

How narco-terrorism was legalized: Alvaro Gómez and the M-19

In November 1989, Colombia's drug cartels celebrated a quiet but major victory in their war against that nation when the April 19 Movement—better known as the M-19—succeeded in getting the Barco government to co-sign a “peace treaty” which essentially legalized the M-19 as a political party. The M-19 was also granted special protection and privileges in the March 1990 congressional elections. Most importantly, the legalization of the narco-terrorist M-19—best known for its bloody 1985 siege of the Colombian Justice Palace—established a precedent for the flood of “peace proposals” by the drug traffickers to follow. After all, they argued, if their foot-soldiers could be legalized by the government, why not the chiefs?

On April 30, 1990—the sixth anniversary of the mafia's assassination of anti-drug leader and Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla—Medellín Cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar personally confirmed that the M-19 works hand-in-glove with his cocaine cartel.

Escobar sent a letter to judicial police commander Col. Oscar Pelaez Cardona, in which he boasted: “I am going to tell you a story that neither you nor the Colombian people know: I have always been a good friend of nearly all the M-19 leaders. At moments of greatest tension and difficulties, I gave refuge to Alvaro Fayad and Iván Marino Ospina,” two narco-terrorist M-19 leaders later killed in action.

Escobar's letter was a protestation of innocence of the April 26 assassination of M-19 presidential candidate Carlos Pizarro León-Gómez. The “Extraditables,” the alias used by the drug cartels, had initially claimed responsibility. Shortly thereafter, military and police intelligence services announced that they had found substantial proof that the cartel had indeed ordered the hit.

The narcos sing a new tune

The narcos quickly changed their tune. Simultaneous with Escobar's revelation of his pact with the M-19, the “Extraditables” issued a new statement, in which they denied any role in the killing, instead accusing Colombia's security forces of committing the crime. They now demanded that the government immediately fire several police chiefs who have

taken the lead in hunting down the cartel chieftains.

The M-19's new presidential candidate, Antonio Navarro Wolf, repeated the same line: The drug traffickers were not responsible for Pizarro's murder, he insisted, because Escobar is the M-19's friend. His group had signed a non-aggression pact with Escobar back in 1981, he added. Pizarro's brother also echoed the Extraditables' line that “certain sectors of the government” were behind the killing, and demanded purges of the security forces.

Escobar, who has made and violated many such “non-aggression pacts,” even ordering the assassination of scores of his most intimate collaborators, had no scruples in ordering the politically expedient murder of his “good friend” Carlos Pizarro. Pizarro's assassination was doubly useful to the cartels: It added to the climate of terror they sought before the May 27 presidential elections, while providing the drug lobby's propaganda machine a new platform from which to assault Colombia's military and security forces—the last bulwark against a narco-terrorist takeover. The entirety of the cartel apparatus, from the traffickers to their top political protector, former President Alfonso López Michelsen, suddenly “strangely coincided,” as one newspaper editor noted, in their demands for a reorganization of the Colombian Armed Forces.

This final confirmation, from both Escobar and from Navarro Wolf, that the M-19 is a narco-terrorist agent of the drug trade, exposes the deadly flaw in the government's war strategy against the cartels: the attempt to separate “political” terrorism from the drug trade, as if one could somehow negotiate “peace” with narco-terrorism while waging war against drugs.

The Barco government's open-arms policy toward the M-19 was not concocted in Colombia alone, however. From the outset, it was supported and pushed from Washington, as a necessary part of the regional accords struck with Moscow to establish a global superpower condominium. Thus the M-19 has been hailed throughout the region as prodigal sons, wayward idealists returned to the political fold, and an “exemplary model” for El Salvador and other terror-torn countries.

Yet the M-19 has never renounced its paymasters, the cocaine cartels. Instead, it has publicly defended the cartels from accusations of assassination, it has embraced the cartels' proposal for drug legalization, and it has demanded a purge of the cartel's nemesis, the Armed Forces. The M-19 has not foresworn subversion of civilized life in Colombia; it has only switched battlefields.

Dismantling Colombian justice

The M-19's role as cartel foot-soldiers surfaced dramatically on Nov. 6, 1985, when forty M-19 assassins seized the Colombian Justice Palace, taking among their hostages 12 members of the Supreme Court who were debating the constitutionality of Colombia's extradition treaty with the United States. That treaty was specifically directed against the cocaine cartels. After President Belisario Betancur refused to discuss the M-19's theatrical demand that he allow them to put the presidency on "trial," the narco-terrorists carried out their real assignment: The Supreme Court magistrates were executed and the national legal archives containing dossiers on the drug traffickers were set afire. Thirty hours later, the Army recaptured the Justice Palace; a total of 100 people died in the conflagration.

According to the book *Los Jinetes de la Cocaína (The Cocaine Horsemen)*, written by Fabio Castillo, a researcher for the anti-drug newspaper *El Espectador*, Escobar's cartel had given the M-19 \$5 million, and a vast cache of weapons, to carry out the Justice Palace action. As the "Extraditables," the traffickers had been issuing death threats against the murdered magistrates almost daily in the period just prior to the M-19 occupation.

Those threats were carried out through the M-19 siege. After the Justice Palace holocaust, the Supreme Court has never been the same. After many new nominations and resignations, the Court declared the extradition treaty unconstitutional in December 1986, using a procedural error in its initial approval as the pretext.

Antonio Navarro Wolf, "explaining" the Justice Palace action to a Mexican journalist in a December 1985 interview, stated that there were only two credible institutions left in Colombia: the Supreme Court and the Church. The M-19's goal, said Navarro, was to start by destroying the first, which they effectively accomplished. He explained that the M-19 strategy was to seize what he called the "Andean spine," so that it could serve to "oxygenate" the Central American revolution.

After the Justice Palace incident, the media—both domestic and foreign—busily assured the world that the M-19 was virtually finished (they had lost 40 cadre, including several top leaders), and that the final mop-up was only a matter of time.

And yet, on Nov. 6, 1989—the fourth anniversary of the Justice Palace seizure—a peace pact between the M-19 and the government was ready for signing! That pact committed

the government to amnestying the leaders of the group, providing them security protection with the resources of the state, and submitting a bill to Congress according to which the M-19 would be awarded congressional seats with fewer votes than required by law. At the last moment, the government postponed the signing for one week, to avoid appearing in "bad taste" by seeming to commemorate the Justice Palace disaster by legalizing its perpetrators.

The Congress, under intense pressure from then Interior Minister Carlos Lemos Simmonds (who was later forced to resign from the Barco government), refused to approve the final part of the pact, which would have awarded the M-19 a power bloc in the Congress. Nonetheless, in the March 11, 1990 elections, the M-19 won one senatorial, one congressional, and two mayoral positions, thanks to the propaganda machine provided them by the government.

How is it possible that the assassins of the Justice Palace were now the "heroes of peace"? It all began with the kidnaping of one of Colombia's more prominent political figures, former Conservative Party presidential candidate Alvaro Gómez Hurtado.

The Gómez blackmail scenario

The kidnaping of Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, who at the time was demanding an end to the government's interminable "dialogue" with the narco-terrorists launched in 1982 by then President Belisario Betancur, terrorized the Colombian political class.

Gómez was kidnaped on May 29, 1988 as he was leaving church with his wife. One of his bodyguards was slaughtered in the action. The message the M-19 thereby delivered was clear: "If we can kidnap Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, who has played such a prominent role in the political life of the country for the past 40 years, we can kidnap anyone we choose." Many members of the political elite, including many recognized "conservatives" and opponents of dialogue with the guerrillas, began to issue statements designed to appease the M-19 and presumably prevent Gómez's death—and/or their own.

Through various intermediaries, the Gómez family, the government, and the political parties negotiated for Gómez Hurtado's release. The first ransom demand was that the M-19 be given maximum publicity. The principal M-19 negotiator in the affair was none other than the group's current presidential candidate, Antonio Navarro Wolf, who had been living in Cuba until that time. Even as Gómez was still their captive, the M-19 proclaimed that it was giving up its arms and "going legit." Colombian political leaders, trade unionists, and bishops held a meeting in the papal nunciature of Panama in June 1988, which was attended by M-19 leaders Navarro Wolf and Rosemberg Pabón. The date for Gómez's release was then set.

Amid great fanfare by the media, Gómez arrived at his home on foot on July 21, 1988. The next day, he gave a

press conference to prove that he was “a free man” and had made no promises to his captors. Later Gómez was to write a book, *Soy Libre (I Am Free)*, which painfully, if unwittingly, detailed the brainwashing process to which he had been submitted during his captivity. One week after Gómez’s release, the M-19 won a second “summit meeting” with the Colombian political elite, which began the process of its legalization.

In early 1989, the Barco government announced an official agreement with Carlos Pizarro León-Gómez, the man who had ordered Gómez Hurtado’s kidnaping. One of the initial agreements was to hold a series of “round-table discussions” at which the M-19 would present its “proposals for change” to the country’s political and social organizations, which would then be submitted as legislation to Congress. In effect, the government had authorized the creation of a kind of parallel Congress, with narco-terrorists wielding the gavel.

The case of Gómez Hurtado, now a fierce advocate of dialogue with the narco-terrorists, of drug legalization, and of negotiations with the drug cartels, tested the mettle of the Colombian political elite. They proved more than ready for the next phase.

Drive for drug legalization

The Gómez kidnaping was to prove but a foot in the door for the real objective: the legalization of the drug cartels themselves.

On Jan. 18, 1988, the Extraditables kidnaped Andrés Pastrana Arango, the son of former Conservative Party president Misael Pastrana Borrero, and the most favored candidate at the time for mayor of Bogotá. On Jan. 25, they kidnaped and assassinated anti-drug Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos. Also in January they attempted to kidnap the Conservative candidate for mayor of Medellín and former director of the daily *El Colombiano*, Juan Gómez Martínez.

Pastrana was freed by the police on Jan. 25, but during the week of his captivity, the Pastrana family had already begun negotiations with the Extraditables to win his release. According to Pastrana’s own statements after release, his captors treated him well and he was able to establish some camaraderie with them. Pastrana, who went on to become Bogotá’s mayor, never again touched the theme of the drug trade in his political campaigning. He also became notorious for sponsoring Bacchanalian drug/rock fests through his office where, according to police reports, the attendees “smoked everything but the lawn.”

Today, Andrés Pastrana is an open advocate of drug legalization and suspension of extradition of drug traffickers. On April 23, 1990, Pastrana attended a Washington, D.C. conference of mayors as a special honored guest, where he told reporters that he favored striking a deal with the traffickers:

“What I am saying today is that there is a proposal that

was made about two months ago by the Extraditables . . . [where they] offered surrender, handing over laboratories, land, the paramilitary groups . . . and above all the definitive extermination of the drug problem. We are in a war that has victors and vanquished; these vanquished—in this case the Extraditables—have said they would accept Colombian law, and that there should be a response from the government.

“In the Colombian judiciary, we have nothing written into the law about ‘plea bargaining,’ that is, flexibility such that those persons in some way or another could admit to being criminals, accept Colombian law, agree to be tried. I believe that this possibility could be sought, that in the case where they confess, accept, surrender those laboratories, dismantle them as they have said, the matter should be looked at from the standpoint that regarding the penalties established by Colombian law, there could be a pardon for them.”

Pastrana displayed clearly that he had been brainwashed by terror. Asked if the traffickers could be trusted to abide by any such deal, he responded: “I believe so. You don’t realize that everything they have said, they have done. They

U.S. State Department sabotages the war on drugs

The U.S. State Department has for years been a hotbed of “closet”—and not-so-closet—supporters of an accommodation with the drug trade. Such supporters go right to the top—as proven in the fall of 1989, when former Secretary of State George Shultz not only went public with his support for drug legalization, but announced that he will be campaigning for that cause.

On Oct. 20, 1989, the *Washington Times* reported that “certain officials” of the Bush administration were preparing “contingency plans” to negotiate with the drug-trafficking mafia should the Colombian government which takes office in August 1990 decide “to make a deal with the narcos.” The daily also said that “the U.S. would entertain Colombian proposals for commutation of sentences, or partial amnesty in specific cases, as long as that would satisfy the objective of halting the flow of drugs to the United States.”

One week later, on Oct. 25, Secretary of State James Baker weakly told reporters, “As far as I know, that is not the government’s policy.” Bush’s official spokesman Marlin Fitzwater told another journalist inquiring about the *Times* report, “I don’t know, I refer you to the office of [national anti-drug coordinator] William Bennett.”

said that in the matter of kidnaping people, killing politicians, they have killed two presidential candidates. They have said they would set off bombs. They have set off bombs. They have told us they would carry out terrorist acts, and they have carried out this series of terrorist acts.”

Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos was a different matter. When his kidnapers dragged him wounded from his car, he was heard to shout, “Kill me, you bastards!” Carlos Mauro Hoyos preferred to die a martyr than become a mouth-piece for his bitterest enemies. His corpse was found later that day.

Pastrana, who was freed that same day, told the press that Carlos Mauro Hoyos’s assassination had been “an error by the Extraditables. I am sure that their intention was not to kill him.”

After a failed kidnaping attempt and numerous mafia efforts to destroy his newspaper, Medellín’s Juan Gómez Martínez practically begged pardon for anything his newspaper might have published against the drug traffickers. He went on to become Medellín’s mayor and, after the mafia

murder of presidential front-runner Luis Carlos Galán in August 1989, became one of the most dedicated proponents of drug legalization and of dialogue with the cartels.

In December 1989, the Extraditables kidnaped the son of Germán Montoya, the general secretary and leading adviser to the Barco presidency. Montoya’s efforts to involve the entire Barco government in peace negotiations with the drug traffickers became a public scandal. The outcome of his efforts are dealt with elsewhere in this report. On April 3, 1990, the Extraditables kidnaped Sen. Federico Estrada Vélez, after he issued several statements opposing dialogue with the traffickers. Three days later he was released, and his first statements were to propose creation of a high-level commission to institutionalize dialogue with the cartels.

After the kidnaping of Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, the drug traffickers were fully convinced that if one can kidnap and break the will of a political notable, one has every right to belong to the political elite. The families of the drug traffickers would—per force—become as respectable as the Kennedy family in the United States.

On Feb. 7, 1990, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Thomas McNamara told the Colprensa news agency that “extradition is not the solution” for the drug trade. On the eve of the presidential “anti-drug summit” in Cartagena, Colombia, McNamara added that the United States would not interfere if the Colombian government were to opt for a deal with the drug cartels.

In March 1990, the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics Matters issued its annual report, stating: “While extraditions of major traffickers should continue *during the next year*, success ultimately rests on Colombia’s ability to prosecute and jail traffickers in Colombia.” The implication: The U.S. is willing to concede that extradition should be phased out, if that would facilitate a deal with the cartels.

On March 29, 1990, the *Washington Times* published an interview with David Wilson, the head of financial investigations of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, who declared that U.S. policy is to urge Colombia’s President Barco *not* to concentrate anti-drug efforts on closing down money-laundering operations, for fear this would “detract” from efforts to capture drug traffickers and destroy their infrastructure.

The March 1988 issue of the State Department’s International Narcotics Control Strategy Report had stated outright that the profits of the drug trade could be positively “beneficial” for otherwise debt-burdened Third World economies: “From different vantage points, there are both positive and negative perceptions of the effects of narcotics money laundering. Proceeds from drug trafficking are

used to finance other criminal activities . . . to threaten governments . . . and support insurgencies. . . . Despite these serious problems, laundering criminally derived money can provide benefits to some otherwise economically unattractive countries. Such monies create an influx of capital which can lead to a stimulation of the country’s economy. The increase in capital created by the criminally derived money increases money reserves, lowers interest rates, creates new jobs, and, in general, encourages economic activity.”

On April 28, 1990, the Bush administration reported that it was “angered” by a Republican congressional move to supply four Cobra helicopter gunships to the Colombian Armed Forces, to assist in their battle against the drug traffickers. John Walters, chief of staff to drug czar William J. Bennett, said, “We do not consider it an appropriate piece of equipment. We are very concerned that lethal aid be limited in a manner that prevents excessive use beyond what is necessary for programs we’re proposing in conjunction with the Andean countries. This particular weapon system involves firepower in excess of anything [government experts] believe is appropriate.”

“Excessive” firepower against the narcos? On May 8, it was revealed that the Colombian drug cartels had attempted to purchase 120 anti-aircraft Stinger missiles on the U.S. black market, and were willing to pay millions in cash for their purchase. The missiles, which use infrared heat-seeking mechanisms to hone in on their targets, were allegedly wanted for terrorist assaults on the aircraft of the President and his cabinet.