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From Greed to Grievance *The Shifting Political Profile of the Colombian Paramilitaries*

Winifred Tate

On June 28, 2004, indicted drug trafficker and paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso, wearing a fashionable Italian suit and tie, addressed the Colombian Congress from the podium. "The judgment of history will recognize the goodness and nobility of our cause," he told the assembled legislators and press. The day before, Mancuso, along with two other paramilitary leaders, had traveled in an official air force plane from the small northern Colombia hamlet where paramilitary leaders had assembled to begin talks with the Colombian government. After almost a decade of fighting outside the law, Mancuso was now addressing the heart of the state, his many arrest warrants—as well as the extradition order issued by the U.S. government that would land him in a jail in Washington, D.C., four years later—temporarily suspended as the Colombian government and the paramilitary leaders began negotiations intended to demobilize paramilitary fighters in exchange for state benefits.

Over the past decade, paramilitary forces under the umbrella of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) transformed themselves from regional renegades to political operators and valid interlocutors, respected in many quarters as worthy of sitting at the negotiating table with the government. This metamorphosis involved changes in paramilitary tactics, as well as a substantial public relations campaign aimed at changing public perceptions at home and abroad. These groups had begun new and wider military operations in the late 1990s, dramatically expanding their numbers from an estimated 2,500 in the early 1990s to more than 15,000 by the end of the decade,

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and embarked on offensive military campaigns to conquer new territory. Paramilitary leaders carried out a public relations campaign employing a range of strategies to engender public acceptance of their role as political spokesmen from the government and international funders. Paramilitary groups with significant links to a growing number of congressional and local politicians were central in transforming the electoral map of Colombia.¹ These efforts were a critical component in the domestic and international support for current negotiations between the government and paramilitary leaders.

Through these negotiations, the Colombian government demobilized almost 32,000 paramilitary fighters by July 2007, using traditional conflict-resolution strategies based on the collective disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of combatants. These conflict-resolution techniques have been developed over the past several decades to bring violent oppositional groups into legal political life. However, the history and nature of the Colombian paramilitary forces, particularly their ongoing links with state security forces, involvement with violent criminal enterprises, and strategic deployment of public relations and media campaigns to increase public support of their claims without substantially altering their abusive practices, pose profound challenges to the employment of traditional peacebuilding strategies in Colombia. Unlike the insurgents who have participated in previous peace negotiations with the Colombian government, the paramilitaries were not radical leftists intent on defeating the government, but rather were led by elite ranchers and farmers—many deeply implicated in drug trafficking—who claimed to support the state. While guerrilla factions have long employed public diplomacy to further their cause, the paramilitaries have brought an unprecedented level of sophistication to their public relations campaigns. This chapter will examine how paramilitaries used new forms of technology, such as the Internet, and organizational forms including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foundations to increase public support and justify their negotiations with the government. These paramilitary forces offer an example of how illegal armed groups can learn political lessons from previous peace processes. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of negotiations within the Colombian conflict, outlines the history and evolution of paramilitary forces there, and then reviews the paramilitaries' efforts to bolster their legitimacy and articulate their version of the Colombian conflict, before concluding with the challenges that paramilitary groups present to the conflict-resolution models used in the current negotiations.

Negotiations within the Colombian Conflict

Measuring the degree to which illegal armed groups articulate a valid grievance against the state and represent a significant constituency is of critical

¹ See Mauricio Romero, ed., *Parapolítica: La ruta de la expansión paramilitar y los acuerdos políticos* (Bogotá: Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris and Intermedio Editores, 2007).

importance in assessing prospects for successful negotiations with those groups. In their analysis of illegal armed groups in entrenched conflicts, World Bank economists Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler offered the “greed and grievance” spectrum, concluding that illegal armed groups generally move from grievance, or the articulation of complaints against the state, to greed—efforts to capture and maintain control over strategic resources. Their work was widely used in Colombia’s case to explain the evolution of the guerrillas, who were seen as moving from ideologically based resistance against the state, to increasing involvement in criminal activity and drug-trade profiteering. However, Collier and Hoeffler’s work has not been sufficiently analyzed in light of groups that have used the articulation of grievances against the state to further—or to mask—their violent criminal enterprises. In Colombia, grievance discourses employed against the state by violent groups have complex genealogies that do not easily translate along left-right ideological divides. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to trace their evolution here, these discourses offer deep-rooted political resources for Colombian groups to project and claim political legitimacy and public support even while maintaining extremely violent practices. Liberal guerrillas as well as organized bandits during and following the partisan violence of the 1950s, the leadership of the major drug cartels during the 1980s, and some paramilitary spokesmen in the 1990s have all employed grievance discourses decrying state inefficiency and illegitimacy to build public support for themselves. This chapter focuses on the paramilitary leadership’s use of grievance discourses and an accompanying repertoire of political practices to garner greater public support and access to official political resources (including the opportunity to run for elected office and receive state funding). By portraying themselves as motivated primarily by grievance—as victims of guerrilla violence forced to take up arms when abandoned by the state—paramilitaries attempt to counter the perception that they are motivated primarily by greed, whether defending the interests of large landowners and drug traffickers or conducting death squad operations as clandestine agents of state counterinsurgency efforts.

With a few notable exceptions, the majority of analyses of Colombian paramilitaries have focused on human rights concerns or have been journalistic accounts of their military operations. The most detailed work examining the evolution of Colombian paramilitary forces has employed the concept of military entrepreneurs to describe the shifting movement between legally sanctioned activities and illegality over time and has underscored how paramilitary forces have defended different economic interests in different regions.² This framework, while useful in describing those shifts, does not allow an

²See Thomas Gallant, “Brigandage, Piracy, Capitalism and State Formation: Transnational Crime from a Historical World Systems Perspective,” in *States and Illegal Practices*, ed. Joseph Heyman (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas, 1982–2003* (Bogotá: IEPRI, 2003).

exploration of how paramilitary leaders have strategically used political repertoires, discourses, and organizational forms—many traditionally employed by the left—to increase their public support. The acceptance of the paramilitaries as a negotiating partner with the government is the most significant sign of their success in reframing and legitimating their cause.

The talks begun in 2003 between paramilitary groups and the Colombian government were only the latest such negotiations in the long history of peace efforts in Colombia. Although ultimately unsuccessful in resolving the armed conflict, such efforts have allowed the demobilization of thousands of combatants from individual guerrilla groups. Amnesties and reintegration programs for bandits and Liberal Party guerrillas in the 1950s were the first such efforts. Talks with Marxist guerrillas began in the early 1980s, long before their more successful Central American counterparts would engage in dialogues for peace. By the 1990s, an international diplomatic consensus widely accepted negotiations with illegal armed groups—even for those perceived by some in the U.S. government to have employed illegal tactics or to represent unsavory ideological projects—as an established model for resolution of violent conflict. Colombia's recent paramilitary demobilization efforts are unprecedented in their size and scope; the government has moved almost 32,000 paramilitary members through its programs, while previous collective guerrilla demobilizations have involved at most only a few thousand fighters.

Previous negotiations offer many lessons to thoughtful combatants. In many cases of collective demobilization, former combatants suffered serious persecution, both from former enemies and from still active former comrades. In part because of this violence, no guerrilla force has been successful in creating a sustainable legal political party. Combatants concerned about the possible legal repercussions of demobilization may note that none of the thousands of combatants participating in these processes have faced trials or truth commissions attempting to address criminal violence or abuse that they may have committed. Indeed, many enjoyed significant economic benefits through government subsidies and reintegration programs. Finally, former guerrillas were able to return to "legal life," rejoining their home communities, and many movement leaders were able to run for political office, head foundations and NGOs, and become political commentators with respect from many quarters. Merely participating in such talks can generate public support for groups involved, even if the negotiations are ultimately unsuccessful.

Paramilitary groups participating in negotiations with the government have already obtained concrete benefits. Like demobilized guerrillas before them, demobilized paramilitary members receive a government stipend (in this case, slightly less than minimum wage for two years) in addition to employment and educational benefits. While delivery of promised benefits and services has suffered significant delays, such incentives remain an important factor, particularly for rank-and-file paramilitary members. More important

for paramilitary leaders facing criminal indictments, implementation of the Justice and Peace Law passed in 2005 and discussed further by Arturo J. Carrillo in Chapter 7 of this volume has produced little accountability. While the law was significantly strengthened by a May 2006 decision of the Constitutional Court, which required a complete confession and full declaration of assets and expanded the definition of victims eligible for reparations, execution of the law has been slow.³ Implementation depends on the 23 prosecutors and 150 investigators assigned to the Justice and Peace Unit of the Attorney General's Office, which must handle the 2,812 demobilized paramilitaries accused of crimes against humanity. As of June 2007, only forty of the accused had given their first testimony, and the investigation process was significantly delayed, with many of the accused refusing to provide information. Charges in some cases have been dismissed because witnesses recanted previous testimony; at least four prominent leaders of victims' groups calling for investigations have been assassinated.⁴

Evolution of Paramilitary Forces

"Paramilitary groups" and "self-defense groups" describe a range of different armed actors in Colombia over the past fifty years. These groups have developed according to profoundly different regional dynamics.⁵ Despite regional variation, the evolution of paramilitary groups can be divided roughly into three major, at times overlapping, phases: death squad operations, in the 1970s and early 1980s; private armies funded by the drug trade, in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and the efforts to consolidate paramilitary groups under a single coordinating body represented by national spokesmen participating in public political life, starting in the late 1990s.

Paramilitary Death Squad Operations

One of the major differences between paramilitary groups and those illegal armed actors that have engaged in peace talks and demobilization programs is that paramilitaries historically have acted in concert with—and been

³See International Crisis Group (ICG), *Colombia: Towards Peace and Justice*, Latin America Report no. 16 (Bogotá/Brussels: ICG, March 14, 2006), www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4020&l=1 (accessed September 30, 2008); also Human Rights Watch, *Letting Paramilitaries off the Hook* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004), www.hrw.org/backgrounders/americas/colombia0105/ (accessed September 30, 2008); Latin America Working Group (LAWG), *Colombia: The Other Half of the Truth* (Washington, D.C.: LAWG, June 2008), http://lawg.org/docs/the_other_half_of_the_truth.pdf (accessed September 30, 2008).

⁴Adam Isacson, "The 'Justice and Peace' process takes a grotesque turn," June 24, 2007, Center for International Policy, www.cipcol.org/?p=431#more-431 (accessed August 23, 2008).

⁵For greater detail on the history of paramilitaries, see Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas*; Francisco Cubides, "Los paramilitares y su estrategia," in *Reconocer la guerra para construir la paz*, eds. Malcolm Deas and María Victoria Llorente (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 1999); Carlos Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico en Colombia: Origen, desarrollo y consolidación: el caso "Puerto Boyacá"* (Bogotá: Editorial Documentos Periodísticos, 1990).

supported by—the state military apparatus rather than in opposition to the state. (An important exception to this is the paramilitary violent repression of state judicial efforts to investigate paramilitary crimes, particularly involving the drug trade.) Paramilitary groups have periodically been legally incorporated into counterinsurgency efforts, and the links between legal and illegal paramilitaries have historically been pervasive. The legal basis for state sponsorship of paramilitary organizations was Law 48, approved by the Colombian Congress in 1968, which allowed the government to “mobilize the population in activities and tasks” to restore public order.⁶ International pressure and additional attacks against government officials led President Virgilio Barco to declare the creation of paramilitary groups illegal in 1989. The expansion of paramilitary groups in the 1990s coincided with the organization of legal rural defense forces, known as the “Convivir.” Officially launched in 1995, the Convivir were enthusiastically supported by Álvaro Uribe during his tenure as governor of Antioquia (1995–98). Following numerous complaints of Convivir participation in human rights abuses, the Supreme Court upheld their legality in 1997 but prohibited them from collecting intelligence for the security forces and from receiving military-issued weapons.⁷

According to human rights groups and government investigators, during the first phase of paramilitary activity, there was considerable overlap between the civilians legally trained by local military forces in the 1970s and illegal paramilitary death squads, such as the American Anti-Communist Alliance, active in the Magdalena region.⁸

Expansion of Private Armies

The first qualitative shift in Colombian paramilitary groups came in the 1980s, when money from the drug trade allowed such forces to grow from small groups linked to local military commanders to private armies. Unlike the death squad operations in other Latin American countries, the paramilitaries benefited from the enormous resources provided by Colombia’s most lucrative industry: drug trafficking. The fusion of counterinsurgency ideology and illegal narcotics revenue produced one of the most lethal fighting forces in Latin America. As the owners of vast haciendas (the result of money laundering and efforts to buy their way into the landed gentry, known as

⁶See Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940–1990* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 222–23.

⁷Washington Office on Latin America, *Losing Ground: Colombian Human Rights Defenders under Attack* (Washington, D.C.: WOLA, 1997); Human Rights Watch, *Colombia’s Killer Networks* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995); Human Rights Watch, *Yearly Report 1997* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1997); Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report 2000* (New York: United Nations, 2000), 24.

⁸See Michael Evans, ed., “The Truth About the Triple A,” an electronic briefing book published by the National Security Archive, 2007, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB223/index.htm (accessed September 10, 2008).

“reverse agrarian reform”), drug traffickers needed protection from the guerrillas, whose primary fund-raising techniques involved *boleteo* (extortion), *vacunas* (“vaccination” against guerrilla attack), and, increasingly, kidnapping of rural elites. Paramilitary groups linked to drug cartels (particularly the Medellín Cartel) worked closely with Colombian military officers to eliminate suspected guerrilla sympathizers, while at the same time attacking Colombian authorities who tried to investigate drug trafficking. Paramilitary groups were particularly vicious in targeting activists from the leftist parties, who enjoyed considerable support following the 1987 reforms, which allowed popular election of mayors and other local officials previously appointed to their posts.⁹

Paramilitary groups organized in the Middle Magdalena Valley—one of the epicenters of the drug-financed landgrab of the 1980s—became pioneers in the politicization of paramilitary activities, attempting to unify their growing military power into a grassroots base that would serve as the foundation for political control. In 1983, Puerto Boyacá mayor Luis Rubio, together with allies in the Liberal Party, created the Association of Middle Magdalena Ranchers and Farmers (ACDEGAM). As part of their political strategy to strengthen ties among local farmers, businessmen, the “self-defense forces,” and the military, members set up more than thirty schools offering “patriotic and anti-Communist” education, health clinics, and agricultural cooperatives and built roads and bridges, all funded by a combination of “voluntary contributions” and government and private money. According to journalist and historian Steven Dudley, however, the ACDEGAM also served as “the autodefensas’ center of operations. Recruiting, weapons storage, communications, propaganda, and medical services were all run from ACDEGAM headquarters.”¹⁰ ACDEGAM leadership worked with the support of local and national politicians, including Congressman Pablo Guarín. By the end of the 1980s, ACDEGAM, together with a sister organization known as “Tradición, Familia y Propiedad,” made up the core of a new political movement called Movimiento de Restauración Nacional (MORENA). Spurred by the electoral reforms, MORENA candidates won six mayoral seats in the Middle Magdalena Valley, self-proclaimed the “National Front of Anti-Subversive Mayors.” Outside its regional strongholds in the Middle Magdalena Valley, MORENA never achieved national prominence or even significant support in other regions with significant paramilitary presence. The paramilitary political movement would not emerge until the late 1990s, although the surviving

⁹For the history of the Patriotic Union, see Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas*.

¹⁰Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, 68. See also Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Mauricio Barón, “Restating the State: Paramilitary Territorial Control and Political Order in Colombia” (IEPRI working paper no. 66, Crisis States Programme Working Papers series no. 1, Development Research Centre, London School of Economics, September 2005).

leadership went on to play a major role in the new paramilitary structure. For example, Iván Roberto Duque ("Ernesto Baez"), former secretary-general of ACDEGAM and founder of MORENA, went on to be an architect of the paramilitaries' evolving political platform.

Current paramilitary leaders may also be drawing on the efforts of Colombian drug traffickers, particularly the Medellín Cartel, to bolster public support. Cartel boss Pablo Escobar used several tactics to increase his public profile and influence, including running for elected office (he was elected congressional representative alternate in 1982) and funding community development. In their unsuccessful efforts to prevent approval of extradition, the "Extraditables" (a group of drug traffickers led by Escobar) used human rights discourses and nationalism in communiqués and media interviews to frame their cause as not simply organized crime but a legitimate political and essentially Colombian enterprise. (They also resorted to extreme violence, called "narcoterrorism.") Many drug traffickers also engaged in negotiations with the central government as well as with local officials.¹¹ During this period, several influential leaders of the paramilitaries, including the Castaño brothers, were deeply involved in drug trafficking and active in efforts to build the political legitimacy of trafficking organizations.

Emergence of the AUC

The third phase of expansion was marked by the creation of a national coordinating body of paramilitary groups, the AUC.¹² Following a summit in July 1997, the AUC issued a statement announcing an offensive military campaign into new regions of the country "according to the operational capacity of each regional group." Newly created "mobile squads"—elite training and combat units—carried out these operations, which included numerous massacres targeting the civilian population in these areas. The July 1997 massacre in Mapiripán, Meta, was the first step in implementing this new plan. During July 15–20, 1997, gunmen from the AUC took control of Mapiripán, killed at least forty people, and threatened others. The exact death toll was never established, because many of the bodies were dismembered and thrown into a nearby river. Following a lengthy investigation, a military court sentenced

¹¹See Mary J. Roldán, "Cocaine and the 'Miracle' of Modernity in Medellín," in *Cocaine: Global Histories*, ed. Paul Gootenberg (New York: Routledge, 1999); Francisco Thoumi, *Illegal Drugs, Economy and Society in the Andes* (Baltimore, Md.: Woodrow Wilson Center/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

¹²For more detail on drug trafficking and paramilitary groups in Colombia, see Alonso Salazar, *La Parábola de Pablo: Auge y caída de un gran capo del narcotráfico* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2001); Robin Kirk, *More Terrible than Death: Massacres, Drugs and America's War in Colombia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 108–09; Álvaro Camacho, "Narcotráfico y violencias en Colombia" (conference transcript from the Historical Analysis of Narcotrafficking in Colombia symposium, National Museum, Bogotá, October 30, 2003).

Gen. Jaime Uscátegui to forty months in jail for dereliction of duty because he failed to respond to repeated requests for action by local authorities and his own subordinates.¹³ AUC fighters carried out similar massacres throughout the country. At the same time, paramilitary leaders gained increasing power within local and national politics. This has been dramatically demonstrated in the *parapolítica* scandal that first emerged in the fall of 2006 and caused the resignation of the foreign minister and the head of the national intelligence service.¹⁴ As of August 2008, the investigation remains ongoing; twenty-nine members of Congress have been detained and an additional thirty-nine remain under investigation.¹⁵

Paramilitary Public Relations

Since its formal incorporation, the AUC has been engaged in a major public relations campaign to improve its image and represent itself as a legitimate political force. Its first communiqués copied the style of the guerrillas, issued with a dateline “from the mountains of Colombia” (previously, the guerrillas were the only armed actors inhabiting *el monte*), with a color logo in the letterhead depicting a peasant man silhouetted against a map of Colombia. In marked contrast to other forms of communication from paramilitary groups, such as the death threats intended to strike fear in the recipients (often sent in creative forms such as funeral invitations), these communiqués showcased the political nature of the organization.

In addition to written communiqués, the paramilitaries created a series of sophisticated Web pages that reflected their preoccupation with public relations. In 1999, the paramilitaries launched “Colombialibre.org,” a Web site that, by 2001, rivaled official Colombian government sites in its sophistication, graphics, and content. (The guerrillas’ Web sites, by contrast, languished until 2003 with only occasional flashing updates.) One of the first documents posted on the site included “proposals for structural reforms for the construction of a new Colombia,” alongside diagrams outlining the AUC’s structure of command, communiqués, open letters issued by paramilitary leaders, and documents outlining the history and evolution of paramilitary forces. By 2005, the still active Web site was home to daily press links to articles featuring paramilitary commanders and activities, as well as links to the home

¹³One of the military officers who requested assistance, Col. Lino Sánchez, was also investigated for misconduct as a result of his public testimony in the case.

¹⁴See John Otis, “Court Tell-Alls Tie the Elite to Paramilitary Killings,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 20, 2007.

¹⁵These figures are from a table produced by the Colombian think tank Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y para la Paz (INDEPAZ), www.indepaz.org.co/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=646&Itemid=1 (accessed September 8, 2008).

pages of the regional blocs making up the AUC, which featured their own communiqués and command-structure diagrams.¹⁶

In addition to use of the Internet, the AUC leadership, under the command of Carlos Castaño, also launched a media outreach offensive. Colombian journalist María Cristina Caballero claims to have carried out one of the first major press interviews with Castaño in 1997, following the Mapiripán massacre described above. During the interview, Castaño announced that he was "tired of fighting and ready to sit down at the negotiating table." At the time, President Andrés Pastrana had made peace talks with the FARC the major focus of his administration. In her account, Caballero reports asking Castaño to "prepare a document explaining what he wanted to achieve with his movement and proposing the key reforms the country needed for peace." His reply was later published by the Colombian newsmagazine *Cambio 16* in May 1998, along with responses from the guerrilla leadership.¹⁷ Widespread and apparently systematic interviews with the press did not begin until 2000, however. In March of that year, Castaño appeared in his first on-camera interview in a prime-time special on Caracol network. In an apparent effort to soften his warrior image, he appeared wearing a sweater and slacks. He admitted that he often cried when thinking of the tragedies caused by the fighting in Colombia and that his troops should have "operated with more prudence." In addition to subsequent nearly weekly appearances in the Colombian press, Castaño was featured on the cover of the international edition of *Time* magazine on November 27, 2000, and profiled in the *Washington Post* (under the headline "King of the Jungle") on March 12, 2001. That same year, Castaño approved the release of *My Confession*, a fawning biography resulting from a series of interviews with a Colombian journalist. The book became a Colombian best seller. Regional paramilitary leaders also began appearing frequently in the Colombian press during this period. After Castaño's disappearance on April 16, 2004, Northern Bloc commander Salvatore Mancuso was often featured in the press, and his biography, *Salvatore Mancuso: Life Enough for One Hundred Years*, was published in late 2004; in May 2005, he launched his own Website, highlighting his analysis and speeches. Castaño's brother Vicente Castaño Gil was featured for his first press interview on the cover of Colombian newsmagazine *Semana* in June 2005. In the interview, he clearly attempted to position himself as a long-standing power behind Car-

¹⁶ As of June 2007, a much-reduced version of the "Colombialibre.org" Web site was dedicated to the "National Movement of Demobilized Self-Defense Forces," with empty pages and no links to regional groups. By the following month, the site was completely dismantled. As of this writing, Mancuso has been extradited to the United States to face drug-trafficking charges and it is unclear how this will impact the ongoing Colombian investigations into his human rights crimes as required by the Justice and Peace Law.

¹⁷ María Cristina Caballero, "A Journalist's Mission in Colombia: Reporting Atrocities Is Not Enough," *Columbia Journalism Review* (May-June 2000), <http://backissues.cjrarchives.org/year/00/2/caballero.asp> (accessed September 9, 2008).

los's public face and stressed the political evolution and focus of the paramilitaries under his command.

Complementing their media and Internet presence, paramilitary leaders also attempted to transform perceptions of their organizational structure and behavior through the publication of command diagrams and internal regulations, and their emphasis on the acceptance of human rights and international humanitarian law standards (in marked contrast to the guerrilla leadership, which publicly rejected such norms as illegitimate and part of a neoliberal and repressive regime that does not apply to them). According to the Constitutional Statutes and Disciplinary Regime adopted in May 1998 at the AUC's second national conference, the organization had developed into a highly regimented military command structure incorporating regional groups; part of the military discipline included instructing new recruits to obey international humanitarian law, also known as the "rules of war," and to refrain from violating human rights.

This approach was partly the result of active consultation with a number of well-educated advisers. In his biography, Carlos Castaño claims to have worked extensively with Jesuit-trained intellectuals to develop the AUC's political strategy. International organizations, foremost among them the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), also played a role. In 1997, the ICRC negotiated a new memorandum of agreement with the Colombian government that allowed ICRC representatives to have direct contacts with illegal armed groups. As a result of that agreement, the head of the ICRC, Pierre Gassmann, was one of the first international officials to meet with Castaño. One staff member at the time recalled, "It was a controversial decision, but the ICRC viewed them as an armed actor with a clear line of command, which is enough under international humanitarian law." The ICRC also offered training in international humanitarian law to combatants. The same staff member, who worked in southern Colombia during the late 1990s, gave "three or four" workshops to the paramilitaries. "They were easy to get in touch with; you had the cell phones of all the local commanders and their commanders, and they always responded quickly to requests," he told me. "Their troops were mainly young men from cities like Medellín and Cali, just guys who wanted a job," he concluded. "But they had a very clear line of command to Castaño; they knew that the ICRC boss had talked to Castaño, and were afraid of getting him mad." The impact of these classes on paramilitary behavior in the field was unclear. Murder and massacre rates in some regions seemed to decline, but figures are notoriously unreliable since many deaths, particularly in rural areas, are never reported.

The ICRC representatives were not the only officials to contact Castaño. Journalists, international groups attempting to promote humanitarian agreements, representatives of Colombian Protestant and Catholic churches, government officials, and NGOs acknowledged holding frequent off-the-record

meetings with paramilitary commanders during the late 1990s. On at least two occasions, high-ranking government ministers have met with Castaño; Minister of the Interior Horacio Serpa met with Castaño to discuss threats against Serpa's own life, and a high-ranking delegation met with Castaño to negotiate the liberation of seven members of Congress kidnapped by the AUC in May 1999. Local government officials also met frequently with paramilitary commanders in their regions.

Paramilitary groups are creating foundations and NGOs to promote their agenda. Extremely lenient Colombian legislation governing the administration of such organizations has facilitated their use by groups from across the political spectrum. One of the first such organizations was the *Fundación para la Paz* (Funpazcor), established in Córdoba in the early 1990s by Carlos Castaño's older brother, Fidel, and run by his sister-in-law. Set up to distribute land to demobilized Popular Liberation Army (EPL) fighters, many of whom later joined Fidel's restructured paramilitary force, then known as the *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urubá* (ACCU, a forerunner of the AUC), the foundation has been controversial. It remains unclear to what degree the entity functioned as a foundation, and how much land it distributed. The foundation has been under investigation by the Attorney General's Office for serving as a front for illegal weapons purchases and other criminal dealings, and it is currently on the U.S. State Department list of terrorist front organizations. Since the early 1990s, scores of paramilitary-sponsored NGOs have been organized. According to paramilitary commander Jorge 40, most women involved in the paramilitaries are "dedicated to social and political projects."¹⁸ Isabel Bolaños is one such example. Originally linked to peasant organizations and guerrilla groups including the EPL, she worked closely with Carlos Castaño in development projects throughout the late 1990s before her capture in 1999, when she was charged with various paramilitary crimes.¹⁹ In some cases, these efforts are building on more than a decade of privately organized, paternalistic land redistribution efforts, such as the proposal by the cattle ranchers' association *Federación Colombiana de Ganaderos* (FEDEGAN) that members donate land to peasant settlers in conflictual areas.

"They [the AUC] are preparing political proposals, including buying land and offering work, to win over people. It is very serious political work," an evangelical pastor who had been working in northern Córdoba for many years told me in 2001. These political and financial efforts have made it more difficult for grassroots and church organizations to maintain their community-based projects. "We can't respond in the same way as the paras

¹⁸ Author interview, January 15, 2005.

¹⁹ Bolaños' life history was included in a collection of testimonies by Patricia Lara, *Las Mujeres en la guerra* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2000). It is also likely that she was the woman identified as "Rosa" in Alma Guillermoprieto's article titled "Our New War in Colombia," *New York Review of Books* 47, no. 6 (April 13, 2000).

can, in terms of offering resources. It is a church of peasants—the going rate for a day's work is four thousand pesos [less than US\$2], and they are offering eight thousand. They are organizing the communities, buying land; they are doubling their troops."

In another example of adopting leftist tactics, paramilitary-backed organizations in Bolívar organized a series of self-proclaimed "peace" marches and road blockades to protest a proposed "demilitarized" zone for peace talks with the ELN in 2000 and 2001. The two main organizations, Asocipaz and No al Despeje, were widely credited with shutting down the talks. AUC commander Carlos Castaño publicly supported their efforts on his Web site, where he credited the AUC with militarily defeating the ELN in the region. The AUC was also widely believed to have provided financial and logistical support to these groups.²⁰

Since their demobilization as part of the Cacique Nutibara Bloc in November 2003, demobilized paramilitaries in Medellín are becoming actively involved in a number of local community projects. Their flagship organization, the Democracy Foundation, promotes community development and small-business projects for demobilized paramilitaries. Among their projects, they are organizing "neighborhood invasions," efforts by the poor and internally displaced to establish squatter settlements. Demobilized leaders have been elected to local offices. While such efforts have been common in previous cases of guerrilla demobilizations, what is significant in this case is the degree to which demobilized paramilitaries remain engaged with active paramilitary forces in the region. "The problem is not that they are doing political things—that is what happened during all the demobilization processes, with the EPL, M-19, ELN," one Medellín-based community activist told me. "The problem is their capacity for intimidation, armed and unarmed. Leaders have to submit, leave, or be killed." Reports by the International Crisis Group, Amnesty International, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have all concluded that paramilitary groups maintain control over Medellín neighborhoods—and, in many cases, are working in concert with demobilized individuals.

Paramilitary leaders freely admit that efforts to increase social control in the areas where they maintain a permanent presence are part of their new strategy to expand their authority. Community and religious leaders from a number of areas where paramilitary groups have consolidated military control, including parts of southern Colombia, the Magdalena Medio region, and the northern coast, have reported over the past five years that paramilitary commanders have begun to regulate virtually every facet of social life—they are mediating domestic disputes, establishing codes of conduct and dress,

²⁰See Omar Gutiérrez, "La oposición regional a las negociaciones con el ELN," *Análisis Político* 17, no. 51 (2004).

and meting out harsh punishments for community members who do not comply with these codes. According to Comandante Andrés, a senior member of the Norte Bloc, "We became the police in the region. If a woman says, 'My husband hit me,' we have to solve their problems. We solve money disputes and the issue of inheritances." Despite the decline in homicides in regions of consolidated paramilitary control, violence and intimidation are still employed to enforce compliance. Religious leaders in southern Colombia reported that young men who failed to obey the rules of conduct in their communities were punished, first by having their heads shaved, then by beatings, amputation of fingers, and even death. During an interview in January 2005, one such leader recounted how paramilitaries had consolidated their presence in the areas where he did pastoral outreach. He noted:

They recruited a lot of young men from the zone, to build up the command structure in the area. Their plan is to get involved in the community dynamic, to penetrate it, gain absolute control. In the town, now everything is controlled by them, even the traditional things like rituals of baptism. If someone wants to kill someone from the town, it has to be approved [by the paramilitary leader]. They provide logistical support for the political part of the work and the social services network. Today the political component is very strong. The *personero* [municipal human rights official] himself is one of them.²¹

Paramilitary commanders also freely admit that they are closely involved with official structures of local governance in the areas they control. "We advise the authorities so they take advantage of the best opportunities for their communities," Comandante Andrés told me. Both Jorge 40 and Salvatore Mancuso made similar pronouncements during interviews.

According to Amnesty International,

A significant component of their strategy for exercising control over the population is the imposition of rules of conduct in even the most private of spheres: intervention in disputes between family members or neighbours and the use of corporal punishment to punish transgressors. These activities have been carried out with the knowledge, acquiescence and participation of the security forces. This type of control is often preceded or accompanied by what the paramilitary groups call "social cleansing"—the killing of petty criminals, prostitutes, and others perceived as "socially undesirable"—designed to show how efficient they are at establishing "public order." Amnesty International has received testimonies that point to the persecution, disappearance, and killing of persons from stigmatized groups, including sex workers, people targeted because of their sexual orientation, and alleged carriers of STDs such as HIV/AIDS.²²

²¹ Member of the clergy, interview by the author, southern Colombia, January 2005.

²² Amnesty International, *Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes:" Violence against Women in the Armed Conflict*, AI Index: AMR 23/048/2004 (London: Amnesty International, October 13, 2004), www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR23/040/2004 (accessed September 8, 2008).

The Bogotá office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the International Crisis Group have also reported alleged links between paramilitary groups and local government agencies, including the Administrators of the Subsidized Health Regime (ARS) and a Barranquilla-based, government-contracted tax-collection service, as well as between paramilitary groups, political leaders, the Administrative Department for Security (DAS, a specialized branch of the police), and the Attorney General's Office in the department of Norte de Santander.²³

The Paramilitary Narrative: Victims and Victors

Through interviews, Web sites, and other documents, paramilitary leaders have articulated a new version of Colombian history in which they are both the victims in the Colombian conflict, sacrificing security and domestic life to defend the nation, and the victors, able to defeat the guerrillas in areas where the military merely maintained an uneasy stalemate or ceded control entirely. In this narrative, paramilitary forces emerged as an independent force ready to step into the vacuum left by an absent state. For many Colombians, including many in the rural elite and the urban middle class, this narrative resonates with their direct experience (as well as projected fears) of guerrilla violence and the failure of the state to provide security. The role of drug trafficking in financing paramilitary operations and of other financial interests in determining the priorities of paramilitary leaders is completely erased.

I heard one version of this history from paramilitary commander Salvatore Mancuso the day before his public demobilization on January 18, 2005. Following Castaño's disappearance in April 2004, Mancuso assumed the public role of political ideologue and major promoter of paramilitary negotiations with the government. Mancuso is well known among the Colombia elite. The son of an Italian immigrant, he was raised within the cloistered world of the cattle barons of the Atlantic coast and studied in the United States. He claims to have traveled later to Vietnam to learn about counterinsurgency techniques and to have become an accomplished helicopter pilot. We met at the end of a long day as the members of the North Bloc, whom Mancuso had summoned for demobilization, were going through the pre-interview and documentation phase before the formal ceremony scheduled to take place a few days later. Forty-two years old, plump, and sunburned, he was wearing the uniform of a wealthy Colombian on his day off: khaki pants with a polo shirt and deck shoes. Appearing tired and often sighing, he told

²³Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, "Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Colombia," E/CN.4/2005/10, February 28, 2005, 19, www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/documentos/informe2004/documentos.php?cat=60 (accessed September 30, 2008); ICG, *Colombia's New Armed Groups*, Latin America Report no. 20 (Bogotá/Brussels: ICG, May 10, 2007), www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4824&l=1 (accessed September 30, 2008).

me, with the studied calm of someone who had related the story many times before, the story of how he joined the paramilitaries.

He began with how the government had abandoned them in the face of escalating guerrilla violence. "In the beginning, it was simple. We were cattle ranchers, *gente de bien*. But at a certain moment in life, things change." During the late 1980s, the EPL and, later, the FARC grew bolder among the vast haciendas that filled the northern coast of Colombia, promoting peasant organizations and kidnapping and extorting local landowners. Mancuso was one of many among the economic elites who sought support from the military to protect their holdings. "I worked very closely with the state," he said. "I set up a communications network for the army and the police. We set it up to get information to the army. It went well in the beginning. But the commanders changed, and they didn't want to respond to the needs in the community. They said they wouldn't go into the red zone [that is, areas of known guerrilla strength]; they were afraid that they would get the soldiers or themselves killed. They have no commitment to the country; they are just looking out for their own careers."

By the mid-1990s, some ranchers and business leaders were ready to take matters into their own hands, and they met in 1997 to plan their strategy. "The government denied us help," Mancuso explained, "so we had two options: run away or confront them. We decided to confront the problem. We sent public letters asking for help, to the national government, to the minister of defense at that time, Fernando Botero. There is a copy on the Web site. We sent copies to the armed forces, the president, the human rights ombudsman [*defensor*]. But they never answered me."

This new organization involved personal transformation from community member to leader and institutional transformation involving the creation of a parallel state structure. "Things have changed drastically," said Mancuso. "Before, I was a rancher; now I represent two hundred and fifty ranchers—I fight for them and for me. When the guerrilla came, I had to start looking out for my neighbors. It was a snowball effect. I started defending my own interests, then my neighbors' interests, now everyone's interests." Although the initial response was to provide security for landowners in the area, the paramilitary forces assumed a much larger role within the community, ultimately taking over the essential roles of the state—providing security and mediating conflicts, but also building infrastructure, establishing schools, and offering health care. "So we had to fix the roads, pay for the schools, pay for education," Mancuso explained. "We became the state. Slowly we became a substitute for the state, which had never been present. We had to pay for water [*acueductos*]; we had to pay the salary for the teachers, the doctors, the nurses. Here there were no roads. How much did we have to pay to put in the roads?"

Paramilitaries also fundamentally changed the social composition of the region by repopulating areas from which landowners and peasants had been forcibly displaced by violence. "We brought in friends to buy the land. After the displacements, the people who the guerrillas forced out—some people began coming back to their land, or we found other people to buy it." The paramilitaries also got involved in political organizing, creating the local associations that form the backbone of Colombian political life, including neighborhood associations (*juntas de acción comunal*), and successfully running candidates for local elections, including town councils, state assemblies, and mayoralties.

According to Mancuso, the paramilitaries did more than replace the state. They were *better* than the state, because of their resources and because they were unencumbered by the institutional procedures and limitations of democracy. "Social control is a simple issue when you have to resolve all the problems of the state," he said. "You become what you are trying to substitute, but we are more efficient, because the state has more bureaucracy, more limitations. We have the advantage because we don't have to deal with the bureaucracy; we can just solve problems. When we get involved, things get done. We have the resources; we put in electricity, schools."

The discourse of efficiency and organizing services, including security, without the state's help—"getting things done"—has a long history in the clientelistic relations that have characterized Colombian politics. It was a hallmark of the mafia-state structures established by the cartels that have flourished in this area of Colombia for the past two decades.

In addition to employing their own resources, paramilitary forces in the region increased local community access to state resources by shepherding development proposals through the appropriate channels. Mancuso said, "We helped communities prepare projects that were then submitted to the governmental agencies—and approved. We directly contracted the engineers for the projects."

According to Mancuso, the paramilitaries' plans for political influence extend beyond the simple demobilization of their troops to include defending the communal responsibilities they assumed as the proto-state: "After the demobilization, we are going to create a political party, because we have too much responsibility for the community, the people in the region, to abandon the work we started. We will keep working to solve the problems in the community, the economic and the social problems."

This account is notable not just for its positive portrayal of paramilitary forces as community organizers, but also for what it leaves out. Drug trafficking as a source of revenue for paramilitary groups is completely absent from Mancuso's engaging description of life on the Colombian Caribbean coast, which has been dramatically transformed by the rise of the illicit narcotics

trade over the past three decades. The paramilitaries appear to act only defensively, to protect their property and rights from guerrilla attacks, with no mention of the offensive military strategy that characterized their incursions into other areas of the country throughout the 1990s. Finally, there is no mention of other political forces in the region, including legal opposition parties, grassroots organizations, and social movements.

I heard similar stories from other paramilitary commanders whom I interviewed; this version of Colombian history also appears in the documents explaining paramilitary "origin and evolution" available on paramilitary Web sites and in the fawning biographies profiling paramilitary leaders. In their accounts, paramilitary leaders borrow heavily from the genre of self-presentation known as testimonial literature, which purports to tell the collective story of oppressed groups. Most of these narratives have focused on the experience of victims of human rights violations and, in some cases, of those who resisted. The reflections of many former guerrilla commanders, particularly in Central America but increasingly in Colombia as well, fit the genre.²⁴ In almost all, the narrative arc remains the same: growing up innocent of political machinations, called into service by an oppressed community, frustrated by the impossibility of change through existing channels, and left with no option but organizing to defend collective interests, resulting in a personal and communal transformation. In such narratives, once the domain of leftist resistance efforts against Latin American state oppression, paramilitary leaders insert their own story of repression by, and resistance to, guerrilla forces.

Paramilitary Challenges to Conflict-Resolution Models

The shift in paramilitary tactics and the public relations campaign to bolster the paramilitaries' political legitimacy pose serious challenges for analysts and activists interested in pursuing peace in Colombia. First, it is often difficult for analysts to separate the groups' actual practices from their public relations efforts. The pursuit of negotiations with paramilitary groups as well as with the guerrillas requires clarity on many issues that paramilitary public relations efforts are designed to conceal. These issues include the degree to which paramilitary leaders represent a coherent command structure, their ongoing military operations and responsibility for human rights violations,

²⁴For more on the testimonial genre, see John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). Some of the best-known testimonies include Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1983); Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1986); and Jacobo Timmerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (New York: Knopf, 1981). Testimonial narratives from former Colombian guerrillas include Vera Grabe, *Razones de vida* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2000) and María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo, *Escrito para no morir: Bitácora de una militancia* (Bogotá: ILSA—Ediciones Antropos, 2000).

and their efforts to maintain paramilitary power structures in the context of negotiations and national demobilization efforts.

Public relations efforts disguise the paramilitaries' ongoing brutality. Community and religious leaders in many areas of the country report that the danger faced by those documenting violence has prevented many crimes from being registered in official tallies. The evangelical pastor I quoted earlier, who noted the increased presence of paramilitary political programs, went on to say that despite his numerous visits lobbying paramilitary leaders to respect church leaders, they continued to attack anyone they viewed as a hindrance to their efforts. "They promise to respect the work, but then, two weeks ago they killed a pastor while he was delivering a sermon," he said. "They say they know that pastors choose sides. . . . They say they do their own intelligence, and have people who were in the guerrillas who tell them who the people are and what they have done."

Paramilitary forces are also resorting to new modalities of violence that allow perpetrators to escape the scrutiny of international human rights reporting. These include incidents of "multiple homicides"—killing several people over a number of days and scattering the bodies, or dumping corpses in different locations. Such new practices circumvent being documented as "massacres," which are defined as the killing of four or more individuals in a single incident and at the same location. Similarly, a new phenomenon called "confinement" has emerged, according to the reports of some community leaders.²⁵ As observers count numbers of people forcibly displaced, the paramilitaries' practice of refusing to allow community members free passage or travel masks the gravity of the issue.

One of the most serious challenges to the demobilization process is to ensure that the process does not simply channel individuals through demobilization programs but dismantles the underlying structures of paramilitary power. This does not appear to be happening. Despite the ongoing demobilization efforts, paramilitary groups appear to be consolidating and expanding their political and military control in many areas of the country. Colombian officials rightly praise the reduction of violence in many communities. In many cases, however, this reduction in violence results not from the expansion of state institutions and the possibilities of genuine participatory democracy but from the social control exercised by paramilitary groups, which, in many regions, is still based on the threat of violence and the establishment of parallel authoritarian structures of governance. This danger is equally apparent in the areas hosting paramilitary demobilizations. For example, international organizations have reported that demobilized Cacique Nutibara

²⁵See U.S. Office on Colombia, "Tools of the Colombian Conflict: Civilian Confinement and Displacement," January 2005, www.usofficeoncolombia.org/documents/confinement.pdf (accessed June 18, 2007).

Bloc (CNB) members continue to use intimidation and maintain connections with active paramilitary forces in the areas of Medellín where they are attempting to consolidate political power. For groups involved in community-development projects in the areas where demobilized CNB members are active, this presents many significant challenges. Worse, Colombian journalists and international organizations have documented the emergence of new armed groups, such as the Black Eagles and the New Generation Organization, among others. Violence from paramilitary groups that refused to demobilize, and the diverse new forms of illegal armed organizations, also pose a significant challenge.²⁶

Paramilitary public relations efforts also conceal the ongoing role of paramilitary groups in criminal activities and illegal economies. Many paramilitary leaders remain deeply involved in drug trafficking, but paramilitary groups are involved in smuggling and illegal trade of other kinds as well, particularly the lucrative trade in stolen gasoline. Internal disputes over drug trafficking have resulted in divisions between "harder-line" paramilitary leaders more deeply involved in drug trafficking and a more "political line" of paramilitary leaders supporting demobilization in the name of political legitimacy. The ongoing conflict and the paramilitaries' uninterrupted pursuit of lucrative criminal activity complicate the possibility of offering incentives for demobilization and increase the risk that combatants will be "recycled" back into illegal armed groups. According to the Colombian National Police, 474 demobilized paramilitaries have been killed, although some estimates put the number at 1,000. Most were killed because of criminal activity, but some were reportedly victims of conflicts between newly organized paramilitary groups.²⁷ There are many additional challenges to efforts to demobilize paramilitary forces. These include the lack of centralized control, deep divisions among the paramilitary leaders, the lack of educational and economic opportunities for demobilized combatants, and administrative problems within governmental assistance programs.

Conclusion

Efforts to understand the conditions that made negotiations between Colombian paramilitary groups and the government possible must include an analysis of paramilitary campaigns to gain public support. Despite their criminal activities and brutal record, paramilitary leaders have learned to harness the persuasive power of new technologies, including the Internet, and organizational forms traditionally used by the left, such as creating NGOs, sponsoring peace marches, and developing foundations. Their leaders used the me-

²⁶See ICG, *Colombia's New Armed Groups*.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 22.

dia to articulate a version of Colombian history that depicted paramilitary forces as both victims and heroes who took responsibility for the security and social welfare dimensions of the state that had abandoned them. Their success in these efforts, through co-opting the discourse of peace and social transformation and concealing the true nature of their agendas and their actions, poses profound challenges to conflict-resolution efforts in Colombia.