It has been said that Pablo Escobar, the Colombian drug lord, is the most successful criminal in history. He headed one of the biggest drug trafficking organizations of all time, and before his death he had amassed a fortune of over $3 billion. While he valued his family above all else, he was also known for spreading violence and destruction. Pablo Escobar forever changed the way illegal narcotics were handled (once in life and again in death), and the policies and practices of the Colombian government with respect to drugs.

Pablo Escobar was born in 1949, in Colombia, to a peasant and a schoolteacher. When he was two years old his family moved to the town of Envigado, a suburb of the city of Medellin. He arrived in Envigado at a time of violence, when two political parties were warring. In Colombia this era was called La Violencia, and it lasted around 40 years. With this war going on, Escobar grew up in a violent time, and so fighting was normal for him.

When he was a teenager he was expelled from school. After this incident he began to commit small crimes and thefts. He first got into the drug business by driving coca paste from the mountains to labs in Medellin. He and his cousin would race to get there and the winner would keep the money. He was caught only once, and the charges had to be dropped due to a technicality.

By the time he was 26 he had transformed from a kid making deliveries to a “full on” drug smuggler. At this time cocaine was worth around $35,000 a kilo. He used small planes to carry the drugs, and smuggling made him rich. By the time he was 30 he had purchased a huge estate and established a tight, loyal, intricate drug trafficking network. In fact his network was so efficient that American drug lords looked to it as an
example for their operations. His planes would carry around 400 kilos per trip and each one would be over $10 million in value. Barrels would be dropped into water or unloaded and high-speed motorboats made the finishing runs.\(^5\)

During this time cocaine was like alcohol during prohibition. The public did not consider it a huge vice and some people thought it would eventually become legal. There was huge demand in the Untied States and Escobar was happy to fill it as best as he could. He saw himself as the Al Capone of his time. When it was legalized his organization would be legitimized and he would become famous.\(^6\) By the time he was 32 he was making around half a million dollars a day.\(^7\)

Even with this huge profit and organization neither the United States nor Columbia was truly aware of Escobar and his Medellin Cartel until a complex sting operation and raid on one of his main jungle bases. The operation was so big that it had a system of airstrips and laboratories, which were capable of processing and shipping cocaine industrially. It was so big that Escobar and the other drug lords had named it Tranquilandia, the land of tranquility. The raid destroyed Tranquilandia, and with it, over a billion dollars worth of cocaine, but not before key evidence was gathered, raising Escobar’s profile in both Colombia and the US.\(^8\)

Escobar is not only famous for his drug trafficking on such a large scale but also for his narco-terrorism. In order to make sure his operation ran smoothly Escobar used violence strategically. He would frequently clash with the Colombian government. Anyone who got in his way was killed. It didn’t matter who you were to Escobar. “If he had to kill the father, he killed the whole family.”\(^9\) This is what separated him from other smugglers. He used violence in a way that would get him whatever he wanted. If you
stood in his way you were dead. If you refused a request or even a bribe you were dead. Escobar is said to be responsible for killing “scores of government officials, police officers, journalists, Supreme Court justices, and even a leading presidential candidate named Luis Carlos Galan.”¹⁰ This violence is what sparked the Colombian Government’s anger.

Previously the government in Colombia had said that Escobar (and his drugs) was not its problem. The Colombians were not buying the drugs, Americans were. Many Colombians loved Escobar. He would bring food to the poor. He built soccer fields and gave other gifts to those in poverty. Many people saw Escobar as a modern day Robin Hood. Some people chose to forget his violent side and still remember him as a hero.¹¹

It wasn’t until his terrorism got out of hand that the Colombian government started to act against him. They wanted to work with the United States to help bring down the drug dealers, and they said that if Escobar were captured he would be sent to America to be tried, rather than Colombia. From then on Escobar didn’t want to buy his freedom; he only wanted to ensure that he wasn’t prosecuted in America.¹² His acquaintances credit him with frequently saying, “Better a grave in Colombia than a cell in the USA.”¹³

After seeing a drug leader killed with his son and another shipped off to America to be tried, Escobar realized he wasn’t as safe as he had previously thought. He then moved to turn himself in so that the government would protect him and his family from his competition. He went under a few conditions however. He wanted to build his own high-class prison suite. It was built on his land and was equipped with an office, Jacuzzi, a bar and a discotheque for parties.¹⁴,¹⁵
However, after he brought four men that had previously worked for him to the prison to be tortured and killed over a financial issue, the authorities, who had yet to stop his trafficking of narcotics, decided to move him to a regular prison. Because of his fear of the move he decided to escape, and went on the run. Police filled the streets of Medillin looking for him. In the 17 months that they were looking for him they used 11,000 search warrants and put up 4,000 roadblocks. Governments from around the world donated equipment to aid in the finding of Escobar. Finally on December 2\textsuperscript{nd} of 1993 Escobar was found and killed. No one is sure who shot him, but some people speculate that he killed himself.

His death did not put anyone out of business or slow the drug trade. The price of cocaine neither increased nor decreased. The only thing it stopped was the Medillin Cartel’s spree of violence. However, Pablo Escobar forever changed the drug industry, and the way Colombia handled it.

Before Escobar, Colombia didn’t see drug trafficking as its problem. Cocaine was transferred one briefcase at a time and Colombians weren’t buying the drugs. Once Escobar started his operation the industry was changed forever. One briefcase of cocaine turned into $13 million being flown into the United States. He took it to a new level. This, combined with his violence and narco-terrorism, is what finally made the Colombian government decide to attempt to crack down on drug lords. Thanks to Escobar raising the bar both on the scale of the enterprise and the violence, the country’s policy had to be changed. They went from a “not our problem” mindset to collaborating with countries around the world, including the USA, to limit and stop drug trafficking.
His death, a historical moment for both the industry and the Colombian police force, did not really slow the drug trade. However it changed the industry again. Those left over who had high positions in the Cartel realized that giant enterprises had more of a chance of and were more vulnerable to the United States and Colombia’s interference. Rather than form huge groups, smaller organizations would take over one part of the process. One group would smuggle drugs to the labs. Another would control the labs. Yet another would ship it out. After Escobar, monopolies were avoided because they were more susceptible to being caught.\textsuperscript{19}

While his death changed the way drugs were shipped, it did not change the way they were combated. This was one of the first real victories for the Colombian police and government and a sign that they were on the right track. While they need to improve in order to combat the smaller, therefore harder to find organizations, the policies are not really any different.

Escobar, often considered the most successful criminal of all time, changed the drug business and his country forever. While the murder rate has gone down since his prime, there are still an estimated 300 organizations smuggling drugs in Colombia.\textsuperscript{20} His death, which didn’t have any immediate effect on the amount of drugs being shipped or the problems that Colombia faced, forever changed the way that the drug business was run, and showed the world that the war was far from over. Thomas Cash, an agent in charge of the DEA of Miami, said that the Medellin Cartel’s rivals would now have the market cornered, because “no one person will ever replace Pablo Escobar.”\textsuperscript{21}

2 Combs, Cindy C and Martin Slann, “narco-terrorism and Columbia.”

   <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/archive/godfathercocaine.html>

4 Combs, Cindy C and Martin Slann, “narco-terrorism and Columbia.”


7 Combs, Cindy C and Martin Slann, “narco-terrorism and Columbia.”


13 Combs, Cindy C and Martin Slann, “narco-terrorism and Columbia.”


15 Combs, Cindy C and Martin Slann, “narco-terrorism and Columbia.”

16 Combs, Cindy C and Martin Slann, “narco-terrorism and Colombia.”


19 "The Colombian Cartels." PBS

20 "The Colombian Cartels." PBS


Cover Image:
http://panachereport.com/channels/human_interest/images/pablo-escobar_000.jpg