

Cocaine is king in Colombia, thanks to George Bush

by Dennis Small, Gretchen Small, and Valerie Rush

George Bush didn't create narco-trafficking in Colombia, but he did play a decisive role in turning it into a fine art—and a most profitable one, both financially and politically.

During 1979-81, Colombia was producing an average of 10,500 tons of marijuana per year, more than two-thirds of the world total at that time. Almost the entire crop was being exported to the United States, and a well-integrated transport and distribution network had been put in place to market it.

But then, a change occurred. In the early- to mid-1980s, Bush's "secret government" apparatus struck a deal with Colombia's then-dominant Medellín Cartel, in which it took advantage of the cartel's established trafficking infrastructure, and the cartel shifted into more profitable cocaine trafficking, and channeled large amounts of drug funds into the Contras' war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The hard evidence of Bush's involvement with this apparatus is summarized elsewhere in this section (pp. 22-29).

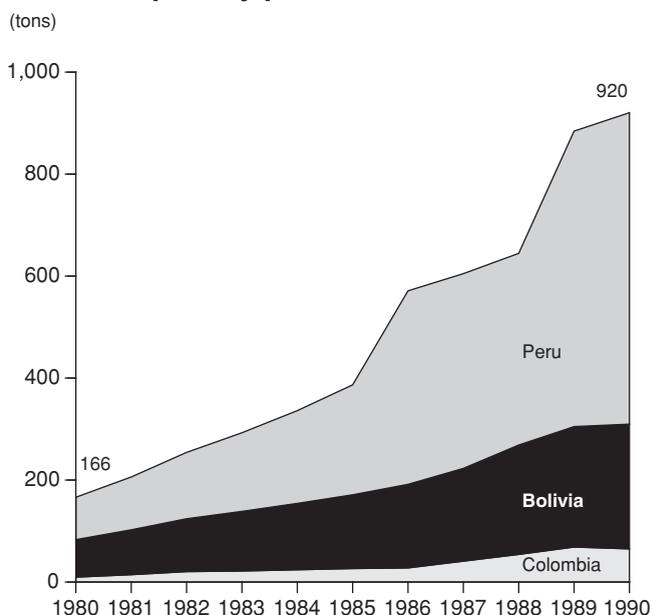
Things changed quickly in Colombia, as a result of Bush's involvement. Over the course of the 1980s, national marijuana production fell to slightly more than 2,000 tons per year (the 1989-91 average), which was one-fifth of what it had been a decade earlier, and constituted only 7% of the world total. Cocaine moved in to take its place—and quickly became king. Although most of the coca leaves were grown in neighboring Peru and Bolivia during the 1980s, the vast majority of that crop was refined into cocaine in Colombian laboratories, and from there shipped out, principally to the United States.

Over this period, the combined cocaine production from Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru (the world's only three producers) rose from 166 tons of HCl equivalent in 1980, to 920 tons in 1990—a more than fivefold increase. As **Figure 1** shows, the sharpest rise occurred during 1985-89, as the Bush coup of 1983-86 was locked into place. Cocaine production between 1985 and 1989 grew by nearly 25% per year, on average.

The Bush connection

A startling indication of Bush's role in these developments was the testimony given to a U.S. Senate hearing in 1987, where Medellín Cartel money-launderer Ramón Milián

FIGURE 1
Cocaine: quantity produced



Sources: NNICC; OFECOD, Peru; EIR.

Rodríguez revealed that he had given \$10 million in cocaine profits to Félix Rodríguez, a long-term CIA agent who ran the drugs-for-guns exchange for George Bush. Milián told investigative journalist Martha Honey that Rodríguez had offered that, "in exchange for money for the Contra cause, he would use his influence in high places to get the [cocaine] cartel U.S. 'good will' . . . Frankly, one of the selling points was that he could talk directly to Bush. . . . The issue of good will wasn't something that was going to go through 27 bureaucratic hands. It was something that was directly between him and Bush."

Milián met with Rodríguez on Jan. 18, 1985. Four days later, Rodríguez met with Vice President Bush in the Executive Office Building.

The promised "good will" was not long in coming. Indicative is the role played by a former senior official of the Reagan-Bush Department of Justice, Michael Abbell. In November 1984, Medellín Cartel boss Jorge Ochoa and Cali Cartel boss Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela were sitting in a Madrid jail on drug charges, facing extradition—and probable life sentences—in the United States. Abbell, who had been the acting director and deputy director of the International Affairs section of the DOJ's Criminal Division from 1979 through 1984, abruptly quit that post, and travelled to Spain to testify against the extradition of Ochoa and Rodríguez to the United States, claiming that his old employer, the U.S. Department of Justice, had filed faulty papers against his new clients, the drug

lords. Thanks to Abbell, Ochoa and Rodríguez were sent to Colombia, where they were eventually set free.

Abbell continued to serve as a big cheese in the Cali Cartel's stable of lawyers, and as a top Washington lobbyist for his clients—whom he described as “mainstream” and “legitimate businessmen”—until his 1998 conviction for racketeering. Throughout this period, Abbell played an important public relations role as well, presenting the Cali Cartel as the “less violent” alternative to the Medellín Cartel, and arguing that a deal could be struck with the Cali Cartel because “the people in Cali are adamantly opposed to any violence. . . . My impression is you can work with these people.”

And work with them he did, as did George Bush. In part, Bush passed off his overt alliance with the Cali Cartel as necessary for his phony war against the rival Medellín Cartel. Otherwise, Bush's hypocritical justification for such a criminal alliance was that collaboration with the cartels was a “necessary evil,” supposedly in order to fight communist subversion—e.g., the Sandinistas. In the face of unimpeachable evidence that drugs and terrorism are *one and the same* apparatus, and that allying with one against the other is an impossibility, the Bush administration developed the official theory that the phenomenon of “narco-terrorism”—first defined and documented by Lyndon LaRouche in the early 1980s—does not really exist.

For example, in February 1986, then-FBI Director William Webster told the *Los Angeles Times*: “Words like narco-terrorism tend to exacerbate the realities as we know them. I also do not believe that the hard evidence links the two.”

Only three months before Webster's denial that narco-terrorism exists, the M-19 guerrillas had seized the Colombian Justice Palace in Bogotá, burned the legal archives containing extradition papers on the cartels' leading figures, and executed those Supreme Court judges who had been debating the restoration of the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty. In May 1986, the head of counterterrorism for the U.S. State Department, Robert Oakley, testified to U.S. Senate hearings that his office was in possession of “very solid evidence” that the M-19 had been paid \$5 million by one of the top drug cartels, to carry out the attack.

FIGURE 2
Colombia–U.S. cocaine trafficking routes



So much for the supposed nonexistence of narco-terrorism.

The Colombia-U.S. cocaine corridors

Colombian cocaine routes to the United States, like the earlier marijuana routes, have historically divided into two principal corridors (see **Figure 2**). The first moves cocaine by air and sea northward from Colombia to the east coast of the United States (especially Florida), using the Bahamas, Cuba, and other Caribbean islands as transshipment areas. The second moves cocaine first up through Central America, and from there divides into an easterly route through the Caribbean (connecting to the first route, described above), and a westerly or Pacific route, first into Belize and Mexico, and from there into the United States. It was this latter corridor that Bush's Iran-Contra apparatus developed most extensively.

FIGURE 3

Contra network drug transshipment points



Figure 3 provides a closer view of Bush’s mid-1980s Central American cocaine corridor.

Costa Rica: The various Contra groups making up the so-called Southern Front were based here, and had as their leading local political patron, former President José “Pepe” Figueres, the long-standing partner of Cuban-based, Medellín Cartel financier Robert Vesco.

The key logistics officer for the Southern Front was John Hull, a U.S. national whose Costa Rican ranch was, already by 1980-81, reportedly a cocaine stash point for the Colombian cartels, midway on its route north. By 1984-85, Hull’s ranch was a major Contra logistics and drug-trafficking center, with planes using his airstrip carrying guns and cocaine.

Money for Contra operations was funnelled through several Costa Rican companies owned by known traffickers: Frigoríficos de Puntarenas, which shipped dope to the Miami-based Ocean Hunter Seafood, owned by Contra operative and

longtime trafficker Francisco Chanes; Diacsa, a Costa Rican company which received \$41 million in Contra payments from Oliver North and the State Department’s Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Organization (NHAO) between March and September 1986—after it had been indicted for cocaine trafficking and laundering; and so on.

Honduras: The main force of Bush’s Contras, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), was based out of Honduras—and it was run through the networks of Medellín Cartel kingpin José Ramón Matta Ballesteros, a Honduran national who, by the mid-1980s, was the cartel’s point-man for Central American transshipment and its liaison with the Mexican cartels. The principal logistics company used by the FDN was owned by Matta Ballesteros. Between 1983 and 1985, his air transport company, SETCO, transported at least a million rounds of ammunition, food, uniforms, and other military supplies for the FDN, and was paid for its services out of

FIGURE 4

The Colombia-Mexico cocaine corridor, late 1990s



Sources: PGR, Mexico; Uniform Statistical System for Drug Control, OAS.

North’s Contra accounts. From late-1985 to mid-1986, Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams’s Nicaraguan Humanitarian Aid Organization at the State Department, also paid SETCO.

At the time that SETCO was receiving official U.S. government payments, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Enrique Camarena was hot on Matta Ballesteros’s trail, as the individual key to the Colombian cartel’s ties to Guadalajara, Mexico cartel drug kingpin Miguel Félix Gallardo. In March 1985, Camarena was kidnapped, tortured, and killed in Mexico. The DEA began a manhunt for Matta Ballesteros, as the man who it suspected had ordered the hit, but the Bush team kept its deal with him intact. Within months of being arrested in Colombia, Matta Ballesteros bribed his way out of jail, and returned immediately to Honduras in March 1987. There, he set himself up as the country’s leading “businessman”—and not one peep was heard from the Bush team or the U.S. State Department. Only when the Contra

operation collapsed, was Matta Ballesteros finally arrested and brought to the United States, where he was tried and convicted for the murder of Camarena.

El Salvador: One of the most important supply centers for the Contras was established in January 1985 at the Salvadoran Air Force base at Ilopango. Hangars 4 and 5 at Ilopango, leased to the Bush-North operation, served as staging areas, supply depots, and parking areas for more than a dozen Contra pilots, under the direction of Félix Rodríguez, placed in that position directly by Bush’s National Security Adviser (1982-89) Donald Gregg. According to reports filed by the DEA’s agent in El Salvador, Celerino Castillo, large quantities of cocaine were stored at Hangars 4 and 5, and then smuggled north to Florida, Texas, and California, by pilots whose names had already been entered into DEA computers as Class I cocaine violators.

Guatemala: While not employed as a major center for Contra operations by the Bush team, the drug cartels targeted

Guatemala as a vital way-station for cocaine shipments moving north. By 1985, significant amounts of marijuana were being grown in the Petén jungle region in the north of the country, and Colombian cocaine was being transshipped through numerous clandestine airfields, many owned by the local landed oligarchy, on Guatemala's Pacific coast. In 1984-85, Lyndon LaRouche and *EIR* warned the Reagan-Bush administration that it must aid Guatemala in carrying out a full-scale attack against the drug trade and narco-terrorism, or Guatemala would become a major base of the cartels. And, in 1985, LaRouche associates helped organize an on-the-ground anti-drug exercise, Operation Guatusa, to encourage such cooperation. However, the Bush apparatus in Washington blocked LaRouche's efforts, and by 1989, not only was marijuana production far more widespread throughout the country, but Guatemala had become a major producer of opium, and a major cocaine transshipment center.

Belize and Chiapas: The small country of Belize, a member of the British Commonwealth, has also played a crucial role as a Central American way-station and coordinating center for both drugs and terrorism moving into southern Mexico. Cocaine shipped up from Colombia into Belize is then transported overland through southern Mexico, in particular through the state of Chiapas where the British-sponsored Zapatista narco-terrorists are active, and northwards to the United States.

By the late 1990s, the Colombia-Mexico cocaine corridor, with the Belize-Chiapas channel playing a major role, was carrying 70% or more of all the Colombian cocaine shipped into the United States (see **Figure 4**).

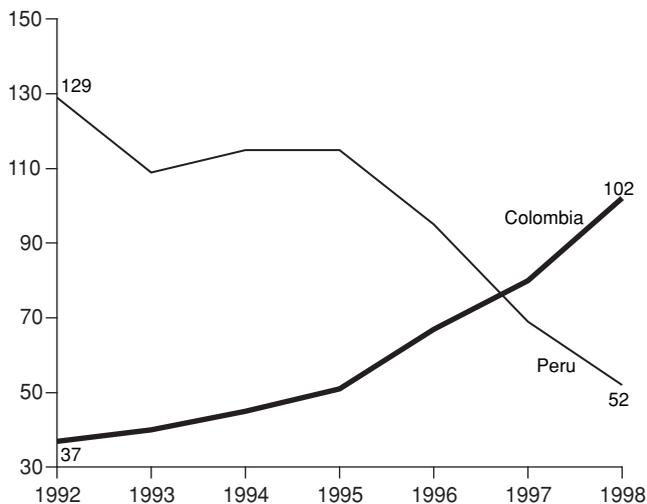
Post-script

In August 1989, Colombian Presidential front-runner and war on drugs advocate Luis Carlos Galán was murdered by cartel assassins. Among the weapons used by the cartel hitmen were some that were traced by serial numbers to an arms shipment paid for by then-Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams, out of funds maintained by Bush's so-called "Project Democracy" apparatus for clandestine operations.

The Abrams funds were provided to an Israeli "retired" colonel, Yair Klein, who, at the height of the Iran-Contra shenanigans, set up a weapons-smuggling and mercenary-training operation on the Caribbean British protectorate of Antigua. Klein was part of a regional network of Israeli arms smugglers that was fully integrated into the Bush-North "secret parallel government" covert war apparatus, working as an important channel into the cartels. Iran-Contra "banker" Bruce Rappaport ran several Antiguan banks that were linked to the southern Florida money-laundering operations of the Colombian cartels; he provided the credit line for the Klein operations, which were called upon by George Bush, when, as President, he decided to launch, first, a "Contra" program, and, later, a full-scale invasion, to oust Panamanian leader

FIGURE 5
Coca area harvested

(thousands hectares)



Sources: U.S. State Department and U.S. General Accounting Office.

Manuel Noriega, who had earlier balked at abetting the Contra wars in Central America.

Galán's assassination cleared the way for the eventual takeover of Colombia by the Cali Cartel in the 1990s, through the successive cartel-dominated governments of César Gaviria and Ernesto Samper Pizano.

As a result, not only cocaine processing, but also coca growing, has become king in Colombia. In Peru, the Alberto Fujimori government adopted anti-drug and anti-terror policies during the 1990s (over the violent opposition of George Bush, it should be noted), which succeeded in reducing coca cultivation in that country by 60% between 1992 and 1998 (**Figure 5**). In Colombia, on the other hand, coca cultivation has nearly tripled over the same time period, leaping from 37,000 to 102,000 hectares, and making the country the world's number-one coca grower.

Politically, the Colombian government of Andrés Pastrana is now in the advanced stages of surrendering entire chunks of the country to the FARC and ELN narco-terrorists. Ironically, it is Bush's old lie of the 1980s—that the guerrillas and the drug cartels are *not* two sides of the same coin—which is again being used by the Bush apparatus inside the Madeleine Albright State Department, and elsewhere in Washington, such as by the Inter-American Dialogue. But, this time, the argument has been flipped on its head: Now, they argue, it is necessary to work with the FARC and ELN against the "greater evil" of the drug traffickers, all the while denying the overwhelming evidence that the FARC is nothing but Colombia's Third Cartel.