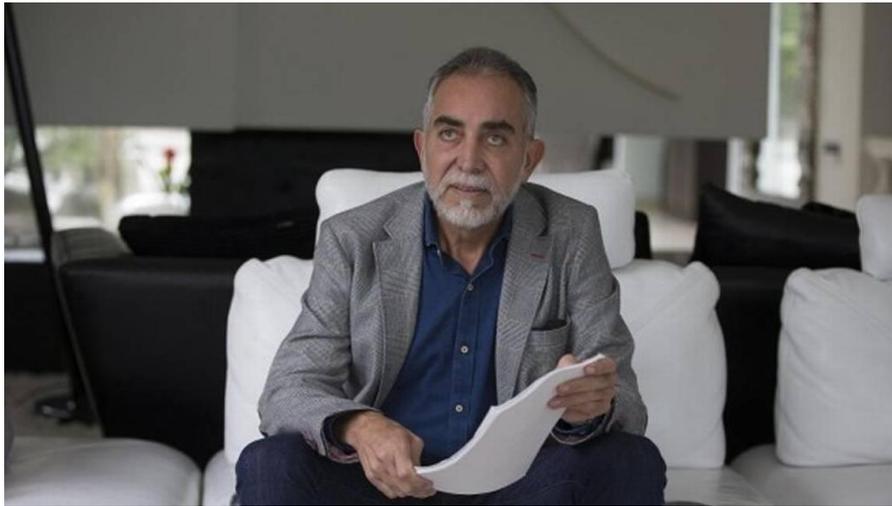


## U.S. agent got prostitutes and cash from Colombian drug lord. Now he's headed to prison.



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The bribes a federal agent accepted from a wanted Colombian drug lord — \$18,000 in cash, prostitutes, restaurant meals and a hotel room — don't add up to much.

But they have cost Christopher V. Ciccione II his career with Homeland Security Investigations and his freedom.

After pleading guilty Thursday to a conspiracy of “deceit, craft and trickery” against his own government, the 52-year-old fired agent faces up to five years in prison at his sentencing in February before U.S. District Judge Robert Scola. Other charges, including fraud and obstruction of justice, will be dropped by the U.S. Attorney's Office at that point. “Chris is a good man who served his country for more than 20 years both in the military and as a federal agent,” his defense

attorney, **Marc Seitles**, said after the plea hearing in Miami federal court. “Sadly, he had a poor lapse in judgment, and today, accepted responsibility for it.”

Ciccione, who was arrested in September, didn’t break the law to help just any Colombian drug-trafficking suspect. In exchange for taking bribes, he got a reputed Cali cartel boss, Jose Bayron Piedrahita, removed from the indictment in one of the biggest cocaine-smuggling cases in the nation’s history.

Deploying a web of lies, the veteran agent persuaded federal prosecutors in Miami to dismiss Piedrahita from an indictment six years ago that initially charged about 100 members of the powerful Cali cartel in 1993.

A new indictment accused Ciccione, Piedrahita and the agent’s informant in Colombia, Juan Carlos Velasco Cano, of conspiring to commit fraud and obstruction of justice. The agent and informant have pleaded guilty, while the U.S. government is seeking the extradition of Piedrahita, 58, from Colombia.

The agent, after socializing with Piedrahita in Bogotá in December 2010, lied that the suspect was a fugitive who could not be identified or found, according to a statement filed with his plea agreement. Ciccione admitted he “falsified official records and lied to his supervisors and the U.S. Attorney’s Office to cause” the original drug-trafficking indictment to be dismissed against Piedrahita.

The indictment is not only a stain on the former agent and the federal government’s high-profile investigation of the once-formidable Cali cartel, which extended from 1991 to 2011. It also calls into question all of Ciccione’s investigative work: He initially served as a U.S. Customs Service agent in 2001 before it was absorbed into the Department of Homeland Security in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

### **Feds auction high-end cars seized from drug lord**

Federal law enforcement is auctioning off cars so valuable at Marlins Park on Wednesday that it would take Giancarlo Stanton's wealth to buy one. The auction, led by the US Marshall's service, is a group of cars owned by drug kingpin Alvaro Lopez Tardon, imprisoned for 150 years in Miami in 2014 for among other things, laundering \$14 million in local real estate. The cars include a \$1.9 million Ferrari and a \$900,000 Bugatti.

The department declined to comment on the current indictment or on whether it was reviewing all of Ciccione’s criminal cases.

According to the indictment, Ciccione communicated with Piedrahita through the agent’s confidential informant, Velasco. Starting in February 2010, Ciccione

emailed federal prosecutors that he would be seeking dismissal of the drug-trafficking charges against Piedrahita.

Months later, in July, Velasco informed Piedrahita of Ciccione's effort and that he was trying to obtain a visa for Piedrahita to come to the United States.

One of the agent's first favors was to alter Piedrahita's record on a federal criminal database called TECS, so that it falsely showed he was a "former suspect of a closed investigation" rather than a defendant in the "Operation Cornerstone" case against the Cali cartel, the indictment said.

By that November, Piedrahita was making arrangements for Ciccione's visit to Bogotá the following month. Piedrahita told Velasco, the informant, that "three divine women" were going to join them.

On Dec. 6, 2010, Ciccione and an unnamed Homeland Security agent traveled to Bogotá and met with Piedrahita, Velasco and others at the Marriott Hotel. "During the party," the indictment said, "Ciccione consumed alcoholic drinks and had sexual relations with a prostitute, which were paid for by Piedrahita."

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