

Killing Pablo

By Mark Bowden

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The most notorious drug trafficker in the world had been perched on a spectacular Andes mountaintop, running his cocaine business surrounded and protected by the Colombian army. Current estimates were that 70 to 80 tons of cocaine were being shipped from Colombia to the United States every month, and Escobar controlled the bulk of it.

Inside his custom prison, Escobar lived like a sultan. There were parties with gourmet food and booze, beauty queens and whores. There were drugs, water beds and elaborate sound systems. Escobar ran his narcotics empire by phone. He ordered the murders of anyone who crossed him - including two of Escobar's onetime associates who were tortured and killed inside prison walls - according to one account, hung upside down and bled like steers.

At the presidential palace in Bogota the day of Escobar's escape, Busby found President Gaviria pacing in his office with fury. Gaviria had been up all night receiving one outrageous report after another: No assault had been made on the prison during daylight, despite Gaviria's orders. His vice minister of justice and his Bureau of Prisons chief had gone in themselves without authorization to talk with Escobar, and both had been taken hostage. And, finally, the worst of all scenarios had played out: Escobar had vanished.

It had taken more than two years, hundreds of lives, and hundreds of millions of dollars - much of it from U.S. covert funds - to hound the murderous drug billionaire into his surrender. Now, in one night, it had all come undone.

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prison to talk to him! For what? To notify him that he was going to be taken? What did he expect would happen? Such a stupid thing! I mean, such a stupid thing!"

Gaviria was fed up. For many long months, he had resisted the entreaties of the U.S. government. He had tried to control Escobar on his own. Now everything had changed. The time had come, he had decided, to call in the Americans.

The agreement that had landed Escobar in his prison suite at La Catedral the year before was a masterpiece of duplicity. A man with the blood of thousands on his hands was allowed to plead guilty to having introduced his cousin to a man who had arranged a single drug shipment overseas. Escobar was to serve a prison term and emerge a free man, all sins forgiven.

The length of the term was undetermined because prosecutors were allowed to add new charges if they obtained evidence of further crimes - not likely, for witnesses against Escobar typically were either bribed or murdered. In return, the government agreed not to extradite Escobar to the United States.

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La Catedral was legally a state within a state. The national police, who had lost hundreds of officers to Escobar's assassins, were forbidden to come within 12 miles of the prison. Concerned that American Special Forces or CIA agents might descend from helicopters, Escobar asked the provincial government to close the air space over the jail, which it did. Army guards fired on any aircraft that encroached.

Escobar's surrender in 1991 had allowed Gaviria to claim a political victory. Not only was the drug boss behind bars, at least technically, but the long and bloody bombing campaign directed by Escobar and his fellow narcos had been halted. Thousands of Colombians had died. Millions lived in terror. The country was exhausted by violence.

But now, a year later, Gaviria had decided to move Escobar to an actual prison on a military base in Bogota, a two-hour helicopter ride from Escobar's power base in Medellin. The president was embarrassed by newspaper exposes of Escobar's lavish life behind bars. And he was under pressure from the Americans, who had covertly pumped millions of dollars into the Colombian police pursuit of Escobar that had helped compel his "surrender."

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Once he was elected, Gaviria's fondest hope was for the Escobar problem to just go away, at least for a while. Colombia was rewriting its constitution, an enormously important and historic task that could establish a stable and peaceful undergirding for the nation for the first time since civil war, La Violencia, had erupted more than 50 years before.

The last thing Gaviria needed was for Escobar to be running loose again, setting off his truck and car bombs and unleashing his sicarios, or hired assassins. Ever the pragmatist, the president put aside whatever anger he felt toward the murderous drug boss and struck the deal that had sent Escobar to prison. That Escobar had been able to simply vanish from it now confirmed all of the worst international assumptions about the country. It made Colombia look like a narcocracy.

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Both Busby and Wagner, the CIA man, saw Gaviria and the others in his administration as pleasant, well-educated, idealistic and hopelessly naive in their polite upper-middle-class ways. They hadn't stood a chance bargaining with a tough, streetwise gangster like Escobar. Even so, Busby believed that Gaviria, if frustrated and angry enough, was capable of turning cold and calculating. If they were going to get Escobar, they would need a president like that.

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Busby did have close connections with American Special Forces, but they stemmed less from his military service than his years as ambassador-at-large for counterterrorism in the State Department, a job that involved coordinating American diplomatic and covert military action throughout the world.

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EIGHT YEARS AGO, at the request of the Colombian government, U.S. military and spy forces helped fund and guide a massive manhunt that ended with the killing of Pablo Escobar, the richest

cocaine trafficker in the world.

While portraying the pursuit of Escobar as essentially a Colombian operation, the United States secretly spent millions of dollars and committed elite soldiers, law enforcement agents and the military's most sophisticated electronic eavesdropping unit to the chase.

The full extent of the U.S. role has never before been made public. Details of the 15-month operation, which began during the administration of President George Bush and continued under President Clinton, are revealed in a serial beginning in *The Inquirer* today.

A two-year *Inquirer* investigation has found that:

The Army's top secret counterterrorism unit, Delta Force, along with a clandestine Army electronic surveillance team, tracked the movements of Escobar and his associates and helped plan raids by a special Colombian police unit called the Search Bloc. The former American ambassador to Colombia directed the U.S. effort with assistance from agents of the CIA, FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, and National Security Agency.

Midway through the operation, the Search Bloc began collaborating with vigilantes, who assassinated Escobar's associates and relatives. U.S. soldiers and agents said they witnessed the cooperation. The United States continued to supply intelligence, training and planning to the Search Bloc even as the assassinations continued.

In November 1993, Pentagon officials sought to end U.S. involvement in the manhunt. They were concerned that American forces in Colombia were going beyond their instructions and possibly violating a presidential directive prohibiting American involvement in assassinations of foreign citizens. The campaign to withdraw the U.S. personnel was stalled by a lobbying effort led by the American ambassador in Bogota. Five weeks later, Escobar was killed by Colombian police.

Official accounts at the time said Escobar, 44, was killed Dec. 2, 1993, in a gun battle on a rooftop in the city of Medellin. Autopsy reports and photos reveal that he was shot point-blank in the ear. A senior Colombian National Police commander said Escobar was executed by a member of the Search Bloc after being wounded. The Colombian government had said its aim was to arrest Escobar, an indicted criminal.

The mission to track down Escobar rid Colombia of a violent menace who threatened to topple the state. Escobar had terrorized his country beginning in 1984 - assassinating judges, police officers, journalists and politicians. Much of the violence was meant to coerce the Colombian government to ban extradition of drug traffickers to the United States. Escobar was believed to have ordered the killings of three of the five candidates for president of Colombia in 1989.

But eliminating Escobar did nothing to stem the flow of cocaine to the United States, and may have inadvertently contributed to the formation of "super cartels" - alliances among guerrillas, growers, paramilitaries and traffickers that today threaten the government of Colombia. Those alliances are one target of the \$1.3 billion in U.S. anti-narcotics aid to Colombia this year, which includes 300 American troops training Colombian security forces.

American involvement in the hunt for Escobar began in 1989, when President Bush authorized a secret military effort to help Colombia track down leaders of the Medellin cocaine cartel. Its code name was Heavy Shadow.

Centra Spike, a top-secret Army unit that specialized in tracking people by monitoring telephone and radio calls, was covertly sent to Colombia in August of that year.

The sophisticated surveillance helped chase Escobar into hiding and a life on the run. He surrendered to Colombian authorities in 1991 after negotiating a deal that allowed him to live with his closest associates in a comfortable "prison" built for him in his hometown of Envigado, near Medellin.

Escobar fled the prison on July 22, 1992, when Colombian authorities tried to move him to a real prison. After he disappeared, Colombian President Cesar Gaviria asked the United States to expand its assistance. Bush authorized the clandestine deployment of Delta Force and other U.S. personnel, and the multimillion-dollar effort continued during the Clinton administration until Escobar's death.

Public statements by U.S. officials during the manhunt acknowledged that American forces had helped train the Colombian Search Bloc. But American involvement in the effort was far more extensive than that.

Participants said that secret U.S. contributions totaled hundreds of millions of dollars in hardware, personnel and cash. At its height, with all these forces assembled under Ambassador Morris D. Busby and CIA station chief Bill Wagner, Bogota was the largest CIA station in the world.

The hunt for Escobar took an ugly turn in February 1993, when a vigilante group calling itself Los Pepes (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar, or People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar) embarked on a campaign of murder and bombings.

The vigilantes burned Escobar's mansions and luxury cars and began methodically killing off lawyers, bankers, money-launderers, assassins and relatives who helped him maintain his cocaine empire. In so doing, the vigilantes made a key contribution - stripping away the infrastructure of Escobar's organization and leaving him isolated and afraid for his family.

In communiqués, Los Pepes said it was composed of relatives of people murdered or terrorized by Escobar. The vigilantes hung a sign around the neck of one victim that read: "For working with the narco-terrorist and baby-killer Pablo Escobar. For Colombia. Los Pepes."

The Search Bloc's methods were no less brutal. So many of its targets were killed, rather than arrested, that American officials came to regard the phrase "Killed in a gun battle with the Colombian police" as a euphemism for summary execution.

Busby, then the U.S. ambassador, and Colombian Gen. Hugo Martinez, the Search Bloc commander, both deny that the hunt for Escobar was tainted by cooperation with Los Pepes, who at their busiest were killing as many as five people a day. The group assassinated an estimated 300 people. No one was ever prosecuted for these murders.

Martinez said in interviews that he and his men had no association with Los Pepes, whom he called a "nuisance."

"They made more trouble for us than help," said Martinez, who survived numerous attempts on his life and on his family. He said he turned down a \$6 million bribe from Escobar to abandon the chase.

Busby said he had been told of evidence that the Search Bloc and Los Pepes were working together, but never found it convincing. He said that if he had believed the two groups were linked, "it would have been a show-stopper. We would have pulled everybody out of the country. I communicated that directly

to the Colombian president."

The evidence Busby had seen was detailed in a secret cable he wrote on Aug. 1, 1993. In it, the ambassador said that Colombia's top prosecutor had told him he had "very good" evidence of a connection. Busby also said that "our own reporting" suggested a link.

Separate DEA cables from the embassy noted the connection between the Search Bloc and a leader of Los Pepes.

Busby, in an interview, said he had not seen the DEA cables and that DEA agents and Delta Force operatives never informed him of the interactions they witnessed between members of the Search Bloc and Los Pepes.

He said he still does not believe the Search Bloc and the vigilantes were connected.

In a series of interviews, former Colombian President Gaviria, now general secretary of the Organization of American States, said he suspected ties between his police generals and Los Pepes.

"I was very concerned there was a connection," Gaviria said. "I spoke out against Los Pepes very strongly from the beginning, but I feared there was a connection with the police. I think the police felt they were very close to getting Escobar, and maybe they went ahead because of that."

Colombian Fiscal General Gustavo de Greiff, the equivalent of the U.S. attorney general, had more than suspicions. During the summer of 1993, he told U.S. officials in Bogota that he had strong evidence that Martinez and several top officers of the Search Bloc were working with Los Pepes. He said the evidence was sufficient to charge them with bribery, drug trafficking, torture, kidnapping and possibly murder.

Busby relayed this information to Washington in his secret cable of Aug. 1, 1993. The ambassador expressed misgivings about the sources of de Greiff's information. Many of the allegations, he wrote, were made by "ex-Escobar assassins" trying to discredit the Search Bloc.

Nevertheless, Busby said, he had urged de Greiff and the Colombian defense minister to immediately remove Martinez and the other officers, and had threatened to withdraw American support if they failed to do so. Busby said he wanted to "remove the taint from the anti-Escobar effort."

Contrary advice was being offered by Joe Toft, the DEA chief in Bogota. In a cable written two days after Busby's, Toft said he had urged Colombian officials to keep Martinez in place. The message reads in part: "The BCO" - Bogota Country Office, meaning the U.S. Embassy - "continues to support Colonel Martinez and his subordinates."

Martinez remained commander of the Search Bloc. Neither he nor any member of the unit was ever prosecuted, and U.S. support for the Escobar manhunt never wavered.

Colombian Police Col. Oscar Naranjo, then intelligence chief of the National Police and now chief of analysis for the Ministry of Defense, said in an interview that Los Pepes had worked closely with the Search Bloc.

"The Pepes were a desperate option after Pablo Escobar had generated so much violence in Medellin," Naranjo said. "Old partners of Escobar's got together to offer their services to the government. For the high-ranking officers of the police and government, their relationship with the Search Bloc was kept

deliberately unclear, but people celebrated the actions of Los Pepes at all levels of the government. They and the Search Bloc acted on information gathered by the U.S. Embassy, and the Colombian army and police."

Toft's Aug. 3, 1993, cable said: "At this point, according to de Greiff, police officials were probably already too deeply involved with Los Pepes to withdraw. The witnesses' testimony indicates that not only were some members of the Bloque and Los Pepes running joint operations, some of which resulted in kidnappings and possibly killings, but that the leadership of Los Pepes was calling the shots, rather than the police."

There is other evidence of cooperation between the Search Bloc and Los Pepes.

Fidel Castano, a colorful and ruthless Colombian paramilitary leader known as "Rambo" who at one time had helped Escobar ship cocaine and who was killed in 1994 fighting against Marxist guerrillas, acknowledged publicly to reporters before his death that he was a founding member of Los Pepes. He and his brothers turned against the drug boss after he murdered their associates, he said.

In a dispatch to DEA headquarters on Feb. 22, 1993, DEA agent Javier Peña in Bogota identified Castano as "a cooperating individual who was once a trusted Pablo Escobar associate." Peña noted that Castano had valuable connections with the Colombian drug underworld. The cable went on to detail a recent Search Bloc raid on a suspected Escobar hideout that had been led by Castano.

Castano's connection with the Search Bloc was noted in another DEA memo, written in September 1993 by agent Steve Murphy.

A Colombian pilot and former drug trafficker, who asked to be identified only as Rubin, said he was associated with the death squad but stopped short of saying he was a member.

Rubin said one leader of Los Pepes, a man he identified only as "Bernardo" or "Don Berna," had worked for two Medellin drug bosses who had been murdered by Escobar. Two DEA agents said they were familiar with Bernardo, who lived with other members of the group in a house just outside the gate to the Search Bloc headquarters in Medellin. They said they witnessed his regular association with Search Bloc commanders.

Toft, who resigned as Bogota DEA chief months after Escobar was killed to protest growing links between drug dealers and the Colombian government, said the entire effort to track down Escobar was tainted by association with criminal elements.

"On the day Escobar was killed, there were all these celebrations in Bogota," Toft said. "I went to the parties. Everybody was drinking champagne and slapping each other on the back, and the whole time I had this knot in my stomach. I was happy we had gotten Escobar, but at what price? It took away a lot of the joy."

As the manhunt intensified in 1993, two high-level Pentagon officials began to express concerns about potential violations of Presidential Executive Order 12333, which originated during the Nixon administration after congressional hearings exposed excesses in the intelligence community. It has been updated under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

The order states: "No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination." It adds: "No agency of the Intelligence Community shall participate in or request any person to undertake activities forbidden by this Order."

Concerns about potential violations of the order prompted Lt. Gen. Jack Sheehan of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to recommend the withdrawal all American military forces from Colombia in November 1993, just weeks before Escobar was killed. At the time, Sheehan was in charge of all U.S. military operations overseas.

Sheehan said he made the recommendation after two CIA analysts briefed him at the Pentagon about suspected links between the Search Bloc, Los Pepes and American forces in Colombia.

The analysts, according to Sheehan, noted that the tactics employed by Los Pepes were similar to those being taught to the Search Bloc by Delta Force; that intelligence gathered by U.S. forces was being shared with the death squads; and that Delta Force operatives were overstepping their deployment orders by accompanying Search Bloc members on raids.

Sheehan's recommendation was supported by Brian Sheridan, deputy assistant secretary of defense for drug enforcement policy and support.

When he learned of Sheehan's recommendation, Busby was angry. He said he "used my influence" in Washington to try to keep the troops in Colombia. According to Sheehan, the ambassador phoned the White House from Bogota and enlisted support from the National Security Council.

"They all lined up against pulling our guys out," Sheehan said. "I thought this thing had gone way past the original deployment order, and I didn't like the way it looked at all. For Busby and the others, it was an ends-justifies-the-means kind of thing. I was opposed to it, as was anyone who takes seriously the importance of civilian control over the military."

Busby said he believed the CIA analysts who made the report to Sheehan had been "misinformed" about the seriousness of the evidence linking the Search Bloc and Los Pepes.

"We had made promises to President Gaviria that I felt we were obligated to keep," Busby said. "I was not about to abandon him at that late date. It was too important to him and us. I was also, frankly, angry that I had not been consulted."

In the end, the Pentagon ordered the covert units in Colombia - Centra Spike and Delta Force - replaced by unclassified special forces. The changeover had not been completed by the time Escobar was killed on Dec. 2, 1993.

When Los Pepes had publicly surfaced earlier that year, Clinton had just assumed office. There is no indication that suspicions of American involvement with the vigilantes ever reached him.

A senior Pentagon official said of the manhunt: "There's no question that things down there got ugly. Pablo Escobar was like a man standing on top of a mountain . . . consisting of every family member, business associate, friend and admirer he had built up over 40 years. And ultimately the only way to get at him was to take down the mountain, one person at a time, until Pablo had no place left to hide."

A former American army officer who took part in the manhunt called the effect of Los Pepes "very significant."

"They were stunning," he said. "There was no question in my mind that they were acting on information we gathered. It made it more and more difficult for him to hide. As more and more people were killed, he became terrified for his family. Ultimately, that was what enabled us to find him."

Months after Escobar's death, former Bogota DEA chief Toft released surveillance tapes showing that cocaine traffickers in the Colombian city of Cali had helped finance the presidential campaign of Gaviria's successor, Ernesto Samper. Toft said he believed the hunt for Escobar actually helped create the alliances that today bedevil the country.

Gaviria said that from his standpoint, "the battle against Pablo Escobar was never primarily about stopping drug smuggling.

"He was a very serious problem because he was so violent," the former president said. "He was a threat to the state. The level of terrorism we had to live with was something awful."

Busby, who is retired from the State Department and works as a consultant, described the long pursuit of Escobar as highly secret, but also satisfying.

"Lots of things happened that no one is ever going to talk about," Busby said. "Nobody has ever really talked about this. I will say that in my long experience, I have never seen so many different American agencies, military and civilian, work together with such professionalism and efficiency. I'm really proud of that, and, let me tell you, at that point I would not have wanted to be Pablo Escobar."

Pablo Escobar was arguably the richest and most violent criminal in history. Forbes Magazine in 1989 listed him as the seventh-richest man in the world.

A small-time gangster and car thief from Medellin, the second-largest city in Colombia, Escobar violently consolidated the cocaine industry there in the late 1970s. Elected as an alternate to Colombia's Congress in 1983, Escobar enjoyed widespread popularity among the poor in Colombia, especially in his home state of Antioquia.

He turned his violent methods against the state in 1984, when Colombia began cracking down on the cocaine exporters and extraditing them to the United States for trial.

His campaign of murder, kidnapping, bombing and bribery from then until his death in 1993 forced a constitutional crisis in Colombia. He cowed the government into banning extradition, and his murder campaign against judges and prosecutors so intimidated the nation that it abandoned trial by jury and began appointing anonymous, "faceless" judges to prosecute crimes.

At the height of his power in the late 1980s, Escobar and his Medellin drug cartel controlled as much as 80 percent of the multibillion-dollar export of Colombian cocaine to the United States.

Escobar was blamed for assassinating three of the five candidates for Colombian president in 1989, and for instigating a takeover of the Palace of Justice in Bogota in 1986. More than 90 people died in the subsequent siege, including 11 Supreme Court justices.

When one of Escobar's bombs brought down an Avianca Airliner in Colombia in November 1989, killing 107 people, he became one of the most feared terrorists in the world.

Men working for Escobar were caught that same year trying to buy Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in Miami.

A heavy pot-smoker, Escobar cultivated a relaxed, informal style with his friends and associates, but he was so vicious to his enemies that he was feared by everyone. In his battle with Colombian police, he

placed a bounty on the head of officers in Medellin, paying higher rewards for killing those of greater rank. By the time of his death at age 44, Dec. 2, 1993, Escobar was considered responsible for thousands of deaths in Colombia, yet he was mourned publicly by large crowds in his home city.

By walking out of prison in July of 1992, Pablo Escobar had done his enemies a favor.

He had gone from prisoner to prey. Morris D. Busby, the U.S. ambassador to Colombia, knew this opportunity would not last long. If Escobar was not apprehended quickly, before he had a chance to securely set himself up as a fugitive, the search might drag on for months or years.

Escobar had spent a lifetime building criminal associations. His wealth and his reputation for violence ensured loyalty where his popularity did not. Ensnared in his home city of Medellin, he was king of the mountain. He would be free to resume and refine the web of drug trafficking, assassinations, terror bombings, bribery and intimidation that had made him the world's most notorious outlaw.

Busby wanted Escobar now, while he was still on the run - and at a moment when the Colombian government, after years of hesitation, had finally issued the Americans an unequivocal invitation to do whatever it could to track Escobar down. The ambassador had served as State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, so he knew all the secret tools in the U.S. arsenal. And he knew exactly what he wanted: He put out a call for Maj. Steve Jacoby.

For the previous three years, Jacoby had secretly worked from a locked-down section on the windowless fifth floor of the bunkerlike U.S. Embassy in Bogota, where few people beyond the ambassador and the CIA station chief knew exactly who he was or what he did. In fact, Steve Jacoby wasn't even his real name. It was one of four identities he could assume at any moment, each supported by passports and credit cards. Changing into each one was like slipping on a new pair of shoes.

Jacoby ran a covert operation for one of the most classified units in the U.S. Army, a highly specialized cadre of communications experts that had gone by a variety of cover names over the years. It had been called Torn Victory, Cemetery Wind, Capacity Gear and Robin Court. Lately, it was "Centra Spike."

Until Escobar settled into his luxury prison suite outside Medellin in 1991, Jacoby and his handpicked operatives had spent much of their time secretly tracking the drug lord, his cronies and his rivals.

Escobar's sweetheart deal with the Colombian government had been a disappointing end to that chase and, with the elusive drug boss in prison, their mission had been throttled back. Jacoby had used the slack time to pull some of his men and equipment out of Colombia. Marriages and machines were in need of repair.

Jacoby was a career soldier and a new kind of spy. With the end of the Cold War, a profusion of small-scale, specialized American military operations were being launched in exotic places by small units of unconventional soldiers dispatched on short notice. America's newest enemies were not only regional powers and dictators and their armies, but also terrorists, crime bosses and drug traffickers.

Military commanders who once focused on enemy troop maneuvers and missile throw weights now also needed more timely, localized and specific information: How many doors and windows does the target building have? What kind of weapons do the bodyguards carry? Where does the target eat dinner? Where did he sleep last night, and the night before?

Centra Spike had evolved to provide the kind of precise, real-time intelligence that big spy outfits like the CIA were not designed to collect. Over time, the unit's primary specialty had become finding people.

Techniques for eavesdropping on radio and telephone conversations from the air had been perfected during missions over El Salvador. There were other military and spy units that could do it; what distinguished Centra Spike was its accuracy. It was capable of pinpointing the origin of a call within seconds.

The unit had advanced far beyond the primitive days of World War II, when ground-based antennas could do little more than determine the general vicinity of a radio signal. By the Vietnam War, army direction-finders had perfected techniques for quickly locating a radio signal to within a half-mile of its origin. By the '80s, when Jacoby joined a precursor of Centra Spike, that capability had been reduced to a few hundred meters.

Instead of triangulating from three receivers on the ground, the unit did it from one small airplane. Airborne equipment took readings from different points along a plane's flight path. When a signal was intercepted, the pilot would fly an arc around it. With on-board computers providing instantaneous calculations, operators could begin triangulating off points in that arc within seconds. If the plane had time to complete a half circle around the signal, its origin could be narrowed to under 100 meters.

The system was ideal for tracking a man like Escobar, who moved from hideout to hideout, communicating by cell phone and radio. While a radio or phone signal could be encrypted, there was no way to disguise its origin. And the system worked in any kind of weather or terrain.

The presence of such sophisticated military spying equipment targeted at foreign citizens was legal. A National Security Decision Directive signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1986 declared the flow of drugs across U.S. borders a national security threat and authorized the use of American military forces against foreign drug traffickers. A similar classified directive signed by President George Bush in 1988 authorized the U.S. military to arrest foreign nationals and bring them to the United States for trial.

So Centra Spike was officially approved. It was also highly classified. The unit's operators and equipment had been slipped into Bogota under the direction of the previous CIA station chief, John Connolly. Colombian officials were informed that the United States, at their invitation, was to begin some fairly sophisticated electronic surveillance, but details about methods or personnel were not provided.

The first problem was getting Centra Spike's aircraft into the country without arousing suspicion.

Anyone looking for America's most sophisticated eavesdropping equipment would be watching for something high-flying and fancy, with great bulbous features and bristling with antennas. They probably wouldn't be looking for two perfectly ordinary Beechcrafts, an older model 300 and a new model 350.

Inside and out, the Beechcrafts looked like standard twin-propeller, six-passenger commercial planes. Such aircraft were common in Colombia, a mountainous country with poor roads. But these Beechcrafts were \$50 million spy planes crammed with state-of-the-art electronic eavesdropping and direction-finding equipment.

A close examination of either plane would have revealed a wing span about six inches longer than the normal models - to accommodate the two main eavesdropping antennas built inside. Five more antennas could be lowered from the plane's belly in flight.

In the cockpit was more instrumentation than in a 747. Once the planes had reached altitudes of 20,000 to 25,000 feet, operators switched on laptop computers plugged into the planes' mainframe and power centers. Wearing headsets, the operators could monitor four frequencies simultaneously.

The laptops displayed the planes' positions and the estimated positions of signals being tracked. Because the planes flew so high, no one on the ground could see or hear them. It was an extraordinary capability, particularly useful because it was unknown to even the most sophisticated telecommunications experts - the kind of people drug lords hired to advise them on ways to avoid detection.

To help explain why the Beechcrafts were in Colombia, the CIA set up a dummy corporation called Falcon Aviation. The company was said to be conducting an aviation safety project, a survey of Colombia's VOR (VHF Omnidirectional Range) beacons. These are transmitters at all airports to help pilots locate runways.

The project gave Centra Spike's pilots a plausible reason to fly just about anywhere in the country in pursuit of Escobar and other drug traffickers. There were only a few dozen VOR beacons in Colombia, so anyone familiar with the country's aviation infrastructure would know that such work would only take a few weeks. But no one ever questioned the mundane little Beechcrafts.

This ability to track and tail Escobar had been at Busby's disposal for nearly three years. Now, with Escobar back on the loose, Colombian President Cesar Gaviria was giving the Americans carte blanche to use it.

Joe Toft, the gun-toting DEA chief in Bogota, understood just how different the game had become. In a cable to Washington, Toft wrote that Escobar "has placed himself in a very precarious position."

He offered a prediction:

"Escobar's gall and bravado may lead to his ultimate downfall."

In the three years since their unit had arrived in Colombia, the men of Centra Spike had come to recognize not just the voice of Pablo Escobar, but his idiosyncrasies and unique personal style.

The secret electronic eavesdropping and tracking unit had heard the man's voice on radio and cell phone many times during the first hunt, before Escobar struck his 1991 deal with the Colombian government and moved into a comfortable suite in the "prison" run by his bodyguards.

Now, in the summer of 1992, Escobar had walked out of prison and was once again a fugitive. This time, the Colombian government had asked the United States to take a more assertive role in hunting down the man whose assassins and terrorists had killed thousands of Colombians, including presidential candidates and supreme court justices.

Supervised by Maj. Steve Jacoby, Centra Spike's analysts felt they knew Escobar as well as anyone, though none had ever seen or spoken to him. Inside a steel-reinforced vault on the windowless fifth floor of the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, they listened to hours and hours of Escobar's recorded conversations.

Based on Escobar's discussions with his lieutenants, lawyers and family members, it was clear that he was a man of a certain refinement. He had a deep voice and spoke softly. He was articulate, and though he sometimes slipped into the familiar Paisa street patois of Medellin, he normally used very clean Spanish, free of vulgarity and with a vocabulary of some sophistication, which he sometimes sprinkled with English expressions.

He was painstakingly polite, and he seemed determined to project unruffled good humor at all times, even though it was quite clear that everyone who spoke to Escobar was deathly afraid of him. Both the

pattern and content of these calls changed Centra Spike's understanding of the Medellin drug cartel that Escobar had helped build. Particularly illuminating were the calls Escobar made after the death in 1989 of Jose Rodriguez Gacha, one of Escobar's top confederates. Jacoby's Centra Spike operators had helped the Colombian army and police track down Gacha - who was gunned down with his son and five bodyguards by Colombian government helicopters.

Instead of scrambling to fill the leadership void created by Gacha's death, or allowing feuding among Gacha's underlings, Escobar worked coolly like a chief executive officer who had lost a key associate. People called him to make decisions, and he did so calmly, redistributing Gacha's interests and responsibilities.

A few weeks later, they found out just how vicious Escobar could be. He ordered his men to kidnap a Colombian army commander, then had them slowly torture the man to death. Revulsed, one Centra Spike officer bought a \$300 bottle of Remy Martin cognac and vowed not to open it until Escobar was dead.

Tipped off by the eavesdropping unit, Colombian security forces began scoring big successes. They intercepted some of Escobar's drug shipments, and some of the drug boss' key associates were arrested or killed. Escobar himself was always alerted by corrupt Colombian police or army officers in time to escape, but he began to suspect a spy. He had several members of his security force tortured and executed in his presence in early 1990. In one intercepted conversation, Centra Spike recorded the screams of victims in the background as Escobar spoke lovingly to his wife.

Now, in July 1992, Jacoby and his unit were back in Bogota to resume the hunt.

He was waiting at the U.S. Embassy when top American officials returned from an all-night session with Colombian President Cesar Gaviria at the presidential palace. It was during this session that Gaviria, breaking years of official reluctance to allow full-scale American involvement in the government's war against drug traffickers, had asked the Americans to do whatever they could to track down Escobar.

They conferred in the big steel vault upstairs in the embassy compound - Ambassador Morris Busby; Jacoby; Joe Toft, country chief for the Drug Enforcement Administration; and Bill Wagner, the CIA station chief in Bogota. It was July 23, 1992, the day after Escobar walked out of jail.

Busby looked as if he hadn't slept.

"How long do you think it's going to take for you to find him?" he asked.

Maybe a day or two, Jacoby said. They all knew that if Escobar evaded them for the first few days, the hunt would get significantly harder. The big question was how quickly the Colombians could get up and get moving once Escobar was pinpointed.

For all their determination, the National Police had proved repeatedly inept in the first war against Escobar. Despite solid leads provided by Centra Spike, he always got away. There was such fear of Escobar that the Colombians always went out in force, hundreds of men on trucks and helicopters. It was like stalking a deer with bulldozers.

Then there was the corruption issue. Among the hundreds of police involved in these raids, there was always someone willing and able to tip off Escobar for a fee.

"No matter how good our intelligence is, and how hard they try, they just can't close the last thousand

meters," Jacoby told the ambassador. "With these guys, it just ain't gonna happen."

Busby considered the resources at his disposal. The CIA was good at long-term intelligence gathering, not special ops. The DEA was good at street work, recruiting snitches and building cases. The FBI in foreign countries did mostly liaison work.

What Busby believed they needed were the manhunters of Delta Force, the Army's elite and top-secret counterterrorism unit. Busby was familiar with the unit from his years as the State Department's ambassador for counterterrorism. Nobody could plan and perform a real-world operation better than the men of Delta.

Colombian law forbade foreign troops on its soil, and it would really be pushing President Gaviria's invitation, but the ambassador felt it was possible on the Colombian end. Delta was stealthy enough that the Colombian press would never find out they were there. But Busby knew there was strong resistance within the Pentagon to entering the drug war, and he believed it was unlikely that Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, would order the move over such strong objection.

"What we need is Delta, but we could never get them," Busby said.

"Why not?" Jacoby asked.

Jacoby and others in the special-ops community knew that Gen. Wayne Downing, chief of the Army's Special Operations Command, had been interested in getting Delta involved during the first war against Escobar.

What had stopped Downing was the possibility of getting one of his men killed. A dead American from Delta would provoke a crisis in Washington, bringing down scrutiny he was not prepared to accept.

"What are our chances of going in and not getting anybody killed?" Downing had asked one of his advisers.

"Almost zero," he was told. "None of these narcos is going to surrender peacefully. If you go in, you either have to take them all or kill them all."

Downing had let it be known to Jacoby and others that if a situation developed that was the right fit for Delta Force - something clean, precise, and that could be done in a nonattributable manner - he was ready to send them.

So when Busby said, "They'll never sign up," Jacoby countered by saying: "I think you're wrong. If you ask, I think you'll get what you ask for."

"I guess there's no harm in asking," the ambassador said.

Jacoby gave the ambassador some advice.

"Don't say you want them to come in here and go after Pablo themselves," he said. "That will never fly. Say you want them to offer training and advice."

They all agreed that Delta was the answer.

There was one other thing that was understood: This time nobody expected Pablo Escobar to be taken

alive. The Colombians had no stomach left for putting him on trial or locking him up; Escobar had just shown how pointless that was.

Even though Escobar had been indicted by American courts, Colombia would not extradite him to the United States. Escobar's terror bombings and assassinations had cowed the Colombian congress into outlawing extradition for the drug traffickers.

No, this time the hunt was for keeps, the men in the vault concluded. No one said it out loud, but they all knew: When the Colombians cornered Escobar this time, they all believed they were going to kill him.

Hopes at the U.S. Embassy soared when a Delta Force team led by Col. Jerry Boykin arrived in Bogota late in the evening of Sunday, July 26, 1992.

Ambassador Morris Busby's request for Delta to assist in the hunt for Pablo Escobar, much to his surprise, had sailed through Washington. The State Department had approved it and passed it up to the White House, where President George Bush consulted with Joint Chiefs Chairman Colin Powell and then instructed Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney to give the ambassador anything he needed. The word was that Bush, who had poured millions into a new effort to stanch the flow of drugs from South America, had taken a strong personal interest.

The order came through Gen. George Joulwan, commander of the U.S. Army Southern Command in Panama, and Maj. Gen. William F. Garrison, commander of the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, N.C. Col. Boykin and his crew flew south that evening with authorization to get the job done. Their mission was code-named Heavy Shadow. They arrived on a U.S. Air Force jet painted to look like a standard commercial flight.

Eight very fit American men dressed in civilian clothes were met at El Dorado airport in Bogota by midlevel embassy officials and driven downtown in the dark, moving swiftly along roads that in daylight would have been choked with traffic.

The U.S. Embassy was just north of central Bogota, a gray, four-story, L-shaped structure with a windowless fifth floor atop one arm. It was set back behind high walls. In the vault on the closed fifth floor, Busby was waiting with CIA Station Chief Bill Wagner and Joe Toft, the top DEA man in Bogota.

Busby and Boykin were old friends, and after a few minutes of getting caught up, the ambassador began briefing the Delta colonel on the situation. It was, to say the least, confusing.

From the rondos of blame taking place in the government palaces to the furious caterwauling of the Colombian press, the July 22 prison escape of Pablo Escobar had set off a great storm in Bogota. There were hourly contradictory reports: Pablo had been captured; Pablo had been killed; Pablo had surrendered; Pablo was still hiding in the jail.

To an extent that no one had anticipated, the Escobar problem was a keystone that touched every fissure of Colombia's confusing power structure. When Escobar walked out of jail, the hopeful administration of President Cesar Gaviria had begun to splinter. Every day a new official investigation began. The Ministry of Justice accused the army of accepting bribes to allow Escobar's escape; one widely circulated (and false) report held that Escobar had paid huge sums to the soldiers around the prison, then walked out dressed as a woman.

President Gaviria had already fired all the guards and army officers associated with the disaster, as well as the air force general whose pilots had kept the assault force waiting for hours on the ground in Bogota

after they were ordered to attack the prison.

The military began spreading rumors that Escobar had escaped through a secret underground tunnel. It seemed possible: On intercepted phone calls from the prison in the weeks before the escape, Escobar and his men had been overheard speaking about using "the tunnel."

Escobar had, in fact, left by more conventional means. The "tunnel" turned out to be the drug boss' term for the covered truck that was used to roll contraband - women, weapons, bodies, alcohol - up and down the mountain under the studiously uninterested noses of prison guards and army patrols. The truck helped Escobar maintain his extravagant lifestyle inside the comfortable "prison" that he had paid to have built and that was guarded by men he controlled.

The day after his disappearance, Escobar's lawyers had presented the government with a surrender offer. In his typical arrogant, formal style, the drug boss' demands were enumerated:

- (1) That he would be able to return to prison;
- (2) That his guards be rehired;
- (3) That aerial surveillance of the prison be stopped;
- (4) That no additional charges be brought against him;
- (5) That his family and those of the others be allowed unrestricted prison visits;
- (6) That the National Police have nothing to do with his rearrest or imprisonment.

Much to the satisfaction of the U.S. Embassy, President Gaviria had flatly refused to negotiate.

The following day an odd communique was broadcast by the national radio station Caracol, from someone calling himself "Dakota," who claimed to speak for "The Extradictables," the theatrical form Escobar often used when making formal statements to the public. The term referred to the period, a few years earlier, when the drug barons had waged a successful campaign of terror and bribes to outlaw their extradition to the United States.

Ever concerned with his image and mindful of the storm of speculation around his escape, Escobar listed the following helpful clarifications:

One billion pesos (about \$475,000 in today's dollars) were paid to bribe the army to let him escape.

Escobar was hiding at a safe location and would not surrender.

While there would be retaliation against high officials, there would be no acts of violence against the public.

There were no tunnels beneath the prison.

Seventy armed men met Escobar when he left the prison.

Escobar originally intended to kidnap and execute Vice Minister of Justice Eduardo Mendoza, and return his body "in pieces" to Bogota, but did not only because he had been forced to hurry off.

President Gaviria's pledge to protect the lives and rights of Escobar and the confederates who escaped with him was "a joke."

In addition, the U.S. Embassy had received a fax on the day of Escobar's escape - an ugly threat issued politely:

"We, the Extradictables declare: That if anything happens to Mr. Pablo Escobar Gaviria, we will hold President Gaviria responsible and will again mount attacks on the entire country. We will target the United States embassy in the country, where we will plant the largest quantity of dynamite ever.

"We hereby declare: The blame for this whole mess lies with President Gaviria. If Pablo Escobar or any of the others turn up dead, we will immediately mount attacks throughout the entire country. Thank you very much."

The slightly adolescent flavor of this message led the embassy to suspect Escobar's teenage son, Juan Pablo, a chubby would-be heir to the cocaine dynasty who had lately taken to making threats on his father's behalf. To further confuse matters, Escobar's mother, Hermilda, in a newspaper interview in Medellin, said her son had fled to southern Colombia, and would turn himself in when it was safe.

Trying to cut through all this noise - it was hard to tell what was true and what wasn't - the embassy was fortunate to have Maj. Steve Jacoby's secret electronic eavesdropping unit, Centra Spike, in the air high over Medellin. On July 24, just two days after his escape, the unit picked up Escobar talking at length on a cell phone. They pinpointed his location to an area about four miles from the prison, in a wealthy suburb of Medellin called Tres Esquinas.

Evidently assuming that the government could not yet have him under surveillance, Escobar was doing a lot of talking, using as many as eight cell phones. Already, he was providing solid leads for the Delta manhunters.

Col. Boykin boasted to Colombian National Police Col. Oscar Naranjo that he and his men would find Escobar within the week.

The Delta soldiers who arrived in Colombia just four days after Pablo Escobar left his prison in July 1992 had initially hoped to hunt down the notorious narco-terrorist themselves. Given the clumsy track record of the Colombians, it seemed the best chance of finding Escobar quickly.

Delta specialized in this kind of quick strike. The men trained constantly and could move rapidly anywhere, day or night. They preferred orders that explained the what and why of a mission without precisely spelling out the how. This time the initial order was, vaguely, to assist in the hunt for Escobar, who had escaped from prison just four days before.

Maj. Gen. William F. Garrison, commander of joint special operations at Delta's home base at Fort Bragg, N.C., was a veteran of covert operations. He had worked on the infamous Phoenix program in Vietnam, which targeted Viet Cong village leaders for assassination.

That was long before Executive Order 12333, the prohibition on U.S. government involvement in assassinations. The order, which originated during the Nixon administration after congressional hearings exposed excesses in intelligence operations, had been updated under Presidents Carter and Reagan:

2.11 PROHIBITION ON ASSASSINATION

No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination.

2.12 INDIRECT PARTICIPATION

No agency of the Intelligence Community shall participate in or request any person to undertake activities forbidden by this Order.

Gen. George Joulwan, commander of the U.S. Army Southern Command in Panama, had been emphatic in his instructions for the Escobar operation. He knew how easy it was for these "black" special-operations forces to fly beneath the Army's command radar. Joulwan knew that the Delta men wanted to do the job themselves, and probably could, but he was more concerned that in achieving the military goal of eliminating Escobar, they would create a political storm more destructive than Escobar himself.

"No, you're not going to do it yourself," Joulwan had instructed Col. Jerry Boykin, commander of the eight-man Delta team sent to Colombia on July 26.

Officially, the team members were flying to Bogota merely to provide advice and training. Of course, if they managed to kill Escobar in such a way that the Colombians got credit, no one was going to complain. But no such order was articulated, and Morris Busby, the U.S. ambassador to Colombia, was set against it anyway.

Sensitive to the precarious position of President Cesar Gaviria, the ambassador explained to Col. Boykin the political storm that would erupt if Delta operators were discovered running around in black masks shooting people. Given Escobar's penchant for spectacular violence and his well-armed bodyguards and assassins, the chances of an American getting killed or captured were high.

The ambassador simply wanted the Delta men to lend their expertise, to provide intelligence, analysis, training and operational assistance. If the Colombians took all that and then went out and shot somebody while trying to arrest Escobar, the U.S. mission would stay comfortably within the law.

The Delta operators were not to participate in raids. They were to remain at the National Police command posts in Medellin, the main one at the Carlos Holguin police academy, and the other inside the prison where Escobar had been held. Busby wanted the team members to get out there and show the Colombian police how to track down this fugitive, pronto.

They had to act quickly, before Escobar had a chance to rebuild his operation. In the four days since Escobar's escape, he already had begun reassembling his hit men and bodyguards and setting up the system that would allow him to live comfortably on the run.

Busby tried to convey urgency. He and his embassy staff had been working round the clock since the escape.

On Monday, July 27, Col. Boykin and the ambassador met with President Gaviria, while two high-ranking Colombian police commanders met at the U.S. Embassy with the newly arrived Americans. One of the Colombians was Lt. Col. Lino Pinzon, the man assigned to head the Colombian search effort for Escobar.

The Delta men inflated their ranks. They did not want the Colombians thinking a mission as important

as hunting down Pablo Escobar would be relegated to midlevel soldiers. So Lt. Col. Gary Harrell, one of the largest line officers in the Army, with an aggressive personality to complement his linebacker physique, was introduced as a general.

Col. Pinzon, who already was unhappy with the Americans' refusal to allow him to see their command center inside a steel-lined vault on an upper floor of the embassy, clashed with Harrell.

Harrell was a country boy with a direct style. He had a handshake that people warned you about. Pinzon was something of a dandy, a stylish officer with a crisp salt-and-pepper crew cut who played a good game of tennis and kept a manicurist and pedicurist on his staff.

Pinzon was told of an American surveillance team's phone intercepts that had pinpointed Escobar at a finca, or estate, on a hilltop in a wealthy suburb of Medellin called Tres Equinax. He scoffed at the idea that the fugitive could be found magically by plucking his phone calls out of the air, but agreed that if another call came from the same place, his forces would be ready to move in. Four members of the Delta team would fly to Medellin the next day to help plan the assault if it came.

One of the first two operators to leave for Medellin was a man known to the Colombians as Col. Santos, or simply Jefe (Chief). None of the Delta men used their real names. While Boykin was the commander, and Harrell was initially in charge in Medellin, it was Santos, whose real rank was sergeant major, who would stay on for most of the 15-month hunt, supervising the Delta operators and Navy SEAL commandos who rotated in and out.

Santos also acted as liaison between the embassy and the Colombian units hunting for Escobar. He was a slender, exceedingly fit former track star of Mexican heritage who had grown up in New Mexico speaking both Spanish and English.

A man of exceptional warmth and poise, Santos had a wry sense of humor. Where Harrell was full of hearty bluff, Santos was calm, smart and resolutely nonconfrontational.

He and another operator boarded a plane to Medellin the following evening, laden with portable global satellite positioning devices, microwave visual imagery platforms, and video cameras with powerful lenses for remote day-and-night ground surveillance. They were to link up with Colombian forces and pinpoint the spot where Escobar's phone calls had originated, using coordinates supplied by the airborne Centra Spike electronic-eavesdropping unit.

They would train a camera on that location and begin watching for signs of the fugitive's presence. The microwave transmitter would send real-time images back to the Colombian police, so that there would be no mistaking the target.

The two Delta men were late arriving at the Holguin Academy. They had been dropped at the wrong landing strip and had to wait for their police escorts to drive from another airstrip to retrieve them.

It was bad enough that they had spent three hours in the dark at a remote airstrip deep inside narco country, two unarmed Americans loaded with sophisticated spying gear. When they finally did link up with the Colombian police search force, things would get worse.

After an unnerving trip from Bogota, the two Delta soldiers finally arrived at the Medellin headquarters of the Colombian police units searching for Pablo Escobar in July of 1992.

The two Americans slept that night in sleeping bags on the floor of a storehouse just inside the main

gate of the Holguin police academy - close enough, they thought, to be obliterated by a car bomb parked outside.

They awoke to their first view of the city. Medellin, Colombia's second-largest city, had a reputation for mercantile genius and industry. The city's traditions had nurtured, in part, its most recent boom as the world capital of cocaine.

One of the Americans, known to the Colombians simply as Col. Santos, met the following morning, July 28, with Lt. Col. Lino Pinzon, a commander of the search forces. Pinzon indicated that he regarded Delta's arrival as an insult to his leadership skills and a threat to his career. The elite, top-secret American commandos had been sent after a request by Colombia's president for help in the hunt for Escobar.

It was a classic culture clash. Pinzon had already complained to Joe Toft, the Drug Enforcement Administration chief in Colombia. Toft tried to calm Pinzon, to convince him that working with these Americans would bring credit and glory to his unit, but he knew Pinzon wasn't buying it.

When big, aggressive Gary Harrell, a Delta lieutenant colonel, arrived later that day from Bogota, things got worse. Harrell and Pinzon had already clashed at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota. Now, on Harrell's first day as the top American at the Holguin Academy, he and Pinzon began quarreling.

Still, the two men were stuck with each other and began setting up joint operations. Delta positioned two operators in Escobar's former observation tower up at La Catedral, the prison Escobar had built. One operator was Sgt. Maj. Joe Vega - a "captain" for this operation - a broad-shouldered weight lifter with long, black hair.

The Colombian police had moved into the prison and were living in comfort, the commander ensconced in Escobar's former luxury suite. Vega had a satellite phone and laptop computer to help him rapidly correlate the map coordinates sent to him by Centra Spike, the secret American Army team of electronic-surveillance experts who operated from two specially outfitted twin-engine planes.

Vega also carried an 8mm video camera with several high-powered lenses, and a microwave relay to transmit the image down to the Holguin Academy.

The team waited for Escobar to make another phone call from a finca, or estate, in an exclusive Medellin suburb of Tres Equinax where Centra Spike had previously homed in on one of his conversations. He was quiet that night, but early the following evening, a Tuesday, Centra Spike picked up another phone call from the same spot.

In the observation tower, Vega quickly found the coordinates on his map and alerted Harrell, who tried to rouse Col. Pinzon and get his men moving.

According to Delta soldiers and DEA agents, the Colombian commander did not respond.

When the embassy in Bogota learned that Pinzon had not moved, calls were placed to the Presidential Palace, and President Cesar Gaviria himself finally ordered Pinzon and his men to get going. Outraged that the Delta team had gone over his head, Pinzon was indignant, and took hours to assemble his men.

It wasn't until early the next morning that Pinzon launched his "raid." Pinzon dispatched about 300 men in a caravan of pickup trucks and cars.

From his perch at La Catedral prison, talking by phone to Steve Jacoby, the American major in charge

of Centra Spike at the embassy, Vega noted the procession of headlights as this giant convoy begin moving up the mountain.

"Wait a minute," he told Jacoby. "Now there's another set of headlights moving down the hill on the other side of the mountain."

Escobar would not have even needed to be tipped off. Everyone on the mountain could see and hear the approach of the police.

Pinzon's men found the estate to be typical of an Escobar hideout, luxurious furnishings far beyond the norms even for that neighborhood, including a sparkling new bathroom with a deep tub.

Pinzon seemed pleased when his men turned up nothing. He later told DEA agent Javier Pena that he had a "gut feeling" that Escobar had never been at the finca. He would find Escobar quicker, he said, by relying on his own instincts rather than all this American technology.

As soon as the police withdrew, however, Centra Spike intercepted more phone calls, these from Escobar's men arranging to move him to a new hideout and discussing the need to collect identity documents and weapons. It was 4:30 a.m. when Pinzon, clad in silk pajamas, answered Harrell's summons at the door of his quarters.

"How do you know he's there?" Pinzon asked.

Harrell was not at liberty to explain.

Again, it took pressure from Bogota to force Pinzon to move, and again he sent the caravan up the hill. They spent the rest of the night and most of the day searching door to door, and found nothing. Pinzon complained to Pena: "These Delta guys are trying to get me fired in Bogota."

By the end of the week, the search force was empty-handed and Escobar had clearly moved on. There was little chance now that he would be found quickly.

Harrell returned to Bogota with complaints about Pinzon's attitude, effort and tactics, while Pinzon spread word of Delta's failure. At the embassy, Col. Pinzon would henceforth be known simply as "Pajamas."

In the capital, U.S. Ambassador Morris Busby had his own problems. Once the Colombian government's invitation for help was made known at the Pentagon following Escobar's escape that July, it had prompted an overwhelming response and now the competition was on.

The CIA made a bid for funds to get "Majestic Eagle," their own more expensive eavesdropping version of Centra Spike, flying. All the other branches had their own ideas about how to best locate a fleeing drug lord. By the end of the first week, the ambassador had people camped out on the floor in the embassy conference room.

Every direction-finding, surveillance and imagery team in the U.S. arsenal descended on Medellin.

Anything that had a potential manhunting capability was shipped to Colombia. It was like a sweepstakes. There were so many American spy planes over the city, at one point 17 at once, that the

Air Force had to assign an AWAC, an airborne command and control center, to keep track of them. It took 10 giant C-130s just to deliver the contractors, maintenance and support staffs for all this gear.

For Joe Toft, the DEA country chief who had spent years learning his way around Colombia, the initial excitement over all this military help quickly soured. The flood of new data required intelligent, seasoned analysis, which was in short supply.

This sudden full-court press was meant to cause problems for Escobar, but instead it provoked a crisis in Bogota. One night, one of the newly arrived aircraft, an enormous RC-135, flew so low that the Colombian press was able to photograph it clearly.

When a radio report broadcast evidence of an American military "invasion" of Medellin, all hell broke loose. The mayor of Medellin demanded an immediate investigation. The Colombian defense minister was forced to admit that the government had invited the Americans. A judicial investigation began instantly, on charges that President Gaviria's administration had violated the constitution by allowing foreign troops on Colombian soil.

The defense minister argued that American troops weren't on Colombian soil, they were just in the air - in fact, most of the military planes were flying out of Panama. There was nothing in the constitution about overflights. Of course, no one knew about Delta Force.

It was the journalistic equivalent of war. Radio Medellin started broadcasting the tail numbers of American aircraft, including one of the CIA planes, which was promptly flown out of Colombia.

CIA Station Chief Bill Wagner was furious, Jacoby was spooked, and President Gaviria, mindful that he had asked for this help, was now politely complaining to Ambassador Busby, "This is nuts!"

By the end of the week Busby had ordered home everything except Centra Spike, the CIA and Delta. It was clear that Escobar was not going to be caught, even with the most sophisticated targeting information, until Colombia could muster a mobile, elite strike force that was trustworthy, determined, stealthy and fast. What was needed, clearly, was a surrogate Delta Force.

"Pajamas" Pinzon would have to go. And whether it was quid pro quo or not, Gary Harrell was shipped back to Fort Bragg.

"Captain" Vega stayed camped out up at La Catedral, and "Colonel" Santos stayed on at the Holguin Academy awaiting the arrival of the one man everyone felt was needed to make the effort come together: the indefatigable, incorruptible Col. Hugo Martinez.

Col. Hugo Martinez was delighted when he got the news, in Madrid, that Pablo Escobar had walked out of jail. No one knew better than the colonel what a charade that imprisonment had been. Martinez had spent nearly three years hunting Escobar before his infamous 1991 "surrender" to a luxury prison cell guarded by his cronies, which Martinez viewed as the evasive drug lord's most ingenious escape to date.

Martinez had never met Escobar, but his life was inextricably entwined with the fugitive's. From 1989 to 1991, the colonel had been in charge of the first police campaign to capture Escobar. His efforts, though ultimately futile, were rewarded in 1991 with a comfortable post in Madrid, as military liaison to Spain.

There was another, more urgent reason for his transfer: Escobar had tried several times to murder the colonel and his family in Colombia. On the very plane that took Martinez and his family from Bogota to

Madrid, a bomb had been set to explode at a certain altitude. It was discovered, in flight, after the airline received a last-minute phone tip. The pilots held a very low altitude to the nearest airfield, where the bomb was found and removed.

Now, in the summer of 1992, the Colombian and American governments had decided that with Escobar once again a fugitive, the man to lead the new, expanded hunt for him was Police Col. Hugo Martinez.

It was a good time to leave Spain. Just a few months earlier, a car bomb had been discovered on the street outside the Colombian Embassy in Madrid, right where Martinez passed each day to work. The colonel avoided the street that day only because he had heard a radio report of police activity blocking the road. The police activity, of course, was the Madrid police bomb squad. The device was so complicated that they detonated it on the spot.

Everyone knew who the target was. Martinez was asked to stay away from the embassy for a while. He took his wife and family on an extended camping trip, feeling impotent, isolated, pursued and angry. So long as Escobar remained in jail, there was nothing he could do. The drug boss' escape was a godsend, an opportunity to fight back again.

Martinez was six years older than Escobar at 48, a point in life where a man feels it is now or never for his life's goals. He was quiet and bookish, with an aloof manner that seemed ill-suited to leading men in the field.

Tall and fair-skinned, with a long face, high forehead and prominent nose, he towered over most of his comrades in the police command, and looked more European than Colombian. He had a wry sense of humor and a crooked smile, which leavened the cynicism of his long police career.

When he was handed the first assignment to go after Escobar in 1989, Martinez knew all too well that he had been handed the short straw. The police commander in the district surrounding Medellin had just been murdered after arresting several members of Escobar's Medellin cartel. The magistrate who had signed Escobar's arrest order also had been killed, as had a reporter from one of Bogota's leading daily newspapers, *El Espectador*, who had written approvingly of the effort.

There was a sense that Escobar could reach anyone, anywhere, at any time. Just days after Martinez had taken over the first hunt, a 220-pound car bomb exploded in Bogota, killing six people. The target of the blast, an outspoken police general, had somehow emerged unscathed from his armored limousine, its tires melted to the pavement.

It didn't help that Medellin, Escobar's home city, was practically owned by the drug boss. The city's police had been so corrupted by Escobar that the new National Police Search Bloc under Martinez's command did not contain a single paisa, or Medellin native, for fear he would secretly be on Escobar's payroll.

But that precaution had its own costs: Martinez's men knew nothing of the area, and had no local sources or informants. Even the unit's plainclothes detectives, members of Colombia's FBI, called *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS)*, stood out because none spoke with the distinctive paisa accent. On the unit's first foray into Medellin, 80 men in 10 vehicles got lost.

Not all the local police were corrupt, and some fell to Escobar's assassins during the first hunt. They were killing police in Medellin at a rate of six per day, some of them from the Search Bloc. With so many killings, and so much paralyzing fear, Martinez's men were now emotionally engaged. When the National

Police considered moving the unit out of Medellin, the colonel and his men insisted on staying. They would weep and pray at funerals for their dead comrades, then go back to work, their fear warring with a powerful sense of mission. Martinez fought this internal war himself, and there were times when his fear won out.

Once, the colonel rushed back home to Bogota after a bomb was discovered in the basement of his family's apartment building. Nearly all the residents of the building were high-ranking National Police officers, but their response to the bomb was not to rally around their besieged colleague. Instead, they held a meeting and voted to ask Martinez to move his family out.

The colonel flew home from Medellin to help his family pack. It was during this trip that Escobar proved how vulnerable the colonel and his family were - and just how far Escobar's reach extended, even in Bogota.

Martinez remembered the scene well years later. He had told only his boss at police headquarters, Gen. Octavio Vargas, that he was returning that day to Bogota. So only the general, Martinez's pilot, and anyone who saw him land knew he was there. He was stuffing boxes when a retired police officer, someone he had known since his days in the academy, arrived at his door.

The colonel was surprised and alarmed. How had this man known to find him in Bogota?

"I come to talk to you obligated," the retired officer said with a pained expression.

Martinez asked what he meant.

"If I did not agree to come talk to you, they could easily kill me or my family."

Then the man offered the colonel \$6 million, a bribe from Pablo Escobar to call off the hunt. More specifically, the officer explained: "Continue the work, but do not do yourself or Pablo Escobar any real damage."

Escobar also wanted a list of any snitches in his own organization.

Sometimes the fate of an entire nation can hinge on the integrity of one man.

Police Col. Hugo Martinez had been handed a suicide mission in 1989 - hunting down drug kingpin Pablo Escobar. This was during the Colombian government's first war against Escobar, before Martinez was called back in 1992 to rejoin the hunt.

He and his men had worked in an atmosphere of terror throughout 1989 and into 1990, every man expecting to be betrayed by his fellows. The National Police had constructed special chapels in Medellin and in Bogota just to handle the heavy demand for funeral services for officers murdered by Escobar's assassins.

From the first day the colonel believed he would be killed in this war. He accepted the risk. But his greatest fear was for his wife, his daughter and his two sons.

In late 1990, Martinez flew from his headquarters in Medellin to Bogota, where a car bomb had been discovered at his family's apartment building. As he was helping his family pack, he was approached by a retired police officer, an old friend, who offered him a \$6 million bribe from Escobar to sabotage the hunt.

This bribe had come after a chilling demonstration of his family's vulnerability. The bomb in their basement made it clear that Escobar could find them. Now he had shown that he could follow Martinez's every move - Martinez had told only his boss about flying to Bogota - and also send the colonel's old friend to do his bidding.

The colonel's colleagues did not want the family in their building if it meant they were likely to be bombed. His own department was shunning him and his family and abandoning them to their fate.

And for what? Martinez could not even see the wisdom of going after Escobar. Cocaine was not Colombia's problem, it was the norteamericanos' problem. And even if they got Escobar, as the United States insisted, it was not going to curb the cocaine industry.

This first effort to get Escobar was being pushed hard by the U.S. Embassy, a fact that Escobar exploited skillfully in his public pronouncements. It resonated with the Colombian public because it was true.

The public believed the violence was provoked by the Americans' desire to extradite Escobar. It was Martinez's own dogged effort on the gringos' behalf that made the drug boss more desperate and determined. If the search effort stopped, he felt, the bloodshed and kidnappings would probably end as well.

There were car bombings in Bogota almost every day. By November 1990, Escobar's men had kidnapped 10 prominent men and women, including the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *El Tiempo*, and the daughter of a former Colombian president. These carefully chosen kidnappings had rocked Bogota to its social core.

In Medellin there was open war. Escobar still had a bounty on the head of every policeman there, more for members of Martinez's search team. The colonel and his men were being accused of using torture to extract information. Colombia was locked in a nightmare of blood and pain, and the colonel felt sometimes that he alone was orchestrating the whole terrible symphony.

Now he was being offered a generous ticket out. All he needed to do was side with Escobar, take his \$6 million, and silently betray any tipster who contacted the Search Bloc.

But the colonel did not consider the bribe for any longer than it took him to have those thoughts. His gut rebelled against the offer. His old friend showing up unannounced had spooked him badly; the whole conversation had seemed off-balance. Martinez cursed at his friend, and then his anger turned to pity and disgust.

"Tell Pablo that you came but did not find me here, and then leave this matter as if it had never occurred," he said.

Martinez had known other police officers who took bribes, and he had always held them in contempt. Once he had accepted the bribe, he knew, Escobar would own him, just as he owned the friend who had approached him with the words, "I come to you obligated."

For Martinez, it would be like turning over his soul to the devil.

After he dismissed his old friend, Martinez drove to police headquarters and informed his boss, Gen. Octavio Vargas, of the bribe attempt. They agreed it was a good sign.

"It means we're getting to him," Martinez said.

Two years later, in the summer of 1992, the Americans working with the Colombian police search team were more impressed by its new commander's will than his methods.

This tall, taciturn colonel nicknamed "Flaco" (Skinny) meant business. Martinez had been the driving force behind the first hunt, which had hounded Escobar to his surrender in 1991. He began this second, more intensive search by rounding up top people from the first operation and recruiting police and army veterans to create a new, elite Bloque de Búsqueda, or Search Bloc. It would eventually number 600 men.

One of Col. Martinez's first acts at the Holguin Academy headquarters in Medellín was to line his lieutenants against a wall and tell them that if he discovered any of them betraying their mission, "I will personally shoot you in the head."

He locked down his men to prevent uncontrolled communication in and out of the compound, and, perhaps most important, he showed genuine frustration and anger when a mission failed. The Americans had worked with Colombian officers who would joke about failed missions, who took them no more seriously than getting the wrong order at a restaurant.

But the men of Delta Force and Centra Spike were appalled by the Search Bloc's lack of tactical sophistication. One morning, approaching a suspected Escobar hideout, the assault force lined up along a ridge and then simply walked toward the target house. A Centra Spike man accompanying them on the raid, helping to locate Escobar, suggested that the force drop down and crawl.

"In the dirt?" a Colombian officer asked. "My guys don't crawl in the dirt and mud."

The occupants of the target house easily spotted the slow-moving assault force and escaped. They had fled in such haste that they hadn't completely burned documents, so they had urinated and defecated on them.

When an American from Centra Spike began fishing papers out of the mess, Col. Martinez himself had objected.

"I can't believe you'd do that," he said. "That's human waste!"

"Where I come from, we also low-crawl and get our uniforms dirty," the Centra Spike man said.

After the documents were cleaned and dried, the unit found handwritten notes from Escobar, sealed with his thumbprint. The notes promised financial security for the caretaker of the farmhouse. Copies had been prepared for several other fincas, or estates, indicating that Escobar kept a string of such safe houses. The recovered documents provided valuable insights into how he recruited and nurtured assistance in the hills.

After entering the finca, the assault force settled in front of the television and began drinking Escobar's sodas and cooking his steaks. Two men who had stayed behind in the farmhouse, the caretakers, were bound and gagged. Martinez's men began beating them severely.

"What are your guys doing?" the Centra Spike man asked Martinez.

"We're interrogating them," the colonel said.

"If you want them to talk, why don't you take the gags out of their mouths?"

"No, no," Martinez said. "Leave it alone. You shouldn't be here." He ushered the American away from the farmhouse.

After that, the colonel tried to keep Americans away from the action - not to protect them, but to protect their eyes. Reports drifted back about Martinez's tactics - beatings, electroshock torture, killings - and it was evident to Americans working with the Search Bloc in Medellin that some of these things went on, but always out of sight.

It was a smart move, one that some officials at the U.S. Embassy appreciated. Human rights abuses were problematic. But as long as the Americans didn't see them, they didn't feel obliged to report them.

If the Search Bloc was torturing people, American soldiers in Medellin did not object. The fact that Martinez played rough with his fellow citizens was seen as an advantage. Let the word go out to anyone who cooperated with Escobar.

Another thing the Americans working with the Search Bloc liked about the colonel was that he learned from his mistakes. His men did learn to low-crawl, and to fish documents out of latrines. He was candid about his unit's tactical shortcomings, and took steps to correct them.

Martinez was skeptical of American technology, but he learned fast. When he overheard Escobar's voice on a portable radio monitor carried by one of the Centra Spike men during a raid, the colonel asked for the same equipment the next time out.

Later, when rumors began to circulate that Martinez was eager to nail Escobar because he was secretly on the payroll of the rival Cali cartel - rumors that some of the DEA men took seriously - the group in charge at the U.S. Embassy discounted them. And Martinez himself vigorously denied them.

Ambassador Morris Busby and CIA station chief Bill Wagner were not about to discard the colonel. As far as the embassy was concerned, Hugo Martinez was exactly the kind of man to go up against Escobar. The drug boss had finally met his match.

Four days after Pablo Escobar's escape from prison in July of 1992, a team of American DEA agents took a leisurely tour of La Catedral, the site of Escobar's luxury prison suite.

The mountaintop "prison" was now a hot tourist attraction for top-ranking American and Colombian officials. CIA station chief Bill Wagner would tour it days later with a video camera, accompanied by several members of his staff. The visits confirmed all the worst suspicions about Escobar's supposed imprisonment, but it also gave the Americans a rare glimpse into the life and mind of the world's most famous fugitive.

Although the agents suspected the Colombian army of destroying or carrying off most of the documents left behind, including floppy discs and the hard drives from Escobar's computers, much of interest still remained.

First, there was the sheer opulence of the place. The "cells" were lavishly furnished suites with living rooms, bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens and balconies that offered a stunning vista of Medellin, the surrounding valley and hills.

Just outside Escobar's suite was a small table with telephones and a metal box mounted on the wall that was the main circuit box for all the communications lines to the prison - leaving little doubt who was in charge. Down a flight of steps from Escobar's balcony was an elaborate dollhouse, large enough for his 7-year-old daughter to play inside.

The tour revealed that Escobar had been raising and using messenger pigeons to thwart electronic surveillance. They found little metal leg-bands for the pigeons neatly labeled: "Pablo Escobar/Maximum Security Prison/Envigado".

There was also evidence of Escobar's fears. Any flat ground on the hillside complex had wires suspended overhead, attached to tall posts around the perimeter to prevent helicopters from landing. One of Escobar's biggest concerns was that airborne American commandos or paid assassins would come for him in the night.

There were secret hiding places built into the walls of the prison suites, and trick doors to afford quick, silent avenues of escape. The gymnasium and kitchen were below, just inside the fence. The living quarters and cabanas were up an incline so steep that the DEA agents were breathing heavily when they reached the top.

Beyond the cabanas, the Colombian police had found a sizable arsenal of automatic weapons and ammunition. Escobar and his men had been prepared to hold off a sustained military assault.

On a shelf over Escobar's desk was a neat library of news clippings, diligently clipped, pasted and sorted in file boxes. His correspondence included fan mail from all over the world, requests for money, notes of thanks for favors bestowed, letters of sympathy after his arrest and imprisonment. One was from a local beauty queen, who referred to Escobar as her lover.

There was a handwritten draft of a letter from Escobar to President Cesar Gaviria, requesting armor-plated cars for his wife and children. One pathetic letter was from a man pleading with Escobar not to kill any more members of his family, as he had already done away with nearly all of them. There was a letter from the wife of a prison guard, thanking him for her husband's recent promotion.

Escobar had kept copies of all his indictments, and had framed a collection of the mug shots taken at each arrest. One showed the lean, tousle-haired young man arrested for stealing cars in Medellin in 1974; another was the fuller-faced, mustachioed shot from his first and only drug bust in 1976.

Escobar kept files on his Cali cartel rivals, complete with photographs, addresses, descriptions of their vehicles and license numbers. He had a framed picture of Ernesto Che Guevara, the Argentine-born Marxist revolutionary. Alongside was an illustration from Hustler magazine, depicting Escobar and his associates cavorting in an orgy behind bars (throwing darts at a picture of President George Bush on a TV screen), and a photograph of himself and his son Juan Pablo posing before the front gate of the White House.

Among his collection of videotapes was, predictably, a complete set of The Godfather films, Chuck Norris' Octagon, Steve McQueen's Bullitt and Burt Reynolds' Rent-a-Cop. There were five Bibles, and collections of prize-winning books. These were not the shelves of an avid reader, but of a self-improver who purchased books in bulk intending to begin a course of reading.

The closet in the bedroom was stacked with identical pairs of Nike sneakers and a neat pile of pressed blue jeans. Over Escobar's huge bed was a golden, ornate portrait of the Virgin Mary painted on inlaid

tile. There were photographs of Escobar, his family and his fellow inmates at what appeared to be a lavish Christmas dinner in the prison's disco and bar, and pictures of Escobar posing with Colombian soccer stars.

In the prison bedrooms were wide-screen TVs, electronic game players, stereos, VCRs, laser disc players, laser discs and videotapes (some of them pornographic, including homemade sex movies starring inmates and girlfriends). One framed photo showed Escobar costumed as Pancho Villa; another showed him and a bodyguard dressed as Prohibition-era American gangsters, complete with tommy guns.

The DEA agents itemized all they found and posed for snapshots, happy as high schoolers invading a rival gang's clubhouse. They posed sitting on Pablo's bed, taking turns wearing a thick fur cap that the drug boss had worn in a famous photograph reproduced on the cover of the Colombian weekly newsmagazine *Semana*.

It was all just scraps left behind by the Colombian investigators, but it still added up to a fascinating portrait of a man who clearly relished his celebrity outlaw status, even though he was known to protest his innocence at every public opportunity.

Escobar was a man of stark contradictions. He was a determined hedonist who recruited teenage beauty queens for sex on water beds under the florid portrait of the Virgin Mary, yet was so devoted to his family that his pursuers considered his most vulnerable spot to be the safety of his wife, Maria Victoria, and children, Juan Pablo and Manuela.

Escobar signed all his correspondence with his thumbprint, and he stamped one on the framed photo of him and his son at the White House. It was a form of graffiti, Pablo Escobar's thumbprint on the front door of the home of the President of the United States.

At the end of July, drawing on this information and its own files, the CIA prepared a brief "personality assessment" of the infamous fugitive. It attempts, with thinly veiled contempt, to sketch the internal life of this complex new military target, and concludes with chilling prescience about the tactics that would ultimately lure Escobar to his death:

"Despite Escobar's authoritarianism, extreme self-centeredness and grandiosity . . . he is not a madman . . . he is in touch with the realities around him. In fact, Escobar is resilient and can generally adjust well to changes in the environment. . . .

"Escobar appears to derive pleasure from the havoc he creates . . . Escobar has only a very limited capacity to tolerate frustration, competition, or challenges to his authority. He does not feel bound by the normal rules of conduct and frequently expresses his aggression in raw, direct forms. . . .

"Escobar nurses a grudge, sometimes for years, until he can get his revenge, which is often of homicidal proportions. And Escobar kills gratuitously, with total disregard for innocent bystanders. Moreover, he lacks the capacity to feel remorse. . . .

"Escobar . . . appears to be motivated primarily by money and power - he is no idealogue.

"Escobar's paranoia is his greatest vulnerability. . . As he begins to feel more pressured he will become more rigid and less able to adjust to changes in his environment. . . .

"Escobar does seem to have genuine paternal feelings for his children, and the young daughter Manuela is described as his favorite. His parents were once kidnapped by a rival group, and Escobar apparently

spared no effort or expense rescuing them. Whether his concern for his parents or his children would overcome his stringent security consciousness is not clear."

Two days after his escape from prison in July of 1992, Pablo Escobar sent a taped statement to selected Colombian TV and radio reporters. It was signed: "Colombian jungle zone, Thursday, July 24, 1992. Pablo Escobar and comrades."

This was a bit of theater, because Escobar was actually only a few miles from the prison, ensconced on a private estate in a wealthy suburb of Medellin. Judging from the aggrieved tone of the statement, he was in a petulant mood. He alternated between indignation at the Colombian government and resentment that his comfortable life in prison had been so disrupted. He portrayed himself as a misunderstood victim.

In the statement, Escobar complained that even though he and his men - his fellow inmates - had generously agreed to "lose control over more than half of the jail, and our rights" to accommodate the government, he was shocked when the army suddenly surrounded the compound on the night of July 22. The army acted after the government decided to move Escobar to an actual prison, in Bogota.

It had become clear to the government, in early 1992, that Escobar had completely taken control of the prison. His armed bodyguards decided who and what came in and out of the prison gates. He and his men lived in suites equipped with big-screen TV sets, king-size beds, sound systems, a Jacuzzi and a bountiful supply of booze, drugs, guns and whores. He ran his vast drug empire from inside his prison suite, even torturing and murdering two former associates behind prison walls.

In the confusion, Escobar also escaped - through an entire brigade of the Colombian army. In his taped statement, he said he was driven out in the truck his men had used to haul contraband into the prison.

Now, once again a fugitive, Escobar began issuing the same menacing demands that he had laid out during his campaign of bombings and assassinations before his surrender in 1991. In his statement from hiding, he made it clear that he would prefer to resume his life of comfort in "prison," only this time under protection of the United Nations:

"As for the aggression carried out against us, we won't take violent actions of any nature yet and we are willing to continue with the peace process and our surrender to justice if we can be guaranteed to stay at the [prison], as well as handing control of the prison to special forces of the United Nations."

The same day he issued the statement, Escobar also spoke with two of his lawyers during a long telephone conference call. Recording the conversation were American electronic-eavesdropping experts from Centra Spike, the U.S. Army unit that was secretly operating out of the U.S. Embassy in Bogota.

What the Americans heard was Escobar's well-founded suspicions that the U.S. government was very interested in tracking him down.

"We had information that the Americans were participating in the operation" at the prison, Escobar told his lawyers. "I have some information . . . that there were some gringos."

In fact, there is no evidence that Americans had any direct role in the raid on the prison by the Fourth Brigade of the Colombian army. But Escobar was absolutely correct when he described for his lawyers a coordinated effort by the American and Colombian governments to eliminate for good their mutual problems with Pablo Escobar. (Over the next six months, the secret CIA operation in Colombia would swell to nearly 100 people, making it the largest CIA station in the world.)

"There's a combined force. The army and the gringos looking for Bush's reelection," Escobar said.

Escobar instructed one of his lawyers, who had been in touch with President Cesar Gaviria's administration, to stress to Gaviria personally just how troubled he was by these Americans.

"When you have a chance of making a statement, say that what caused the biggest concern was the presence of the gringos," Escobar said. "The fact that the army would be going along with the gringos. What explanation can be given for that?"

Escobar knew that any covert intelligence or military association with the Americans would cause severe domestic political pain for Gaviria, so raising the issue with the president was a way of reminding him that he was playing a dangerous game. Escobar proposed that he and Gaviria sign "a contract" allowing him to return to his luxury prison outside Medellin and guaranteeing in writing that he was never to be moved without his consent.

There would be no agreement. Gaviria flatly refused to make any concessions, and a Colombian court rejected a formal appeal by Escobar's lawyers to have his escape ruled a legitimate action taken in fear of his life.

His prison lifeline gone, his enemies in government allied with the hated Americans, Escobar was now a full-fledged fugitive. But he was still richer than his friends and more ruthless than his enemies. In this second round of his war against the government, he would rely once again on violence and terror, but also on his countrymen's resentment of the United States.

To many of Colombia's poor, America was the enemy, an oppressive world power propping up the wealthy elite in Bogota. Escobar was expert at playing on this populist theme. He was a hero to many in Medellin's ghettos. If America was allied with the Colombian government against him, that was tantamount to a betrayal of the mother country. Surely the public, his public, would not stand for it. If some Colombians did tolerate such a blasphemy, his bombs would bring them back to reality soon enough. It would take time, but he was sure this alliance against him would buckle.

It had to buckle, because Escobar knew well the consequences of remaining a fugitive, how easy it was in Colombia for a suspect to be killed trying to escape from the police. To anyone with eyes to see, killing Escobar appeared to be the government's plan. Pablo certainly understood. It was a practice so commonplace throughout South America that there was an expression for it: La Ley de Fuga. The Law of Escape.

On Jan. 30, 1993, a car bomb exploded in Bogota, blowing a crater several feet deep in the street and sidewalk and taking a savage bite out of a bookstore.

Bogota was accustomed to car bombs by now, but even by that weary city's standards this was a nightmare. The bookstore bomb was estimated to have contained 220 pounds of dynamite.

Inside the store, children and their parents had been buying school supplies. Torn body parts were strewn about. In all, 21 people were killed, 70 more injured in an attack blamed on Pablo Escobar.

Bill Wagner, the CIA station chief in Colombia, recoiled when he stepped past the police barricades. The first thing he saw was a severed hand in a gutter running with blood. It was the hand of a small child.

He thought: "We are going to kill this son of a bitch if it's the last thing I do on this earth."

Despite the determination of the United States, the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars, and the deployment of elite U.S. military and espionage units, six months had passed in the hunt for Escobar and the effort had yielded little but frustration. Their prey was always one step ahead. And even though Escobar was on the run, he was quite capable of ordering terrorist bombings anywhere and at any time.

But his pursuers were growing stronger. Discipline instilled by a new commander, Col. Hugo Martinez, and Delta Force training had vastly improved the speed and efficiency of the Colombian National Police Search Bloc, based at an old police academy in Medellin. The academy now felt almost like home to Delta chief "Col." Santos, Joe Vega and the other Delta soldiers and Navy SEALs who regularly rotated through.

There had been successes, most notably on Oct. 28, 1992, when Brance "Tyson" Munoz, one of Escobar's most notorious sicarios, or assassins, was killed in the proverbial "gun battle with national police," a phrase that drew winks at the U.S. Embassy.

Centra Spike, the top-secret U.S. Army electronic-surveillance unit, had first located Tyson at a house outside Medellin. A killer whose nickname came from his resemblance to the American boxer, Tyson was renowned for his ferocity and loyalty to Escobar, whom he had known since childhood. He had gained weight and grown his hair long in an effort to disguise himself.

Tyson was located when an informant took advantage of reward money offered by the U.S. Embassy. Delta operators in Medellin then watched him for days, determining that every day at noon he played soccer in the yard of his house. A raid was planned for one of these soccer sessions. The Search Bloc wanted to catch him outdoors and unarmed.

On the day of the raid, as Centra Spike operators listened in, they picked up a call tipping off Tyson. The killer at first misunderstood the warning. Assuming that Escobar himself was the target, Tyson quickly called the boss and warned him to move. Predictably better informed, Escobar explained the mistake, and Tyson fled to a new hideout, this time in a ninth-floor apartment in northern Medellin. He shared the apartment with his girlfriend and their small child.

Centra Spike promptly found him again by tracking his wireless phone calls; Escobar and his men had not yet learned how quick and precise the surveillance could be. Again Delta operators watched him through high-powered lenses, studying his routine.

The raid was launched at 1 a.m. with the whispered radio code "The party has begun." Search Bloc officers found Tyson's apartment secured with a heavy steel door, which they blew off its hinges. The breaching charge was a bit overdone. It blasted the door across the apartment and punched it completely through an outer wall, sending it crashing to the street nine stories below.

Tyson was shot, according to the Search Bloc's report, as he climbed out a back window to the fire escape. It was particularly good shooting. He took a bullet between the eyes.

There was always a steep price to pay for these victories. On the day Tyson was killed, four police officers were shot in retaliation, and three died. In the six-month hunt for Escobar, more than 65 police officers had been killed in Medellin, including some Search Bloc members whose identities were supposed to be secret. Often these men were killed in their homes or while traveling to and from the academy, which demonstrated that Escobar knew their identities, work shifts and home addresses.

The officers' funerals were grueling. Colombians were not fastidious embalmers, so the special chapel the National Police had built in Bogota often reeked of death, an odor that in time seemed to hover over

this entire enterprise.

The women would wail and the men would gasp and weep and then retire to get staggeringly drunk. After attending one funeral in which a pregnant widow clutching a small child threw herself on her husband's casket and had to be pulled away, the normally stoic DEA country chief, Joe Toft, went back to his secure apartment and cried.

Escobar issued occasional galling communiques. He had given a rambling interview in September to a journalist, in which he portrayed himself as a persecuted national hero with broad popular support. He had donated millions of dollars for soccer fields and housing in urban slums.

"Sixty percent of the people say that the government betrayed me . . .," Escobar said. "I think all the saints help me, but my mother prays a lot for me to the child Jesus of Atocha." Escobar said he would like to "die standing in the year 2047," and added: "Those who know me know that I have a good sense of humor and I always have a smile on my face, even in difficult moments. And I'll say something else: I always sing in the shower."

Bill Clinton took office in January 1993 with an inclination to reverse the priorities of President Bush's drug war. The new administration planned to attack addiction at least as hard as it went after suppliers. Bush's defeat meant that Ambassador Morris Busby's days in Bogota were numbered, and few in the embassy believed that President Clinton and his new ambassador would share their enthusiasm for the hunt for Escobar.

It felt as if time was running out. The prospect of Escobar slipping away once more was frustrating to the Americans who had devoted so much time, money, effort and emotion to the chase.

It was at precisely this moment that the hunt for Escobar took a dramatic new turn. One day after the bookstore bombing, "La Cristalina," a hacienda owned by Pablo Escobar's mother, was burned to the ground. Two large car bombs exploded in Medellin outside apartment buildings where Pablo's immediate and extended family members were staying. No one was killed - the guards had been warned to flee minutes before the bombs went off - but the message was clear.

Several days later, another of Escobar's country homes was torched. All of these acts targeted individuals who, while related to Escobar, were not themselves considered criminals. In the timeless hammerlike prose of the police teletype, DEA agent Javier Pena explained in a cable to headquarters in Washington that a new, homegrown resistance had emerged:

"The CNP believe these bombings were committed by a new group of individuals known as 'Los PEPES' (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar/ People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar). This group, which has only recently surfaced in the Medellin area, has vowed to retaliate against Escobar, his family, and his associates, each and every time Escobar commits a terrorist act which injures innocent people."

The Colombian police, Pena wrote, had determined that the targets of three attacks attributed to Los Pepes were Escobar's wife, mother and aunt. And while the police and Colombian government had officially denounced the attacks, he wrote, "they may secretly applaud these retaliatory acts."

In the cable, Pena outlined Escobar's likely response:

"He will either slow his terrorist campaign in order to protect his family and property, or he will escalate

his attacks to demonstrate his power and lack of respect and fear of his enemies."

Officially, the U.S. Embassy in Bogota was silent on the sudden emergence in early 1993 of Los Pepes (People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar), a vigilante group apparently dedicated to violent retribution against the fugitive drug lord.

The gang in the steel vault on the fifth floor of the embassy - Ambassador Morris Busby, CIA Station Chief Bill Wagner, and the Drug Enforcement Administration country chief, Joe Toft - was not displeased. Nor were the DEA agents, Delta Force operators and Centra Spike electronic surveillance experts at the Search Bloc headquarters outside Medellin.

And why would they be? What could be better than a homegrown vigilante movement against Public Enemy No. 1? All along, Escobar's official pursuers in the Search Bloc had fought at a disadvantage. The unit's Colombian commander, Police Col. Hugo Martinez, was suspected of employing vicious tactics in his hunt. But compared with Escobar, who kidnapped and murdered the sons and daughters of his enemies, who set off bombs in public places filled with children, the Search Bloc had been a model of decorum.

The Search Bloc was, of course, limited to seeking out wanted criminals, while Escobar routinely targeted innocents. The unit had to take a judge along on every raid, and if the judge did not like the way the Bloc members conducted themselves, he could file human-rights abuse charges - certain to be encouraged by Escobar's many well-paid allies in the Bogota bureaucracy.

When things got too hot for Escobar or his associates, they had always been able to wriggle out by arranging to surrender and, sheltered by a small army of lawyers, work a deal. In short, Escobar had long hidden behind the law and his "rights."

In an interview he gave while hiding the previous September, Escobar had said: "In jail or on the street, they have to respect my rights." To his pursuers, of course, this afforded him an enormous advantage, which made the sudden appearance of Los Pepes tremendously satisfying to the Search Bloc.

The governments of Colombia and the United States might deplore terrorism, but there was no doubt about its effectiveness. Terror was Escobar's strongest weapon. Why not turn it against him?

The drug boss certainly didn't lack for bitter enemies, but his foes had little in common. They ranged from some of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Bogota to rival street thugs in Medellin and Cali. What if someone were to give them a push - some organization, some money, some useful intelligence, some training, planning and leadership?

Los Pepes were so perfect they were . . . well, too perfect.

One of the men involved with Los Pepes, a Medellin drug trafficker and pilot who used the code name "Rubin," said he was recruited as an informant by DEA agent Javier Pena.

"I met with Javier in October 1992 in Medellin," said Rubin, who asked that his real name not be used. "He explained that the idea was to expand the informants net for the Search Bloc, and wanted me to help."

Pena said he remembered Rubin's working closely with the Search Bloc as an informant, but he did not recruit him or offer to get him a visa to the United States - as Rubin had claimed.

"He was wanted in the United States," the agent said.

Rubin said that in Medellin he met with a man who was known as Don Berna, a former hit man for the Galeano family. The Galeanos had been major drug traffickers in Escobar's organization until the drug boss murdered the two brothers who led the family.

Rubin said Don Berna was one of the leaders of Los Pepes, which he said consisted of 12 men "and three jeeps" who worked with Col. Martinez's men. In the fall of 1992, this group began to make associates and family members of Escobar's an offer they dared not refuse.

"We would offer people money, supplied by the DEA, in return for their cooperation," Rubin said. "They could accept the money and help us, or Los Pepes would return and kill them. It was that simple. Either help us or you will become a target. That's how we developed the information that led us to Pablo."

Pena said that DEA money was offered to the Search Bloc to pay informants, and that the money might have been distributed through Rubin and the others, who were identified as "informants."

The activities of Rubin, Don Berna, and others in their group were known to Delta operators and DEA agents who worked in Medellin, all of whom ultimately reported to Wagner, the CIA station chief, at the embassy in Bogota. In an interview for this story, Wagner said he did not remember Los Pepes.

One of Wagner's goals in Colombia was to establish a link between cocaine trafficking and Colombia's dominant guerrilla group, FARC - links that would justify pushing antidrug work from the realm of law enforcement into the realm of war. That would unleash against men like Pablo Escobar the kinds of forces and resources typically directed against communist insurgencies and outlaw states. He had top-level allies in this effort. Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he was advised by President George Bush and Defense Secretary Dick Cheney that combating drugs would be "a No. 1 priority" of their administration.

This was the bigger picture Wagner had in mind when he arrived in Colombia in January 1991, and Escobar's escape a year later had hastened the transition. Now the CIA station chief had the kinds of resources in Colombia needed to wage war against the narcos, and for him the hunt had become very nearly a full-time job.

After the frustrations of the first six months, there was a strategy shift. If Escobar stood atop an organizational mountain that consisted of his family, financial associates, sicarios and lawyers, then perhaps the only way to get him was to first take down the mountain. During the late fall and early winter of 1992-93, the effort against Escobar began targeting more aggressively his worldwide financial empire.

Sickened by the carnage of the January 1993 bookstore bombing, Wagner had personally taken charge of the agency's efforts to undermine Escobar's bombing campaign. Just days before the bombing, his agents by chance had made a connection with a man involved with Escobar's bomb squads. Wagner decided to work the man himself, employing all his spy-craft to protect the source from discovery.

He met with the man just days after the bookstore blast, and about once a week after that. He learned that the bookstore bomb had originally been planned for the Ministry of Justice, but when the car bombers discovered that security was too tight there, they panicked, parked the car nearby, and ran. Wagner also began learning the names of the men running Escobar's bombing campaign.

The bookstore blast had just about erased what was left of Escobar's popularity outside Medellin.

Days later, the government, responding to public outrage, declared him Public Enemy No. 1, and offered the unprecedented reward of five billion pesos (\$6.5 million) for information leading to his capture.

The forces pursuing Escobar had long been united in their desire to get him before he was able to negotiate another comfortable "surrender" deal. Search Bloc and government correspondence was always careful to record that the desire was to "capture" Escobar, but privately they said they did not expect to take him alive.

Inside Search Bloc headquarters in Medellin, DEA agent Pena detected a distinct shift in mood after the bookstore bombing. Just after the blast, Pena encountered a group of Martinez's top men emerging from a meeting with the colonel.

"Things have changed now," they told Pena.

The hunt for Escobar, already bloody and terrible, was about to take an even darker turn. In the previous months, Los Pepes had operated quietly, but in late January a decision was made - Rubin said he thought it was a mistake - to begin publicizing its actions. Bodies of Escobar's associates began turning up all over Medellin and Bogota, most with signs around their necks advertising the vigilante group.

Sometimes they were victims of Los Pepes; sometimes they were killed by the Search Bloc. Among the dead were some of the names Wagner had uncovered with his mole. Whenever the Search Bloc was publicly responsible, the reports read: "Killed in a gun battle with Colombian police."

The hunt for Pablo Escobar grew uglier in 1993. In his desk at the Search Bloc headquarters, Col. Hugo Martinez kept a growing pile of grisly photographs of the dead. Displaying the photos to a Delta Force operator one afternoon, the colonel said of Medellin cartel members his men had not yet found, "As long as I'm the commander here, they're not going to live."

Delta soldiers interviewed for this story said they weren't surprised or distressed by the colonel's attitude. Indeed, they supported it. As far as they were concerned, it was a bad idea to bring narcos back alive, because they all had good lawyers and Colombia's legal system was so corrupt there was no real chance for justice.

Of no one was this more true than Escobar himself. While never stated as an official position, none of the men pursuing Escobar, American or Colombian, expected to see him taken alive. The search forces saw themselves in a race with more liberal elements in the Colombian government, particularly Fiscal General (Attorney General) Gustavo de Greiff, who was trying to negotiate another peaceful surrender.

A DEA memo written in September 1993 noted that both the National Police and the U.S. Embassy hoped that somehow Escobar would be "located" before he was able to strike another deal with the government, "which could amount to the beginning of a new farce."

Some key Escobar associates did manage to surrender. On Oct. 8, 1992, his brother Roberto and one of Escobar's sicarios, or assassins, Jhon "Popeye" Velasquez, turned themselves in. They were promptly locked up at Itagui, a conventional maximum-security prison in Medellin.

It was only a matter of time before Escobar worked out his own terms. The ambassador and other officials at the U.S. Embassy knew that President Cesar Gaviria himself had been drawn into a dialogue with the drug boss' lawyers just days after his escape.

These developments lent urgency to the effort against Escobar, and made welcome the sudden, dark

contributions of Los Pepes in 1993. If those who had been hunting Escobar for six months - Martinez for nearly four years - were hunting him down to kill him, who or what would stop them?

Everyone would be careful not to say this aloud, although it did slip out.

When police Col. Gustavo Bermudez (director of the military side of the Medellin task force) told a Colombian TV station in October that he would rather see Escobar killed than captured, it caused a brief furor in the press. Juan Pablo Escobar, the drug boss' teenage son, called the National Police hotline and said that if his father were killed, "Col. Bermudez will find his whore mother dead." Bermudez retracted his statement and said it had been taken out of context, but he had accurately reflected the sentiments of many of those involved in the search.

If handled discreetly, who would know except those who had much to lose by revealing the truth? The bureaucrats and politicians in Washington didn't read Colombian newspapers. The embassy was the lens through which the United States viewed the country. And the embassy was guiding the hunt for Escobar.

As for the Medellin cartel associates turning up dead - as many as three or four a day by the summer of 1993 - it wasn't as if the government and the Americans were the only likely suspects. Escobar had been warring with other drug exporters and crooks his entire adult life. His campaigns of intimidation and murder had left hundreds, if not thousands, of mourners, some of them from wealthy families.

Most of the victims of Escobar's violence came from the upper middle class in Bogota. As a class, however, they were unlikely to form bands of hit squads. Many of Bogota's most prominent families had members who invested heavily in the cocaine business.

Right-wing paramilitary squads and leftist guerrillas had long experience with hit squads and were clearly capable of the work attributed to Los Pepes.

But Escobar had never been especially political, and he had formed alliances of convenience over the years.

The paramilitaries had close ties to the Colombian army, with whom Escobar enjoyed cozy relations; he had "escaped" from prison in July 1992 by strolling through the army's Fourth Brigade. The right-wing death squads had been bankrolled to a large extent by Escobar and other drug kingpins. Some of them were getting rich exporting drugs themselves.

Leftist guerrillas had even less reason to go after Escobar. His dramatic ongoing flight was distracting the United States and tying up Colombia's elite military units.

The protracted effort to track Escobar was given such high priority by both the Colombian government and the U.S. Embassy that it began to deeply trouble Joe Toft, the American country chief for the DEA.

Toft never lost sight of the fact that Escobar was part of a much larger problem. As the hunt stretched into 1993, Toft could see that the Cali cartel, the main rival to Escobar's Medellin cartel, was growing richer and stronger. Its cocaine shipments to the U.S. actually had grown while Escobar was on the run. The longer the hunt went on, the better it was for its business.

Given the timing and tactics, the most likely forces behind Los Pepes were the Moncada and Galeano families, against whom Escobar had declared open war, and the National Police, which had lost hundreds of officers to Escobar's sicarios. Both were receiving American support.

The execution of the Galeano and Moncada brothers, ordered by Escobar, had fractured the Medellin cartel. Having been in business with Escobar for years, the widow Dolly Moncada, along with Mireya Galeano and her brother Raphael, knew many of his secrets. The murder of their loved ones was sufficient motivation to seek Escobar's own death.

Within weeks of Escobar's escape, a DEA memo written by agent Steve Murphy noted that the two families were trying to recruit sicarios "to battle Escobar," offering 20 million pesos (\$29,000). Another Murphy memo written on Oct. 16, 1992, noted that Marta Moncada, a sister of the slain men, was cooperating with the hunt for Escobar.

A former drug trafficker and pilot who went by the name "Rubin" said he worked in Medellin with a group headed by a man known as Don Berna, who had been the chief hit man for the Galeano family. Rubin said Don Berna and the others in the group, which would eventually call themselves Los Pepes, worked closely with the Search Bloc, and with the DEA.

"At first, Los Pepes would just kill people," said Rubin, who asked that his real name not be used. "Then the philosophy changed at one point. . . . Those in charge said: 'Let's not kill them all.' "

Both the Galeano and Moncada families were angry, rich and powerful, but they were not strong enough to go up against Escobar's organization on their own. They needed a strong push, some organization, some inside intelligence, and cash. Suspicion has traditionally fallen on the rival Cali cartel, but an equally likely suspect would be the Americans.

At least one person in Colombia felt there was no mystery at all about the vigilante group that called itself Los Pepes. The day after several of Pablo Escobar's properties were bombed in January 1993, the fugitive drug boss sent a note to Col. Hugo Martinez, who headed the police Search Bloc.

The message flatly accused Martinez of ordering the "terrorist actions" against the homes of his relatives. Escobar did not mention Los Pepes. Instead, he wrote: "Personnel under your supervision set car bombs at buildings in El Poblado, where some of my relatives live."

Pointedly, Escobar also mentioned the supposedly secret headquarters of the Search Bloc at the Holguin Academy in Medellin - what he called Martinez's "headquarters of torture." Those headquarters, Escobar wrote, had directed "criminal actions undertaken by men who cover their faces with ski masks."

Escobar concluded the note with his customary coda, a thumbprint and a death threat:

"Knowing that you are part of the government I wish to warn you that if another incident of this nature occurs, I will retaliate against relatives of government officials who tolerate and do not punish your crimes. Don't forget that you, too, have a family."

The colonel hardly needed to be reminded. His family had been living with Escobar's threats for years. Martinez had moved his wife, a dentist, and his two younger children with him to the Holguin base (his eldest son, Hugo, had recently graduated from the National Police academy in Bogota). Just four months earlier, three police officers assigned to protect his family had been gunned down in Medellin. The hit was a very personal message from Escobar. The officers had been on their way to pick up Martinez's youngest son for school.

Escobar had been aware for years of Martinez's pivotal role in the government's campaign against him. He had suspected, correctly, that the Americans were helping to guide and finance the Search Bloc. And now he had concluded that the newly emergent vigilante group, Los Pepes, was directly linked to the

Search Bloc.

But Escobar didn't know, six months into his second sojourn as a fugitive, how deeply the Americans were penetrating his organization.

In August 1992, just two weeks after Escobar's escape from prison, the U.S. Embassy in Bogota secretly flew a young woman to Washington, D.C. Her name was Dolly Moncada, and she knew every detail of the inner workings of Escobar's Medellin drug cartel.

She had been part of the cartel while her husband, William Moncada, was serving as one of Escobar's top associates. Now Dolly was a widow, and a vindictive one. Escobar, suspicious that William Moncada was withholding money from him, had ordered him tortured and murdered. Then he sent word to Dolly, demanding that she turn over to him all of her assets and threatening a war against her and her family.

Dolly was a dangerous woman. Instead of giving in to Escobar, she vanished in mid-August. Escobar searched desperately for her. He ordered her former residence in Medellin ransacked and her caretakers taken hostage. The kidnapers painted the word guerra (war) on the walls.

Three days later her dead husband's business associate, Norman Gonzales, was kidnapped, held captive and tortured over 13 days. His captors tried drugs and electric shock in an effort to learn Dolly's whereabouts. Gonzales didn't know. Escobar then offered a \$3 million reward for whoever could help him find her.

By now, Dolly was in the hands of the U.S. government. Desperate and angry, she had struck a deal with the administration of President Cesar Gaviria. She handed over most of her family's assets, and won American protection. She was quickly flown to Washington, where she became Confidential Informant SZE-92-053.

Dolly had been talking to DEA agents in the United States when, in December, her 23-year-old brother, Lisandro Ospina, was kidnapped. He was a student with no involvement in the drug cartels and had been visiting Bogota after finishing his first semester at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Up to this point, Dolly had seemed intent on merely crippling Escobar's empire. Now she wanted to harm Escobar himself.

Dolly "was extremely upset by this occurrence," a DEA memo said, "and wants to take some type of retaliatory action against Escobar personally."

Dolly knew exactly how to hurt Escobar. In a series of debriefings conducted in Washington and recorded by the DEA, she outlined in detail Escobar's entire criminal organization. She was impatient with what she considered the gentle tactics employed by the Search Bloc, which was authorized to go after only those suspected of criminal activity. Dolly wanted to go after everyone associated with Escobar, his family members, his lawyers, anyone. She wanted people killed.

She gave the names of the key members of Escobar's inner circle. If they had been indicted, she said, they should be arrested. If not, she suggested, they should be killed.

Dolly listed five lawyers who, she said, "handle Escobar's criminal and financial problems and are worse than Escobar. These attorneys negotiate with the Colombian government on his behalf and are fully aware of the scope of activities since he consults them before he carries out any action."

She provided a list of Escobar's most prized properties and assets, his antique cars, country homes, apartments, aircraft and airports.

Dolly also offered what she considered helpful advice on how to bring Escobar out into the open, where he could be trapped and killed: "He needs to be provoked, or angered and made desperate so that he wants to strike back. . . . Escobar may then make mistakes," a DEA memo said, quoting Dolly. She recommended confiscating his assets - or destroying them.

The memo said Dolly also advised, wrongly as it turned out, that Escobar would attribute any deaths of his associates not to the authorities, but to the rival Cali cartel. "As a result," Dolly predicted, according to the DEA memo, "the Escobar organization would turn on itself and begin killing itself again."

There was one other piece of advice proffered by Dolly Moncada: Perhaps the U.S. should take another look at some Colombian drug traffickers held in American prisons. Although these narcos had been talking to U.S. authorities in hopes of earning reduced sentences, Dolly said, they knew a lot more than they were telling about Pablo Escobar.

After her husband was murdered by his former boss Pablo Escobar, Dolly Moncada began providing valuable information to the Americans who were helping direct and finance the hunt for the fugitive drug lord. Among her suggestions was that the authorities talk to Colombian drug traffickers held in American jails.

Soon after Dolly was debriefed by the DEA in Washington, D.C., in late 1992, an incentive was offered to jailed Colombian drug dealer Carlos Lehder, a former associate of Escobar's. Lehder, seeking a reduced sentence, responded with his own suggestions for closing in on his former ally.

In a letter to the DEA from federal prison in Leavenworth, Kan., where he had been given a new identity under the federal witness protection program, Lehder recommended that the Americans create a Colombian "freedom fighters brigade, controlled by the DEA, and independent of the Colombian politicians, police or army." Lehder wrote that "the rich, the poor, the peasant, the political left, center and right are willing to cooperate" in the effort to bring Escobar down.

Of more immediate use was Lehder's description of Escobar's daily routine while in hiding - how he would move from safe house to safe house, how he would almost certainly stay close to his home base in and around Medellin. He drew a crude map and provided insights into Escobar's habits and preferences:

"Escobar is strictly a ghetto person, not a farm or jungle person. . . . Escobar always tries to keep within distance range for his cellular phone to reach Medellin's phone base. That's approximately 100 miles, so he can call any time.

"Generally, P. Escobar occupies the main house with some of his hit men, radio operator (Big High Frequency radio receiver), cooks, hores [whores] and messengers. For transportation they have jeeps, motorcycles and sometimes a boat. I have never seen him riding a horse. Escobar gets up at 1 or 2 p.m. and goes to sleep at 1 or 2 a.m.

"Fugitive Escobar uses from 15 to 30 security guards, with arms and WT [walkie-talkies]. Two shifts of 12 hours each. Two at the main road entrance, some along the road, the rest around the perimeter of the main house (one mile) and one at his door. . . .

"The main house always has two or three gateway paths which run to the forest and thus toward a second hideout or near a river where a boat is located, or a tent with supplies and radios. Escobar is an

obese man, certainly not a muscle man or athlete. He could not run 15 minutes without respiratory trouble. Unfortunately, the military police has never used hunting dogs against him."

Lehder told the agents that any time the lookouts on the far perimeter saw a vehicle approaching or a low-flying airplane or helicopter, they would "scream through those walkie-talkies" and Escobar would immediately flee.

In addition to Dolly Moncada and Lehder, the DEA noted with approval the cooperation of another former Escobar associate with a grudge. Colombian paramilitary leader Fidel Castano was a charismatic assassin who occasionally exported drugs and smuggled diamonds. A onetime friend of Escobar's who had helped him hide during the government's first war against the narcos, Castano turned against Escobar after the murders of Castano's friends, the drug-dealing Moncada and Galeano brothers.

In a dispatch to DEA headquarters on Feb. 22, 1993, DEA agent Javier Pena identified Castano as "a cooperating individual who was once a trusted Pablo Escobar associate." He reported that Castano had actually accompanied the Search Bloc on a raid 10 days earlier, when one of the unit's top officers drowned as the raiding parties crossed the Cauca River. Castano had reportedly made heroic efforts to rescue the man.

In Castano, Lehder and the Moncada and Galeano families, the hunt for Escobar had gained allies willing to play by the bloody rules of Medellin's underworld. The Colombian government and the U.S. Embassy used them throughout the fall and winter of 1992 to gather information about Escobar and his organization.

As early as September, the search effort seemed to be acting on Dolly Moncada's suggestion to go after Escobar's lawyers. On Sept. 26, the Search Bloc raided an estate owned by Escobar's attorney, Santiago Uribe, one of those named by Dolly. The raiders were in the process of ransacking the place when Uribe himself drove up. He was arrested and questioned.

Uribe acknowledged that he was one of Escobar's lawyers but denied knowing his fugitive client's whereabouts. Among Uribe's files the Search Bloc found letters from Escobar and tapes linking him to drug dealing, bribes and murder - including the assassination just days before of Judge Myrian Velez, one of the "faceless" judges in Medellin, who had been appointed, supposedly in secret, to investigate the murder of a crusading newspaper editor. Velez had been preparing to indict Escobar as the "intellectual author" of the murder.

The evidence added to the government's criminal case against Escobar, but by now few in the government - and virtually no one within the Search Bloc - were talking about arresting Escobar and putting him on trial. As a DEA memo pointed out in summarizing the raid against Uribe, the Colombian police officer in charge "relayed a message that they were continuing their search for Escobar and preferred that Escobar not surrender."

As determined as its leadership was, the Search Bloc was still a step or two behind its prey. The team simply could not close the last one hundred yards.

This was the assessment delivered by "Col. Santos," the chief Delta operator assigned to the Search Bloc headquarters in Medellin. After the first blundering raids in 1992, when Escobar and his entourage had driven down one side of a mountain while the Search Bloc lumbered up the other, the unit had blown one good lead after another.

Despite these failures, the Americans were impressed with Col. Hugo Martinez after he took command

following Escobar's escape. None of the Americans assigned to the Search Bloc headquarters had been in Colombia during the first war against Escobar, so they didn't realize at first how far back went this war between the colonel and the drug lord.

The colonel knew how the game was played. American soldiers working closely with the Search Bloc knew that when Martinez grabbed somebody associated with Escobar, the man had better start talking fast. If the man did talk, he would end up arrested instead of having his photo added to the growing pile of photographs of bloody corpses in the colonel's desk drawer.

Between October and the end of December 1992, 12 major players in Escobar's empire had been killed by the Search Bloc. Often the photos in the colonel's drawer would show the victim with a bullet wound in the forehead, or through the ear. Each one was reported killed "in gun battles" with the Search Bloc.

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Despite Ambassador Morris Busby's strict orders, the Delta operators and DEA agents left the compound anyway, usually for Search Bloc assaults. Over time, the Americans became illicit forward observers, heading off with a new set of Centra Spike coordinates, searching for a convenient observation post where they could watch a suspected hideout, sometimes for days.

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Up in their Beechcraft spy plane over Medellin one day, the Centra Spike operators were stunned by what they overheard.

They had just picked up a brief radio transmission from Pablo Escobar. They plotted the coordinates, then sent the data to the Search Bloc headquarters. There, the unit's commander, Col. Hugo Martinez, shared the information with his top officers.

It was at this point that the Centra Spike men picked up a phone call from the base. Someone was calling from the Search Bloc headquarters to warn Escobar. Apparently there was a soplón, a traitor, within Martinez's handpicked inner circle.

Escobar had been tipped off in plenty of time to escape. But the Centra Spike operators had recorded the soplón's warning - "They're on their way, they're coming for you!" - which had gone out to an Escobar associate called Pinina.

Several days later, a Centra Spike technician visited Martinez at the base and played the tape. The colonel didn't recognize the voice, but he assumed it was one of the men on his command staff. So the colonel dismissed all but his two or three most trusted officers, sending all the others to Bogota for reassignment.

Eight days later, after briefing only his top commander, Maj. Hugo Aguilar, about a pending raid, Martinez was again called by the man from Centra Spike: Minutes after sending coordinates to the Search Bloc base, the unit had picked up another telephone warning to Pinina.

"If it isn't you," the American said, "it has to be one of the men who are right there with you."

Martinez was angry, and frightened. It had only been two minutes! He knew he could trust Aguilar ... or could he? He summoned the major to his office and confronted him. Aguilar swore he had made no such call, and was wounded to be accused.

Martinez felt wounded, too. Aguilar said he had conveyed the colonel's plans to three other top officers, but that was it. The information had not traveled outside the Search Bloc's smaller new inner circle.

The colonel was spooked. If he couldn't carry on a conversation with his most trusted officer without Escobar finding out about it minutes later, what hope did he have of ever catching the man? Within 30 minutes, he was on a helicopter to Bogota, where he turned in his resignation. He explained to the generals that the situation was out of his control. The generals refused his resignation, and ordered him back to Medellin to straighten things out.

When Martinez returned the following day, Aguilar met him at the helicopter and said they had found the soplón. Just after Martinez had flown away from the base, Aguilar had stormed out to confront the officers he had spoken with. All three angrily denied the betrayal, but as they spoke they noticed that a mechanic who worked at the base was standing close enough to overhear. He had been standing at the same spot when they had spoken earlier.

"That's got to be him," Aguilar said.

Before accusing the man, they set a trap. With the colonel back in his office the next day, they ran

through the same scenario. Aguilar emerged from Martinez's office and consulted with his three officers, standing close enough for the mechanic to overhear. Minutes later, Centra Spike recorded a phone call from the base delivering the false information.

The mechanic was confronted, and confessed. Fearing for his life, he said he had been recruited by a second lieutenant, one of the men Martinez had banished from the base nine days earlier. He said he also had been paid to kill Martinez. He had been given a pistol with a silencer and had actually climbed a tree several nights before outside the window where the colonel often sat reading. The mechanic said he was too far away to fire accurately and, fearing an errant shot would prompt return fire, he had resolved to spend a few days practicing with the pistol. He had planned to try again the night before, but the colonel had not returned from Bogota.

The incident reinforced the pervasiveness of Escobar's influence, even within the Search Bloc compound. The traitor lieutenant had been handpicked for the Search Bloc. Like the other men at Holguin, he had no access to telephones or radios, so he had recruited the worker.

Now more than ever, the colonel realized how dangerous his mission had become, and how hopeless the entire effort sometimes seemed. Not long afterward, the traitor lieutenant was killed, Martinez said, "fighting against the guerrillas." Several of Martinez's men said they believed the man was executed.

Even after this soplón had been sniffed out, there was still reason to believe Escobar had sources inside the compound. In November 1992, two raids on targets where Martinez was convinced Escobar had been hiding turned up nothing. Yet during the same period, raids on some of the cartel's midlevel management routinely got results. The experience confirmed Centra Spike's accuracy, yet when it came to Escobar, the raids were always too late.

Over the Christmas holidays in 1992, Escobar made yet another surrender offer, this time in a letter to two sympathetic Colombian senators. He would turn himself in if the government agreed to house him and 60 members of the "military and financial arms" of his organization at a police academy in Medellin, to be supervised by members of the Colombian army, navy and air force.

He also demanded that all members of the Search Bloc be fired. In the letter, he accused Col. Martinez of routinely torturing those he arrested. Escobar demanded an investigation of these "human rights abuses," and then issued a threat:

"What would the government do if a 10,000-kilogram bomb were placed at the Colombian prosecutor general's office?"

He promised a new wave of kidnappings, threatening members of the "diplomatic community." He vowed to plant bombs at the government-owned radio and television station, the national tax offices and the newspaper El Tiempo.

Colombian President Cesar Gaviria responded in early January by calling the demands "ridiculous," and he dismissed Escobar's charges of human rights abuses as a public-relations ploy. Still, the warnings spread fear throughout official Bogota. Fiscal General Gustavo de Greiff, Colombia's top federal prosecutor, asked U.S. Ambassador Morris Busby to help relocate his family to the United States for safety.

For all the misery Escobar had caused, Martinez could not help but admire the way his enemy never seemed to lose his temper, especially when he was in danger. In the recordings of Escobar talking to his associates, the drug lord seemed to radiate calm. Martinez was impressed by his ability to manage

several problems at once, and by the care with which he planned his moves.

Escobar proved to be flexible and creative. During the months when Martinez imposed a blackout on all cellular-phone use in Medellin, hoping to make it more difficult for Escobar to communicate with his organization, the drug boss just switched over to radio or communicated by messenger.

Escobar seemed able to anticipate how others would react, and plan accordingly. He and his friends would speak in elaborate impromptu codes that required remembering specific dates, places and events. Often Escobar's fluency with these facts tripped up his associates, who couldn't keep up with their boss' agile memory.

It was clear that Escobar believed he could stay one step ahead of the colonel for as long as it took for the Gaviria administration, or perhaps the next administration, to capitulate to his demands. Martinez was stubborn, but after six months of futile searching, after the deaths of 65 police and scores of civilians, he was no closer to finding Escobar in January 1993 than when he had started.

The colonel became devoted to his superstitions, bathing stones he carried in goat's milk, watching for omens to supplement the steady stream of intelligence he got from the Americans.

It was in this climate of frustration and fear that Los Pepes suddenly began to produce results.

By January 1993, the Americans directing the search for Pablo Escobar had managed to produce elaborate organizational charts for his Medellin drug cartel. The charts were displayed in the secret vault at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota and inside the Delta Force outpost in Medellin.

Some of the information had been gleaned from months of electronic eavesdropping on Escobar and his associates by Centra Spike, the secret U.S. Army unit. Some had been coerced from people interrogated by Col. Hugo Martinez and his police Search Bloc, and some came from informants recruited by the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Search Bloc to work in Medellin. Of these, according to an informant known as "Rubin," some were members of Los Pepes, the death squad that was methodically killing Escobar's hit men, relatives, lawyers and business associates.

The embassy's charts laid out Escobar's financial network, his businesses, his extended family, his legal teams. Many of those on the charts were not known to be criminals, or had not been indicted for crimes, but they were part of the mountain that propped up the drug lord. Such information would have been useful to a group like Los Pepes, and more than one American at the embassy believed it was finding its way to them.

The pattern of Los Pepes' hits corresponded neatly to the charts, and it wasn't just whom they were killing, but whom they were not. Some of the top names on the embassy's organizational charts were now under almost constant surveillance - and seemed immune to Los Pepes.

"It sure seemed to us like they knew who we were watching most closely, because they left those people alone," one of the Centra Spike operators said.

After a hiatus following the first dramatic raids on Escobar's properties the previous autumn, Los Pepes went on a killing rampage. The group had actually been killing people quietly for months, but now a decision was made to go public. On Feb. 3, the body of Luis Isaza, a low-level Medellin cartel manager, was discovered in Medellin with a sign around his neck: "For working for the narco-terrorist and baby-killer Pablo Escobar. For Colombia. Los Pepes."

Four other low-level cartel workers were found murdered in the city that day. The next day the bodies of two men known to be Escobar's business associates were discovered. There were more murders the next day, and the next, and the next. It was a controlled bloodbath. All of the victims had one thing in common - Pablo Escobar.

Among them was a former director of the Colombian National Police, Carlos Casadiego, who had been publicly linked to the Medellin cartel. On Feb. 17, one of the dead was Carlos Ossa, the man thought to be financing Escobar's day-to-day operations.

On the same day Ossa's body was found, a government warehouse burned to the ground, destroying Escobar's collection of 17 antique and luxury cars, valued at more than \$4 million. The vehicles had been seized by Colombian police in 1989, but it was assumed that Escobar would one day reclaim them.

Fidel Castano, a paramilitary leader cooperating in the search, told the Americans in Medellin that Escobar was now in bad shape because so many of his men had been killed or jailed. A memo by DEA agent Javier Pena that February quoted Castano:

"Escobar was having trouble getting his hands on cash as he was spending a great deal of money in his present war with the government of Colombia."

The day Ossa's body was found, one of Escobar's most notorious assassins, Carlos Alzate, turned himself in. A day later, a man thought to be one of Escobar's chief money launderers, Luis Londono, was found murdered with a Los Pepes sign around his neck. Two weeks later, Jose Posada, the man Ossa had replaced, also surrendered.

As the pace of killings and surrenders mounted, Los Pepes publicly offered cash rewards for information on Escobar and his key associates and began broadcasting threats against the drug lord's family.

American soldiers and agents in Medellin believed there was a direct connection between the Search Bloc and Los Pepes. They observed men they associated with the death squad meeting with officers at the Search Bloc base. The men carried radios and appeared to maintain communications links with Col. Martinez's men.

DEA agent Pena knew their leader only by the name Don Berna, a stooped, fat man with buck teeth and bad skin who always had pretty girlfriends and wore an expensive watch. Don Berna had been at the compound from the earliest days after Escobar's escape. He presented Pena with a gold watch as a gift of friendship.

Col. Martinez, now a general, denies all this. He calls Los Pepes criminals, former associates of Escobar's who turned against him, originally working as informants, and then as killers.

"They began to employ against Pablo Escobar the same kind of terror he employed," Martinez said recently. "Pablo Escobar would set off a bomb in Bogota, and Los Pepes would set three against Escobar's interests, his family, or the criminal group he headed. It was a black spot on the Search Bloc, because Pablo Escobar manipulated the media very well. Whether writing or speaking, he always publicly claimed that the Search Bloc was in fact Los Pepes. However, Los Pepes and our group did not share any links at all."

In any case, it was clear that the vigilante group had spooked Escobar more than anything the government had been able to do. One sign that the fugitive was feeling the heat came Feb. 19, when

Pena learned from the prosecutor's office in Medellin that Escobar intended to send his children to Miami. Escobar's wife, Maria Victoria, had purchased tickets for their son, Juan Pablo; their daughter, Manuela; and a woman friend named Doria Ochoa on an Avianca flight scheduled to leave Medellin at 9:30 a.m.

Ambassador Morris Busby moved fast. He believed that Escobar's most vulnerable pressure point was his family. If they were tucked away in relative safety in the United States, it would ease a tremendous daily psychological burden on the fugitive.

Meeting with Colombian Defense Minister Raphael Pardo at his residence early the next day, Busby explained that he did not want the family to leave.

They had visas to enter the United States, but Busby wanted them stopped. Since they had been issued tourist visas, Pardo and the ambassador discussed turning them back because what they were doing, in fact, was fleeing from danger. This could not be called "tourism."

Then Busby's public affairs officer suggested, "Why don't we poke fun at him?" Why not turn them away on the grounds that children under the age of 18 could not travel to the United States without both parents?

DEA agent Pena was at the airport in Medellin when the children arrived, surrounded by bodyguards and accompanied by Ochoa. Manuela carried a small, fluffy white dog. They were allowed to board the plane before police moved in. Three of the family's bodyguards were arrested, and four others fled. The Escobar children and Ochoa were escorted off the plane.

It created a raucous scene in the airport. Doria Ochoa argued vehemently with Pena, who took their passports. Juan Pablo, a tall, chubby 16-year-old, joined in the commotion.

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If Pablo Escobar had ever doubted that the United States was hot on his trail, those doubts vanished after the U.S. Embassy in Bogota refused to issue visas for his wife and children to flee to the United States in February 1993.

Escobar had always tried to avoid picking a fight with America, but now the Americans' latest moves clearly distressed him. Ambassador Morris Busby received by mail a newspaper clipping in an envelope that appeared to have been hand-addressed by the fugitive. The clipping was about the decision to turn back his family, and in a quotation from one of Escobar's defenders, one line was circled: ". . . is it valid to cancel the visas of children because one is persecuting the father?"

On March 2, Busby received a handwritten letter from Escobar, with his signature and thumbprint at the bottom. The letter mentioned a comment by a prosecutor in New York, in reference to the World Trade Center bombing earlier that year, that no enemy of the United States could be ruled out in investigating the attack. Included on the enemies list was Escobar's Medellin cartel.

Escobar wrote that he wasn't at war with the United States "because in your country the government has not been participating in bombings, kidnappings, torture and massacre of my people and my allies."

If he had carried out the World Trade Center bombing, he added, "I would be saying why I did it and what I want."

The bloodbath continued in Colombia, with Escobar's random car bombs increasingly answered with chilling precision by the vigilantes from Los Pepes. The day after Luis Londono - described by the DEA as one of Escobar's primary money-laundering experts - was killed, his brother Diego Londono, an architect, turned himself in, claiming Los Pepes had also tried to kill him.

The day Londono surrendered, Escobar's brother-in-law, Hernan Henao, known as "HH," was killed by Search Bloc members as they raided his apartment in Medellin.

Dolly Moncada had urged her new American allies to go after not just Escobar's gunmen, but his infrastructure, his family and his legal teams. In the spring of 1993, that's what started happening.

For surveillance purposes, the Drug Enforcement Administration had compiled elaborate lists of Escobar's relatives, with many of the names provided by Dolly Moncada. A list given in February by Joe Toft, the DEA country chief, to John Craig, the CIA deputy station chief, listed names and phone numbers for Escobar's father, mother, wife, brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, mother-in-law, and children.

On March 4, an attorney who had worked for Escobar, Raul Zapata, was found murdered. The next day another attorney, Maria Munoz, was murdered. After another of Escobar's car bombs exploded in Bogota on April 15, killing 11 and injuring more than 200, Los Pepes exacted swift revenge, blowing up two fincas, or estates, owned by Escobar's key associates.

The same day, two more of Escobar's lawyers, Juan Castano and Guido Parra, were killed. Parra was murdered along with his 18-year-old son, Guido Andres Parra. They had been abducted from their apartment in Medellin by 15 heavily armed men.

Their bodies were found, hands tied with plastic tape and bullet wounds to the head, stuffed in the trunk of a taxi. A hand-lettered sign in the trunk read, "Through their profession, they initiated abductions for Pablo Escobar." It was signed, "Los Pepes," with a postscript: "What do you think of the exchange for the bombs in Bogota, Pablo?"

The body of the taxi driver was found about a mile away, with a sign that accused him of working for the Medellin cartel. Any public dismay over the killings was far outweighed by anger over Escobar's deadly car bomb in Bogota.

In a statement issued by Los Pepes to the press, the vigilantes referred to Escobar's "demented attitude" and concluded, "We challenge Pablo Escobar and all his people to fight a frontal war which only affects the parties involved and doesn't incur the vile assassination of Colombians, under the false pretense that with these actions he will convince the last hopefuls of the power of his extinct organization; otherwise we will be forced to fight a frontal war against him and his close ones."

Los Pepes saw themselves as a military organization. They called for the war to be fought without involving "civilians," but evidently Escobar's "close ones" and innocents such as the son of Guido Parra did not qualify. Los Pepes also spread the word that the drug boss had been condemned to death, whether or not he surrendered.

The killings of Escobar's lawyers prompted three of the drug lord's best-known attorneys, Santiago Uribe, Jose Lozano and Reynaldo Suarez, to publicly resign from his service. In June, Lozano, who continued to represent Escobar despite his public resignation, was shot 25 times in downtown Medellin as he walked with his brother, who was badly injured. In July, seven other lawyers who had worked for Escobar or his cartel resigned (Uribe for the second time) after Los Pepes publicly threatened "potential harm or murder."

As this lawlessness accelerated through the spring, no one from Washington questioned it or noted America's possible links to it. No one from Colombia was complaining, or explaining.

The only voice of complaint came from Pablo Escobar. On April 29, he wrote a letter to Colombia's chief prosecutor, Gustavo de Greiff, who had recently indicted him for murder and other crimes. Escobar named Fidel Castano, a paramilitary leader who had secretly been providing information to the Americans, as the head of Los Pepes:

"Los Pepes have their headquarters and their torture chambers in Fidel Castano's house, located . . . scarcely 40 yards from an incinerated house which belonged to a relative of mine. There they torture trade unionists and lawyers. No one has searched the house or confiscated their assets."

Escobar went on to complain that the murders and kidnappings he attributed to Los Pepes were not investigated by the government. The government, he said, offered rewards for information on the leaders of his cartel and leftist guerrilla commanders, but nothing for Los Pepes members.

The letter ended with yet another indication that the killings of his associates, the attacks on the homes of his loved ones, the relentless pursuit by the Search Bloc - all of it - were starting to wear on Escobar. He was ready to surrender.

"I remain disposed to turn myself in . . ." he wrote. And as always, he listed his conditions: ". . . if given written and public guarantees."

In the fifth-floor vault at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Centra Spike analysts were not missing the

distinct pattern in the Los Pepes hits. The death squad was killing off the white-collar infrastructure of Escobar's organization, targeting his money-laundering experts, bankers, lawyers and extended family - names listed on the very charts that Centra Spike's surveillance experts and the CIA had painstakingly assembled over the previous six months.

Often the hits corresponded with intelligence Centra Spike was turning over to CIA Station Chief Bill Wagner, who was passing it along to Colombian police commanders in charge of the Search Bloc. More and more of the people identified by Centra Spike's Beechcraft spy planes were turning up dead.

Despite this, Centra Spike's operators felt they were well within the legal boundaries of their mission. They gave their information to Wagner, and what happened to it after that was, as far as he was concerned, none of their business. If Col. Hugo Martinez and his men were attempting to enforce Colombia's laws and arrest criminals, whatever they did on their own could hardly be the responsibility of the embassy.

If Los Pepes were working with the Search Bloc, that would explain their apparent access to fresh U.S. intelligence. After the vigilante group's murders and bombings on April 15, a Drug Enforcement Administration memo to Washington summed up the official attitude at the embassy:

While not completely unexpected, the attacks by Los Pepes further demonstrates their resolve to violently retaliate against Escobar each and every time Escobar commits a terrorist attack against the GOC and/or the innocent citizens of Colombia. Although the actions are not condoned nor approved by the CNP nor the BCO, they may persuade Escobar to curb such behavior for fear of losing members of his own family. Too, these types of attacks will seriously cut into those assets owned by Escobar and his associates.

As long as any American linkage with Los Pepes remained circumstantial, the embassy had little to fear.

And as long as the Colombian government did not object, and the new U.S. administration and Congress did not notice, the pursuit of Escobar could proceed as a war. The phrase dirty war was redundant. Innocent people would always get killed in the cross fire, but at least Los Pepes was choosing targets with a great deal more precision than Escobar was.

After Los Pepes killed one of Escobar's top lawyers, Guido Parra, and Parra's teenage son, the public outcry prompted President Cesar Gaviria to make another public statement denouncing the group. This time he offered a \$1.4 million reward for information leading to the arrest of members of the vigilante squad. Los Pepes promptly issued a communique announcing that it was disbanding, having "made a contribution" to the effort against Escobar.

Several months earlier, the secret informant Dolly Moncada had given the Americans the names of six key members of Escobar's organization who she thought should be taken out, one way or another. By summer, three had surrendered and were in prison and one was dead. Of the lawyers she had named, all were either dead or had publicly resigned.

Despite Los Pepes' public pledge, the killings continued. The death toll now included Escobar's brother-in-law, Carlos Henao, and his cousin, Gonzalo Marin. Another nephew was kidnapped.

Fear of Los Pepes had taken root in Escobar's family. By the end of June 1993, many members of the extended family had fled the country, or had tried. The United States was using its influence to deny them safe havens. When Nicholas Escobar, a nephew of Escobar's, and his family were traced to Chile, the

embassy prevailed on the government there to evict them. The family appealed through Chile's courts, which bought them a few weeks before the appeal was denied and they fled to Germany.

In early July, the president of neighboring Peru announced that his country would not allow Escobar's relatives to enter even as tourists. Meanwhile, Escobar's brother Argemiro, nephew, sister Luz Maria and her husband and three children were discovered in Costa Rica, where they were deported and flown back to Medellin.

Back in Colombia in mid-July, Escobar's wife filed a legal petition demanding that the Colombian government allow her children to leave the country. It was denied.

Escobar made another offer to surrender in March, just before the Search Bloc killed one of his most notorious assassins, a man known as "El Chopo." The offer was delivered by an Escobar lawyer to a Roman Catholic bishop.

By now the fugitive drug boss, his ranks riddled by deaths and surrenders and increasingly isolated and vulnerable, had dropped many of his former demands for surrender. He no longer insisted in living in his own prison, surrounded by his own men and guards. Now he asked that his family be given government protection - earlier he had demanded U.S. government protection - that he be given a private cell with his own kitchen (to prepare his own food to prevent poisoning), and permission to phone his family three times a week.

President Gaviria reiterated the government's refusal to accept any conditions for Escobar's surrender, but Fiscal General Gustavo de Greiff sounded a dissenting view: "I do not see any difficulty in abiding by these requests, not as a concession but as a solution."

De Greiff was increasingly at odds with the Gaviria administration. Elected independently, unlike the American system in which the attorney general is a presidential appointee, he felt his role was to uphold the nation's laws and basic human rights. He viewed the official search for Escobar as a killing mission, and began pressing instead for Escobar's capture or surrender.

His office assumed responsibility for protecting the drug boss' immediate family, offering bodyguards (paid for and fed by the Escobars) for the apartment building where they lived in Medellin. De Greiff also pushed for investigation and prosecution of Los Pepes.

By early August 1993, the new Clinton administration overseers had noticed how neatly the dirty work of Los Pepes dovetailed with the U.S. mission against Escobar, and representatives from the Justice Department and the Pentagon flew to Bogota to demand answers.

Ambassador Morris Busby was asked directly about Los Pepes in August, when Brian Sheridan, the Clinton-appointed civilian overseer at the Pentagon for covert operations, visited Bogota. Sheridan left the meeting convinced there was no evidence linking Los Pepes to the Search Bloc.

Busby had heard about evidence to the contrary, but nothing that he found convincing. He would later say he had not seen DEA reports suggesting such a connection, including one written by agent Steve Murphy noting that "the police were cooperating with the group at some level, including sharing information."

Busby himself had written about the alleged connection a month earlier.

In a secret State Department cable titled "Unraveling the Pepes Tangled Web," dated Aug. 1, just days

before the meeting with Sheridan (a cable Sheridan would not see until months later), the ambassador noted that he had met with President Gaviria on April 13 to "express his strongest reservations about the group." Busby wrote that he had discovered that Fidel Castano, one of the suspected Los Pepes leaders, was in constant contact with the national police.

The memo said Busby requested that all police contact with Castano cease, and he was assured that it would.

Concerned that the manhunt he was leading might somehow be linked to the vigilantes of Los Pepes, U.S. Ambassador Morris Busby wrote a long, secret memo to the State Department in August 1993.

Busby explained that he had warned the Colombian government to sever any ties with members of the vigilante group, which had been killing as many as five people a day.

The ambassador wasn't convinced the alleged connection was true, but there was evidence that Los Pepes was working closely with the elite Colombian police unit, known as the Search Bloc, which was partially funded by the U.S. government and guided by American military officers, law enforcement agents and CIA operatives - all of whom reported to Busby.

In his memo, Busby reported that Colombian President Cesar Gaviria had called a meeting of his key advisers in April and ordered that any contacts between the Search Bloc and Los Pepes be terminated at once. After that meeting, Busby wrote, the president called a top police commander who was not suspected of links to the death squad and ordered him to "pass the word" that Los Pepes must be dissolved immediately.

"Gaviria's effort to send such an important message to Los Pepes via one of his key police commanders . . . indicated that the president believed police officials were in contact with leaders of Los Pepes," Busby wrote.

His memo went on to note that the message clearly got through: The very next day, Los Pepes publicly announced that the group was disbanding.

But it never happened. Los Pepes soon resumed the campaign of terror against Escobar, and evidence of a link to the Search Bloc continued to mount.

By July 29 - three days before Busby wrote his memo - the ambassador was told by Colombia's top prosecutor, Fiscal General Gustavo de Greiff, that there was sufficient evidence to issue warrants against the Search Bloc commander, Col. Hugo Martinez, and half a dozen police officials. Busby's memo said the charges included accepting bribes, drug trafficking, kidnapping, torture and "very possibly murder."

The memo said de Greiff had told a Drug Enforcement Administration official that the key witness against Martinez was a prosecutor who had been jailed on corruption charges. The prosecutor said he had been paid bribes by Martinez, with the money coming from the Cali drug cartel, Escobar's hated rivals. Martinez vehemently denied the allegation.

Deep into the memo, Busby revealed that the fiscal general had made a stunning allegation: Not only were Los Pepes and the Search Bloc working hand in hand, but Los Pepes had taken charge of the hunt for Pablo Escobar.

De Greiff believed that Los Pepes, which surfaced with "harmless" attacks against residences of Escobar's relatives, later began murdering and kidnapping citizens whose only crime was their

relationship with Escobar, Busby wrote. The fiscal general said the police, whose "tacit support" helped Los Pepes get started, then "went too far" and moved from simple intelligence-sharing to violent attacks against civilians, according to Busby's memo.

At this point, Busby quoted the fiscal general as saying: "Police officials were probably already too deeply involved with Los Pepes to withdraw. . . . Not only were some members of the Search Bloc and Los Pepes running joint operations, some of which resulted in kidnappings and possibly killings, but that the leadership of Los Pepes was calling the shots, rather than the police."

The prosecutor supplying this evidence had worked with the Search Bloc at its headquarters in Medellin - by law, a representative of the fiscal general's office had to authorize all the unit's searches, seizures and arrests - and had been charged with selling an expensive car seized during a raid. In an effort to help his case by assisting prosecutors, he had described torture sessions and murders committed by Col. Martinez's men.

Still, Gaviria had decided not to have Martinez arrested, for fear "the police might not obey" the order, Busby's memo said. Gaviria was also concerned that a public scandal involving the Search Bloc would effectively end the hunt for Escobar, conceding another huge victory to the drug boss.

"It would be terrible, if after all the deaths and upheaval in the country, Escobar was victorious," the memo said. But Busby also noted that de Greiff had promised that charges would be brought against Martinez and the others eventually, "even if they are national heroes."

Busby's memo said that he had pressed the fiscal general to act, saying that if there was good evidence against the officers they should be replaced immediately.

"The investigation could then proceed at its own pace and the would maintain the integrity of the unit," Busby wrote. "Justice would be served and the effort against Escobar kept intact. Additionally, if tainted officers, at least one of whom was a principal contact of ours, were kept in place, we would have no choice but to withdraw our support for the unit."

Busby then met with Colombia's defense minister, who said the allegations had been falsely spread by Escobar. Busby said Gen. Octavio Vargas, administrative head of the Search Bloc, promised him that Martinez would be transferred and that charges against the colonel would be handled by a military tribunal. Busby's memo promised that the embassy was "aggressively pursuing this matter" and that his "thinly veiled threats to withdraw our support" seemed to have been heeded.

Busby concluded by noting that Escobar and his assassins, who feared and despised the Search Bloc, had every reason to try to discredit the unit by publicly linking it to Los Pepes.

"On the other hand," he wrote, "it is not hard to believe that policemen who have been hunting Escobar for years without success, who have seen the bloodshed firsthand, could have been attracted to an 'easy solution' like the Pepes. . . . The key points for us are to distance ourselves from the accused - by having them transferred - until the matter is clarified, and to continue to pursue the investigation."

If Busby was pressing the Colombian president to remove Martinez immediately, Gaviria was getting a different message from Joe Toft, the DEA's top man in Bogota. The day after the ambassador wrote his memo, Toft met with de Greiff to encourage him to let Martinez stay. According to a DEA cable describing the meeting, Toft and another DEA official encouraged de Greiff to honor the president's request:

"Obviously, the impending implications and repercussions . . . would almost certainly overwhelm the Gaviria administration," the cable said. "Also, this type of information could potentially elevate Escobar once again to the status of national hero. . . . The BCO has enjoyed a long and successful working relationship with Colonel Martinez. . . . Of interest is the fact that the Medellin cartel has been decimated and practically brought to its knees, all under the leadership of Colonel Martinez. To date, the BCO continues to support Colonel Martinez and his subordinates."

This was the message that got through, not the ambassador's "veiled threat" to the president. Col. Martinez was not transferred. There were no charges against him or any members of his Search Bloc for involvement with Los Pepes, nor would there ever be. And American support for the unit never wavered.

Records pertaining to U.S. actions in Colombia in 1993 remain classified. Questioned about the vigilante group years later, former CIA Station Chief Bill Wagner said: "I have no memory of them."

Other American principals, including Busby and Toft, now dismiss Los Pepes as creatures of the Colombian underworld, a plague Escobar brought upon himself, and a welcome one. Gen. George Joulwon, chief of the U.S. Army Southern Command, said: "I only vaguely remember some of that. If there was a connection it went expressly against my instructions."

The vigilantes of Los Pepes resumed their bloody work, sometimes with dark panache. On July 14, a prize stallion owned by Roberto Escobar, Pablo's brother, was stolen, its rider and trainer shot dead. The stud, named Terremoto, or Earthquake, was worth millions and commanded a breeding fee of \$600,000.

The horse was found three weeks later, tied to a tree just south of Medellin, healthy but neutered.

The hunt continued.

Col. Hugo Martinez did not protest when he learned that his superiors in Bogota were planning to replace him, and had even picked his successor. He offered to step aside. As the first anniversary of Pablo Escobar's escape passed in July 1993, there seemed to be better reasons to leave than to stay.

Col. Jose Perez, his proposed replacement, was a respected officer who had been working on a poppy eradication program, which meant he probably had a comfortable relationship with the U.S. Embassy. So Martinez requested a transfer to Bogota, citing stresses caused by long separations from his family, who had been sent back to the capital from Medellin for their protection.

The hunt for Pablo Escobar had created strains in many families, the colonel's perhaps most of all. His children had been forced out of school for long periods when they were in hiding, and he hardly saw them or his wife, who blamed him for the problems in their marriage. As much as he wanted to finish the job, and as much as he felt that to step down would be an admission of failure, he was ready to quit. The manhunt simply demanded too much.

But his request was again rejected, and Perez never came. Despite Martinez's alleged ties to the vigilantes of Los Pepes, detailed in Ambassador Morris Busby's memos to Washington, the colonel continued to receive American support, even when he wasn't sure he wanted it. He was certain that was the primary reason he remained, for it was the Americans who had bankrolled and pushed the effort from the beginning.

Besides, no one else in the National Police wanted the job. In the year that Martinez had commanded the Search Bloc, the unit had conducted thousands of raids, arrested or killed scores of Escobar's closest

associates, and seen scores of police and civilians killed in return. The hunt for Escobar had evolved into a kind of civil war between Medellin and Bogota. The Search Bloc conducted its raids in Medellin, and Escobar set off his retaliatory bombs in the capital.

The toll of the hunt was terrible, but the police could afford to lose more men than Escobar could. By the summer of 1993, the once powerful Medellin cartel was in shambles. Escobar's fincas stood empty and looted. His most palatial estate, Napoles, was now a police headquarters.

Many of his former allies had abandoned him, offering to trade information for government acquiescence in their own drug trafficking (or for protection from the vigilante group Los Pepes). But the man himself was still at large, moving from hideout to hideout, trying to hold together his crumbling empire, still setting off bombs, still sowing terror.

So long as Escobar was free, the Search Bloc's lesser successes amounted to little. Every day Escobar remained at large was an insult to the rule of law, and a blot on the reputation of Colombia . . . and Col. Martinez's force.

There were those who refused to believe Martinez was really trying to catch Escobar. *Semana* magazine polled officials in Bogota about the Search Bloc's failure to get Escobar, and reported that "corruption" was believed to be the primary reason. The second reason most frequently cited was "inefficiency." Meanwhile, prosecutors in Bogota were investigating the disappearance of some of the \$1 million seized in Search Bloc raids.

Inside the fences at the Search Bloc base, Martinez wrestled daily with disappointment and frustration. He and his men lived there apart from their families for months at a time, always under the shadow of death. Escobar had evaded the police raids for so long that many had begun to doubt he would ever be caught. The colonel's top men complained that the effort was ruining their careers and often asked to be recommended for other assignments. The Americans provided money, guidance and information, and their support kept him in command, but Martinez knew he still lacked their complete trust.

One day in late summer of 1993, Santos, the Delta commander at the Search Bloc base, and DEA agent Javier Pena brought him a tape Centra Spike had recorded of a radio conversation between Escobar and his son.

Martinez was excited. It was the first time he had actually heard Escobar's voice in more than a year. He wanted his men to analyze it. The Americans allowed him to listen to the tape but refused to give him a copy. They remembered an embarrassing leak in 1989, when the transcript of a phone conversation recorded by Centra Spike wound up in the newspapers, tipping off Escobar to their capability. The orders were that no copies or transcripts could be made.

Martinez was furious. Pena and Santos were apologetic.

"Look, Colonel," Pena said. "I feel bad about it myself. You want to kick us all out of here . . . kick us out. We'll leave right now."

They secretly allowed the colonel to copy the tape, but Martinez stayed angry about the official snub. He had long since embraced American technology. He had been skeptical at first, and it had led them in the wrong direction often enough. But they had come so close to nailing Escobar on several occasions that he no longer doubted the spooks from Centra Spike and the CIA knew what they were doing.

The colonel had allowed the American role in his command to grow. On July 14, he met at the Search

Bloc base with U.S. Army Col. John Alexander, visiting from Delta Force's headquarters at Fort Bragg, and agreed to allow the unit to establish a ground-based listening post in the Medellin suburbs to supplement its Beechcraft spy flights. This allowed the U.S. Army's snoops to keep constant tabs on radio and cell phone traffic in Medellin - but it was a potentially controversial and embarrassing move for both countries.

The presence of Delta operatives at the Search Bloc base was a closely guarded secret. Having more U.S. Army personnel living in Medellin exposed them to danger and increased the likelihood that their presence would be discovered by the Colombian press.

Revelations that gringo soldiers had been allowed not only to operate on Colombian soil but to conduct electronic surveillance in a major city might bring down the Gaviria administration. And for Washington, the presence of American soldiers set up just outside a city as violent as Medellin was fraught with danger.

As it was, Centra Spike's Steve Jacoby and Delta's commanders were being summoned to the Pentagon on a regular basis to reassure nervous administrators. But having a permanent presence on the ground gave the unit a 24-hour capability, instead of being limited to the hours the Beechcrafts were in the air.

Martinez had also agreed to Alexander's suggestion that Delta begin playing a more active role in "development of targets and subsequent operational planning," according to a memo Alexander wrote to Busby about the meeting. The ambassador himself met with Martinez at the Search Bloc base on July 22, the first anniversary of Escobar's escape, to tour the facility and underscore America's continued commitment.

Martinez hardly needed convincing. If his superiors would not let him off the hook, then finding Escobar, finishing this thing, was the only way out. When he learned that a special unit of Colombian police had been successful in tests with a new portable direction-finding kit, he requested that it, too, be sent to Medellin to aid the hunt for Escobar.

There was only one problem. The special unit included his son Hugo.

Col. Hugo Martinez did not want his son coming to Medellin. Without telling the young man, the colonel had twice intervened to block his transfer to that dangerous city. Now he would block him again.

The younger Hugo Martinez was a lieutenant who worked for a special Colombian electronic surveillance unit that used portable devices to track down the source of a radio signal. The unit had been successful in recent cases, and was running tests in Bogota. The colonel believed it might help finally find Pablo Escobar, who was believed to be hiding somewhere in Medellin.

The Americans in their surveillance planes could tell the Search Bloc what neighborhood and even what block the signal from Escobar's cell phone was coming from, but in a city as densely populated as Medellin, a block wasn't good enough. The colonel hoped this new team might provide the pinpoint capability they needed.

"Send the team, but I don't want you to come here," Martinez told his son.

The team members using the portable electronic gear would have to live and work undercover in the city. Coming and going from the protected headquarters of the colonel's Search Bloc outside Medellin would blow their cover.

Given the bounty Escobar had placed on the head of every police officer in Medellin, and the even higher reward for killing a member of the Search Bloc, Martinez feared putting his son in such a position.

"Send someone else," the colonel said.

The younger Martinez reminded his father that he, his mother, brother and sister had been living with the threat of Escobar for years. Once, knowing that his phone conversation was being recorded and would eventually reach Col. Martinez's ears, Escobar had said: "Colonel, I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill all of your family up to the third generation, and then I will dig up your grandparents and shoot them and bury them again."

He had been a target for a long time, Hugo told his father. "At least this way I have the chance to fight back. I'm part of the team, and it won't work as well without me. We need to try to resolve this, so that it is not always going to be hanging over our heads. We can do it together."

Young Hugo looked nothing like his father. He was short, stocky and dark where his father was tall, pale and slender. But father and son shared a stubborn ability to stay focused - a trait that Hugo would demonstrate in the coming months.

Hugo also shared his father's keen intellect, but in him it was less apparent. He was a visionary, the kind of man who could persuade other people to follow him even when only he understood where they were going.

The father led by stern discipline and example; Hugo led with enthusiasm. When he talked about technical matters that often only he understood, Hugo flushed with pleasure. He would begin making scratchy diagrams of his ideas, leap to his feet, gesturing, explaining, exhorting. He believed in technology with evangelical passion.

During his father's first war against Escobar, Hugo had been a student at the National Police Academy in Bogota. He was 20 when the threats against his family started.

Their lives changed dramatically. No longer a typical, upper-middle-class family, they effectively became fugitives. They were not allowed to travel, and hardly a month went by without hearing that someone close to them had been killed or kidnapped. Friends they had known for years shunned them out of fear.

Hugo escaped some of this when he entered the police academy, where, aside from a few appropriate precautions, he lived as a normal cadet. He was training to become a police officer, to support the nation's laws and institutions, with a full appreciation of their fragility. He longed to help his father hunt down Escobar.

When he graduated, Second Lt. Hugo Martinez was sent to an investigative arm of the Colombian judiciary. He was placed with an electronic surveillance unit that had been given portable eavesdropping and direction-finding equipment by the CIA. The surveillance team had already purchased equipment from France and Germany that was designed to perform a similar function, but they had never been able to get the direction-finding part of it to work.

Hugo was assigned to work with the CIA kit, which looked like a prop from an early science-fiction movie. It was a gray metal box about a foot square, with cables snaking out the sides, and a spray of antennae on the top, one at each corner and six more in the center. It had a screen, no bigger than the

palm of his hand, that displayed the strength and direction of a signal.

The whole contraption fit inside a bulky suitcase, and was used in concert with the much bulkier French and German equipment, which was housed in three gray vans. The vans would park on the hills just outside Bogota and raise their antennae - to the uninitiated they looked like electric company repair vehicles. The three vans would go out on trial runs to triangulate a target signal, placing it within a prescribed area.

Hugo would then cruise through the streets with another officer in an unmarked car, monitoring the directional signal with the screen and headphones. In theory, Hugo's team would pinpoint the signal to the correct building, even the correct floor and apartment.

It never worked. After some wrangling the police bought upgrades that did improve the system slightly, but it fell considerably short of being able to pick one building or floor from another. Hugo and his unit could find the right two-block area, but picking the right house was beyond them.

Progress in direction-finding was further stymied because his team's simple eavesdropping capability was in demand. When President Cesar Gaviria learned that the National Police were able to park outside a building and listen in on conversations inside, Hugo's team was assigned to eavesdrop on guerrilla leaders in Bogota for peace negotiations.

The unit was able to supply government negotiators with inside information about the guerrillas' negotiating strategies, and alert them to new proposals before they were made. As a result, the team developed a reputation for surveillance wizardry that overstated the actual case.

They were not really getting better at radio direction-finding. For that purpose the equipment was still useless. But, Hugo said, they didn't let on. Each small victory brought them a better assignment.

In 1991 and 1992, they were used against guerrillas in the southern part of the country. It was only after these missions that Hugo's commander was able to convince police authorities that they really needed more work on their direction-finding skills. They were allowed to return to Bogota not long after Escobar's escape, where they resumed their tests on city streets.

As hard as they tried, Hugo knew that his little gray boxes were not yet working well enough to help him find a man like Pablo Escobar.

Lt. Hugo Martinez and his team of electronic surveillance experts started getting better with their funny little boxes. They combined the various components, American, French and German, and developed techniques through trial and error.

Even though they still could not trace a signal reliably, their eavesdropping capability alone was exciting. It deprived criminals of privacy. Martinez had listened to so many intercepted conversations by now that he felt he could sense when someone was about to begin discussing something illicit.

Snooping was addictive. The more he worked with the direction-finding kits, the more attuned he became to subtle nuances in the images they displayed and the sounds they emitted in his headphones. It was like learning a new language.

He was not yet thinking about using it against Pablo Escobar. He assumed Escobar was too difficult a target. The kind of criminals he was after were unsophisticated people who never suspected that someone might be listening to their phone or radio conversations.

Going up against Escobar with this equipment would be foolhardy, precisely because it could steer them so close to him without being able to pinpoint exactly where he was. The risk was that the equipment would bring members of his team just near enough for Escobar to have them kidnapped or killed.

Seizing the son of Col. Hugo Martinez, the commander of the Search Bloc that had been hounding him for so long, would be a major coup for Escobar. The elder Martinez repeatedly warned his son to be careful, and would pass along the personal threats he received.

In the first few months after Escobar's escape, Col. Martinez had banned all cell-phone use in Medellin and closed down all repeater stations for transmitting signals. People had to use standard phone lines - or point-to-point radio communications, which required a clear line of sight between transmitter and receiver.

The idea was to isolate Escobar. He was too smart to use normal phone lines, but if he tried to communicate through the uncluttered airwaves he would be much easier to find. The drug lord responded by using messengers.

It was only in the spring of 1993, as he grew increasingly concerned about the vigilantes of Los Pepes and getting his family out of Colombia, that Escobar resumed regular radio communication. He found places that provided a view of the top of the apartment building where his family was living under heavy guard, speaking most often to his son, Juan Pablo.

This was the weak link that the colonel wanted to probe. The special police technical team had just been transferred to Medellin. And joining them, despite Col. Martinez's forceful objections, was his son Hugo.

Hugo Martinez and his partners found apartments in the city. The CIA provided them with six new direction-finding kits, designed to be operated from three small Mercedes vans. Three teams were created, each assigned to a van.

Their arrival stirred hopes in the Search Bloc. A CIA direction-finding crew had been working in Medellin since the previous November, with poor results. Now the inflated reputation Hugo's unit had earned preceded it, and the new men said nothing to deflate it. They had also arrived in time to take advantage of important new information.

Medellin's chief prosecutor, Fernando Correa, who met frequently with Escobar's family, had noticed a few interesting things. The family was virtually imprisoned in Altos del Campestre, its apartment building in Medellin, and lived in terror of Los Pepes. Increasingly the family members' energies were spent looking for passage to some other country. They were despondent.

Pablo Escobar's wife, Maria Victoria, wrote in a letter to her husband that year:

I miss you so very much I feel weak. Sometimes I feel an immense loneliness takes over my heart. Why does life have to separate us like this? My heart is aching. How are you? How do you feel? I don't want to leave you my love. I need you so much, I want to cry with you . . . I don't want to pressure you. Nor do I want to make you commit mistakes, but if our leaving is not possible, I would feel more secure with you. We'll close ourselves in, suspend the mail, whatever we have to. This is getting too tense.

Juan Pablo, a hulking 15-year-old who stood 6 feet tall and weighed more than 200 pounds, acted as

the man of the house, at least in Correa's presence, and appeared to be making all the decisions for his family. He spent hours with binoculars observing the neighborhood from his perch, keeping a nervous eye out for those who appeared to be keeping an eye on them.

Once, he was watching when three men stepped out of a car and fired a rocket-propelled grenade at their apartment building. He carefully noted their appearance and the make and model of their car as the grenade slammed into the building, spewing smoke and debris but causing no casualties.

Juan Pablo also noted the license numbers of cars driven by those he suspected of working for Col. Martinez. He photographed men outside the building whom he found suspicious, and indignantly asked the prosecutors who visited the family to pursue and arrest those he described.

Unlike his mother, who was overcome by the situation, Juan Pablo seemed to relish it. He clearly enjoyed his dealings with Correa and other representatives from the Fiscalía, or Attorney General's Office, using their fear of his father to bully them. He received coded written messages from his father and wrote him cocky letters in return. In one undated letter written that fall, Juan Pablo updated his father:

Remembered Father,

I send you a big hug and warm wishes. . . . The prosecutor's office cannot raid the places of the guys in the pictures because unfortunately that is the way the law goes.

In the letter, Juan Pablo told his father where he thought Col. Martinez sometimes stayed overnight in Medellin, and wrote out two pages of descriptions of the men and cars he had seen outside the apartment building.

He concluded by suggesting that his father send a scare into a local TV station that had dared to air pictures of the family's apartment building: It would be good to tease the TV people so they won't make the building stand out so obviously, because when they came here they told me they were going to erase the tape and they didn't do it. Take care of yourself. I love and remember you. Your son.

On one official visit, Correa noted that Juan Pablo carried a beeper, and when it went off (at regular times during the day) he would abruptly leave the apartment. Correa presumed it was to speak on a phone or radio with his father. This was something he definitely intended to pass on to Col. Martinez and the Search Bloc.

On one of his many visits to the apartment building that housed Pablo Escobar's wife and family in Medellin, the Colombian prosecutor Fernando Correa had noticed several cellular phones. On another visit, he discovered a radio transceiver hidden behind the trap door on the ceiling of the building elevator.

This information was relayed to Col. Hugo Martinez at the Search Bloc headquarters outside Medellin. The colonel passed it on to his son Hugo, a member of a Colombian electronic surveillance unit recently dispatched to Medellin to assist in the hunt for Escobar.

Hugo asked his father to have Correa note the make and model number of the radio, and its frequency range. He also asked his father to get Correa to do what he could to encourage 15-year-old Juan Pablo Escobar to speak for longer periods with his father.

Provided with the frequency of Juan Pablo's radio, and with a rough idea of when father and son spoke, Hugo and his surveillance teams set about intercepting these calls.

At first they tried working with the CIA, which had its own eavesdropping team in Medellin. The Americans were not having much luck tracking Escobar, but Col. Martinez urged his son to work with them because he wanted to keep an eye on them. He didn't fully trust the American spy agency. The gringos jealously guarded their methods, and they would often fail to share everything they uncovered.

The younger Martinez had his own reasons for wanting to work with the American team. He thought he might learn from them, and he, too, wanted to find out everything the Americans were doing. "With me there, you know you will get everything," he told his father.

One of the first problems faced by the new unit was deciphering the coded lingo Juan Pablo and his father had constructed to confuse their pursuers. They used key words as a signal to switch frequencies, which they did quickly and often.

At first this tactic prevented the surveillance teams from getting even a general fix on Escobar's location, because every time father and son switched frequencies the signal would temporarily be lost. The direction-finding cars drove in randomly throughout the city, racing a few blocks in the direction of a signal and then pulling over to the curb when they lost it.

After a few days of this it became clear that the streets of Medellin, with so many walls, overhead wires, high-rises and other obstructions, were the worst kind of environment for direction-finding.

In the first few weeks, the Search Bloc followed the efforts of the younger Martinez and his teams with great interest. Once or twice they launched raids, breaking into the houses of startled Medelliners who had no connection to Pablo Escobar. Very quickly, enthusiasm for this new tool dried up. The new little vans and CIA equipment were just another disappointment.

Col. Martinez told them to keep at it, but in time everyone assumed the only reason the teams were still around was because Martinez's son was working with them. This was humiliating for the son, because he knew it was true. But it wasn't true in the way everyone suspected. Without a doubt, their rapid series of failures would have sent any other unit packing, their antennae and weird little boxes heaped with scorn.

But Hugo had his father's ear. They would sit together into the night, with Hugo selling his father on the amazing potential of the technology, how close they were to actually making it work. When it failed again and again he would explain to his father exactly why, his crew-cut head hunched between his shoulders as he sketched out his diagrams with arrows and filled the margins with math.

"It isn't something simple and straightforward," Hugo said. His father listened and asked questions, and, in time, was converted. The rest of the Search Bloc may have considered the technology a useless whim, a father's indulgence, but the colonel had become a believer.

It wasn't just that he loved his son and wanted him to succeed, although the colonel was smart and honest enough to know that was part of it. The equipment, he was convinced, had potential. If Hugo and his men could work out the bugs, this was the thing that would give him a decisive advantage over Escobar, the magic device that could pick him out of the city.

The best thing about it was that Escobar knew absolutely nothing about Hugo's team. By now he knew the American spooks could pinpoint him with some accuracy from the air. He had even taken to talking on his cell phone while in the backseat of a car, moving through city streets, just to throw them off. But he did not yet suspect that their technology might, at least in theory, enable a team like Hugo's to find him in his moving car and follow him home.

In time, the colonel became convinced that when they finally got Escobar, it would be with Hugo's equipment, while the fugitive was talking on the phone, unsuspecting. He believed this in part because of Hugo, but also because he needed to believe it. He needed to believe there would be a way out of this endless struggle. And it didn't hurt that the one showing the way was his son.

As the hunt wore on late into the summer of 1993, at least one member of the top brass at the Pentagon began to worry about how far the Americans in Colombia seemed willing to go to get Pablo Escobar.

As the operations chief at the Pentagon, Maj. Gen. Jack Sheehan was director of all special operations overseas. Sheehan already suspected that Delta and Centra Spike were overstepping the strict limits of their deployment order, which confined them to the Search Bloc headquarters outside Medellin. There, they were restricted to training, intelligence-gathering and analysis.

Sheehan was not a big fan of special operators. He regarded the men in charge - Gens. Wayne Downing and William Garrison in the United States and Ambassador Morris Busby in Bogota - as exceptionally aggressive. He called such men "forward leaners," by which he meant that they sometimes tended to stray beyond the strict parameters of their missions. Sheehan had heard tales of Delta operators going out on raids with the Search Bloc, and he worried about a possible U.S. relationship, direct or indirect, with the vigilantes of Los Pepes.

Sheehan's chief concern was that information gathered and analyzed by Centra Spike and Delta might be used to guide assassination squads to their targets - Escobar's lawyers, bankers, associates and hired killers. If that were the case, such assistance could fall into the category of supplying "lethal information," something allowed only with authorization from the president and notification of Congress.

The Clinton administration was growing more cautious about clandestine U.S. military operations overseas, and by autumn that year seemed inclined to pull everything back. According to administration officials, President Clinton felt he had been blindsided when Gen. Garrison and his Delta special operators found themselves in a pitched firefight in Somalia, where 18 American soldiers were killed in October 1993.

The deployment order for sending the special operations units to Colombia in 1992 had been very clear. They were there only to provide training. If they were going out on missions for any purpose other than training, they were exceeding their authority.

In fact, Delta operators had been secretly going out on Search Bloc raids for months, assisting as forward observers and helping the Colombians use global positioning devices. Sheehan knew that if just one Delta soldier were wounded or killed during a Search Bloc raid, it would raise an unholy stink in Congress, which by law must be consulted before placing American troops in harm's way. The larger concern for him was civilian control of the military - a principle both he and his boss, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell, took very seriously.

The American involvement in Colombia had created a string of issues inside the Pentagon. When it was decided that Search Bloc helicopter pilots needed training flying at night with night-vision goggles, American pilots were sent to Medellin. The pace of the hunt was demanding, so any training would have to be given on-the-job. This provoked a fight over whether sending pilots along to conduct training violated the prohibition against sending American soldiers on raids.

The pilots got permission to go.

This opened the door slightly for Gen. Garrison. He sought to send Centra Spike's skilled operators, with their portable direction-finding equipment, out with an American pilot on the Search Bloc helicopters.

Steering a raid to a specific spot required smooth coordination between the technician and the pilot, something the Americans had perfected. Here Garrison saw an opportunity to get official permission to send Delta operators out on raids. He argued that with an American pilot and technician accompanying the Search Bloc, then Delta needed to go along, too, to provide protection.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the request in the summer of 1993, but the Defense Department would not concur without approval from the White House. Defense officials were waiting at the White House for a meeting with Clinton's staff when a colonel on the Joint Chiefs' staff called to say they had decided to withdraw the request.

There were those working for the Joint Chiefs who, like Gen. Sheehan, weren't especially keen on sending Delta out on raids in Colombia, so they weren't about to take such a fight to the President. And as the mission evolved, Sheehan began to object more strongly.

In the late summer of 1993, Sheehan took his concerns to Powell. The chairman, who would be leaving the job in late September, asked him to look into it further. Sheehan also discussed his concerns with Brian Sheridan, the principal deputy secretary of defense for special operations. Sheridan began asking pointed questions about possible connections between the American effort in Colombia and Los Pepes.

In November, two CIA analysts met with Sheehan and other top brass at the Pentagon to report that Los Pepes were, in fact, Col. Hugo Martinez's Search Bloc. The analysts claimed that the vigilantes had been paid for and trained and, in part, led by Delta Force, and were receiving intelligence from the CIA and Centra Spike. "These guys have gone renegade, and we're behind it," one analyst told Sheehan.

Others at the meeting sharply contradicted the report.

"Bull----," one of them said, explaining that Ambassador Busby had been monitoring the situation and was convinced the Search Bloc was not involved with Los Pepes.

Gen. Sheehan believed the CIA report. He said he was taking the matter to the new Joint Chiefs chairman, Gen. John Shalikashvili, and would ask that all American special forces engaged in the hunt for Escobar be pulled out of Colombia. Sheridan backed Sheehan. He expressed concern that revelations, or even suspicions, of an American military link to Colombian death squads would harm Clinton.

It was late on a Friday afternoon in mid-November, and the only hope supporters of the mission against Escobar had of stalling the immediate withdrawal of American forces was to find someone on the Defense Department staff to oppose Gen. Sheehan. Before the night was over, a position paper had been produced that rebutted the CIA analysts' claims. That effectively countered Sheehan and Sheridan by forcing the question to a higher level at the Department of Defense.

Busby and his staff in Bogota had weighed in on the position paper, denying the CIA analysts' findings, which was enough for the Defense Department to decide to delay pulling out Delta and Centra Spike until further information was gathered.

As it happened, that mid-November delay was all that was needed. At the very moment the issue was

heating up inside the Beltway, matters were finally coming to a head inside Colombia.

The special Colombian police squad sent to Medellin with its curious little portable direction-finding kits was having no luck finding Pablo Escobar. The Search Bloc was continuing to provide security for the men, but the unit itself was considered a joke. Things got so bad that Col. Hugo Martinez, the Search Bloc commander, finally sent the unit's leaders back to Bogota.

The new commander, a lieutenant put in charge by Col. Martinez himself, was the colonel's son, also named Hugo. Because of the unit's failures, and young Hugo's role in them, he was regarded with amused contempt by the men who worked for his father.

Determined to redeem themselves, Hugo and the other men began working round-the-clock shifts with the CIA's electronic-surveillance experts, monitoring the known frequencies on the radio used by Juan Pablo, the son of Pablo Escobar. Juan Pablo, holed up in an apartment building in Medellin with his mother and sister, used code words to communicate by radio with his fugitive father.

Hugo's unit had been presented with an opportunity in August 1993, when Centra Spike was ordered out of Colombia temporarily to assist with the U.S. military operation in Somalia. With Centra Spike gone, the Colombians placed an antenna on a hilltop just outside the city that helped the mobile units fix on the signal from Juan Pablo's radio.

This round-the-clock surveillance quickly showed that Escobar restricted his radio communications to one hour each evening, roughly between 7:15 and 8:15. So each day at that time, Hugo's unit began trying to zero in on the signal the minute Escobar started talking. Hugo assigned one scanner to monitor the frequencies most often used, and another to scan the entire 120-140 MHz range that could be used by Juan Pablo's radio.

Eventually, through patient trial and error, they were able to break the code employed by father and son. If Pablo said, "Let's go up to the next floor," or "the evening has ended," it was a signal to shift to a specific frequency. Once the police units knew the code, they were able to follow the signal as it shifted. It was clear to Hugo that the Escobars believed their precautions made it impossible for their conversations to be tracked for more than a few moments at a time.

Still, in early October 1993, the Colombians experienced more setbacks.

Working with the CIA officials, Hugo's team tracked Escobar's location to San Jose Seminary in Medellin. The drug boss had a long-standing relationship with the Catholic Church in Medellin, and Juan Pablo had attended San Jose's elementary school. It was considered a promising target, and so Col. Martinez began planning a major raid.

The next day, Pablo Escobar's voice came up on the radio at the appointed time. The signal on the screen and in his headphones told Hugo that Escobar was speaking on the radio inside the main building in the seminary complex.

The raid was launched as Hugo listened to Escobar talking. Doors were blown off, flash-bang grenades exploded, police assault forces loudly descended . . . and the fugitive kept talking, as though nothing were happening. When the leaders of the assault teams told Hugo they hadn't found anything at the seminary, Escobar was still talking calmly on the radio.

"He's in there!" Hugo insisted, trusting his equipment and his ability to read the signals.

"He's not in there," the major in charge of the raid said. "We're in there. We've done our search."

Escobar was still talking. There was no background noise, and he still seemed unperturbed. Hugo had to conclude that the raid had not even come close.

The assault teams were more convinced than ever that they were wasting their time. With deepening scorn for the colonel's son, the CIA and their worthless gizmos, the teams continued searching on the chance that Escobar had a secure hiding place somewhere on the grounds. Five hundred men proceeded over the next three days to take apart the seminary and an attached school. They poked holes in walls and ceilings, probed the buildings, looked for secret rooms and tunnels. They found nothing, and left behind furious officials from the archdiocese.

It was not possible to fail more spectacularly. Hugo was a laughingstock at the Search Bloc base. He was demoralized. He gave up his command over the surveillance teams, turning the main effort back over to the CIA officials.

Hugo did, however, prevail on his father to let him keep his small Mercedes van and two men to work on the equipment alone. Working with the little direction-finding kits had always been his favorite part of the job anyway.

Now there were competing groups trying to track Escobar: Hugo's vehicle and the ones coordinated by the CIA. Over the next few weeks they picked up Escobar's signal several times, and even though the force had no faith in the equipment, it was ordered to conduct raids.

Col. Martinez protested that they needed to marshal their intelligence and men, wait until the fix was certain and the opportunity was right. But his superiors in Bogota had grown suspicious and impatient. Even the U.S. Embassy wanted more raids.

The most spectacular of these came Oct. 11, after radio telemetry placed Escobar in a finca, or estate, on a high hill near the village of Aguas Frias. Located in a well-to-do suburban area just outside Medellin, the finca had a clear line of sight to the high-rise apartment building where Escobar's family was staying.

After the raid on the seminary, Escobar's voice had disappeared from the radio waves. The Search Bloc feared the raid might have frightened him. But after days of silence he finally made a call, coming on at one of the regular times with his son.

It was this call that the Search Bloc picked up and placed at the hilltop finca in Aguas Frias. In the tone of his voice and the thrust of his conversation, Escobar gave no indication that anything untoward had happened.

By the autumn of 1993, Pablo Escobar was in bad shape. His lifelong, fabulously wealthy organization had been dismantled and terrorized by the vigilantes of Los Pepes.

In a single two-week period, five members of his extended family had been killed, presumably by Los Pepes, and several of his remaining key business associates had been kidnapped and murdered. Others were in prison, on the run or in hiding.

In an effort to raise money for his war against the state and to continue his flight, Escobar's associates were selling off his assets around the world. A DEA cable dated Oct. 21 noted that an Escobar family physician was traveling and selling off the family's properties: a 70,000-acre timber farm in Panama, estates in the Dominican Republic, and two 20-acre lots in South Florida. Efforts were also under way to

sell his art collection, jewelry and precious stones, including a collection of uncut emeralds valued at more than \$200,000.

Escobar's primary link with the rest of the world was now his loyal teenage son. Just as Col. Hugo Martinez now hunted Escobar with his son at his side, the drug boss and his son conspired daily to evade them. They were now talking by radio four times daily. So long as the Search Bloc knew where Juan Pablo was, and could monitor his communications, the colonel felt he would never completely lose track of Escobar.

For two days running, the electronic surveillance teams traced Escobar's radio to the top of a hill in the Medellin suburb of Aguas Frias in October 1993. It was a spectacular locale, a heavily wooded small mountain in the vast range of the Occidental Cordillera. There was only one road up the mountain to the finca, a collection of small cottages around a main house.

The colonel ordered a surveillance team to load a radio telemetry kit on a helicopter and fly over the area. As it happened, they were passing overhead at the moment Escobar made another call. The kit indicated that the radio call had been initiated directly below. Alarmed, the Search Bloc major in charge immediately ordered the helicopter back to the main Search Bloc base, fearing that it had alerted Escobar to their presence.

When they returned, the major told Col. Martinez that Escobar was making calls from the hillside, but there was a good chance he had been spooked by the helicopter. The colonel decided to launch a raid on the finca if Escobar made another call that afternoon.

Martinez could sense that the ring was closing around Escobar. For weeks, he had felt they were getting close to finally finishing the job. When Joe Vega, a Delta sergeant, left Medellin that fall, the colonel had warned him not to go.

"You will miss it," Martinez said. "We are going to find him soon."

He daily consulted special stones and other ritual objects, and in them he saw omens of a resolution. It was a gut feeling, well informed by the knowledge that Escobar could not hold out much longer. His ability to run was now limited, and their ability to find him was improving every day.

Now, on this day, Oct. 11, Martinez believed that the whole effort was coming together. The electronic surveillance had tracked Escobar to a likely hideout and had monitored his presence there. All of the direction-finding equipment now agreed: Escobar was staying at that finca on top of the hill. This was the day they would get him.

The usual time for his call was 4 o'clock, so with choppers circling near the hilltop, and with forces poised to move quickly up the hill, the colonel and his top officers gathered in his operations center around a radio receiver, waiting for Escobar's voice to crackle on the air. There was no call at 4. The men waited. Five minutes later there still was no call.

It was beginning to appear that Escobar had slipped the noose again. But at seven minutes after the hour, his voice came up. The raid commenced.

Escobar wasn't there.

The colonel then cordoned off the mountain for four days, establishing an outer perimeter, an inner perimeter, roadblocks and search teams. Search Bloc helicopters dropped tear gas and raked the forests

around the finca with machine-gun fire. More than 700 police and soldiers searched the area with dogs, but they did not find Escobar.

He had managed another miraculous escape. The assault teams had hit the finca, assuming that Escobar would be calling from inside. It turned out - they learned this listening to Escobar's phone calls in coming days - that in order to improve the signal, every time he called his son he would hike into the woods farther up the hill. So he'd had a ringside seat as the helicopters descended. He'd hidden in the woods and then fled down in darkness. He later sent his wife a battery from the flashlight he used to light his way, telling her to keep it, "because it saved my life."

Despite its failure, the raid gave a boost to the electronic surveillance teams, because there was ample evidence that Escobar had indeed been staying at the finca. In the primary house, the base for a portable radio phone was found, turned on, the handset missing. The radio was preset to the frequency Escobar had been using for the last four weeks in his talks with Juan Pablo.

The house was run-down except for a newly installed bathroom, which always suggested the drug boss' presence. The assault teams found two women at the house, Monica Victoria Correa-Alzate and Ana Ligui Rueda, who said Escobar had been staying there for several days.

They explained, quaintly, that Escobar had been "dating" Correa, who was 18. Rueda had been working as his cook. Both women confirmed that Escobar had been nearby when the helicopters came down, and they gave the Search Bloc a description. He had been wearing a red flannel shirt, black pants and tennis shoes. His hair, they said, was clipped short but he wore a long black beard with no mustache.

In the house the police found eight marijuana joints, a large quantity of aspirin ("suggesting a great deal of stress," a DEA cable describing the raid speculated), a wig, a videocassette of the Medellin apartment building housing his wife and children, several music cassettes, two automatic rifles (an AK47 and a CAR15), just over \$7,000 in cash, and photos of the fugitive's two children, Juan Pablo and Manuela.

They also found false ID documents and a list of license-plate numbers, evidently compiled by Juan Pablo, of vehicles driven by officers assigned to the Search Bloc.

The documents confirmed that Escobar's organization was in poor shape, and that he was very worried about his family. One letter said Maria Victoria, Escobar's wife, needed money to continue supporting the Colombian fiscal general's forces and bodyguards hired to protect her and the children. She complained that it was very expensive to feed 60 people and that she had to purchase beds for them. The letter blamed Col. Martinez for a recent grenade attack on the family's apartment building, which had been publicly attributed to Los Pepes.

Found with Maria Victoria's letter were unsent letters Escobar was preparing for former associates in Medellin, demanding money and threatening, "We know where your families are."

In a cable to DEA headquarters, American agent Steve Murphy stressed the positive results of the raid:

"Intelligence obtained at the search site and recent Title III intercepts indicate that Escobar no longer enjoys the financial freedom he once had. While he may continue to be a Colombian land baron, Escobar and his organization are extremely short of cash."

On the night of Nov. 26, 1993, the U.S. Embassy in Bogota learned that Pablo Escobar's wife and children were planning once more to flee Colombia.

They hoped to fly to London or Frankfurt, Germany . The family was growing increasingly desperate. They had been under round-the-clock protection by agents from the fiscal general, Colombia's top federal prosecutor, ever since a failed effort to fly Escobar's son, Juan Pablo, and daughter, Manuela, to the United States in March.

In the intervening months, Los Pepes had killed members of their extended family and burned most of the family's properties. The vigilante group seemed to be toying with the Escobars, picking off cousins, in-laws and friends, including some who had been living in the neighborhood where Escobar's immediate family was staying.

In early November, a rocket-propelled grenade had been fired at the Escobar building and another grenade had exploded outside the front doors. These were mere warning shots, but to the family it seemed that the threat was closing in.

The fiscal general, Gustavo de Greiff, was holding Escobar's family in place, officially protecting them from vigilantes but also positioning them like bait in a trap. The pressure increased when, in late October, de Greiff threatened to withdraw his protection.

Increasingly at odds with the administration of President Cesar Gaviria, de Greiff was still trying to engineer Escobar's surrender before he could be found by Col. Hugo Martinez's Search Bloc. The Americans, along with Gaviria and the Search Bloc commanders, feared that a surrender would enable Escobar to once again run his drug cartel with impunity from a comfortable "prison."

De Greiff was not above playing hardball with Escobar, who had just engineered the kidnapping of two teenage boys from wealthy families in Medellin and extorted \$5 million in ransom.

De Greiff informed Juan Pablo that unless his father turned himself in by Nov. 26, the large detail of bodyguards that had been protecting the family would be withdrawn. Escobar's wife Maria Victoria, and his son and daughter, would "only be entitled to the same security as any other Colombian citizen," de Greiff informed the family.

Maria Victoria was terrified. In a letter to de Greiff, she asked him to visit her, and pleaded with him to give her husband more time to surrender so that he could consult with his attorneys. She wrote that the family was "anguished." She argued that they were not responsible for her husband's refusal to surrender, and should not be punished for it. She reminded de Greiff that she and her children were not criminals, and that they too were trying to persuade Escobar to surrender.

The same day, de Greiff received a note from Juan Pablo, which began, "Worry, desperation, anguish and anger are what we feel in these confusing moments." The young man urged de Greiff to investigate the kidnappings and killings of several close family associates, whom he said were victims of the Search Bloc and Los Pepes.

He wrote that on Nov. 5, his longtime childhood friend, Juan Carlos Herrera-Puerta, who was living with the Escobars, was kidnapped. On Nov. 8, the administrator of their apartment building, Alicia Vasquez, a close friend, was kidnapped and killed. On the same date, the family's maid, Nubia Jimenez, was kidnapped and killed.

On Nov. 10, Juan Pablo wrote, masked men kidnapped Alba Lia Londono, the children's personal tutor. On Nov. 15, according to Juan Pablo, the police attempted to kidnap a family chauffeur, Jorge Ivan Otalvaro-Marin. Ten armed men jumped him, but Otalvaro exchanged fire with them and escaped. Juan Pablo said de Greiff should prosecute these crimes as vigorously as the state was pursuing his

father.

Juan Pablo defended his father's honor vigorously, negotiating with government representatives as though Escobar were a head of state. By early November, the son (speaking several times a day with his father) was hammering out a secret deal with de Greiff's office for the long-awaited surrender. De Greiff did not share the plan with President Gaviria or the U.S. Embassy.

De Greiff agreed to several of Escobar's demands: To transfer Escobar's brother Roberto from isolation to a part of Itagui Prison where other Medellin cartel members were housed. And to place Escobar in the same section upon his surrender, and to allow him 21 family visits each year.

The deal was contingent on getting Escobar's family out of Colombia. The fugitive was insisting that he would not turn himself in until Maria Victoria and the children were flown to a safe haven. De Greiff promised to help the family flee, but only after Escobar's surrender.

In early November, Juan Pablo assured de Greiff that his father would surrender on or before the Nov. 26 deadline, either at the fiscal general's office in Medellin or the family's apartment building, and that he would likely demand that representatives of the National Police and the Colombian army be present. De Greiff eventually acquiesced, and began laying plans to get Escobar's family out of the country.

Word of these surrender negotiations leaked in early November, alarming the U.S. Embassy. In a Nov. 7 cable, DEA agent Steve Murphy wrote:

"Obviously, if the above is true, and the BCO has no doubts about its accuracy, then the GOC and particularly the Fiscal's office has not been straightforward with the BCO or other American embassy personnel. Should Escobar agree to the one remaining condition regarding his family's departure from Colombia, his immediate surrender may be imminent."

Surrender, of course, was what the Americans, the National Police and Escobar's other enemies hoped to prevent. Mindful of the extent to which Escobar had corrupted and intimidated the Colombian judiciary, agents had warned in an earlier cable that if he managed to surrender before he was found by the Search Bloc, it would begin "a new farce."

American officials at the embassy believed the Search Bloc was closing in. With Escobar's wife and children baiting the trap, and Los Pepes continuing to kill off his associates, he was isolated and desperate. If he managed to get the family to safety, there was no telling what would happen. He might surrender - or launch a new campaign of bombings, kidnappings and assassinations.

Everyone involved in the manhunt knew that the best leverage for catching Escobar was his concern for his family. It wasn't an impeccably ethical strategy, but it was working. Ever since Los Pepes had begun killing those close to Escobar in retaliation for his assassins' attacks, Escobar's bombings had dropped off almost to nothing.

When Ambassador Morris Busby learned of the family's pending flight, he went to work. He was assured by Colombia's defense minister that the government was opposed to letting the Escobars go, but there was no legal reason to prevent them from leaving Colombia.

So the government concentrated on slamming doors of entry to all the family's known destinations. Maria Victoria had purchased tickets to London and Frankfurt. Because the London flight stopped over in Madrid, the defense minister contacted the Spanish, British and German ambassadors there, formally asking that they refuse entry and return the family directly to Colombia if possible.

So long as his wife and children were in Colombia, Escobar would keep worrying about them, and keep calling them. With the Search Bloc's improving targeting methods, every time Escobar made contact with his son or wife it gave Col. Martinez and his men another chance at him.

By November of 1993, Gustavo de Greiff was becoming a problem.

He was the Fiscal General, Colombia's top federal prosecutor, and he was now working in open defiance of President Cesar Gaviria on the matter of Pablo Escobar. De Greiff had told Gaviria that he disagreed with effectively holding the Escobar family hostage. As an elected official - an "independent entity," he called himself - he had decided to help the family leave Colombia in order to complete his deal for the fugitive's surrender.

When word spread that the family was looking for a haven in Canada, Colombian Defense Minister Raphael Pardo contacted the Canadian ambassador, only to learn that de Greiff already had called to request that the Canadian government allow the family to enter. The Colombian government was now split on the matter, so U.S. Ambassador Morris Busby threw his support behind Gaviria, contacting the various governments himself and winning assurances that the Escobars would be turned away.

During these negotiations, de Greiff suddenly informed the U.S. Embassy that Escobar had escaped to Haiti. He said his office had learned from a reliable informant that the drug boss had landed safely in Haiti on Nov. 25. According to the source, Escobar was now under the protection of a Haitian death squad called "Night Services," which was unofficially attached to the Haitian police.

The hunt for Escobar appeared to be coming apart. The embassy traced de Greiff's sources to Miami - an imprisoned cocaine dealer connected with the Cali cartel named Luis "Lucho" Sanataacruz and two men with the nicknames "Navigante" and "Hector." DEA agents were dispatched to debrief the men personally. The Haitian death squad leader supposedly protecting Escobar was a man named Joel Deeb.

"We are analyzing the developing situation for clues to the potential motivation of someone like Joel Deeb in providing Pablo Escobar with sanctuary," read a secret State Department cable written that weekend.

While the embassy tried to verify Escobar's presence in Haiti, the cable concluded, the Search Bloc was continuing to operate in Medellin under the assumption that Escobar remained in the area.

In light of what happened over the next two days, the Haiti tip appears to have been an effort to distract the authorities and create enough confusion to help slip the Escobar family out of Colombia. The day after "Hector" "confirmed" to de Greiff that Escobar was in Haiti, Centra Spike picked up Escobar using a phone in Medellin. If Escobar had been planning to lie low in order for the Haiti ploy to work, events soon conspired to flush him back out on the airwaves.

DEA Special Agent Kenny Magee was friendly with the security chief for American Airlines at the El Dorado Airport in Bogota, so he was selected to follow the Escobar family as they left the country. A blue-eyed former Michigan cop who had come to Bogota four years earlier, Magee had flunked Spanish in his senior year of high school. (He told his teacher, "I'm never going to need Spanish." She said, "You never know.")

Magee showed up at the airport on Saturday, Nov. 27, with two plainclothes Colombian National Police colonels, and with DEA agents Steve Murphy and Javier Pena. Magee had purchased tickets on two early evening flights booked by the Escobars, one to London and the other to Frankfurt. The planes

were leaving within 10 minutes of each other, so Magee and the two Colombians pocketed their boarding passes and waited for the family to show up.

It wasn't hard spotting them. The family's plans had evidently been leaked to more than just the National Police and the U.S. Embassy. The departure of their plane from Medellin had been captured by TV camera crews there, and three dozen reporters were waiting for them inside the terminal in Bogota.

The small plane stayed out on the tarmac, and all of its passengers except the Escobars were let off. Bodyguards carried the Escobars' luggage to a waiting Avianca Airlines bus, followed by more than 20 heavily armed men escorting Escobar's wife Maria Victoria, daughter Manuela, son Juan Pablo and Juan Pablo's plump 21-year-old Mexican girlfriend, Doria Ochoa. The family members held jackets over their heads to avoid being photographed. They boarded the bus and were driven to a remote entrance where they could wait out in private the six hours until their overseas flight.

Five minutes before the Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt was scheduled to depart, the family emerged surrounded by bodyguards and were hustled through the main terminal. All but Juan Pablo held jackets over their heads. The teenager shouted threats at the mob of reporters pushing around them, then disappeared down the jetway.

Magee and the Colombian policemen followed, taking seats in business class. It was the first time Magee had seen the family. Maria Victoria was a short woman with glasses, conservatively and stylishly dressed. The tiny Manuela, 9, clung to her mother. Juan Pablo stood 6 feet tall at age 16, a round-shouldered, portly boy. He and his girlfriend sat apart from his mother and sister.

Magee carried a shoulder bag with a camera built into the bottom. He began snapping pictures of the family surreptitiously. An enterprising journalist had a seat next to Juan Pablo, trying to interview the youth with what appeared to be little success.

When the plane landed in Caracas, there was so much security out on the runway that it looked to Magee like a head of state was arriving. It was the same in Frankfurt, hours later.

Unknown to the family, just an hour after their flight had left Bogota, a spokesman for the German Interior Minister had released a statement announcing that the Escobars would not be allowed to enter Germany. Soon afterwards, an angry Pablo Escobar was on the phone, blowing his Haiti cover story. He called the Presidential Palace in Bogota.

"This is Pablo Escobar. I need to talk to the president," he told the operator at the palace.

"OK, hold on, let me locate him," the operator said, and immediately patched the call to the National Police. After a delay, a police officer posing as a palace operator came on the line and said, "We can't get in touch with the president right now. Please call back at another time."

The police officer had sized it up as a joke, and hung up. The phone rang again.

"This is Pablo Escobar. It is necessary that I talk to the president. My family is flying to Germany at this time. I need to talk to him right now."

"We get a lot of crank calls here," the officer said. "We need to somehow verify that it is really you. It's going to take me a few minutes to track down the president, so please wait a few more minutes and then call back."

With that, the officer informed his superiors that Pablo Escobar was making calls to the palace. President Gaviria was notified; he refused to speak with Escobar. When the fugitive called back a third time, the Search Bloc was waiting, and the call surfaced on its electronic web.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Escobar, we have been unable to locate the president."

Escobar went berserk. He swore at the officer on the phone. He threatened to detonate a bus filled with dynamite in front of the palace and set off bombs all over Bogota. He said he would bomb the German Embassy and begin killing Germans if his family was not allowed to enter that country. Minutes later he made similar threats on the phone to the German Embassy and the Lufthansa office in Bogota.

No one had been able to get a precise fix on his location, but he was without a doubt still in Medellin.

When the Lufthansa plane carrying the family of Pablo Escobar finally landed in Frankfurt, Germany, on a Sunday afternoon in November 1993, it was forced to taxi to a remote spot on an alternate runway, out of the view of press waiting in the terminal.

Colombian President Cesar Gaviria had been on the phone to officials in Spain and Germany, urging them to refuse the Escobars. He explained that if the family was safely removed from Colombia, there would be another vicious bombing campaign by Pablo Escobar.

It was not the kind of request from a head of state that other nations were likely to ignore. There was nothing to be gained by Spain, Germany or any other country in allowing entry to the family of such a notorious outlaw.

German Interior Ministry officials drove out to the plane to process the other passengers' passports and immigration documents, including those of DEA Special Agent Kenny Magee and the Colombian police colonel flying with him. A bus took them to the terminal.

The Escobars were taken by another bus to an office in the international section. Maria Victoria, Escobar's wife, who was carrying \$80,000 and large amounts of gold and jewelry, asked for a lawyer and was provided one. The family immediately petitioned for political asylum, then waited through another long night for a ruling.

Magee was met in the main terminal by two DEA colleagues based in Germany and they, too, waited through the night. Early the next morning, the Escobars' petition was denied. The family was escorted by heavily armed German police back out to a Bogota-bound plane that had been kept waiting for two hours.

Also escorted to the plane were three men believed to be personal family bodyguards, whom the German authorities described as "thugs." Magee boarded the plane with four German immigration officers assigned to escort the family back to Colombia. He sat two rows in front of the family and across the aisle.

At some point during this long flight home, the DEA agent sat down with the German immigration officers in the smoking section of the plane. They had seized the Escobars' passports and had agreed to allow Magee to photograph them. He took the passports into one of the plane's lavatories, laid them out on the narrow counter and snapped a photo of each. As he pulled the door open, sticking the passports in his back pocket, he was startled to encounter Escobar's son, Juan Pablo, standing in the doorway. The teenager was just waiting to use the toilet.

Juan Pablo and the rest of the family looked exhausted. They had been on planes or in airports since Saturday afternoon, and all they had managed was to fly in one enormous circle. When the Lufthansa flight landed again at El Dorado airport in Bogota, the weary Escobars were escorted off the plane and turned over once again to Colombian authorities.

Magee inspected the seats where the family had been sitting. He found several large empty envelopes with large dollar amounts written on them, two credit cards, and a discarded note that read in English: "We have a friend in Frankfurt. He says he will be looking for us so he can help us. . . . Tell him to call Gustavo de Greiff" - Colombia's top federal prosecutor. Magee assumed it was a note they had hoped to pass to someone at the airport in Frankfurt, but they had never reached the terminal.

After the family was taken into custody at the airport, Colombia's defense minister ordered de Greiff to drop his office's official protection of them. The Escobars were escorted by the National Police to the Tequendama Hotel in Bogota, a large modern complex that included retail shops and an apartment tower. Guests of the hotel and residents of the apartment tower began fleeing when word spread that Escobar's family was staying there, much to the dismay of the hotel's management and nearby shop owners.

Exhausted and frightened, Maria Victoria told government officials that she did not wish to return to Medellin, and pleaded to be sent anywhere in the world outside Colombia. She said she was tired of living with her husband's problems, and just wanted to live in peace with her children.

Escobar phoned the hotel not long after the family arrived, conveying a brief message to Juan Pablo.

"Stay put there," he said. "Put pressure on the authorities to leave for another country, call Human Rights, the United Nations."

As if to tighten the screws on Escobar, Los Pepes chose this day of his family's return to Colombia to issue another public pronouncement. In a communique to the press, the vigilantes said they could no longer respect the government's wish that they desist and were going to resume actions against Escobar.

Escobar responded bitterly. On Nov. 30, he wrote a letter to the men he suspected of leading the vigilante group. Among those he listed were Col. Hugo Martinez, commander of the police Search Bloc hunting Escobar; the "DIJIN Members in Antioquia" (the Search Bloc); Miguel and Gilberto Rodriguez Orejuela, purported leaders of the rival Cali drug cartel; and Fidel and Carlos Castano, the paramilitary leaders who secretly had been cooperating with the Search Bloc.

He sealed the letter with his thumbprint, and forwarded it to his few remaining front men for public release:

Mister Pepes:

The communique you produced today is full of lies, deceit and falsities, like all the previous ones. You promise to reappear but the truth is that you have always been active because just a few days ago you perpetrated kidnappings, murders and dynamite bombings. . . .

You say in your lying communique that you have never attacked my family and I ask you: Why did you bomb the building where my mother lived? Why did you kidnap my nephew Nicolas? Why did you torture and strangle my brother in law Carlos Henao? Why did you try to kidnap my sister Gloria? You have always characterized yourselves by being hypocrites and liars . . .

The prosecutor's office has a lot of evidence against you. . . . The government knows that [the Search Bloc] is the Pepes' military branch, the same one that massacres innocent young men at street corners.

I have been raided 10,000 times. You haven't been at all. Everything is confiscated from me. Nothing is taken away from you. The government will never offer a warrant for you. The government will never apply faceless justice to criminal and terrorist policemen.

What credibility can Colonel Martinez have . . . if he himself planted a revolver and dynamite in my lawyer's car so he would appear to be a terrorist? The same colonel who tortured and murdered lawyers is now promoted to brigadier. What can be expected of people like you, who don't even show respect for honor and truth?

Regards Pepes.

Pablo Escobar

Copy to national and foreign media, the President, Minister of Defense, Prosecutor . . .

The Colombian police finally had members of Escobar's family exactly where they wanted them. Now that they were out from under the official protection of Fiscal General de Greiff, Escobar's wife and children were in the hands of Los Pepes as far as the fugitive was concerned. The police knew Escobar would be frantic.

Police at the hotel reported hearing Escobar's little girl, Manuela, singing a Christmas carol to herself as she wandered the empty complex. She had substituted the traditional chorus with one of her own that went, in part, "Los Pepes want to kill my father, my family, and me."

After Hugo Martinez's success in tracking down a Medellin drug dealer with his police unit's high-tech gear, his father gave him a few days off to visit his wife and children in Bogota. But on Hugo's first night back, in late November 1993, Pablo Escobar started issuing phone threats, which were traced to a neighborhood in Medellin.

It was bad luck and good luck. Hugo was disappointed at having to cut short his vacation - he flew back to Medellin early the next morning - but he was also excited. He had full confidence again in his unit's special direction-finding equipment, and he knew that with the Escobar family being held at the Tequendama Hotel in Bogota, Pablo would be worried and on the phone often.

The hotel was owned by the Colombian armed forces. While Escobar's wife, Maria Victoria, and their children had been under the protection of Colombia's top federal prosecutor, it had been unlikely that the Search Bloc or Los Pepes (which Escobar considered one and the same) would harm them. It was the fear that the prosecutor was going to drop his protection that had prompted the family's futile flight to Frankfurt, Germany, earlier in November.

Now Escobar's wife and children were in the hands of the police, which meant their safety depended on nothing more than the goodwill of the men who were hunting him down.

Col. Hugo Martinez, commander of the Search Bloc and father to Hugo, took steps of his own to make the most of this moment. Unsure of his own colleagues in Bogota, the colonel had someone he trusted assigned to the hotel complex switchboard - an officer who had been a friend of Hugo's in the intelligence branch and had lived for a time at the Tequendama.

They devised a system to tip off Hugo immediately each time Escobar phoned. All calls to the hotel came through the switchboard, so if a call sounded like Escobar, they would delay making the connection to the family's apartment upstairs until Hugo had been alerted. That way, his unit's monitors in the air and on the ground could start tracing the call before the conversation even started.

Escobar gave them plenty of chances. Over the next four days, he would call six times. Even though the first few conversations were very short - Escobar checking to see how the family was holding up and urging his son to continue doing everything possible to get out of Colombia - Centra Spike was able to get a precise fix on his location. It was a middle-class neighborhood in Medellin called Los Olivos, a sector that included blocks of two-story rowhouses and some office buildings.

For his part, Escobar tried to confuse his pursuers, who he knew were listening, by speaking from the backseat of a moving taxi, using a high-powered radio phone that was linked to a larger transmitter that his men constantly moved from place to place. Escobar himself had moved into a rowhouse on street 79-A, house number 45D-94, in the third week of November 1993, more than a month after he had narrowly escaped a Search Bloc raid of his hideout in Aguas Frias, a Medellin suburb.

He was constantly moving, buying houses throughout the city and surrounding area he knew so well, for Medellin was his hometown. He carried dozens of newspaper ads for real estate with his notebooks, and was always buying and selling hideouts. That way, he was always home, even though he had no home.

He moved with his collection of wireless phones. It didn't trouble him to know that the authorities listened whenever he spoke on the phone. It had been that way for years. He used the knowledge to feed disinformation, to keep his pursuers running in every direction but the right one. The game wasn't to avoid being overheard, which was impossible, but to avoid being targeted.

It was evident from Escobar's phone conversations and letters he had written over the previous months how infuriated he was with his reduced circumstances, but clearly he also felt some pride. The same man who had posed dressed as Pancho Villa and Al Capone had been the most wanted fugitive in the world for 15 months - for more than three years if you counted his first war with the government.

After so much carnage, so many millions spent to hunt him down, he was still alive, and still at large. Many people wanted him dead: the Americans, his rivals in the Cali cocaine cartel and their government lackeys, the Search Bloc and Los Pepes, whom he was convinced were really just Search Bloc forces in league with his other enemies.

As he moved from place to place in Medellin, he took comfort in all the simple people of his home city who still believed in him, who still called him El Doctor or El Patron. They remembered the housing projects he had bankrolled, the soccer pitches, the donations to church and charity, and they had little affection for the government forces closing in on him.

And even though Escobar's organization had been taken apart, so many of his friends killed or in jail, he believed he could still right things. Then there would be many, many scores to settle. As his son, Juan Pablo, had sneered to a representative from the prosecutor's office a few months before: "My dad is also searching for everyone who is after him, and destiny will say who finds who first."

But Maria Victoria (he called her "Tata") and the children had to be moved out of the way. Escobar believed his family was in terrible danger. Any harm that came to his family would cause him great pain, but would also be the greatest insult. If he could not protect his own family, his enemies and his friends would know he was finished.

Escobar hadn't seen his wife and children in more than a year and a half. He clearly admired the way Juan Pablo had stepped forward in this crisis, and he was relying on his son more and more to protect Maria Victoria and Manuela.

He had to get his family out of Colombia, not just for their protection, but to free his hands. With Maria Victoria and the children safe, he could turn on his enemies full-force, unleash a bombing and assassination campaign that would bring the government to its knees and send his would-be rivals in the Cali cartel scurrying for cover.

He would give them a war they had no stomach for - he knew that much from past experience. They would beg him to stop, offering him anything he wanted in return for his token surrender, just like the last time, in 1991. That was the road back.

Hugo Martinez got an incorrect fix on the source of the first call Pablo Escobar made to his family at the Tequendama Hotel in Bogota on a Tuesday in late November 1993.

But by the next day, the American surveillance experts at Centra Spike and the Search Bloc's own fixed surveillance teams in the hills over Medellin had pinpointed Escobar's location in the neighborhood called Los Olivos.

Hugo's father, Col. Hugo Martinez, knew they were very close. At first, he asked permission to cordon off the entire 15-block neighborhood and begin going door-to-door, but that was rejected - in part because a Delta Force commander and others at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota advised against it.

Escobar was an expert at escaping such dragnets. Closing down the neighborhood would just let him know they were on to him. Instead, the colonel began quietly infiltrating hundreds of his men into Los Olivos. His son, Hugo, stayed with a group of 35 in a parking lot enclosed by high walls, where the men and vehicles could not be seen from the street.

Similar squads of men were sequestered at other lots in the neighborhood. They stayed through Tuesday night until Wednesday, the first day of December. Food was brought in. There was only one portable toilet for all the men.

Hugo spent virtually all this time in his car, waiting for Escobar's voice to come up on his mobile surveillance equipment. He ate and slept in the car.

Later on Wednesday, Escobar spoke on the phone with his son, wife and daughter as they wished him a happy birthday. He was 44 years old that day. He celebrated with marijuana, a birthday cake and some wine.

Hugo raced out of the lot in pursuit of this signal, tracing it to a spot in the middle of the street near a traffic circle just after the conversation ended. No one was there. Hugo was convinced his scanner was right. Escobar evidently had been speaking from a moving car. Hugo returned to the parking lot discouraged, and the men camped out there were again disappointed.

Hugo waited until about 8 on Thursday morning before Col. Martinez gave the men permission to come back to base, clean up and rest. Hugo drove back to his apartment in Medellin, took a shower, and then fell asleep.

On this day, Thursday, Dec. 2, 1992, Pablo Escobar awakened shortly before noon, as was his habit,

and ate a plate of spaghetti before easing his widening bulk back into bed with his wireless phone. Always a heavy man, he had put on about 20 pounds while living on the run, most of it in his belly.

"On the run" was a misnomer, for Escobar did not do much running. He spent most of his time lying low, eating, sleeping, talking on the radio. He hired prostitutes, mostly teenage girls, to help him while away the hours. It wasn't the same as the lavish orgies he had arranged in years past, but his money and notoriety still allowed for some indulgences.

Escobar had trouble finding jeans that would fit. To get a waist size to accommodate his girth, he had to wear pants that were a good six inches too long. The light blue pair he wore on this day were turned up twice in a wide cuff. He wore flip-flops and had pulled on a loose blue polo shirt.

Prone to intestinal discomfort, he may have been feeling the effects of his birthday revelry the night before. On this afternoon, the only other person in the house was Alvero de Jesus Agudelo, known as Limon, who served as Escobar's valet, driver and bodyguard. The two others staying with them, his courier, Jaime Alberto Rua-Restrepo, and his aunt and cook, Luz Mila Restrepo, had gone out after fixing breakfast.

At 1 o'clock, Escobar tried several times to phone his family, posing as a radio journalist, but the switchboard operator at the Tequendama Hotel told him the staff had been instructed to block all calls from journalists. He was put on hold, then asked to call back, but finally he got through on the third attempt, speaking briefly to his daughter, Manuela, and then to his wife, Maria Victoria, and his son, Juan Pablo.

Maria Victoria sobbed on the phone. She was depressed and fatalistic.

"Honey, what a hangover," Pablo said sympathetically. She continued crying. "These things are a drag. So, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"What does your mother say?"

"It was as if my mother fainted," she said, explaining they had last seen her as they left the airport Friday in Medellin during the family's failed attempt to flee Colombia for Frankfurt, Germany. "I did not call her. She told me bye, and then—"

"And you have not spoken to her?"

"No. My mother is so nervous. My mother will die because she made me crazy," Maria Victoria said, explaining how all the family deaths in the previous year - most at the hands of the vigilantes from Los Pepes - had just about killed her with sorrow.

At his apartment, Hugo was awakened by a phone call from his father.

"Pablo's talking!" the colonel said. Hugo dressed quickly and hurried back out to the parking lot, where the other officers were assembling.

Escobar was still on the phone.

"So, what are you going to do?" he asked his wife gently.

"I don't know. I mean, wait and see where we are going to go and I believe that will be the end of us."

"No!"

"So?" Maria Victoria asked flatly.

"Don't you give me this coldness! Holy Mary!"

"And you?"

"Ahhh."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. . . . What do you need?" Pablo asked. He did not want to talk about himself.

"Nothing," his wife said.

"What do you want?"

"What would I want?" she asked glumly.

"If you need something, call me, OK?"

"OK."

"You call me now, quickly. There is nothing more I can tell you. What else can I say? I have remained right on track, right?"

"But how are you? Oh, my God, I don't know!"

"We must go on. Think about it. Now that I am so close, right?" Pablo said, in what appears to be a suggestion that he was about to surrender.

"Yes," his wife said, with no enthusiasm.

"Think about your boy, too, and everything else, and don't make any decisions too quickly, OK?"

"Yes."

"Call your mother again and ask her if she wants you to go there or what."

"OK."

"Remember that you can reach me by beeper."

"OK."

"OK."

"Ciao," said Maria Victoria.

"So long," her husband said.

With the police Search Bloc listening in and recording the conversation, Pablo Escobar chatted on the phone with his wife and family as they holed up in a hotel in Bogota, trying desperately to get out of Colombia. It was Thursday, Dec. 2, 1993.

After Escobar had spoken with his wife, his son, Juan Pablo, got back on the line. Juan Pablo had been given a list of questions from a journalist.

Often, when Escobar was in trouble, he used the Colombian media to broadcast his messages and demands, trying to whip up public sentiment in his favor. Other times, when he was displeased with the media, he would have reporters and editors killed. Juan Pablo wanted his father's advice on how to answer these questions.

"Look, this is very important in Bogota," Escobar told his son. He suggested that they might also be able to sell his answers to publications overseas, an opportunity to lobby publicly for his family to be given refuge. For now he just wanted to hear what the questions were. He said he would call back later to help his son answer them.

"This is also publicity," Escobar said. "Explaining the reasons and other matters to them. Do you understand? Well done and well organized."

"Yes, yes," Juan Pablo said. He began to read the questions: "Whatever the country, refuge is conditioned on the immediate surrender of your father. Would your father be willing to turn himself in if you are settled somewhere?" "

". . . Go on," Pablo instructed.

"The next one is, 'Would he be willing to turn himself in before you take refuge abroad?' "

"Go on."

"I spoke with the man and he told me that if there were some questions I did not want to answer, there was no problem, and if I wanted to add some questions, he would include them."

"OK. The next one?"

" 'Why do you think that several countries have refused to receive your family?' OK?"

"Yes."

" 'From which embassies have you requested help for them to take you in. . . ?' "

"OK."

"Don't you think your father's situation, accused of X number of crimes, assassination of public figures, considered one of the most powerful drug traffickers in the world . . . ?" Juan Pablo stopped reading.

"Go on."

"But there are many. Around 40 questions."

Escobar told his son he would call back later in the day. "I may find a way to communicate by fax," he said.

"No," Juan Pablo said, apparently concerned that use of a fax would somehow be too dangerous.

"No, huh? OK. OK. So, good luck."

Escobar hung up.

Lt. Hugo Martinez and his special Colombian police electronic tracking team had not been able to assemble in time to chase the signal from this phone call. However, the American technicians at Centra Spike and the Search Bloc's own fixed listening posts had triangulated it to the same Los Olivos neighborhood where the calls had originated the day before.

They hunkered down and waited for the promised next call. If Escobar was going to try to answer 40 questions, he was going to be on the phone a long time.

At precisely 3 p.m. that Thursday, Escobar called his son back.

Juan Pablo again began relaying the journalist's questions. The first asked the son to explain what it would take for his father to surrender.

Escobar instructed, "Tell him: 'My father cannot turn himself in unless he has guarantees for his security.'"

"OK," said Juan Pablo.

"And we totally support him in that."

"OK."

"Above any considerations."

"Yep."

"My father is not going to turn himself in before we are placed in a foreign country, and while the police

"The police and DAS is better," interjected Juan Pablo. "Because the DAS are also searching."

"It's only the police."

"Oh, OK."

Pablo, resuming: "While the police -"

"Yeah."

"OK, let's change it to, 'while the security organizations. . .'"

"Yeah."

". . . continue to kidnap . . ."

Lt. Hugo Martinez drove away from his police surveillance unit's temporary staging area in a Medellin parking lot on Thursday, Dec. 2, 1993. His friend on the switchboard at the Tequendama Hotel in Bogota had just alerted him that Pablo Escobar was on the line to the hotel.

Escobar's voice had been recognized right away, even though he was still pretending to be a journalist. He had called the hotel several times to speak with his wife and family staying there.

All of the men at the staging area followed Hugo out. The rest of the Search Bloc was converging on the Medellin neighborhood of Los Olivos, where Hugo's surveillance team had pinpointed the source of Escobar's call.

Excited and nervous, Hugo could feel all of his father's men, hardened veterans of the police assault team, close on his heels. Hugo's reputation with the men in the Search Bloc had improved since his rocky beginning, but they remained skeptical. He knew that if he failed again now, with all these men awaiting his direction, he would never live it down.

The tone in his headphones and the line on his scanner directed Hugo to an office building just a few blocks from the parking lot. He was certain that was where Escobar was speaking. No sooner had he named the address than the assault force descended, crashing through the front doors and moving loudly through the building.

Escobar continued to speak calmly, as though nothing was happening. Clearly the fugitive was not in the office building now being raided.

Hugo felt panic. How could his equipment be wrong? He took two long deep breaths, forcing himself to remain calm. So long as Escobar was talking, he could still be found.

In the passenger seat of the white Mercedes van, Hugo closed his eyes for a moment and then looked again more carefully at the screen, which was no bigger than the palm of his hand. This time he noticed a slight vibration in the white line that stretched from side to side. The line spanned the entire screen, which meant the signal was being transmitted close by, but the slight movement suggested something else.

From experience, Hugo knew this vibration probably meant he was picking up a reflection. It was very slight, which is why he hadn't noticed it before. When the reflection was bouncing off water, the line usually had a slight squiggle in it, but this line had no squiggle.

"This is not it! This is not it!" he shouted into his radio. "Let's go!"

To his left was a drainage ditch with a gently moving stream of dirty water. To get to the other side, where Hugo was now convinced the signal originated, his driver had to go up a block or two and turn left over a bridge.

When the van had crossed the bridge and returned on the other side of the ditch, Hugo realized that only one car from his unit had followed him. There were three men in it. The men in the other car either hadn't heard him or were ignoring him.

Escobar's conversation with his son continued.

Juan Pablo repeated a question from a list of 40 given to him by a Colombian journalist. He and his father were formulating Escobar's replies. This question asked why so many other countries had refused to allow Juan Pablo, his mother and sister entry.

The family, under death threats from the vigilantes of Los Pepes, had been trying desperately to flee Colombia.

"The countries have denied entry because they don't know the real truth," Escobar said, answering the question.

"Yes," Juan Pablo said, evidently taking notes as his father spoke.

"We're going to knock on the doors of every embassy from all around the world because we're willing to fight incessantly," Escobar continued. "Because we want to live and study in another country without bodyguards and hopefully with a new name."

"Just so you know," Juan Pablo said. "I got a phone call from a reporter who told me that President Alfredo Cristiani from Ecuador, no, I think it is El Salvador . . ."

"Yes?" Escobar got up now and moved to the second-floor window, mindful that this conversation had dragged on for several minutes; twenty seconds was his usual limit. As he listened, he looked at the cars moving on the street below.

"Well, he has offered to receive us. I heard the statement, well, he gave it to me by phone," Juan Pablo said.

"Yes?"

"And he said if this contributed in some way to the peace of the country, he would be willing to receive us, because the world receives dictators and bad people, why wouldn't he receive us?"

"Well, let's wait and see, because that country is a bit hidden away."

"Well, but at least there's a possibility, and it has come from a president."

"Look, with respect to El Salvador," Escobar said.

"Yeah?"

"In case they ask anything, tell them the family is very grateful and obliged to the words of the president, that it is known he is the president of peace in El Salvador."

"Yeah."

Escobar stayed at the window, still mindful of the length of the call. When Juan Pablo related a question about the family's experiences under government protection, his father answered: "You respond to that one."

Juan Pablo rattled off three more of the questions, but then his father abruptly ended the conversation. He had seen something on the street below.

"OK, let's leave it at that," Escobar said.

"Yeah, OK," Juan Pablo said. "Good luck."

"Good luck."

"Yeah."

. . . and commit massacres in Medellin.' "

"Yes, all right."

"OK," Pablo said. "The next one."

The radio signal pointed Lt. Hugo Martinez straight ahead.

The line on his computer screen lengthened and the tone in his headphones grew stronger as his unmarked police surveillance van moved down a street in a middle-class neighborhood of Medellin on Dec. 2, 1993.

Electronic surveillance from the air and the ground had traced calls made by fugitive drug trafficker Pablo Escobar to this neighborhood. Hugo and his driver were trying to find the exact house. They drove down the street until the signal peaked and then began to diminish, the line pinching in at the edges of the screen and the tone slightly falling off.

They turned around and crept back. The line stretched slowly until it once again filled the screen. They stopped. This was it. They drove past that point again just to make sure; again the signal grew, peaked and then slightly diminished.

The driver turned around again. As they approached the house where the signal was strongest, Hugo looked up . . . and saw him.

A fat man stood in the second floor window. He had long, curly black hair and a full beard. The image hit Hugo like an electric shock. It was Pablo Escobar.

He was talking on a cell phone. Suddenly he stepped back from the window. Hugo thought he had seen a look of surprise. Through his headphones, he heard Escobar say "Good luck," and end his conversation with his son.

Hugo and his team had been eavesdropping on Escobar for three days as he telephoned his wife and son at a hotel in Bogota. The fugitive was trying to get his family safely out of Colombia. Until this moment, the officers had not been able to tell exactly where his calls were coming from.

Now Escobar was literally right in front of them. Years of effort, hundreds of lives, thousands of futile

police raids, untold millions of dollars, countless man hours, all of the false steps, false alarms, blunders. And here he was at last, one man in a nation of 35 million people, one man in a ruthless underworld he had virtually owned for nearly two decades, one man in city of more than a million where he was revered as a legend.

Hugo leaned out and told the officers in the car behind him, "This is the house."

It was a simple two-story rowhouse in the middle of the block with a squat palm tree in front. Hugo suspected Escobar had been spooked by their white van cruising slowly past, so he told his driver to keep going down to the end of the block. Shouting into the radio, Hugo asked to be connected to his father, Col. Hugo Martinez, commander of the Colombian police Search Bloc.

"I've got him located," Hugo told his father. "He's in this house."

The colonel knew this was it. Hugo would not be saying this unless he had seen Escobar with his own eyes.

"Station yourself in front and in back of the house and don't let him come out," his father said.

Then the colonel ordered all units to converge on the house immediately.

Two men positioned themselves against the wall on either side of Escobar's front door. Hugo's van drove around the block to the alley. There was a one-story garage with an orange tile roof extending from the back of the house. With weapons ready, they waited.

It took about 10 minutes for the rest of the Search Bloc force to arrive.

"Martin," one of the lieutenants assigned to the Search Bloc assault team, stood ready as his men applied a heavy steel sledgehammer to the steel front door. It took several blows before it went down.

Martin sprinted into the house with the five men on his team, and the shooting began. The first floor was empty, like a garage. A yellow taxi was parked toward the rear, and a flight of stairs led up to the second floor.

As the police pushed upstairs, Escobar's lone bodyguard, Jesus Agudelo, called "Limon," jumped out a back window and fell about eight feet to a grating on the garage roof. As Limon sprinted out across the tiles, the Search Bloc force in the alley below opened fire.

According to the police, Limon was hit at least four times as he ran. Hugo said his momentum carried him right off the roof, and Limon fell lifeless to the grass below. The fatal shot struck him directly in the center of the forehead.

Escobar had come out the window behind Limon. He had stopped to kick off his plastic flip-flops, and dropped down to the roof. Police said he was carrying a pistol and a rifle. He stayed close to one wall, where there was some protection.

Police Maj. Hugo Aguilar, who had climbed onto the roof overhead, could not get a clear shot down at him. So there was a break in the firing as Escobar moved along the wall toward the back street.

At the corner, Hugo said later, Escobar pointed his weapons in both directions, shouted, "Police mother---s! Police mother---s!" and fired rounds that hit no one.

Then he broke for the crest of the gently sloping tile roof, trying to make it to the other side. A cascade of fire felled him at the center of the roof. He sprawled on his broad belly on the dislodged orange tiles, hit by a round in his thigh and another in his back, just below the right shoulder blade.

Accounts differ as to what happened next, but this much is certain: Escobar was killed by a round that entered the center of his right ear and exited just in front of his left ear.

According to Hugo Martinez, the shooting then continued. Inside the house, Martin and his men fell to the floor as rounds fired by Search Bloc members on the street below crashed through the second-floor window and into the walls and ceiling.

Martin believed he and his men were taking fire from Escobar's bodyguards. He shouted into his radio, "Help! Help us! We need support!"

Finally, the gunfire stopped.

On the rooftop, Maj. Aguilar shouted: "It's Pablo! It's Pablo!"

Men were now scaling the roof. Someone found a ladder and placed it under the second-floor window, and others climbed down to the roof from the window.

Aguilar reached for the body on the roof and turned it over. The wide bearded face was splashed with blood and already it was beginning to swell. It was wreathed in long, blood-soaked black curls.

Aguilar grabbed a radio and spoke directly to Col. Martinez, speaking loudly enough for even the men on the street below to hear:

"Viva Colombia! We have just killed Pablo Escobar!"

It is difficult to reconstruct precisely what happened on the rooftop. Each Search Bloc member interviewed for this story provided an account based on what he had seen. Certain details differed. In some cases, these accounts included descriptions given to Search Bloc members by other witnesses.

Official reports said Escobar was shot dead as he ran across the rooftop during a gun battle with police. But a senior Colombian National Police commander now says Escobar was executed at close range. Autopsy reports and photos show that the fatal round went directly into his right ear.

"I believe it is true that Escobar was shot in the head after he was wounded on the rooftop," said Col. Oscar Naranjo, who was chief of intelligence for the Colombian National Police at the time. "You have to understand, the anxiety of that team was so high. Escobar was like a trophy at the end of a long hunt. For him to have been taken alive . . . no one wanted to attend that disaster."

Col. Martinez said there was "no point-blank 'coup de grace.'" He indicated that the fatal shot was fired from at least three feet away.

Maj. Aguilar told the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* that he fired the 9mm round into Escobar's ear, but he did not say from what distance.

Steve Murphy, a DEA agent working out of Medellin, was the first American on the scene. He had heard the news at Search Bloc headquarters, and had immediately phoned his boss Joe Toft in Bogota. Toft told him: "You better get your ass out there and bring pictures back."

Murphy grabbed a camera, ran outside and flagged down a police vehicle that was taking Col. Martinez to the killing scene.

They arrived as the colonel's men were setting up barricades. Crowds had begun to form as word spread that Escobar had been killed.

Murphy climbed to the second floor and was directed to look out the window to the rooftop. There he saw Escobar's barefoot body stretched on the orange roof tiles. Men from the raiding party stood around the bloodied corpse, sharing swigs from a bottle of Black Label Scotch.

Murphy shouted and the men posed for his camera, raising their rifles triumphantly. He climbed out to the roof and took more pictures, with more of the men posing around the slain fugitive.

Then Murphy gave the camera to an officer and posed next to Escobar's corpse himself. One of the men took a small knife and carefully scraped off the corner of Escobar's bloodstained mustache for a souvenir. Another man scraped off the other corner, leaving Escobar with a bizarre Hitler-style mustache that would be featured in news reports, a final indignity inflicted upon the fugitive drug boss by his pursuers.

There was a commotion on the street as Escobar's mother and sister arrived. The mother, Hermilda, was a short, slightly stooped woman in her 60s, with gray hair and spectacles. She pushed her way up to a corpse on the grass and saw that it was Limon.

"You fools!" she shouted. "This is not my son! This is not Pablo Escobar! You have killed the wrong man!"

But then the soldiers directed the two women to stand to one side, and from the roof they lowered a stretcher bearing the corpse of her son.

As she left the place, she pulled her mouth tight and betrayed no emotion, and paused only to tell a reporter with a microphone: "At least now he is at rest."

Shortly after Escobar was shot dead, Colombian Police Gen. Octavio Vargas telephoned his good friend Toft, the DEA country chief in Colombia.

"Jo-ay!" Vargas shouted happily into the phone. "We just got him!"

That was just seconds before the call from Murphy. Toft stepped out into the hallway and shouted: "Escobar is dead!"

Then he ran upstairs to tell Ambassador Morris Busby, the man who had directed the American effort

in this 15-month manhunt.

Busby was ecstatic. He grabbed a phone and called Washington. He asked to speak with Richard Canas, the National Security Council's drug enforcement chief at the Executive Office Building, across the street from the White House.

Canas took the call and heard Busby say: "We got Escobar."

"Are you sure?" Canas asked.

"Ninety-nine percent," Busby said.

"Not good enough. Have one of our people seen it?"

"Give me a few minutes," Busby said.

It did not take long for Busby to get absolute confirmation: Steve Murphy had turned over Escobar's body and had looked into the lifeless face of the man who had been the most powerful criminal in the world.

Busby called Canas back.

"Got him," he said. "Dead. Got him. Gone forever."

At the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, a party erupted. Champagne bottles popped. Banners were draped that read "P.E.G. DEAD." Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria was finally gone.

Ambassador Busby felt a deep sense of satisfaction. After nearly 20 years of counterterrorism work, he felt this was the most impressive feat he had ever been involved with. They had stuck with the chase for 15 hard, frustrating, bloody months. The effort had involved U.S. military, diplomatic and law enforcement agencies spanning two administrations and two continents.

It had been ugly. Since Escobar's escape from prison in July 1992, 209 people associated with Escobar or the Medellin cartel had been killed. Fifty-two of Escobar's associates had been captured, and another 29 had turned themselves in under a generous government surrender offer.

Busby visited the Presidential Palace that afternoon to personally congratulate President Cesar Gaviria. Extra editions of the Bogota newspapers were already on the street. El Espectador ran an enormous page one headline that read "FINALEMENTE SI CAHO" (FINALLY, HE'S DOWN). Gaviria signed a copy for the ambassador.

The death of Pablo Escobar may have been cause for celebration in official circles in Washington and Bogota, but for many Colombians, especially in Medellin, it was an occasion for grief. Thousands attended Escobar's funeral, following his casket through the streets. They swarmed to get closer, and some mourners opened the casket lid to stroke the dead man's face.

There were chants of "We love you, Pablo!" and "Long Live Pablo Escobar!" There were shouts of

anger toward the government, and threats of revenge.

Escobar was their martyr, slain by a government they believed had persecuted him. Even today, it is not unusual to find Escobar's framed photograph in Colombian homes.

Escobar's grave is still carefully tended. It is framed by flowering bushes, and ornate iron bars support three flowering pots. On the simple gravestone there is a photograph of a mustachioed Pablo in a business suit.

On the day Escobar was killed, Col. Hugo Martinez ran into the hideout and found the drug boss' portable phone. That was his trophy. He used it to phone his superior, Maj. Luis Estupinan, to congratulate him on the kill.

That evening, the men of the Search Bloc in Medellin partied late. Col. Martinez and his son Hugo did not join them. Such overt displays were not the colonel's style. When the men began firing their weapons into the air, the colonel put an end to the party.

The next morning, the colonel, Hugo and some of the other top men in the Search Bloc were honored in Bogota. That evening, back at their home, the colonel's youngest son, Gustavo, age 10, was looking through a sack of Escobar's personal items that the colonel had collected. In the bag was a small loaded handgun. As Gustavo examined it, the gun went off.

The bullet scratched the skin of his belly, but the boy wasn't seriously hurt. The colonel gathered up the items and delivered them that night to police headquarters, as though they were a curse.

Martinez says he still feels haunted by the dead drug boss. He says he derived personal satisfaction from Escobar's death, and he finally got his promotion to general, but he paid a heavy price.

"When I think about Pablo Escobar, I think of him as an episode in my life that completely altered the way I was living," Martinez said in an interview last summer in his home village of Mosquera. "I don't blame him as a person or anything like that. However, being involved in those operations, I abandoned my family and my sons who needed me in what was a crucial time in their lives."

Martinez was accused of accepting money from the Cali cartel and of being involved with the illegal activities of Los Pepes - accusations he denies. He said the allegations were first made by Escobar himself, and spread by the Colombian press.

Martinez was never charged with any crime. For a while, for safety reasons, he considered moving with his wife and family to Argentina. But just as he began to inquire about emigrating there, he read news reports that Pablo Escobar's wife and son had been arrested there. Martinez said he felt sympathy for Escobar's family.

"Just as I was trying to go someplace else for security, so were they," he said. "I hurt to see they are still suffering for something that happened so long ago. They are also trying to escape from all that."

Escobar's wife and children are believed to still own a substantial part of his illicit fortune. They live under assumed names in Buenos Aires, where Maria Victoria and Juan Pablo were charged in 1999 with

attempting to illegally launder money. A family lawyer says Juan Pablo works for a computer graphics company, and Manuela, who is still a teenager, is a student.

Not long after Escobar's death, Juan Pablo paid an unexpected visit to the U.S. Embassy in Bogota. He asked to see Busby, who called downstairs to Toft.

"Hey, Joe, Pablo Escobar's son is downstairs. I'm not going to see him, OK?"

Toft agreed to meet with Juan Pablo. He stepped into the room to encounter a soft-looking young man. Toft was impressed with the boy's poise under the circumstances.

"He told me that he and his family were in great danger, and they were appealing for visas to save their lives," Toft remembers.

"What will it take for me to get a visa?" Juan Pablo asked.

"All of the cocaine and cocaine money in the world would not get you a visa," Toft told him.

Juan Pablo did not appear surprised by the answer.

"Are you sure we can do nothing?" he asked again. "Is there anything, anything we could do to earn a visa?"

"Even if you helped put the whole Cali cartel in jail we would not give you a visa," Toft told him.

And Juan Pablo left.

During the celebration at the embassy after Escobar was killed, Toft felt a knot in his stomach. He felt it all the while he was smiling, embracing colleagues, talking to the Colombian press. Toft was troubled by a feeling that somehow, they had sold their souls to the devil.

Even so, he framed a certificate presented by DEA Special Agent Kenny Magee to those directly involved in manhunt. It read, in part: "Because of your selfless dedication and willing sacrifices, the world's most sought after criminal was located and killed. . . ." At the bottom were the signature and thumbprint of Pablo Escobar.

In his briefings in Washington over the previous year, Toft had soft-pedaled evidence of links between his own agency and the vigilantes of Los Pepes. He knew his agents had seen self-confessed Los Pepes leaders at the headquarters of the Search Bloc, the police team funded and guided by the United States.

He knew that certain murders of Escobar associates by Los Pepes came after the victims had been located by U.S. intelligence, and the information had been passed to the Search Bloc. On the one hand, Los Pepes were dismantling Escobar's Medellin cartel and stripping away the layers of protection around him. On the other hand, their brutal methods troubled Toft's conscience.

Now, with Escobar dead, Toft worried that the effort against Escobar had created a monster. It had opened a bridge between the Colombian government, its top politicians and generals, and the rival Cali drug cartel - what the DEA came to call a "super cartel." In the years the Americans had focused on Escobar, Toft feared, the Cali cartel had consolidated its operations, cemented its relationship with the

Colombian government, and emerged as a cocaine monopoly.

In 1994, Toft retired from the DEA.

"I don't know what the lesson of the story is," he said recently. "I hope it's not that the end justifies the means."

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