized a plan to capture all of Colombia's top drug lords in one bust: Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, Jorge Luis Ochoa, Pablo Escobar Gaviria, and

Carlos Lehder.

Thanks to information provided by Seal, the DEA knew that all the cartel chieftains would be together in one place, celebrating the successful delivery of a major cocaine shipment to the United States. The DEA would simply have to be at a certain small island in Central America at the right time, snag the whole crew, and bring them to the United States for trial. At that time, the drug traffickers could not hold their festivities in Colombia because President Belisario Betancur was hot on their trail in the aftermath of the mafia assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla.

But, as it turned out, the traffickers were not only dealing with Bush and the CIA, but also with various high-level officials in the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Hoping to convince the U.S. Congress to finally approve an *official* budget for the Contras, Bush and North decided to reveal the traffickers' relations with the Sandinista government. That would mean, of course, revealing that Seal was the DEA's informant.

And so, on July 17, 1985, just three days before the DEA capture operation was to be launched, North leaked his story to the press. The *Washington Times* published an article revealing that the U.S. government had photographic and other evidence proving the Sandinista government's involvement in the drug trade.

The capture of the cartel bosses was thus frustrated thanks to Bush and North. Barry Seal, the only U.S. wit-

ness against the Colombian traffickers, was assassinated in February 1986 after being stripped of government protection. A federal judge, unbelievably and inexplicably, made public his parole conditions, thereby setting him up for assassination. Moreover, Seal knew the details of how Bush and North were financing the Contras with drug money.

In 1990, the Colombian daily *El Espectador* published two articles which presented the story as an example of how in the United States, as in Colombia, there was corruption and lack of coordination among law enforcement agencies.

One cannot begin to guess how many Colombian lives would have been saved had the DEA succeeded in dismantling the cartels' leadership in 1985. Did Bush and North save the drug lords simply to promote the Contras, or was saving them part of their deal with the traffickers? Or, more likely, did Bush and North deliberately sabotage the DEA operation in order to prevent a trial of the cartel chieftains at which their involvement in the Contra drugs and weapons pipeline would most certainly have come out?

Another question is whether the April 30, 1984 assassination of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla was a joint action by Bush, his CIA agents, and the drug traffickers, given that the tenacious justice minister was starting to put Bush's cartel buddies in an uncomfortable spotlight. And could the same perhaps be said regarding the September 1989 assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán? The weapons used to murder Galán later turned out to have been financed by CIA cut-outs for a Panamanian "Contra" force against Panama's Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. How they got into the hands of Colombian cartel assassins remains to be clarified.