
REVIEW ESSAYS

DRUGS, LIES, AND AUDIOTAPE: The Samper Crisis in Colombia

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- SÍ, SABIA: VIAJE A TRAVES DEL EXPEDIENTE DE ERNESTO SAMPER.* By Ingrid Betancourt Pulecio. (Santafé de Bogotá: Temas de Hoy, 1996. Pp. 414.)
- LA CRISIS: CUATRO AÑOS A BORDO DEL GOBIERNO DE SAMPER.* By Luis Cañón. (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1998. Pp. 528.)
- PODER, JUSTICIA E INDIGNIDAD: EL JUICIO AL PRESIDENTE DE LA REPUBLICA ERNESTO SAMPER PIZANO.* By the Comisión Ciudadana de Seguimiento. (Santafé de Bogotá: Utópica, 1996. Pp. 219.)
- TRAS LAS HUELLAS DE LA CRISIS POLITICA.* Edited by Francisco Leal Buitrago. (Santafé de Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, Fundación Friedrich Ebert de Colombia, and the Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales, UN, 1996. Pp. 298.)
- LA PARABOLA DEL ELEFANTE.* By Fernando Londoño Hoyos. (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana and Monte Verde, 1996. Pp. 494.)
- LA CONSPIRACION: EL LIBRO BLANCO DEL JUICIO AL PRESIDENTE SAMPER.* By Juan Manuel López Caballero. (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1997. Pp. 264.)
- LA VERDAD SOBRE LAS MENTIRAS.* By Santiago Medina Serna. (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1997. Pp. 256.)
- LA VERDAD PARA LA HISTORIA: DEFENSA DEL PRESIDENTE ERNESTO SAMPER PIZANO ANTE EL CONGRESO.* By Luis Guillermo Nieto Roa. (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana and Monteverde, 1996. Pp. 171.)

AQUI ESTOY Y AQUI ME QUEDO: TESTIMONIO DE UN GOBIERNO.

By Ernesto Samper Pizano. (Santafé de Bogotá: El Ancora, 2000. Pp. 393.)
UN PRESIDENTE EN CONTRAESCAPE. By Enrique Santos Calderón.
(Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1997. Pp. 384.)

EL PRESIDENTE QUE SE IBA A CAER: DIARIO SECRETO DE TRES PERIODISTAS SOBRE EL 8.000. By Mauricio Vargas, Jorge Lesmes, and Edgar Téllez. (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1996. Pp. 462.)

YO ACUSO: UN DOCUMENTADO PLIEGO DE CARGOS CONTRA EL PRESIDENTE SAMPER. By Pablo Victoria. (Santafé de Bogotá: Temas de Hoy, 1997. Pp. 237.)

Three days after his election as president of Colombia in June 1994, Ernesto Samper was accused by Andrés Pastrana, his campaign opponent, of having accepted money from the Cali drug cartel to finance his presidential campaign. Pastrana's accusation was based on an audiocassette given to him the previous week by a sympathetic member of the police intelligence service. The cassette contained taped telephone conversations between the top leaders of the Cali cartel and a Colombian journalist who served as a virtual public spokesperson for the cartel. Although the conversations were somewhat cryptic, they apparently referred to a decision by the cartel to channel the equivalent of several million dollars into the Samper presidential campaign. Moreover, the conversations seemed to indicate that Samper was aware of this deal, as were his top campaign officials. Pastrana's accusation, together with subsequent testimony and evidence, led eventually to impeachment proceedings against Samper in 1995 and again in 1996. On both occasions, amidst highly criticized procedures, the Cámara de Representantes voted against impeachment. Samper served the remainder of his term in a highly polarized political atmosphere and left office in August 1998.

The Samper drug scandal culminated more than two decades of growing political influence by drug-trafficking cartels. The violence and political corruption fomented by the drug cartels have become major obstacles to democratic consolidation in Colombia. Yet for much of the past twenty years, the corrupting influence of the drug cartels appeared to be limited to the lower and intermediate levels of the political system—police officers, customs officials, judges, local mayors and town council members, and some national legislators. The Samper drug scandal revealed that by the mid-1990s, the political influence of drug traffickers had made its way to the top of the Colombian political system.

A number of books have emerged in Colombia in recent years purporting to make sense of the Samper drug crisis. Their authors have included journalists, key protagonists in the scandal, and academic observers. The deep polarization resulting in Colombia from the Samper crisis is apparent in these publications. Critics view Samper and his supporters as

crooked politicians who made secret deals with drug traffickers to protect the dealers' interests in return for campaign resources. Supporters view the president's opponents as conspirators who, in collaboration with the United States, sought to overthrow a popularly elected president who wanted to carry out a liberal social program. The books often come to diametrically opposed conclusions with regard to key questions: To what extent did cartel money enter the presidential campaign? Did Samper know about the cartel financing? Should Samper have been impeached and removed from office? What are the deeper implications of the Samper drug scandal for the Colombian political system?

The Journalists

The most appropriate place for interested readers to begin is with the journalistic accounts of the scandal. The first and perhaps most widely read account was *El presidente que se iba a caer*, written by Mauricio Vargas, Jorge Lesmes, and Edgar Téllez, three journalists affiliated with the national newsmagazine *Semana* during the Samper administration. The book was written in the form of a diary in which the authors recount in chronological fashion their investigative efforts. The style recalls Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *All the President's Men* on the U.S. Watergate scandal, with the journalists taking on the role of key protagonists in the unfolding drama. While this approach is often fascinating, as when the reporters meet with unidentified informants who provide valuable information, it is occasionally irritating, particularly when the authors ignore important developments in which they were not personally involved.

It must be acknowledged nonetheless that Vargas, Lesmes, and Téllez played a crucial role in uncovering key aspects of the drug scandal. Throughout these investigations, they were privy to an extraordinary amount of confidential information from intelligence officers, former campaign officials, politicians, and informants from the Cali cartel. Lesmes became a key confidant of Santiago Medina, Samper's former campaign treasurer, who eventually confessed to Lesmes the details of how the cartel helped finance the Samper campaign. As their investigation proceeded, the journalists became increasingly convinced by Medina's story, and their critical reports in *Semana* resulted in death threats against them. One of the authors' more sobering discoveries was that the death threats originated from a telephone in the presidential palace.

Although *El presidente que se iba a caer* provides a fascinating account of the Samper crisis, it has provoked controversy in Colombia because of the liberty with which the journalists utilized direct quotations from conversations that were supposedly "off the record." Moreover, the book is disappointing in that its detailed narrative ends in January 1996, after the first impeachment effort against Samper failed in the Cámara de Representantes.

The journalists inexplicably chose to summarize the more serious impeachment proceedings in the summer of 1996 in a brief thirteen-page epilogue. This abrupt ending unfortunately mars an otherwise absorbing investigative report.

The most complete narrative of the scandal to date is *La crisis: Cuatro años a bordo del gobierno de Samper* by Luis Cañón, currently general editor of the newspaper *El Espectador*. Cañón's book is rich in detail and provides an excellent overview of what the author characterizes as "the gravest political crisis of Colombian history in the last half century" (p. 16). Unlike the other works reviewed here, *La crisis* presents Samper as neither angel nor devil but rather as a complex, three-dimensional individual. Above all, Samper is revealed to be a shrewd politician, as shown in his ability to take the initiative, divide the opposition, and transform the debate over the drug scandal into a debate over his social program.

At the same time, Samper is portrayed as a tragic figure for whom each victory is pyrrhic. His most notable victory was, ironically, his success in dismantling the Cali cartel in the summer of 1995. His celebration of this achievement was fleeting, however. It was followed almost immediately by the testimony of his campaign treasurer, Santiago Medina, who directly implicated Samper in accepting cartel funds for his campaign. Moreover, the United States credited the Colombian police and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) for this victory rather than Samper.

A strength of Cañón's narrative is his emphasis on the interventionist role played by the United States throughout the drug scandal. The United States participated in the initial taping of the telephone conversations of the Cali cartel leaders that unleashed the crisis in the first place. Subsequently, using the threat of "decertification," the United States pressured the Samper administration to take a more forceful approach in the war on drug trafficking. Washington demanded the appointment and resignation of specific Colombian officials as well as the adoption of specific policies such as lengthening sentences for convicted traffickers, introducing legislation against money laundering, and renewing extradition of traffickers to stand trial in the United States. When the Colombian Cámara de Representantes ultimately failed to impeach Samper on the scandal charges, the United States responded by revoking Samper's visa to enter the country.

Despite the many strengths of *La crisis*, Cañón sidesteps the central issue of the extent of Samper's involvement in the campaign-financing scandal. In short, Cañón fails to provide a detailed examination of the available evidence and offers no conclusions as to Samper's culpability. Such an undertaking would seem to be a function of investigative journalism, and its absence is regrettable in an otherwise admirable narrative.

The third journalistic effort, Enrique Santos Calderón's *Un presidente en Contraescape*, does not pretend to be an objective account of the Samper drug scandal. Santos, currently codirector of Colombia's largest daily news-

paper, *El Tiempo*, was the most widely read opinion columnist in the country during the Samper administration. The book takes its title from the name of his biweekly column, "Contraescape," and is an edited collection of his columns. Santos is an eminently readable yet incisive commentator. His observations are keen, his arguments straightforward, and his criticisms biting. One of the most interesting aspects of this book is Santos's evolution from staunchly defending Samper to conveying an attitude of unrelenting hostility.

Santos never accuses Samper directly of having knowingly accepted campaign money from the Cali cartel. Rather, the columnist argues that even if Samper did not know of this occurrence, he must personally shoulder the political responsibility for what happened in his campaign. Moreover, Santos argues convincingly that Samper's refusal to resign from office only deepened Colombia's enormous problems of governability. While Santos is harshly critical of Samper, he also condemns the "complicit tolerance" of ordinary Colombians regarding the political corruption epitomized by the Samper scandal. At one point, he declares with resignation, "we deserve [Samper]" (p. 168) and laments that "if a president elected with drug money continues in power as if nothing happened, it is because to Colombians this does not appear to be that grave a matter" (p. 171).

Santos's insightful opinion pieces are occasionally off the mark. For example, he predicted early on in the crisis that Samper would resign from office and later that the United States would not decertify Colombia in its annual review of international cooperation in the war on drugs. Despite these infrequent bouts of wishful thinking, Santos is usually a sober commentator who is also passionately committed to attacking the seemingly endemic corruption in the Colombian political system. *Un presidente in Contraescape* represents well the sector of Colombians who were outraged by the revelations of political corruption in the Samper drug crisis.

The Campaign Treasurer and the Campaign Manager

The Samper drug scandal would never have reached crisis proportions except for the testimony given by Samper's campaign treasurer, Santiago Medina. His revelations in 1995 led to the first impeachment process against Samper. Two years later, Medina published his version of events in *La verdad sobre las mentiras*. The core of the book consists of the testimony that Medina gave to the public prosecutor's office. Because his accusations were central to the scandal, they are worth recounting in detail.

Santiago Medina charged that the Samper campaign received from the Cali cartel during the 1994 campaign some six billion Colombian pesos (about six million dollars U.S. at the time). Medina's principal contact with the cartel was journalist Alberto Giraldo, whose voice later appeared on the tape that unleashed the scandal. According to Medina, Giraldo first offered

to facilitate cartel financing of the campaign in early April 1994. Although this initial offer was rejected, by late April the financial situation of the Samper campaign was desperate. At this point, campaign manager Fernando Botero spoke to Samper about the possibility of receiving funds from the Cali cartel. Samper agreed but demanded plausible deniability. Medina claims that Samper's reply to Botero was, "Do what you have to do, but don't let me know about it" (pp. 102–3).

Medina then flew to Cali on 6 May, where he met directly with the leaders of the cartel. They offered to give the Samper campaign a billion pesos and to help finance a runoff election if necessary. After Samper failed to defeat Pastrana with a majority of votes in the first round of the presidential election, Medina returned to Cali on 1 June to arrange for new funds from the cartel. This time Medina carried a memorandum stating that Samper appreciated the cartel's economic assistance to his campaign, that Samper's administration would respect the cartel members' legal rights and those of their family members, and that Samper would support a lenient justice policy if the cartel members would surrender to Colombian authorities. After receiving the memorandum, the cartel leaders agreed to send five billion pesos to the Samper campaign in Bogotá.

These charges dropped like a bombshell. Samper reacted by vigorously denying them and calling on the Congreso de la República to open an investigation into his conduct. His response led the Cámara de Representantes to begin in 1995 the first impeachment process against the president.

Medina's story has a certain ring of truth to it, particularly his detailed descriptions of his interaction with the cartel. Other testimony and pieces of evidence later corroborated several of Medina's specific charges (such as how the money was transported from Cali to Bogotá and later distributed to the regional treasurers of the Samper campaign). At the same time, *La verdad sobre las mentiras* is marred by gossip, rumors, and hearsay. The book displays enough questionable assertions to plant a seed of doubt in careful readers' minds as to the veracity of all Medina's claims. Samper and his lawyers were quick to pick up on this weakness and strove mightily to undermine Medina's credibility. Whatever the ultimate accuracy of Medina's assertions, the testimony contained in this book initiated the impeachment process against Samper. Students of the Samper drug crisis will find Medina's book indispensable for their research.

Medina's testimony, despite its explosive nature, was ultimately insufficient to bring about Samper's impeachment. After a four-month preliminary investigation (highly flawed by most accounts), the Comisión de Acusación e Investigación of the Cámara de Representantes voted on 13 December 1995 against formal investigation of the president. The impeachment saga appeared to have ended. A month later, however, Samper's former campaign manager, Fernando Botero, decided to confess. Son of the famous Colombian painter and sculptor of the same name, Botero was one of the

country's most respected politicians. His testimony confirmed Medina's accusations that the Samper campaign had received significant funds from the Cali cartel, although Botero claimed to have been unaware of this activity at the time, which he surmised after the fact. Botero's confession reignited the Samper drug scandal and set into motion a second impeachment process that culminated in June 1996 with a 111–43 vote by the full Cámara de Representantes against bringing charges against Samper before the Senado.

Botero's views are faithfully represented in *La parábola del elefante*, which was written by his lawyer, Fernando Londoño Hoyos. Londoño took the title of his book from a pointed observation made by Archbishop Pedro Rubiano of Bogotá. Referring to an assertion by Samper that if drug money had entered his campaign, it had done so behind his back, the archbishop remarked, "If they let an elephant into your house, you cannot avoid seeing it." The implication was that the sheer quantity of illicit money that had poured into the campaign's coffers made it impossible for Samper to have been ignorant of what was happening. The title also suggests the strategy taken by Londoño throughout the book: to sidestep the involvement of his client, Fernando Botero, in order to focus all of his energies on Samper's complicity in the drug scandal.

Londoño's book is thus an incessant attack on Samper's protestations of innocence and ignorance. Londoño seeks to demolish Samper's testimony, particularly this presidential claim: "I do not personally know anyone linked with drug trafficking, much less have I had a political, commercial, or any other type of relationship with persons outside the law" (p. 14). Londoño asserts that this testimony is "absolutely false" and presents an array of evidence in his effort to demonstrate that Samper had relations with drug traffickers going far back in time. Although Londoño does not succeed in proving a long-standing relationship between Samper and the Cali cartel, he provides more than enough evidence to undermine the credibility of Samper's statement. From this point, Londoño proceeds rather convincingly to refute Samper's contentions that he had nothing to do with the finances of his campaign and that the drug money could have entered into the campaign without his knowledge.

Londoño draws on Botero's testimony in *La parábola del elefante* to argue that Samper's campaign incorporated two opposing tactics: one that relied on the votes provided by traditional political bosses (*caciques*) and the other that attracted the support of independent voters by constructing an image of a new "modern Samper." Londoño observes that Samper's decision to pursue both tactics simultaneously required tremendous financial resources and suggests that this course ultimately prompted Samper to turn to the Cali cartel for money in the second round of elections.

On the whole, *La parábola del elefante* succeeds in poking holes in much of Samper's defense. But Londoño's credibility suffers from his extremely

partisan stance. In his role as Botero's lawyer, Londoño minimizes his client's role in the scandal. For example, Londoño accepts without question the testimony of Santiago Medina on how drug money entered the campaign. But he conveniently ignores the fact that Medina testified that it was Botero who sent him to the cartel in the name of Samper. Likewise, Londoño's argument that Botero had nothing to do with distributing the drug money once it entered the campaign coffers is directly contradicted by Medina's testimony. The fact that Botero chose to admit his "knowledge" of the drug financing without assuming any responsibility for it struck many observers as ludicrous. Samper himself remarked to the *Semana* journalists that if Botero had actually confessed his participation in the drug financing, "he would have achieved much more credibility and, quite simply, he would have toppled me that same night" (Vargas, Lesmes, and Téllez, p. 446).

The Congressional Accusers

The Samper drug scandal ultimately played itself out in the halls of the Colombian Congreso. Although Samper's supporters dominated the Cámara de Representantes, his opponents were vociferous in their accusations against the president. Perhaps the most loquacious of Samper's accusers was Conservative legislator Pablo Victoria. In June 1996, Victoria made a three-hour speech in the Cámara urging his colleagues to impeach Samper. A year later, he published *Yo acuso: Un documentado pliego de cargos contra el Presidente Samper*, essentially Victoria's congressional speech interspersed with background explanations of the text.

Victoria based much of his argument on the testimony given by Santiago Medina and Fernando Botero. He acknowledges that there are discrepancies in these testimonies regarding dates and meetings, but he argues that "behind the insignificant discrepancies [is] the truth" (p. 18). Victoria proceeds in a relatively systematic fashion to examine the evidence linking Samper to the drug-financing scandal. Toward the end of *Yo acuso*, he admits that no smoking gun directly implicates Samper. Victoria goes on to argue, however, that the accumulation of evidence strongly indicates Samper's knowledge and approval of the drug financing of his campaign. Victoria criticizes in particular the accounting practices of the Samper campaign, lamenting that the campaign finance accounts contain so many inconsistencies that the true amount of income and expenditures may never be known. Nonetheless, after reviewing the reports submitted by the public prosecutor's office and the Consejo Nacional Electoral, Victoria concludes that the accounting fraud perpetrated by the Samper campaign ranged somewhere between seven and ten billion pesos (pp. 145–46).

Unfortunately, the merit of *Yo acuso*—the careful examination of the campaign finance accounts—is undermined by Victoria's visceral animosity toward Samper. Victoria jumps on the slightest pretext to vilify the ac-

cused president, often reading into Samper's testimony conclusions that are not self-evident. Victoria shows the same hostility toward Heyne Mogollón, the highly questioned leader of the Comisión de Acusación e Investigación, referring to him repeatedly as "the accessory after the fact." Although the conduct of both Samper and Mogollón can be legitimately questioned, Victoria's venomous approach lessens his credibility. A more evenhanded analysis would have lent greater weight to his assertions and disposed readers to accept his conclusions more readily.

One of Victoria's fellow legislators, Ingrid Betancourt, takes precisely this approach in *Sí, sabía: Viaje a través del expediente de Ernesto Samper*. This work is a well-documented analysis of the evidence in the Samper scandal and a more personal narrative of the author's transformation from a staunch Samper supporter into one of his strongest accusers in the Congreso. Betancourt begins by recounting her decision in 1993 to support the Samper campaign when she decided to run for a seat in the Cámara de Representantes. She notes that her connections to Samper were familial (their fathers had been friends) as well as ideological (a shared desire to make economic liberalization more humane). Her confidence in the future president led her to direct a Samper campaign office in the Usaquén neighborhood of Bogotá.

Despite this background, Betancourt's opinion of Samper had changed significantly by the time the scandal reached the Congreso. She became one of the most prominent legislative critics of not only Samper but the lack of transparency of the impeachment process itself. Because she did not trust the official report of the Cámara de Representantes' Comisión de Acusación e Investigación, Betancourt determined to undertake her own investigation, which led her to conclude that Samper was guilty of several crimes. First, he was guilty of providing false documentation to the Veeduría (the overseer's office) and the Consejo Nacional Electoral. Second, he engaged in fraud in deceiving the council with manipulated financial accounts in order to receive approximately one billion pesos in matching funds from the state treasury for his campaign. Third, Samper provided false testimony to the Cámara's Comisión de Acusación e Investigación, pretending to believe that his campaign had respected the electoral laws and that he had been duped by his collaborators when in fact he had been aware of all significant developments in his campaign. Betancourt argues that these crimes alone were more than sufficient to impeach Samper. She points out, however, that it was much more difficult to demonstrate that Samper had actually approved of the drug financing of his campaign. Ultimately, Betancourt falls back on "the elephant thesis" of Archbishop Rubiano—that it was virtually impossible for such an enormous amount of money (all in cash) to have entered Samper's headquarters in the final days of the campaign without his knowledge. Even if it was possible, the revelations of the taped conversations shortly after the elections provided Samper with all the elements necessary to understand what had happened in his campaign.

Sí, sabía is to be counted among the most serious of the publications antagonistic to Samper. Betancourt convincingly supports two major conclusions: that the Samper campaign suffered from a number of grave irregularities, including the unregistered receipt of drug money; and that the impeachment process itself was grievously flawed.

Samper's Defenders

While Samper was confronted by a formidable array of opponents, he also could count on the support of a significant majority of the members of the Congreso as well as the services of Luis Guillermo Nieto Roa, a masterful defense attorney. Nieto's basic defense of the president claimed, "Not a single piece of evidence exists that demonstrates that the president took part in the conduct he is accused of" (p. 10). Nieto portrays Samper instead as the victim of the machinations of Santiago Medina and Fernando Botero. Soon after Samper's exoneration in the second impeachment process, Nieto published *La verdad para la historia: Defensa del Presidente Ernesto Samper Pizano ante el Congreso*, a book comprising Samper's testimony before the Cámara's Comisión de Acusación e Investigación as well as Nieto's written defense of the president.

Nieto's skill as an attorney bolstered Samper's testimony considerably. In *La verdad para la historia*, Nieto systematically reviews forty-three different testimonies collected during the course of the investigation (excluding those of Botero and Medina). From these testimonies, Nieto draws four major conclusions. First, none of the testimonies directly implicated Samper in any wrongdoing. Second, Samper did not become involved during the campaign with questions about campaign financing, an aspect of the campaign completely managed by Fernando Botero and Santiago Medina. Third, Samper's directions were emphatic in demanding that all campaign contributions come from persons with a clean background. And fourth, if despite these forceful directions, money of illicit origin entered the campaign, it happened despite the candidate's wishes, and an effort was made to keep Samper from finding out. Nieto acknowledges that testimony indicates that "there arrived at the regional treasuries cash or checks of doubtful origins and that those behind this operation were Medina and Botero. However, one can never establish any personal responsibility of the candidate Ernesto Samper, given that in these declarations there is no charge against him" (p. 48). In short, drug money may well have entered the campaign, but it was done behind Samper's back and against his expressed wishes.

Nieto also acknowledges in *La verdad para la historia* that there are reasons to believe Medina's testimony that he made several trips to Cali, in accordance with Botero's instructions, to speak to members of the cartel and arrange the contribution of funds for the second round of the election. The outcome of these efforts was positive, and money was sent to Medina's

house in Bogotá. If this version is correct, then where did the drug money go if it was not employed in the Samper campaign? Nieto's answer is that the money sent by the cartel for the use of the Samper campaign was actually taken by Medina and Botero for their own enrichment. That is, Medina and Botero tricked the cartel into contributing money for the Samper campaign and then stole the money for themselves. Nieto's explanation is creative but suggests a level of chicanery on the part of Medina and Botero that is hard to believe, particularly considering the cartel's capacity to retaliate. Moreover, it is doubtful that the cartel would have contributed millions of dollars to the campaign without some assurance that Samper knew about the gift and would be influenced in his future policy toward them. Finally, it is unclear what criteria Nieto uses to accept readily most of Medina's testimony while rejecting the aspects that directly implicate Samper.

Even if Nieto's alternate explanation is unpersuasive, he is a skilled lawyer who is often able to produce what all defense attorneys seek—a reasonable doubt in his audience. This is particularly true with regard to the testimony of Botero, whom Nieto characterizes as a habitual liar who misleads “with grace, with style, and with the help of foreign advisors as well” (p. 109). Nonetheless, much of Medina's testimony and parts of Botero's remain persuasive. Disinterested readers may well find themselves unconvinced in the end by the arguments of the president's lawyer.

A second notable volume defending Samper is *La conspiración: El libro blanco del juicio al Presidente Samper* by Juan Manuel López Caballero, son of former Liberal president Alfonso López Michelsen (1974–1978). López Caballero argues that the denunciation of Samper presented by Public Prosecutor Alfonso Valdivieso to the Cámara de Representantes in fact had “no legal or factual element to sustain it” (p. 33). Rather, Valdivieso's denunciation was “a political decision” in which “his interests and connections took precedence over his status as a magistrate obliged to defend the cause of justice” (p. 33). To sustain this position, López Caballero enters into a minutely detailed legal disquisition aimed at demonstrating that the charges against Samper lacked all legal substance. In particular, he challenges Valdivieso's use of the crime of “illicit enrichment” to charge Samper with accepting drug money for the purposes of campaign financing. Although López Caballero's argument is interesting, most readers will probably concur that such legal hair-splitting diverts attention away from the central question of whether drug money was used to finance the campaign and the extent of Samper's knowledge or participation in this event.

On these questions, López Caballero acknowledges that Valdivieso has shown that the Cali cartel sent cash to the Samper campaign. López Caballero argues nevertheless that the evidence indicates that the amount of money sent was significantly less than the figure claimed by the prosecutor and that the majority of this money never entered the campaign coffers. After reviewing the testimony of Fernando Botero and Santiago Medina,

López Caballero offers his “most likely” scenario of what happened. Botero was worried about the second round of presidential elections and interpreted what he believed to be Samper’s desire to accept money from the Cali cartel. Botero then utilized Medina to carry out the operation, arguing that Samper had approved but the process was to be managed by Botero. Most of the campaign leaders were simply unaware of the operation, or if they suspected anything, decided not to investigate. Samper might have suspected something but chose not to intervene. More likely, Samper was completely unaware of anything suspicious occurring in his campaign. Although López Caballero’s explanation falls within the realm of plausibility, it is ultimately unclear why this is “the most likely scenario.” Why is this scenario any more likely than Medina’s story, in which Samper knew and approved of the drug financing of his campaign?

In the final part of *La conspiración*, López Caballero elaborates his thesis that a conspiracy led by neoliberal partisans actually motivated the effort to remove Samper from office. The leaders of this group of conspirators were to be found in the editorial offices of the newsmagazine *Semana*, supplemented by certain columnists from the newspaper *El Tiempo* and certain Conservative publications such as *La Prensa* and *Dinero*. These conspirators were in turn supported by officials in Washington, D.C., in the Organization of American States (meaning former Colombian President César Gaviria), and in other multilateral organizations. According to López Caballero, the conspirators feared that the Samper administration would undermine the new economic model put in place by the previous Gaviria administration, which featured free trade, financial liberalization, privatization, and a tight money policy. The conspirators’ insistence on maintaining these neoliberal policies led them to the extreme of seeking to impeach President Samper under the guise of campaign irregularities.

Unfortunately, López Caballero’s conspiracy theory lacks substance. There is no doubt that most of those labeled by López Caballero as “conspirators” favored the impeachment of Samper and that many of them favored liberal economic policies. But to argue that the latter position was the cause of the former one, without offering any supporting evidence, is poor scholarship to say the least. López Caballero chooses to ignore the fact that most of the so-called conspirators were appalled by the depth of corruption implied by the Samper drug scandal as well as deeply troubled by the evident problems of governability that the crisis had produced. He also overlooks the fact that many Samper opponents, epitomized by Ingrid Betancourt, were not proponents of neoliberal policies. Not least, López Caballero’s obsession with his conspiracy notion leads him to ignore the real conspiracy to overthrow Samper, led by a small group of writers, former politicians, and military officers. This intent, described succinctly by Luis Cañón, ultimately failed to prosper (see Cañón, 261–64). In the end, López Caballero’s

sweeping condemnation of Samper's opponents in *La conspiración* is unconvincing and does little to rehabilitate Samper's image.

The Citizens' Oversight Commission

One of the most significant, although often overlooked, actors during the second impeachment process was the Comisión Ciudadana de Seguimiento (the Citizens' Oversight Commission). It was created during a general assembly of organizations from Colombian civil society in April 1996 as a citizen's watchdog group that would oversee the impeachment process. The commission consisted of fourteen highly respected citizens, several of them noted legal scholars. During the second impeachment process, the commission took various legal actions aimed at securing a fair and open investigation. After the Cámara de Representantes exonerated Samper in June 1996, the commission reported their final conclusions in *Poder, justicia e indignidad: El juicio al Presidente de la República Ernesto Samper Pizano*. This volume constitutes without question the most serious investigation of the facts of the drug-financing scandal published to date. The overall conclusion is sobering: the evidence indicates that Ernesto Samper knew and approved of the financing of his presidential campaign by the Cali cartel and therefore should have been impeached.

The fact that Samper was not impeached reflects to a significant degree the vast array of irregularities that occurred during the congressional investigation. More than a dozen major ones took place and were denounced by the Comisión Ciudadana de Seguimiento when they occurred, usually to little avail. The most serious irregularity was the failure of the Cámara de Representantes to preclude several legislators from participating in the impeachment process because they had received money from the Samper campaign that allegedly was contributed by the Cali cartel. Other disturbing events were the indirect payoffs made by the Samper administration to members of the Cámara's Comisión de Acusación e Investigación in awarding disproportionate pork-barrel spending to their districts. The Comisión Ciudadana de Seguimiento also details several ways in which the Comisión de Acusación e Investigación demonstrated a distinct lack of interest in investigating the Samper campaign rigorously. For example, that commission ended its investigation prematurely, omitted as evidence the taped conversations of the cartel leaders, refused to carry out a rigorous technical examination of Samper's campaign accounts, and failed to analyze the credibility of Samper's own testimony. The commission also details twenty-one instances in which Samper's testimony appeared to be false, misleading, or lacking in credibility.

The Comisión Ciudadana de Seguimiento convincingly establishes, based on several different testimonies, that money from the Cali cartel entered

the Samper campaign. Moreover, the commission managed to trace the itinerary of this illicit money without needing to rely on the testimony of Botero or Medina, the audiocassette, or even the financial audit of the public prosecutor's office. Even more disturbing, the commission sets forth some twenty-five pieces of evidence or logical deductions that together lead one to infer that Samper participated in the drug financing of his campaign. It should be underscored nonetheless that the commission produced no smoking gun. Thus some readers may still be willing to grant Samper the ultimate benefit of the doubt. Still, the accumulation of arguments is impressive, and most readers will be inclined to agree with the commission that in all likelihood Samper was guilty as charged.

The President

The most recent volume published on the crisis is the memoir written by Samper himself, *Aquí estoy y aquí me quedo: Testimonio de un gobierno*. The book was meant to provide an autobiographical reflection on Samper's four-year administration and therefore covers much ground in addition to the drug-financing scandal. Yet over half of its chapters are related directly or indirectly to the crisis and its aftereffects. This well-written memoir is replete with the humor for which Samper is justifiably renowned. It consists of thirty-two substantive chapters, each one a self-contained essay on a particular issue. The lack of background detail and the absence of a chronological structure, however, require readers to possess some previous knowledge of the drug crisis.

Samper vigorously defends his actions relating to the drug scandal. He admits to having made poor selections for his campaign treasurer (Medina) and campaign manager (Botero). But he maintains nevertheless that he was ignorant of any financial misdeeds that occurred during his campaign. Rather, Samper repeats the hypothesis first articulated by his lawyer, Luis Guillermo Nieto, to the effect that Botero and Medina likely engaged in a scam meant to enrich themselves. He also embraces the argument of Juan Manuel López Caballero that a conspiracy existed to bring down his government, by violent means if necessary. Particularly notable in this memoir is the extent to which Samper fails to confront the details of the specific charges made against him. Even more surprising is the almost complete lack of reference to Santiago Medina. While Fernando Botero is the subject of an entire chapter, Medina and the specific accusations he made regarding Samper never appear in the memoir. Samper's refusal to tackle these charges head-on is a lamentable omission that clearly weakens his case. A careful reading of the memoir provides no new reasons to accept Samper's claims of innocence.

At the same time, Samper's evident anger at U.S. intervention in Colombian affairs appears completely justified. The most overt manifestations of this interventionism were the decisions by the Clinton administration to

“decertify” Colombia in its 1996 and 1997 annual reviews of international cooperation in the war on drugs (after the Samper government had dismantled the Cali cartel) and the 1996 decision to revoke Samper’s visa to enter the United States (when the Cámara de Representantes refused to impeach Samper). In an amusing anecdote, Samper recounts that he was so distraught by the provocative actions of U.S. diplomat Robert Gelbard that he requested a psychological profile of the official. The results described Gelbard as a “person affected by character disorders. . . . This pathological type begins to see outside himself what is happening within and to demonstrate symptoms of persecution that lead him to attempt to induce in others the fear that he himself feels” (p. 276).

All questions of culpability aside, a persistent critique of Samper revolved around his refusal to resign to ensure the governability of the country. Samper’s response is that his resignation would have undermined the rule of law in Colombia and jeopardized the stability of Colombian institutions. While he is undoubtedly correct that the aggressive tactics used by his opponents strengthened his resolve to remain in office, Samper never explains convincingly why his resignation would not have eased the political crisis in Colombia. Whatever one’s stance on Samper’s culpability, his memoir does little to elucidate why his continuance in office genuinely benefited the country.

The Academics

A major obstacle to a better understanding of the Samper drug scandal has been the relative lack of studies that go beyond the immediate description of events to analyze the broader sociopolitical context in which the crisis developed. The most notable exception here is the edited volume *Tras las huellas de la crisis política*, a collection of nine essays produced under the direction of Francisco Leal Buitrago, one of Colombia’s preeminent social scientists. The contributors are respected scholars from a variety of academic disciplines, and their essays are almost uniformly well written and illuminating.

The opening essay by Leal analyzes the background to the Samper crisis as well as some of its unique features. He notes that the political history of Colombia during the twentieth century has been marred by recurring crises. In confronting them, political elites have sought to maintain institutional stability above all else, a strategy that has done little to eliminate the original causes of the crises. As a result, Colombia’s political situation grows ever more complex because each new crisis contains elements of the older crises that were never resolved. Thus the Samper drug scandal must not be viewed in isolation but as a crisis originating in a number of unresolved problems—agrarian disputes, violence, impunity, the concentration of wealth, corruption—complicated by new elements from the international scene. Leal highlights the roles played by drug trafficking, the political system, and the

United States in the Samper crisis, factors that receive more detailed treatment in other essays in *Tras las huellas*. He criticizes harshly Samper's stubborn refusal to leave power, which Leal claims produced a minimal level of governability and delegitimated the authority of the executive branch. Leal's strongest criticism, however, is that the Samper crisis allowed the military to achieve greater autonomy and regain control over security issues in Colombia.

One of the strongest essays in *Tras las huellas* is by Luis Alberto Restrepo. Although it focuses on the crisis in the executive branch, the essay provides one of the most crisply written overviews of the Samper drug scandal. Restrepo argues that the Samper crisis helped weaken the Colombian economy, undermined public order as the Samper administration lost credibility, and provided an excuse for greater U.S. intervention. Not least, "Samper's continuation in the government, thanks to the support of the most corrupt sectors of the political class . . . , signifies a triumph for the drug traffickers" (p. 55). Restrepo maintains that the Samper crisis emerged out of a context shaped by the deteriorating two-party system, the expansion and penetration of drug trafficking in Colombian society, the relative strengthening of the Colombian judicial system, and changes in U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of the cold war. Restrepo concludes that the future does not look promising for Colombia. He fears in particular that continuing U.S. pressure on Colombia will lead to generalized anarchy and civil war or to authoritarianism and dictatorship.

A third essay that contributes significantly to understanding the Samper crisis is that by Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez on the crisis of the party system in Colombia. He argues that the two traditional parties in Colombia, the Liberal party and the Conservative party, are simply fragmented collections of local caciques who manage to stay in power through clientelistic relations with a limited number of voters. In this context, the political parties became vulnerable to drug money as individual politicians struggled to obtain the resources necessary to get elected. Moreover, the fragmentation of the parties made it impossible for them to act cohesively during the Samper crisis. In effect, Samper was able to make the clientelistic dependence of individual legislators work to his advantage by trading pork-barrel benefits for political support during the impeachment process. Pizarro's exploration of the characteristics of the Colombian political party system thus provides a better understanding of both the origins of the drug scandal and the manner in which Samper avoided impeachment despite the evidence against him.

Several other essays in *Tras las huellas* merit careful reading. Rodrigo Uprimny's essay on the "judicialization" of the Samper crisis deftly explains the details of crucial legal issues (like the debate over "illicit enrichment") as well as the role played by key judicial institutions throughout the Samper

crisis. Mauricio Reina adds an excellent piece on drug trafficking in the Colombian economy. He argues convincingly that while drug trafficking has been the source of wealth for a small minority of Colombians, the economic resources of drug traffickers have generally produced more negative effects than positive ones for the Colombian economy. Juan Gabriel Tokatlian provides a valuable overview of U.S.-Colombian relations on drug trafficking, highlighting the increasing “narcotization” of these relations as well as the growing intervention of the United States in internal Colombian affairs. Overall, Leal’s *Tras las huellas* helps to fill a significant gap in the literature on the Samper drug crisis by offering contextual analyses of the crisis that are invaluable for a more sophisticated understanding of this key event in modern Colombian political history.

Conclusion

The Samper drug crisis polarized Colombian politics to the extreme. In the eyes of many Colombians, President Samper lacked credibility and his remaining in power only deepened a preexisting crisis of legitimacy in the Colombian political regime. Relations between the United States and Colombia deteriorated sharply during the Samper administration. Internally, the Samper administration’s obsession with saving itself hobbled needed initiatives in social and political reform. Violence and human rights abuses continued apace, and both right-wing paramilitary groups and left-wing guerrilla movements grew substantially during this administration. Not least, the violence, the breakdown in public order, and the ongoing uncertainty of the Samper years weakened the Colombian economy. By the end of the Samper administration, Colombia was entering into its most severe recession since the Great Depression.

The tremendous consequences of the Samper drug crisis lead one to conclude that Samper’s resignation from office could have spared Colombia much unnecessary pain. Yet the question remains of what actually happened in the campaign. The evidence contained in the dozen books reviewed here indicates that a huge sum of money from the Cali cartel entered into the Samper campaign in 1994, although the exact amount will probably never be known. With regard to Samper’s personal culpability, no unequivocal piece of evidence directly implicates him. But despite the absence of a smoking gun, the preponderance of evidence suggests that Samper knew about drug money entering his campaign and at least acquiesced to it. Enough evidence certainly existed to justify impeaching Samper and bringing his case before the Senado.

If some sense of delayed justice concluded the tragedy of the Samper drug crisis, it was manifested in the June 1998 presidential elections, when Samper’s former opponent, Andrés Pastrana, eked out a narrow victory over

one of Samper's staunchest defenders, Horacio Serpa. The Pastrana administration holds promise for correcting some of the worst consequences of the Samper crisis, but there should be no false illusions. The structural conditions that facilitated the Samper scandal have not changed appreciably. Drug corruption will therefore continue to plague the Colombian political system for the foreseeable future.