

Colombia

Case: Gerardo Bedoya Borrero

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By Ana Arana

Gerardo Bedoya approached the desk of Isabella Prieto, his colleague and protégé at El País, with his column for the next day. "Think of a headline," he said in his deep voice.

"He was pleased with himself that day," recalled Prieto. The column endorsed extradition for drug traffickers, a touchy subject in Cali, where the Cartel had reigned for two decades.

Bedoya, a talented writer and provocative thinker whose work was not widely known outside of Cali, was the fiery editor of the editorial page at Calis El País. "He had been writing very harshly about drug trafficking for months," added Prieto. "We had told him to tone it down, but he kept doing it." In so doing, Bedoya was violating an unwritten rule for journalists in Cali -avoid writing negatively about the drug cartel.

Bedoya despised the five cartel leaders. His biweekly columns lashed out against the drug kingpins, who pretended to be upstanding civic leaders. He also thrashed those Caleños who buckled to the traffickers' wishes. Bedoya was an expert wordsmith whose language -ironic and full of contempt -cut like a razor's edge. He turned more daring every week.

The column that cost him his life ran February 27, 1997. Three weeks later, on March 21, Bedoya was shot dead by a hired gunman in a darkened street. It was the Cali Cartel's revenge. But it seemed that the cartel wanted to kill not only the man, but also his reputation. The murder investigation has been plagued by half-truths and delays provoked by suspicious rumors that Bedoya was killed not because of his work but because of a homosexual lovers' quarrel. The rumor was

unfounded -Bedoya was in fact nicknamed "crazy-pecker," a slang phrase applied to womanizers. What 's disturbing, however, is that the prosecutor's office has pursued this gay theory for so long, while other evidence faded.

The insinuations have directly influenced the government's investigation, slowing the proceedings and leaving the case in total impunity more than two years after the murder.

Little Tolerance for the Narcos

The decision to kill Bedoya was probably made in 1995. That's the year Bedoya began writing his harshest pieces about the cartel. Colombians were facing their worst nightmare- drug-related corruption had reached the highest levels of Colombia's political, business, and social circles. Bedoya was impatient with his countrymen's complacency toward the cartels. "We allowed them to prosper," he would tell his friends.

He had little tolerance for drug traffickers. He even forbade his cook to shop at the La Rebaja pharmacy chain, because it was owned by brothers Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, top leaders of the cartel.

In 1995, Colombia was shaken by disclosures that President Ernesto Samper received six million dollars in campaign contributions from Cali drug traffickers. The accusations were first revealed by Andrés Pastrana, in a cassette he aired during his first televised appearance on July 24, 1994, after having lost to Samper in the presidential elections. The cassettes contained taped telephone conversations between the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers describing their financial contributions to Samper's presidential campaign.

That was the beginning. Between 1995 and 1997 Colombia's attorney general, Alfonso Valdivieso, launched an all-out campaign -known as Proceso 8000 -to unmask corruption in political circles. Dozens of politicians and businessmen charged with receiving payoffs from drug traffickers were prosecuted and jailed. The process almost crippled the government, but President Samper's political astuteness kept him in office, despite strong public anger and disgust. The

Colombian Congress voted against charging him with improper behavior. Many members of the Colombian Congress feared that they, too, would be investigated.

The process divided the Colombian population between those who supported Samper and his Liberal Party and those who wanted complete accountability and Samper's resignation. Samper did manage to complete his term and transferred presidential powers to Pastrana in August 1998.

Samper clung to power by exploiting the dissatisfaction among Colombians over U.S. drug policy. Colombians are fed up with U.S. pressure on what they consider their business. Many Colombians argue that the United States unfairly focuses most of its anti-drug efforts on the producer countries and little on the U.S. consumers.

Bedoya told his friends that the Colombian government never would have investigated itself without pressure from the United States and the tenacity of Attorney General Valdivieso, who took his job seriously. (Valdivieso is a first cousin to Liberal Party presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán, who was assassinated in 1989 by drug traffickers.)

Bedoya's fateful February 1997 column touched on all those issues.

Bedoya was among a handful of journalists and columnists who wrote against drug trafficking and Samper. Most of those journalists, however, were based in Bogotá, where there was less danger from the Cali Cartel. The national press based in Bogotá, in fact, covered much of the Proceso 8000 inquiry, spurred by leaks from the attorney general's office, which wanted to keep the Samper administration from hindering the scrutiny.

That Bedoya lived and wrote in Cali made his position almost suicidal. Most Cali Cartel leaders were in prison by 1996, but their control over drug trafficking was far from over. A review of Bedoya's columns and editorials of the time would indicate he suspected the same.

According to former U.S. officials, the Cali organization orchestrated its downsizing a few years before its leaders surrendered. "The cartel was never conquered; they just dismantled the large operations and splintered into several cells," said one official.

With the fall of the Cali Cartel, the city of Cali lost much of the drug-connected investments that went into the construction and service industries. The city's unemployment jumped to 18 percent.

The civic power the narcos exerted over the city began to evaporate. The police no longer stopped traffic along major streets to allow the traffickers' motorized caravan to surge ahead. They also stopped cordoning off the streets where Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela went to visit his mistress.

Bedoya wanted steps taken to ensure the narcos did not take over his city again. He supported proposals to introduce strict money-laundering laws. He also backed the controversial legislative bill that would reinstate retroactive extradition of Colombian citizens charged with crimes in other countries, principally the United States. His editorials pointedly agreed with the U.S. position.

On Jan.18, 1996, he wrote: "The narco nationalism used the latent patriotism of Colombians to abolish the extradition. They got rid of it by detonating bombs, using payoffs and spouting populist rhetoric. Our sovereignty! Beautiful words can have foolish meanings. We never should have thrown away that key. Extradition was a club that dissuaded. It was an ultimate option for a weak and financially poor country, which must defend itself from criminals who are more powerful and richer than it is. I never believed that extradition violates our sovereignty."

At the same time, U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urged President Clinton to decertify Colombia. And John Deutsch, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, declared that the Colombian crisis and Samper's involvement in narco-corruption had created a serious challenge for U.S. policy.

"There is a silent threat from the drug traffickers," said Luis Cañon, who is now the news editor of the Bogotá daily *El Espectador*. Bedoya apparently misjudged the danger.

The Cali drug kingpins had received relatively light maximum sentences of nine years' imprisonment, but they did fear extradition.

Pro-narco graffiti appeared on walls around the city. The narcos were willing to serve prison time in Colombia and to turn over a fraction of their considerable wealth, which Forbes magazine had estimated among the top 100 fortunes in the world. But they would never accept the measures Bedoya supported -full forfeiture of properties obtained with drug money and retroactive extradition.

Bedoya's support of the U.S. position -extradite the traffickers to the United States because Colombian jails were not reliable enough -ensured his death sentence. Columns such as one he wrote following the escape of José Santacruz Londoño, another Cali leader, from a maximum-security prison, added fuel to the fire.

"In Colombia, the maximum-security prisons are actually maximum-insecurity prisons," he wrote.

The anti-Samper Lecture

Bedoya may have been singled out for murder as early as December 1995, around the time Cali cartel leaders began planning their surrender. Police had reinforced security for leading journalists in Bogotá, but they ignored journalists in the provinces. Bedoya drove around Cali in an unpretentious Volkswagen Golf. Leopoldo, 50, had been his driver for several years.

Bedoya longed for his city to become civic and law-abiding. "He constantly said you had to remind people of what was right," said his cousin Hugo Borrero.

On January 6, 1996, he wrote: "This city could be better than it is. It could be what it should be. It could regain its tranquility... it could reaffirm our sense of

community. It could exile the narcos. It's easy, including the latter, if there is the official and collective will to do it."

His column about Diego Maradona, the famous Argentine soccer player, amounted to an indictment against drug trafficking: "Maradona is providing youngsters a great service. Why? Because he speaks the truth. Drugs are bad; drug addiction is a hell-hole and a tragedy... In a (recent) interview Maradona said the death penalty should exist for drug traffickers."

Bedoya came to despise President Samper.

Bedoya's first columns on Samper's involvement with the Cali cartel were direct, but respectful.

"It is not easy to resign. But to do so would be a conscious act for which the Colombian people and future generations would thank Ernesto Samper," he wrote in January 1996.

His columns soon became caustic. When the Colombian Congress began to investigate Samper in June 1996, and it seemed obvious that Samper had cut deals with influential congressmen to thwart the process, Bedoya wrote: "What next? The President does not want to goIt is not improbable that we will tire of this confrontation, that we will accept with resignation that although there was narco money, it is better if the president remains in officeBut this attitude is suicidal for a country now offered the best opportunity to cleanse its democracy and make a deep and sincere examination of the dangers of drug trafficking."

In September 1996, heroin was discovered in the presidential plane that was to take Samper to the United Nations in New York. Samper's government said the heroin was part of a conspiracy by the United States. Bedoya wrote: "Let 's not get carried away with speculations; let's not make up so many excuses. The heroin in the presidential plane was just another episode in Colombia's drug trafficking tragedy ...the drug traffickers were trying to send another shipment to the United States, taking advantage of the presidential plane's immunity."

Bedoya believed in his mission. "It's the job of us poor journalists to rebuild hope," he wrote.

The Last Assignment

One of Bedoya's girlfriends, Ximena Palau, warned him when she thought he was being too extreme. "I kept saying, 'Keep your mouth shut. You live in the belly of the beast,'" she said. Bedoya did not tell her about his February 1997 column before it ran.

When Rodrigo Lloreda, then editor of El País and now defense minister, read the column, alarm bells rang. Shortly before, Lloreda had asked Bedoya to soften his prose. A mild-mannered man, legendary for his equanimity, Lloreda's family had founded El País. The daily is modern and well-written. But it was not Lloreda's style to attack the traffickers frontally.

Lloreda called Bedoya at home late at night and insisted on editing the column, according to employees at the daily. He changed the headline and took out references to the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers. Despite those changes, the column remained the most provocative item in the next morning's newspaper.

Even the headline was aggressive: "Let them call me pro-Yankee." The lead paragraphs said: "I prefer the pressure of the United States to the pressure of the narcos. I prefer American influence over our government to the influence of the drug traffickers. I prefer the United States intervening in our internal affairs to the drug cartels."

"U.S. pressure has led to the following: 1) A money-laundering law. 2) Longer prison terms for traffickers. 3) Greater security in jails, so criminals don't do whatever they want. 4) The fumigation of thousands of hectares of poppy and coca fields. 5) The resurgence of the extradition topic as a legitimate issue, and not as a taboo that is untouchable and prohibited. 6) The creation of a public awareness that recognizes the damage drugs have caused the Colombian political system and society. Drug trafficker pressure on our government and our society

has led to the following: 1) A penal code written under the influence of, and by lawyers working for the traffickers. 2) Ridiculous prison sentences handed down to those criminals. 3) Elimination of extradition (of Colombians) as a tool to fight international crime. 4) Political corruption... 7) Financial contributions to a presidential campaign that won the elections."

Bedoya's friends still shudder when they re-read that column.

Bedoya had become the only loud dissenting voice in Cali. Another Cali journalist who dared earlier was Raúl Echavarría Barrientos, assistant editor of Cali's other daily, Occidente. He was killed in 1986, two days after his newspaper ran an editorial endorsing a proposal by former U.S. President Ronald Reagan seeking the death penalty for drug traffickers.

His Personal Life

Ximena Palau said she almost cried the next morning when she read the pro-Yankee column. "I knew he had signed his death sentence," she said in a choked voice. "You had to be in Cali to understand the enormity of the headline and the column's content."

Interviewed in Bogotá, where she now lives, Palau is angry about the lack of justice in the case. Palau shows a picture of her and Bedoya standing in front of New York City's Lincoln Center. Bedoya was passionate about opera and classical music. The snapshot was taken in the fall of 1996, at a high point in their romance. She recalls his passion for buttoned-down Brooks Brothers' shirts and Bally loafers, his love for Cuban cigars. She is not as forthcoming about his love for women. Never married, Bedoya had a weakness for beautiful women. There were a lot of "widows" at his funeral, said his cousin Borrero. "He managed to remain friends with all his girlfriends, and they all showed up at the funeral."

When he died, Bedoya was with another woman, a beautiful brunette named María Eugenia Arango, who was scarcely known in Bedoya's circle. A divorcee with a small daughter, she loves gold jewelry and bullfights. His friends suspect she knows more about the murder, but she refused to talk to the IAPA.

Suspicions about Arango have deepened among Bedoya's friends since they learned she told police he was gay and did not have sexual relations with women. Her statements are contradicted by his former girlfriends, including Ximena Palau. But the Cali investigators, who remain in charge of the case, have accepted Arango's assertions as truthful. Cali is a conservative tropical city, where Bedoya's long-term bachelor status was viewed with suspicion. The insinuations anger Palau and Borrero. They have refused to talk to the police while they pursue this line of inquiry. The police in turn say the family is uncooperative, alleging that is why the case remains unsolved.

"It is a crude deduction made by those who never knew him," said Borrero. "I would not care, except it has slowed down the investigation. It is the perfect tactic, which makes me believe even more that his murder is part of a larger conspiracy."

Palau, an elegant woman of 36, says she has never been with a man as manly as Bedoya. "Do you think we would cover that up if (the rumor) were true and provided a key to solving his murder?" she asked.

A known womanizer, Bedoya did not wish to marry. "He liked living alone," Borrero said. "In fact, I thought that was the right choice because he was neurotic and impossible to live with; he would have driven any woman crazy." Every year, Bedoya would tell his friends that "this year" he would get married, but he never did.

Bedoya lived in a city known for beautiful women and nightclubs, but he was not a "tropical man." He preferred classical music, poetry, and books. His was among the best personal libraries in Cali. He often escaped to New York City for cultural stimulation. Indeed, he was planning to fly there the week he was killed.

Bedoya frequently complained about the lack of intellectual companions in Cali. When Palau moved to Bogotá for her job, he lost one of his partners for good conversation.

Bedoya held various political positions in Cali and Bogotá at the time the Conservative Party was in office. When Bodoya died he was president of the Cali chapter of the Centro de Estudios Colombianos, a conservative think tank.

A romantic at heart, Bedoya's character was significantly molded by a strict Jesuit education at a boarding school in Rochester, N.Y., where he spent three of his high school years. He was a fan of Rubén Darío and Baudeliere, and recited sonnets and poems by other French and English writers from memory. He loved to talk endlessly about science, politics and the arts. After his death, colleagues found a hand-written notebook full of thoughts about life, citizenship, marriage, solitude, and happiness.

In this computer age, Bedoya still used a portable Remington, like the ones foreign correspondents carried around the world decades ago. An insomniac, he took two- hour showers every day, while he mapped out the day's work and topics he would write about, according to Palau.

Bedoya was a hard person to like. An extremist in his likes and dislikes, he loved or hated people and treated them likewise. Even in death, there are people who still hate him. Others can't hold back their tears as they remember his neurotic personality and his sense of humor.

Juanita, a young black woman, was his cook. Bedoya had a special relationship with her and her two children. It was an uncommon relationship in Cali, where racial divisions are stark. "I pray to him when something wrong happens to me, because I know he will help me," she said. "He was a great señor who did not deserve to die like that."

Bedoya had his favorites at the newspaper. One of them was Diego Martínez, the news editor. "Gerardo was amazing. I loved him very much and it pains me to think about his death," said Martínez, closing his eyes as he looked at taped news clips of the murder.

Bedoya dated several women. But according to his friends, he never dated women who were not upper class. The exception was María Eugenia Arango, the mysterious, beautiful woman he met at Cali's bullfighting fair in December 1995.

The Crime

Shortly before 4 p.m. on March 20, Arango called Bedoya at his office. His office was enclosed by glass panes, open at the top. His secretary, Isabella Prieto, and reporters who sat nearby could always hear his conversations, carried on in a loud voice. Arango asked Bedoya to take her apartment hunting because her car was not working. Everybody remembered it was Arango, because ever since Bedoya brought her to the newspaper shortly after meeting her, she had become the subject of vivid interest among the newspaper's staff.

"I still remember the day she entered the newsroom," said Martínez. "All heads turned. She was stunning and young." Few of Bedoya's close family and friends knew Arango. She is still friendly with his sister, Clara, but Bedoya didn't get along well with his sisters.

Tall, tanned and with green eyes, Arango captured Bedoya's interest at the bullfights. In 1995 she bought two seats next to Bedoya's reserved spots. Bedoya was annoyed by his sister's decision to sell her two seats in the exclusive area occupied by the family, one of Cali's elite. Tradition requires that these seats pass from generation to generation. Few nouveau riche can get in.

But his anger subsided when he saw Arango in one of those seats. While Arango supposedly had little money then, she is said to have spent \$2,000 for season passes. Clara Inés, Bedoya's sister, denied in an interview that she was the one who decided to sell the seats to Arango. She claimed that Bedoya had introduced Arango to her and asked that the seats go to Arango. But other friends and relatives of Bedoya said he met Arango at the bullfights.

Bedoya attended a birthday party for the newspaper's business manager the evening of March 20, 1997. He left the daily headquarters at 7:30 p.m. His friends never saw him alive again.

Bedoya's driver took the red Volkswagen to a gated community in south Cali where Arango lived with her mother and daughter. Arango took a few minutes to come down. Bedoya waited in front of the entrance gate, a dark area where he walked in a circle for 10 minutes to exercise. His friends wonder why the killer did not follow him and kill him there.

According to what the driver told authorities, when Arango finally appeared, they took off for Multicentro, on Calle 87 and Carrera 12, another gated community a few minutes away by car.

Arango and Bedoya got out of the car and entered the complex through the entry gate; they were going to see an apartment. The street light was not working -it had inexplicably gone out that very day, leaving the entire area dark. The guard told the driver to park a few meters away. Thus when Arango and Bedoya exited through the gate a few minutes later, they had to walk a short stretch along a row of trees to reach the car. A man jumped suddenly from the shadows and shot five times straight at Bedoya. The killer wore a white T-shirt and a baseball cap.

The killer shouted, "Bedoya, you faggot ..." as he emptied his pistol (another hint that has led the police down the homosexual love tryst theory). Bedoya took five bullets below the abdomen and fell mortally wounded on the pavement. Arango threw herself on the ground, while the driver cowered inside the car. The gunman casually walked toward the corner and fled on a motorcycle. Police versions vary as to whether it was one or two killers. Detectives at the scene said the crime was committed by professional hitmen.

"They shot to kill," one police source said. The killer walked away calmly. No one tried to stop him. He strolled around a wall, and witnesses heard a motorcycle take off. Police believe a second man was waiting on the bike.

The Investigation

The Bedoya murder triggered public outcries in Cali and elsewhere in Colombia. Hundreds of mourners clad in black crowded his funeral. Every major newspaper

carried a front-page story on the assassination. Fellow columnists dedicated entire columns in his honor. The immediate response was to blame traffickers from the Cali area.

Bedoya was selected to receive the Maria Moors Cabot Award posthumously. Rodrigo Lloreda traveled to New York City to accept the award, given every year by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The certificate is on display at the Gerardo Bedoya Study Center in the basement of El País' Cali headquarters.

More than two years after Bedoya's murder, the investigation is still in the early stages. Many people seem to just want it to go away. Some of the slain journalist's former colleagues at the paper were interested in talking. But Lloreda refused to meet with the IAPA. Similarly, the daily 's head of security would not cooperate. The security chief, responsible for coordinating the investigation at the paper, only hinted that many other angles needed to be explored.

Cali's Palace of Justice is a somewhat rundown, mint-green structure built like a maze in the 1950s. The regular court system is on the bottom floors. It also houses the offices of Cali's regional prosecutor, who represents a parallel justice network set up in 1991 to take on drug trafficking and terrorism cases. One of six regional offices in Colombia, it operates within the "faceless justice" designed to protect judges and witnesses at a time when more than 200 judges had been killed by drug traffickers.

The office is headed by Lucas Pulido, a small-framed civil servant with a studious face. To enter Pulido's office, a visitor must pass through a metal detector and hand identification to his bodyguards. This office handles all delicate cases involving drug trafficking and terrorism in the Department of Valle in western Colombia. Pulido had the Bedoya case from the beginning, until it was transferred to the human rights unit of the attorney general's office in Bogotá. There's no news of how the inquiry is progressing.

The Bedoya case fell into a shaky investigative system because most of the crimes against journalists were assigned to regional judges (faceless). Congress currently

is drafting legislation to end the system, but it's not yet clear what will happen to the evidence gathered so far.

In the past, a faceless judge managed the voluminous case file -about 500 pages - and kept it protected from public scrutiny, as required by the Colombian legal system.

In Pulido's office, Esperanza Leal, who coordinates the work of the faceless judges, defends the slowness of the investigation. "We have no real suspects," she explained. "We 'reworking with four hypotheses," but adds that Bedoya's family is to blame for the lack of progress. "We can 't get the family to talk to us. The family knows why he was killed."

The investigators have focused on the homosexual angle, without even inquiring about the drug trafficking connections. "What he wrote was not that important," Leal said. "We see no reason for traffickers to target him."

"He was not an important writer," asserted the press secretary, Jorge Mahecha. "His editorials did not move public opinion. He was not writing the worst things about drug trafficking. There were others," he pointed out almost triumphantly. Pulido and the woman appeared uncomfortable.

Who are the other writers in Cali? Puzzled, Mahecha looked around the room and, with a grin, said: "Well, there's Rodrigo Lloreda."

Because of the delays, leads have dried up, hampering a fair and complete investigation. The investigators followed many leads provided by Arango.

According to the special prosecutor's office in Cali, Arango presented herself as one of Bedoya's principal girlfriends. She told police that Bedoya did not have a sexual relationship with her and that she did not believe he had had any with other women. In corroboration, she named another of Bedoya's friends, a man whose truthfulness Bedoya's cousin questioned. The investigators have rejected any Arango involvement in the crime because, they say, Bedoya wanted to give

her an apartment. "Why would she have him killed if he was going to support her?", Leal asked.

Hugo Borrero, the cousin, said Bedoya would never offer such a deal to anyone. "He was a tightwad," he said.

Some Irregularities

The current investigators have overlooked even the most elemental rules of police work. For example, there was no follow-up on the sketch of the potential killer, which was drawn based on testimony from eyewitnesses. Both Pulido and Leal said their office considers such sketches useless for an investigation.

"Frankly, in Colombia, sketches based on eyewitnesses don't work," Leal said. "We all look like Indians. We all look alike, so how are we going to find the suspects?" she said, smirking. "These sketches are useful only in exceptional cases," Pulido added.

Is there hope for the Bedoya case? "We'll see, but we have hundreds of other cases like this one," said Leal, shrugging her shoulders.

Borrero, a towering man with white hair and beard, was Bedoya's first cousin and best friend. He and Bedoya knew each other's secrets. He believes the investigation raises the question of conspiracy, most probably by drug traffickers. "First they kill him. Now their aim is to assassinate his character," he said.