

The Drug Busters

As its involvement in the narcotics war grows, the Pentagon outlines a plan to crush the cartels

Call it D-Day in the Andes, Apocalypse of the Drug Lords, the ultimate bust. Hundreds of troops from three nations swoop down on scores of targets—hidden airfields, jungle factories, heavily guarded haciendas—to cripple, in one swift blow, the cocaine cartels of South America. This is not a scene from a Tom Clancy novel but a plan now being worked up at United States Southern Command, home of Gen. Maxwell Thurman, the hero of the Panama invasion. In a "secure room" called the Counternarcotics Operation Center at the Quarry Heights headquarters of Southcom in Panama City, 30 officers are preparing "target folders" aimed at severing the links that tie Latin America's narco-traffickers. Thurman's plan, according to briefing documents obtained by *Newsweek*, calls for a "simultaneous (regional) attack to impact the cartel's entire support structure." Translated from Pentagonese, that means a hemispheric drug raid. According to a senior Southcom officer, the intelligence necessary to pick the targets will be ready as early as "next month."

The model is Thurman's invasion of Panama last December—an all-out assault to "take down" the forces of Gen. Manuel Noriega. This time the actual troops would not be American but the forces of Colombia, Bolivia and Peru, which would attack cartel targets in their countries at the same time. But all the logistics, planning, training and support would be provided by the Americans. Says a U.S. Defense Department analyst familiar with Southcom's activities, "We wouldn't pull the trigger, but we'd point the gun." And if need be, Thurman is prepared to go in with U.S. commandos. A well-placed intelligence source has told *Newsweek* the Pentagon has plans to send U.S. special forces to "snatch" Colombian drug lords if President Bush gives the order.

To be sure, a joint South American drug

raid is unlikely to happen anytime soon—or possibly ever. Lawmakers in Congress would be loath to see the United States repeat the mistake of Vietnam and be drawn into direct combat in the Andean highlands. Diplomats at the State Department are reluctant to offend the sensibilities of America's southern neighbors. And South American nations have a hard time working with each other, much less with gringos from up north. Thurman's scheme is "the kind of high-profile operation that will revive memories of U.S. imperialism," warns Ted Galen Carpenter, director of foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington.

Yet Thurman is no loose cannon. The



Mama Coca
El Dapel de la Coca
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'We wouldn't pull the trigger, but we'd point the gun':

The Challenge

The armed forces' assessment of the drug problem is daunting. A look at what they have to deal with:

- In the Andean rain forests, some 750,000 *campesinos* (peasant farmers) grow 220,000 tons of coca leaves annually.
- Near growing sites, usually in Peru and Bolivia, the leaves are rendered down to 3,000 tons of coca paste. Transported to labs in Colombia, the paste is further refined to 1,300 tons of cocaine powder.
- The cocaine is smuggled out of South America in small portions, on between 3,000 and 5,000 ship voyages and on 1,300 to 3,500 airplane flights a year.
- The bulk of the cocaine goes to the 2 million to 3 million cocaine users in the United States, where it is quickly dispersed from wholesalers to street-corner dealers.

SOURCE: U.S. SOUTHERN COMMAND



LEIF SKOGSTRA

New military mind-set: Anti-drug trainers



ALLAN TANNENBAUM—SYGMA

On patrol in the Panama Canal Zone

The Response

The military is spending more to control drug traffic, and high technology is playing an increasing role in the battle:

■ Department of Defense will spend \$450 million fighting smugglers this fiscal year and \$1.2 billion in 1991. U.S. Southern Command wants to spend \$191 million next year.

■ Air Force radar planes now spend 40 percent of their time on drug surveillance. Soon, the radars that monitor Soviet missiles will also track high-altitude drug planes.

■ By 1992, radar balloons will be deployed along the southern U.S. border and coast to catch low-flying drug planes. A \$143 million radar system that will cover the Caribbean is under construction in South America.

■ Next year some 100 U.S. military advisers will be in the Andes nations training local troops to fight drug traffickers.

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE SOURCES



LEN STONE—SYGMA

Concerns: Colombian soldier burns a cocaine cache

Pentagon has been invited to join the drug war by the White House and Congress alike. In 1988 Congress officially designated the Defense Department as the lead agency in stopping drug smuggling. Drug czar William Bennett has acknowledged that trying to block drugs at the border is a hopeless exercise. Coast Guard and DEA busts have barely dented the flow. The supply of cocaine can be stopped or significantly slowed only by "going to the source"—hitting the drug traffickers in their lairs. At first, the Pentagon refused to be drafted. But at Bush's insistence Defense Secretary Dick Cheney last year ordered the Pentagon brass to play along.

Now that the cold war is over, the armed

services have become eager participants in the drug war. "It's their new meal ticket now that the commies are not their big threat," says a congressional staffer. The Pentagon plans to spend \$450 million fighting drugs this year. Next year the counter-narcotics budget will more than double to \$1.2 billion. The military mind-set, says one Southcom briefing, will have to change from nuclear megatons to cocaine kilos. Thurman already has his goal in mind: he wants 500 tons seized within a year.

Turf battles: Generals are paid to plan future wars. Their civilian masters are supposed to decide whether and when to fight them. Will the military men take over the war on drugs from the civilians they are supposed to serve? The G-men at the FBI and the DEA will resist the Pentagon's effort to usurp their turf in the war on drugs. "The CIA and the military have spent 10 years trying to find one goddam hostage in Lebanon," grumbles a senior DEA official. "What makes them think they can come down here and solve the dope problem?"

But it would be a mistake to underestimate Thurman, who is as skilled at bureaucratic in-fighting as he is at waging war on the battlefield. "There is no doubt in [Thurman's] mind," says a well-connected Pentagon source. "He's in charge. It's his command that's drawing up the plans. Thurman is a 24-hour-a-day guy and no one is going to step in his way. If you throw up political obstacles, he'll steam-roll you."

Already, Air Force AWACS planes spend 40 percent of their time trying to spot drug runners. Southcom wants to spend \$191 million fighting drugs next year, sending as many as 100 military trainers into Latin America to teach tactics to local armies. A seven-man Special Operations Command team already helps the DEA plan drug

raids in the region. The United States will spend \$143 million for new radars across the northern rim of the continent to provide blanket coverage of the Caribbean Basin by 1991. The military has always loved high tech, and Thurman has Southcom researching new gadgetry, including radars that can look through a wall—or a jungle canopy—like X-rays. The Pentagon is also tinkering with an aerial vapor-sniffing detector to pick up the smell of chemicals used in clandestine drug labs.

In the military view, the war on drugs has been fought up to now by amateurs. "[DEA agents] are cops," said an officer on Thurman's staff. "Very brave. But cops." To Thurman, cops are for collaring

criminals on the street, not masterminding the overthrow of international cartels. Southcom officers deride DEA record keeping as a shoe-box operation. (DEA is still trying to computerize its files.) The Pentagon scoffs that drug intelligence in Latin America moves with all the speed of the pony express: DEA agents working in forward areas have to wait days for sensitive reports to be flown in by helicopter. Too often, drug traffickers have fled by the time the police raid their hideouts. In Bolivia, Thurman is installing a prototype Command and Management System that will allow agents in the field to hook up, via satellite, with computerized intelligence records in Washington. Using a sophisticated computer program code-named Hawk-eye, field agents will be able to photograph a drug runner's plane with a digitalized cam-

era, send the image through the computer system to Washington and learn the likely route and destination of the plane "within two minutes," according to a Defense Department document.

It remains to be seen whether this computer wizardry will work any better than the high-tech clunkers sometimes produced by the Pentagon. Organizing, not inventing, is the military's real skill, and Thurman is a skillful and determined organizer. Already the Southcom commander has dispatched a team of officers from Panama to expand a command-and-control outpost in an office building in Rosslyn, Virginia, close to the Pentagon.

Thurman's thinking about how to battle the drug lords is deeply influenced by his success in Operation Just Cause, the invasion of Panama. The key to victory was to

attack the Panama Defense Force everywhere and at once, Thurman believes. In his private Washington briefings, he likes to use the analogy of the Pillsbury Doughboy: poke him in the stomach and he just expands someplace else. So too with the cartels, says Thurman: attack them in one spot, and they just move on to another.

To illustrate the problem, Thurman points to the raid on La Petrolera, a major drug transshipment center in the remote jungle southeast of Bogotá. On the night of May 3, Colombian special forces backed by helicopters and fighter planes raided the center. The raid was portrayed as a great success: three cocaine labs seized, 24 airstrips cratered, six aircraft and 18.5 tons of narcotics worth \$860 million seized, two traffickers killed, 23 arrested. The United States played an important secret role,

Max Thurman: The 'RoboCop' General

On June 13, 1989, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney issued a two-paragraph press release announcing the pending retirement of Gen. Maxwell R. Thurman, 58. Five weeks later, on July 20, Cheney quietly reversed himself, announcing that Thurman had just been appointed commander in chief of the U.S. Southern Command at Quarry Heights, Panama. The full story of what happened between June 13 and July 20 is still a matter of conjecture, but this much at least is known: at some point, Thurman had a meeting with George Bush that led him to the hottest command slot in the post-cold-warrior Army.

One year later Thurman is widely known as the man who brought down Manuel Noriega. What is also clear, in the wake of *Newsweek's* reporting on U.S. plans for a military offensive against the Colombian drug cartels, is that Thurman is the Pentagon's point man in the hemispheric war against cocaine. How those plans turn out, and whether Thurman will be hero or goat, very much remain to be seen. But for the moment, at least, the brusque, hard-driving North Carolinian is being touted as one of the best generals



Hot command spot in the post-cold-warrior Army: In Panama City

around—the kind of soldier who throws himself into his mission relentlessly and totally. Thurman, to cite one pertinent biographic detail, has never married, and a Pentagon official says he has just "never had time" for a personal life. "That wasn't his purpose for being," this official says. "His cause has been furthering Army objectives... He's sort of like a RoboCop."

RoboCop or not, Thurman is a formidable leader—a man who drives his staff with a combination of brute energy and force of intellect. He is something of a rarity among Army generals in that he is

not a West Point graduate, and he has long been known by fellow officers as "the Maxatollah" for his by-the-book zeal. He has now turned Southern Command upside down by purging officers loyal to his predecessor. The purge has led to grumbling at Quarry Heights and Thurman, some joke, is now in a dead heat with Noriega for the title of Most Hated General in Panama.

But Thurman is adept at staring down his critics. After the Panama invasion, he dazzled a roomful of senators by delivering a masterful briefing entirely without notes.

And when visiting members of Congress peppered his staff with acrid questions about the Army's rock-music barrage of the papal nunciature, Thurman himself stood up. "I am the music man," he said defiantly, and the question was dropped.

Mailed fist: Like the invasion of Panama, Thurman's appointment to Southern Command sends an unmistakable message to Latin America—and to his critics that is precisely the problem. In their view, Thurman lacks both the knowledge and the diplomatic skill required for so delicate a mission, and some predict that his hard-charging style will touch off an anti-American backlash. "Thurman had barely set foot in Latin America and suddenly he's Napoleon," says one unhappy Southcom veteran. "And now he has the answer to any problem, in Panama or wherever: send in the troops." His defenders say Thurman knows exactly where the political line is. "He'll move right up to the line," a former aide says, "but he won't step over it." If so, Thurman may yet become the mailed fist behind the velvet glove of U.S. policy toward the region—and if he fails, Bush's drug-war strategy will almost certainly falter too.

DOUGLAS WALLER in Washington with SPENCER REISS in Miami



CARLOS ANGEL—GAMMA-LIAISON

**A scheme modeled on the Panama invasion:
Arresting a Noriega supporter**

providing intelligence, mapping and planning for the operation. But to Thurman and his men, La Petrolera only proved the Doughboy theory. After the raid, drug runners simply moved to other shipment hubs. In his briefings, Thurman reveals that La Petrolera gave him the same valuable intelligence as the failed Oct. 3, 1989, coup attempt against Noriega. By observing how the enemy reacted to a single blow, he can now plan for knockout punches at several sites.

The United States is determined "not to Americanize" the Andean drug war, says the assistant secretary of State for international narcotics matters, Melvyn Levitsky. But Thurman wants to make sure that the United States controls the battle from behind the scenes. A model for what the Southcom commander has in mind was the ambush of Colombian drug kingpin José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha last December. The air assault, which killed Gacha and his 17-year-old son, was conducted by Colombian troops. The United States denied any involvement. However, intelligence sources have told NEWSWEEK that the raid was coordinated by American commandos working for the CIA.

As details of Thurman's plan leak out, there are sure to be grumbles on Capitol Hill, where lawmakers complain that they are being kept in the dark. "We want to examine this policy before body bags come back to this country," says Democratic Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, a Vietnam veteran. The outcry will be louder in Latin America. Although Thurman's briefings stress the need to respect local sovereignty, critics say he is somewhat insensitive to political considerations. "If you're a political person you're not listened to in his command," says a Pentagon aide. Military officers who are Latin specialists in U.S. embassies in the region have been purged



PETER McFARREN

Aid: U.S. adviser (rear) with Bolivian policemen

for less diplomatically inclined officers with an aggressive "operational" approach. Some Pentagon and State Department analysts worry that American meddling will enable opposition parties to accuse the fragile Latin American governments of selling out to Uncle Sam. "Latin Americans are going to be sophisticated enough to know who is pulling the strings," says Carpenter of the Cato Institute.

So far, Colombia and Bolivia have been amenable to increasing U.S. involvement in their drug wars. Peru has not. Newly elected President Alberto Fujimori has made clear that he wants no U.S. military involvement beyond training or equipping his troops. For the moment the Lima government has balked at accepting \$35 million in U.S. military aid. "We're on hold," says a State Department official.

"Southcom can do all the planning it wants and it may not go anywhere in Peru."

Even if Thurman could persuade the Andean nations to go along with his plan, would it work? Thurman's Panama analogy only goes so far, warn some defense analysts. In Panama the war zone was largely limited to the 20 square miles of Panama City. Bolivia, Colombia and Peru, by contrast, are roughly one third the size of the United States. Operation Just Cause was fought with 22,500 elite U.S. troops. Thurman will have to depend on unevenly trained and sometimes corrupt local forces to carry out his plans. U.S. intelligence had thoroughly penetrated the PDF, while information about the cartels remains spotty. While the drug lords have no actual armies, they have been buying some powerful weapons. Last May FBI agents in Florida arrested two Colombians allegedly attempting to buy 120 stolen Stinger anti-aircraft missiles on behalf of the Medellín cartel. What is intended to be a lightning raid could turn into a long counter-insurgency struggle against armed guerrillas like Peru's Sendero Luminoso, who already control the coca-growing region in the Upper Huallaga Valley.

Cocaine flow: There are small signs at the moment that drug flow into the United States is abating and that demand is slackening. Coca prices in the Andes are dropping, which, if it continues, may persuade farmers to shift to other crops, while in some U.S. cities the wholesale price is rising. If things are going so well, asks Sen. Chris Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, why embark on a risky new military adventure?

Answer: the good news could

be short-lived. The CIA estimates a 35 percent increase in the coca crop in the last two years and even higher production in the future. In that case, Thurman will be well positioned to move. He has a plan, while others have none. His proposal has not made it to George Bush's desk yet, but Thurman is a personal favorite of the president. Though cautious in many respects, Bush showed a taste for military action when he ordered the invasion of Panama. The military man who gave Bush his greatest victory stands ready to offer a second gambit using Latin troops. Thurman's plan may seem at once improbable and potentially disastrous. But in history's long march, so are most wars.

DOUGLAS WALLER with MARK MILLER and JOHN BARRY in Washington, SPENCER REISS in Miami and bureau reports