

Who's who in the 'dialogue' with the drug mafia

Alfonso López Michelsen

The man who has spearheaded the campaign to "launder" the drug mafia in Colombia is former President Alfonso López Michelsen. Making the drug trade into the irreplaceable underpinning of the Colombian economy was the hallmark of his 1974-78 presidency; during his term, banking and tax reforms invited the investment of vast sums of money, of undefined origin, in key sectors of the economy. López also stood behind the first major effort to promote marijuana legalization, starting in 1979 when his family helped finance the "grow dope, not food" campaign of López protégé Ernesto Samper Pizano, then head of the prestigious National Association of Financial Institutions (ANIF).

Starting in 1984, López Michelsen openly offered his services to the drug cartels as their interlocutor, in an effort to force Colombian society to "come to terms" with its sworn enemy. Since then, López's political machine has been repeatedly deployed on the drug traffickers' behalf.

A mere one week after the drug cartels ordered the murder of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla on April 30, 1984, López Michelsen skipped off to Panama to hold secret talks with drug kingpins Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Jorge Luis Ochoa. While there, he helped them draft an "offer" of a deal to the current government of President Belisario Betancur. In exchange for an end to extraditions of drug traffickers to stand trial in the United States, and a general amnesty that would pave the way for society's acceptance of the traffickers as respectable businessmen, they were, they said, prepared to dismantle their smuggling operations and bring their billions in drug revenues back to the country.

López delivered the mafia's "offer" to President Betancur. When the offer was refused, López took his campaign to



Alfonso López Michelsen

the media, giving a full-page interview to *El Tiempo* promoting the cartels' scheme.

That was not, however, the first contact López had had with the drug traffickers who call themselves "the Extraditables." Two years earlier, the cocaine-trafficking Medellín Cartel had contributed nearly half a million dollars to López's 1982 reelection bid, because, as trafficker Carlos Lehder was later to reveal, they were expecting him to legalize the drug trade if he won reelection. Ernesto Samper Pizano, then López's campaign manager, and Santiago Londoño White, its treasurer, personally accepted the drug money from Lehder, in the name of the cartel. The same Londoño White, in 1984, was to set up the Panama meeting between López Michelsen and the cartel chieftains.

Joaquín Vallejo Arbeláez

On Aug. 18, 1989, the mafia carried out the assassination of Colombian presidential frontrunner Luis Carlos Galán. As in 1984 with their murder of Lara Bonilla, the mafia employed its two-pronged strategy: Terrorize, then negotiate. When the government of President Virgilio Barco responded to the Galán killing with a furious crackdown on the drug traffickers, the drug cartels came up with another "López Michelsen." On Oct. 8, cartel emissary Joaquín Vallejo Arbeláez surfaced with an interview in the Pastrana family's newspaper *La Prensa*, where he claimed to have been mediating secret talks between the drug lords and President Barco's private secretary, German Montoya, for over a year. The scandalous effect of Vallejo's claims was to cast doubt on the seriousness of Barco's anti-drug efforts and, the traffickers hoped, to force the government onto the defensive.

Vallejo, a former ambassador to the United Nations and interior minister on various occasions, is considered one of Colombia's most influential intellectuals. He is also the literal godfather of Medellín Cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar. According to *La Prensa*, Escobar's father had been a foreman on one of Vallejo's estates: "Thirty-nine years earlier, Joaquín Vallejo had held the son of his *compadres*, Pablito Escobar Gaviria, in his arms, acting as his godfather. . . . Today he is the godfather to *The Godfather*."

Vallejo also told *La Prensa* that he is a proponent of drug legalization. After insisting that his contact with the drug lords ended after the murder of Luis Carlos Galán, Vallejo hastened to assure that "I did agree, and continue to agree [with holding a dialogue with the mafia], although now one has a few scruples of conscience. But in a war, at any point, it is possible to pardon, if not forget. I am also an advocate of drug legalization."

According to the revelations, Vallejo had met repeatedly throughout 1988-89 with Escobar and his lawyer Guido Parra, and with cocaine Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha and Fabio and Luis Ochoa. On Oct. 7, *La Prensa* reproduced a facsimile of a document, hand-written by Vallejo according to his own

admission, which elaborated the cartels' offer to dismantle their drug-trafficking machinery and bring home their drug dollars in exchange for an end to the government's war on drugs—specifically, the extraditions to the United States, the raids, and the arrests—and an amnesty for themselves and their assets. It also included an offer by the traffickers to “facilitate” a deal whereby the United States would legalize cocaine consumption, and the Colombian government would get the monopoly on exports of the drug.

Vallejo readily defended the “good faith” of the drug traffickers in his mediation efforts. In an Oct. 10, 1989 interview, Vallejo was asked if the mafia's offer to abandon drug trafficking in exchange for amnesty and an end to extradition was trustworthy. He responded: “I am also practical. It seems to me that people who are currently hidden in the jungles, without the chance to return to normal, civil life, would abandon [the drug trade] even though it meant no longer earning those enormous sums of money. . . . I believe that these people would renounce future earnings, as anyone would, in exchange for peace and the right to naturally enjoy what they already have, since they have not offered to hand over their properties, but simply to end the business.”

Vallejo's comment on the entire cartel proposal: “Ethical considerations aside, they have reached practical solutions.”

Henry Kissinger

At the time of the revelations, Vallejo also reported that former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was being considered for employment by the cartel as their public relations lobbyist in Washington. Vallejo claimed that Montoya's position was that any deal between the Barco government and the cartels to suspend extraditions had to necessarily include the U.S., and that he had therefore urged the traffickers to contract a high-level U.S. intermediary to lobby in Washington on their behalf. “They knew what Kissinger costs. However, they said they were ready to take on those costs for the purpose of convincing the American government of the appropriateness” of such a deal, Vallejo told *La Prensa*.

Vallejo's recommendation may well have stemmed from his own reputed business relations with the former secretary of state's company, Kissinger Associates. Well-informed business circles in Colombia maintain that Vallejo once worked as a paid consultant to Kissinger Associates. What is certain is that Dr. Kissinger, despite the international publicity given Vallejo's revelation, has never issued any statement disassociating himself from Vallejo's recommendation.



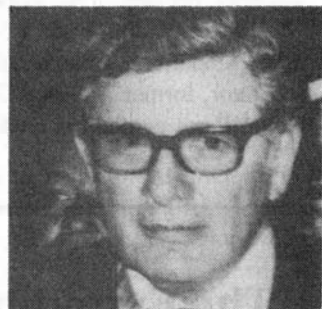
Henry A. Kissinger

López Michelsen's 'Notables'

Despite Vallejo's best efforts to back the Barco government into a corner, the drug traffickers had fortunately not taken into account the resistance of the military or the outrage of the Colombian people in the aftermath of Galán's murder. The Barco government issued public statements adamantly denying any ongoing negotiations with the traffickers. The cartel charged the government with “playing dirty.” And the war on drugs continued, leading to the December 1989 police raid which cornered and killed Medellín Cartel “enforcer” and reputed number two man, Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha.

The Medellín Cartel's next move was to order the kidnapping of the son of presidential adviser German Montoya, along with nearly 80 members of the country's leading families. They demanded negotiations as their ransom. Montoya took the bait, and appealed to López Michelsen's old friend Santiago Londoño White and to J. Mario Aristizabal to intercede with the cartel for his son's release.

That was the cue for the entrance of López Michelsen, who pulled together a group of prominent personalities dubbed the “Notables,” to facilitate dialogue with the traffickers. The “Notables” were political heavyweights, including three former Presidents—López himself, Julio César Turbay, and Misael Pastrana Borrero—as well as Patriotic Union President Diego Montaña Cuéllar and Cardinal Mario Revollo Bravo of Bogotá.



Julio César Turbay

The “Notables” issued a letter to the “Extraditables,” urging the release of Montoya's son and the other kidnap victims, and promising that society “would look with benevolence upon this final gesture, and would make the Extraditables the beneficiaries of a less severe treatment. . . .” The “Extraditables” responded with a communiqué: “We accept the victory of the state, of the institutions, and of the legitimate established government. We will lay down our weapons and abandon our war aims, out of desire for the highest interests of the fatherland.” They promised no more bomb attacks, and no more executions. López's machine announced triumphantly that the traffickers had “unconditionally surrendered.”

That the “Notables/Extraditables” exchange was the joint effort of López and the traffickers was exposed by Gen. Harold Bedoya, commander of the Fourth Army Brigade headquartered in Medellín. Bedoya charged on Jan. 16 that the “Notables” document “was known about in advance by the drug mafia. One of the signers [López], through a lawyer named Guido Parra, had been in contact with Pablo Escobar and Luis Ochoa, in order to inform them of what would be

presented to the public. For the drug traffickers, it was not a surprise at all, because they were expecting the statement. . . . It could be said that this is blackmail.”

That same day, the anti-drug newspaper *El Espectador* also called the proposal “blackmail,” and said, “Whitewashing a deal or a surrender in a battle to which Colombia’s dignity is committed would be intolerable.”

Guido Parra

Playing a major role in the formulation of the “Notables/ Extraditables” exchange alongside López Michelsen was Guido Parra, Pablo Escobar’s lawyer, who had already represented Medellín Cartel interests in the Vallejo Arbeláez affair. Parra’s connections to the mob go back to at least 1974, when he represented the department of Antioquia before the lower house of Congress as a congressional alternate to Bernardo Guerra Serna, today a powerful senator whose name figures prominently on the U.S. State Department’s visa blacklist, because of his suspected ties to the drug cartels.

Between Guido Parra’s congressional stint and his work as the Medellín law partner of another López Michelsen collaborator, former Attorney General Carlos Jiménez Gómez, Guido Parra earned his credentials as an agent of the drug

cartels. Jiménez Gómez’s four-year term (1982-86) as Attorney General paralleled López’s efforts to force a negotiated accommodation with the drug cartels, and included at least one personal attempt at mediation immediately after López’s own 1984 tête-à-tête in Panama with the cartel kingpins. Jiménez Gómez also dedicated much of his energies to appeasing the narco-terrorists by using his high office to persecute the military under the pretext of defending “human rights.”

Like his collaborator Vallejo Arbaláez, Parra turned to the press for both maximum publicity and maximum pressure on the government. After the release of the “Extraditables” response to the “Notables” letter, Parra presented a document to the media which detailed his and the others’ roles in the negotiating process. In it, Parra confirmed López’s critical role in formulating the “Extraditables” so-called surrender offer. Wrote Parra, “It is worth stressing the extraordinary idea of the surrender, whose authorship belongs to the lucid mind of Dr. Alfonso López Michelsen. . . . The Gordian knot of the conflict was untied by the multi-faceted use of that proposal.” Parra also claimed that the “Notables” sent a message to Pablo Escobar urging him to protect himself from the state security agencies, since his capture would make the

The Extraditables’ record of satanic terror

The satanic mind that governs the leaders of the cocaine cartels was never more brutally expressed than in 1988, when Colombia’s cocaine kings sent a letter to a Colombian judge which threatened not only to kill her, but to eradicate all generations of her family from the face of the Earth, if she were to find drug kingpin Pablo Escobar guilty of the December 1986 murder of *El Espectador* newspaper director Guillermo Cano. That judge has since been forced into exile. Signing themselves “the Extraditables,” their letter stated in part:

“We have decided to write you again to declare the following: We are friends of Pablo Escobar Gaviria and therefore ready for anything. We have learned that you propose to call him to trial in the Cano case. . . . We have also heard rumors according to which, after his trial, you will be given the benefit of a diplomatic post abroad. But we want to remind you that . . . you are committing a serious error that could stain your life and will leave you ill-fated until the end of your days. You know perfectly well that we are capable of executing you anywhere on this planet. You should also know that meanwhile, you

will see all the members of your family fall one by one. We advise you to rethink, now, since later you will have no time to lament. Be absolutely assured that if you call Mr. Escobar to trial, you will remain without descendants or offspring on your family tree. . . . If this letter doesn’t tell you anything, we ask that you take into account the cases of Tulio Manuel Castro, Hernando Baquero, Gustavo Zuluaga Serna, Alvaro Medina, Carmencita Londoño, Lara Bonilla, Colonel Ramírez, Parejo González, etc., etc., etc. [all mafia victims—ed.]. We advise you not to mess with Pablo Escobar Gaviria.”

Despite all their professions of patriotism and offers of surrender during the past eight months, the Extraditables remain evil thugs. Notwithstanding the cosmetic efforts of certain political and press outlets, both domestic and foreign, to present the traffickers as “businessmen” willing to make a deal, or as patriots prepared to invest in their country, their actions continue to speak for themselves.

● In August 1989, immediately following their assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán, the Extraditables sent a communiqué to “the people of Colombia” protesting the government’s refusal to negotiate with them, and promising:

“We will continue our fight and our total war against the anti-nationalists, the sell-outs, and we declare absolute war on the government, the industrial and political oligarchy, the journalists who have attacked and affronted us,

process fail.

Parra's document also introduced a third interlocutor: the government of the United States. Parra said that as a show of good faith on the part of the Colombian government, there had been "preparatory efforts of a diplomatic nature to extract from the U.S. authorities statements which discredited the mechanism of extradition as the sole means of fighting the drug trade." The U.S. State Department more than complied. At least three times in 1990, it has issued statements rejecting extradition as "a long-term solution" for the Colombian drug problem. U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Thomas McNamara reportedly assured the media that the Bush administration would not object to Colombian government's efforts to strike a deal with the cartels.

The Londoño White brothers

Santiago Londoño White, described by Parra as a negotiator for the government in the Montoya kidnaping, is yet another cog in the López Michelsen machine. He is the prominent Antioquian businessman who served as López Michelsen's campaign treasurer in 1982 and accepted campaign donations from the Medellín Cartel. He also organized the meeting in Panama between López and the cartels. Londoño

earned his considerable fortune building the bomb-proof bunkers and estates of drug chieftain Pablo Escobar. Along with his brother and business partner Diego, Santiago has been publicly identified as an "investor" in the Medellín Cartel. And both Santiago and Diego Londoño White were named by NBC-TV in August 1988 as "helping the heads of the [Medellín] Cartel invest millions of dollars in Brazilian real estate."

Today, Guido Parra and Diego Londoño White are in jail, accused under the state's anti-terrorism statute of collaborating with narco-terrorists. In a May 20 interview to the daily *El Tiempo*, López complained bitterly that his colleagues were being treated "as if they are accomplices of the drug traffickers." When Parra's praise of López's role in the "Notables/Extraditables" dialogue was first published, the former President did not deny his part. He is now claiming he has had no contact with Parra for the past 15 years, and denounces as a "fabrication" taped evidence in the hands of the courts that he had sent a warning to Escobar, through Parra, to be careful.

Is Alfonso López Michelsen perhaps nervous that he may be next to be charged with "aiding and abetting" narco-assassins?

the judges who have sold out to the government, the extraditing magistrates, the presidents of associations, and all those who have pursued and attacked us. We will not respect the families of those who have not respected our families, and we will burn and destroy the properties of the oligarchy."

- In November 1989, the Extraditables claimed responsibility for blowing up an Avianca airliner after it took off from Bogotá's El Dorado Airport. All 107 people aboard were killed. The action, said an anonymous caller, was directed against police informants allegedly aboard the flight. Bomb fragments were later discovered, confirming sabotage.

- In December 1989, a giant truck bomb packed with an estimated 1,100 pounds of dynamite exploded during morning rush-hour outside the headquarters of Colombia's security and intelligence agency (DAS), killing at least 35 and injuring 350. The bomb, which damaged the first nine floors of the building and other structures up to 10 blocks away, opened a crater 15 yards wide.

- In March 1990, the Extraditables issued a statement denying involvement in the assassination of the presidential candidate of the leftist Patriotic Union party, Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa. The statement also denounced the government's refusal to accept their "peace offerings" and declared the Extraditables in "a state of alert." One excerpt of the lying statement reads: "We emphatically reject

militarism, torture, disappearances, murders, genocide, and human rights violations."

- On March 31, 1990, the Extraditables issued a communiqué pledging to explode 11,000 pounds of dynamite in one of Bogotá's most prestigious neighborhoods if several of their number were not released from jail immediately. They threatened the usual list of judges, politicians, and so forth, and also pledged to murder one member of the Cano newspaper publishing family for every Colombian extradited to the United States. Less than one week later, on April 5, a 1,700-pound bomb, which police said could have killed 5,000 people, was defused in a wealthy suburb of Bogotá. The next day, the Extraditables issued a statement pledging to continue the war against the government. "We will respond with bombs and executions to extradition and disappearances," said the statement.

- On April 11, more than a dozen people—including eight policemen—were killed and 72 wounded in a 220-pound car-bomb blast directed against an elite police unit in the city of Medellín. During the first two weeks of April, more than 40 policemen were murdered by mafia hit-men and car bombings in Medellín, after Pablo Escobar offered a reward of 4 million pesos (\$40,000) for every policeman killed (20 million pesos for an officer). On April 25, another car bomb blew up a police truck and killed at least 10 people, including a four-year-old child.