
Colombia

The dope lobby hits back at Betancur

by Valerie Rush

An all-out war against the government of Colombian President Belisario Betancur has been declared by the dope mafia, in retaliation for the President's decision to extradite Colombian drug traffickers sought by U.S. law-enforcement authorities. At the same time, the U.S. dope lobby is trying to sabotage the potential for genuine and effective Colombian-American collaboration in the war on drugs.

On Nov. 26, a stolen car loaded with dynamite was exploded in front of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá, killing a Colombian mother of three and injuring six others. The car bombing followed nearly two weeks of continuous death threats directed against President Betancur, Justice Minister Parejo Gonzalez, U.S. Ambassador Lewis Tambs, and others who played a role in moving ahead the extraditions of the first six Colombian drug traffickers, currently in jail and awaiting disposition, including sports-magnate Hernando Botero. The mafia also threatened to murder five U.S. citizens for every Colombian extradited, sparking an exodus of U.S. embassy personnel and their families back to the United States.

In the aftermath of the car bombing, bomb threats have been called into airline offices, political party headquarters, and the Colombo-Americano Center, an educational facility in Bogotá. A growing number of American corporate executives have begun scheduling trips home with their families, and a generalized environment of fear is being fostered in the country.

This violent response of the mafia to Betancur's move is understood if one recognizes that by reversing his earlier opposition to extradition of Colombian nationals, Betancur has eliminated one of the mafia's last defenses in Colombia—a corrupted and/or terrorized justice system incapable of keeping the criminals behind bars. In the United States, these criminals face hefty prison sentences. Exemplary is the case of Harold Rosenthal, a notorious drug trafficker whose participation in a major Colombian cocaine ring has just netted him a lifetime prison sentence in the United States.

During the week of Nov. 25, the Spanish government of Prime Minister Felipe González announced the arrest of two of Colombia's most wanted drug mafiosi, Jorge Luis Ochoa

and Gilberto Rodríguez, both of whom had fled Colombia after the murder of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla on April 30. Jorge Ochoa, whose father, Fabio Ochoa Restrepo, was named as co-owner of the vast cocaine laboratories raided in the jungles of Caquetá last March, had met clandestinely with former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen in May to try to parlay an amnesty deal with the Betancur government; the offer was turned down cold. Rodríguez was the owner of the prestigious Banco de los Trabajadores before he sold it to López Michelsen's son Felipe and to López's openly pro-drug protégé Ernesto Samper Pizano. Both Ochoa and Rodríguez are now facing probable extradition to the United States, where they face trafficking, money-laundering, and conspiracy charges.

Breaking the U.S. link

The extradition issue alone does not explain the violent rage of the Colombian dope mafia, however. Betancur's decision in favor of extradition is part of a region-wide escalation by Ibero-American governments against the international oligarchy which funds and deploys Dope, Inc.

Collaboration between the Brazilian and Venezuelan governments and Italian judges in rooting out Sicilian mafia networks in South America, Venezuela's recent expulsion of the terrorist Tradition, Family, and Property cult, with the assistance of the Brazilian Catholic Church, the Spanish government's work with Interpol to bust two of Colombia's most prominent mafia fugitives, progress toward a uniform Ibero-American-wide penal code against drug trafficking, the recent U.N. vote to declare the drug trade a "crime against humanity"—all of this marks a new era in the war on drugs which, for the first time, takes the approach of "a universal response to a universal crime."

But it is the possibility that the Reagan administration will join in an unprecedented regionwide anti-drug effort that has the dope mob and its lobbyists truly terrified. U.S. commitment to such an effort would not only mean greatly enhanced financial and technological resources for the war against drugs, but would also bring to bear the regulatory and enforcement might of the U.S. government against the financial interests—both onshore and offshore—who profit from the traffic of illegal drugs.

Not accidentally, a recent spate of articles have appeared in the U.S. media—including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Miami Herald*—attempting to demean and discredit such major interdiction efforts as the U.S. Caribbean-based "Operation Hat Trick" as unable to make a dent in the unstoppable flood of narcotics. U.S. Ambassador to Bogotá Lewis Tambs had the right idea when he told the press after his embassy had been bombed that the United States would not be frightened out of its moral commitment: "In spite of the unfortunate consequences that accompany our struggle, we vow to continue the fight against common drug trafficking and terrorism."