

Government Gambled in Turning to Cartel

By Michael Isikoff
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MIAMI, Nov. 23—For years, he was perhaps the U.S. government's ultimate enemy in the war on drugs—a brash drug baron who, from his Colombian jungle hideout, expressed his fondness for Adolf Hitler and proclaimed cocaine trafficking the "revolutionary weapon against North American imperialism."

But in a federal courtroom here this week, Carlos Lehder called himself a changed man. "I was a smuggler, I was a criminal and I was a rascal," said Lehder, testifying in the drug trafficking and racketeering trial of former Panamanian leader Manuel Antonio Noriega. "It is my intention to coop-

erate with the United States government and rehabilitate myself."

The appearance of Lehder as a U.S. government witness was the riskiest move federal prosecutors have made in the Noriega case and underscored the extraordinary lengths to which they have gone to convict Panama's ex-strongman.

Yet by the end of the week, the prosecutorial gamble appeared—at least tentatively—to have paid off: During his three days on the witness stand, Lehder provided the first insider account anywhere of life at the upper levels of Colombia's drug mafia and, in the process, delivered some of the most damaging testimony to date against Noriega.

Lehder, wearing a white shirt and dark blue tie, regaled the jury with

detailed descriptions of "round-table" meetings of Medellin drug cartel leaders in which they reviewed operations, plotted new smuggling routes and discussed payoffs to political leaders throughout the hemisphere. Perhaps most critically, Lehder—the cartel's "chief of transportation"—brought a new coherence and context to a case that until now has often seemed confusing and mired in contradictions.

For example, two earlier witnesses—cartel associates Roberto Streidinger and Gabriel Taboada—had last month described a meeting in Medellin in mid-1983 where they said Noriega, then chief of Panamanian intelligence and about to become his country's chief military officer, showed up alone wearing a

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Key Figure in Noriega Case

Lehder, in a fancy white suit and accepted a suitcase stuffed with \$500,000 from Jorge Ochoa, Pablo Escobar and other cartel chieftains.

Although Lehder was not present, he testified he had been told about the session at the time and that he saw an entry for \$500,000 to Noriega on the cartel's ledger book. He also added a devastating new detail: At the meeting "we were provided with the pictures of all the DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] agents assigned to Panama and their names and addresses."

Some earlier witnesses, such as drug pilot Floyd Carlton, had described Noriega's dealing with the cartel as highly circumspect, saying the Panamanian worked through

intermediaries, in part for fear of jeopardizing his relationship with the U.S. government.

But Lehder described a far more intimate and complex relationship between Noriega and the cartel. As he explained it, the bond was forged in 1982 when cartel leaders were desperately searching for new smuggling routes to the United States. Panama was a particularly unattractive alternative because Noriega's G-2 intelligence officers had been torturing cartel smugglers.

"It was very nauseous for us—his behavior," Lehder said. "But at the same time, we wanted to use Panama. At this point, we either had to bribe him or fight him."

The decision was to pay him off and, according to Lehder, a dele-

gation of cartel leaders visited Panama and cut a deal: The cartel would receive use of Panama's international airport, a special radio frequency for its airplanes and protection from G-2 in exchange for paying Noriega \$1,000 for every kilogram of cocaine it smuggled through the country.

When defense attorney Frank Rubino sought to discredit his account, Lehder showed that four years in the federal government's maximum-security penitentiary at Marion, Ill., had not tempered his combativeness or mental agility. He sparred repeatedly with Rubino, needling him with references to "your multimillionaire police officer client."

When Rubino demanded to know how many millions of dollars Lehder had made in the drug trade, the witness shot back: "With or without the assistance of your client?"

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Former Drug Baron Aided Noriega Prosecution

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But Lehder's testimony also proved politically dicey for the prosecutors. In addition to implicating Noriega, the former cartel baron named a host of other governmental luminaries in Latin America, including Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro, members of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and former Colombian president Alfonso Lopez Michelsen as among those Lehder charged had aided the cartel's business in the early 1980s.

His accusation that Michelsen had accepted \$900,000 in cartel campaign contributions in 1982 set off a political firestorm in Colombia and embarrassed the State Department because Michelsen heads the gov-

erning Liberal Party of President Cesar Gaviria.

"The inexplicable aspect of all this is how U.S. justice solicits this type of statements, offering reductions of sentences to people who break all records in slandering people, people . . . who have made deals to save their scalps," Michelsen said in a statement prominently displayed in Colombian newspapers.

Nor was he the only one raising doubts about Lehder's credibility. Sentenced in 1988 to life plus 135 years in prison, Lehder testified that he negotiated an agreement with prosecutors last summer in which he was moved out of the Marion penitentiary, and eight of his family members were brought to the United States and placed un-

der federal protection. Prosecutors also have agreed to inform Lehder's sentencing judge of his cooperation, although government sources insist this is not likely to lead to his release anytime soon.

Nevertheless, critics have wondered how the Bush administration, which has been pushing for congressional passage of a crime bill authorizing the execution of drug kingpins, could be making any arrangement with Lehder. "He started the cartel, for crying out loud," said former U.S. attorney Robert Merkle, who prosecuted Lehder. "He was the guy who really triggered the American appetite for cocaine."

Special correspondent Douglas Farah in Colombia contributed to this report.