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Bruce M. Bagley

COLOMBIA AND THE WAR ON DRUGS

Aside from traffickers in the United States, Colombians earn more from the drug trade than do any other nationality of the western hemisphere. During the 1980s 70 to 80 percent of the refined cocaine and 50 to 60 percent of the marijuana available in the U.S. market have come from Colombia. Colombia also ranks as the world's largest supplier of quaaludes, and there are indications that in the mid-1980s Colombian drug traffickers began experiments with opium cultivation as well. Moreover, Colombian criminal organizations have become involved in virtually every aspect of the narcotics trade, from financing drug plantations and laboratories in Colombia and other South American countries, through smuggling operations, to distribution networks at both the wholesale and street levels in the United States, Canada and Europe.

The infamous Medellín cartel alone is reputed to earn some US\$2 billion to \$4 billion a year and to rival many Fortune 500 companies in terms of its global reach. Including the entire spectrum of drug exports, probably \$2.5–3 billion a year in profits are repatriated to Colombia; drugs now rank above coffee (\$2–2.5 billion) as the country's principal foreign exchange earner.

Colombia's emergence as a key source and trafficking country has understandably attracted a great deal of attention from U.S. policymakers, law enforcement officials and journalists over the last decade. Indeed, in the minds of most Americans, Colombia is now essentially synonymous with drug trafficking. In view of the country's sullied reputation, the Colombian government's obvious failure to rein in the Colombian *narcotraficantes* and the growing concern in the United States about the drug problem reflected in the Reagan Administration's "war on drugs," Colombia has inevitably come under increas-

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ing pressure from Washington to act more forcefully against drug production and trafficking within its borders.

Washington's approach to the drug problem has focused on eliminating drugs at the source of production and refinement or seizing them before they reach American shores. The specific international policies it has promoted in Colombia, as in the rest of Latin America and the Third World, include programs of eradication, crop substitution, interdiction and enhanced law enforcement.

Given the current intensity of anti-drug sentiments in the United States and the growing political pressure to "do something" about the drug plague, Washington's emphasis on "supply-side" solutions in Colombia and elsewhere seems logical from a U.S. perspective. But often lacking in U.S. discussions is an awareness that Colombia and other Latin American countries confront equally dire drug-related problems themselves. These countries see the need to balance supply-side efforts with greater emphasis on the demand side in the United States if they are ever to make headway against drug traffic. This article focuses on the domestic implications of the drug problem in Colombia in an effort to clarify why many Colombians and Latin Americans have come to this conclusion and what it implies for the war on drugs.

II

Colombia is a country of contradictions. On the one hand, it ranks as the most economically prosperous nation in Latin America during the 1980s. Its economy grew by 5.5 percent in 1987, and is expected to grow by 4.5 percent in 1988. It has achieved real economic growth every year since 1980, and unlike virtually all its regional neighbors, not once in the 1980s has Colombia fallen behind on debt service payments or sought to renegotiate its \$15.7-billion debt.

On the other hand, despite its relative economic success Colombia is one of the most violent countries in the hemisphere, perhaps in the world. In 1987 there were some 16,200 homicides in Colombia, a 15-percent rise over 1986. In fact, the current murder rate has been estimated by the Colombian government to be higher than it was during the peak years of *la violencia*—the undeclared civil war of 1948–58 between the dominant Liberal and Conservative parties in which 200,000 people died. Murder is the principal cause of death of Colom-

bian males aged 15 to 44 and the second leading cause of death among all age groups.

Colombia's rising tide of violence is in part politically motivated. Since its return to civilian rule in 1958 after four years under the military regime of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, Colombia's political system has been formally democratic. Nonetheless, the highly restrictive political procedures adopted under the bipartisan National Front agreement effectively limited participation in the system to the dominant Liberal and Conservative party elites, while denying access to other social forces created by rapid economic modernization. Colombia, with one of the most skewed patterns of income distribution in Latin America, has been plagued for decades by increasingly violent guerrilla warfare. It harbors the oldest Marxist guerrilla organization in the hemisphere, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). Colombia is also home to at least eight other guerrilla organizations, including the non-Marxist 19th of April Movement (M-19). In all, there are some 12,000 to 15,000 guerrilla combatants currently active in Colombia.

Left-wing violence has in turn spawned a wave of violence from the right. During the 1980s paramilitary groups and right-wing death squads have proliferated in Colombia; the government recently identified 138 such organizations. Their targets have been most frequently peasant and labor union leaders, intellectuals, journalists and leftists suspected of collaboration with the guerrillas. At least some of these death squads have included active or retired military and police personnel in their ranks, conjuring up visions of the "Salvadorization" or "Argentinization" of Colombia.

Despite record levels of political murders in recent years, however, less than ten percent of Colombia's homicides are politically motivated. Out of its history of bitter civil wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the inherited hatreds that developed between the Liberal and Conservative parties, Colombia evolved a deeply ingrained culture of partisan violence that sets it apart from other Latin American republics. This tradition of violence has been compounded by rapid social change, extensive poverty and high unemployment, all of which have fostered high rates of crime. Efforts to combat crime are hampered by the corruption and inefficiency of the national police and judiciary, and by the limited presence (or total absence) of government institutions in large areas of the national territory.

While Colombia has long been accustomed to extraordinarily high levels of violence, the rise of organized drug mafias in the country in the late 1970s provoked a qualitative change in the violence. Relying on paid assassins, locally known as *sicarios*, Colombia's drug lords have not only fought among themselves but also waged a systematic campaign of murder and intimidation against government authorities seeking their extradition to the United States. In the last three years alone, Colombia's drug bosses have been responsible for the assassination of one minister of justice (and an attempt on the life of a former justice minister serving as Colombia's ambassador to Hungary), one attorney general, more than 50 judges, at least a dozen journalists, and more than 400 police and military personnel. They have effectively paralyzed the country's system of justice, driven scores of prominent Colombians out of the country and degraded the lives of those who stay. Murder has become a regular source of income for many.

The most recent kidnapping to dominate Colombian headlines was that of Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, the Conservative Party's presidential candidate in 1986 and a prominent newspaper editor. In the wake of his abduction on May 29, 1988, former President Misael Pastrana Borrero declared that "this country is in flames." He added, "Last year I said we were on the verge of the abyss. Today, I think we are in the abyss."¹

III

While Colombia's emergence as a preeminent drug-trafficking country in the last 15 years has been nothing short of meteoric, the roots of its involvement with drugs lie much further back in history. Colombia's indigenous people have grown and chewed coca for thousands of years. Marijuana cultivation is a more recent phenomenon; it arrived in Colombia via Panama during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Colombian marijuana production mushroomed in the middle and late 1960s as a result of growing U.S. demand. By the early 1970s Colombians had emerged as major U.S. suppliers, earning at least \$1 billion annually, although Mexican traffickers remained dominant. The epicenter of marijuana production in the hemisphere shifted to Colombia in the 1970s when

¹ Andres Oppenheimer, "Rising Violence Rips Colombia," *The Miami Herald*, June 12, 1988, p. 1A.

the United States tightened up drug enforcement along the U.S.-Mexican border and when Mexico launched a major drive against its domestic producers in 1975. Colombia is ideally located for smuggling large amounts across the Caribbean into the United States. The Colombian state was relatively weak and corruptible, while Colombian terrain afforded optimal conditions for cultivation.

By the end of the 1970s Colombia accounted for some 70 percent of the marijuana reaching the United States from abroad. Between 30,000 and 50,000 small farmers along Colombia's Atlantic coast came to depend directly on marijuana cultivation for their livelihood, while at least another 50,000 (seasonal pickers, transporters, guards, bankers, and such) made some part of their living from it.

The trade proved to be an important source of new wealth for the Atlantic coast, as the newly rich *narcotraficantes* went on building sprees, imported Mercedes cars, bought protection from local judges, politicians and customs agents, and married their children into Colombia's oligarchical families. But the boom was by no means an unmixed blessing. The coast's Guajira Peninsula, a center of contraband smuggling since colonial times, experienced a dramatic upsurge in drug-related violence and a disintegration of police and judicial institutions through corruption and bribery. Many legitimate businesses were bought up by mafiosos looking for ways to launder their illicit profits.

IV

The Colombian cocaine trade followed in the footsteps of the marijuana traffickers. In the late 1960s a relatively small cocaine-smuggling network had developed largely under the control of exile Cuban criminal organizations based in Miami. Coca was cultivated in small plots by Paez Indians in southwestern Colombia and the Western Cordillera. Smuggling was primarily carried out by individual carriers or "mules" who transported a few kilograms at a time using commercial airlines. In 1970 U.S. Customs seized a mere 100 kilos of cocaine from Colombia. As the U.S. demand for cocaine expanded rapidly in the early 1970s, the limited coca supply grown in Colombia was augmented with coca paste imported from Bolivia and Peru and refined in Colombia's "kitchen laboratories."

In 1974 Carlos Lehder Rivas—who would subsequently emerge as a drug kingpin—was a 25-year-old small-time crim-

inal serving time in a U.S. prison for marijuana smuggling and car theft. While in prison he dreamed of replacing the “mules” with private airplanes capable of carrying hundreds of kilos of cocaine in a single load. After he got out of jail in 1976 he began to work with cocaine-smuggling networks in the Colombian city of Medellín to put his revolutionary ideas into practice. By 1977 he, along with Jorge Luis Ochoa—another future cocaine baron, had effectively transformed the transportation system into huge airlift operations.

By late 1977 the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was already referring to a “Medellín Trafficking Syndicate” in testimony before Congress:

Cocaine traffic is dominated by disciplined syndicates whose overall structure is superior to any other organizations in South America. Some groups operate as underworld multinational corporations, vertically integrated from the clandestine laboratories in Colombia to the stateside distributors. As a result, Colombia has developed a large and aggressive criminal underworld which dominates the entire South American trafficking organization.²

After establishing their dominance on the South American side of the market, in 1978–79 the Medellín drug bosses turned their attention to gaining control of wholesale distribution in the United States. Thus began a period of violence in South Florida known as “the cocaine wars.” It peaked in 1981 with a reported 101 drug-related murders. Because the biggest profits were made in the United States, not South America, the various Colombian gangs involved in the trade fought bitterly among themselves for control of the Miami-based wholesale market. In the process, they systematically exterminated the Cuban-Americans and others who were involved in the trade on the U.S. side. By eliminating these middlemen and installing their own, the Colombians not only improved their profit margins, but also disposed of many Cuban informants who had ties with the CIA and other U.S. law enforcement agencies, thereby lowering their risks.

By reinvesting their profits, the Colombians expanded and streamlined production in Colombia and farther south in the Andes. They also purchased bigger and better airplanes and

² Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, “South American Study Mission, August 9–23, 1977.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, SNAC-95-1-13, 1977, p. 9.

boats for transporting drugs, more sophisticated electronic communications devices and radar to escape detection, and paid huge bribes to law enforcement officials in both Colombia and the United States for protection.

The DEA estimated that from 14 to 19 metric tons of cocaine were smuggled into the United States in 1976. By 1982 the DEA estimated that upwards of 45 metric tons of cocaine a year were being imported into the U.S. market. The Medellín bosses became fabulously wealthy, leading *Forbes* magazine to begin listing Medellín drug barons like Jorge Ochoa and Pablo Escobar among the richest men in the world. Although impossible to determine precisely, revenues derived by Colombia from marijuana and cocaine were about \$1.5 billion in 1980. By 1985 the figure had risen to between \$2.5 billion and \$3 billion annually, where it remains today.

By the early 1980s the cocaine trade was eclipsing the marijuana traffic in terms of wealth and power. The distinction between the two enterprises, largely controlled by different groups, lies in the difference between farming and industry. Marijuana is essentially a labor-intensive process; the employment and income multiplier effects are therefore more widely distributed. Cocaine requires fewer people, more capital and at least an incipient industrial process relying on imported chemicals. It demands financial skills to handle the much larger profits, which are heavily concentrated in a few hands.³ Cocaine syndicates tend to be more vertically integrated, more hierarchical and more violent.

The Colombian cocaine industry does not have the same well-defined hierarchical structure that characterizes organized crime in countries like the United States. In a sense, the cartel has made the transition from infancy to adolescence, but has not yet reached full maturity as a criminal organization.

A key date in the evolution of the cartel was November 12, 1981, when, after M-19 guerrillas kidnapped his daughter and demanded \$1 million in ransom, Jorge Luis Ochoa called a meeting of the leading drug traffickers at his family's restaurant, La Margarita, on the outskirts of Medellín. The traffickers, recognizing that their wealth made them vulnerable to extortion, each reportedly contributed \$7.5 million to form an organization called "Death to the Kidnappers" (MAS), dedi-

³ Alan Riding, "Shaken Colombia Acts at Last on Drugs," *The New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1984, p. A16.

cated to ending kidnappings in Colombia. Their decision to cooperate to protect themselves from guerrilla kidnappings represented the definitive end to the cocaine wars and the effective beginning of what today is known as the Medellín cartel.

In addition to forming MAS, the traffickers at La Margarita agreed to build and operate collectively a giant cocaine laboratory complex on the Yarí River in the department of Caquetá. An informal division of labor among the drug kingpins began to take shape. Pablo Escobar specialized in security for the organization; he is reputed to have employed some 200 gunmen and created two schools for training assassins. Jorge Luis Ochoa, and his brothers Juan David and Fabio, took responsibility for the distribution networks in Florida and California. Other trafficking groups based in the city of Cali, run by Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela and José Santacruz Londoño, apparently controlled distribution in New York and Houston. Carlos Lehder assumed responsibility for air transport into the United States, often using the Bahamas' Norman Cay as a stopover.

Although the term has stuck, a number of experts argue that the Medellín group does not technically qualify as a cartel. They point to the relatively loose internal structure of the Medellín group and the presence of other independent organizations. Moreover, the group has not been able to control the supply effectively or fix prices at inflated levels; the wholesale price for cocaine dropped from \$60,000 per kilo in 1980 to less than \$10,000 in 1987.

Already wielding enormous economic power, the Medellín traffickers reached out for a larger share of political power. Several, such as Lehder, bought interests in local radio stations and newspapers. Others, such as Pablo Escobar, sought to create a following in the cities by handing out cash to the poor, building low-income housing in the slums, or purchasing sports teams and constructing sports stadiums. A number contributed to local political campaigns. Indeed, there are persistent rumors that congressional and even presidential campaigns in the 1980s, especially in 1982, received financial backing from the drug lords. Lehder went so far as to create a political party and to publicize his political ideology (a hybrid of Colombian and Latin American nationalism, leavened with elements of fascism) through his newspaper, *Quindío Libre*. In 1982 Escobar was elected as an alternate congressman on a Liberal Party

slate in his home department of Antioquia. In 1982–83 the Medellín group also financed a nationwide publicity campaign to arouse nationalist sentiment against the 1979 U.S.-Colombian Extradition Treaty.

Despite these political activities, most observers do not believe that the Colombian traffickers have political goals beyond protecting their profits and themselves from prosecution in Colombia or extradition to the United States. Their campaign contributions were designed to buy them political protection and compliant judges, police and customs officials. The MAS assassinations were intended to protect them and their families from leftist rebel kidnappings. Their systematic attacks on the judicial system since 1983 have been geared toward preventing the Colombian government from carrying out the extradition treaty with the United States.

v

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s successive Colombian governments did little to stop drug trafficking. As one U.S. official put it: “You get lip service support from the government on narcotics matters but nothing else.”⁴ Before 1973 the U.S. government provided Misael Pastrana’s Administration (1970–74) with only token assistance for narcotics control: six spare vehicles and some handcuffs, with a total value of approximately \$45,000. In 1973 the U.S. government did respond positively to a Colombian request for training, spending some \$6 million over four years to train 600 Colombian law enforcement officials.

Despite this training and some modest Colombian expenditures on enforcement, responsibilities among Colombian agencies remained unclear and overlapping, leading to constant friction, bureaucratic turf battles and general inefficiency. Moreover, every agency was understaffed, poorly trained and underpaid, leaving them vulnerable to systematic bribery and corruption from the traffickers. Although Pastrana’s rhetoric was cooperative, it did not yield practical results.

When President Alfonso López Michelsen (1974–78) took office, he found Colombia’s anti-drug efforts in complete disarray, with high-level corruption pervading enforcement agen-

⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, Foreign Affairs Committee, “The World Narcotics Problem: The Latin American Perspective.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 91-5710, 1973, p. 24.

cies, especially the security police, the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS). He quietly fired the head of DAS, General Luis Ordóñez Valderrama, and replaced him with General José Matallana, a highly respected army officer. Matallana purged over half of the top DAS officials and even arrested some. Despite these efforts, the linkages between the Colombian security forces and the drug traffickers remained essentially intact throughout the López presidency. In 1975 the DAS even became involved in shoot-outs against other Colombian anti-narcotics units.

In 1977, yielding to insistent U.S. pressure, President López announced an expanded campaign against cocaine traffic, assigning anti-narcotics units of the national police to seaports and international airports. He also proposed reorganizing the judicial police into an elite, highly paid and centralized narcotics force with an annual budget of \$15 million. The Carter Administration promised increased resources, including three helicopters and other equipment worth \$3.7 million. Then a U.S. congressional fact-finding mission to Colombia learned that the helicopters were too small to be used effectively in the crop eradication program for which they were earmarked. The mission also expressed concern that so few aircraft would not provide sufficient mobility for law enforcement personnel and questioned the value of employing outmoded conventional aircraft to combat the highly sophisticated equipment used by the traffickers.⁵

President Julio César Turbay Ayala took office in 1978. In his inaugural address he declared war on the traffickers and promised that his administration would restore law and order in Colombia. Three months after taking office, he used his state-of-siege powers to crack down on drug traffickers and sent the military into the Guajira Peninsula. Supported by the navy and air force, the army imposed a blockade on the Guajira for almost two years, seizing over 6,000 tons of marijuana and nearly 300 aircraft and boats.

The U.S. government enthusiastically embraced President Turbay's war on drugs in Colombia. When President Turbay agreed in 1979 to a U.S.-Colombian extradition treaty that would permit Colombian traffickers accused of crimes in the United States to be extradited and tried in the U.S. courts, the U.S. ambassador, Diego C. Asencio, successfully petitioned

⁵ *Ibid.*

Washington for \$16 million in additional assistance for Colombia, out of the total \$42 million earmarked for worldwide narcotics interdiction. This figure represented a tripling of the anti-narcotics aid that the United States had provided to Colombia from 1970 through 1977.

The U.S. government also provided substantial support for Colombia's military interdiction campaign, for the reorganization and strengthening of the Colombian Customs Service and for the National Police. Much to the dismay of the U.S. State Department and Colombian officials, however, Congress subsequently amended the law, effectively barring the use of U.S. funds for such items as airborne radar, planes and communications equipment because it feared that they would be used for military rather than drug enforcement purposes. The Colombians argued that such restrictions would severely hamper their anti-drug operations.

U.S. anti-drug policy suffered another important setback when the Colombian army announced in March 1980 that it was abandoning its U.S.-assisted efforts to curb marijuana shipments from the Guajira region. Many Colombians felt that the campaign had failed to meet its goals and had hurt Colombia's economic interests. The army commanders had become increasingly leery that the army would be corrupted, as the police had been, by the estimated \$110 million in protection monies disbursed annually by the traffickers. Also, the Colombian military needed the manpower elsewhere to check an upsurge in guerrilla activity that occurred in 1978-80.

The Colombian experience with militarization of the Guajira provides important insights into the Colombian trafficking problem. First, the army's campaign did put a serious dent in the marijuana trade in the region, even though it did not halt it altogether. Second, the costs to the local population were high and deeply resented. Third, to the extent that enforcement efforts in the Guajira were successful, they tended merely to displace drug cultivation and transport activities to other parts of the country, such as the Eastern Plains and the Amazonian jungle, rather than eliminating them. Fourth, the Colombian military was susceptible to drug corruption. Fifth, once the military withdrew, the traffickers proved quickly able to reestablish activities. Sixth, because supply-side eradication and interdiction campaigns were not coupled with parallel demand reduction programs, there was little (if any) hope of achieving a permanent cessation of drug trafficking.

Recognizing this last point as elemental, President Turbay himself noted: "Colombians are not corrupting Americans. You are corrupting us. If you abandon illegal drugs, the traffic will disappear."⁶

VI

President Belisario Betancur Cuartas came to office in 1982 with considerable reservations about conducting the type of war on drugs favored by Washington. He refused on nationalist grounds to honor the extradition treaty signed by Turbay, preferring to try Colombian traffickers in Colombian courts.

While his uncooperative attitude, especially with regard to extradition, outraged Washington, Betancur did take measures against the increasingly powerful Colombian drug lords. To head the Justice Ministry, he appointed Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, who actively went after the traffickers in cooperation with U.S. narcotics agents. On March 10, 1984, Colombian police and DEA officials jointly raided and destroyed the Medellín cartel's huge cocaine-refining complex on the Yari River. In this raid they seized 27,500 pounds of cocaine with an estimated street value of \$1.2 billion, the largest cocaine bust on record. U.S. officials were jubilant, viewing it as a major blow against the cartel.

In retaliation, the Medellín kingpins put out a contract on Minister Lara. Despite his own increased security measures and a bulletproof vest given to him in appreciation of his efforts by U.S. Ambassador Lewis Tambs, he was assassinated in Bogotá on April 30, 1984, by a cartel hitman. Lara's death sent shock waves through Colombian society and galvanized the Betancur government. The president proclaimed a "war without quarter" against the traffickers and invoked state-of-siege powers that quickly produced an unprecedented wave of arrests, confiscations of property and destruction of laboratories. While welcomed in Washington, this massive response also confirmed U.S. officials' suspicions that Colombian authorities had considerable intelligence on the drug smugglers but simply lacked the will to go after them.

President Betancur abandoned his previous opposition to extradition and signed an extradition order for Carlos Lehder, who had already fled the country. The Colombian public's

⁶ "The Colombian Connection," *Time*, Jan. 29, 1979, p. 29.

revulsion at Lara's assassination provided broad-based support for the drastic actions taken by the president. It also heightened Colombia's awareness of its own growing drug problem, particularly of the widespread addiction to *basuco*, a cheap, powerful form of cocaine, that had developed in the early 1980s among Colombian youth. Many Colombians realized that they could no longer afford to dismiss the cocaine traffic as a "gringo" problem to be solved by the Americans.

Betancur's crackdown surprised the cartel leaders and forced them to go into hiding in Panama, where they paid strongman Manuel Noriega \$4–5 million for protection. Jorge Ochoa and Pablo Escobar contacted former President López who was in Panama as an official election observer, denied they were responsible for the Lara assassination and made a "peace" offer, which they asked López to transmit to the Betancur government. Claiming to control 70 to 80 percent of the South American cocaine traffic, they offered to withdraw from the drug business and help fight it in the future, to get out of politics, and to repatriate billions of dollars. In exchange, they sought their "reincorporation" into Colombian society in the near future. They held a second secret meeting in Panama City on May 28 with Colombia's Attorney General Carlos Jiménez Gómez, in which they added the suggestion that the extradition treaty be revised so they could not be prosecuted retroactively.

The U.S. embassy was informed of the offer, and Washington immediately stated its adamant objections to any such deal. When the story broke in the Colombian press in early July, a firestorm of protest obliged President Betancur to deny that there were or would be any negotiations with the drug lords.

Although obviously neither the United States nor the Colombian public was in any mood to accept a deal, in hindsight a strong argument can be made that a golden opportunity to strike a bargain beneficial to Colombia was lost. The cartel bosses specifically offered to hand over their clandestine laboratories and airstrips, to stay out of the trade, and to help substitute other crops for coca and marijuana. They estimated that once their organization had been dismantled, it would take others at least ten years to replace it. The intelligence about the industry's structure and money-laundering operations would have been extremely useful to both Colombian and U.S. law enforcement in opposing a resurgence. The repatriation of some \$15 billion would have been enough to offset Colombia's entire foreign debt. It might also have saved the

country from the orgy of terror, corruption and murder unleashed by the cartel over the next four years—the abyss referred to by former President Pastrana.

Rather than bargain, however, President Betancur opted to escalate the war. Backed by substantially increased U.S. aid, during the next two years he extradited ten Colombians and three foreigners to the United States, stepped up eradication programs and seized more illicit drugs than all of his predecessors combined. But the Colombian trafficking organizations proved more adaptable and resilient than anticipated. The sweeps by the army and confiscations of suspected traffickers' properties did eliminate most of the huge cocaine-processing complexes, but the traffickers adjusted by returning to mobile, small-scale operations. They also increased their use of bribery, intimidation and murder to insulate themselves from prosecution, and liberally rewarded their followers to ensure their loyalty.

In exile in Panama, the cartel overlords strengthened already existing relations with General Noriega. They later established relations with both the Sandinistas and the contras in Nicaragua. New contacts with Hondurans, orchestrated by Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros (a Honduran with close ties to the Medellín cartel), facilitated the explosive growth of shipments through Honduras into Mexico. The Medellín group built ties with Mexican marijuana and heroin smugglers and with Mexican authorities to facilitate the shipment of Colombian cocaine across the Mexican border into the American southwest. In the Caribbean they strengthened relations with the Bahamas and Jamaica and developed new ties in Cuba, Haiti, Belize and several smaller island countries. The net result was a massive proliferation of new routes and the corruption of governments previously untouched by the cocaine trade; the total tonnage of exported cocaine increased and prices dropped. By 1986 some 40 percent of the cocaine flowing into the United States had been diverted from the traditional Caribbean routes across the U.S.-Mexican border.

Even more devastating for Colombia were the escalating attacks on its judiciary, part of the traffickers' fight against extradition. Between 1981 and 1986 over 50 judges, including a dozen Supreme Court Justices, were murdered, and any judge who handled a drug case was bombarded with death threats if he refused to be bribed. It is widely believed in Colombia that the Medellín cartel paid the M-19 guerrillas \$1

million to occupy the capital's Palace of Justice in November 1985, a debacle that ended in the deaths of all the Supreme Court justices held hostage, some 80 others including all the M-19 guerrillas, and the palace's complete destruction.

Whether the traffickers in fact paid the M-19 for this attack, there is no question that the drug lords entered into temporary alliances with some leftist guerrilla organizations in the remote areas where drug cultivation and refining activities overlapped with guerrilla operations. Such arrangements have been frequently mislabeled as a new "narcoguerrilla" alliance, but it is more accurate to view them as transitory marriages of convenience rather than as a budding fusion of *narcotraficantes* and rebels. The guerrillas were paid in weapons or cash for their services, thereby increasing their capacity to wage war on an already besieged government.

These linkages notwithstanding, it is crucial to recall the Medellín traffickers' formation of the MAS in 1981 to assassinate guerrilla sympathizers. MAS was responsible for many, if not all, of the more than 500 deaths among members of the left-wing Patriotic Union, formed in 1985 with the backing of the FARC and the Colombian Communist Party, as a result of President Betancur's truce negotiations. The goals of the guerrillas and the traffickers are fundamentally incompatible: the guerrillas are revolutionaries who seek to overthrow the Colombian system; the traffickers are robber-baron capitalists who seek to protect their ill-gotten gains and assure themselves immunity from prosecution. Their stormy relations have involved far more bloodshed than cooperation.

By disrupting the traffickers' networks in Colombia, the Colombian authorities demonstrated that the drug lords were vulnerable. At least some guerrilla organizations such as FARC, whose peasant supporters cultivated coca for the cartel and other traffickers, decided to take over growing and refining operations for themselves, thereby cutting out the Medellín middleman. In response, the Medellín cartel has refused to purchase coca paste from the FARC guerrillas, precipitating more clashes between the two groups.

At least as ominous for Colombia is the emerging trend among the drug lords to buy up large tracts of rural land in guerrilla zones. Unlike the previous landowners, the traffickers have been unwilling to pay the guerrillas protection money. Instead, they have used their resources and firepower to create large private armies to protect themselves from the rebels, and

to massacre peasants suspected of collaborating with guerrillas. The result has been a veritable bloodbath in the countryside in recent years, which authorities have been unwilling or unable to control.

As landowners, the drug lords will inevitably gain a foothold in legitimate associations of farmers and cattlemen that wield significant influence in Colombia's political system. In this fashion they may ultimately attain through the side door the kind of political power they initially sought via party politics and direct campaign contributions.

VII

When President Virgilio Barco Vargas took office two years ago, he inherited from Betancur a country with a contradictory image. Colombia had been lavishly praised for its crackdown on trafficking and was generally recognized as the leading Latin American nation in the area of law enforcement. But these efforts had not stopped the flow of cocaine or even slowed it noticeably. Moreover, Betancur's war against drug traffickers was clearly faltering and the nation's judicial system had literally ceased to function. Although in his inaugural address Barco promised to continue the anti-drug drive begun by his predecessor, during his first three months in office he gave little indication that this would have priority.

In late August 1986, for example, just a few weeks after Barco took office, a lower court judge, apparently bribed or threatened by the traffickers, unexpectedly released cartel member Jorge Luis Ochoa. Ochoa had recently been extradited from Spain to Colombia, and Washington wanted him extradited to the United States. In early December Colombia seemed to be abandoning the fight altogether when an intimidated Supreme Court declared the extradition treaty unconstitutional because it had not been signed by President Turbay himself but rather by his minister of government.

On December 14, 1986, President Barco signed the treaty, bringing it back into effect. Three days later Guillermo Cano Isaza, the crusading anti-drug publisher of Colombia's second-largest newspaper, *El Espectador*, was assassinated in Bogotá by cartel gunmen. Barco reacted swiftly, decreeing a new offensive against the narcotics trade in which the army was ordered to take part. Over the next month army and police units conducted over a thousand raids and arrested almost 800 suspects, including three traffickers on a list of 113 that the United

States had submitted to Colombia for extradition. But no major cartel figure was caught in this roundup.

In response to Barco's campaign, on January 13, 1987, the Medellín cartel carried out its boldest assassination attempt since the Lara Bonilla affair. A hit squad was sent behind the Iron Curtain to Budapest to murder Betancur's former justice minister, Enrique Parejo González. Parejo had been sent out of the country as ambassador to Hungary to protect him from the cartel, which was after him because of his "traitorous" support for extradition. Although he was shot three times and seriously wounded, Parejo survived. Nevertheless, the attempt had chilling implications: no one was beyond the reach of the Medellín traffickers.

On February 4, 1987, cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder and 15 of his bodyguards were arrested at one of his farms by an elite anti-narcotics police unit. Fearing that he would be able to bribe or shoot his way out of Colombia's jails, the Barco government hurriedly extradited him to the United States. Lehder, whose flamboyance and volatility made him a liability to the cartel, said it had betrayed him to the authorities. A second, not incompatible, theory holds that the arrest occurred because President Barco had just replaced the Medellín police chief and his top aides with uncorrupted personnel. Lehder thus lost his protectors in the police force, which then acted on an anonymous tip as to his whereabouts.

Lehder had gained notoriety in early 1985 with his announcement that he would pay \$350,000 to anyone who could kill or capture the DEA chief, and a lower amount for others. In March 1985, in hiding as a result of Betancur's crackdown, he gave an interview (subsequently aired on national television) in which he appealed to discontented military officers and Marxist revolutionaries alike to join him in the "cocaine bonanza . . . the arm of the struggle against America . . . the Achilles' heel of American imperialism." After Lehder's arrest and extradition to Florida, cartel members made threats against Colombian and U.S. officials, including one, not carried out, to kill five Americans for every Colombian extradited to the United States. He was sentenced on July 20, 1988, to the maximum term of life imprisonment without parole.

But Lehder's extradition appears to have stemmed neither the flow of cocaine from Colombia nor its wave of drug-related violence. It may even have increased the mayhem by stimulating rivals like the Cali group to challenge the Medellín cartel.

Throughout 1987 and in 1988, the Barco government was buffeted by guerrilla and drug mafia violence. By mid-1987 eight of nine guerrilla organizations had broken the truce negotiated by the Betancur Administration and cut off the ongoing peace talks. The government refused the guerrillas' demands for "power sharing" and would only discuss the terms of their disarmament. The activities of death squads increased, and reports of human rights abuses and disappearances by the military rose dramatically.

In June 1987 the Supreme Court, intimidated by the cartel's violent reprisals, once again ruled that the extradition treaty was unconstitutional despite Barco's signature. Barco promised that his government would find a legal way to extradite, but extraditions were suspended indefinitely. In November Jorge Luis Ochoa was captured (apparently by accident) at a routine police checkpoint outside of Cali. After little more than a month in jail, he bribed his way out. Although Barco subsequently prosecuted the judge who released Ochoa, the damage was done. U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese called the release a "shocking blow" to international law enforcement and protested that the Colombians had assured him they would extradite Ochoa to the United States.

On January 25, 1988, the Colombian attorney general, Carlos Mauro Hoyos Jiménez, was shot to death along with his two bodyguards during an attempted kidnapping on the outskirts of Medellín. In a nationwide address that evening, Barco vowed that he would not "surrender" to blackmail or intimidation by the traffickers. He invoked state-of-siege powers and announced a package of emergency measures, the Statute for the Defense of Democracy. Specifically, he announced that he was increasing the 70,000-man National Police force by 5,000 and would appoint 5,000 new judges and assistants. Barco also pledged to renew extradition efforts and ordered the military to join the police in a new offensive. Within a month the army destroyed two large cocaine-processing complexes and dozens of smaller ones, but it did not recapture Jorge Ochoa.

VIII

The Colombian government has been drafted to man the front lines of the drug war without the proper resources, training or equipment. The results have been fatal for many Colombian officials and debilitating for the country's political system. Yet the U.S. government continues to insist that Co-

Colombia must take on the drug lords, no matter what the costs. According to Francisco Bernal, head of Colombia's Narcotics Bureau in the office of the attorney general: "We're being left to fight this war alone. We're supplying the dead, the country is being destabilized and what help are we getting?"⁷ Even President Barco has expressed concern that Colombia is unfairly "sacrificing" more than other nations.⁸

Many Colombians are incensed by what they see as the U.S. government's myopic obsession with extradition. In reaction to Colombia's release of Ochoa and the Supreme Court's ruling on the extradition treaty, Washington ordered sanctions against Colombia, including lengthy customs checks for travelers and products arriving from Colombia. These actions fueled rising nationalism and anti-U.S. resentments, and led many Colombians to conclude that U.S. authorities did not understand the country's precarious situation.

The Reagan Administration has insisted that extraditions are an essential anti-drug weapon, but by early 1988 it was clear that there was little support in Colombia for a renewal of extraditions. In May Justice Minister Enrique Low Mutra announced that the Barco government was studying the possibility of repudiating the 1979 treaty unilaterally.⁹ The U.S. sanctions have prompted the Barco government to emphasize the need for a multilateral rather than a purely bilateral approach to the drug-trafficking problem.

Neither the guerrillas nor the *narcotraficantes* appear capable of overthrowing the Colombian government. But many Colombians are clearly weary of the costly and seemingly interminable war on drugs. The waves of violence have shaken confidence in Barco's leadership and his strategy of close cooperation with the United States. Hard-liners are calling for an expanded role for the military in the fight against both the drug lords and the rebels, even at the cost of restrictions on democracy and civil rights. A military coup in Colombia is also unlikely, but the kidnappings and other violence may well drive the civilian leadership to rely increasingly on military force to govern the country. In the process, human rights violations on all sides

⁷ Alan Riding, "Colombians Grow Weary of Waging the War on Drugs," *The New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1988, p. 8.

⁸ Bradley Graham, "Drug Killings Cow Colombians," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 6, 1987, p. A14.

⁹ EFE News Agency, "Colombia Might Repudiate Extradition Treaty with U.S." in *The Miami Herald*, May 17, 1988, p. 11A.

will rise and the political system is likely to become more authoritarian. In the final analysis it is Colombia's democratic traditions and institutions that are at stake. The next U.S. administration must take care not to force Colombia into the abyss of authoritarianism in the name of national security and the war on drugs.

One of the most glaring deficiencies of the U.S. strategy is the tendency toward nonconsultative, unilateral decision-making in bilateral or multilateral affairs. Typically, Washington has pursued a cooperative strategy with Colombia, but when Colombia's share of America's drug market increases or during electoral campaigns or after dramatic incidents, Washington frequently acts unilaterally without consulting or even warning Bogotá. From a policy perspective, it is astonishing how little has been learned by either party in this "peak and valley" relationship. Neither the U.S. nor the Colombian government has developed a strategy to anticipate, much less resolve, these crises. President Reagan has unquestionably assigned more financial and human resources to anti-drug programs than any of his predecessors. But judging by the current scope of the drug-trafficking problem, these programs have clearly been inadequate.

Despite some encouraging signs that U.S. drug use may be leveling off or even declining, drug trafficking remains the fastest-growing industry in the world. The consuming population is huge. Total acreage under cultivation has continued to expand. New areas and countries are constantly being added to the list of producing or transiting nations. The violence, corruption and destabilization associated with the drug trade have increased to threatening levels despite intensified enforcement efforts. Cooperation with key countries like Colombia appears to be on the decline.

IX

What is to be done? One approach is for Washington to finance a significant buildup of Latin American governments' drug-fighting capabilities. The United States could provide source countries including Colombia with the \$2-3 billion annually that would be required to establish effective control over drug-producing areas which are essentially "occupied" by guerrilla forces or multinational criminal organizations. This strategy would entail provision of more firepower, helicopters, communications equipment and intelligence support. Produc-

ing countries could also be given more advanced technologies for combating the narcotics industries: herbicides for spraying, radar systems to track the movement of drug smugglers' boats and aircraft, modern anti-aircraft weapons, electronic devices to bug and jam traffickers' communications, and heat-seeking equipment to detect drug laboratories. Many Latin American countries need more sophisticated security systems to protect officials, judges and witnesses. This strategy of escalated efforts is not simply a matter of providing the means; politically difficult institutional reforms in drug-producing and transiting countries are needed to make their use effective.

A second option would be to "Americanize" anti-drug operations in Latin America. This approach would entail the U.S. government's assuming drug enforcement functions that source countries do not or cannot perform, provided that those countries consent. Examples of Americanization are the extradition and trial of Colombian drug dealers in U.S. courts and the U.S. Army's Operation Blast Furnace against cocaine laboratories in Bolivia in the summer of 1986. The effectiveness of the Americanization model is limited, however; Operation Blast Furnace paralyzed Bolivia's cocaine industry for a few months, but the introduction of U.S. forces undermined the popularity and nationalist credentials of President Víctor Paz Estenssoro's government, was condemned by virtually all factions on Bolivia's political spectrum, and was rejected as an option by most other Latin American countries, including Colombia and Mexico. The problem with extradition is that the drug mafia can immobilize the judicial system, as it has in Colombia, by violence and intimidation. Americanization is therefore a risky, potentially counterproductive approach that should be applied only in special circumstances.

A third U.S. option is to support Latin American governments' efforts to offer viable economic alternatives to the drug trade. Effective drug enforcement involves much more than merely parachuting men and equipment in to raid laboratories and to eradicate marijuana, opium or coca fields. The United States could make a major contribution by helping economically depressed nations provide crop- and income-substitution programs for drug farmers. It could open up new economic opportunities by lowering import barriers for legitimate exports—textiles, sugar, coffee, flowers—and extending the Caribbean Basin Initiative's preferential trade system to all South American governments willing to adopt serious anti-drug cam-

paigns. It could help alleviate the crushing burden of Latin American debt by taking the lead in devising new formulas for debt relief. Renewed regional economic development is an indispensable component of any successful, long-term effort to reduce drug trafficking.

A fourth, radically different, option would be to abandon the war against drugs and move instead to legalize, or at least decriminalize, drug consumption. Advocates of this option often compare current anti-drug policies in the United States and abroad with previous U.S. efforts to prohibit alcohol consumption; they predict that the suppression of drug use is likely to be no more successful than prohibition was.

Proponents of legalization or decriminalization argue that a distinction should be made between the public health problem of drug abuse and the violence and criminality associated with the drug trade because it is illegal. They do not condone or encourage drug use; they believe that the best way to curtail drug trafficking is to treat drugs as a public health, rather than a criminal, problem. By legalizing the production and sale of drugs, it would be possible to remove the clandestine profits from the drug trade and thus eliminate the economic incentives for criminal gangs to get involved. The state could control quality and lower sale prices, eliminating the need for users to commit crimes—stealing, muggings, murders—to procure drugs. U.S. federal, state and local governments now spend approximately \$8 billion annually on law enforcement and additional billions on courts, prisons and prisoner maintenance (one-third of all federal prisoners are in jail for drug-related crimes). Moreover, the state could tax the sale of drugs, thereby earning billions in revenues to finance programs of drug education, prevention and rehabilitation.¹⁰

There are, of course, many downside aspects to legalization. Many Americans consider the idea of legalizing drug use to be morally repugnant. It is also possible that drug abuse will increase if drugs are legalized, although by how much is not known. Addiction rates, job accidents, worker productivity losses and medical treatment costs could rise as well. Without arguing that it is a panacea, legalization's proponents aptly point out that current policies are not working. Their central point, that the public health aspects of drug abuse should be

¹⁰ Ethan A. Nadelmann, "U.S. Drug Policy: A Bad Export," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1988, pp. 97-108.

separated from the criminality that arises from drugs' illegality, deserves debate. But it is abundantly clear that the political winds in the United States do not favor legalization; hence this option does not appear to be a viable one in the near future. And, unless the United States moves toward legalization, no country in Latin America could do so without incurring severe sanctions from Washington.

To even dent the drug traffickers' power, Latin America will need massive additional assistance from the United States; the most promising strategy is a combination of options one and three. Unfortunately, the political climate in Washington presently seems to be shifting against foreign aid, as the U.S. Congress has reduced American economic and military assistance around the world. Colombia has received no economic aid since 1975 and military assistance was ended this year.

There is no question that the United States needs to rein in demand more effectively if any real success is to be achieved in the war against drugs. As long as the profits remain so great, illicit drugs will be smuggled into the United States from the impoverished Third World. Linking demand reduction with stepped-up law enforcement at home and abroad, as currently advocated by the United States, is a strategy fraught with dangers for source countries. The United States would "get tough" not just at home, but with Latin American and Caribbean governments that do not fully meet U.S. expectations. Instead, less rhetoric and more diplomacy would permit greater U.S. cooperation with the very Latin American countries whose active support is most needed. American drug officials should establish more realistic objectives and standards for their own anti-drug programs and other nations'.

Attempts must be made to anticipate new trends or developments, such as crack, a potent form of cocaine unknown ten years ago. The principal challenge for U.S. drug warriors is to develop a viable, long-run strategy for both demand and supply sides and then to implement it consistently. This will necessitate significantly higher levels of U.S. funding at home and abroad and sustained efforts at cooperation with the Latin Americans. The "war on drugs" is nowhere close to achieving the cooperation required, and it is unclear whether the United States and Latin America have the political will and are prepared to devote the resources necessary for the fight. Without such commitments they cannot realistically expect to turn the corner, much less see any light at the end of the tunnel.