# [***Summer Reading: The downfall of King Cocaine***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:47K8-JK00-01K9-41B9-00000-00&context=1516831)

The New Zealand Herald

January 2, 2003 Thursday

Copyright 2003 The New Zealand Herald. All Rights Reserved.

**Section:** ENTERTAINMENT; Books; Reviews

**Length:** 1683 words

**Byline:** By TONY WALL

**Body**

*Mark Bowden:* Killing Pablo

Atlantic Monthy

$23.95

The bizarre photograph shows a group of soldiers toting machineguns and grinning cheerfully - like hunters with a prize deer - by the body of a man lying twisted on the tiles of a roof.

Hard to believe that their "game" was once one of the richest men in the world and one of the most powerful in Colombia.

Journalist Mark Bowden first saw the photo framed on the wall of a United States military source. "What's that?" he asked. "That, my friend, is Pablo Escobar," the military man said. "I keep that on my wall to remind me that no matter how rich you get in life, you can still be too big for your britches."

Bowden, author of Black Hawk Down and a journalist with the Philadelphia Inquirer, had until then been unaware of the extent of US military involvement in the hunt for Escobar, who had run a ruthless terror campaign alongside his billion-dollar cocaine cartel while a fugitive from Colombian authorities.

The photograph sparked his interest and he began researching a series of newspaper articles which would eventually become the book Killing Pablo.

The bulk of the book rests upon interviews Bowden conducted with Americans and Colombians involved in the pursuit of Escobar from 1989 until his death on December 2, 1993.

He was also able to obtain more than 1000 pages of mostly secret cables sent from the US Embassy in the Colombian capital, Bogota, to Washington. The documents amount to a daily record of the manhunt through the eyes of the Americans who took part.

The book is a portrait of perhaps the most notorious criminal of modern times, as well as a fascinating insight into how the US operates on foreign soil.

Pablo Escobar, from the northern Colombian city of Medellin, was born in 1949 and by the early 80s was a billionaire, controlling the notorious Medellin cartel that flooded the US with cocaine.

In 1989, Forbes magazine listed him as the seventh-richest man in the world.

Escobar killed anyone who crossed him, including hundreds of judges, police officers and politicians - and became one of the world's most feared terrorists.

But, Bowden writes, while he was a vicious thug, he had a social conscience, having set up a group called Medellin Without Slums which helped to house the poor.

He was a brutal crime boss but also a politician with a winning personal style that, at least for some, transcended the ugliness of his deeds.

At his death, he was mourned by thousands. Crowds rioted when his casket was carried into the streets of Medellin.

At his height, Escobar built small, remote-controlled submarines that could carry up to 2000kg of cocaine from the northern coast of Colombia to waters just off Puerto Rico, where divers would remove the shipment and transport it to Miami in speedboats.

He would send fleets of planes north, each carrying 1000kg of cocaine. Eventually he was buying Boeing 727s, stripping out the seats, and loading as much as 10,000kg a flight. Customs intercepted only a fraction of the shipments.

Escobar was above the law, and in Medellin he created a dual system of justice. The violence committed in the course of his business - the murder rate doubled in the city during this period - was ignored by the police.

Escobar regarded murders committed by his hit-men, or sicarios, as matters of no consequence to society at large. It was strictly business, a grim necessity in a state without a strong legal system.

He considered it his right to use violence on his own account, and on occasion did so publicly, binding a worker he had caught stealing from his estate hand and foot and personally kicking him into his swimming pool in front of horrified guests.

By the early 80s, much of the ruling class in Bogota had made its peace with drug trafficking. Some saw cocaine simply as a new industry, one that had created a wealthy, young social class.

The narcos, as the cocaine bosses were called, wanted the state to legitimise their enterprise, and given the money they were ready to spread around and the building boom going on in Medellin, some intellectuals saw the cocaine trade as potential economic salvation for Andean nations.

Bowden says Escobar could have continued pulling strings in Colombian politics through a long lifetime, but the mistake he made was to covet a public role - hedecided to enter politics himself.

In 1978 he was elected as a substitute city council member in Medellin. In 1982 he successfully ran for Congress, again standing as a substitute.

The post carried automatic judicial immunity, so he could no longer be prosecuted for crimes under Colombian law. He was also entitled to a diplomatic visa, which he began using to make trips to the US with his family. Escobar told his friends he intended some day soon to be President.

But his brush with politics was short-lived, and he retired from public service in 1984, when political rivals revealed his link to drug trafficking and his previous criminal convictions.

Around this time the US began moving against cocaine billionaires. President Ronald Reagan created a Cabinet-level taskforce to co-ordinate efforts against drug-smuggling, with Vice-President George Bush in charge.

The drug lords would become not just law enforcement targets but military ones - an important distinction. In 1986 Reagan signed a national security directive which for the first time declared drug trafficking a threat to national security, opening the door to direct military involvement in the war on drugs.

At the same time, mainstream attitudes towards cocaine use underwent a dramatic shift. In June 1986, basketball star Len Bias collapsed and died after snorting cocaine.

The decade-long flirtation with the white powder by affluent young Americans had begun to sour anyway, but Bias' death sealed it.

Colombia had signed a treaty that recognised the shipment of illegal drugs to be a crime against the US. As such, it called for suspected drug traffickers to be extradited for trial to the US. The prospect struck fear into the hearts of men like Escobar, who declared "better a tomb in Colombia than a prison cell in the United States".

So Escobar effectively went to ground in his hometown of Medellin, moving between safe houses and protected by crooked police and officials.

He continued to run the Medellin cartel and carried out a series of murders, assassinations, kidnappings and bombings that kept Colombia in a constant state of seige. No one was immune from his wrath, and victims included the Justice Minister and a front-running presidential candidate.

In 1989 the Colombian Government set up a special search team to hunt down Escobar and other cocaine kingpins. Colonel Hugo Martinez was appointed its commander, a post considered one of the most dangerous in Colombia.

In the first 15 days, 30 of the colonel's 200 men were killed. Escobar's army of hitmen picked them off one by one. But Martinez bravely stuck to the task, and would be there four years later when Escobar was finally killed.

At the same time that the search team was being set up, a secret US Army unit specialising in electronic surveillance was sent to Colombia to help to track down Escobar. Codenamed Centra Spike, the unit's speciality was finding people.

Eavesdropping on radio and telephone conversations from the air, its members were capable of pinpointing the origin of a radio or ***cellphone*** call with amazing accuracy within seconds. The unit began tracking Escobar using a small aircraft stacked with millions of dollars of electronic gear.

Each time Escobar phoned or radioed a friend or family member, the unit would track the call and the search team would be dispatched to take him out.

But, incredibly, Escobar was able to avoid capture for years, despite having the US Army and its most sophisticated equipment on his tail. He did this through talking in code on the radio, tips from corrupt officials and bumbling by the search team.

There was a brief reprieve for Colombia in 1991 when Escobar came to an agreement with the Government which led to him being imprisoned in a "jail" of his own making. It was in fact a mansion, and the guards were on his payroll. He was able to come and go as he pleased and continued to run his cocaine operation.

After a year, the Government decided to move him to a proper jail, but when troops were sent to get him, he escaped and went back into hiding for the last year of his life.

The pressure on Escobar became intense during this period. Rival cocaine cartel members and families of his victims formed a vigilante group called Los Pepes, which systematically went about murdering Escobar's associates and members of his extended family until he became isolated.

Los Pepes boasted that they killed up to 300 people. Crucially, they were fed information by the search team, which was closely aligned with Centra Spike, raising the likelihood that the US was involved in the murders of Colombian civilians.

In the end it was a combination of hard work by the search team and sheer blind luck which caught Escobar. The team had been listening in to his coded radio conversations with his son for several days.

Colonel Martinez's son, a member of the search team who was a radio expert, was tracking the signal in a Medellin suburb when he suddenly saw Escobar standing at a window.

Dozens of team members surrounded the house, and Escobar was shot after climbing out a window on to a roof. It appeared he may have been shot in the leg first, then executed at close range - a bullet had entered at the centre of his right ear and exited just in front of the left ear, passing straight through his brain.

Hundreds of millions was spent on the hunt for Escobar, but his death did not stop the flow of drugs to the US. Rival cocaine cartels simply took over the business.

But the killing was a major coup for the authorities who had hunted him for so long and brought to an end a terror campaign of incredible savagery: 30 judges killed, 457 policemen, 20 murders a day for two months. Finally Colombia could move out from Escobar's dark shadow.

No wonder the soldiers in that photo could not suppress wide grins.

**Load-Date:** January 1, 2003

**End of Document**