

From Pablo Escobar to the New Drug Cartels

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English 12

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April 18, 2013

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Almost twenty years ago, on December 2, 1993, Pablo Escobar, the inventor of Colombia's cocaine trade, was killed execution style on a rooftop in his home city of Medellin. He was shot by a police force that was determined to get him by any means necessary. This execution led to the death of one narcotics organization and the birth of another. The drug trade continued in full force, with the center still being the city of Medellin. While the stories surrounding Escobar have grown over the last twenty years, the criminal organization he created, the Medellin Cartel, no longer exists. The cartel structure he invented, which involved controlling all the links in the drug chain from production to retail, is also gone. This paper will explain how the cocaine cartel structure has evolved from its beginnings under Escobar to its new form. The old structure was under one man – Escobar – but the new cartel structure is broken into specialized functions, spreading from South America through the Caribbean and Mexico. Medellin remains the center of Colombia's cocaine trade, but it no longer controls every step in the crime business. This is the new reality of the drug trade in North and South America.

Pablo Escobar was one of a kind. From a very young age, he resorted to petty crime in order to survive. He slowly graduated to serious offenses like car theft, kidnapping, and smuggling. When he was 26, Escobar was arrested for possession of cocaine, and this was a turning point. Within days, his arresting officer was mysteriously killed. Nine judges who were

to oversee his case were threatened, and all the evidence against him was destroyed. That was to serve as a sign of how he intended to deal with the authorities in his rise to the top of the cocaine world (Alvarez 39).

Escobar started his own cocaine operation and gradually took over the majority of the drug trade in Colombia. He killed Fabio Restrepo, the leader of the Medellin Cartel, and took over the organization. He was headed for the top with his bold way of killing everyone who stood in his way – whatever the risk. While heading the Medellin Cartel, Escobar managed to align himself with some of the most powerful drug dealers, both in Colombia and around the Americas. With their help, he was successful in monopolizing the market by out-organizing and out-killing rivals like the Cali Cartel (Mollison 125).

His motto was “plata o plomo,” which means “take the silver or take the lead (bullets)” in Spanish. He would offer great bribes to cooperative police, informants, and politicians, but he'd murder anyone who would turn him down. This is how he managed to build an extremely strong network within the Colombian government and society. Along with his thriving business, Escobar also had political ambitions. He tried to create a Robin Hood-like image by building soccer grounds, schools, hospitals and housing projects in poor neighborhoods. As a result of his generosity, ordinary poor people would support and even protect him (Alvarez 187).

Meanwhile, his cocaine business was making him an annual profit of over \$2.75 billion as he supplied about 80% of the cocaine product that ended up on American streets. By this time, he had bought several mansions, airplanes and helicopters. He had even recruited a formidable army of enforcers that served him with unquestioning loyalty and blind devotion (Mollison 101).

In 1985, at the peak of his power, Escobar did what no drug lord had ever dared – he sent several heavily armed men to the Colombian Palace of Justice to destroy all evidence against

him and to massacre the lawmakers who wanted to extradite him to the United States. This action made him feared by Columbia's politicians and lawmakers. For years, Pablo Escobar's illegal activities went uncontrolled by the weak Colombian authorities. He had three out of the five presidential candidates for the 1989 national election assassinated because they were in favor of having him extradited to the USA. However, the single most frightening act that he ever committed was the bombing of an airline – Avianca Flight 203 – which killed 110 innocent people. The motive? To kill one of these presidential candidates, who, it turned out, wasn't even on the plane! But it didn't matter, because it made Escobar a man to be feared (Mollison 119).

On one occasion, while a minor drug dealer was enjoying a drink with Escobar at his ranch, a Chevy Blazer pulled up, two burly men got out and an individual was dragged from the back. “Pablo simply said ‘Excuse me’. He walked over and executed the man and then he came back to the table. He simply looked at me and he said, ‘He betrayed me.’ Then he asked me what I'd like for dinner. He scared me with that” Among the barons, Escobar stood out because of this reckless ferocity (Alvarez 227).

I spoke to my economics teacher, Richard Brand, about the methods used by Escobar to stay in power. Mr. Brand painted a chilling picture of Escobar's political tricks. “Pablo Escobar wanted to use the immense power of the business to bend the government to his will. He created an image for himself, especially among the poor people. Schools, playgrounds and sports facilities were built with his drug money, and a food distribution program was established. Poor people loved him for this generosity, calling him El Patrón, and supporting him when authorities tried to arrest him. Those who weren't impressed by his money were brought around through fear. Nine politicians who refused bribes were offered a terrible choice: ‘I'm going to kill you if you don't take the money I offer you, so what do you prefer? Do you prefer money or do you

prefer to be killed?’ Those who summoned the courage to defy him did not live long. ‘You couldn’t confront Pablo Escobar, because you knew what would happen: you would die,’ Mr. Brand continued: “He did whatever he wanted. He didn’t consult with anyone. He frightened everyone. It wasn’t just a few people; he scared the whole of Colombia and even the drug pushers in the United States. He thought that whatever he wanted is the way it should be done, and he didn’t ask anyone’s opinion” (Brand).

But although Escobar did what he wanted, he ran his empire like a business corporation; dealers would get orders that we had to fill. Under the contract with the cartel, they were to move the cocaine at a certain rate out of the country. These people were the clearinghouse for the cocaine. The business was impressively efficient, but not economically smart. Escobar and his cocaine allies mistakenly assumed that they could increase profits by increasing supply. This worked for a while, but the law of diminishing returns went unnoticed until it was too late. Prices fell. Escobar and his cartel found they had to sell an ever greater amount of the drug simply to make the same income. The flood of cocaine brought them into an ever more dangerous attention of U.S. drug enforcement organizations (“Evolution of the Columbian Drug Organizations”).

Escobar mistakenly thought he could control the situation by controlling his local problems. As law enforcement threatened the cartel, Escobar reacted with reckless violence. ‘Suddenly everybody was carrying guns.’ Escobar’s hit-men would travel on motorbikes through the crowded streets of Medellín and Bogotá, seeking out enemies and gunning them down in broad daylight. It was the law of collecting money at all costs.’ With cocaine, however, the stakes were far too high. He ignored the possibility that US drug agencies would work with South American authorities. That’s just what happened. Columbian authorities – supported by US power – pursued Escobar (Alvarez 231).

Escobar eventually surrendered to the Colombian authorities in exchange for them not extraditing him to the US. But Escobar was still the boss at home. The terms of his imprisonment were laughable, as the authorities confined himself to a prison called La Catedral – custom-built to his specifications, which more of a playboy’s mansion than a correctional facility. Guarded by his own henchmen, he continued to run his business from Le Catedral until he got tired of prison, executed a few of the authorities, and escaped (Montoyo).

This marked the beginning of the end of Escobar as Colombian law enforcement along with the American DEA and FBI decided to take action against him. He managed to escape from the authorities and remained at large for quite a while, but he was a marked man (“South American Narcotics Organizations”).

At about the same time, a group called the Pepe Rebels was founded by some of Escobar's former aides who he had betrayed. These rebels started killing anyone who had absolutely any connection with Escobar, in an attempt to get him to surrender. At the same time, a team called the Search Bloc was organized by the Colombian government in association with the US (“Columbian Drug Organizations”).

Finally, the Columbian authorities settled on a way to get Escobar. Escobar had one big weakness – his family. He had two children – Juan Pablo and Manuela – from his wife Maria Victoria. Escobar's love for his family was what led him to his own demise. While hiding from the authorities, he made the fatal error of constantly phoning his wife, his daughter, and his son. But they were under constant police surveillance. The Colombian police finally captured his phone signal and located him in a house in Medellin where he was gunned down by the police forces – execution style on December 2, 1993. Escobar was gone (Alvarez 298).

But even though he was gone, Escobar left behind a horrible legacy. Colombia remained marred by drug wars; only now, the players were different and, some would say, worse. Over the years, Colombia's drug trade fragmented. Escobar was the un-challenged head of the Medellin Cartel, an organized hierarchical criminal enterprise that initially flew in coca base from Peru and Bolivia, processed it in Colombia's jungles, then flew it to the mainland US in huge quantities. For two years after Escobar's death, the Cali Cartel was able to continue operating with the same model, until the leaders, the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers, were captured in 1995. And then, in 1995, the Colombian underworld underwent a change. There was no longer a figure like Escobar able to rule over the cocaine industry and control all the different links in the chain. It was now the time of the "drug federations," like the Norte Del Valle Cartel, which had its roots in the Cali Cartel. It was the era of the "baby cartels," many of which specialized in special links of the drug chain. One organization would collect the coca plants. Another organization would refine the coca into cocaine. Another criminal gang would export the drug to the Caribbean islands for distribution. And another group would transport the refined cocaine to the United States – like cocaine laboratories or transport (Montoyo).

The truth is that if Pablo Escobar were alive today, he would not immediately recognize the new generation of Colombian drug trafficking syndicates. First of all he would have a hard time finding his modern day counterpart. There is not a single boss today who is able to exercise control over a large portion of the cocaine trade. When any figure manages to climb too far up the criminal ladder, he is quickly identified by the Colombian police and the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and brought down. His closest counterparts in the drug world are now Mexican leaders. The best example was Sinaloa Cartel head Joaquin Guzman,

alias "El Chapo," who was recently captured by Mexican authorities ("Columbian Drug Organizations).

While some of the groups are more important than others, the removal of any single group will not necessarily lead to the fall of other parts of the network; nor will it result in more than temporarily interrupting the flow of drugs until the network reforms itself and fills the gap. The drug traffickers of today, some of them sons of pioneers in the trade who worked alongside Escobar, are hard to identify. One of the problems the police have today is identifying them. As the former chief of the national police force, General Oscar Naranjo, the architect of many of Colombia's improvements in anti-narcotics intelligence gathering, wrote: "the mafia has become practically invisible." But the criminal organizations are still there and they are still dangerous – if not so glamorous as the organization ruled by El Patron ("Narcotics Organizations").

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