

# Colombia's dope trade: from military defeat to political victory

by José Restrepo

---

## **Mi Guerra en Medellín**

by Col. Antonio Bahamón Dussán  
Intermedio Editores, Santafé de Bogotá,  
Colombia, 1991

---

The November 1991 release of the book *Mi Guerra en Medellín* (*My War in Medellín*), by retired Army Col. Antonio Bahamón Dussán, caused an immediate sensation in Colombia, turning it into a bestseller almost overnight. The book is more than just a personal account by the former second-in-command of the Medellín-based Fourth Army Brigade of 18 months of violent combat against the most powerful drug cartel in the world. It is also a dramatic indictment of the César Gaviria government for its betrayal of the Colombian Armed Forces, and of the nation, through an ignominious pact with the enemy.

The book's impact stems from the fact that the denunciations come from a highly respected and battle-tested military professional, who resigned from the Army rather than suffer the degradation, as he put it, of going "from persecutor to bodyguard" of the Medellín cocaine cartel. Bahamón and his family were later forced to flee the country.

The book's appearance also coincided with a public accusation of treason against President Gaviria by former Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González. The one lent weight to the other and sent shockwaves through the Colombian political elite.

Colonel Bahamón opens his book: "I dedicate this book to the soldiers, policemen, judges, and journalists killed in a war waged honorably in the streets of Medellín and in the mountains of Antioquia, but later quietly lost in the labyrinths of politics."

### **'Blood spilt in vain'**

"It is June 19, 1991. At 11 a.m., [cartel chieftain] Pablo Escobar Gaviria hands himself in to the Medellín Office of Criminal Instruction. One hour later, the National Constit-

uent Assembly approves the non-extradition of Colombians, by a vote of 51-13. The two events go hand-in-hand, the first the consequence of the second. At that moment, I knew that the war against narco-terrorism was lost, and that the sweat and blood of police and soldiers had been spilt in vain."

Colonel Bahamón reveals that, through a front, Escobar had first purchased the land in his hometown where his "manor jail" now sits, along with 11 surrounding properties, well in advance of his June 19 "surrender." The town of Envigado, owned lock, stock, and barrel by Escobar, constructed an ostensible drug rehabilitation center on the site, and following Escobar's "surrender," sold it to the Gaviria government for "conversion" into a jail for the cartel boss and his lieutenants.

Not surprisingly, writes Bahamón, the so-called drug rehabilitation center had been constructed with the five "trademark characteristics" of all of Escobar's hideouts: "an excellent observation field, a football field, an artificial waterfall for bathing after sports, a lake, and two layers of electric fencing to allow for the vigilance of watch-dogs."

Bahamón not only details how the so-called surrender of the cartel chieftains had been prepared long before the negotiated plea-bargain with the Gaviria government, but how the role of the Armed Forces had been degraded in the process. He writes that Escobar had imposed a three-layer security system for his "manor jail," as one of the conditions of his surrender. The first layer of security guards was hand-picked by Envigado's mayor from a list submitted by Escobar. At least 11 of the 20 guards later turned out to have criminal records. The second layer was made up of prison guards, and the third by troops from Bahamón's own Fourth Brigade.

Bahamón wrote: "It is unusual in the Army for a commander to explain his orders. In this case, however, he had to do so. Pablo Escobar's security was now the number-one priority of the Fourth Brigade. This priority, he told us, had been set by the President of the Republic." Thus, for the Fourth Army Brigade, "the same that had pursued Pablo Escobar on government orders for several years . . . the defense of Pablo Escobar and his group of Extraditables was

now our first order of business. We had gone from soldiers to jailers.”

Jailers of what?

Bahamón offers the reader a glimpse of the horror that the drug cartels represent for the country. He describes, from first-hand knowledge, how cartel assassins turned to kidnaping and murdering Colombia’s abandoned children, selling their body parts on the international markets: “On Oct. 20 [1990], in a house in the El Prado barrio, an air-conditioned basement was discovered, especially outfitted with surgical equipment and clinic receptacles which apparently were a part of that macabre trade. The instruments and surgical tables were placed right next to the microwave ovens used to dry the cocaine chlorhydrate.”

### Fraud of the ‘peace negotiations’

Bahamón’s book documents in detail the inspiring efforts of the Fourth Army Brigade to accomplish in the 18 months prior to Escobar’s surrender what the political elites had refused to do since the cartel assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla in April 1984: namely, the identification and destruction of the security, intelligence, financial, and trafficking networks of the Medellín Cartel. Despite infiltration by mafia informants and brutal terrorist counterattacks by the enemy which claimed countless victims among its ranks, the Fourth Brigade chalked up one success after another and was well on its way to military victory against Escobar’s cartel.

Enter the “Notables,” a group of prominent political figures who began the negotiations with Escobar’s “Extraditables” that led to the government’s eventual surrender. The negotiating process brought about several moments of “peace” in the war with the cartel, according to Bahamón: “Those periods were not prolonged, as they served merely to enable the drug trade to make a show of good faith which, in essence, was nothing more than a change in pressure tactics to achieve a ban on extradition [to the U.S.] and the return of their confiscated properties.”

Bahamón characterizes these “peace negotiations” with the traffickers as submission to narco-terrorist blackmail, and takes Colombia’s political class to task for lacking “the spiritual dimension to see their friends and family members fall” in battle. And yet, for all the author’s awareness of the role the “Notables” played in derailing the war on drugs, he misses a crucial point: namely, that the Notables—prominently headed by former President Alfonso López Michelsen—were not *submitting* to the cartel out of cowardice or lack of moral fiber. They are, rather, the *godfathers* of the Colombian dope trade, the *architects* of the policy of Colombia’s surrender to Dope, Inc.

For example, it was made known during the period of the war that his Fourth Brigade had acquired a tape recording in which López is heard advising Escobar’s lawyer Guido Parra on how best to formulate cartel negotiating positions, so as

to permit the most favorable response by the Notables and, eventually, by the Gaviria government itself.

Colonel Bahamón requested retirement from the Colombian Army, after he was scapegoated by the government for its pact with Escobar. A scandal arose when Bahamón, in his reluctant capacity as jailer, was obliged to authorize the visit of Colombian soccer star René Higuita to Escobar, apparently to receive the mafia godfather’s blessing before an international sports competition. When the story hit the press, the embarrassed Gaviria government ordered military authorities to take the heat. Bahamón was jailed for five days. For him, it was the last straw.

### A crazy war

The Extraditables are still threatening, bribing, and assassinating their enemies, and their iron control in cities like Medellín is maintained through the so-called popular militias—organized death squads made up of the mafia’s hired assassins in combination with narco-terrorist forces such as the FARC, EPL, and M-19. The drug lords sit comfortably and securely in their “manor jails,” under Army protection.

Bahamón bitterly wrote: “With the surrender of the mafia chieftains, [military] officials and soldiers were now providing security to the Ochoa brothers in Itagui jail, and to Escobar and his group in the Envigado jail. Paradox of this crazy war: Now their security is being paid for by the state. They are able to save vast sums that were until now spent in maintaining an army of bodyguards. . . . Obviously these are no longer needed, because the Colombian Army, always victorious, never vanquished, and tried in a thousand battles, has gone from persecutor to bodyguard, by the force of circumstances and as the result of a sick obsession to achieve a peace we didn’t deserve.”

The Medellín Cartel “trials,” scheduled for sometime this year, will be conducted in secret and are expected to result in sentences of five years or less. To all appearances, the Gaviria government is fully collaborating in the cartel’s legal defense. Justice Minister Fernando Carrillo has just been sent to the United States to gather evidence from the Drug Enforcement Administration and Justice Department against Escobar. While the U.S. evidence is purportedly required to bolster the government’s legal case against Escobar, it is widely acknowledged that, once used—however ineffectively—in a Colombian court, Escobar will be immune from future U.S. prosecution by the U.S. constitutional provision against double jeopardy.

Bahamón, like most Colombian citizens, has little hope that justice will be done in a court system where the law of “the bullet or the bribe” has long held sway. Through its plea-bargain deal with the government, writes Bahamón, “narco-terrorism had won the penultimate battle. Now, protected day and night by our troops, there remains only the battle of the courts.”