It was just before midnight when Enrique Peña Nieto declared victory as the newly elected president of Mexico. Peña Nieto was a lawyer and a millionaire, from a family of mayors and governors. His wife was a televsion star. He beamed as he was showered with red, green, and white confetti at the Mexico City headquarters of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which had ruled for more than 70 years before being forced out in 2000. Returning the party to power on that night in July 2012, Peña Nieto vowed to tame drug violence, light corruption, and open a more transparent era in Mexican politics.

Two thousand miles away, in an apartment in Bogota’s upscale Chicó Navarra neighborhood, Andrés Sepúlveda sat before six computer screens. Sepúlveda is Colombian, bricklike, with a shaved head, goatee, and a tattoo of a QR code containing an encryption key on the back of his head. On his nape are the words “/\head/” and “\body\” stacked atop each other, dark riffs on coding. He was watching a live feed of Peña Nieto’s victory party, waiting for an official declaration of the results. When Peña Nieto won, Sepúlveda began destroying evidence. He drilled holes in flash drives, hard drives, and cell phones, fried their circuits in a microwave, then broke them to shards with a hammer. He shredded documents and flushed them down the toilet and erased servers in Russia and Ukraine rented anonymously with Bitcoins. He was dismantling what he says was a secret history of one of the dirtiest Latin American campaigns in recent memory.

For eight years, Sepúlveda, now 31, says he traveled the continent rigging major political campaigns. With a budget of $600,000, the Peña Nieto job was by far his most complex. He led a team of hackers that stole campaign strategies, manipulated social media to create false waves of enthusiasm and derision, and installed spyware in opposition offices, all to help Peña Nieto, a right-of-center candidate, eke out a victory. On that July night, he cracked bottle after bottle of Colón Negra beer in celebration. As usual on election night, he was alone.

Sepúlveda’s career began in 2005, and his first jobs were small—mostly defacing campaign websites and breaking into opponents’ donor databases. Within a few years he was assembling teams that spied, stole, and smeared on behalf of presidential campaigns across Latin America. He wasn’t cheap, but his services were extensive. For $12,000 a month, a customer hired a crew that could hack smartphones, spoof and clone Web pages, and send mass e-mails and texts. The premium package, at $20,000 a month, also included a full range of digital interception, attack, decryption, and defense.

The jobs were carefully laundered through layers of middlemen and consultants. Sepúlveda says many of the candidates he helped might not even have known about his role; he says he met only a few.

His teams worked on presidential elections in Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Venezuela. Campaigns mentioned in this story were contacted through former and current spokespeople; none but Mexico’s PRI and the campaign of Guatemala’s National Advancement Party would comment.

As a child, he witnessed the violence of Colombia’s Marxist guerrillas. As an adult, he allied with a right wing emerging across Latin America. He believed his hacking was no more diabolical than the tactics of those he opposed, such as Hugo Chávez and Daniel Ortega.

Many of Sepúlveda’s efforts were unsuccessful, but he has enough wins that he might be able to claim as much influence over the political direction of modern Latin America as anyone in the 21st century. “My job was to do actions of dirty war and psychological operations, black propaganda, rumors—the whole dark side of politics that nobody knows exists but everyone can see,” he says in Spanish, while sitting at a small plastic table in an outdoor courtyard deep within the heavily fortified offices of Colombia’s attorney general’s office. He is serving 10 years in prison for charges including use of malicious software, conspiracy to commit crime, violation of personal data, and espionage, related to hacking during Colombia’s 2014 presidential election. He has agreed to cooperate with authorities in Colombia and has agreed to testify before Congress in the United States.

Andrés Sepúlveda
claims he spent eight years disrupting campaigns across Latin America

By Jordan Robertson, Michael Foley, and Andrew Willis
Photographs by Juan Arredondo
Most jobs were initiated in person. Sepúlveda would give him a piece of paper with target names, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers. Sepúlveda said Rendón handed him a notepad with the name of the most powerful people in Venezuela, Diosdado Caballo, then the president of the National Assembly. He also went outside his tight circle of trusted hackers and called in a hacktivist group, to attack Chávez's website.

A few weeks later Sepúlveda hacked Caballo’s Twitter account, Rendón seemed to congratulate him. "It was an amazing news—" he wrote in a Sept. 9, 2012, e-mail, linking to a story about the breach. (Rendón says he never sent such an e-mail.

Sepúlveda provided screen shots of a dozen e-mails, and many of them were from a website he said he had been hired to destroy that from November 2011 to September 2012 Sepúlveda sent long lists of government websites he hacked for various campaigns to a senior member of Rendón’s consulting firm, facing them with hacker slams (“Owner!” read one). Two weeks before Venezuela’s presidential election, Sepúlveda sent screen shots showing how he’d hacked the opposition website. “We can turn it on and off at will.” Chávez won but died five months later of cancer, triggering an election, won by Nicolás Maduro. The day before Maduro claimed victory, Sepúlveda hacked his Twitter account and posted allegations of election fraud. Blaming “conspiracy hackings from abroad,” the government of Venezuela disabled the site for nearly an entire country for 20 minutes.

In Mexico, Sepúlveda’s technical mastery and Rendón’s grand vision for a ruthless political machine inspired him to digital action fueled by the huge resources of the PRI. The years under President Felipe Calderón and the PAN, (as in Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) were plagued by a grinding war that fueled kidnappings, street assassinations, and beheadings.

"Listen to music" meant to intercept a target’s phone calls. To “caress” meant to attack; to "shush it down the toilet." If Rendón needed to send an "insurance policy." Rendón cultivated an image of a mentor. A devout Buddhist and practitioner of martial arts, Sepúlveda says, his payments were made in cash, half upfront. When he traveled, he used a fake passport and stayed at dead drops. (Sepúlveda says it was a small job for a client of his."

Sepúlveda says he was offered several political jobs in Spain, which he says he turned down because he was too busy. On the question of whether the U.S. presidential campaign is being tampered with, he is unequivocal. “I’m 100 percent sure it is,” he says.

Sepúlveda grew up poor in Bucaramanga, eight hours north of Bogotá by car. His mother was a secretary. His father was an activist, helping farmers find better crops to grow than cocoa plants, and the family moved constantly because of death threats from drug traffickers. His parents divorced, and by the age of 15, after and the family moved constantly because of death threats from drug traffickers. His parents divorced, and by the age of 15, after

In Florida for defamation, but the court dismissed the case on the grounds that Fusnes couldn’t be sued for his official acts.) The campaign's democracy activities, he studied psychology and worked in advertising before advising presidential candidates in his native Venezuela. After accusing then-President Chávez of vote rigging in 2007, he left and never went back. According to Rendón, who owned a fleet of luxury cars, wore big flashy watches, and spent thousands on tailored coats. Like Sepúlveda, he was a perfectionist. His staff was expected to arrive early and work late. “I was very picky,” Sepúlveda says. “I did what I liked, I was paid well and traveled. It was the perfect job.” But more than anything, their right-wing politics aligned. Sepúlveda says he saw Rendón as a genius and a mentor. A devout Buddhist and practitioner of martial arts, according to his own website, Rendón cultivated an image of mystery and menace, wearing only all-black in public, including the occasional samurai robe. On his website he calls himself the best malware. Venezuelans and Ecuadoreans are superb at stealing scanning systems and software for vulnerabilities. Argentines are

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offered the youthful energy of Peña Nieto, who just finished a successful term as governor.

Sepúlveda didn’t hide the idea of working in Mexico, a dangerous country for involvement in public life. But Rendón persuaded him to travel there for short trips, starting in 2008, often flying him in on his private jet. Working at one point in Tabasco on the sweltering Caribbean coast, Sepúlveda hacked a political boss who turned out to have connections to a drug cartel. After Rendón’s security team learned of a plan to kill Sepúlveda, he spent a night in an armored Chevy Suburban before returning to Mexico City.

Early polls showed Peña Nieto 20 points ahead, but his supporters weren’t taking chances. Sepúlveda’s team installed malware in routers in the headquarters of the PRD candidate, which let him tap the phones and computers of anyone using the network, including the candidate. He took similar steps against PPS’s Vázquez Mota, its first female presidential candidate.

On the left, the Democratic Revolution Party, or PRD, chose Andrés López Obrador, a former Mexico City mayor.

In May, Peña Nieto visited Mexico City’s Ibero-American University and was bombarded by angry chants and boos from students who accused Peña Nieto of holding a hand on an adjacent building, lidig, according to some social media posts, in a bathroom. The images were a disaster. López Obrador soared.

But he also knew the currency issue was a political landmine. In Mexico, the peso would sink. Sepúlveda rose in the polls, the lower the peso would go. If López Obrador didn’t shut down efforts to discredit the president by showing that the guerrillas continued c in drugs and violence even as they talked about peace. Within months, Sepúlveda hacked the phones and e-mail accounts of more than 700 FARC guerrillas, created a party and backed an alternative candidate, Oscar Iván Zuluaga, who opposed the talks.

Rendón, who was working for Santos, wanted to join Sepúlveda’s team. He considered Rendón’s willingness to work for a candidate supporting peace with the FARC a betrayal and suspected the candidate was going soft. They were the opposite of each other. Sepúlveda was a well-investigated by ideology first and money second, and that if he wanted to get rich he could have made a lot more hacking financial systems than elections. For the first time, he decided to oppose his mentor. Sepúlveda went to work for the opposition, reporting directly to Zuluaga’s campaign manager, Luis Alfonso Hoyos. (Zuluaga denies being involved in hacking; he refers reporters to a clone site. There they posted what looked like a long defense written by Costa Bonino, which casually raised questions about whether his Uruguayan roots violated Mexican restrictions on foreigners in elections. Costa Bonino left the campaign a few days later. He indicated recently that he knew he was being spied on, he just didn’t know how. It goes with the territory. As he rose in the polls, the lower the peso would go. He started stoking fear that he could create trends. One conversation he started scared him that the more López Obrador rose in the polls, the lower the peso would sink.

Just about anything the PRD said or did was hacked. By 2012, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe’s successor, unexpectedly restarted peace talks with the FARC, hoping to break the logjam around topics such as land reform and by FARC guerrillas, created a party and backed an alternative candidate, Oscar Iván Zuluaga, who opposed the talks.

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In one case, Maynor was asked to steal data as a security test, but the individual couldn’t show PRD’s national director, Hoyos, the campaign’s security who he wanted to test. In another, a police body that wasn’t related to the hacking detail in a campaign how a candidate’s movements could be tracked to shut off a user’s iPhone for a bugged clone. “For obvious reasons, we always have to be cautious,” one of Rendón’s aides, Maynor, who declines to name the candidates involved.

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