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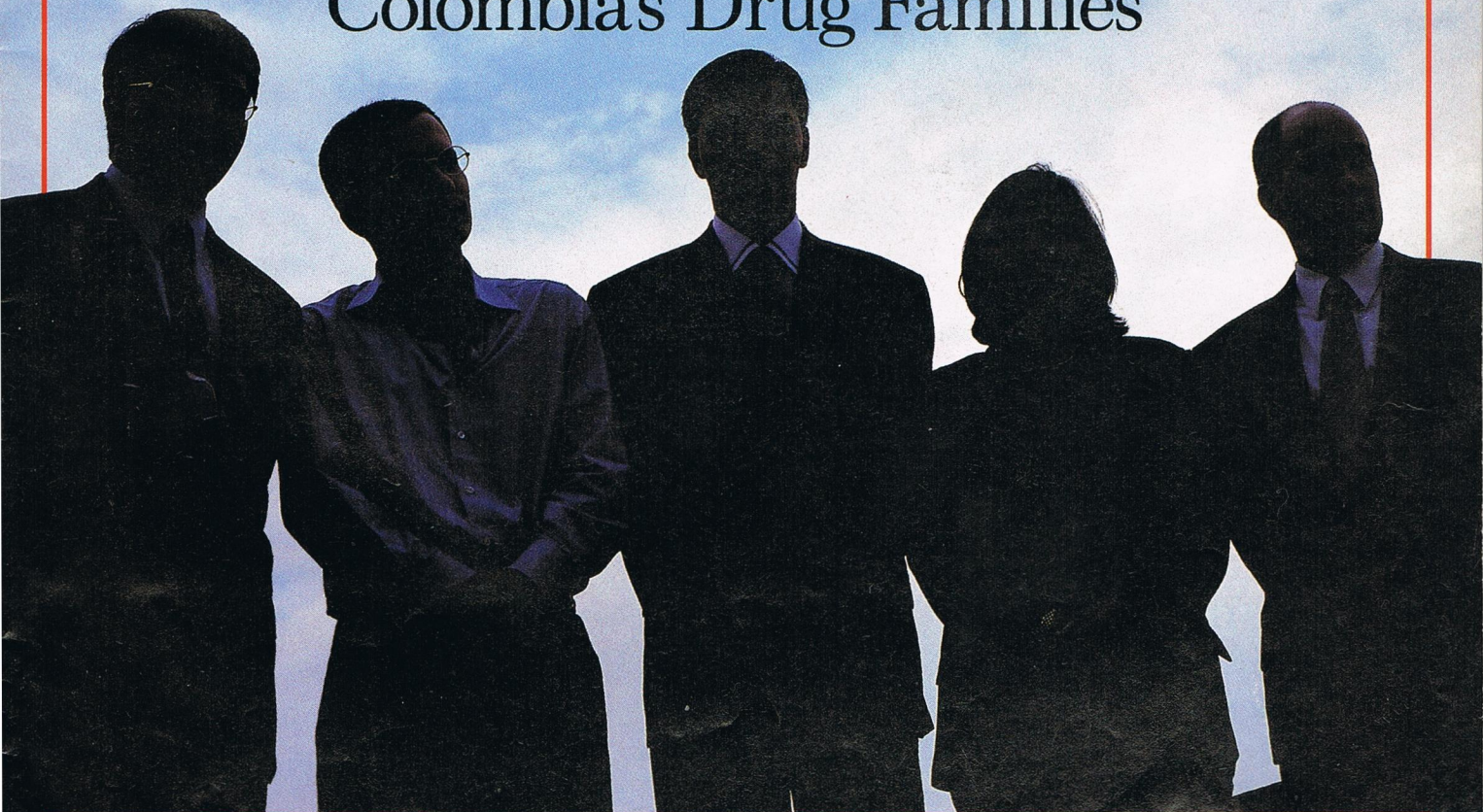
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## THE CHILDREN OF COCAINE

**EXCLUSIVE**

Growing Up in the Shadow of  
Colombia's Drug Families



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## WORLD AFFAIRS

Their parents wanted them to be Colombia's Kennedys. But the children of the Cali cocaine cartel can't shake the past. BY DAVID SCHRIEBERG

# Sins of the

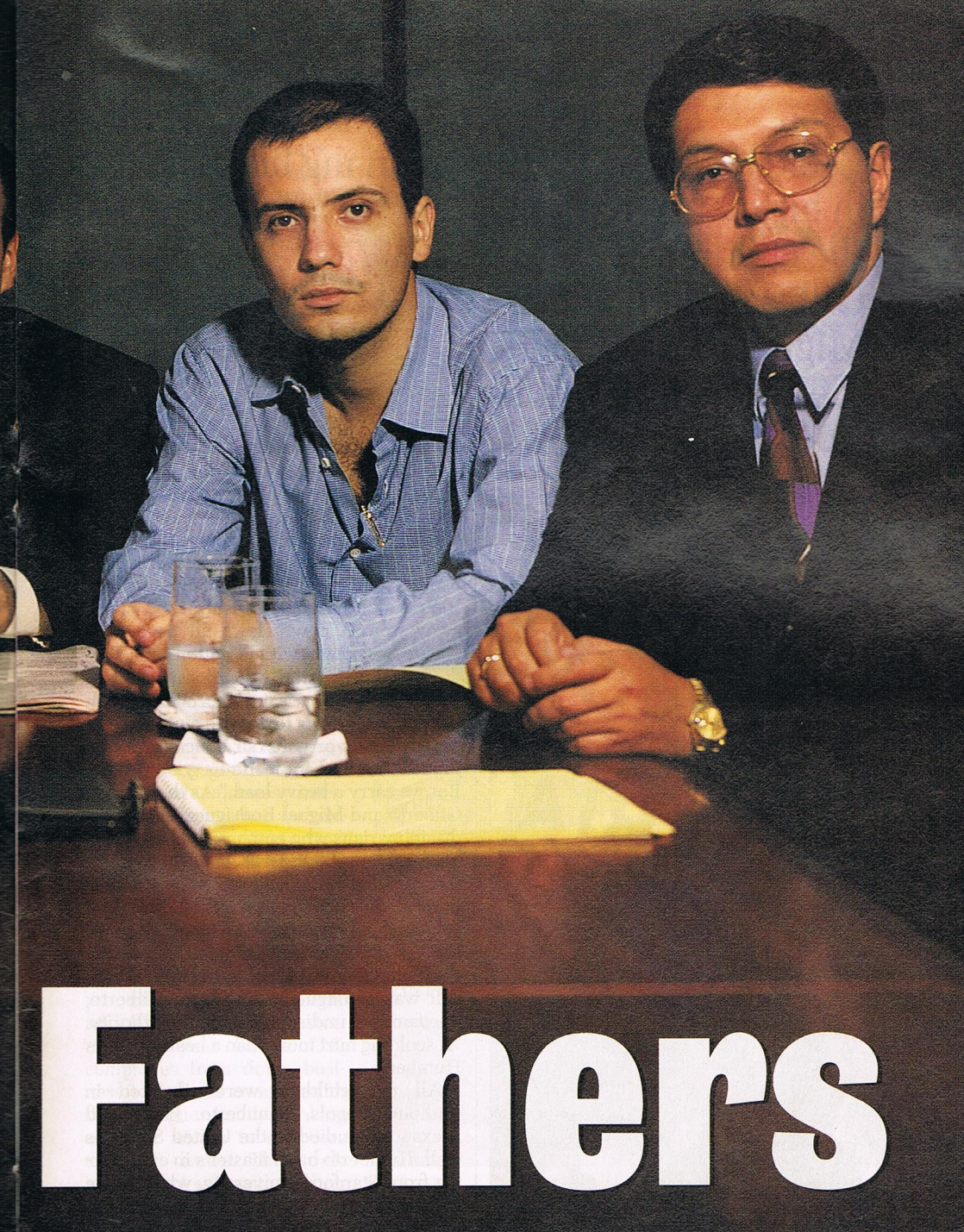
**O**N THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF Cali, in an unmarked building surrounded by barbed wire and protected by bodyguards and security cameras, a Colombian family gathers. Brothers, sister and cousins, they range from their late 20s to mid-30s. They are tastefully dressed, well-educated Latin American Yuppies. They are hospitable, good-humored and—up to a point—frank with visitors, admiring and affectionate toward one another. They believe in God and kin, the laws of the state, hard work. These are the family values drilled into them since birth by the stern patriarchs of their clan: Gilberto and

Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, the reputed godfathers of the Cali cocaine cartel.

It is many months since the Cali drug lords were captured by a special drug force, and they have begun to talk. Even in Cali, where Gilberto, 57, and Miguel, 51, posed for years as legitimate businessmen, their confessions to drug trafficking, illegal enrichment and criminal conspiracy have stripped away the last shreds of the family's claim to honor and respectability. But in an exclusive group interview with NEWSWEEK, the children say they won't desert the Rodríguez brothers. "Your father is your father," Humberto says. "If all your life you have loved him, why are you going

to stop because of these circumstances?"

Circumstances have always been tricky for these kids. They grew up in the shadow of a vicious criminal organization run by elders who came from Colombia's working class. The parents dreamed that their drug fortune would finance the children's ascendancy into the upper classes, that the kids might become a Colombian version of the Kennedy family. That probably won't happen in this generation; some police suspect that one of the kids, William, helps run the cartel. He denies involvement. But in some ways the kids have fulfilled the dream. Humberto Rodríguez Mondragón, 33, is Gilberto Rodríguez's third son—a



**The next generation:** *Humberto Rodríguez Mondragón, María Alexandra Rodríguez Mondragón, Juan Carlos Muñoz Rodríguez, William Rodríguez Abadia and Jaime Mondragón at the family business headquarters*

tall, serious young man who heads the supermarket chain that is one of the Rodríguez family's many legitimate businesses. His older brother Jaime, 36, and his first cousin Juan Carlos Rodríguez Abadia, 31, run a chain of discount pharmacies that is also owned by the family. Humberto's sister, María Alexandra, 27, is a wife, a mother and a member of the board of directors of the family conglomerate, which employs 7,000 Colombians and, in addition to the retail chains, includes pharmaceutical labs and a leading football team, the Club America de Cali. William, 31, is Miguel Rodríguez's oldest son and a lawyer in Cali.

The setting for the clan's talk with NEWSWEEK last month was a small conference room in the heavily guarded building that serves as corporate offices for the Cali branch of the drug-store chain. The freewheeling, five-hour conversation touched on many subjects but always circled back to two: the Rodríguezes' reaction to the charges against Gilberto and Miguel and, more broadly, to their own predicament as heirs of the most notorious drug kingpins in the world. "This situation of drug trafficking has raised our profile to the point that today we are talking to NEWSWEEK," Jaime said. "But the truth is I never wanted a profile like this."

They did not deny that Gilberto and Miguel were involved in drug trafficking, although they said that they themselves had not benefited from drug profits and knew little about the real nature of the family enterprise while they were growing up. "We have never had an open conversation about their involvement in 'the business,'" Alexandra said. "Do you think they came to us and said, 'We are traffickers'? No, not even now." They revere Gilberto and Miguel as family patriarchs and loving parents and are concerned about their well-being if the two capos, who are now in jail in Bogotá, draw the maximum, 24-year, prison terms

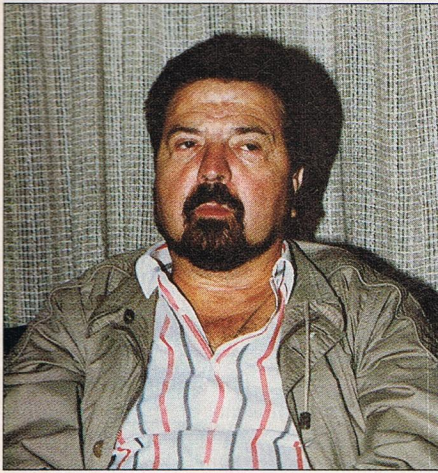
# Fathers

**Taking care of business:** The Rodríguez children run a number of the family's legitimate companies, including a chain of discount pharmacies

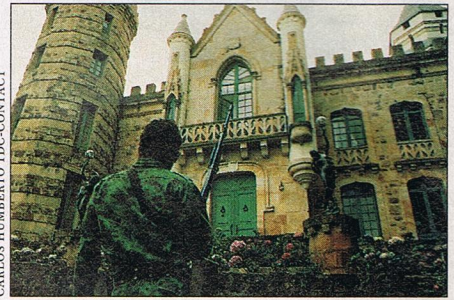


JEFF BRAVERMAN

**Hard work and high moral standards:** While Pablo Escobar's kids were living like pashas in his mansion (right), the children of Gilberto (left) and Miguel (below) spent their school vacations stocking shelves



PHOTOS IMAGES COLOMBIA—SYGMA



CARLOS HUMBERTO TDC-CONTACT



GAMMA-LIAISON

**Most wanted:** Miguel (above) and his brother face up to 24 years in prison

allowed under Colombian law. "We have wrapped ourselves around my father and my uncle," Humberto said. "They lead this family, and they have taught us to stay united." "What we pray for every day," said William, "is that everybody forgets about the Rodríguezes and leaves us in peace."

That is hardly likely—for the Cali cartel and the Rodríguez family are under attack from every side. While there are no charges against them in Colombia, Humberto and

the others believe that they have been targeted by a special combined unit of the army and national police, the Bloque del Búsqueda, which is assigned full time to busting drug traffickers. They believe that their phones are tapped. Their movements are followed, their bank accounts have been frozen; in recent weeks, Colombian officials—led by the crusading chief prosecutor Alfonso Valdivieso—have seized more than 100 of their properties. "These

children watched their fathers in this line of work since they were little," said Col. Benjamín Núñez Núñez, commander of the Bloque del Búsqueda. "They can't sneak away from it now. They still have their businesses bought with ill-gotten gains."

The children bitterly dismiss such talk as "the stigma of the last name." "Drug trafficking had nothing to do with our businesses, our family or with our education," said Jaime. "Our fathers made us good people. But we carry a heavy load." As they told it, Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez were strict disciplinarians who emphasized hard work and high moral standards. While the kids of the Medellín cartel leaders were living like pashas, the Rodríguez Orejuela children spent school vacations stocking drugstore shelves. Bad grades meant no allowance. Bad behavior meant the leather belt. Worse still was a tongue-lashing from Gilberto, the family's undisputed senior authority. "A scolding hurt more than a beating," says Humberto.

All five children were educated in Catholic schools. Humberto, Jaime and Alexandra studied in the United States as well: Humberto has a master's in engineering from Stanford University, while Jaime got a master's in industrial engineering at Columbia. The Rodríguez brothers warned their kids not to hang out with the wrong crowd. "They wanted us to be with people who weren't in the business," Jaime said. "They checked out who we were going around with and who their fathers were." Still, he said, "there was always somebody who said, 'Hey, your father is a drug trafficker.' We'd argue with them, call them liars." The truth came out in 1984, when Gilberto was arrested in Spain and extradited back to Colombia for trial. (He was later acquitted.) "When they came back from Spain, they told us we had to prepare ourselves to be good men," Juan Carlos said. "They said, 'So that what happened to us doesn't happen to you.'"

Over the next decade, though, as they

urged their children not to repeat their mistakes, the Rodríguez brothers were growing "the enterprise" into a world-class criminal organization without equal. Along the way they battled and beat Pablo Escobar, who bombed their drugstores as he waged a war of narcoterror against the government and society. The Cali cartel fed critical information to the government that crippled the rival Medellín drug cartel, protected their own interests from government intervention and helped police find Escobar, who died in a shoot-out." As they expanded their routes to the United States, Europe and Asia, they bought friends throughout Colombia's political system, raising corruption to previously unimaginable levels. Their alleged financing of half of President Ernesto Samper's 1994 campaign has sunk relations with the United States and triggered a political crisis that could force Samper to resign. Samper denies knowing about cartel funds in his campaign.

The Rodríguez children say that now they have become social pariahs, struggling to avoid the collapse of their business empire. In 1989, they said, they bought the family's aboveboard business interests from their father and uncle. But the taint of drug trafficking and the intensifying pursuit of the Cali cartel's drug profits have forced them to try to liquidate their businesses. "We have evaluated all the possibilities, and there is no other option," Humberto said. The Clinton administration last year barred U.S. companies from doing business with firms connected to the Rodríguez family, choking off their access to suppliers and U.S. banks. Their only hope is to sell out to their employees.

They say they live in fear of the knock on the door. Last year Humberto and Alexandra were briefly arrested when a police raiding party crashed one of their business meetings, then released when the cops discovered there were no orders to detain them. "We're all on the edge of finishing in prison," Alexandra said.

There are worse threats. In May William was shot and nearly killed by unknown gunmen while eating dinner at a Cali restaurant. Six people died, including two of his best friends. Pale, drawn and nervous, he walks with a limp, and at one point in the interview opened his shirt to show the bullet wounds from the attack. "Who is going to go out and eat with me now?" he complained. "This is worse than having AIDS."

# Breaking an Addiction

Life is a lot quieter now in Cali—and a lot poorer

ONE DAY THREE YEARS AGO, FRANCISCO JOSE LLOREDA WAS WAITING AT A traffic light in downtown Cali. The urban planner glanced carelessly at the car beside his. It was a Toyota 4x4: a *narcotoyota*, as Caleños describe the local cocaine traffickers' trademark vehicle. Something about Lloreda seemed to annoy the other driver. The stranger rolled down his window and yelled, "We're *narcos!* Do you care?" Lloreda knew better than to reply. One wrong word might have cost him a bullet through the fender—or possibly through his head.

A few weeks ago, at another intersection, Lloreda watched as another Toyota 4x4 roared through a red light. A startled woman in the next car called out to him: "Are there really still drug dealers in Cali?" Yes, there are. Even so, the sense of dread has disappeared. Lloreda still can't get over the relaxed manner of the woman's question. "Nobody would have said that before," he says. "Everybody was too afraid."

Now Cali's traffickers are the ones who seem scared. Since last year, when a special national-police task force began working seriously to eradicate the cartel, the city's surviving

narcos have gone deep underground. The fashionable discos and restaurants on Sixth Avenue are safe again: young women can go there now without fear of being kidnapped by thugs to liven up the traffickers' private parties. At least one high-end hotel uses a special code whenever staffers spot a known narco boss heading for the registration desk. Warned to buy "mosquito repellent," the clerk on duty knows to say that unfortunately all rooms are full.

Cali is a lot quieter now—but also a lot poorer. City officials estimate that in the early 1990s, at the peak of the cocaine boom, the drug lords' nontrafficking doings accounted for as much as 25 percent of the region's total economic activity. The city's skyline bristled with construction cranes. Businesses sprang up to fulfill the narcos' desires:

## Cold turkey: Most construction projects are frozen

florists to provide their girlfriends with daily bouquets, health clubs to help them stay handsome, whole streets of luxury-car showrooms.

With the kingpins in jail and many of their lieutenants on the run, unemployment has soared from 9 percent a year ago to nearly 15 percent now. Dozens of restaurants have shut down. Retail sales have plummeted. Private investment is frozen. The local newspaper, *El País*, is full of classified ads for properties at bargain prices, many of them offered by cash-starved narcos desperate to get liquid. "Everything they own is for sale," says the mayor, Mauricio Guzmán Cuevas. "Apartments that sold for \$80,000 are going for \$30,000. And nobody's buying."

Guzmán and other city leaders insist that Cali's cold-turkey cure is for the best, despite the economic pain. The city was a thriving place before it got hooked on drug money. Then the narcos' wild spending made Cali the most expensive city in Colombia. Real-estate prices and rents were higher than Bogotá's. Now Caleños realize that the city's boom times were only a drug-induced hallucination. "This city had a huge dynamism before there was narco traffic here," says *El País* editor Luis Cañón. "Now we are trying to recapture that." It's the only way Caleños can prove that their city is something more than a den of gangsters.



JEFF BRAVERMAN

DAVID SCHRIEBERG in Cali



PHOTOS IMAGES LTDA—GAMMA-LIAISON

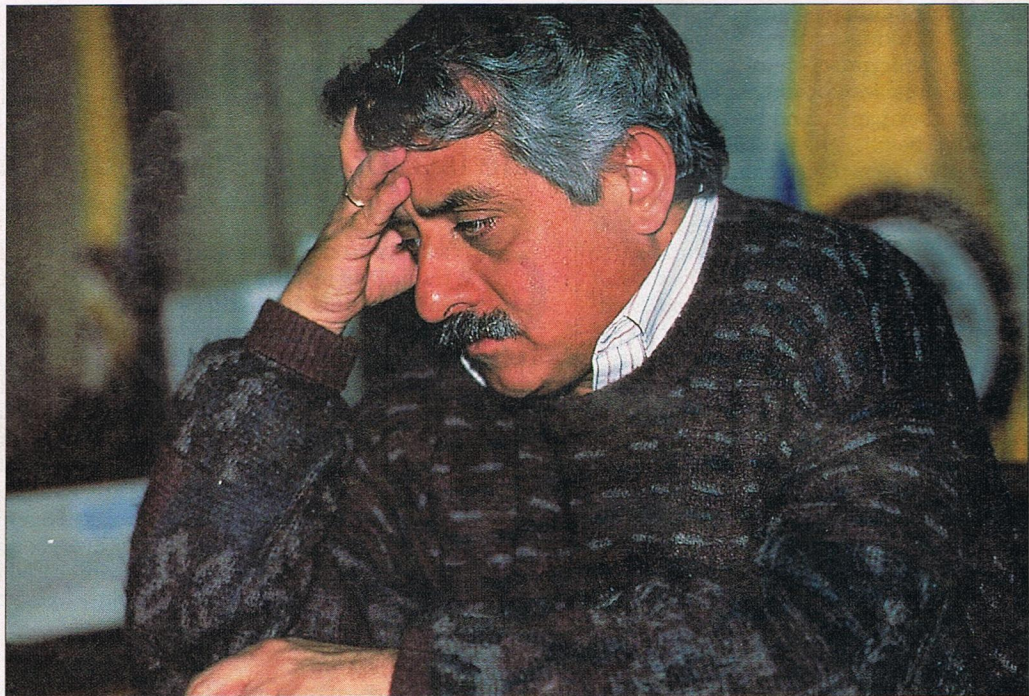
**Tainted funds?** *Samper has been accused of financing his campaign with cartel money*

The shooting incident suggests that much as they would like, the children cannot escape family ties to the cartel. Law-enforcement officials in both countries allege that

William has assumed a leadership role in the syndicate. "He runs everything," says Núñez. "He practically has taken over the role of his father since [Miguel] went to prison." William insisted the real target in the restaurant was someone else. "If there is anything that would give [Gilberto and Miguel] pain in this life," he said, "it would be that one of us becomes involved in drug trafficking."

U.S. officials, who say the cartel was responsible for 80 percent of the cocaine now smuggled into the United States, are pressing Bogotá to root out and destroy the syndicate. In June Gilberto, Miguel and 72 associates were charged, in a 203-page indictment handed down by a federal grand jury in Miami, with drug trafficking and racketeering and accused of widespread bribery of Colombian officialdom. The indictment is only the latest of many charges filed by U.S. prosecutors against the Rodríguez brothers, who are unlikely ever to see the inside of an American courtroom because Colombia does not permit the extradition of its citizens. But the June indictment was a special blow to the family because it also alleged that William took over operational control of the cartel after his father's arrest on Aug. 6, 1995—and further that William "initiated efforts to retaliate for the arrest of his father ... including directing others to locate and/or kill witnesses who could potentially testify against his father."

"This has destroyed me, absolutely destroyed me," William said in the interview. "First they say that I'm a drug trafficker, then that I'm a killer." The children, who reflexively defend each other, see the



RICHARD EMBLIN—BLACK STAR

## No escaping 'the stigma of the name': The war against narcoterror over, anti-drug officials, led by prosecutor Alfonso Valdivieso (above), have seized more than 100 of the children's properties



CARLOS ANGEL—GAMMA-LIAISON

charges against William as an assault on them all. William claimed the charge that he tried to have witnesses killed was based on the testimony of a woman who, after trying to blackmail him, took her story to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "Tomorrow another person goes and says that it's Humberto or Jaime or Juan Carlos."

He may be crying wolf. The deputy commander of Colombia's National Police, Gen. Luis Enrique Montenegro, says there is now "no basis" for saying the younger generation of the Rodríguez family shares their fathers' guilt—a statement that seems to include William, despite his recent indictment in Miami. Other Colombian police, however, echo the U.S. suspicions against William. And no one knows whether Gilberto and Miguel will get lengthy prison terms, as their children fear. In Bo-

gotá, prosecutors have issued arrest warrants in an alleged plot to bribe the judge who will shortly sentence them. Since bribery has always been a favorite cartel weapon against law enforcement, there could be another attempt to grease the always slippery wheels of the Colombian justice system.

What will become of the Rodríguez children? Shame and disrepute is not what they were raised for. Their fathers hoped to use an ill-gotten fortune to cleanse their names and propel them into the country's elite class. For now, they will play golf—and wait. "We want to have the most important companies in Colombia," says Humberto. "We'll come back and start all over." Maybe, but only after Colombia has forgotten the stigma that comes with their fathers' names.

With STEVEN AMBRUS in Bogotá and Cali