

Let us remember the fallen heroes of Colombia's war on drugs

The Colombian government's cowardly capitulation to narco-terrorism strikes at the moral foundations of republican government and engenders a loss of faith in reason itself. Such martyrs of the republic as Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, Police Col. Jaime Ramírez Gómez, newspaper publisher Guillermo Cano Isaza, and Sen. Luis Carlos Galán, along with hundreds more, represented that combination of morality and reason which Colombia's narco-terrorist enemies could not tolerate. Let their lives be an inspiration all those who vow to continue their battle, regardless of the risks.

Rodrigo Lara Bonilla: anti-drug crusader

Colombian President Belisario Betancur's August 1983 appointment of political dissident Rodrigo Lara Bonilla to the powerful post of justice minister, marked the first time that the cocaine cartels had to fear the weight of the law. Born in Huila, Colombia in 1944, Rodrigo Lara was a lawyer and university professor, and served as mayor of his hometown of Neiva, then as a senator and an ambassador before his appointment to the Justice Ministry.

During his short nine months in office, Lara not only publicly identified key cartel figures, but had begun to penetrate the elaborate political and business fronts the cartel czars used to conduct their business and to trace the flow of "hot money" into political coffers. He also devoted much of his effort to forging an Andean-wide pact against drugs. He lobbied intensively in favor of extraditing drug traffickers wanted abroad, and succeeded in winning presidential support for experimental use of herbicides against Colombia's vast marijuana crops.

In September 1983, one month after taking office, Lara told the press that he and his family were receiving constant death threats, but that "I will not yield in my fight against the drug industry. What would happen if the justice minister died

of fright from every threat against him? There are risks one must assume in life."

Working in close collaboration with National Police Col. Jaime Ramírez, Lara identified "virtual private armies" forged by the cartels, reorganized the National Narcotics Council under his personal jurisdiction, and ordered the Civil Aeronautics Agency to ground over 100 private airplanes belonging to prominent drug traffickers and to begin the first systematic mapping of clandestine airstrips. He also developed a close working relationship with the anti-drug U.S. ambassador to Colombia, Lewis Tambs, who also received frequent death threats.

By December 1983, Lara was battling the mafia-infiltrated Colombian Congress for the legal jurisdiction to confiscate private property and capital assets of drug traffickers. Some 30 politicians were under investigation for taking money from the mob. Assassination threats began to pour in.

On March 7, a combined deployment by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Colombian National Police, and Lara Bonilla's Justice Ministry led to raids on what proved to be the largest cocaine-producing complex yet discovered anywhere, known as "Tranquilandia." The series of 14 separate refining laboratories, with accompanying airstrips, were discovered deep in the equatorial jungles of Caquetá department, constituting what the DEA dubbed a "cocaine industrial park" of heretofore unimagined dimensions. Seized and destroyed in the raids were 14 metric tons of pure cocaine, and nearly 12,000 drums of ether, acetone, and other chemicals used in the cocaine refining process.

The mob fought back. Corruption charges were manufactured against Lara, and the pro-drug daily *El Tiempo* publicly urged Lara to resign. Warnings of a new assassination plot against him were received. The Betancur government made arrangements for Lara Bonilla and his family to leave Colombia, taking an ambassadorial post in Czechoslovakia. But Lara would not give up, and in early April he issued a call for a "world pact" against drugs and global extradition procedures against drug traffickers.

At 7:00 p.m., on April 30, 1984, Lara Bonilla died in a hail of machine-gun fire from a pair of motorcycle killers hired by the Medellín Cartel.



Col. Jaime Ramírez Gómez: nation's finest cop

One of the worst blows to the resistance was the Nov. 17, 1986 assassination of Lara's close collaborator Col. Jaime Ramírez Gómez, in full view of his wife and children. Ramírez was a key liaison with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and was highly respected continentally as much for the excellence of his intelligence and investigatory methods, as for his courage and honesty. He had been scheduled to testify on Nov. 18, the day after his murder, at an investigatory tribunal on evidence he had personally amassed on cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar's role in the assassination of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla.



Ramírez and Lara Bonilla made an extraordinary team, not only collaborating on intelligence work which made blows like that against Tranquilandia possible, but also jointly formulating a justice reform proposal designed to strengthen the vulnerable state. Sentences had to be increased, penal codes stripped of legal loopholes through which the criminals could escape the reach of justice, and international accords such as the extradition treaty with the United States, had to be enforced.

Ramírez knew that the extradition issue was critical to the success or failure of the war on drugs. In an interview with reporters in November 1986, published posthumously by *El Espectador* on Nov. 19, Ramírez repeated: "In this matter of extradition, no one should be fooled into believing that we are dealing with anything less than the key factor in the fight against drugs. . . . The day that [the treaty] is annulled, they will have won the war."

Guillermo Cano Isaza: Colombia's conscience

Lara Bonilla's offensive was given a public platform in the Bogotá daily *El Espectador*, the country's second-largest newspaper. The distinguished publisher and editor-in-chief of *El Espectador* was Guillermo Cano Isaza, a white-haired patrician with a fierce dedication to restoring his country's national dignity.



Under Cano's direction, *El Espectador* launched its first major anti-corruption campaign in 1983, with a series of devastating exposés of powerful drug banker Jaime Mi-

chelsen Uribe, the first cousin of former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen, also known as "The Godfather." Those exposés led to the Michelsen empire's downfall and an inglorious Dec. 31, 1983 flight from Colombia by the banker himself.

In the second half of 1986, the cartel escalated its blackmail and terror campaign against the country, accompanied by a synchronized series of calls for drug legalization. On Dec. 1, 1986, Justice Samuel Buitrago Hurtado, president of a high-level government advisory board known as the Council of State, went on national television to call for ending extradition and for the legalization of the cocaine and marijuana trade as a means of boosting the government's tax revenues.

Outraged, Cano dashed off a column: "Legalize drug trafficking? That would be like legalizing and justifying all the collateral activities: money laundering, the assassination of Supreme Court justices, of cabinet ministers, of judges. . . . Colombia is lowering its guard against organized crime. Each day we are more shocked to learn . . . that the miracle prescription is legalizing the drug trade. That the panacea is Church dialogue with the chiefs of the drug trade. We are on the verge of coexisting with organized crime, with accepting it."

On Dec. 17, 1986, Cano was shot through the head by a motorcycle assassin wielding the mafia's favorite weapon, the MAC-10 machine pistol.

Luis Carlos Galán: toppling a President

As the electoral campaign for a new presidency in 1990 began to gear up, the drug mafias discovered to their horror that the front-running candidate was Sen. Luis Carlos Galán, a colleague and friend of the murdered Rodrigo Lara Bonilla.



A young, reform-minded politician with tremendous popular backing, Galán represented one of the few remaining political forces in the country who had not been bought or terrorized into submission by the cocaine cartels. A founder along with Rodrigo Lara Bonilla of the New Liberalism current within the Liberal Party, Galán had charged as far back as 1982 that "the drug trade wants to destroy New Liberalism because it knows that it is its enemy in Colombia." Galán pledged at Lara Bonilla's funeral to "defend the values and principles for which Rodrigo Lara gave his life." Galán especially defended extradition as "one of the principal tools to confront the drug traffickers. We must use it without fear." On Aug. 18, 1989, the drug mafia murdered Luis Carlos Galán as he prepared to address 7,000 supporters at a nationally televised political rally in poverty-stricken southern Bogotá. With Galán's death, Colombia lost a President.