

## Journalism & Organized Crime in Colombia and Mexico

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Richard Hartwig  
Political Science Department  
Texas A & M University-Kingsville  
Kingsville, TX 78363  
kfreh002@tamuk.edu

John Bailey  
Department of Government  
Georgetown University  
Washington, DC  
baileyjo@georgetown.edu

## Outline

I. Introduction .....	2
II. Journalism & the Social/Cultural Context of Drug Violence	
The Mexican Context .....	8
The Colombian Context.....	11
Working hypotheses.....	23
III. Internal and External Dynamics of Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO's)	
The United States and Mexico .....	25
The United States and Colombia .....	48
Working hypotheses.....	66
V. Conclusions.....	67
VI. Bibliography.....	72

One of Barranquilla's most popular songs is about a man who becomes a *caimán*, a smaller crocodile that inhabits the banks of the Magdalena River. . . . To get the attention of the woman he was in love with, he turned himself into a *caimán*. Unfortunately, he was never able to turn himself into a man again.

Silvana Paternostro  
*My Colombian War*

Transnational organized crime is a central challenge to Latin America's efforts to strengthen rule of law in both rural and urban areas. Drug trafficking is currently the most salient aspect of transnational crime. Focusing on the Americas, we find a large, bifurcated literature. On the one hand, we have vivid, journalistic accounts such as Jon Lee Anderson's story "Gangland: Life in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro" in the Oct. 5th, 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*. To read this story is to have an epiphany: Rio, the city which is to host the 2016 Olympic Games, had at least 100,000 people working for drug gangs. In 2008, there were nearly 5,000 murders in the city and the police admit to having killed 1,188 people "resisting arrest".<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, we have high quality, but bloodless, academic books such as David Mares' *Drug Wars and Coffee Houses: The Political Economy of the International Drug Trade* (2006). Mares describes the complexity of the drug trade as a public policy issue. We learn, for example, that tobacco and alcohol are more important than marijuana as "gateways" to hard drug use [p. 53]. This is the big picture, drawn from a comprehensive survey of the literature.

The current paper has to do with the relationship between these two types of literature.

We will concentrate on journalistic accounts of drug-related crime in Mexico and Colombia and

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<sup>1</sup> Substantial efforts have since been made to "clean up" Rio and gangs of criminals have been displaced from many of the *favelas*. However, according to State University of Rio de Janeiro anthropologist Alba Zaluar, 45% of Rio's *favelas* are now under the control of militias, composed primarily of active-duty and retired police officers, prison guards and soldiers. Cited in Simon Romero and Taylor Barnes, "Officers of the Law, Outside the Law: In Parts of Brazil, Militias Deal in Extortion, torture and Murder". <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/world/americas/in-parts-of-brazil-militias-operate-outside-the-law.html?>

how they relate to academic work. Our overall thesis is that it is crucial to include both types of literature in any examination of the subject. Failure to do so will blind us to human aspects of the problem of illegal drugs; will impoverish our theoretical understanding; and may result in flawed public policies.

As academics and teachers, we are both fascinated and horrified by journalistic accounts of the drug-related violence in Mexico, Colombia, and the United States. In October, 2009, for example, an article entitled "Confesiones de un asesino de Ciudad Juarez" [Confessions of an Assassin in Juarez, Mexico] was published in *Nexos en linea*. U.S. journalist Charles Bowden interviewed a *sicario*, a professional assassin, in a restaurant somewhere along the southern side of the US/Mexican border. The man admitted to having killed some 250 people as a hit-man for drug cartels. In the course of the interview, Bowden asked the *sicario* how much the man would charge to kill him. "Five thousand dollars, at the most, probably less. You don't have links to people in power. No one would come after me if I killed you."

Few academics have access to this kind of information, let alone the courage or the recklessness required to seek it out. But the books and articles of Charles Bowden and other journalists constitute essential raw material for academic writing on drug-related crime. Such accounts are also important for teaching purposes; they generate interest and convey "understanding" in a way that academic literature cannot hope to emulate. We believe that journalistic accounts should be more widely used in policy-making circles as well. Ideally, the relationship between the two literatures should be reciprocal, with reporters informing academics and academic literature being sufficiently useful and accessible to ground the writing of journalists.

Journalism is an academic discipline, but journalists who write about international crime are seldom academics. Journalists and academics inhabit different worlds. Academics strive for promotion, tenure and prestige-- measured by the quality of their publications, by the status of institutions they are affiliated with, and by the quality of their teaching. Social scientists prize rigor about facts and theory more than good writing. Journalists operate in the "real" world of market discipline. Some are employed by newspapers, magazines and other--often-endangered--media organizations. Free-lance journalists sell their stories piecemeal wherever they can. Journalists need to tell vivid, interesting stories, but also need to clothe their narratives in facts. Their facts come from a variety of sources, but usually emphasize personal interviews. Journalists gauge success by getting a good story from the right source. Journalists sometimes push the envelope to tell a story that a general audience will want to read. Like soldiers and war correspondents, many journalists specializing in drug-related crime seem addicted to the adrenalin rush stimulated by proximity to danger.

To evaluate the quality of journalistic "ore," the authors focus on recent books and articles on drug-trafficking in Colombia and Mexico. Our choice is pragmatic. More has been written in recent years on drug-related violence in Colombia and Mexico than on this type of criminality in other Latin American countries. Colombia is of particular interest to Mexicans, who fear the "Colombianization" of their country and hope to emulate the relative success Colombia has had in dealing with it. Mexico currently has no equivalent to either the FARC guerrilla group or to the (now partially demobilized) paramilitary organizations which have fought the guerrillas in Colombia.<sup>2</sup> However, both the FARC and the paramilitaries traffic in illegal drugs.

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<sup>2</sup> The Zapatistas in Chiapas have never tried to overthrow the Mexican government; nor would they have the slightest chance of doing so.

Our procedure will be to use a series of orienting questions about the internal and external behavior of drug-trafficking organizations as a guide to review the books. Our goal is to propose working hypotheses that might be interlinked to constitute a preliminary theory of organized crime and the political system.

In Mexico and Colombia, academics and journalists lead more precarious lives than in the United States and Europe. We will review a mix of national and foreign authors, with a tilt toward the foreign. The foreigners have less knowledge of local contexts, but are less likely to be threatened, killed, kidnapped, or tortured because of their work.<sup>3</sup> The accounts of foreigners are also more likely to appear in other than Spanish-language publications.

We begin with a section on the social/cultural context of drug-related violence and criminality in the two countries. In Colombia this also involves guerrilla activity. We then narrow our focus to the internal and external dynamics of drug trafficking/ guerrilla organizations. Can journalists help inform us about the internal dynamics of criminal organizations, the relationships between such organizations, and their interactions with the political systems in which they operate? With respect to internal dynamics, for example, what explains the origins of the gang and its evolution of the over time? How does the leadership emerge? What explains the degree of internal coherence of the gang? With respect to the external

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<sup>3</sup> The New-York based Committee to Protect Journalists reports that 42 journalists have been killed in Colombia since 1992. Garry Leech writes that all of the journalists assassinated in the past decade have been Colombians, adding that: "Colombian journalists had, in large part, learned to avoid serious investigative journalism". *Beyond Bogota: Diary of a Drug War Journalist in Colombia*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2009, p. 182. David González and Jean-François Boyer, in "Tamaulipas: La prensa amordazada," *Le Monde diplomatique*, 10 June, 2009, pp. 1, 7-10, quoted a newspaper owner in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas as saying that nearly every means of communication in the state has an employee who works for the drug gangs and tells the directors when they have committed "errors". González and Boyer cite the Mexican National Human Rights Commission as saying that 48 "communicators" were killed in Mexico between 2000 and 2009. In a story entitled "Dead Line," in the April 2011 issue of the *Texas Monthly*, John Burnett writes that no Matamoros newspaper, radio station, television station or website was willing to say that the Gulf Cartel leader Tony Tormenta (Antonio Ezequiel Cárdenas Guillén) had been killed in the city on November 5, 2010, although the story generated headlines all over the world. Burnett writes that a specially selected police reporter serves as the Gulf Cartel's liaison to the media, telling them what they may and may not print or broadcast. *Ibid.*

dynamics, why does the gang decide to evade, cooperate with, or confront other gangs, or the police? To what extent do gangs cultivate political support from political parties and/or elected officials? The story will shift back and forth between rural and urban areas. In the drug business, the countryside and the cities are inextricably linked, like supply and demand.

## **JOURNALISM AND THE SOCIAL/CULTURAL CONTEXT OF DRUG VIOLENCE**

Imagine, if you will, a multi-colored, patchwork quilt laid over a landscape of mountains and deserts. The quilt represents the totality of human interactions, thin in some areas, thick in others. It is alive. Part of the quilt is what you can see through the window of an airplane: the tapestry of highways, farms, buildings and cities that lie below. Another part of the quilt is invisible, but on the record: telephone calls, letters, e-mails and official currency transfers. Also unseen, but legitimate, are institutional relationships that structure life in the 21st Century: government agencies, businesses, churches, non-profit organizations and the like. As if charged with electricity, the quilt buzzes with emotions like love, fear, greed, and nationalism.

The underside of the quilt lies in the shadows, seeking to hide itself. It is composed of secret relationships and illegal transactions. Sometimes there are flashes of light as weapons are fired, people are killed and the fabric begins to unravel. But hidden weavers quickly appear and draw new threads across the gaps in the cloth.

Intrepid journalists venture into the darkness and draw vivid pictures of patches of the secret quilt which they observe. But the quilt is ever changing. The big picture remains unclear. The present writers will attempt to sew the journalistic pictures together to better understand the quilt as a whole and the origins and future of its ominous dark side.

## The Mexican Context

At least 50,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence since late 2006, when President Felipe Calderón unleashed the Mexican military on the drug cartels.<sup>4</sup> We are still looking for a term to describe what is happening. It is not a conventional war; it is not a civil war; and it is not guerrilla warfare. "Drug war" is simply a label, heavy with political symbolism. Our preference is to use the generic term "Violence," as it is used in Colombia. We could refer to "The Mexican Violence" in order to distinguish the two cases. It might be even better to call it "The Mexican-American Violence," since the demand for drugs, the supply of money, and the weapons used come predominantly from Mexico's northern neighbor.

Many journalists lack the kinds of information required to answer our specific questions.<sup>5</sup> Englishman Richard Grant, for example, published a book in 2008 entitled *God's Middle Finger: Into the Lawless Heart of the Sierra Madre*.<sup>6</sup> Grant simply read books about the Mexican Sierra Madre, talked to informants like Joe Brown, author of the classic *Forests of the Night*, and headed off into the mountains. He never penetrated a drug gang; Grant met only peasant marijuana growers and low-level smugglers. However, his beautifully written book is anything but irrelevant to our endeavor. It tells us about the social and cultural context in which the drug

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<sup>4</sup> In January 2012, the Mexican government reported that 47,515 people had been killed in drug-related violence since late 2006, but the accuracy of this figure is debatable. It is probably too low. Damien Cave, "Mexico Updates Death Toll in Drug War to 47,515, but Critics Dispute the Data". *New York Times*, 11 January. 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/world/americas/mexico-updates-drug-war-death-toll-but-critics-dispute-d.../>

<sup>5</sup> George W. Grayson writes: "Since 2004, when its editor was stabbed to death, the *El Mañana* chain, which publishes newspapers in Matamoros, Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo, has simply stopped running articles about the cartels and their activities. *Mexican Messiah: Andrés López Obrador* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007): 275.

<sup>6</sup> New York: Free Press. The title of the book comes from a statue of Jesus, whose raised hand had lost all but the middle finger.



gangs operate in this part of northwestern Mexico. This is crucial to an understanding of how the gangs work at the grassroots level. Consider the following quotation:

. . . The Sierra Madre developed a rough, violent, fiercely independent culture that had more in common with the American frontier than the civilized parts of central Mexico. Feuds and vendettas flourished. So did banditry, alcoholism, a fanatical machismo, and a deep distrust of law, government, or any kind of outside authority (p. 8).

Grant's mentor Joe Brown is quoted as saying that the Sierra has always been an anarchical, dangerous place. But now "nearly all the decent people have been killed or run out and all the bad guys have automatic weapons . . . It's become the kind of anarchy that gives anarchy a bad name" (p. 9 ).

There's this idea in the Sierra that you're not a man until you've killed a man, like it was with the Apaches, and now you add alcohol and cocaine and AK-47s into the equation. . . (Brown, p. 10)

What you had now, in other words, was a hillbilly vendetta culture that was up to its eyeballs in the world's most murderous business enterprise: illegal narcotics. Its existing tendencies toward violence, vengeance and ruthlessness had become supercharged. Homicide was now the leading cause of death for men in the mountains of southern Sonora and the entire state of Sinaloa. (p. 123)

Grant talked to Joe Brown about how "raw and alive" he had felt in the mountains. But the Sierra Madre was a confusing place. In a Chihuahuan town named Álamos, for example, Grant had seen big, healthy marijuana plants growing in tree wells at the headquarters of the state judicial police. This was the agency which was supposed to combat illegal drug cultivation. Grant understood that some police were corrupt but couldn't believe that the cops were actually growing marijuana.

"No,no," one of the locals said. "They sit out there on the front steps and roll their joints and throw the seeds into the tree wells and Mother Nature does the rest."  
"But they don't pull out the plants. They're right there for everyone to see."  
"They will pull them out but what's the hurry? Look, the buds are nearly ready." (p 11)

Grant spent a lot of time in *cantinas*, or bars. The cantinas were "raucous,

accordion-driven and cocaine-fueled," but were good places to learn about the drug trade. Like other observers, Grant was struck by the religious component of the illegal drug business. The traffickers, with their gold chains, ostrich skin boots and silk cowboy shirts, were devoted to Jesús Malverde, the patron saint of the Mexican *narcos*.

[They] wore scapulars of the mustachioed bandit around their necks and took their loads of marijuana, heroin, and Colombian cocaine to Malverde shrines to get them blessed for safe passage north into the United States. Hit men went to the shrines to get their bullets blessed, so they would fly straight and true and lethal (p. 12).

Then there were the *narcocorridos*, the drug ballads. This is a variation of *norteño* music in which the lyrics glorify the life of a drug trafficker. Grant suggests that despite the accordions and the polka beat, the type of music it most resembles is gangsta rap (p. 105).

Drug money could conceivably be put to positive uses, but in Grant's description the money is usually destructive in the Sierra. It is used to buy guns, booze, women, and pickup trucks, which are frequently wrecked by drunken and stoned outlaws.

With the money from your first crop you buy clothes, jewelry, and guns, said Gustavo. 'It's illegal to own a firearm in Mexico but I can assure that every one of these huts has at least one pistol and one rifle inside. Then you buy your truck, your solar, your satellite, and TV. The last thing you spend money on is the house. Look at that: he didn't even buy a tin roof to keep the rain out but he's got a \$30,000 Dodge Ram parked out front.' (p. 126)

People in the mountains had a finite amount of land which was over-logged and could not support a growing population. The solutions of choice were either to emigrate to the United States or to grow marijuana ("the crop that pays") to sell to the local *narcos* (drug traffickers). There were other types of people in the Sierra as well. For example, Grant met John, a member of a local Mormon community.<sup>7</sup> John is described as being personally abstemious, not using tobacco, alcohol or coffee. However, he had no objection to his neighbors' growing and

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<sup>7</sup> Grant (p. 54) writes that the Mormons established eight communities in northern Mexico. Three were located in the Sierra Madre mountains of Chihuahua. In 1885, the Mormons arrived in Mexico, where they could continue to practice polygamy undisturbed.

trafficking marijuana. Indeed, John was on good terms with many of the local traffickers and said that they made good neighbors. At one point, the local mafia protected the Mormon community from a neighboring "ejido" [collective farm] that was encroaching on their land. "There was no law as we would understand it in the Sierra but there were always systems of authority" (pp. 58-59).

One of the most interesting parts of Grant's book is his description of how people interacted with each other in the remote mountains and pine forests.

Whenever we came across another person, whether on foot, in a truck, or riding a horse or mule, John would stop and they would talk until they found the name of someone they knew in common. It was the custom of the country. You stated where you were going and exchanged your clan credentials. You mentioned any army units that you had seen or heard about in the area. You discussed the condition of the road and the prospects for rain. Then you nodded at each other and went on your way (p. 58)

It was important to take account of the army units. In Álamos, Sonora, Grant hired a guide named Gustavo Aragón. Gustavo explained what would happen if the army caught a marijuana grower who had not fixed them with a bribe. The army would often give the person a choice between *bote*, *leña* or *plomo*. *Bote* meant the can or prison, where you might get ten years. "...And these are not nice, clean *gringo* prisons where they give you food (p. 124)."

*Leña* is firewood and what this means is they will take a piece of wood and beat you half to death with it. In three days you might be able to walk. . . . *Leña* is the smart choice but it's a very hard choice to make. The third choice is *plomo*, or lead. They take you into a clearing and the captain says, 'Start running and we won't start shooting until you reach the brush'. Then they open up with automatic rifles. When you hear the army killed a grower in the Sierra, it usually means the grower chose *plomo*. Most of them do. Their pride won't allow them to stand there and be beaten or taken off to jail (ibid.).

There are some "bad guys" in Grant's book, which begins with an account of what it feels like to be hunted. One night in the mountains a man said: "You say you're alone and unarmed. . . Aren't you afraid someone will kill you?" "Why would anyone want to kill me?" The tall one

smiled and said: "To please the trigger finger" (pp. 2-3). This is what Joe Brown had predicted would happen to Grant:

"If you go up in those mountains, what you are going to find is murder. . . . that's where you'll get shot on sight, no questions asked, and the guy who shoots you will still have a smile on his face from saying hello" (p. 7).

But this wasn't the whole story. A young man named Ángel was Grant's guide to a Sonoran town named San Bernardo. Ángel was a schoolteacher, a bohemian who was interested in art and culture. San Bernardo was headquarters of a drug gang called Los Güeritos (The Blonds) or Los Números (The Numbers). A reporter from the Hermosillo newspaper *El Imparcial* had recently been kidnapped and tortured to death for publishing a story about the gang. But Ángel, a native son, rejected the idea that the town might be considered dangerous:

It is a very close community. I know all the *mafiosos* because we grew up together and with me they are very friendly and respectful. They are not bad people. 'But they do a lot of killing,' said Grant. It is the nature of the business, unfortunately. I feel sorry for them. They have made a bad choice and their only future now is to get killed or go to prison (p. 137).

The people have good hearts and beautiful souls but they lack education, they lack culture, they are caught up in this lifestyle of machismo and status symbols. Also they need more law. It is so easy to kill someone and get away with it. 'How many friends of yours have been murdered?' Many, he said, shaking his head sadly. 'Maybe twenty, twenty-five. But they were not all close friends' (pp. 137-138).

Drugs and revenge were major reasons for all the killings described in Grant's book. A Tarahumara Indian named Isidro explained: "Drugs give people money to buy guns, alcohol and cocaine. . . . People get more aggressive and paranoid. They kill more easily and then the dead man's family has to avenge the killings." When Isidro's father was killed his mother asked him to take vengeance.

It was very hard, but I decided not to because if I avenged my father, I would end up losing my brothers and maybe my uncles. It wouldn't bring back my father and would bring more sorrow into my family. My mother didn't understand. She never really forgave me (p. 243).

We hope readers will agree that the above material is important. Immediately focusing upon internal and external dynamics of criminal enterprises may be counterproductive if the larger context is neglected. Of course, the Sierra Madre is but one of many Mexican contexts. The ever-changing situation of cities along the US/Mexican border is substantially different. Monterrey, Guadalajara and Mexico City are other worlds entirely--as are cities like Puebla, which to date have been less affected by the Violence.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Colombian Context**

Illegality in Colombia is more politicized than in Mexico. Guerrillas, drug cartels and paramilitary forces have national political aspirations in Colombia, which is not yet the case in Mexico. Part of the explanation is that the 20th Century Colombian state was less centralized and weaker than the Post-Revolution Mexican state. Bogotá, the capital, is nowhere near as dominant as Mexico City. Mexico has exercised much greater control over its national territory, but this may be receding in recent years. Colombia, on the other hand, has not experienced a major revolution comparable to that which began in Mexico in 1910. Instead, it is known for violence. Colombian novelist Fernando Vallejo has suggested that the country's name be changed to "Violencia".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> One possible explanation for the relative tranquility of the city of Puebla is that a corrupt governor made a deal with the "narcos" to the effect that the *mafiosos* could live in the Puebla and their families could go to school there as long as they did their business elsewhere. We have heard a similar theory about Monterrey. However, although heads of drug gangs live in Monterrey, drug violence and kidnappings have increased in recent years. Along the northern border, drug *capos* often live on the U.S. side for protection. Their rivals often hunt them down anyway. There is no way to verify such theories. In any case, since Mexican drug gangs have fragmented, the violence seems to be out of control.

<sup>9</sup> Silvana Paternostro, *My Colombian War: A Journey Through the Country I left Behind* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), p. 26.

It makes a big difference whether you look at a country from the outside in or from the inside out. It is also important whether you view society from the bottom up or from the top down. Foreigners learn about a new country from the outside in. Richard Grant learned about Mexico by looking at a map, reading some books, talking to experts, and then driving into the Sierra Madre, where he encountered small-time drug smugglers from the lower rungs of the social ladder. Natives learn about their country from the inside out. Children absorb language and culture like little sponges. More abstract knowledge comes through further socialization, formal education, and contact with the media.

Journalist Silvana María Paternostro Montblanc grew up as a denationalized, upper-class, provincial Colombian. Paternostro's perspective, in *My Colombian War: A Journey Through the Country I left Behind*, is both top-down, "inside-out" and "outside-in". Like Grant, Paternostro has no inside knowledge of the guerrillas/drug traffickers. What she does have is inside knowledge of upper-class culture in northern Colombia. For present purposes, her major contribution lies in highlighting the importance of social class with respect to recruitment into illegal/subversive activities such as drug trafficking and attempting to overthrow the government.

Paternostro grew up in an elite, but progressive, Conservative family in Barranquilla, on Colombia's northern coast. Her family had a country estate named "El Carmen", initially a cattle ranch which Silvana's grandfather turned into a cotton farm to supply the textile mills of Medellín. "...Having land in the countryside afforded us a feudal life of masters and servants in a burgeoning merchant city. I grew up with things money cannot buy: serfdom. . . . Servants seemed like dolls that could talk, dolls that actually responded."

When I realized that many of them did not know how to read and write, I asked for a blackboard for Christmas. I became their teacher and I took my job seriously. Using chalks of many colors, I stood in front of the handful of live-in servants giving them lessons and grading their homework. (p. 89)

Silvana's parents decided not to send her to the Catholic convent school where her mother had been educated. Instead, she was sent to the secular, co-ed, Karl C. Parrish American School. Students at this school pledged allegiance to both the Colombian and American flags. Silvana left Colombia at age 17 for a boarding school in suburban Detroit, later attending the University of Michigan. While studying at Ann Arbor, Paternostro attended some meetings of the Latin American Solidarity Committee, but felt uncomfortable. The other students seemed uninterested in her being a Colombian.

I was still drawn to the organization and the Americans who were so committed to the place where I came from. Although frankly, until that moment I had never considered myself as Latin American. I came from Barranquilla, not even there--I came from El Parrish [the school] and Riomar and el Country (p. 143).

Today, Paternostro is a New York-based journalist, with publications in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *The Paris Review* and elsewhere. Her parents moved to Panama in 1979 and then to Bogotá, the Colombian capital, in 1986. At that point, she was more interested in Central American rebels than in Colombian drug lords. In 1999, news reports of rebels close to Bogotá got Paternostro interested in Colombia again. Silvana realized that she had never taken a close look at a map of her native country. Doing so for the first time, she imagined Colombia as a deformed doll:

First, the head, bald and too small, and the neck, long like a giraffe's, is what Colombians call "the Coast." There is where I come from. It is the extension of land that borders the Atlantic Ocean and shares mountains . . . with Venezuela.

Then there are the disproportionate arms. The left one, the stump, is hunched up higher as if it were recovering from the blow it received in 1903, when Teddy Roosevelt chopped off the beautiful, muscular, and healthy arm to create Panama. Colombia was left with the underarm, the region known as Chocó, with its forgotten impenetrable rainforest--a perfect place for drug labs and armed rogues to hide.

Extending south, down the rib cage, the nooks and crannies, the jungles and rivers of the Pacific Coast emerge. That entire underarm and rib cage are closer to the laws of nature, far from the rule of law. (pp. 8-9)

Paternostro is interested in cultural politics. She returned to Barranquilla with the idea that "more than the fight among armed illegal groups, many of Colombia's ills come from the power structures inside the homes" (p. 72). At a tea party, Silvana asked a friend's mother about her daughter Vicki, now living in Madrid.

Vicky is fine. But I'm worried about my granddaughter. You know that to have live-in help is very expensive there and so Vicky doesn't have a maid. And my little granddaughter is growing up like that.

These same ladies point and scream, "*Mátenlos*. Kill them," when the television shows images of Manuel Marulanda and his rebel group. My grandmother spews out "atheist, Communists" when they appear on her TV (p. 72).

Silvana is an insider; her great, great great grandfather was a Conservative general during the War of 1000 Days, which pitted the Conservatives against the Liberals at the turn of the 20th Century, killing perhaps 100,000 people. She writes that Colombian identity is defined by region and political orientation. Social class is a third key variable, with the social elite historically split down the middle between Liberals and Conservatives: the Liberal Pumarejo family and the Conservative Corbonells... People from Barranquilla look down on *cachacos* from Bogotá as "cold, haughty, and hypocritical" and have similar disdain for people from other regions of the country. Colombians from the Guajira peninsula, jutting out into the Caribbean northwest of Venezuela, are known for good reason as pirates and smugglers. In recent times, the word "guajiro" became synonymous with "drug trafficker", a person who came in wanting to buy everything (p. 114). As to political orientation, Paternostro notes that during the period known as La Violencia (1946-57), some churches had red entrances for the Liberals and blue entrances for the Conservatives to keep the two sides from killing each other during masses (p. 12). Paternostro



chooses not vote in Colombian elections, but in Barranquilla she cannot escape her identity. "As much as I do not identify myself as a Montblanc . . . here I am one." More than 37 Montblancs had been kidnapped by rebels/drug dealers (p. 75).

Upon returning to Barranquilla, Silvana spent time with her family and family friends. She wanted to visit "El Carmen," the family estate, but her plans were frustrated by the danger of travel by land. She ultimately made a day trip by airplane. In her social circle, the conflict with the guerrillas/kidnappers/drug traffickers was barely mentioned.

The war killed 30,000 people last year, and I have still not heard the word mentioned, not once. War is like sex--spoken in secret and filled with innuendoes and euphemisms. It's called 'the situation', the 'internal conflict' or at most the armed conflict'. People talk about peace instead (p. 80).

But one day Silvana was home when a family maid received a phone call. "She hangs up and in a calm voice informs the other maid, the kitchen maid, that her cousin and her cousin's husband have just been killed. The guerrillas, those *hijueputas* [sons of bitches], were to be blamed" (p. 50).

*The New York Times* ran a story on August 8, 2001 describing how ranchers in northern Colombia had created an 8,000 man militia known as the United Self-Defense Forces (AUC) to fight the guerrillas which 'has wiped three rebel groups from the area in a fierce campaign characterized by massacres of peasants and assassinations' (p. 82). But this was not in the Barranquilla newspapers.

I cannot help but notice that in the two weeks I've been in Colombia I have yet to read about the paramilitary. They are completely absent from the local news (p. 82).

General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla became President of Colombia in 1953 in a military coup--an unusual event in the country's history. He was deposed in 1957 in a counter-coup supported by leaders of both the Liberal and Conservative parties. The two political parties initiated a

twelve (extended to 16) year period of coalition government called the National Front. The Presidency alternated every four years between a Liberal and a Conservative. In 1970, it was the Conservatives' time to win. Their candidate was Misael Pastrana. Pastrana was opposed in the April 19th general election by the former dictator Rojas Pinilla and his ANAPO party, which had strong working class support in the major cities. Pastrana may or may not have won the election, but he won the vote. In protest, a new guerrilla group was organized: the M-19 (Movement 19). The M-19 was composed of university students/defectors from the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The FARC, led for decades by Pedro Antonio Marín (also called Marulanda), is still the major guerrilla group today.

Paternostro, citing other published sources, writes insightfully about the class characteristics of the M-19 and the FARC. She notes that the young university students who joined the guerrilla groups were very different from Marulanda, the FARC leader. They were from the city, wore their hair long and sported bell bottoms and platform shoes. Marulanda was a *campesino*, a man of the land, who wore military uniforms and rubber boots. The students wanted a revolution with books, music, and *picardia*, mischief. "The students realized that the peasant leader [Marín/Marulanda] had no sense of humor and was prejudiced against whoever was not a man that toiled the land" (p. 66).<sup>10</sup>

Marulanda's followers, writes Paternostro, were introverted, disciplined, suspicious, country men who rose with the dawn. The directorate of the M-19, influenced by the Uruguayan Tupamaros, were quite different. "They were young, urban and educated. They grew up with

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<sup>10</sup> Paternostro may be wrong about Marulanda not having had a sense of humor. Robin Kirk tells a story about Arturo Alape, Marulanda's biographer, visiting a FARC camp in 1960. Alape, a member of the Colombian Communist Party, had just returned from Cuba and gave a lecture to Marín and his followers about Cuba's revolutionary land reform. The lecture was met with silence. The night before Alape was to leave, Marín and an ally named Charro Negro played a practical joke on this soft intellectual. Shots rang out; people screamed. Alape ran outside and crouched in a hole, which turned out to be the camp urinal. "Marín laughed so hard that tears dripped down his cheeks." *More Terrible than Death: Violence, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia* (New York: Public Affairs), p. 66. His sense of humor was simply different from that of the students.

Che Guevara, Bob Dylan and parties. Many were from the coast." "The revolution is a party," said Jaime Bateman, one of the group's founders. To introduce themselves to the country, the M-19 ran ads in newspapers. One of them read: "Parasites? Worms? Lack of Memory? Inactivity? M-19 is coming" (p. 66).

Bateman went to Marulanda with the idea of stealing Bolívar's sword, an idea he got from the Tupamaros, who had once stolen the flag of José Gervasio Artigas, the liberator of Uruguay. Marulanda thought this was a waste of time (p. 67). Paternostro writes:

Marulanda reminds me of my grandfather (even if he would roll in his grave at my thought). To these men, who proudly call themselves *hombres del campo*, or men of the country, city life, books, and ideas are for sissies, spoiled boys like my father, who was always quoting economists, or like Bateman. It didn't matter if they believed in the free-market like my father or in a state-controlled economy like the M-19 boys, they were seen with suspicion by men who'd spent their lives cultivating the land (p. 68).

Simón Trinidad was the nom de guerre of an upper-class *costeño* named Ricardo Palmera. Trinidad, who became a FARC commander, referred to his class background as shameful. Like Paternostro's father, Trinidad studied economics in Bogotá and at Harvard. Trinidad worked as a banker, taught economics and was married at the country club. Then he gave it all up and joined the FARC. Trinidad was valuable to the guerrillas since he knew what all the rich people in the region were worth. He made lists of who should be kidnapped (p. 84).<sup>11</sup> Palmera's transition to the left apparently began when he worked at a government development bank [*Caja Agraria del Cesar*] that gave agrarian credits to poor farmers. He subsequently became a professor [at the Popular University of Cesar] and gravitated into politics, becoming a follower of Liberal Presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán. After Galán was assassinated in 1989, Palmera was arrested and interrogated by the Army. He joined the Patriotic Union (UP),

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<sup>11</sup> According to the Wikipedia, downloaded 3/19/2010, Palmera stole 30 million pesos from the privately owned *Banco de Comercio* and took financial records that were later used for extortions and kidnappings. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sim%C3%B3n\\_Trinidad/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sim%C3%B3n_Trinidad/)

the political arm of the FARC. Then Jaime Pardo Leal, head of the UP, was assassinated. It became too dangerous to be a member of the legal wing of the guerrilla movement, so Palmera joined the FARC. He became Simón Trinidad, "Simón" being a reference to the liberator Simón Bolívar. Newly trained, he returned to his roots in the northern countryside as commander of FARC 's 41st Front. The FARC had become more of a big tent.

Simón Trinidad was part of the failed peace negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government during the Andrés Pastrana administration (1998-2002). At one point in the negotiations, he gave the government two months to end unemployment in the country (p. 234). After watching Trinidad's performance on television as spokesman for the FARC, Paternostro wrote:

Simón Trinidad is arrogant for sure. It is the haughtiness of being male in a macho country and not having grown up in Bogotá. Trinidad's body language is that of a provincial man, regardless of his political position. . . . These men do not negotiate. Because that is the way they were raised; because of what is called *la ley del monte*, the law of the mountain (p. 232).<sup>12</sup>

It seems plausible that an occasional upper-class individual like Ricardo Palmera might leave his privileged life to fight for "social justice". But Paternostro also writes of a man called "Jorge 40", a paramilitary leader from the northeastern city of Valledupar. "He is the aristocrat-para; the other side of the coin to Simón Trinidad, the aristocrat-rebel, both men born with silver spoons, destined to be the best and the brightest . . . but have instead turned into armed outlaws" (p. 230). The picture becomes more confused.

A few people like Trinidad or Guillermo Saenz Vargas ("Alfonso Cano") joined the FARC or the other guerrilla groups out of commitment to revolution. But in some rural areas, writes Paternostro, " joining the FARC [and to a similar extent the ELN] became as settled a

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<sup>12</sup> Trinidad was captured in late December, 2005 in Ecuador and extradited to the U.S., where he was tried four times and ultimately sentenced to 60 years in prison for conspiring to hold three U.S. contractors hostage.

career track as law or teaching" (p. 65). Most of the rebels were like Jorge Briceño Suarez ("[Mono Jojoy"), commander of FARC forces in the south. He drove a Toyota Prado 4x4 which retailed for \$50,000 in the United States. Mono Jojoy once told a journalist that he joined the guerrillas because he had a talent for war. "I was nothing when I was a civilian. I was created by weapons" (p. 66).

Marín was the distant, revered founder. But it was Mono Jojoy who epitomized their aspiration, a jolly, vicious, fun-loving murderer who drives a flashy vehicle with his pistol on his hip, girls on the running boards, and a rum bottle at the ready (ibid).

Paternostro quotes a Colombian economist named Salomon Kalmanovitz to explain the existence of the guerrillas--questioning her own thesis about feudal family structures.

Kalmanovitz argues that the rebels are businessmen more than revolutionaries.

They not only tax per head of cattle, acre of land, or pound of tobacco. They also charge per gram of cocaine, or to guard poppy fields, processing labs, and airstrips. The paramilitary, in their struggle to defend the concept of private property and punish and take revenge on the rebels who have kidnapped and killed their family members, does the same. They are neither guerrillas nor paramilitary--they are warlords (p. 211).

Paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño is quoted as saying an interview: "Yes, I am also an extortionist. . . . This produces excellent results because we can attack our enemy using their same methods. It is inevitable that in an irregular war human rights get violated" (p. 166).

Castaño's statement brings to mind what former Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín had to say about his country's Dirty War against leftist guerrillas in the 1970s: "We fought the Devil with his own weapons. As a result, Argentina became Hell."

U.S. President Richard Nixon declared his War on Drugs in 1972. The border with Mexico became hot and the drug trade moved south, all the way to Barranquilla.<sup>13</sup> In *The Night*

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<sup>13</sup> Ron Chepesiuk provides a more detailed explanation for the growth of the marijuana industry in Colombia, writing: "The DEA launched Operation Buccaneer in 1974 to eradicate the indigenous marijuana crop in Jamaica, so the local traffickers simply shifted operations to Colombia's north coast and its Guajira Peninsula. Meanwhile, a paraquat-spraying program in Mexico led U.S. consumers to shun Mexican weed, and that country's drug traffickers

of the *Fireflies*, Colombian journalist José Cervantes Angulo describes how a pair of North-Americans persuaded *campesinos* from Santa Marta to go to the Guajira peninsula to grow marijuana for them.

What the agrarian bank didn't lend the peasants the *gringos* gave to them. 'They came in with sacks of dollars and they would say: 'Here's some money to get you started'. . . . Then they would show you another sack and they would say, 'Here is another one to pay you for half of the harvest in advance. I'll come back in six months' (Paternostro, p. 113).

A man named Luís worked for Silvana Paternostro's grandfather on the El Carmen estate. Luís told Silvana that while he worked at El Carmen during the week, he worked for himself on the weekends, raising his crop of marijuana. He paid day laborers from the farm more than they received from her grandfather. It is not hard to understand.

Nor is it hard to understand what happened later. Colombians took over the drug operations from the *gringos*. Then the leftist guerrillas got into the business, followed by the paramilitaries. Many *guajiros* got rich, moved to Barranquilla and other cities, and bought their way into society--or tried to do so.

They wanted to buy the houses, the big ones, the ones in the nicest part of town like ours. Legend had it that they drove around town and when they saw a house they liked they would simply pull into the driveway and knock on the door. If they were invited in, they would politely remove a gun from the waistband, set it on the coffee table, and make an offer, a very attractive, hard-to-say-no-to amount, in dollars (p. 115).

High society started to become corrupted by the drug money. Not that it had been pure before, but this was different. "Members of good Barranquilla families, especially wayward sons who preferred cars and women to university degrees and traditional office hours, joined the marijuana bonanza as well" (ibid). People called them degenerates, but their parties were so lavish that everybody wanted to come. When Silvana's parents left for Panama, they sold their house to a *marimbero*, as the "grass" smugglers were called. It was a wedding gift for the

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moved to Colombia too." *Drug Lords: The Rise and Fall of the Cali Cartel* (Wrea Green, UK: Milo Books, 2007), p. 20.

smuggler's wife, who was a classmate of Silvana's mother. The marriage later broke up; the man was a social climber who had wanted to put shag carpeting over the rosewood floors (p. 111).

One of Silvana's friends married a handsome drug smuggler named Ramón Delgado. Ramón predicted that marijuana would soon be legalized and be as common in supermarkets as beer. "Tobacco companies will be buying marijuana from my fields" (p. 131). Delgado is dead now. Matilde, a house decorator for the smugglers, concluded: "It's cursed money. I don't know one of those guys who made it rich and is also alive" (p. 129).

### **Working Hypotheses:**

1. Revenge is a major reason for the number of homicides in the Sierra Madre.
2. Culture is an important and changing variable in the Violence.
3. Drug use is a major factor in the Violence.
4. Both the police and the Mexican military are often corrupt.
5. Drug cultivation in the Sierra Madre is one of two ways for *campesinos* to make significant amounts of money--the other being emigration to the United States.
6. The effect of drug money is nearly entirely negative in the Sierra Madre.
7. The availability of guns is a key factor in the Violence.
8. Outside of the major towns, the Mexican government has only tenuous control in the Sierra Madre area, maintained only by force and corruption.
9. Social class may be a key variable in analyzing drug violence.
10. Many individuals involved in the illegal drug trade aspire to the trappings of higher social class status.
11. Social class may be a key variable with respect to recruitment into revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements. Both types of movements may become involved in illegal drug smuggling.
12. Geography is of great importance as it relates to traditions of smuggling.
13. Illegally obtained money is a solvent which dissolves social relationships and norms. Over time, the "new wealthy" will become legitimized in the class structure.
14. It is not unusual for respectable people at all social class levels to become involved in drug trafficking.
15. The corrupting effect of drug money may turn both guerrillas and paramilitary fighters into warlords.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Free Online Dictionary defines a warlord as "a military commander exercising civil power in a region, whether in nominal allegiance to the national government or in defiance of it".

16. Colombians have historically been defined by the linked variables of family, social class, region and political affiliation. These variables carry over into the new dynamics of illicit enrichment.
17. Since life expectancy is short and a violent death is possible at any moment in the illegal drug business, it is to be expected that religion will play a role in the lives of *narcos*--albeit in a perverted form.
18. The illegal drug business has resulted in a large, but temporary, transfer of wealth to elements of the lower socio-economic classes.
19. People in the drug business have shorter time perspectives than their peers within the same socio-economic class.

### **INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DYNAMICS OF DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS (DTOs)**

We hope that the previous section was sufficient to convince the reader of the importance of the social/cultural context of illegality as described by serious journalists. This is not to say that journalists have all the answers. Richard Grant did not relate his experience in the Sierra Madre to the larger literature on drug smuggling or to key academic works on Mexican politics. Nor did Silvana Paternostro relate her acute observations on Colombian society and rebels/drug smugglers to the best books on the Colombian political system and the international drug trade. Almost by definition, journalism is not cumulative. It cannot create general theories. This is not a criticism; journalists are rarely academics and probably could not earn their living if they were. Our point is that high quality journalism can help to prevent premature generalizations and the bureaucratization of solutions. We do not need more Wars on Drugs that tend to become wars on people.

At this point, we move on to consider how journalistic literature can help us to understand recruitment into drug-related gangs and the internal/external dynamics of illegal organizations in Mexico and Colombia, with their connections to the United States.



## United States and Mexico

Don Henry Ford Jr. was born in 1957 in Midland, Texas, the childhood home of George W. Bush. His father was a geologist. The family moved the family to Quito, Ecuador, when Don was in the 8th grade. Ford Jr. learned both Spanish and empathy for the Indians, or so he says in an autobiography entitled *Contrabando: Confessions of a Drug-Smuggling Texas Cowboy*.<sup>15</sup> Don reacted against his family's new wealth and adopted the life style of a cowboy, wearing boots, chewing tobacco and riding horses. After high school, he spent a summer in Colombia with Farmland Industries. In 1975, Ford Jr. enrolled in Texas A&M University to study animal science and rodeo. At his father's insistence, he also signed up with the Corps of Cadets. This was a mistake. Don Ford resisted hazing, was punished, skipped classes and flunked out of school. He was reprimanded by his parents, transferred to a junior college and married a woman named Cheryl, who had a child and smoked pot. Don liked to raise plants and animals. Since he could not support the family raising vegetables alone, he also had an indoor crop of marijuana. One thing led to another.

Ford Jr. and his family moved to Oregon, which he thought was a good place to raise pot and cattle. While working on a cattle ranch, Don met a neighboring rancher named "James" who admitted that he smoked pot, but was really into Jesus. James was from a fisherman's family in Florida. He had dropped out of school at age 17 and became a millionaire a little more than a year later. James and his high school buddies, all sons of fishermen, had a fleet of small, fast boats. They would unload Jamaican and Colombian ships and take the merchandise to waiting storage facilities and vehicles near the Florida coast. James eventually became one of the largest

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<sup>15</sup> New York: Harper, 2006.

marijuana brokers in the country. Feeling the heat, he moved to Oregon, where he became a full-time farmer and rancher. A couple of times a year, James would disappear to receive a shipment of as much as 60 tons of drugs. At that time, Ford writes, he was not an evil man:

We grew as much of our own food as we could and preserved it by drying and canning. We raised grains and ground our own flour, baked bread in wood stoves. . . . All of this to prepare for the "end times" that were sure to come any day, just like Jesus said. We ate no white sugar or preservatives--didn't want to contaminate our bodies. But we smoked all the marijuana our lungs could stand--and then a little more.<sup>16</sup>

In those days, James refused to use or sell hard drugs. But a few years later, James looked like a white-collar businessman rather than like a hippie. Now he used and sold cocaine. Ford once saw him with a pile of 30 kilos of cocaine fresh off a boat from Colombia. Each kilo was worth \$56,000 wholesale.<sup>17</sup>

Ford Jr. eventually returned to Texas. There was a good market for illegal drugs. In Plainview, "a surprising number of those farmers plowed all night while high on crank or cocaine, perhaps with a beer between their legs and a joint thrown in for good measure" (p. 60). Ford became a marijuana smuggler, but was not consistently successful. Marijuana is a seasonal, perishable commodity. And then there was the problem of getting paid. He writes: "maybe the reason people like Oscar and me never rose to the level of an Acosta or a Carrillo is that people knew they could rip us off and we wouldn't do anything. Acosta and Carrillo would kill you--and maybe your family as well" (p. 65). At one point, Ford was arrested in Big Bend National Park with 30 pounds of marijuana. He took a plea bargain and was placed in a minimum security prison, a facility which "was as nice as most college dorms". Rather than serve out his term, Ford escaped with some other prisoners who were interested in marijuana smuggling. He fled to a tiny Mexican village named Piedritas on the south side of the Rio Grande, where he was

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

joined by his wife and their six children. He received permission to raise marijuana from the leader of the Mexican community. Ford was busted on a smuggling run to the U.S. in 1986 and served five years in a U.S. maximum security federal penitentiary.<sup>18</sup> His career in the drug trade was not ultimately successful, but Ford escaped with his life and is now free.

In the previous examples, middle-class, white "Americans" became involved in bringing drugs into the United States. There is also the demand side of the equation. What happens to the drugs once they arrive at their destination? Tony Rafael (a pseudonym) deals with this issue in a book entitled *The Mexican Mafia*, set in the *barrios* of Los Angeles, California. "Rafael" is a politically conservative writer who has studied gang behavior. His central concern is a secretive, prison-based gang called "Eme" in Spanish. One of the rules is that members of Eme, The Mexican Mafia, cannot admit the existence of the organization except to another member--under penalty of death. Those who falsely claim membership are also subject to execution (p. 34).

Rafael writes:

It doesn't stretch credulity to claim that the Mexican Mafia runs the California prison system. The correctional staff is there to provide housing and services, but the power is almost completely in the hands of Eme brothers. One correctional officer said that, "We don't run the prison. They do. We're not the enemy we're just the referees" (p. 33).

Eme's main rivals are Nuestra Familia (NF), a Hispanic gang based in northern California, the Black Guerilla Family, and the Aryan Brotherhood. However, Eme is portrayed as the strongest gang. By the early 1990s, it had 350-400 full members who were called *Carnales* (blood brothers). The Mexican Mafia began as a prison gang, with membership open only to convicts. However, Eme has been able to project power beyond the walls of the prisons. In 1993, it gave the following orders to all Hispanic street gangs: 1) stop drive-by shootings; 2)

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-35.

swear allegiance to the Eme, and 3) pay taxes to the Mexican Mafia.<sup>19</sup> Compliance was only partial, however.

There are hundreds of street gangs in California. Kids as young as 10-12 are often "jumped" into gangs. Youngsters in street gangs like "Avenues" are essentially farm teams for the larger organization. "Natural leaders emerge and the larger gang recruits the good earners and talented criminals" (p.154). Leaders of the street gangs may be recruited into the Mexican Mafia. Rafael argues that multi-generational criminal families are common, that children are socialized into lives of crime by their parents and siblings. Drugs for use and sale are supplied by Border Brothers (BB), illegal Mexicans who do most of the smuggling.

Rafael writes that The Mexican Mafia has a dramatically different organizational structure than the Italian Mafia.

. . . La Cosa Nostra is like a feudal system. Warlords, the family heads, control a territory. The family heads create policies, establish rules of conduct, and sanction retribution for errant members. The killing of made men or family heads has to be submitted for approval and blessed by the Commission. Poaching on another family's territory is prohibited. . . (p. 32).

The Mexican Mafia . . . is a horizontal organization. There is only one rank--a brother, or *Carnal*. Since 1957 when the Eme was founded . . . the policy has been "one man, one vote." "there aren't bosses, family heads, or subordinates, and there's no line of reporting. Territories are up for grabs and while fighting and politicking between brothers is technically forbidden, it happens with such frequency that the rule may as well not exist (Ibid.).

Terrence Poppa is an exemplar of the risk-taking journalist. He traveled to Ojinaga, Chihuahua, a small town along the Rio Grande River across from Big Bend National Park, to interview Pablo Acosta, the ruling trafficker of that key *plaza*.<sup>20</sup> His book *Drug Lord: The Life*

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<sup>19</sup> Rafael writes that tax collectors from the Mexican Mafia visit Southern California neighborhoods with Hispanic street gangs. "The Eme has little difficulty enforcing taxation. Every gangster knows that the Eme controls the prisons. And every gangster knows that he'll eventually end up there" (p. 39).

<sup>20</sup> *Plaza* in this context refers to a territory over which the trafficker exercises control.

*and Death of a Mexican Kingpin*<sup>21</sup> tells Acosta's story and describes the relationships between drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and the Mexican government in the 1970s and 80s. This was the twilight of the hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Ojinaga locals, including Acosta's father and grandfather, had been engaged in smuggling for generations. Young Pablo learned the business and the geography of his stretch of the U.S./Mexican border at an early age.

Acosta, a Mexican resident but also a U.S. citizen, worked as a day-laborer in California and Texas. He drifted into marijuana and heroin smuggling in his early twenties as a sideline to his "day job" as a roofing contractor. Snared by U.S. authorities, his initial prison experience opened new vistas.

The prisons provided another type of education. When he was released in 1973, Pablo Acosta had all the connections he needed south of the border to pick up where he had left off. Even better, he could now also tap into numerous Anglo and Chicano crime networks north of the Rio Grande through friendships he had formed in prison. With those networks, someone who had done five years in the federal pen on a heroin conviction carried a respectable calling card (p. 34).

Poppa portrays Acosta as a natural entrepreneur and leader. With only a fourth-grade education, Acosta ran a complicated business connecting scores of drug suppliers with hundreds of clients. In his good years, he could work two or three days without sleep, energized by cocaine. Acosta was astute, physically courageous (a survivor of several gunfights and ambush attempts), and generous in both a genuine and an instrumental way. Nevertheless, giving was not as compulsive for Acosta as it had been for Shorty Lopez, a former *plaza* chief in Ojinaga. Pablo

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<sup>21</sup> Seattle, WA: Demand Publications, 1998.

usually gave with the idea of getting something back, even if only a sliver of useful intelligence from a toothless old peasant up the river. A crisp twenty-dollar bill could result in a tip that American police were patrolling the river down by Lajitas. Or information that a truck carrying six hundred pounds of marijuana had come through his *plaza* and the owner hadn't sought his permission or paid him tribute.

Over the years, Pablo had installed a fortune in water pumps, fencing, plastic irrigation piping, and other equipment trucked in from the United States. The materials got distributed to a lot of ranches, gratis. Those ranchers would look the other way when Pablo's men drove through or landed an airplane late at night. He had purchased their silent complicity (p. 114)

Acosta also projected an image of invincibility and menace. As a drug retailer, he cultivated fear. The fear increased his control. He would go to the buyer's motel room with a half-dozen of his *pistoleros*. As soon as the motel door opened, the gunmen would rush in like commandos and take positions around the room—after checking the bathroom, closet and anywhere else someone with sinister intent could hide. Then Pablo walked into the room looking like a Mexican bandit who would sooner shoot than talk to you. He would stride past the buyers, who were by then dizzy with fear, and would plop down on one of the beds. Pillow against his back and filthy ostrich-skin cowboy boots stretched out on the bedspread, he would snarl 'Let's talk'" (p. 133).

Ojinaga in the 1970s and 80s was one more iteration of a smuggling culture. Poorly educated farmers and laborers showed Wright-brothers type ingenuity in their workshops, trying to stay one step ahead of US enforcement. One example was the use of propane tanks to hide drugs.

An ex-cowboy began experimenting in the body and fender shop of an Ojinaga acquaintance. At first, he cut a rectangular opening at the base or back of the tank, just like everyone else. After introducing the marijuana, he reinserted the metal plate and sealed the edges into place with Bondo, a body and fender putty that dries as hard as rock. Once the putty dried, he smoothed the seams with an electric sander until there was not a trace of a joint. He spray-painted the result and then ground in caliche dust. His finished tanks looked like they had been sitting in the back of his pickup for years, touched only by the wind, the rain and the blistering desert sun (pp. 128-129).<sup>22</sup>

An interesting issue concerns how the Colombian and Mexican traffickers got connected in the mid-1980s, as the Caribbean routes were put under greater US enforcement pressure. According to Poppa, the Colombians sought out Acosta. US narcotics agents speculated that Amado Carrillo Fuentes (later known as “Lord of the Skies” for his use of large jet aircraft to smuggle cocaine) was sent from Guadalajara by his uncle, Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, to oversee the connection. Acosta’s role was largely to warehouse the loads flown in from Colombia, which were then smuggled across the border by various operatives (pp. 186-187).

Even with the systematic corruption of police and army enforcers by traffickers in the golden years of the PRI, drug kingpins usually lasted only a few years. In Acosta’s case, the downfall was due to personal failings and rivalries. Traffickers tend to become users, and Acosta’s crack habit worsened to the point of undermining his business effectiveness and overall judgment. An additional cause of his demise was becoming too visible, granting newspaper interviews for example. This brought attention to the systemic corruption that allowed his business to flourish. Acosta was killed in a police raid led by Guillermo González Calderóni,

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<sup>22</sup> For a description of current smuggling techniques and U.S. attempts to counter them, see Tim Gaynor, *Midnight on the Line: The Secret Life of the U.S. Mexico Border*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2009.

who was later revealed to be a corrupt “apparatchik” in the PRI-government system. The Ojinaga *plaza* eventually fell under Amado Carrillo’s control.

Poppa describes trafficking in Mexico in the 1980s in terms of the systemic corruption of the PRI-government system, running from workaday smugglers at the ground level to cabinet-level secretaries. He alleges connections between President Carlos Salinas’s brother Raúl and the Gulf Cartel. In his Epilogue (written before Vicente Fox’s election in 2000), Poppa suggests that only with the advent of real democracy can Mexico begin to make progress to root out the corruption that protects trafficking.

Charles Bowden, mentioned above in connection with his interview with a Juárez-based *sicario*, has written extensively on themes of crime and the US-Mexico border. His book *Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family*<sup>23</sup> tells the story of the murder of Lionel Bruno Jordan, brother of Phil Jordan, a high-ranking officer in the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Bruno Jordan’s murder, like so many others in Ciudad Juárez, is never really resolved. It might have been a car-jacking gone bad or a message from traffickers aimed at Phil Jordan. In telling the story, Bowden reports some key ideas about the nature of trafficking crime in the PRI-government system. He develops related themes about corruption in US law enforcement and the complicity of the U.S. government in essentially condoning the Mexican government’s criminal activities because of the priority given to higher state interests (e.g., the passage of NAFTA in the late 1980s early 1990s). Bowden writes, for example: “During the campaign for U.S. congressional passage of NAFTA in the fall of 1993, Phil Jordan, along with the rest of the DEA agents concerned with Mexico, was told to keep his mouth shut about the links between the illicit drug business and the Mexican government” (p. 46). Bowden also

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<sup>23</sup> New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002.



describes tensions between DEA, the Justice Department, and the CIA, sympathizing with DEA's frustrations about lack of cooperation.

Bowden picks up the story of Amado Carrillo Fuentes where Poppa leaves off in the late 1980s. Carrillo Fuentes was a remarkably successful smuggler. To be sure, some of his loads were intercepted by the authorities. In July 1995, five tons of cocaine were seized at a bridge crossing in El Paso. But that was small change for him. According to Bowden, Amado Carrillo moved at least 150 tons of cocaine across that bridge in a year. Carrillo landed 727 airplanes at the Juárez International Airport carrying twenty thousand pounds of cocaine each. DEA thought they were being unloaded by Mexican federal police (60).

One day at 6:01 A.M. a U.S. Customs inspector on the bridge at El Paso waves through a truck carrying 2,200 pounds of cocaine. The task takes him thirty seconds. The inspector earns \$1 million.<sup>24</sup>

Bowden's examples of the extent of corruption and treachery in the Carlos Salinas government (1988-2004) are impressive. Mario Ruíz Massieu, former chief of Mexico's anti-drug program, was detained at Newark airport in March 1994 carrying US\$50,000 in cash. "Later, officials found he had a Houston bank account stuffed with US\$9,041,598. He says he saved this money from his earnings 'on the job'" (89).

Raúl Salinas, Jr., brother of the ex-president, served during the Salinas administration with a maximum salary of \$192,000 a year. He was evidently wise with his money. The authorities discovered he had \$84 million in a Swiss account, forty-five bank accounts scattered about Mexico, twenty parcels of land, six mansions, and thirteen apartments. A Mexican official cautioned that "what we have found is just the tip of the iceberg" (226). Bowden relates how Citibank willingly colluded with Salinas to launder and channel funds to Swiss accounts.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., citing Make Gallagher, "Beaten at the Border: Part Two," *Albuquerque Journal*, October 23, 1995.

Bowden also relates how Amado Carrillo Fuentes was formed by the culture of Sinaloa state, home base of the diaspora of smugglers that fanned out to various states along the border. “By the late 1960s, at least six hundred secret airfields operated in the Mexican north. Federal police officers dreamed of being assigned to Sinaloa because of the money to be made in the drug trade. The local press referred to the federal police as ‘Attila’s hordes’” (123). Carrillo’s uncle, Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, was a leading figure in drug trafficking. “[Amado Carrillo] was typical of his drug culture: intensely patriotic, deeply distrustful of his corrupt government, absolutely enmeshed in family” (*ibid.*).

Bowden describes the origins of the Sinaloa drug cartel as the product of government enforcement pressures. Phil Jordan arrested Jesús Áviles, a low-level trafficker who was related to Pedro Pérez Áviles, a high-level Sinaloan operator. Pérez Aviles, a name Jordan did not know when he took him down in the 1960s, was forging a new kind of enterprise in Sinaloa and Sonora. It was a new type of cartel which would blend and harmonize the interests of various drug groups in Sinaloa. Pérez Álvarez did this because the pressure of paying off the Mexican government and dealing with U.S. police agencies forced him to innovate, to form a new type of organization. He created order almost unconsciously amid the natural disorder of an outlaw culture (p. 126).<sup>25</sup>

Bowden also mentions the Herrera organization, a family business in Durango that trafficks heroin, marijuana, and cocaine and has Colombian connections. “The organization totals over three thousand members (at the time a force greater than all of DEA) and almost

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<sup>25</sup> Although our main focus is not on law enforcement, Bowden offers a key point: “The drug business is set up with compartments for security. On the cartel side there is the desire to keep people sealed from each other lest an arrest threaten an entire organization. On the law enforcement side, a similar tendency occurs for other reasons. Agents protect their informants; agencies protect their information as part of their capital. The U.S. government compartmentalizes information about the drug business in various agencies. There is no big picture, nor is there a market for such an image” (p. 160).

everyone in the outfit is kin. The Herreras are deep into opium growing and heroin production, have a village bearing their name in the Sierra, and constitute the civil and criminal government of the state of Durango” (165).

Like his uncle, Amado Carrillo worked to negotiate business relationships among competing DTOs in order to contain the violence and reduce costs. “In June 1994 Carrillo called a meeting of all the top capos in Puerto Morales, Oaxaca, and created what the gringos now call the Federation, that loose assemblage of thugs that commit to certain rules and divisions of territory and the spoils in the interest of better business” (286-287). The image of a rational, calculating Carrillo in business affairs contrasts with the image of a thoroughly vicious killer, deeply addicted to cocaine.

Two other details are significant. One of Amado Carrillo’s girlfriends in 1978-80 reported to the DEA that he had 60 to 80 people working for him (144). This becomes interesting as we think about network organizations. Also, in 1995 Carrillo bought an interest in a small banking group, Grupo Financiero Anahuac. He used it to launder money, which was then sent to the Cayman Islands. “The son of former President Miguel de la Madrid is president of the bank. (262)”

Like Poppa, Bowden depicts a Mexico of the Salinas and early Ernesto Zedillo period (1988-1998) characterized by a complicit civil society and a completely corrupted political system.

Kidnapping is a high-impact crime that sows fear throughout Mexican society. Julio Scherer García, the award-winning former editor of *Proceso*, a weekly, investigative news magazine, was himself kidnapped in Guatemala in the 1980s. His book *Secuestrados*<sup>26</sup> was inspired by the kidnapping of his son in Mexico in July 1998. Scherer focuses mainly on gangs

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<sup>26</sup> Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2009.

dedicated to kidnapping, mostly in the interior states. One section, however, relates to our interest in DTOs, in this case in Tijuana, Baja California. Trafficking organizations diversified their criminal activities into kidnapping and extortion in the late 1990s and into the 2000s.

Scherer (p. 134) explains the differences between the terms *secuestro* (kidnapping for ransom; “it’s just a business”), *ajuste de cuentas* (pressure applied for money owed), and *levantón* (payback to a rival gang). In interviews with journalists of *Zeta*, a weekly newspaper, Scherer (pp. 130-139) finds that the numbers of kidnappings reported in Baja California are a small fraction of the reality. The police at all levels are organically integrated into organized crime; elected officials are either complicit in crime or completely ineffective. The transition from PRI to National Action Party (PAN) leadership made no difference in the ineffectiveness of law enforcement.

DTOs use kidnapping as a kind “petty cash” to pay for weapons. Surprisingly, Scherer reports that kidnapping gangs in Mexico City co-exist with each other and are more loosely structured than in other parts of Mexico:

Investigations by *Zeta* have publicized the flagrant complicity between competing gangs, which have learned to co-exist. These investigations have also revealed that kidnappings are financing the drug business. Drug gangs are less organized in Tijuana than in the State of Mexico, Michoacán or the Federal District. Kidnappers work quickly and obtain US\$20,000 to US\$30,000 per snatch. This money is important since drug gangs always need money to buy arms. The Mexican army has been successful in capturing weapons and the kidnappers cannot operate unarmed (p. 120).<sup>27</sup>

Ricardo Ravelo is probably Mexico’s most important investigative journalist in the area of drug-related crime. He won the Mexican National Journalism prize in 2008. Ravelo has long been associated with the magazine *Proceso*. In 1996, he was assigned to the police beat and the Attorney General’s Office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) in particular. The PGR taught him a great deal about the structure and operations of the drug cartels and their relations

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<sup>27</sup> Translation by the authors.

with the national, state and local police forces and the military. In 2005, Ravelo published a path breaking book entitled *Los Capos: Las narco-rutas de México*, which describes the various drug cartels, the main smuggling routes, and the *narcos'* relationship to Mexican government. At that time, the largest DTOs were the Sinaloa Federation and the Gulf Cartel. *Los Capos* is not easy reading; there are no footnotes and there is no bibliography. Nevertheless, the book begins to explain why Mexico's transition to democracy in 2000, with the election of President Vicente Fox of the PAN, did not solve the problem of corruption and drug trafficking--and may have made it worse.

Ravelo argues that Vicente Fox made a serious mistake by declaring war on drug trafficking at the beginning of his term of office. The declaration of war was made in Tijuana, headquarters of the Tijuana cartel. Fox repeated the same message in the state of Sinaloa, headquarters of the Sinaloa cartel. Fox had no strategy for his "war" and few available resources. The result was that cells of traffickers dispersed throughout the country, creating new conflicts. The PGR was seriously corrupt and had been selling positions (plazas) in northern border states such as Tamaulipas, where national police officials could get rich from selling protection to the drug gangs. Fox made a second mistake by putting military men in charge of the PGR, headed by General Rafael Macedo de la Concha.<sup>28</sup>

Ravelo has written several other books on the Mexican DTOs, including *Los Narcoabogados* [*The Drug Lawyers*, 2006]; *Crónicas de Sangre: Cinco historias de los Zetas* [*Chronicles of Blood: Five Stories about the Zetas*, 2007], and *Osiel: Vida y Tragedia de un Capo* [*Osiel: Life and Tragedy of a Drug Lord*, 2009]. Given what Ravelo has written over the years, it is surprising that he is still alive. *Crónicas de Sangre*, about the Zeta cartel, is particularly useful in illuminating the external dynamics of drug cartels.

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<sup>28</sup> *Los Capos* (Mexico, D.F.: Random House Mondadori, 2005), 25.

As is well known, the Zetas originally consisted of 30 Mexican Special Forces Airmobile Group troops hired away by the Gulf cartel in 1999 to serve as its enforcement arm. In 2010, after the capture and extradition of Gulf leader Osiel Cárdenas, the Zetas broke away to form their own cartel, setting off a war with gunmen from the Gulf organization. The Zetas have now surpassed the Gulf cartel to become one of the two largest DTOs in Mexico, the other still being the Sinaloa Federation. The Gulf cartel is now allied with Sinaloa against the Zetas and its allies.<sup>29</sup> The Zetas have a well-deserved reputation for being efficient, technologically advanced and extremely brutal.<sup>30</sup>

One of the stories of the Zetas related by Ricardo Ravelo in *Crónicas de Sangre* is entitled “Don Carlos”. It is about Carlos Herrera Araluce, a rich industrialist and PRIista who was twice mayor of the city of Gómez Palacio, Durango (1974-1977 & 1999-2001) and once a federal deputy. Gómez Palacio is the second largest city (260,000 people) in a region in north-central Mexico called the Comarca Lagunera, between the states of Durango and Coahuila. The name of the region comes from the thirteen lakes which existed in the area before two large dams were built. Adjacent to Gómez Palacio is the larger city of Torreón, with over 600,000 inhabitants, which is in the state of Coahuila.

Don Carlos was the *cacique* of Gómez Palacio; he liked to say that not a leaf moved in the city without his permission. Mexican law prohibits consecutive terms for most elected officials, but Herrera Araluce had solved this problem by placing relatives and allies in the mayor’s office when he was not there himself. His daughter Leticia was mayor from 2001 to 2004. Don Carlos owned Quesos Chilchota, a large milk and cheese producer, among

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<sup>29</sup> See the Wikipedia for a well-documented article on the Zetas. [http://ed.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los\\_Zetas](http://ed.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Zetas). Downloaded 5/29/2012.

<sup>30</sup> The Zetas level of discipline and competence seems to have declined somewhat in recent years as personnel have been killed and their replacements have not been adequately trained.

other enterprises. Ravelo writes that the remarkable growth of the Chilcota Group was partly due to Herrera Araluce's ability to exploit the small and medium sized producers of goat and cow milk by fixing prices. However, many attribute the group's success to revenues from drug trafficking and money laundering. But the power of Don Carlos was waning.<sup>31</sup> The first sign of trouble was when his political party, the PRI, lost the Presidency to Vicente Fox in 2000. Then Don Carlos failed in an attempt to win the PRI nomination for Governor of Durango in 2003. The Sinaloa cartel may have had a hand in this.

Ravelo strongly implies that Don Carlos was linked to the Juárez cartel, headed by Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, which had become the dominant DTO in the area in the 1980s. The Juárez cartel laundered most of its illegal money through two firms created for this purpose: Carne de la Laguna and Taxis Aéreos del Noroeste. Herrera Araluce's son Ernesto was accused of protecting a notorious *scicario* of the Juárez cartel named Arturo González Hernández (El Chaky). El Chaky had been head assassin of the Juarez cartel under Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the famous Lord of the Skies. He was kept on by new leader Vicente Carrillo Fuentes after Amado's death in 1997 during plastic surgery. El Chaky was credited with killing the four medical doctors involved in this operation. Ravelo writes that El Chaky was protected by municipal authorities in Gómez Palacio and by high-level officials of the now-defunct Agencia Federal de Investigaciones (AFI), the Mexican equivalent of the U.S. FBI.<sup>32</sup> According to the PGR, El Chaky was planning an attack on the Gulf Cartel, because the Zetas—who had not yet become an independent cartel—were planning to take over the Laguna plaza. But the Juárez

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<sup>31</sup> *Crónicas de Sangre*, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. See Malcolm Beith, *The Last Narco: Inside the Hunt for El Chapo, the World's Most Wanted Drug Lord* (New York: Grove, 2010): 139-138 for a discussion of corruption in the AFI, which was abolished in May, 2009. A new federal police force was then established.

cartel was only a shadow of its former self. It was weak and ripe for picking. It became weaker when the PGR arrested Chaky and several associates in April, 2003—without notifying local authorities in advance. Before the operation, the local head of the AFI had been sent on vacation—to prevent leaks.<sup>33</sup>

In early 2007, a messenger from the Sinaloa cartel came to visit Herrera Araluce in his luxurious home. The message was simple: “Dice el patrón que deje de meter las manos. La plaza ya tiene dueño.” El Chapo Guzmán, head of the Sinaloa cartel, was apparently telling Don Carlos to get out of the drug business; El Chapo was going to take over. Herrera Araluce responded by shouting:

¡A mí nadie me amenaza! Yo soy gomezpalatino! ¡He estado toda mi vida aquí y de aquí me van a sacar solo muerto!<sup>34</sup>

The Sinaloa cartel had serious competition for the Gómez Palacio plaza. In late 2006, the Zetas moved 150 of their men into the Comarca Lagunera. Most of the men had previously served in the Mexican military.<sup>35</sup> Some dressed in black uniforms with the insignia of the AFI; others wore the uniforms of the Policía Federal Preventiva (PEP). They had prepared for their arrival by infiltrating part of the municipal and state police forces, which could provide protection.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 16. “Nobody threatens me! I am a man of Gómez Palacio. I have been here all my life and I will not leave here alive.”

<sup>35</sup> Stratfor writes: “Around 27,000 men and women desert the Mexican military every year, and about 50% of the military’s recruiting class will have left before the end of their first tour. In March 2011, the Mexican army admitted that it had “lost track of” 1,680 special forces personnel over the past decade. . . . Some cartels even reportedly task some of their own foot soldiers to enlist in the military to gain knowledge and experience in military tactics.” “Polarization and Sustained Violence in Mexico’s Cartel War,” 24 January 2012, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Crónicas de Sangre*, p. 29. Elsewhere in the book, Ravelo describes how the police force of Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon was infiltrated by the Zetas in 2006. Police personnel were stopped while making their rounds and were given the option of getting killed or taking bribes. They were paid not to interfere with late-model cars with no license plates and were given cell phones to communicate with the Zetas. Periodic payments ranged from US\$300 to US\$10,000 to the top police official (pp. 95-111). Guadalupe, with a population of approximately 700,000, is part of the Monterrey metropolitan area. In the Spring of 2012, the Zetas were fighting the police of Guadalupe. The arrangement has apparently ended.



On Sunday, May 13, 2007, Carlos Herrera Araluce and his wife made their usual shopping trip to the neighboring city of Torreón. They traveled in a 4<sup>th</sup> level armored car, followed by another vehicle occupied by four bodyguards. However, shortly after leaving a store named Aladinos, they were attacked by twelve gunmen who shot about 100 AK-47 and AR-15 rounds into the car and engaged in a firefight with the bodyguards. In spite of the armor, the car was damaged and both Don Carlos and his wife were wounded. They were taken to a hospital and recovered. One of the bodyguards was killed.<sup>37</sup>

The next day, Enrique Ruiz Arévalo, head of the state of Coahuila's Anti-kidnapping task force, was having breakfast in a Denny's restaurant with a businessman and former mayor of the city of Torreón. The police official was investigating the disappearance of another businessman with ties to Don Carlos. Ruiz Arévalo noticed through the window of the restaurant that his security detail was talking to a group of men with black uniforms and the insignia of the AFI. He went outside to see what was going on and was forced into a pickup truck by the men in the black uniforms. The vehicle took off immediately with the policeman inside.

On May 18<sup>th</sup>, three cars filled with armed men cut off a van driven by a lawyer named Alberto Romero Castañeda, who was forced into the back seat of a Nissan. The men identified themselves as Zetas and started to threaten him. One of the men told Romero Castañeda that they knew he did not give legal representation to drug traffickers. Precisely because of that, they wanted him to take a message to *los pinches empresarios* [the fucking entrepreneurs]. The Zetas said that they had been in La Laguna for ten months and knew which businessmen—including Carlos Herrera--were involved in the drug business. "If you don't do as you are told, we will

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<sup>37</sup> *Crónicas de Sangre*, pp. 36-37 and Leopoldo Ramos, "Balean sicarios en Torreón al político y empresario Carlos Herrera Araluce," *La Jornada* 14 May 2007. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/05/14/index.php?>

kill you and your family.”<sup>38</sup> They said that they would let him go for now. Later, they would give him a letter and a video to show to the most outstanding business leaders of the region.

Three days later, on Monday, May 21<sup>st</sup>, the lawyer received a phone call and a letter from the Zetas. Romero Castañeda called a friend named Víctor Alducin who worked for Canacintra, the National Chamber of Manufacturing Industries, and explained what had happened. Alducin offered to call a meeting of the industrialists to listen to the message from the Zetas. He did so and 25 businessmen, including the President of the Chamber, convened at the offices of Canacintra. The lawyer was told to drive to the Soriana grocery store on Constitution Avenue. There he received the promised video and returned to Canacintra, where he played the tape to the assembled business leaders.

The nine-minute video (CD) showed the blindfolded leader of the Coahuila Anti-kidnapping Task Force, Enrique Ruiz Arévalo, sitting in a chair and describing which businessmen of the Laguna were involved in drug trafficking and money laundering. Ruiz Arévalo said that Carlos Herrera Araluce controlled the operation and was *jefe de la plaza*. The accompanying letter said that the Zetas had not come to rob anybody; they just wanted to do business. They noted, however, that there would be serious consequences for anyone who carried out illegal transactions outside of their organization. After the showing of the CD, the Zetas wanted to have a meeting with the businessmen. They warned that disobedience would have irreversible consequences.<sup>39</sup>

The next day, 25 private airplanes took off from the airport and flew to the United States. Carlos Herrera refused to cede control of the plaza but the cost was high. Between January and

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<sup>38</sup> *Cronicas de Sangre*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-35.

September 2007, 19 businessmen were kidnapped and 13-15 people were killed with the mark of the Zetas.<sup>40</sup>

William Finnegan described the La Familia Mexicana cartel (LFM) in the central Mexican state of Michoacán in a May, 2010 *New Yorker* piece entitled “Silver or Lead”.<sup>41</sup> Finnegan traveled extensively in La Familia’s home state of Michoacán, which is also the home state of President Calderón. At times, Finnegan traveled in the company of an important local politician and businesswoman. He also interviewed and cited U.S. academics George Grayson and Edgardo Buscaglia; Interior Minister Fernando Gomez Mont; Mexican Ambassador to the U.S. Arturo Sarukhan; anti-drug chief of the Mexican Federal Police Ramon Pequeño Garcia; a senior American diplomat in Mexico; and Lázaro Cardenas Batel, a former governor of Michoacán (2002-2008).

Finnegan begins his article by citing an estimate that 85% of the *legitimate* businesses in the state of Michoacán were involved in some fashion with LFM. He argued that the government of many—if not most—cities and towns in the state had been captured by the cartel. It happened like this, said former Governor of Michoacán Cardenas Batel:

I would get a call afterward from the mayor. Ten pickup trucks full of armed men had arrived at the municipality. The local police could do nothing. They were outgunned. But the criminals were very respectful. They would tell the mayor, ‘We want to work here. There will be no trouble, no crime, no drunkenness, nothing.’ Then they would take over the town, and enforce their rules. If a boy hit his mother, they would punish him and dump him in the plaza for people to see. If he did it again, they would kill him. It was a strategy to gain popular sympathy, and it worked.<sup>42</sup>

The mayors were paid for their hospitality. It was the classic choice: *plata o plomo*. But this approach would not work in a larger city.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>41</sup> pp. 38-51. An accompanying podcast is available at [newyorker.com/go/outloud](http://newyorker.com/go/outloud). In the podcast, Finnegan says that less than half of La Familia’s income currently came from drug trafficking.

<sup>42</sup> “Silver or Lead,” p. 48.

Zitácuaro, Michoacán was a city of some 140,000 people. It could not be taken over by ten pickup trucks of armed men. But La Familia could provide important services. Finnegan reports that the cartel ended loan sharking in the city. It also stopped illegal logging and “fined” offenders for deforestation. The *narcos* became environmentalists. Law and order was another service the cartel could provide. A schoolteacher told Finnegan that if you needed to collect a debt, you would go to La Familia. There would be a fee, but you would get your money. “The police work for them. When they arrest people, they don’t take them to police headquarters but to La Familia.”<sup>43</sup> This was the municipal police, not the federal police, the Army or the Navy, all of which were deployed in Zitácuaro.

LFM had a conflictual relationship with the federal forces. After the arrest of one of its leaders in July, 2009, the cartel attacked federal police stations in eight cities in Michoacán. Then they kidnapped, tortured and killed 12 federal agents, leaving the bodies in a pile by a highway.<sup>44</sup>

The crime syndicate convinced local elites of their seriousness by cutting off the heads of a couple of young men who had offended them and leaving the heads in front of a car dealership owned by a prominent local family. Rich people were kidnapped and held for ransom. Few people reported the kidnappings to the police, who might be linked to the kidnappers. Middle-class teachers were also kidnapped. After receiving a presumably modest ransom, a teacher would be released without major harm, but might be asked for the name of another person who would be a good candidate for kidnapping. People who could not raise a ransom would sometimes save themselves by going to work for the cartel. La Familia liked to have people working for them who had government jobs.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

Finnegan reports some interesting recruitment strategies used by the cartels. The Zetas went after former or current military personnel:

... their early recruitment was boldly public, with banners hung over highways, complete with a number to call, urging soldiers to defect and receive ‘a good salary, food and medical care for your families.’ They offered loans and life insurance, and an end to mistreatment and rations of ramen. Those who joined were paid on a scale unimaginable in their previous lives.<sup>45</sup>

All the cartels have things that appeal to young people—especially the poor. One student in Zitácuaro told Finnegan: “*Los narcos* have nice trucks, nice houses, pretty girls, money, power. People fear them. Everybody wants what they have.”

Most cartels have a kind of gangster mystique, but La Familia had a unique kind of spiritualism, regular retreats and motivational seminars—at least before it split. The late *cacique* Nazario Moreno González—also known as “El Chayo” or El Más Loco (The Craziest One)—was a fan of American evangelist John Eldredge’s book *Wild at Heart*. LFM soldiers were reportedly required to carry a copy of *The Bible* or a book of epigrams by El Chayo. Moralism was part of their appeal. They would tell the young people that they meant to stop crime. “We are the authorities now and we’re going to teach you to live together.”<sup>46</sup>

A teacher in Zitácuaro told Finnegan that La Familia looked for two kinds of older students:

Rough, violent kids from broken families, that’s one. The other is good students, especially those who are good at computer work. . . . They want to be able to research properly the assets of the people and the businesses they extort. That’s the new model.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, Finnegan reports that young mobsters were courting the daughters of the city’s leading families. Marriage creates valuable alliances. Public works contracting was perceived

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 40, 44, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

to be controlled and run by La Familia. It was getting hard to make a living without connections to the cartel.<sup>48</sup>

La Familia was not loved in Zitácuaro in early 2010, any more than people loved the federal police or the military. Things were different in Apatzingán, the major city in the Tierra Caliente, where LFM was born. There, the cartel provided a wide variety of social services: employment, public works, free medical care, food, and even rehabilitation centers for alcoholics and drug addicts. When the Zetas had controlled the area, there had been extortion and kidnapping for ransom. After La Familia evicted the Zetas, this changed, according to the politician/businesswoman who accompanied Finnegan to Apatzingán.<sup>49</sup> She talked to the leaders of the gang in her official capacity and explained how these things would be bad for the local economy. La Familia was a local cartel, not an occupying force of gangsters like the Zetas; it could afford to take the long view. So extortion and kidnapping were stopped.<sup>50</sup> The cartel could make plenty of money other ways, like producing and selling methamphetamine. They claimed this was for export only, so as not to hurt the local population.

Finnegan cites College of William and Mary professor George Grayson to explain what happened after the transition to democracy in Mexico after Vicente Fox of the PAN was elected President in 2000. In the old days, Grayson writes:

Drug dealers behaved discreetly, showed deference to public figures, spurned kidnapping, appeared with governors at their children's weddings, and although often allergic to politics, helped the hegemonic PRI discredit its opponents by linking them to narco-trafficking.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a medium-sized group called El Milenio dominated organized crime in Michoacán. It produced methamphetamine and was linked to the Sinaloa cartel. The Gulf cartel, headed by the Zetas, invaded the state in 2001, defeating El Milenio. Remnants of El Milenio and a variety of local forces coalesced to form La Familia and attack the Zetas in 2006. By 2008, the Zetas had been evicted from the state. Ibid., pp. 45-46.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

There were anti-drug campaigns—often at the instigation of the United States—but they were largely meaningless since government agencies were so penetrated by organized crime. As other writers have argued, one cartel would give damaging information about a rival to a law enforcement agency for its own purposes. Arrests would be made and illegal drugs would be confiscated, but the trafficking would continue. Everything changed after the 2000 election.

. . . an enormous power vacuum developed as venerable patronage networks dissolved throughout Mexico. Organized crime filled that vacuum. Politicians, adrift in the new multiparty sea, now needed campaign funds. The drug lords were happy to help. Gang conflicts over territory and trade routes, no longer refereed by the PRI, became more lethal and frequent. The Pax Mafiosa, such as it was, collapsed.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, Finnegan cited Edgardo Buscaglia, a professor at Columbia University who specializes in organized crime, on Calderón's strategy in fighting the cartels. As of the time he was interviewed, Buscaglia thought Calderón had it all wrong.

It's not how many troops you deploy or capos you kill. It's the assets. Businesses confiscated. Civil and criminal asset forfeiture. You can detain fifty-three thousand people, as they have since 2003, but if you still have corrupt judges and prosecutors—a captured state—you aren't doing anything. The conviction rate is 1.8%.<sup>53</sup>

Since "Plata o Plomo" was published in late May, 2010, "La Familia" has undergone some drastic changes. In November 2010, LFM offered to disband if the federal government would agree to safeguard the people of Michoacán. In early December 2010 charismatic LFM co-leader Nazario Moreno González (El Chayo) was reportedly killed. The cartel then split into two antagonistic parts, following competing leaders. One faction followed the lead of José Méndez Vargas (El Chango) and retained the original name. This faction was weakened when El Chango was arrested on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011. The stronger faction of the old LFM, headed by Servando Gómez (La Tuta) calls itself the Knights Templar, the name of an order of religious

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

warriors during the Crusades. The disintegrating LFM has tried to ally itself with the Zetas. The Knights Templar is allied with the Sinaloa cartel.

There are many other good works of journalism on Mexican DTOs. Malcolm Beith's *The Last Narco: Inside the Hunt for El Chapo, the World's Most Wanted Drug Lord* (2010), for example, contains good descriptions of the leadership and organization of the Sinaloa cartel. But it is time to move on to Colombia.

### **The United States and Colombia**

Journalist Charles Nicholl published an autobiographical book in 1985 called *The Fruit Palace*. This was the name of a small café in Santa Marta, on Colombia's northern coast. Nicholl stayed there during his first trip to Colombia in the early 1970s. One night, he met a man named Harvey who had just arrived from Queens, New York. Harvey had done some small-time cocaine dealing in Queens, a city with a large population of Colombians. It was easy to make connections. He could buy the coke an ounce at a time and sell it to acquaintances in the music business.

'For a time it was great', he said wistfully. 'Plenty of candy, plenty of bread. Then you start getting greedy. You're doing two, three grams a night, seven nights a week. When you start getting greedy, it's trouble time. You can't walk away from it any more. That's when you're going to take a fall.'<sup>54</sup>

Harvey did take a fall. One night a street dealer robbed him of half a kilo of cocaine on Lexington Avenue. The half kilo was worth \$15,000 and Harvey had no way of paying his supplier. The rightful "owner" of the coke offered Harvey a deal. He would forget about the

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Fruit Palace* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 14.



\$15,000 if Harvey would take a suitcase full of money to Santa Marta to exchange for cocaine. It was an offer he couldn't refuse. This was one way to get into the smuggling business.

A dozen years later, Nicholl returned to Colombia as a journalist wanting to write The Great Cocaine story. In Bogotá, he found an old acquaintance named Augustus McGregor, a "half-crazed Scottish newspaper man", who spent most of his money on cocaine or basuko (dried cocaine base). Nicholl traded basuko and food for information on the drug business. McGregor told Nicholl that everything had changed since the 1970s:

'They're not gangs any more, they're bloody corporations.' Now it's all what the economists call 'vertical integration', controlling every phase of the operation from raw material to end-user, eliminating the middle-man . . . The whole business is ultimately controlled by a score of giant, mafia-style syndicates. They've got huge production plants down in the south of Colombia. . . There they process the cocaine, either out of raw cocaine paste smuggled up from Peru and Bolivia, or--increasingly--from their own coca plantations. . . . A lot of them have formed an unholy alliance with the Colombian guerrilla factions, the Movimiento 19 and the FARC . . . They pay the guerrillas money and arms, in return for protection.<sup>55</sup>

According to Max Mermelstein, in his autobiographical book *The Man Who Made it Snow*, the value of cocaine coming into the United States increased from US\$10 million in 1975 to an estimated US\$16 billion in 1990. Most of the drug came from Colombia. Mermelstein admits to personally bringing fifty-six tons of cocaine into the United States and sent \$300 million back to Colombia in payment.<sup>56</sup>

Max Mermelstein was born into a working-class Jewish family in Brooklyn. He married a Puerto Rican woman. The new family moved to San Juan, where Max worked as chief engineer for the Sheraton Hotel and learned fluent street Spanish. After separating from his wife, Mermelstein met and married an attractive woman named Christina Jaramillo from Cali,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>56</sup> New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 11.

Colombia. Jaramillo had fled Cali with her daughter and son to escape from her husband, a violent smuggler.

For whatever reasons, Max was not one to follow the rules. He describes being bilked out of an illegal "silent partner" interest in a hotel nightclub by his Puerto Rican partners. Then he arranged a temporarily bigamous marriage to Christina so they could move to the Bahamas together. She was miserable in the Bahamas and pleaded with Max to find a way for her to be reunited with family and friends. He ultimately arranged to move sixty illegal Colombians to the Bahamas and then to Miami. "By the time we arrived, many were happily pushing coke from Key West to Palm Beach."<sup>57</sup>

Christmas Day, 1978 was a pivotal day in Max Mermelstein's career in the drug business. The previous night, there had been a party at the home of Livia Cardona, a Colombian woman who ruled over the independent Miami cocaine market, selling wherever Medellin's Ochoa brothers did not. A five foot three inch Colombian sociopath named Rafael Cardona Salazar got high on a mixture of cocaine and tobacco. Cardona took offense at Cesar, a college student, saying that he was "*un hijodeputa*, who thinks he is too good for a peasant like me. . . ." After shooting Cesar in the face, Rafa and an associate named Chino went looking for Max, saying they needed a driver. Another argument ensued while they were driving and Rafa killed Chino. After disposing of the body, Rafa considered what to do with a terrified Max, who said that he was with Rafa 100%. Salazar let Max live, but now he owned him. There was no escape; Max was in the business for keeps.<sup>58</sup> Rafa used to say that the only way out of the cartel was in a cell or in a box.

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<sup>57</sup> *The Man Who Made it Snow*, p. 29.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 1, pp. 21-24.

Mermelstein was caught in 1985. In return for his testimony, Mermelstein entered the U.S. witness protection program. As the only American to have gained entry into the top levels of Pablo Escobar's cartel, his testimony was devastating. Rafa offered millions to anyone who could locate Mermelstein.

The code of the cartel decreed that anyone who guaranteed a fellow dealer was responsible for that person's future behavior, forever. Rafa had guaranteed me. Therefore my actions were his responsibility. When the death sentence was pronounced on me by the cartel and a price put on my head, Rafa Cardona was also named as a dead man (p. 286).

On December 7, 1987, an estimated 15-30 members of DAS, the Colombian equivalent of the F.B.I., raided Rafa's auto dealership, pushing the bodyguards out of the way. Rafa screamed "What is the mordida? [the bribe]", but the police opened fire with automatic weapons, killing Rafa Cardona and (by mistake) his secretary Estela instantly (pp. 287-288). Mermelstein writes:

A job of this magnitude performed by a hit squad of the Colombian national police cost the sponsors of the execution a minimum of \$30,000 and more likely \$40,000 (p. 288).<sup>59</sup>

In Colombia itself, the drug story worked itself out on parallel tracks. One track was the traditional smuggler. There had always been smuggling in Colombia, but smuggling emeralds, for example, did not pose a major domestic or international threat. This changed when traditional smuggling evolved into the enormous Medellín and Cali drug cartels. A second track was the guerrillas. Guerrillas such as the FARC, the ELN and M-19 also posed a threat to the established order. The guerrillas began kidnapping in the 1970s. This developed into a big business in the 1980s. Then the paramilitaries appeared to combat the guerrillas and became

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<sup>59</sup> Mermelstein recounts a conflict between Pablo Correa, the Medellín cartel's chief money launderer, and Rafa Cardona, who Correa blamed for losing a large shipment of drugs. Correa was killed shortly after this incident. His friends and family may have had Rafa killed in retaliation. *The Man Who Made it Snow*, p. 286.

drug smugglers themselves. This was the third track. Ultimately, all parties, including many government officials, became involved in the drug trade.

As described in a 1990 book entitled *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico en Colombia*, Carlos Medina Gallegos asked ranchers and community leaders in the Middle Magdalena River region about their relations with the FARC before the Medellín cartel began to buy up the valley. At that time, in the 1970s, the inhabitants of the region gave the guerrillas cattle, money or supplies, but the take was not exorbitant. By the end of the decade, the guerrillas' demands increased. Money from extortion was used to create new fronts in areas where cocaine was produced. A FARC commander named Ramón was particularly greedy and brutal. A former mayor told Medina:

These men and this commander completely changed [the FARC's] behavior, different from the [guerrillas] before them; they came to abuse, to demand, to ask for too much, to kidnap without a second thought, without anything. [Ramón] is the one responsible for losing the support of the peasants.<sup>60</sup>

Robin Kirk, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, describes what came next in her first-hand account *More Terrible Than Death: Violence, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia*.<sup>61</sup> From the perspective of the FARC, cocaine was just another business it could tax. But the M-19 guerrillas were primarily city folk and had no guerrillas to enforce their demands. The M-19 decided to go directly to the source of the money and to kidnap drug traffickers and their families for ransom. It was a disastrous mistake, in part because of the traffickers' links to elements of the government. The M-19 kidnapped the three children of trafficker Carlos Jader Álvarez and the sister of Juan David Ochoa. The children were eventually killed. Juan Pablo Escobar,

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<sup>60</sup>Cited in Robin Kirk, *More Terrible Than Death: Violence, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004, pp. 102-103. Mark Bowden cites a secret CIA intelligence estimate issued in June, 1983 as saying: "These guerrilla groups initially avoided all connections with narcotics growers and traffickers, except to condemn the corrupting influence of drugs on Colombian society. Now, however, several have developed active links with the drug trade, others extort protection money from the traffickers, and some apparently use profits from drugs to buy arms." *Killing Pablo* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 43.

<sup>61</sup>.Ibid.

leader of the Medellín cartel, called a meeting of top *narcos* at his Nápoles estate. They formed a group called *Muerte a Secuestradores* [Death to Kidnappers] with the support of a reported 233 people, including traffickers from the Cali cartel. The resulting carnage cut the membership of the M-19 in half. "Dozens of M-19 guerrillas, their associates, and probably innocent people were captured by police, then delivered to MAS to torture and kill."<sup>62</sup>

Colombia's history turned on the fate of the Álvarez children and Martha Nieves Ochoa. MAS cared only about the traffickers and their families. But the example it set was intoxicating to the Colombian army and to many residents of the middle Magdalena Valley.<sup>63</sup>

Army captain Óscar Echandía was appointed Mayor of Puerto Boyacá at one point, since no civilians were willing to assume the position. Echandía proposed collecting donations based on the number of head of cattle a rancher owned. The money would be used to hire and equip men to fight the FARC. These forces were called paramilitaries because of their link to the military. The army provided the intelligence used to select targets. "Once, Captain Echandía drove one of the assassins who killed a local mayor to the hospital after the man was wounded in the attack."<sup>64</sup> Subsequently, the paramilitaries developed on their own, with less direct ties to the Colombian military. To make money, they also began to traffic in illegal drugs and have been implicated in horrendous massacres of suspected guerrillas or guerrilla supporters.<sup>65</sup> During the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), many of the paramilitaries were demobilized.

The development of the Medellín and Cali cartels may be the most remarkable aspect of the Great Colombian Drug story. It is tragic that the talents of the Colombian drug lords were

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109. At least it is the best-known book on Pablo Escobar in the United States.

<sup>65</sup> For details, see Kirk, *More Terrible than Death*; Gary Leech, *Beyond Bogotá: Diary of a Drug War Journalist in Colombia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009); and Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

not invested in legitimate enterprises. Had they done so, they might today stand shoulder to shoulder with such paragons of virtue as Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds.

Mark Bowden's *Killing Pablo*, first published in 2001, is the best-known book on the Medellín cartel, headed by Pablo Escobar.<sup>66</sup> Bowden was a long-time journalist with The Philadelphia Inquirer. He became famous after writing *Black Hawk Down*, about the failed U.S. Special Forces assault against warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid in Somalia, which became a hit movie. Bowden wrote his book without being able to read Spanish. He describes Pablo Escobar as the son of a middle-class family in Envigado, on the outskirts of Medellín. Pablo's mother was an ambitious, educated schoolteacher. Influenced by a nihilistic, countercultural movement called *Nadismo*, Escobar smoked marijuana and dropped out of school. [Pablo never became a heavy cocaine user and was only a moderate drinker (p. 28).] He was ambitious, but not cut out for a standard career. Escobar had middle-class aspirations and tried to get a degree, but failed. Instead, he chose the life of a gangster, one of the other career options in his environment. Escobar became an accomplished car thief before the age of 20. "Maybe it was the dope, but Pablo discovered in himself an ability to remain calm, deliberate, even cheerful when others grew frightened and unsteady" (p. 19). Then the market opened up in the mid-1970s; the pot generation in the United States discovered cocaine.

The cocaine business would make Pablo Escobar and his fellow Antioquia crime bosses-- the Ochoa brothers, Carlos Lehder, José Rodríguez Gacha and others-- richer than their wildest fantasies, among the richest men in the world. By the end of the decade they would control more than half of the cocaine shipped to the United States (p. 22).

By the mid-eighties, Escobar would own nineteen different residences in Medellín alone, each with a heliport. He owned fleets of boats and planes, properties throughout the world, large swaths of Antioquian land, apartment complexes, housing developments, and banks (ibid).

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<sup>66</sup> New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

Bowden writes that Pablo Escobar wasn't an entrepreneur or an accomplished businessman; he was simply ruthless and muscled his way into the business. The Ochoa brothers (Juan David, Jorge, and Fabio) and their pilot "Rubin" were stylish and relatively well educated playboys. They had easy access to upscale social circles in Miami where cocaine could be sold. The leading Medellín coke dealer at the time was named Fabio Restrepo. Escobar, the street tough, sold Restrepo 14 kilos of coke. Two months later, Restrepo was killed and the Ochoa brothers were suddenly working for Pablo Escobar. "Whenever that much money is being made illegally, it attracts sharks" (p. 23).

Pablo absorbed the entrepreneurs, the lab rats, and the distributors like the Ochoas. He 'insured' them. He oversaw their delivery routes, exacting a tax on every kilo shipped. It was pure muscle, an old-fashioned syndicate, but the result was to create for the first time a unified and streamlined cocaine industry. Once the coca leaves had been grown and refined by independent dealers, their shipments would be added to the loads controlled by Pablo's organization, a service for which they paid 10 percent of the wholesale U.S. price (pp. 14-15).<sup>67</sup>

Bowden does not have much more to say about the organization of the Medellín cartel. However, he does describe the "social work" of the drug kingpin. Escobar built housing for the poor and soccer fields with lights so workers could play at nighttime, and played in the games himself (p. 3). He was careful about his public image and courted the poor, using leftist rhetoric when it suited his needs. Mario Henao, his brother-in law, was a leftist intellectual who condemned the capitalist-imperialist United States of America (pp. 27-28). Workers in Escobar's cocaine labs were paid salaries which enabled them to buy houses and cars.

Perhaps influenced by Mario Henao, he [Escobar] began spending millions on social improvements in the city, doing far more than the government ever had for the poor . . . He donated funds and leaned on his associates to raise millions for roads and electric lines . . . He built roller-skating rinks and handed out money at public appearances. He started a housing development for the poor called Barrio Pablo Escobar, which gave

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<sup>67</sup> Boden writes: "If a big shipment was intercepted or lost, Pablo would repay his suppliers, but only for what the load had cost in Colombia." Ibid., pl 25.

homes to people who lived in huts by the city's trash dumps. The Conservative Catholic Church in Medellín backed Pablo's social programs. . . (pp. 28-29)

Doing good in this manner fed Escobar's self image and helped him rationalize his illegal business activities. It also helped create a loyal support base of people who would inform him of threatening activities by rivals or by the Colombian army.

The major contribution of *Killing Pablo* lies in describing in great detail the interactions between the U.S. and the Colombian governments in the hunt for the great outlaw. The hunt started in earnest on August 18th, 1989, after Luis Carlos Galán, the front-running presidential candidate, was assassinated by one of Pablo Escobar's *sicarios*. President Virgilio Barco declared all-out war on the Medellín cartel. He suspended habeas corpus, authorized the army and police to seize cartel properties, and invited further aid from the United States. A few weeks later, U.S. President George H. Bush signed National Security Directive 18, "calling for more than \$250 million worth of military, law enforcement, and intelligence assistance to fight the Andean drug cartel over five years" (p. 64). He also authorized sending a small number of U.S. Special Forces to Colombia for training purposes. President Barco began extraditing suspected drug traffickers to the U.S. for trial. With the assistance of the Americans, Barco also established special units of the national police (*La Policía Nacional de Colombia* [PNC]). One of these units, headed by Colonel Hugo Martínez, was located in Medellín. Called the Bloque de Búsqueda (Search Bloc), it was dedicated to hunting down José Rodríguez Gacha, the Ochoa brothers, and Pablo Escobar (pp. 64-65). (At the time, no one seemed to know how the Medellín cartel worked, or even who was in charge.) For security reasons, none of the members of the Search Bloc could be from Antioquia, the state in which Medellín is located. They did not know the city, had no informants, and could not ask the local police for help, since the Medellín police



were on the cartel's payroll. Thirty of Colonel Martínez's 200 men were killed in the first 15 days (p. 67).

Three months after Galán was killed, writes Bowden, the Medellín cartel planted a bomb on an Avianca airplane, killing 110 people. It was a failed attempt to kill César Gaviria, the successor presidential candidate to Luis Carlos Galán.. This was a bad mistake. The Medellín cartel now seemed to pose a direct threat to American citizens. Some members of the G.H. Bush administration thought Escobar could now be legally targeted for assassination (p. 59). The U.S. Army sent a small, secretive, spy unit to Colombia. Then called Centra Spike, the unit specialized in finding people through electronic means. Much of Bowden's book deals with the relationship between Centra Spike and the Search Bloc in their attempt to locate and kill Pablo Escobar.<sup>68</sup> Escobar and the Colombian government were at war, each trying to intimidate the other.

A kind of truce was declared when Escobar agreed to plead guilty to the least of the charges against him and surrender to the authorities. He would be held in a prison he himself had built on Mount Catedral, with a view of the city of Medellín. This solved problems for everybody. It helped the government that the killings stopped. Escobar got a nice, safe place to live and he could rebuild his cocaine empire from the "prison". The arrangement ultimately unraveled after Escobar executed two members of the Galeano and Moncada families he had summoned to the prison--and then had their brothers executed. Escobar had discovered that these members of his organization had a secret US\$20 million stash of drug money.

What was happening in the prison became widely known. Now, President Gaviria had to act.

What followed was a dark comedy of errors as ministers and generals fell over themselves to

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<sup>68</sup> Bowden had extraordinary access to relevant information. In an 11 page list of sources, Bowden names 40 key players in the hunt for Escobar who he interviewed (pp. 274-285).

avoid having to remove Escobar from his own "prison". They were afraid. In the end, Escobar and his men walked out of the prison past an entire brigade of the Colombian army, approximately 400 men.

The hunt for Pablo was on again, with an astonishing level of U.S. involvement.

Every direction-finding, surveillance, and imagery team in the arsenal descended on Medellín . . . There were so many American spy planes over Medellín, at one point seventeen in the air together, that the air force had to assign an AWACs, an airborne warning-and-control center, to keep track of them. It took ten C-130s just to deliver the contractors and maintenance and support staffs for all this stuff (p. 154).

The American involvement became counterproductive, especially after the Colombian press was able to photograph an American jet flying over Medellín. Most of the U.S. hardware was sent home. The key players, according to Bowden, remained the Search Bloc and Centra Spike, although a small Delta Force team, CIA and DEA agents played a role as well. It was a bloody fight.

By the end of 1992 twelve major players in Pablo's organization . . . had been killed in "gun battles" with the Search Bloc. There was always a steep price to pay for these victories. . . . Through the first six months of the hunt more than sixty-five police officers had been killed in Medellín, many of them Search Bloc members whose identities were supposed to be a state secret. . . . Pablo was offering a \$2,000 bounty for killing Medellín policemen, and it was working (p. 168).

The final piece of the puzzle was the appearance of *Los Pepes* (Personas Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar [Persons Persecuted by Pablo Escobar]). This was a new group which promised to retaliate against Escobar's family, associates, and properties every time he committed a terrorist act. Essentially, it was an anti-Escobar death squad. Bowden speculates that the likely forces behind Los Pepes were the Moncada and Galeano families and the national police, specifically the Search Bloc. Imprisoned Carlos Lehder and Fidel Castaño, who later became a paramilitary leader, played a role as well. Bowden also mentions financial backing from the Cali cartel.

The death squad was killing off the secret white-collar infrastructure of Pablos' organization, targeting his money launderers, bankers, lawyers, and extended family, as if using the very charts that Centra Spike and the CIA had painstakingly assembled . . . What's more, the hits often corresponded with fresh targeting information Centra Spike was turning over to CIA chief Wagner, who was passing it along to the Search Bloc (p. 194).

Bowden writes that "everyone was pleased with the results *Los Pepes* produced" (p. 194).

But there was a problem. Giving information to abet murder would appear to violate Executive Order 12333 in the United States. All the Americans were careful to follow the chain of command to the letter. However, "the complete daily intelligence reports were collected in a red book that was left in an area where any official visitors to the embassy could check them out. Colombian police officers paid regular visits" (ibid).

An American named Joe Toft was Country Attaché for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in Colombia. He retired six months after Pablo Escobar was hunted down and killed. Being displeased with all the praise Colombia was getting from Washington, Toft went on TV in Bogotá and accused Colombian President-elect Ernesto Samper of having accepted US\$3.5 million from Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela of the Cali cartel. Toft furnished a secret tape recording as proof. According to Bowden, this led to a crackdown on the Cali cartel. Newly appointed General Serrano attacked corruption in the PNC, the national police, and arrested six top leaders of the Cali cartel within two months (p. 272).

Taft is now retired and living in Reno, Nevada. When asked by Bowden, he replied: "I don't know what the lesson of the story is. I hope it's not that the end justifies the means" (ibid.)

Camilo Chaparro is a prize-winning journalist with experience at Bogotá's leading daily newspaper, *El Tiempo*, and various television news programs. His 2005 *Historia del cartel de Cali: El ajedrecista mueve sus fichas*<sup>69</sup>, focuses mainly on two sets of themes in Colombia in the

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<sup>69</sup> (Bogota: Intermedio Editores, 2005).

late 1980s and early 1990s: the efforts by Cali cartel leaders Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela to fight extradition to the United States, and the ferocious battle between the Cali and Medellín cartels. The extradition theme is interesting in showing the extraordinary reach of the Cali cartel's corruption into Colombia's congress and the constitutional convention of 1991. At one point, the brothers instructed 43 members of congress to go all-out against extradition measures (p. 25). According to Chaparro, the Cali organization was instrumental in funneling about five million dollars into Liberal candidate Ernesto Samper's successful presidential campaign in 1994.

Un veterano congresista asegura que la influencia del cartel de Cali en ese momento era de tal dimensión que ningún senador podía aspirar a la presidencia del Congreso si antes no contaba con la bendición de los hermanos Rodríguez Orejuela (p. 160).<sup>70</sup>

Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela was the notorious “bean-counter,” who tracked every cent owed to and paid out by the organization. The reach of the corruption is suggested in a taped conversation between Miguel (in prison) and a spend-thrift lady friend. Miguel complains:

“Yo comprendo todo eso [her need to display wealth]. Yo comprendo que tenemos que enviar siempre los mejores regalos, pero me parece una exageración esos gastos. Yo que tengo que sobornar a medio país, no gasto tanto como lo haces tú. Modérate mujer, modérate” (p. 258).<sup>71</sup>

How important was the Cali cartel's assistance to the Colombian government in tracking down Pablo Escobar in December 1993? Chaparro suggests it was fundamental. The cartel mobilized extensive networks of spies of all types to track the movements of Escobar and his group. It recruited some of Colombia's best police and military technicians to manage its intelligence service. “Muchos de estos uniformados habían sido enviados por las Fuerzas

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<sup>70</sup> “A veteran congressman assures that the influence of the Cali cartel at that time was such that no Senator could aspire to the presidency of the Congress without the blessing of the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers.”

<sup>71</sup> “I understand all this [her need to display wealth]. I understand the need to send only the best presents, but these expenses seem an exaggeration to me. I have to bribe half the country and I do not spend money the way you do. Be moderate, woman, be moderate!”

Armadas colombianas a recibir cursos en las agencias de seguridad de Estados Unidos, Gran Bretaña e Israel” (p. 128).<sup>72</sup>

Las autoridades calculan que en la última fase de la persecución contra Pablo Escobar, el cartel de Cali invirtió cerca de 120 millones de dólares en compra de tecnología, pago de informantes y sobornos a miembros del DAS [Colombia’s principal intelligence agency], la Fiscalía, la Procuraduría, la Policía y el Ejército. De los 120 millones, al menos 35 fueron entregados a los jefes militares de los Pepes (p. 203).<sup>73</sup>

The “Pepes” were an armed group formed by an alliance between Carlos and Fidel Castaño, leaders of a paramilitary force in northern Colombia, plus the Cali cartel. The gunmen directed by the Pepes assassinated scores, if not hundreds, of Escobar’s allies.

Chaparro describes at length the organization and function of the Cali group:

“ . . . que a pesar de su estructura descentralizada, la mafia del narcotráfico en el Valle tenía una cúpula bien organizada y cuyos jefes se habían asociado para evitar la competencia entre ellos, regular la producción, establecer los precios del mercado y luchar contra enemigos comunes” (p. 157).<sup>74</sup>

The latter chapters (pp. 233-282) go into detail about decision-making and operations. The Cali Cartel had a core “executive committee” of four backed by another four high-ranking specialists, including one dedicated to enforcement and discipline. In some ways, the cartel acted as a cooperative in which independent traffickers maintained their own sources of drugs and their own distribution networks abroad. Traffickers were free to form their own sub-groups; packages in shipments were carefully coded and accounted for. The Rodríguez Orejuela brothers were not interested in backward integration into coca production or the early stages of processing, considering them too risky. They focused on final processing, smuggling, distribution, and

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<sup>72</sup>“ Many of those uniformed military personnel had been sent by the Colombian armed services to study in security agencies in the United States, Great Britain and Israel.”

<sup>73</sup>“The authorities calculate that in the last phase of the campaign against Pablo Escobar, the Cali Cartel invested about US\$120 million in the purchase of technology, in paying informants, and in bribes to employees of DAS (Colombia’s main intelligence service), the Attorney General’s office, the police and the army. Of the US\$120 million, at least \$35 million went to the military leaders of the Pepes.”

<sup>74</sup> “In spite of the decentralized organization, the leadership of the drug trafficking mafia in the [Cauca] Valley was well organized. Its leaders coordinated with each other to prevent competition between groups, to regulate production [of illegal drugs], to set prices, and to fight against common enemies.”

money-laundering. Chaparro tells a good deal about smuggling techniques and money laundering, which was done through dozens of front businesses and banks controlled by the group. We do not learn much about distribution networks.

Chaparro gives the impression that the Cali and Medellin cartels in effect “contracted out” for the services of *sicarios* on an as-needed basis. Each cartel had a “minister of defense” charged with locating and deploying whatever services were needed. A good example is in the final destruction of Escobar’s group. After Escobar’s death, Pablo’s lieutenants tried to mount a counterattack.

Pero encontraron que todo el aparato militar del capo estaba desvertebrado y que las oficinas de sicarios de las comunas, en otras épocas al servicio de la organización antioqueña estaban controlados por los paramilitares de Fidel Castaño y los emisarios de los hombres de Cali” (pp. 195-196).<sup>75</sup>

Finally, Chaparro narrates the career of Gilberto Rodríguez from newsboy to pharmacy employee, into management jobs and then ownership in the pharmacy. We learn that the brothers staged a kidnapping to raise money to enter drug trafficking, but we do not learn why the brothers chose that particular path into the upper reaches of organized crime.

*Drug Lords: The Rise and Fall of the Cali Cartel*, by Ron Chepesiuk is a detailed and professional English-language source.<sup>76</sup> Chepesiuk, a journalist and borderline academic, supplies fascinating details about the Cali cartel. To begin with, he notes that this was not the “kinder, gentler mafia that their propaganda machine brilliantly portrayed them to be” (p. 68). Its leaders were perfectly willing to torture and kill, but found it in their interest to maintain a low

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<sup>75</sup> “They found that the military apparatus of the *capo* (Escobar) had been taken apart. The networks of the *sicarios*, which had been at the service of the Medellín cartel, were now controlled by the paramilitary organization of Fidel Castaño or by representatives of the Cali Cartel. The term, “oficinas de sicarios,” refers to networks that provide services rather than to physical “offices”.

<sup>76</sup> Wrea Green, UK: Milo Books, 2007. This is an updated version of *The Bullet or the Bribe* (New York: Praeger, 2003). “However, they discovered that the military apparatus of the cartel had been taken apart. The networks of assassins in the municipalities which had previously been at the service of the Medellín Cartel were now controlled by Fidel Castaño’s paramilitaries and by emissaries of the Cali Cartel.”

profile. "Buy Colombia rather than terrorize it' became their guiding philosophy" (p. 76). The Cali organization's intelligence operation was extraordinary.

At the height of power in the early 1990s, the cartel was said to control the public telephone lines in Cali and as many as 5,000 taxi drivers, who were paid to be its eyes and ears in Cali. 'As soon as your plane landed in Cali, they knew who you were,' said Chris Feistl, a DEA agent who investigated the cartel in the 1990s (pp. 74-75).

Chepesiuk cites the New York State Police as saying that the Cali cartel's management structure resembled that of a fast-food chain like McDonalds or Dairy Queen. Cell managers were given financial incentives to sell the product; they were transferred from one city to another if the heat was on; and they got regular vacations and company benefits. "Corporate" lawyers in the United States handled legal problems. The big difference between McDonalds and the cartel was that the cartel's cells operated with little knowledge of each other, for obvious reasons. However, it was a centralized organization with all major decisions being made in Cali. This made it highly dependent upon secure communications, a key weakness (pp. 94-98).

Chepesiuk writes that the Cali and Medellín cartels originally got along with each other. They divided up the market, with Cali getting the New York market and Medellín getting Miami and South Florida. California was left up for grabs--until Cali grabbed it (p. 71). Chepesiuk then discusses various theories about why war between the two cartels erupted. He agrees with Chaparro that the Cali cartel played a major role in destroying Pablo Escobar's organization and that the Colombian government initially neglected the Cali cartel in their efforts to take down Escobar (pp. 129-150). Chapter Eight of *Drug Lords* begins with the following quote from Gilberto Rodriguez, "Chairman" of the Cali cartel: "Mr. Escobar is sick, a psycho, a lunatic . . . he thinks that a criminal can win a war against the state. I think that is absurd" (p. 129). Finally, it is worth noting that both Pablo Escobar and the leaders of the Cali cartel aspired to upper-class status in their respective cities.

We end our patchwork description of the illegal drug business in Colombia with a look at the countryside. Carlos Villalón published an extraordinary article entitled "Cocaine Country" in the July, 2004 issue of *National Geographic*.<sup>77</sup> Villalón got permission from the FARC guerrillas to do a photo essay about cocaine growing in a region under their control. The area was along the Caguán river in the southeastern Amazonian department of Caquetá.

In the 1980s, the Medellín and Cali cartels had gotten the region's farmers to grow coca, which the cartels bought in semi-processed form. When the cartels were destroyed in 1995, the FARC had an opportunity to expand its financial base. First, the FARC brought law and order to the previously rowdy towns. Its code of conduct specified that there was to be no drinking from Monday to Friday, no fighting, and no drug use. Breaking a rule meant being sentenced to work on a development project like building a bridge or a road in the interior, something a government would normally do. In effect, the FARC *was* the government, although control was contested by the Colombian army. The FARC leader assigned a woman commander to each town, believing that women relate better to the local population.

A dealer made the rounds of the small towns once a week, paying about US\$1,000 for a kilogram of base. This was the amount an average farmer could produce in a month. But after buying supplies and paying his workers, the farmer might net as little as US\$325. The FARC collected a 30% tax on the sales. According to the author, the FARC earned hundreds of millions of dollars a year by taxing cocaine transactions in its territory.

Goods and services could be bought with either pesos or cocaine base. The article included a picture of two prostitutes waiting to take a weekly medical exam which was required by the guerrillas. If the women passed the exam, they would receive a permit to work the following week. The prostitutes brought a bag of base to pay their bill, since this was the

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<sup>77</sup> Volume 206, No. 1, pp. 34-55.



currency they received from their clients. Another picture showed an operating room where a doctor was taking bullets out of a guerrilla who had been shot by paramilitary forces. The doctor said: "I can do everything but brain surgery here".

Since Villalón's article was written, the FARC has been demoralized and depleted, but it has not been defeated. Heavily supported by the United States, President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) was successful in reducing the size and the effectiveness of the guerrillas. *The Economist* reports that the number of FARC guerrillas declined from about 18,000 in 2002 to 8,000 in 2011.<sup>78</sup> The most dramatic recent event in the Colombian government's war on the guerrillas occurred on March 1, 2008 when Operation Phoenix was implemented. This was a combined arms attack on a FARC base less than two miles inside Ecuadorian territory. The attack killed 20 members of the FARC, including 2<sup>nd</sup> in command Raul Reyes. Perhaps more importantly, the Colombians captured computers, external hard drives and memory sticks containing information indicating that the Ecuadorian and Venezuelan governments were in close communication with the FARC.<sup>79</sup> FARC leader-for-life Manuel Marulanda Vélez died peacefully in May, 2008. His successor Alfonso Cano was killed on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and several FARC computers were captured. Nevertheless, the guerrillas continue to be an important problem for the Colombian government. They continue to attack oil infrastructure, the Cano-Limón-Covenas pipeline in particular.

President Uribe demobilized the paramilitary groups, with minimal persecution for their crimes. However, the incompletely demobilized paramilitary groups may be as great a threat as the FARC. Some of them have become criminal organizations referred to as "bandas criminales"

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<sup>78</sup> "Security in Colombia: Never-ending". 9 July, 2011., p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> See Frank Walsh, "Rethinking the Legality of Colombia's Attack on the FARC in Ecuador: A New Paradigm for Balancing Territorial Integrity, Self-Defense and the Duties of Sovereignty, 21 *Pace International Law Review* 137 (2009). <http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/pilr/vol21/iss1/4/>

or “bacrim”. They have reportedly begun to cooperate with the guerrillas who were previously their enemies. Bacrim activities are concentrated along the Caribbean and Pacific coasts and in the department of Antioquia. They operate primarily in rural areas, but are also strong in the cities of Medellín and Cali.<sup>80</sup>

### **Working Hypotheses:**

1. Drug use is typically linked to drug trafficking and vice versa. Traffickers become users and users become traffickers.
2. People who are risk-takers are more likely to become involved in drug smuggling.
3. Foreign connections (language skills, marriages) facilitate illegal business transactions.
4. Family connections are important factors in drug transactions in Colombia and Mexico because few participants in the business outside of family can be trusted.
5. There is a tendency for nationals to replace foreigners in the illegal drug business.
6. There is a structural tension between locals and nationals in drug cartels.
7. There are economies of scale in the illegal drug business.
8. Like power, illegal money corrupts.
9. Once people get involved in drug trafficking, it is very difficult to get out.
10. Children are often socialized into lives of crime by their parents and siblings.
11. Large drug "cartels" tend to outsource the riskier parts of their businesses like assassinations.
12. Drug cartels have structural weaknesses as well as strengths. One key vulnerability is found in communications; another has to do with trust. The nature of the vulnerability depends upon the structure of the particular organization.
13. Extreme use of violence may indicate weakness in a trafficking organization. The Mexican Zetas may—or may not be—an exception to this rule.
14. Both guerrillas and drug traffickers may become terrorists.
15. Illegal money attracts sharks. There is a tendency for the most violent criminals to take over a drug trafficking organization.
16. As is the case with governments, illegal organizations require some kind of legitimacy in order to prosper. Pablo Escobar's support for the poor in Medellín created a loyal support base in that city.
17. Before it split, *La Familia* was particularly dangerous since it was the only Mexican drug cartel that sought legitimacy through a positive ideology, although its actions were often inconsistent with its stated beliefs.

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<sup>80</sup> “Colombia’s Growing Organized Crime Threat,” *Stratfor*, 18 April, 2012, p. 1. For a survey of recent literature on this subject, see Winifred Tate, “Paramilitary Forces in Colombia,” *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2011.

18. The differences between vertical and horizontal criminal organizations, as described in *The Mexican Mafia*, have important implications for law enforcement.
19. The line dividing the good guys from the bad guys is sometimes indistinct.
20. Like law schools for budding lawyers, prisons are places where criminals make contacts which facilitate their illegal operations once they are released.
21. Prisons are also like law schools in that they confer a kind of pedigree or badge of honor: the more serious the crime, the better--with the possible exception of crimes against children.
22. Getting paid for services rendered is a key problem for drug cartels since "contracts" are informal and cannot be enforced in the courts.
23. *Narcos* who are ruthless in punishing non-payment tend to displace those who are less willing to use violence.
24. Many of the Mexican *narcos* are "irrational" in the sense that they do not cooperate to maximize profits or maximize their own life spans. They are immersed in a culture of danger, excitement, cruelty and pleasure, knowing that death can come at any time.
25. It will be difficult for any political party—perhaps especially the PAN—to combat illegal drug trafficking if "legitimate" businessmen are involved.
26. Paying middle class salaries and pensions to enlisted personnel in the military is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for reducing cartel recruitment of current and former military personnel.
27. Paying middle-class salaries to police officers is a necessary but not sufficient, condition for reducing levels of police corruption.
30. National borders are often helpful to DTOs as well as to narco-guerrillas such as the FARC. They limit the jurisdiction of law enforcement agencies and may provide safe havens in neighboring countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our inductive, experimental methodology has been to describe selected books and articles on drug-related crime from the journalistic literature. These are the patches which illuminate the shadow side of a quilt of human interactions draped over Colombia, Mexico and the border regions of the United States. We looked first at Richard Grant's *God's Middle Finger* and at Silvana Paternostro's *My Colombian War* for background material. Then we formulated hypotheses suggested by these authors' reporting. We then looked at journalistic books and articles by Terrence Poppa, Mark Bowden, Max Mermelstein, Charles Nicholl, Ron Chepesiuk, Julio Scherer García, Camilo Chaparro, Carlos Villalón, Ricardo Ravelo, William Finnigan,

Jesús Blancornelas and others. Their works contain detailed descriptions of the internal and external dynamics of drug trafficking/guerrilla organizations as they spread their tentacles from Mexico, Colombia, Central America and elsewhere into the United States, feeding off the demand for illegal drugs. Again, we formulated a series of hypotheses. We created the working hypotheses directly from the journalistic accounts, without claiming that they are new to the literature on the subject.<sup>81</sup>

What can be learned from the journalists? The best answer may be: "It depends". First, it depends upon who is considered a journalist. Professors often write newspaper articles or op-ed pieces based on their academic work. For example, Gustavo Flores-Macías, a professor of government at Cornell University, wrote a piece for the *New York Times* in 2010 entitled "Colombia Can Win Mexico's Drug War." He argued that the United States and Mexico have failed to copy crucial elements of the Colombian strategy in its fight against the drug cartels. In Colombia, "foreign aid, security cooperation and judicial reform were necessary but not sufficient conditions for reducing violence." Colombia implemented a wealth tax on the country's richest taxpayers which was earmarked for its security effort. Colombia also created a civilian Ministry of Defense, developed a cadre of experienced civil servants and made the military accountable to civilian leadership. Mexico has done none of these things.<sup>82</sup> However important the argument, we do not consider this journalism. The author is an academic.

Journalists frequently interview academics and quote their publications in their stories. Is this journalism? We would say that it is, although the analysis may have come from somewhere

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<sup>81</sup> For example, number 19 of our 2nd set of hypotheses reads: "The line between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' is sometimes indistinct." Tom Farer elaborates this point as follows: "According to European law-enforcement officials, the world's largest tobacco companies . . . have been selling billions of dollars of cigarettes each year into contraband pipelines." "Conclusion: Fighting Transnational Organized Crime: Measures Short of War," in Tom Farer, ed., *Transnational Crime in the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 245.

<sup>82</sup> July 29, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/30/opinion/30flores-macias.html>?

else. One of the important functions of journalism is to point out recent policy-relevant academic research. The virtue of academic or sometimes institutionally produced work is that longer time periods are normally available for analysis. Here, there is no penalty for dry or boring writing.

What one can learn from journalists depends upon the time frame considered and also upon how much one knows about the subject to begin with. We suggest that reading an ideologically and geographically balanced selection of journalistic accounts may be the *best* introduction to our topic for students and beginners. However, those with prior knowledge of drug trafficking in Colombia and Mexico may also profit because they know what to look for. For example, we were struck by the relevance of prison terms to the subsequent careers of *narcos*. This led us to the observation that prisons are, in a sense, the law schools of the underworld. Having a criminal record is a kind of pedigree; one leaves with a certification from Stonewall College, the school of hard knocks. With some exceptions, the more serious the rap the better. Criminals also learn about law and legal institutions while incarcerated. They are able to make contacts and create networks which will help them become more effective outlaws once they are released. We hope that the hypotheses will be useful. But even if they are not, we believe the exercise has been worthwhile.

The typical process of academic research is something like this: A professor hears about a mugging on the other side of town. This seems interesting and important, so he/she collects statistics on crime rates and their locations and formulates hypotheses as to the causes of the phenomenon. Then the professor attempts to demonstrate causal relationships. Finally, solutions to the problem may be proposed.

Reading the journalistic literature is more like being mugged or talking to people who have been mugged--an anthropological or participant-observer approach. It is a different kind of experience which results in a different kind of understanding. The journalistic approach involves a larger range of emotions and perhaps a greater possibility of empathy--assuming that the sources are well chosen. This approach is more personal and the stories are interesting and absorbing, as they must be if journalists are to sell their wares. Level of interest is a matter of some consequence if students are involved. Good journalism is also important for policy-makers, who may be locked into pre-existing ideological paradigms and may lose track of the human implications of their decisions.

This is not to say that journalism is superior to academic literature. Many of the writers cited here do not link their work to the relevant political systems in any systematic fashion. (Terrance Poppa and Mark Bowden are among the exceptions.) This may be their greatest weakness from a social science perspective. What is missing is illustrated by what Robert Bonner, former Administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, writes in the July/August, 2010 issue of *Foreign Affairs*:

Colombia has a strong central government, whereas Mexico is a federal republic, with all the complexities and fragmentation that entails. It is far easier to reform and reorganize one national police force, as was done in Colombia, than to reform and reorganize two federal, 32 state and over 1,500 municipal police agencies, as will be necessary in Mexico.<sup>83</sup>

Journalism is fundamental to our understanding of crime because it provides the raw material for our work. It tells us what is going on, right now. We cannot ask the drug cartels for organization charts of their operations and for lists of their suppliers. Journalistic accounts are also useful in avoiding facile generalizations and comparisons. For example, in the *Foreign Affairs* article cited above, Bonner argues that the U.S. and Mexico should rely on the proven

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<sup>83</sup> "The New Cocaine Cowboys: How to Defeat Mexico's Drug Cartels", 89, No. 4, p. 46.

"kingpin strategy," which was used to defeat the Medellín and Cali cartels in Colombia. Bonner argues that all the cartels' vulnerabilities should be exploited. However, the "kingpin" part is the idea is that it is difficult to run a large, complex organization, so taking out the leader will be very disruptive. Mexican journalist Ricardo Ravelo wrote in 2005 that this strategy has repeatedly failed in Mexico. Most Mexican drug cartels are no longer hierarchically organized and have been able to quickly replace leaders who have been captured, killed or extradited.<sup>84</sup> Additional evidence to this effect comes from *New York Times* reporter Daniel Kurtz-Phelan's July, 2008 interview with Genaro García Luna, Mexico's Minister of Public Security.

"We staked everything on taking on the heads of the criminal structure, going after the bosses." The government has captured or killed some of the top figures in the Mexican cartels--several of the Arellano Félix brothers of Tijuana, Alfredo Beltrán Leyva of Sinaloa and Osiel Cárdenas Guillén of the Gulf cartel, which dominates the border towns abutting southeastern Texas. "The idea," García Luna said, "was that by taking off the head, the body would stop functioning." Instead, he noted ruefully, "the assassins took control".<sup>85</sup>

The dominance of the assassins in the drug cartels may partly explain the culture of competitive cruelty which has developed in the Mexican Violence.<sup>86</sup> It may also help us to understand why the cartels do not "rationally" divide Mexican territory between the various groups in the interest of profit maximization, as has been attempted in the past.<sup>87</sup> The contrast between the Cali Cartel and the Mexican Zetas could not be sharper in this regard. The Cali Cartel--like the Sinaloa Cartel today--preferred to solve problems with bribes. The Zetas--like Pablo Escobar in his last years--prefer violence.<sup>88</sup> But violence begets violence; it takes two to

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<sup>84</sup> *Los Capos*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>85</sup> "The Long War of Genaro García Luna," *New York Times* 13 July, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/magazine/>

<sup>86</sup> We remember, however, the extraordinary cruelty manifested in the Colombian Violence of the 1940s

<sup>87</sup> Ricardo Ravelo describes how Félix Gallardo created a kind of federation of drug traffickers in Mexico in the 1980s, dividing up the national territory. *Los Capos*, pp. 86-88.

<sup>88</sup> The "2012 *Stratfor* Cartel Report: Polarization and Sustained Violence in Mexico's Cartel War" (24 January, p. 2) makes this argument, saying that the leadership of the Sinaloa Federation prefers "plata" (bribes) while the Zetas prefer "plomo" (bullets).

tango. What exists in Mexico as of the summer of 2012 is a three-sided war of all against all. The three sides are the Mexican military, the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas—each with their own, often temporary, allies.

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