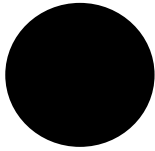


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“Coca Is Everything Here” Hard Truths about Bolivia’s Drug War *Daniel Kurtz-Phelan*

The Chapare, a swath of jungle that runs into the Amazon from the eastern slopes of the Andes, has long been the heart of Bolivian cocaine country. In the 1960s, farmers began burning down patches of forest to plant coca and sell the leaves at open markets in the region’s main towns. Peasants would then turn the leaves into coca paste in clandestine jungle labs and sell the paste to traffickers, most of them Colombian, who would take it out of Bolivia in drug planes or along the rivers of the upper Amazon basin, treat it with ether to get powder cocaine, and start the final product on its way to the cities of Europe, North America, and Bolivia’s better-off South American neighbors. At its height, the Chapare produced almost a third of the world’s coca leaf—enough to make \$25 billion worth of cocaine a year in a country with a total GDP under \$10 billion.

When drug warriors turned their attention to the South American front in the 1990s, they saw the Chapare as their easiest target. Unlike Colombia or Peru, Bolivia had no heavily armed rebel factions to contend with, and its illegal coca production was confined to a relatively small area. By Latin American standards, it was then a stable democracy and had a government that was more or less willing to cooperate. And the Bolivian drug lords of lore—like Roberto Suárez Gómez, who once offered to pay off two-thirds of the country’s foreign debt in exchange for legal impunity—had already collapsed.

So in 1998, U.S.-backed antidrug forces launched an offensive of unprecedented

aggressiveness into the Chapare. Within four years, the region went from growing some 120,000 acres of coca to growing next to nothing. Bolivian authorities hastily reported that they had achieved their goal of “zero coca,” and Washington tallied Bolivia as a clear victory in a record that was otherwise, to put it generously, disappointing. The Chapare was held up as proof that, with enough take-no-prisoners fortitude on the part of the good guys, the war on drugs could be won.

The victory started to erode almost as soon as it had been declared. First, Bolivian officials rescinded their “zero coca” claim. “Satellite error” had caused them to miss some 15,000 errant acres. Then, despite promises that “alternative development” programs would in time make up for lost income, farmers began turning back to coca, or in some cases turning to coca for the first time. In the Chapare, monitoring planes spotted “guerrilla plantations” being carved out of remote stretches of jungle, and soldiers found plants interspersed among licit crops like pineapple and banana, and hidden under the tropical canopy. In nearby Yungas, where farmers in certain areas can grow coca legally for domestic use (unprocessed leaves are made into tea, chewed as a mild stimulant and appetite suppressant, and incorporated into various indigenous practices), cultivation began to spread outside of the “traditional zone.”

For anyone skeptical of American triumphalism, there was good reason to anticipate this resurgence. Observers of the war on drugs talk about the “balloon effect”:

push down on supply in one place, and it pops up somewhere else to meet demand. In the late 1990s, the success of the anti-coca campaign in Bolivia (and, to a lesser extent, Peru) drove production to Colombia. Now, an all-out offensive there—under the auspices of Plan Colombia, which incorporates many of the lessons learned in Bolivia—is threatening to displace supply once again.

But just as important as the economic forces from above are the political forces from below. What drug warriors did not anticipate was that their campaign in Bolivia would create blowback of its own—and that it would be political rather than military. Bolivia's coca growers (cocaleros) responded to militarization by turning themselves into a national political force and one of the best-organized social movements in Latin America. Last year, they forced President Carlos Mesa, before he resigned in the face of national protests, to let them continue cultivating illegal fields.

"People in Washington are very worried about the coca situation in Bolivia right now," Beth Hogan, the head of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) operations in South America, told me on a tour of Yungas. In June, a few weeks after President Mesa's fall, new U.N. figures made official what those people feared: illegal coca cultivation in Bolivia increased by 35 percent last year.

"They Are Afraid of Me"

If Washington needs someone to blame for these numbers, it has a perfect scapegoat in Evo Morales. In recent years, Morales has won international notoriety as the man behind Bolivia's recurrent bouts of instability. He is a power broker in congress, and his party, the left-wing Movement Toward Socialism, or MAS, is the country's largest. In the 2002 presidential elections, he shocked Bolivia's elite by finishing second, one percentage point behind the winner. The U.S. ambassador to La Paz had given him an eleventh-hour boost by ham-handedly warn-

ing of the "consequences" of a Morales victory—an end to American aid. Morales is a likely frontrunner in the presidential elections that will be held in December.

What so frightens the embassy is that Morales is himself a coca grower. A 46-year-old Aymara Indian without a high school diploma, he rose through the ranks of the Chapare's "cocalero syndicates"—grass-roots union groups that "defend the rights of Bolivia's coca growers." Morales has helped turn the cocaleros into one of the most potent forces in Bolivia.

The first time I traveled into the Chapare last winter, it was in a convoy carrying Morales and his entourage on their way to campaign among the MAS's most devoted cocalero constituents. As we descended from the Andes into the tropical lowlands, passing through a checkpoint manned by anti-drug commandos, they stuffed coca leaf into their cheeks and blasted feisty Evo-themed folk music from the jeep's speakers. "The people are sick of so many lies," one song's chorus proclaimed against a background of blaring trumpets. When I expressed surprise that they traveled without armed security—especially since they often spin elaborate tales of American assassination plots—Morales shot back, "We don't need guns to shoot down the agents of empire."

Thanks to comments like that one, Morales often comes across in profiles as a brash provocateur. He catalogues the grievances of Bolivia's restive indigenous majority and issues hostile denunciations of the Bolivian elite and their "American overseers." In person, however, he is more often quiet and reserved. When he talks about his past, he strains to make his life sound unexceptional, reducing it to the basic story of all poor Chapareños: driven from the high Andes to the jungle by economic necessity, and then driven to coca by sheer desperation.

Like Morales, most cocaleros are economic refugees from the highlands. Their

ancestors were Quechua and Aymara Indians conscripted by the Spanish to work in the silver and tin mines, where they were often paid in coca. (The Spanish got over their initial aversion to pagan leaf-chewing when they realized how effectively it staved off hunger, fatigue, and altitude sickness.) But in the 1960s and 1970s, after nearly 500 years of this impoverished highland existence, tin prices collapsed and miners started to decamp for the jungle. This flow of migrants surged in the wake of the austerity-inducing liberal economic reforms of the 1980s. Fortunately, as wave after wave of new settlers arrived in the Chapare, demand for a product well suited to the region's tropical soils was soaring in the cities of Europe and North America. Over the course of the 1980s, accordingly, the number of acres devoted to coca in the Chapare increased more than tenfold. By the end of the decade, some 50,000 families had come to depend on it as a primary means of survival.

In the Chapare today, people talk about the early days of the coca boom as a sort of traffickers' paradise. Colombian drug planes would land on the main dirt road, and you could buy coca paste at market stalls. There's little question that farmers knew where their produce was going. But they mostly came into contact with the drug trade itself only for the sake of selling off their coca—and to manage this interaction they reproduced the union structures that had been so integral to life in the mining communities. The cocalero syndicates, some of which incongruously carry the names of mining camps, thus quickly became the Chapare's basic institutions. Organized into six "federations," they served as a de facto government, distributing land, resolving disputes, and taxing exchanges at their centralized coca markets to pay for schools, roads, and clinics. They also transposed a long history of radical activism onto the new politics of coca: in 1995, the MAS was born out of the six federations.

Morales's stature and identity have transcended his cocalero origins, but he has integrated the cause into an angry left-wing critique of "globalization, neoliberalism, and North American imperialism." He denounces the war on drugs, which he would "abolish" if elected president, as "a mechanism of imperial domination" and calls the cocaleros "a political instrument for the liberation and sovereignty of all Bolivians." As Juan Javier Bacarreza, the head of one of Bolivia's drug-control agencies, put it to me, "Coca is power, political power, and the cocaleros have learned how to use it very well."

Morales's trips through the Chapare are still punctuated by stops at the syndicate-operated markets, which have survived the anti-coca offensive with little sign of disruption. Each market is a tin-roofed building the size of a high school gym, its open concrete floor dotted with mounds of dried leaf and crowded with cocaleros. Buyers and sellers come and go unimpeded, loading leaf-stuffed bags onto trucks and motorcycles and taking them, in most cases, to small coca-paste labs in the jungle. (Some farmers deny that their leaf becomes cocaine, but most say, as one named Carlos Pinaya did to me, "I just sell it here. I don't know where it goes.") At a market in a small town called Villa 14 de Septiembre, Morales walked slowly through the crowd, shaking hands and receiving respectful greetings as people went about their business. At one point, he knelt down, reached into a pile of leaves, and let fistfuls of coca run through his fingers. Holding out a dark green leaf, he turned to me and said, "This is a natural resource of the people of Bolivia."

Later that night, he was sitting before a spread of fried fish, palm hearts, and large bottles of Bolivian beer at a restaurant overlooking the Chapare River and considering rumors—coming in, via cell phone, from sources in military intelligence and the Ministry of the Interior with disconcerting

frequency—about a group of pro-U.S. army officers plotting to overthrow the government and put in place a junta that would crack down on Morales and the cocalers. This sort of disruption is of course not entirely unthinkable given Bolivia's tumultuous politics and Washington's open hostility toward the "illegal-coca agitator" intent on establishing a "narco-state." But Morales's fixation on such rumors reflects a certain amount of self-aggrandizing paranoia as well. "It's clear how much the embassy wants a coup," he told me. I asked him why. "They are afraid of me because they are afraid of coca."

"I'll Plant More"

The point at which Morales's national political career truly took off was, not coincidentally, the point at which Bolivian authorities gave up on "voluntary" coca eradication in favor of a more forceful approach. Through most of the 1990s, La Paz had essentially tried to buy out coca growers: every time a farmer tore up an acre of coca plants, he got a payment from the government. Although the strategy had the desired effect of eliminating a lot of coca fields, it also created a powerful monetary incentive to plant new ones. After several years, and tens of millions of dollars, the net effect was zero.

At the same time, Washington was starting to place more and more blame on South America for the undiminished supply of cocaine on American streets. Drug-policy officials, needless to say, were less than thrilled with Bolivia's efforts. By the middle of the decade, they were wielding the threat of "decertification"—a designation that would have had the devastating effect of cutting off the flow of aid. So when the 1970s-military-dictator-turned-1990s-democrat Hugo Banzer was elected to the presidency in 1997, he appointed Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga, his young Texas-raised and Texas-educated vice president, to oversee the formulation of a new strategy. Quiroga is sharp, charismatic, and cosmopolitan. He

talks about the shame he felt when he first saw the movie *Scarface*—in which Bolivian drug lords figure prominently—and says he wants his daughters to live in a world where their passports will not earn them suspicious looks in international airports and where their native country's name will no longer be automatically associated with "Bolivian Marching Powder." He was, in short, an ideal choice to coordinate anti-coca efforts with the U.S. embassy.

Quiroga's "Plan Dignidad" made full-scale militarization of anti-coca efforts its hallmark. It recommended increased support for alternative development programs—and paid much lip-service to the need to give farmers new means of making a living—but devoted most of its funds to flooding the Chapare with troops. The Leopards, special commandos from the Rural Mobile Patrol Unit, began to mount daily missions to find and destroy jungle coca-paste labs and to man interdiction checkpoints on the Chapare's main roads to keep any coca paste that did get produced in, and the "precursor" materials needed to produce it (kerosene, sulfuric acid, and cement, among others) out. The Joint Task Force (known by its Spanish acronym, FTC) does the work of tearing up the Chapare's coca plants.

Coca cultivation—in contrast to the popular image of industrial-sized plots ringed by mustachioed, machine-gun-wielding guards—is mostly very small-scale. (Indeed, it is startling to realize that enough coca to produce a year's worth of cocaine for the U.S. market could be grown on just 150,000 acres—less than the area of New York City.) The typical Chapare coca farmer might grow rice for his family, some bananas for sale, and a few acres of coca for extra income; he might have a few plants on a stretch of ground between his house and the road and another small plot or two in more distant fields. The FTC's forced-eradication campaign, accordingly, had to be methodical and meticulous: small teams of soldiers,

many of them conscripts, going farm to farm, tearing up coca plants, hacking off their roots with machetes, and burning the detritus.

The main military base in the Chapare is a surprisingly unfortified cluster of muddy cinderblock buildings. Jeeps rattle in and out, and a half-dozen Vietnam-era helicopters sit on a landing pad, waiting to ferry Leopards to remote jungle locations. (“We have very good technicians,” one soldier joked after catching me looking skeptically at the rusty machines.) At the adjoining “Talons of Valor” training school, new recruits are coached in how to spot a drug mule (dry lips and red eyes), search a lumber truck (logging is now the Chapare’s second-biggest industry), and dismantle a lab (a reproduction of which, replete with real leaves and paste-caked equipment, sits in the base’s “museum”). Two American advisers from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) are housed nearby.

One morning at dawn, I arrived at the base to join an FTC squadron on its way to eradicate a field. Soldiers in khaki-colored tee-shirts were loading picks and machetes into the backs of trucks for “just a day’s work in the Chapare,” as the FTC’s head, Lt. Col. Dario Leigue, had put it the previous afternoon. Some were talking through mouthfuls of coca leaves, which they kept stocked in the cargo pockets of their fatigues. As we left the base, my guide, an affable FTC commander named José Zambrana, started talking about Evo Morales, prompted by the black, blue, and white MAS banners that line the Chapare’s main road. Morales’s machinations, according to Zambrana, are the reason for the FTC’s bad reputation. “Evo’s leadership is imposed on the people, and he is fighting for the drug traffickers,” he asserted. “The cocalers are just his soldiers.” Morales and the cocalers certainly have caused ample problems for Zambrana and the antidrug forces since the start of Plan Dignidad. They are famous among radical movements in the

rest of Latin America for perfecting the roadblock—a particularly effective weapon in their case because the road that runs through the Chapare is a crucial link between the Andes and Bolivia’s resource-rich eastern lowlands. They have also organized to defend coca fields, and on occasion clashed violently with FTC units and set booby traps to impede eradication. (To some in the U.S. embassy and in Washington, these last actions have earned them the label of “narcoterrorists.”)

Of most concern at the moment was the concession that the cocalers had recently wrested from Carlos Mesa’s administration. The instability of the previous three years and the MAS’s national electoral success—in part a result of popular outrage over eradication—had emboldened them, and they had threatened a new wave of upheaval that the embattled Mesa could not afford. The deal was simple: the cocalers would let the government eradicate enough coca to meet its target for the year if the government would lay off a portion of their illegal fields. Mesa justified this move as a temporary compromise, which will be rendered moot once an official study of legal consumption, due out later this year, establishes definitively that nearly all Chapare coca, and a substantial percentage of Yungas coca, is going to produce cocaine. (Current law allows 30,000 acres of coca to be cultivated, but internal government and U.S. embassy studies have found that probably only half as much acreage is needed to supply the licit market.) But the cocalers, smelling blood, were promising that the agreement was just the first step toward rolling back the iron-fisted eradication regime set up by Plan Dignidad. On this point, Zambrana and his colleagues were inclined to agree with the cocalers.

Luciano Jaimes Guevara, the young farmer whose fields were to be eradicated, was already waiting when we arrived. His wife and four small children were watching from inside an open-walled kitchen. The squadron’s leaders shook hands with

Guevara and then walked back through his overgrown property to the coca field in the back, where Guevara carefully pointed out which plants they should cut and which should stay.

International observers and human-rights activists have documented all sorts of abuses committed by soldiers during eradication, from several dozen deaths and cases of torture to trampling on other crops and arbitrary destruction of property. The Bolivian government's human rights ombudsman continually criticizes "the systematic impunity" that lets these abuses go unpunished, and the local office keeps on file detailed testimonies of hundreds of cases of abuse. Zambrana's interactions with Guevara were cordial. He later told me that "there is a bitterness to his job" because "these are, in the end, your people, and this is their way of life."

As soldiers spread out over his property and attacked his crops with picks, Guevara, a 27-year-old with a mop of black hair, explained to me that "coca is everything here, there's no other way." By way of demonstration, he showed me some runty pineapples that he had grown with the support of an USAID-funded alternative-development program. He had sold them for virtually nothing.

Once Zambrana and the soldiers had left, I asked Guevara what he planned to do next. He shrugged and answered, "I'll plant more." Weed-like coca, he explained, is extraordinarily easy and cheap to plant and, because it can be harvested four times a year, starts paying off quickly. "And if the soldiers come back?" He smiled: "A new fight."

"Coffee Is Not an Alternative"

No one denies that Plan Dignidad's forced-eradication strategy was a success, at least before politics got in the way. But alternative development will ultimately be the key to getting rid of coca in Bolivia, and its record thus far is much less encouraging.

The cocaleros and their advocates in the Chapare condemn U.S.-backed alternative development as "a complete failure," as the human rights ombudsman for the region put it to me. Emmanuel Gayraud, who helps run the European Union's alternative development program, offered an only slightly less scathing assessment: "It is a lie to say that alternative development has been a success here. It quite simply has not replaced the economic effects of coca."

Representatives of USAID, which oversees alternative development efforts in Bolivia, insist that the people of the Chapare and, now, Yungas are much better off than they would be without American-funded programs. They cite studies showing that families that have fully participated in crop-substitution programs have an income twice that of the regional average. However, the EU's alternative development workers and a number of economists who have studied the issue dispute that such benefits have been widespread. According to some measures, average income in the Chapare has fallen 20 percent since the start of Plan Dignidad (though it still hovers above Bolivia's per capita GDP of around \$900). It is not hard to understand why. During the boom, coca accounted for between a third and three-quarters of Bolivia's exports, depending on whom you ask. In 1990, Bolivia's president alleged that 70 percent of GDP was coca-related and that half of all imports were paid for with drug money. Even though a pathetically small percentage of these earnings was going to actual farmers, it was still a windfall. Since the start of Plan Dignidad, the incentives for growing have, if anything, increased: the price of coca leaf is now five times higher than it was in 1998.

U.S. alternative-development workers see in Yungas a chance to learn from past mistakes. They are also well aware that, as illicit growing spreads beyond the traditional zone, alternative development is even more important there than it was in the Chapare: Yungas cocaleros have staved

off any attempts at forced eradication by threatening to revolt, and they exercise exclusive control of some of the areas where growth is most explosive—"the new red zone," as they say in the U.S. embassy. "If the embassy tries to crack down on Yungas," one MAS leader there assured me, "the reaction of the cocaleros will be immediate and strong." The only weapon of the anti-coca forces functioning in Yungas at the moment, accordingly, is the one that has been least successful in the Chapare.

The latest advance being touted by the embassy is high-end coffee, a product supported by a USAID-backed program called Market Access and Poverty Alleviation, or MAPA. In December, one particular variety of bean, grown and processed by a cooperative funded by USAID loans and advised by MAPA technicians, won the top prize in a continent-wide "Cup of Excellence" tasting competition. It was fetching, as a result, unthinkable high prices in the boutique-coffee market.

MAPA's reigning coffee guru is Marcos Moreno, a middle-aged Panamanian-born grower and agronomist. When I met Moreno at his hotel in downtown La Paz to ride to one of his projects in Yungas—which lies just down a terrifying cliff-side road from Bolivia's two-mile-high capital city—it took little prompting to get him expounding on the promise of coffee. Marcos believes that the cloud-forested slopes that plummet into Yungas offer the perfect conditions for the kind of high-end organic coffee that has the potential to supplant coca. There is something undeniably quixotic about trying to replace one of the world's most lucrative crops—and "the first multinational based in Latin America," as former Peruvian president Alan Garcia once described the cocaine trade—with a commodity that has been suffering from decades of falling prices. But, Moreno declared grandly, "It's about showing them that there's a way forward without coca."

Farmers have long joked that Bolivian coffee is suitable only for prison cafeterias. According to Moreno, however, this poor reputation has nothing to do with the intrinsic quality of the bean and everything to do with shoddy postharvest milling and drying. "They really had no idea what they were doing before three years ago," he told me, going on to list the mistakes that Yungas coffee farmers were making before USAID arrived. Now, MAPA agronomists, working through the region's grower cooperatives, are helping some 7,000 farmers—training them in harvesting techniques, providing grants and expertise for milling facilities, building links between the cooperatives and the international specialty coffee market. The early results have, in a number of cases, been good.

One of MAPA's key innovations, though, is unrelated to the technical aspects of coffee farming. In the Chapare, U.S.-funded programs have typically required that participating farmers give up coca entirely. Many people, including Moreno, now admit that this is a mistake; it reduces participation and places unrealistic demands on new crops that, in many cases, will not become profitable for several years. The MAPA coffee project, in contrast, allows participants to keep some coca, at least for the time being.

Not that this reflects any sort of sympathy for the cocaleros' position on Moreno's part. He sees them as symptomatic of a broad culture of "irresponsibility" and a lingering strain of "Communist sentiment" in Bolivia's coca country. "I never get tired of this word 'responsibility,' because that's the whole problem," he said to me as we approached the Yungas town of Coroico, where one of the coffee cooperatives is located. "All they say is 'give, give, give.' We have to make them take responsibility for their actions." I gently suggested that some growers might think that since the governments of Bolivia and the United States are the ones asking them to stop growing coca, it is those governments' obligation to give

them an alternative. He lashed back: "That's not getting it. That's not taking responsibility. They have to accept that coca is illegal."

At the Coroico cooperative, Moreno guided me to a new wet-milling system—a series of linked concrete tanks under a gleaming tin roof. There, three men were waiting to greet him. Juan Valencia, the cooperative's president, was quick to express his gratitude. Even with Moreno out of earshot, he offered a paean to individual responsibility in the global marketplace: "We are aware that as producers we have to compete at an international level, so we have to continue improving our operations and training our producers." The cooperative has begun selling its best beans at double the normal price.

But if the Coroico cooperative demonstrates the potential of alternative development, it also demonstrates the pitfalls. Last year, MAPA advisors started to come down hard on the cooperative's leadership for its management and accounting practices, which lacked "professionalism" and "transparency." Faced with demands that it accept outside management, the cooperative balked and dropped out of the program. "We have our own people," Valencia told me. "We don't want to hire people we don't know." After a couple of promising years, other factors—especially deteriorating soil—have also started to thwart Moreno's vision. Some of the cooperative's members, as a result, have started switching fields over to coca. "It's worrying," Carlos Yujra, the treasurer, whispered before I left. "How do you convince them to grow coffee instead of coca? I don't have the answer." Another member of the cooperative, Raul Mamani, nodded in assent. "Coffee is really not an alternative to coca here."

On our way back to La Paz, Moreno was in a more reflective mood, and the irrepressible optimism of the morning gave way to more sober consideration of the challenges ahead. "Our war now is getting enough stakeholders to get past inertia in the short

term," he told me. He considered this statement for a moment and then took off on a rant about the silliness and stupidity of the whole "Bolivian system": little access to credit, 20 percent interest when you get it, a Byzantine tax structure, sclerotic community leadership, the shoals of local politics. "I don't even think I could make a coffee farm work here," Moreno grimly concluded.

Back in La Paz, one of the chief Bolivian architects of coca policy, himself a dyed-in-the-wool drug warrior, put it slightly differently. "The most efficient private-sector enterprise in Bolivia is cocaine production," he said. "No regulation, no taxation, no quality control. No subsidies in Iowa, no subsidies in France, and a free trade agreement worldwide. If you try to replace that, you have to face up to sugar subsidies, textile quotas, and all that." His conclusion, in the end, was the same as Moreno's: "It's not viable."

"There Is No Other Work"

Last June, when a second Bolivian president in as many years abandoned office warning of civil war, a former U.S. official explained to me that we were witnessing a "narco-coup"—drug traffickers fomenting chaos in order to shield their business interests from interference. He was wrong, of course. Bolivians had taken to the streets for a variety of reasons, but coca was very far down their list of complaints. After all, President Mesa had essentially conceded defeat on the issue several months earlier.

The erroneous claim of a "narco-coup" was, however, a sign of creeping anxiety in official U.S. circles about the resurgence of coca in Bolivia. The current debate is over just how aggressively to respond. While the fiscal-crisis-stricken White House has recommended a slight reduction in aid in 2006, some of the more militantly antidrug policymakers in the Pentagon and the DEA are pressing for a renewed offensive. Many in the State Department, meanwhile, are warning that any crackdown will come at the expense of Bolivia's stability. It is easy

to make too much of the role of coca in causing the tumult of the last few years, as both the cocaleros and some Americans have tended to do. Still, it seems fitting that the two leading contenders in the upcoming presidential election are Tuto Quiroga (who served as president for what would have been the last year of Banzer's term) and Evo Morales. As of this writing, they are running neck-and-neck. (What rarely gets mentioned in all of this is that, in the years since the war on drugs in South America kicked off, cocaine has become more widely available than ever in the United States. Since the 1980s, the street price of a gram has decreased by two-thirds.)

Of course, on the ground in the Chapare and Yungas all of these debates have a ring of the surreal. Many cocaleros, too persuaded by half by antidrug advertising campaigns meant to make them feel complicit in the deaths of teenagers, think that the United States is literally overrun by cocaine addicts; some, even while defending their right to grow coca, would earnestly apologize to me for the effects the drug trade was having on my friends and family. Others assume that the United States must be using coca as a cover for some other sinister design on Bolivia. At a market in a town called Shinahota, I met with a cocalero leader named Emiliano Choque, who force-fed me Chapare coca leaves while talking about the hopeless poverty of the farmers and the abuses of the antidrug forces. When I asked him about coca-paste labs in the Chapare, he simply denied that such a thing as cocaine exists. I mentioned that I had seen a lab with my own eyes. He froze for only a second and then, grinning through the gap in his teeth, answered breezily, "The United States built that lab and showed it to you so they can turn the Chapare into a colony." Why does it want a colony in an impoverished patch of Bolivian jungle? "They want our trees."

The day before I left the Chapare for the last time, a young Leopard captain named

Adan Hurtado took me on a search-and-destroy mission with four of his men. These missions uncover about 2000 coca-paste labs a year in the Chapare, a number that has not changed much over the years. The Leopards often patrol by helicopter and river canoe, but that morning we were in a jeep, careening along mud paths and scouring the vegetation for signs of an opening. Hurtado's men—some of whom trained at the School of the Americas, at Fort Benning, Georgia, where they learned about "shooting, lots of shooting" and "human rights"—talked about girls and ate the chocolate bars out of military Meals-Ready-to-Eat packs. At one point, we spotted a lone farmer walking on an isolated path. One of the men eyed him suspiciously and said, "They know where [the labs] are, but they don't tell."

When we had a lab, Hurtado knew it immediately. Branches had been cut and then carefully replaced, the mud raked to conceal boot prints. The Leopards climbed out of the jeep, grabbed their M4s, and stepped into the jungle. They moved fast and low through the trees, ducking under vines and cutting away branches with machetes.

The first sign of a lab is its sharp chemical stench. Were it not for the smell, we might have passed through the small clearing without even noticing. A few sticks were stuck into the soil, surrounded by some buckets and plastic sheeting, soggy piles of "used" leaves, a few bottles of chemicals, a gas can, and two pairs of rubber boots for stomping cocaine alkaloid out of the leaves. The structure looked freshly abandoned. There was paste residue in the buckets, and the torches, for working at night, seemed to have been recently extinguished. Perhaps, Hurtado said, the men had gotten word that we were on our way. In any case, they were probably just a few locals anyway—the ones who usually get swept up in these raids. "They are mostly young people because there is no other work," Hurtado acknowledged, with clear

sympathy. The agents who come from the cities to buy the paste are rarely caught.

Swatting at mosquitoes, the men began to tear down the lab and collect all the materials. It had already yielded at least two small batches of paste, each worth upwards of \$1,000. "They were planning to come back," Hurtado surmised. "Everything is still here: diesel, bicarbonate, acid, the implements. The only thing missing is coca." When all of this was accounted for, the absurdity of the task became obvious: the lab consisted of some cut branches and small amounts of readily available supplies; the coca leaves were bought at a local market; and the end product, the result of a night's

worth of heavy lifting and basic chemistry, was the size of a brick and worth more than the average annual income of a Chapare family.

With everything gathered in the center of the clearing, Hurtado unscrewed the cap on a gas can and started splashing diesel fuel on the pile. As his men backed away, he lit a match, and the disassembled lab exploded into flames, which licked the branches 50 feet above. The men started back to the jeep, neither victorious nor defeated, just plodding through another day of business. As we drove away to look for more labs, acrid smoke rose through the canopy behind us. ●