

## The Colombian “War on Drugs”, A Family Affair

Teflon President? Noose Tightens Around Uribe as Former Death Squad Leaders Spill the Beans

By [Tom Burghardt](#)

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[Antifascist Calling...](#)

*Last month’s capture of Colombian drug lord Daniel “El Loco” Barrera by Venezuelan police was hailed as a “victory” in the “War on Drugs.”*

*Barrera, accused of smuggling some 900 tons of cocaine into Europe and the U.S. throughout his infamous career, was described by Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, who announced the arrest on national television, as “the last of the great capos.”*

*But what of the “capo” who enjoyed high office, is wined and dined by U.S. corporations and conservative think-tanks, owns vast tracks of land, is a “visiting scholar” at a prominent American university (Georgetown) and now sits on the Board of Directors of Rupert Murdoch’s [News Corporation](#)?*

When will they be brought to ground?

A Family Affair

To clarify the questions above, one need look no further than the kid-gloves approach taken by the media when it comes to former Colombian President, the U.S. “Presidential Medal of Freedom” recipient Álvaro Uribe.

Accused by human rights organizations over his role in the forced disappearance of thousands of Colombians during two terms in office (2002-2010), Uribe may still land in the dock as a result of ongoing investigations by Colombia’s Supreme Court into official corruption, drug trafficking and mass murder.



Recent arrests by Colombian authorities and revelations by the president's former allies however, are beginning to draw a circle around Uribe and the U.S. secret state in some of the hemisphere's worst human rights abuses of previous decades.

As the net tightens, members of the president's own family are sharply focused in the cross-hairs of investigators. Back in June, [Antifascist Calling](#) reported on the arrest of Ana Maria Uribe Cifuentes and her mother, Dolly Cifuentes Villa on drug trafficking and money laundering charges. The U.S Treasury Department froze their assets last year.

Accused by the Justice Department of having trafficked some 30 tons of cocaine into the U.S. as business partners of Sinaloa Cartel boss Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the women, members of the Cifuentes Villa crime family led by Dolly's brother, Jorge Milton Cifuentes Villa, are prominent members of Colombia's jet-setting narco-bourgeoisie.

According to the [Justice Department](#), the investigation revealed that "the Cifuentes Villa drug trafficking organization was using sophisticated drug trafficking routes to distribute multi-ton cocaine loads from Colombia through Central America, for ultimate distribution in Mexico and the United States." In 2009, some 8.3 tons of cocaine which the family were attempting to export to Mexico were seized by law enforcement officials in Ecuador.

Federal prosecutors charged that the Cifuentes Villa family owns or controls 15 companies operating in Colombia, Mexico and Ecuador involved in a variety of ventures that supported their narco-trafficking enterprise.

Among the firms targeted were *Linea Aerea Pueblos Amazonicos S.A.S.*, a newly-created airline operating in eastern Colombia, *Red Mundial Inmobiliaria, S.A. de C.V.*, a real estate company located near Mexico City, along with *Gestores del Ecuador Gestorum S.A.*, a consulting firm located in Quito, Ecuador.

It is also worth noting that the Cifuentes Villa organization, as the [Center of Public Integrity](#) reported, have also profited from illegal mining operations that traffic rare-earth minerals destined for the world market.

Accordingly, the Cifuentes Villa clan employed the same smuggling routes that trafficked cocaine to move precious metallic ores such as coltan and tungsten, used by the communications industry and weapons manufacturers, onto the international market. When

the Treasury Department placed family members onto its drug kingpin list they identified their mining fronts as “a money-laundering operation in support of a cocaine-smuggling enterprise.”

While U.S. media were mesmerized by the extradition of Sandra Ávila Beltrán, whom the press had dubbed “La Reina del Pacífico” (The Queen of the Pacific), over her lavish lifestyle and family ties to legendary Mexican drug lord Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, onetime godfather of the Guadalajara Cartel, Uribe’s relatives inexplicably “disappeared” from “court records and authorities were unable to pinpoint the pair’s whereabouts,” [Colombia Reports](#) informed us.

Imagine that.

For his part, the former president denied allegations leveled against his brother Jaime, who died in 2001, and claimed that unnamed “criminals,” who conducted “business” from his brother’s car phone had cloned it. He also “denied any knowledge of his brother’s relationship with Cifuentes or the existence of his niece, despite a birth certificate that was uncovered proving Jaime Uribe was her father,” *Colombia Reports* averred.

What Uribe continues to gloss over however, is the inconvenient fact that brother Jaime had been arrested and interrogated by the Colombian Army after investigators recorded calls \made from his phone to none other than Pablo Escobar, the [Nuevo Arco Iris](#) political research center in Bogotá disclosed.

Among the unanswered questions surrounding these recent arrests, investigative journalist Daniel Hopsicker [wondered](#): “Did Álvaro Uribe okay the loading of 3.6 tons of cocaine at an airport he controlled in Rio Negro Colombia onto a ‘former’ CIA Gulfstream (N987SA) jet from St. Petersburg Florida that crashed in the Yucatan in 2007?”

That fateful crash eventually led to the deferred prosecution agreement between the U.S. federal government and Wachovia Bank, fined \$160 million for laundering some \$378 billion for Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel, “business associates” of the Cifuentes Villa clan.

More pointedly Hopsicker asked: “Why did two successive U.S. Administrations lavish billions of dollars to stop drug trafficking on a President of Colombia who was himself involved in the drug trade?”

As the investigative net is drawn around the family of the former president, another Uribe brother, Santiago, “is facing a criminal investigation for the alleged founding and leading of a paramilitary group,” [Colombia Reports](#) disclosed.

Investigations into that group, the notorious death squad the 12 Apostles, again surfaced when [The Washington Post](#) revealed that a former police chief, Juan Carlos Meneses, charged that Santiago “led a fearsome paramilitary group in the 1990s ... that killed petty thieves, guerrilla sympathizers and suspected subversives.”

Meneses, who fled to Venezuela with his family, disclosed that the “group’s hit men trained at La Carolina, where the Uribe family ran an agro-business in the early 1990s.” For services rendered, Meneses told the *Post* “he received a monthly payment of about \$2,000 delivered by Santiago Uribe.”

The former police official said he came forward “because associates in the security services

warned him he would soon be killed for knowing too much.”

“The revelations,” according to the *Post*, “threaten to renew a criminal investigation against Santiago Uribe and raise new questions about the president’s past in a region where private militias funded with drug-trafficking proceeds and supported by cattlemen wreaked havoc in the 1990s. The disclosures could prove uncomfortable to the United States, which has long seen Uribe as a trusted caretaker of American money in the fight against armed groups and the cocaine trade.”

“Uncomfortable” perhaps, but not surprising given the U.S. track record in support of drug-trafficking death squads, especially those which advanced corporate America’s geopolitical interests throughout Latin America.

“Meneses,” the *Post* averred, “is the first close collaborator of the 12 Apostles to speak publicly about the group’s inner workings. His declarations are also the most extensive recounting by a security services official of how Colombia’s militarized police and its army worked in tandem with death squads in one community—a model that investigators of the paramilitary movement say was duplicated nationwide.”

For his part, the former president accused human rights’ activists who have leveled charges against his family “of being guerrilla stooges who disseminate false accusations against his government.”

However, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, who was present when Meneses recounted his story during a taped interview in Buenos Aires, told the *Post* that the former police chief “‘incriminates himself and also the brother of the president who managed the paramilitary group, but also President Uribe’.”

Interestingly enough, Uribe’s appointment to News Corp’s board came while the former president is under investigation for illegally wiretapping human rights activists, journalists, Supreme Court justices and opposition politicians.

His former chief of staff is currently in jail awaiting trial on criminal wiretapping charges and his former secret police chief, Maria Pilar Hurtado, fled Colombia and sought asylum in Panama before similar charges could be filed against her.

And with two more senators now under investigation for suspected ties to paramilitary death squads [Colombia Reports](#) averred, Uribe’s teflon armor is slowly being chipped away.

### Parapolitical Scandal

If, as Voltaire once said, “the history of the great events of this world are scarcely more than the history of crime,” what of the powerful actors who have looted entire nations and did so while serving the interests of their imperialist overlords?

Dubbed the “parapolitical scandal” by Colombian media, the investigation was set in motion when leftist opposition politician, Clara López Obregón, formally denounced and provided evidence in 2005 to the Supreme Court of links between drug trafficking organizations, the military/intelligence apparatus, right-wing death squads and members of Congress, including prominent officials of Álvaro Uribe’s then-governing coalition.

That investigation gathered steam when a laptop was seized by authorities in 2006 from Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, alias Jorge 40, a leader of the Northern Bloc of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC).

The origins of the AUC can be traced to the take-down of the Medellín Cartel and murder of “cocaine king” Pablo Escobar by rival drug organizations, principally the Cali Cartel run by the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, who were provided logistical support and firepower by the CIA and U.S. Delta Force commandos to eliminate the competition.

An umbrella group comprised of far-right militants and drug capos aligned with Colombia’s ruling class, the AUC and splinter groups such as the *Águilas Negras*, or Black Eagles, and the *Ejército Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista Colombiano* (Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia, ERPAC), derive the bulk of their income from drug trafficking as they wage war against the leftist *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC), trade unionists and land reform activists.

Readers will recall that during the 1980s both the Medellín and Cali cartels were given a leg up by the Reagan administration’s CIA as funds derived from the drug trade were diverted to the Nicaraguan Contras as part of the administration’s anti-Communist crusade in Central America.

In fact, as the Agency was forced to admit in the wake of “suicided” journalist Gary Webb’s “[Dark Alliance](#)” investigation, the CIA and Reagan’s Justice Department agreed to a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) that handed their dope-dealing Contra assets get-out-of-jail-free cards.

As political fallout from the latest “War on Drugs” scandal—the “gun walking” Fast and Furious affair that put thousands of high-powered weapons into the hands of cartel killers in Mexico—hovers like a radioactive cloud over the Justice Department, the old watchword of the 1980s, “drugs in, guns out,” is all the more timely.

And like the Contras, the AUC were more than simply an enforcement arm of Colombia’s narco-elites; they served as an unofficial though deadly instrument, to preserve the status quo. For Washington policy makers, this meant continued access by U.S. petroleum corporations, mining and agro-business interests to Colombia’s vast wealth. If thousands of tons of cocaine entered the United States as the price for stamping out “leftist subversion,” then so be it.

Along with incriminating evidence that linked Tovar’s gang to 550 murders, it later emerged that Tovar was a close political associate of Jorge Noguera, the former head of DAS, the *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad* (Administrative Department of Security), the Colombian equivalent of the CIA.

Noguera’s links to Tovar came to light when his deputy, Rafael García Torres, DAS’s former chief of Information Technologies, was arrested and charged by Supreme Court investigators of accepting bribes from right-wing *sicarios* (assassins) and drug traffickers in exchange for erasing their criminal histories, along with those of the Cifuentes Villa clan, from the state intelligence database.

In his testimony, García charged that Noguera, a Uribe crony, collaborated with Tovar’s

Northern Bloc in a coordinated move by the AUC to support local, regional and national candidates for office who supported their hardline against the left.

More recently, the not-so-hidden hand of the United States emerged.

[The Washington Post](#) reported that “American cash, equipment and training, supplied to elite units of the Colombian intelligence service over the past decade to help smash cocaine-trafficking rings, were used to carry out spying operations and smear campaigns against Supreme Court justices, Uribe’s political opponents and civil society groups.”

*Post* reporters Karen DeYoung and Claudia J. Duque disclosed that despite billions of dollars of aid supplied by U.S. taxpayers under Plan Colombia, “the DAS under Uribe emphasized political targets over insurgents and drug lords.”

In fact, Colombia prosecutors told the *Post* that the “Uribe government wanted to ‘neutralize’ the Supreme Court because its investigative magistrates were unraveling ties between presidential allies in the Colombian congress and drug-trafficking paramilitary groups.”

Based on “thousands of pages of DAS documents and the testimony of nine top former DAS officials, the prosecutors say the agency was directed by the president’s office to collect the banking records of magistrates, follow their families, bug their offices and analyze their court rulings.”

These black operations however, were not the work of a few proverbial “bad apples” but were a direct result of projects designed by the CIA.

“Some of those charged or under investigation have described the importance of U.S. intelligence resources and guidance,” the *Post* disclosed, “and say they regularly briefed embassy ‘liaison’ officials on their intelligence-gathering activities.”

“‘We were organized through the American Embassy,’ said William Romero, who ran the DAS’s network of informants and oversaw infiltration of the Supreme Court. Like many of the top DAS officials in jail or facing charges, he received CIA training. Some were given scholarships to complete coursework on intelligence-gathering at American universities.”

As with the previous Clinton and Bush regimes, the Obama administration vociferously denies any knowledge of corrupt practices by Colombian officials and in fact, “anti-drug” programs such as Plan Colombia “are viewed as so successful that it has become a model for strategy in Afghanistan,” the *Post* reported.

By 2012 however, some 139 members of Congress were under investigation; five governors and 32 lawmakers, including President Uribe’s cousin, Mario Uribe Escobar, a former President of Congress, were convicted of paramilitary ties and subsequently jailed.

In late August, former Colombian senator Jorge Visbal, a Uribe ally, “was charged with the promoting and financing of paramilitary groups, held responsible for tens of thousands of human rights violations,” [Colombia Reports](#) disclosed.

“Former AUC leader Salvatore Mancuso testified before Colombian prosecutors that Visbal had an ‘identical ideology’ to the extreme-right paramilitaries and, on behalf of the cattle ranchers, brought ‘information and suggestions’ to meetings with paramilitary leaders to

secure the expansion of paramilitary power in the north of Colombia.”

Mancuso, who took over the AUC when [Israeli-trained](#) narco trafficker and death-squad *fürher* Carlos Castaño “disappeared” in 2004, said during recent court proceedings that Uribe was aware that the organization supported his campaign for president in 2002 “economically and logistically,” according to [Colombia Reports](#).

Prior to his arrest, the human rights organization [Equipo Nizkor](#) reported that Mancuso, the son of Italian immigrants, along with being an AUC “godfather,” was also a member of the *’Ndrangheta*, “the powerful Calabrian mafia which according to Italian police, exceeds the Sicilian Cosa Nostra in both strength and size.”

In fact, when Italian anti-Mafia prosecutor Nicola Gratteri flew to Bogotá to investigate the *’Ndrangheta’s* Colombian drugs network, Gratteri was told by Mancuso he had spied on him the entire time.

“I was in the center of Bogotá, with lots of security protecting me. I didn’t know that all the armored cars that I could see around my hotel belonged to Mancuso,” Gratteri told [The Daily Beast](#). “He told me his protection consisted of 600 men! Not even the U.S. President has such an escort. Can you imagine how much money he had?”

Mancuso claimed Uribe was aware of the AUC’s backing. “There were previous meetings with members of Álvaro Uribe’s campaign, including those delegates that asked us to decrease military operations because it was affecting the campaign and image of the candidate,” Mancuso said.

During those same proceedings, another former AUC leader, Jorge Ivan Laverde, alias “El Iguano,” said that “no evidence exists of these financial transactions because the groups burned all of their paramilitary records before they demobilized.”

Rather conveniently, one might say.

“According to El Iguano,” [Colombia Reports](#) disclosed, “the support of the ex-president all began when the righthand man of AUC creator Carlos Castaño called all groups to give them the order that they must support the Uribe campaign and spend money where necessary.”

The former president denounced these claims and said he would launch “a criminal complaint against the former paramilitary for libel.”

However, former Congressman Miguel Alfonso de la Espriella, who was part of Uribe’s coalition government and later sentenced for ties to the AUC, told prosecutors in September that Uribe “knew he was receiving support from paramilitary groups during his 2002 election campaign,” [Colombia Reports](#) disclosed last month.

The now-disgraced politician said that Uribe “never objected” to meeting with the AUC-backed politicians, but “simply maintained a prudent silence.”

In a recent interview, de la Espriella told [El Espectador](#) that the AUC had donated some \$134 thousand to Uribe’s 2002 presidential campaign.

The former senator told the paper that Mancuso said “our participation in the self defense forces was to seek a deal with his [Uribe’s] government. He [Uribe] did not explicitly reject

this possibility or the support. What he did say was that we wait and if he got elected we would talk again.”

More recently, Uribe’s jailed ex-security chief, Mauricio Santoyo Velasco, accused of illegally ordering driftnet surveillance over electronic communications and the forced disappearance of human rights workers in Medellín, “is willing to officially testify against his old boss and other senior officials,” according to [Colombia Reports](#).

Santoyo is presently jailed in the U.S. for collaborating with the AUC and “previously acknowledged accepting bribes from paramilitary members in exchange for giving them information about police operations being carried out against them.”

According to “highly credible sources” cited by [Colombia Reports](#), Santoyo “is willing to implicate the ex-president and other top officials,” in exchange for a “reduced sentence.”

Although U.S. prosecutors previously said that the Santoyo case was the “tip of the iceberg” and an opposition senator accused the former president of bringing “a criminal apparatus” to the presidential palace in 2002, the current director of Colombia’s National Police, General José Roberto León Riaño, denied that the U.S. is investigating anyone other than Santoyo.

“Yesterday I personally interviewed the toughest prosecutor of the United States on the matter of drug trafficking, Neil MacBride, who is running the case against [retired general Mauricio] Santoyo,” [Colombia Reports](#) averred. “He indicated: ‘there are bad apples in every institution, Santoyo is an apple that acted on his own, but that can’t affect the whole organization’.”

While evidence has yet to emerge that Uribe met with Mancuso as the former AUC chief testified, ubiquitous “facts on the ground” in the form of thousands of tons of exported dope, forced “disappearances” and the mass murder of peasants and left-wing activists tell a different tale and point to official complicity amongst Colombian elites and their U.S. “drug war” sponsors.

#### Back to the Future: U.S. Complicity and Cover-Up

The sordid history of collaboration between Colombian elites, drug gangs, the military and right-wing death squads was known for years by U.S. secret state agencies and federal prosecutors but was covered-up in the interest of “national security.”

In declassified documents published by the [National Security Archive](#) in 2004, we learned that then Senator “Álvaro Uribe Vélez of Colombia was a ‘close personal friend of Pablo Escobar’ who was ‘dedicated to collaboration with the Medellín [drug] cartel at high government levels,’ according to a 1991 intelligence report from U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) officials in Colombia.”

Researcher Michael Evans revealed that the “newly-declassified report, dated 23 September 1991, is a numbered list of ‘the more important Colombian narco-traffickers contracted by the Colombian narcotic cartels for security, transportation, distribution, collection and enforcement of narcotics operations’.”

The former president, a “key U.S. partner in the drug war” and a major recipient of billions of dollars of taxpayer-supplied funds for Plan Colombia, “was linked to a business involved in



narcotics activities in the United States” and “has worked for the Medellín cartel.”

Evans disclosed that “The document is marked ‘CONFIDENTIAL NOFORN WNINTEL,’ indicating that its disclosure could reasonably be expected to damage national security, that its content was based on intelligence sources and methods, and that it should not be shared with foreign nationals.”

One cannot help but ask: whose “national security” was threatened by the disclosure? Certainly not that of thousands of Colombian citizens murdered by drug-linked paramilitary gangsters or the hundreds of thousands of “drug war” victims incarcerated in American gulags for drug use or low-level sales.

“Uribe,” the *Archive* informed us, was “the 82nd name on the list,” and appeared “on the same page as Escobar and Fidel Castaño, who went on to form the country’s major paramilitary army, a State Department-designated terrorist group now engaged in peace negotiations with the Uribe government. Written in March 1991 while Escobar was still a fugitive, the report was forwarded to Washington several months after his surrender to Colombian authorities in June 1991.”

“Most of those on the list are well-known drug traffickers or assassins associated with the Medellín cartel,” Evans averred. “Others listed include ex-president of Panama Manuel Noriega [and] Iran-contra arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi.”

Four years later in another release of previously [classified documents](#), the *Archive* revealed that “U.S. espionage operations targeting top Colombian government officials in 1993 provided key evidence linking the U.S.-Colombia task force charged with tracking down fugitive drug lord Pablo Escobar to one of Colombia’s most notorious paramilitary chiefs.”

“The documents,” Evans wrote, “reveal that the U.S.-Colombia Medellín Task Force, known in Spanish as the Bloque de Búsqueda or ‘Search Block,’ was sharing intelligence information with Fidel Castaño, paramilitary leader of Los Pepes (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar or ‘People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar’), a clandestine terrorist organization that waged a bloody campaign against people and property associated with the reputed narcotics kingpin.”

After Escobar’s take-down, Los Pepes morphed into the AUC and led to a strategic realignment “between Colombian intelligence agencies, rival drug traffickers and disaffected former Escobar associates like Castaño, the godfather of a new generation of narcotics-fueled paramilitary forces that still plagues Colombia today.”

“The collaboration between paramilitaries and government security forces evident in the Pepes episode is a direct precursor of today’s ‘para-political’ scandal,” said Evans. “The Pepes affair is the archetype for the pattern of collaboration between drug cartels, paramilitary warlords and Colombian security forces that developed over the next decade into one of the most dangerous threats to Colombian security and U.S. anti-narcotics programs. Evidence still concealed within secret U.S. intelligence files forms a critical part of that hidden history.”

In this context, as Peter Dale Scott observed in [Drugs, Oil, and War](#), “The true purpose of most of these campaigns has not been the hopeless ideal of eradication. It has been to alter market share: to target specific enemies and thus ensure that the drug traffic remains under

the control of those traffickers who are allies of the Colombian state security apparatus and/or the CIA.”

“Allies” like Álvaro Uribe.

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