

Wanted: the godfather of the drug cartels

by Andrea Olivieri

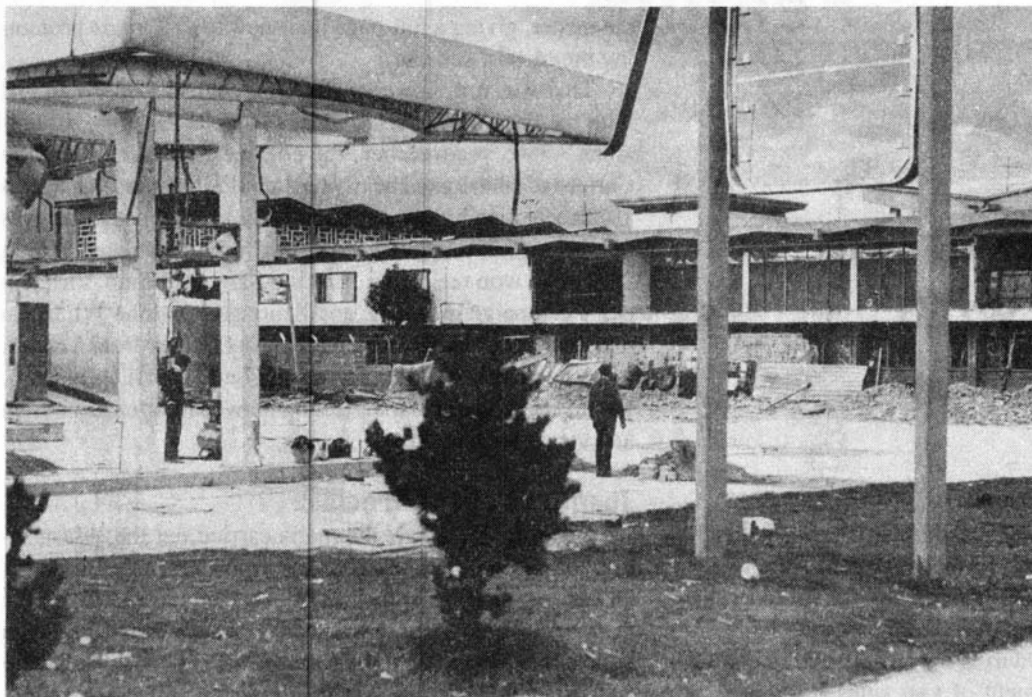
In the week just prior to Colombia's May 27 presidential elections, the drug cartels unleashed a reign of terror unequalled in the history of the country. Remote-control car bombs packed with shrapnel to inflict maximum damage were set off in several major cities, hitting shopping centers, nightclubs, and other heavily populated civilian targets. Another 16 policemen were assassinated in the city of Medellín, by street-killers out to collect the cocaine cartels' offer of \$4,000 per officer killed. The bodyguards of one presidential candidate were assassinated, as was Sen. Federico Estrada Velez, a regional campaign manager and intimate of Liberal Party frontrunner César Gaviria Trujillo.

"Humanity has not suffered this degree of barbarism against innocent people since the times of fascism and Nazism," President Virgilio Barco charged on May 16. These killers are out to overthrow the state, destabilize democracy, and destroy Colombia as a nation, he said. On May 21, Barco called on the nation to form "an unbeatable army of 30 million Colombians, to confront the violent ones . . . because what is at stake is the future of our families, our principles, our rights, and our democracy."

Even as President Barco spoke, the man featured on our cover, former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen, stepped forward to defend these modern-day Nazis, and demand that Colombia welcome them into legitimate society.

This was not the first time. Drug traffickers first established an empire in Colombia during López Michelsen's presidency (1974-78). Thereafter, at every point at which Colombia's patriots rose up to wipe out these killers, López Michelsen stepped forward to defend them. His economic machine set up the mechanisms used to launder the profits of the drug trade in Colombia. His political machine has fought for more than a decade to legalize the drug trade. Today, the godfather has set out to "launder" the drug killers themselves, to force the world to accept them as "respectable businessmen."

The strategy is not limited to Colombia. Today it is as common to read in the editorial pages of Colombia's newspapers as in those of the United States, that the cocaine cartels are to be given a "dignified," a "negotiated" way out of their



The headquarters of the Colombian anti-drug newspaper El Espectador, bombed on Sept. 2, 1989 by the same cocaine cartels that are now demanding to be welcomed into the political system as "legitimate businessmen"—with the encouragement of former President Alfonso López Michelsen.

Javier Almaraz

illegality. Harvard-trained Peruvian journalist Gustavo Gorriti, frequently featured as an editorial commentator in major U.S. dailies, argued this case in a Sept. 19, 1989 column in the *Los Angeles Times*. In Colombia, "what you have is a confrontation between *roque capitalists* and the system," he wrote. "There are no fundamental social, ethnic or religious conflicts, so in spite of the current-bloodletting, assimilation of the *narco-elites* in the span of one or two generations is a likely outcome" (emphasis added).

Similarly, the man touted as one of the leading cocaine "experts" in the United States, Rensselaer W. Lee III, published a book, *The White Labyrinth*, to sustain his argument that "the Colombian mafia basically seeks to prosper commercially without being disturbed." Writes Lee, "The cocaine industry on balance probably functions as a conservative political force. Cocaine traffickers, if not exactly pillars of society, share significant common interests with established groups."

Just as the Kennedy family emerged from its bootlegging in the Prohibition era to join America's "bluebloods" in the Anglo-American Establishment, advocates of this plot argue, so too will the cocaine kings be welcome "in the span of one or two generations."

López Michelsen thought success was close at hand. The Colombian justice system was dismantled, the political system terrorized and/or corrupted, the economy heavily cocaine-dependent, and growing numbers of influential figures acceding to the idea of "dialogue" with the cartels. No international voice outside of this magazine and its collaborators had been raised against the godfather.

But on May 10, several of López's accomplices were arrested by the military on charges of "aiding and abetting narco-terrorism." The Colombian daily *El Espectador* reported that the Army was in possession of a tape-recording implicating López himself.

Just as in 1984, when he could not get the government to accept a deal which he had negotiated with the cocaine kingpins, López took to the press to counterattack. In an interview with the daily *El Tiempo* on May 20, he denied that he had told friends of Medellín Cartel head Pablo Escobar to warn the killer to "be careful." The godfather complained bitterly that his friends who had been involved in negotiations with the cartels were now jailed as "accessories to drug trafficking." López threatened that, therefore, international forces must force Colombia to capitulate before the drug trade. The government and military had refused to accept the recent declaration by the drug killers that they would "surrender," if the government cut a deal with them, he protested. Because Colombians are not "impartial" enough, Colombia should be placed under the "supervision" of the U.N.

López proposes, in effect, a rerun of the British Opium Wars against China, in the 1830s and 1840s, when the British Empire fought to preserve the opium trade when China attempted to rise up against it.

López Michelsen's efforts to keep the law from his doorstep may be in vain. On May 22, he was subpoenaed, along with former President Julio César Turbay, to testify before a judge investigating those "accessories to narco-terrorism" for their role in fostering dialogue with the drug cartels.