

# Chapter I

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Latin America region has been known for their massive drug trafficking operations conducted by powerful cartels. In Mexico, there is the notorious Sinaloa cartel led by Joaquín ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán. Meanwhile in Colombia, there are two giant cartels that ruled the illegal drug trade at their own reigns; Medellín Cartel and Cali Cartel. These drug cartels also have their own specialty products, as in Mexico, they are known for their opium and marijuana. Meanwhile in their Southern counterpart, the Colombian cartels focus on cocaine.<sup>1</sup> Both of these narcotics has a high price in the black market and not all people have sufficient money to buy these illegal goods. The main consumers would only be people that have high income and also paying attention to distance and time constraints. North America fits the cartel’s market destination due to their high economy and geographic proximity. US which considered as the most advanced economy in the world allowed their people to enjoy the benefit from capitalistic system. Not only high demand for the illegal goods, the technology used by the US’ border patrol was not as sophisticated as today’s, which create a big loophole for smugglers.

In the history of Colombian Drug Cartels, the Medellín had established a trade route that connect Colombia and the United States, through Mexico. Medellín

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Stokes. *America's other war: Terrorizing Colombia*. New York: Zed Books, 2005. p. 87

Cartel succeed to create their own trading hub in big cities across United States. The figures behind the cartel success were no other than one of their kingpins, Griselda ‘La Madrina’ Blanco. In mid 1970s, Blanco succeed to pass US’ border checkpoint by using fake passport.<sup>2</sup> She established a network that includes New York, Miami and Southern California, which all of the cities are considered as metropolis.<sup>3</sup> At first, Blanco opened up a lingerie shop as a cover for her drug operations across United States.<sup>4</sup> The lingerie has a special pocket to be filled by cocaine and transported by women as the courier.<sup>5</sup> This allow Blanco’s smugglers to surpass the border check easily and expand her business to major cities, starting from New York then Miami. In the process, Alliance pact was made by the Medellín Cartel with other cartels to secure their trade route, including the Mexican cartels and also their soon-to-be rival, Cali Cartel.

Blanco’s illegal drug trafficking in Miami was a huge success for the cartel’s economy, however, she cannot hide her operation from DEA’s reach. Blanco’s ruthless leadership style deeply affected their “underground” operations. Due to Nixon’s declaration of “all-out global war on the drug menace” and the rise of drug-related violence, DEA launched Operation Swordfish in 1990.<sup>6 7</sup> DEA set up a bogus bank that designed for money laundering operation in Miami. This operation

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Tregunna. "Cocaine Cowgirl: The Outrageous Life and Mysterious Death of Griselda Blanco, the Godmother of Medellín." *Trends Organ Crim*, 2013: 132-134.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA History (1970-1975)." *DEA Official Website*. n.d. <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/1970-1975%20p%2030-39.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA History (1980-1985)." *DEA Official Website*. n.d. <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/1980-1985%20p%2049-58.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2020).

has the objective to trap the “big fish” in Miami drug empire.<sup>8</sup> They established the Dean International Investments and cooperate with the Miami Police Department forming CENTAC-26 (Central Tactical Unit) to apprehend the prominent drug traffickers, including some of Blanco’s lieutenant.<sup>9</sup> The findings of the operation revealed the major drug traffickers are associated with Medellín cartels.

During the early reign of Medellín Cartel, the city itself was relatively at peace. Although there were some incidents caused by Escobar’s men, there were no act of terrorism found. Domestic-wise, the cartel had expanded rapidly due to their shipping to market in US. Escobar or his men often confronted with Colombia’s law enforcer, however, it didn’t stop him from transporting tons of cocaine throughout the American continent. He was well known for his method of “plata o plomo”, which means either you accept the money or get shot. The government did acknowledge the existence of a drug empire operating in the city of Medellín, but they didn’t have the sufficient power to stop them alone and also considering the civilian casualties if they went to war, since Medellín is an urban area. The cartel’s influence in Colombian politics has been rooted deep into multiple governmental institutions, including the ministers, attorney general, military officers, and even the president. However, things started to shift when the US initiated a deal with Julio César Turbay’s administration regarding extradition treaty for drug

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<sup>8</sup> Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA History (1980-1985)." *DEA Official Website*. n.d. <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/1980-1985%20p%2049-58.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office. *The Drug Enforcement Administration's CENTAC PROGRAM -- An Effective Approach To Investigating Major Traffickers That Needs To Be Expanded*. Report For The Attorney General Of United States, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1980.

traffickers. After years of peaceful and undisputed position as the most powerful cartel domestic and abroad, finally something poses a threat to the Medellín Cartel drug kingpins. Most of the cartel's kingpins are located in Colombia, except for Griselda Blanco. All of Medellín founding members; the infamous Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria, Gustavo de Jesús Gaviria Rivero (Escobar's cousin), José Gonzalo 'El Mexicano' Rodríguez Gacha and the Ochoa Family – Jorge Luiz Ochoa Vásquez, Juan David Ochoa Vásquez, and Fabio Ochoa Vásquez.<sup>10</sup>

In Colombia, these people could act as freely as they want without worrying about the consequences from the law enforcers, as they often see themselves as the judge, jury and executioner. In certain points, the corrupt police or even soldiers work for the cartel as their auxiliary security force. The same things won't apply to them if they are extradited to United States. There is a huge gap of differences between the Colombia's and US' criminal justice system. The cartel feared US' criminal justice system because they can't do things like they used to do in Colombia. Even as one of the world's richest man, Escobar cannot influence the US' judicial system. The level of success of "plata o plomo" method also reflect the disparity between a developed country like the United States and a developing country like Colombia. The reason why Colombia has such a severe level of corruption is due to the fact that the state of economy in Colombia was in a concerning level and the money offered by the cartel was extremely large.

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office. *The Drug Enforcement Administration's CENTAC PROGRAM -- An Effective Approach To Investigating Major Traffickers That Needs To Be Expanded*. Report For The Attorney General Of United States, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1980.

Escobar would do whatever he can to influence the Colombian government to change their stances towards US' offer, even the most unthinkable actions. Known as one of the most ruthless drug lords, Escobar's childhood as a son of a peasant farmer deeply affected his actions when he rose to the top of the cartel.<sup>11</sup> He is a philanthropic and sympathize towards the poor, as he was also been in that position during his childhood.<sup>12</sup> He helped them built hospitals, schools, and housing for the poor.<sup>13</sup> The people of Medellín often referred him as "robin hood" and quickly gain popularity among them. In 1982, Escobar used this opportunity to start a political career, which was defied by other Medellín Cartel kingpins.<sup>14</sup> Through the election and massive support from his hometown, Medellín, he was chosen as one of the Chamber of Representatives in the congress.<sup>15</sup> He wanted to eliminate his only threat, the extradition treaty. However, he can't hide his true identity as the head of Medellín Cartel. The congress did aware of who Pablo Escobar was, but they were afraid of him. In 1983, the newly appointed minister of justice, Rodrigo Lara, declare an all-out war on mafia.<sup>16</sup> He also the key figure that ended Pablo Escobar's political career, by debating Escobar's relation with the almighty Medellín Cartel.<sup>17</sup> Not just declaring his stance to war on the mafia, he also exposed cartel's influence

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<sup>11</sup> Juan Pablo Escobar. *Pablo Escobar: My Father*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2016. ch. 3

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Medellin Abraza Su Historia. *Pablo Escobar's Incursion Into Politics*. n.d.

<https://www.medellinabrazasuhistoria.com/pablo-escobars-incursion-into-politics/?lang=en> (accessed February 20, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Cardona. *The beginning of a hurricane of violence called 'extradition'*. August 18, 2018. <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/el-comienzo-de-un-huracan-de-violencia-llamado-extradicion-articulo-708730>. (accessed February 2020, 20).

<sup>17</sup> Medellin Abraza Su Historia. *Pablo Escobar's Incursion Into Politics*. n.d.

<https://www.medellinabrazasuhistoria.com/pablo-escobars-incursion-into-politics/?lang=en> (accessed February 20, 2020).

on Colombian politics and sports league.<sup>18</sup> He showed his commitment through denouncing six out of 14 professional football teams had connection with the cartels, as their source of funding; Nacional, Medellín, América, Millonarios, Santa Fe and Pereira.<sup>19</sup> Rodrigo Lara remain as one of the cartel's threat because he is one of the few "clean" government officials that attain influential position. In 1984, Escobar ordered his *Sicario* to assassinate Lara, and marked as the first time Pablo responsible for a high-profile murder.<sup>20</sup> Soon as President Belisario Betancur heard about the death of one of his prominent ministers, he directly signed the extradition treaty with the United States.

After more than 4 years of time and resources wasted, Escobar was really furious of President Betancur's recent action. He declared an all-out war with the Colombian government, in which Medellín became the capital of murder.<sup>21</sup> From drug trafficking operations and battle against rival gangs, the cartel shifted into a narcoterrorist organization. They teamed up with other criminal organizations including paramilitary groups that have the common goal, to cripple the Colombian government. First major assault took place just one year after the ratification of the extradition treaty, Escobar hired a Colombia guerilla movement, M-19 or Movimiento 19 de Abril, to siege the palace of justice in downtown Bogotá. The raid succeeds to burn all criminal records of Pablo Escobar and M-19 members,

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<sup>18</sup> Jorge Cardona. *The beginning of a hurricane of violence called 'extradition'*. August 18, 2018. <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/el-comienzo-de-un-huracan-de-violencia-llamado-extradicion-articulo-708730>. (accessed February 2020, 20).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA History (1980-1985)." *DEA Official Website*. n.d. <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/1980-1985%20p%2049-58.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2020).

which made them innocent. Since then, Escobar and his men were considered as narco-terrorist and the struggle for power turned Colombia into a warzone, especially Bogotá and Medellín.

Extradition treaty made by the US government was just the beginning to gain more “grip” on Colombia. The event also took place in the midst of Cold War, which the great power competes to gain influence on the Third World country. The outcome of the statement made by President Nixon in 1972 not only for United States. As a global hegemon, US wanted to be seen as the pioneer of global movement and create a free world. State’s interest often lies behind a noble action that usually done by great powers.

As the brief historical background regarding United States' intervention on Medellín Cartel act of narcoterrorism in Colombia, the researcher hopes that the reader will understand the event that sparked the grim past in Colombian history and how it ended. By understanding the key aspect of this conflict, the reader could understand how international politics work in modern days, such as; the back-door diplomacy between US and Colombian government that success to toppled down one of the greatest drug empires in the history of mankind. The topic is still relevant nowadays because the readers would be able to get a deeper insight on the underworld. Hopefully the events that happened in the past can be taken as a lesson for the future.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

Based on the data and information that were previously mentioned, I suggest the following research questions:

1. How did the United States respond to Medellín Cartel's act of narcoterrorism?
2. What can be learned from US responses?

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

There are two objectives of this research; First, is to understand and analyze US responses to counter Medellín Cartel's act of narcoterrorism. Second, is to point out the lesson that we could use to tackle these similar issues nowadays. By analyzing the case, various strategy and method can be learned from the huge success of this war on drugs operation.

### **1.4 Research Significance**

The findings of this research focus on the how the US, with the help from Colombian task forces, succeed to end Medellín Cartel's reign of terror and world-wide drug empire. Therefore, it can provide a thorough understanding on the conflict, either on how it started or how it ended. Second, this research could be used for academicians and policy maker to be a lesson that can be implemented in the present days, in which most countries are still battling against illegal drug substances. For non-academicians, who are interested in the history of Colombian drug war, the name of Pablo Escobar has been a notorious figure in the world of organized crime and hopefully the findings from this research can satisfy the reader's curiosity regarding this topic.



## 1.5 Structure of Writing

The first chapter, the introduction discusses about the background of the thesis topic, research questions, the purpose of the research and lastly, the significance of this research.

The second chapter, the theoretical frameworks mainly discuss neoclassical realism theory and several concepts used to analyze US' responses to Medellín Cartel's act of narcoterrorism. It also comprised of several preliminary findings from experts in regard to the concept of narcoterrorism, act of narcoterrorism done by the cartel and the relations between US and Colombian drug war.

The third chapter, the methodology describes how qualitative approach will be used. Due to heavy historic element in this research, historical research method would fit the best to conduct the research. Both primary and secondary data are used to conduct the research, however, secondary data will cover most of the data collection technique. Lastly, narrative analysis will be used to describe US responses, by presenting the gathered data in chronological order.

The fourth chapter, which is the analysis act as the core of this thesis. This chapter presents the gathered data and analyze it in relation with the research question in chapter one. The gathered data would also be analyzed through the theory and concept specified in chapter two. The findings will be classified into several sub chapters that covers the whole series. Starting from US and Colombia relations before the war on drugs began, then proceed to the national interest of US in Colombia that eventually could lead to their direct involvement. Then, it will proceed to the core of this research, how US decided to directly intervened in

Colombia's drug war, which mainly through military means. Latter, US responses will be analyzed and what kind of practices that can be learned from these series of events.

The fifth chapter, the conclusion and recommendation comprised of the summary of the research. Besides that, this chapter will also present recommendations for future studies on the similar topic of US' foreign policy responses, both overt and covert, towards trans-national organized crimes.

