

Alfonso López Michelsen

The political godfather and sponsor of Ernesto Samper Pizano, López Michelsen, is the man whose 1974-78 Presidency oversaw the mushrooming of the drug trade in Colombia. The son of a former President and a wealthy oligarch, one of López's first acts in office was to



undertake a drastic reform of Colombia's banking and financial system, under cover of an "economic emergency" issued by executive decree. He was guided by his Finance Minister Rodrigo Botero Montoya, today a vice-chairman of the Washington-based pro-drug legalization lobby Inter-American Dialogue. Part of that reform was the creation of the so-called "sinister window," a black market window set up at the central bank to accept illegal drug dollars, no questions asked. Later, the former president of the Federation of Latin American Banks, Fernando Londoño Hoyos, wrote that if the government really wanted to catch drug traffickers, "they should capture them on the lines at the sinister window."

Under López's Presidency, the powerful Grupo Grancolombiano financial conglomerate, under the control of his first cousin Jaime Michelsen Uribe, amassed a vast fortune and came to be known as "The Octopus" for its propensity to swallow up legitimate enterprises. Grancolombiano's "research institute," the National Association of Financial Institutes (ANIF), was the launching pad for Ernesto Samper Pizano's political career. In 1977, Samper was named president of ANIF, and quickly turned it into the national lobby for drug legalization. In a July 1980 press statement, Samper characterized ANIF as "the Latin American coordinator of the international alliance to reform marijuana laws."

Asset-stripping, self-lending, and pyramiding eventually brought down the Grancolombiano Group, sending Jaime Michelsen fleeing to Miami in early 1984. In 1982, López's bid for a second presidential term had failed miserably, despite having taken drug cartel contributions through his campaign treasurer, Samper Pizano. But by 1984, López had succeeded in reestablishing his credentials with the dope mob; he placed Samper Pizano on the board of directors of the Cali Cartel-owned Banco de los Trabajadores (seized by the government two years later), and himself mediated repeated efforts by the drug cartels over the coming years to buy their way into the country's political machinery.

López Michelsen singlehandedly did more to turn Colombia into a "narco-democracy" than any one else, and it is he, that Colombians and the rest of the world have to thank for the Samper Presidency today.

As a reward for his exoneration, President Samper granted De Greiff the post of ambassador to Mexico, a charge which he still occupies. In the narco-cassettes, the Rodríguez brothers affectionately refer to De Greiff as "the old man."

On Sept. 30, 1994, Toft announced his retirement from the DEA and from his post in Colombia. In the same press conference, he denounced the Samper government as a "narco-democracy," warning that the DEA had proof that Samper had received several million dollars from the traffickers to finance his presidential campaign. Spokesmen for the Clinton administration stated that Toft's comments were not an official government declaration, but refused to deny or confirm them.

In November 1994, the Samper government moved to de facto legalize the production of coca leaves in Guaviare and Putumayo departments, after coca producers were organized by the narco-terrorist FARC to conduct an armed "strike" against fumigation of their illegal crops.

On Dec. 6, 1994, according to certain sources, Samper Pizano—under pressure from the DEA—appointed Gen.

Rosso José Serrano director of the National Police. General Serrano began an immediate clean-up of the institution, which had come to be known as one of the most corrupt in the country.

In January 1995, Fernando Botero publicly apologized to the drug traffickers for a raid that the joint army-police "Search Bloc" had carried out during a birthday party for Gilberto Rodríguez's daughter.

On Jan. 27, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette announced that neither the Clinton administration nor the U.S. Congress would certify that Colombia was fighting drugs. Samper launched major diplomatic efforts to avoid such a decertification, and pledged to the U.S. government that he would dismantle the Cali Cartel. The certification was then issued under a "national security waiver," with President Clinton clarifying that the certification was not for the Samper government, but for the country.

On April 20, the Prosecutor's office arrested Eduardo Mestre Sarmiento, former Colombian ambassador to Switzerland, who had served as an intermediary for the Cali Car-