DEATH TO KIDNAPPERS

After the 1959 Cuban revolution, the U.S. became alarmed that Marxist revolts would break out elsewhere in Latin America. In 1962, an Army special warfare team arrived in Colombia to help design a counterinsurgency strategy for the Colombian armed forces. Even though the FARC and other insurgent groups had not yet appeared on the scene, U.S. advisers recommended that a force made up of civilians be used “to perform counteragent and counterton propaganda functions and, as necessary, execute paramilitary, sabotage, and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States.”

In the 1970s, leftist insurgencies broke out in numerous Latin American countries. In reaction, state security forces from Argentina to Guatemala formed death squads and paramilitary groups to crush armed rebellion and to extinguish leftist movements. Colombia was no exception. In 1968, the Colombian Congress legalized paramilitaries and authorized the Defense Ministry to provide civilian patrols with weapons.

Then, in the early 1980s, narcotics money entered the equation, pumping the Colombian paramilitary movement up to a new level. Colombian drug traffickers had begun to invest their profits in extensive cattle ranches and paramilitary groups to crush armed rebellion and to extinguish leftist movements. Colombia was no exception. In 1968, the Colombian Congress legalized paramilitaries and authorized the Defense Ministry to provide civilian patrols with weapons.

The modern era of Colombian narco-paramilitarism began on December 3, 1981, when an aircraft dropped hundreds of flyers over the city of Cali announcing the formation of a death squad called Death to Kidnappers (MAS). Pablo Escobar and some 200 other drug traffickers set up the MAS to retaliate against leftist M-19 guerrillas for the kidnapping of Marta Nieves Ochoa, a university student whose family ran the Medellín cartel with Escobar. Death to Kidnappers declared war on the M-19 and ultimately forced the guerrilla group to release Marta Nieves and to swear off attacking the interests of the Medellín cartel.

At the same time, in the Magdalena Medio, a central region where Pablo Escobar and other traffickers owned large farms, the FARC stepped up its campaign of kidnapping and extortion of landowners and local businesses and even peasants. To deal with this threat, army officials in Puerto Boyacá, Boyacá called a meeting of ranchers and local businessmen at which they agreed to form an autodefensa militia, which was also known as Death to Kidnappers (MAS). This MAS recruited and trained civilians to kill suspected supporters of the FARC. By 1983, locals reported cases of army troops and MAS fighters working together to assassinate civilians and burn farms.

This model of counterinsurgency proved attractive to the Colombian state. On a 1983 visit to Puerto Boyacá, President Belisario Betancur reportedly declared, “Every inhabitant of Magdalena Medio has risen up to become a defender of peace, next to our army, next to our police…Continue on, people of Puerto Boyacá!”

Soon, landowners, drug traffickers, and security forces set up local autodefensas across Colombia. In 1987, the Minister of Government César Gaviria testified to the existence of 140 active right-wing militias in the country. Many sported macabre names like the Blackened Faces, the Ashes, and the Black Hand. These autodefensas rarely engaged the guerrillas in battle, but instead went after their suspected supporters, including leftists and reformers in general.

THE CASTAÑO BROTHERS

The paramilitary movement gained momentum in the mid-1980s when Vicente, Fidel, and Carlos Castaño organized their own anti-guerrilla militia, called Los Tángueros, in the northern department of Córdoba. Like many other fighters in the Colombian conflict, the Castaño brothers sought revenge. Several years earlier, the FARC had kidnapped their father, a local dairy farmer. According to the story, even though the Castaño brothers paid the ransom, they found the elder Castaño dead, tied to a tree.

Already established as drug traffickers, the Castaño brothers funded their autodefensa with cocaine profits and donations from the region’s large landowners. In the words of a local rancher, “In Córdoba, Fidel Castaño Gil was a legend, anyone who fails to recognize it is an idiot….Ninety percent of all the cattle ranchers supported Fidel and his men.”
Working with the army, Los Tangueros first went after the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), another left-wing guerrilla force that competed with the FARC for influence in the banana plantations of the region. Through a campaign of massacres, Los Tangueros forced most of the EPL to demobilize in 1991, and many EPL fighters flipped to the side of the autodefensas. This offensive extended the Castaño brothers’ reach to the coasts of northern Córdoba and Antioquia, strategic areas for exporting cocaine and importing arms via the Atlantic Ocean.

PEOPLE PERSECUTED BY PABLO ESCOBAR
In their next move, in 1993, the Castaños formed People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar (PEPES), a commando squad dedicated to eliminating Pablo Escobar and taking over the Medellín cartel. The PEPES killed Escobar’s associates, pursued his family, and torched his collection of vintage cars. At the same time, Escobar’s other enemies—the Colombian state, the rival Cali cartel, and the U.S. government—were all mobilized to take down the world’s most-wanted man. Ultimately, it is unclear whether the shot that killed Escobar as he climbed out the back window of Medellín hideout was fired by a Colombian policeman or a U.S. special forces sharpshooter.⁹

THE CONVIVIR AND THE ACCU
With Escobar out of the way, the Castaños continued to expand their narcotics trafficking empire while advancing against the guerrillas. They changed the name of Los Tangueros to the more official-sounding Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (Autodefensas Unidas de Córdoba y Urabá, ACCU). The ACCU then worked to wrest the Urabá region of northern Antioquia and Chocó from the FARC and to seize fertile lands from peasant communities.

continued on page 70
Carlos Castaño, along with his brothers Fidel (Rambo) and Vicente (El Profe), was a founder of the paramilitary movement. In 1993, the Castaños declared war on Pablo Escobar and formed a death squad to kill the capo’s family members, associates and torch Escobar’s collection of vintage cars. When Escobar was killed, the Castaños took advantage of the power vacuum to extend their own drug trafficking business and eventually to build a national paramilitary movement called the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).
After an extensive manhunt carried out by a combination of Colombian and US forces, Escobar was discovered and shot as he tried to escape from his Medellín hideout.\(^1\)

The autodefensas—who were ruled illegal by the Colombian Supreme Court in 1989—found cover in a 1994 government decree authorizing the formation of civilian defense organizations known as Convivir, armed watch groups that would protect vulnerable towns against guerrilla incursions. The Convivir were a favorite project of Álvaro Uribe, the governor of Antioquia (1995-1997), who later became president of Colombia (2002-2010). Uribe’s own father had been assassinated by the FARC and he backed the Convivir as a bulwark against the guerrillas.

According to testimony by ex-paramilitary commanders in the region, Governor Uribe’s chief of staff met with them to form at least ten Convivir groups that served as paramilitary fronts in Urabá.10 As ex-ACCU commander, alias HH, declared, “Let’s not lie: all the Convivir were ours.”11

CHIQUITA BANANAS

In 2007, the Cincinnati-based banana company Chiquita Brands pled guilty in a U.S. District Court to funneling 1.7 million dollars of payments to paramilitaries through Convivir groups between 1997 and February 2004.12 The judge fined Chiquita twenty-five million dollars, a sum that commentators in the Colombian press saw as ridiculously low given the atrocities perpetrated by the autodefensas. Some 200 paramilitary soldiers then went on a week-long orgy of rape, torture, and mutilation of the town’s unarmed population.

From within the town, Judge Leonardo Iván Cortés sent desperate messages to regional authorities: “Each night they kill groups of five or six defenseless people, who are cruelly and monstrously massacred after being tortured. The screams of humble people are audible, begging for mercy, and asking for help.”18 His pleas went in vain, as neither the police nor army appeared on the scene.

After the massacre, Carlos Castaño announced that there would be, “many more Mapiripáns.” He kept his word. According to official sources, the AUC committed a massacre every nine days between 1997 and 2002.22

SALVATORE MANCUSO, AUC COMMANDER

Salvatore Mancuso was born in Montería, Córdoba, in 1964, the second son of an Italian immigrant and a local beauty queen. Blessed with good looks, athletic prowess and money, he graduated second in his high school class and finished first in Colombia’s national Motocross Championship. At seventeen, Mancuso married his childhood sweetheart and then set off to study English in Pennsylvania and civil engineering at an elite Bogotá university.

In 1989, Mancuso returned home to manage the el Campamento, a cattle ranch, inherited from his wife’s prominent family.23 One day in 1992, Salvatore Mancuso’s pleasant life took a violent turn. According to his biography,24 when three rebels from the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) entered his ranch he ran the guerrillas off the property with his personal army of militiamen armed with “fourteen-caliber rifles.”25
Photographs of young man’s severed head, which were shown to me by his friends as evidence of atrocities committed against residents of the Santo Domingo 2 neighborhood by the Bloque Metro unit of the AUC paramilitary army. The Bloque Metro laid siege to this neighborhood to drive out urban guerrillas linked to the National Liberation Army (ELN).
with a shotgun, sent his twelve-year-old farmhand to track them back to their base, then delivered the rebels’ coordinates to the Army’s XI Brigade. When the commander refused to order an attack, Mancuso volunteered himself as a guide and led the troops to ambush the insurgents. He thus began his second life, operating as a paramilitary under the alias of El Mono; eighteen years later, authorities attributed 27,000 victims of paramilitary violence to Mancuso’s troops.25

Mancuso is blamed for helping to plan many the AUC’s signature massacres, such as those of Mapiripán, Meta, El Salado, Bolívar, and La Gabarra, Norte de Santander.26 As commander of the Bloque Catatumbo front of the AUC, operating along Colombia’s eastern frontier with Venezuela, Mancuso is believed to have controlled lucrative narco-trafficking routes into the neighboring country. By his own count, between 1999 and 2004, the autodefensas collected 119,600 kilos of coca leaf around Catatumbo.27 The Bloque Catatumbo was notorious for raping women and girls, and reportedly killed thousands of civilians, many of whom were incinerated in crematoriums or quartered and then dumped in the Catatumbo River.28 Locals recall how they stopped eating fish from the Catatumbo River once fishermen began finding body parts tangled in their nets.29

Local residents reported spotting body parts floating in the mangroves of the Bloque Catatumbo, preventing humanitarian aid and witnesses from entering the village.30 Confessions by an ex-paramilitary who helped plan the atrocity have implicated the commander of the Army’s 1st Infantry Brigade and other officials in providing logistical support for the massacre.31

Jorge 40, AUC Commander
Rodrigo Tovar Pupo grew up in a socially prominent family on Santo Domingo Street, the mansion row of Valledupar, Cesar. Tovar is remembered as a party boy, belting out lyrics to the region’s Vallenato songs, a glass of Old Parr whiskey in hand. He took a job as a government inspector, but by the mid-1990s Tovar was reportedly trafficking in weapons.32

In 1996, Salvatore Mancuso recruited Tovar to help expand the AUC eastward into the states of Magdalena and Cesar.33 Tovar adopted the nom de guerre of Jorge 40, and took command of the nascent Northern Block front of the AUC. Thirteen years later, Colombian authorities would document 333 massacres committed by the Northern Block.34

THE MASSACRE OF LA CIÉNAGA GRANDE
On November 22, 2000, seventy AUC troops under Jorge 40’s command rode motorboats into La Ciénaga Grande, an enormous mangrove swamp fed by waters of the Caribbean. After reportedly murdering a dozen fishermen they encountered along the way, Jorge 40’s troops arrived at La Ciénaga’s main town, Nueva Valencia. There, at the foot of the church, the forces executed fifteen more villagers they suspected of ties to guerrillas, and left a message scrawled in blood: “Feliz Navidad! (Merry Christmas)” Half the town’s families then fled the fishing village.35

La Ciénaga is just west of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the largest coastal mountain in the world. In the 1970s, U.S. hippies praised the Sierra’s Santa Marta Gold as the finest of marijuana. Once the marijuana boom turned into the cocaine bonanza, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and its nearby shoreline, became an important site for the cultivation, processing, and shipment of cocaine. The massacre at La Ciénaga formed part of Jorge 40’s strategy to dominate the strategic region.

COCAIN ROUTES
Jorge 40 then waged war against Hernán Giraldo (alias El Patrón), a paramilitary commander of peasant origin who ruled over the Caribbean flank of the coastal massif. The region’s political families reportedly took sides in the fratricidal clash. As chronicled by Semana magazine, members of the clan—who reportedly controlled contraband and cocaine routes as well as mayoral, gubernatorial, and congressional posts—backed El Patrón with the hope of limiting Jorge 40’s expansion. But Jorge 40 vanquished Giraldo, and the body of Jorge Gnecco was soon found by the side of a road, naked and riddled with bullets.36

The demise of the Gneccos led to the rise of the Araújo clan as the Caribbean’s new political powerhouse. In 2002 and 2003, Jorge 40 sent Álvaro Araújo Castro to the senate, and won Hernando Molina Araújo the governorship of Cesar.37 Molina Araújo ran unopposed after all other candidates resigned out of fear for their lives.

In 2001, the FARC kidnapped the patriarch of the Araújo family, sixty-one-year-old Consuelo Araújo, a former Minister

continued on page 78
A girl passes the bodies of two men assassinated in Cúcuta, Colombia. Authorities at the scene said that the killings bore the trademarks of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).
of Culture known in Valledupar as a patron of the region’s Val- lenuato music. Consuelo Araújo was shot in the head as the FARC hustled her up the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta mountainside, with the Colombian Army in hot pursuit. The FARC commander behind Araújo’s kidnapping was a local Kankuamo Indian. Jorge 40 allegedly avenged Araújo’s death with a wave of killings against the indigenous group. By 2004, over 100 Kankuamos had been murdered.41

**THE DRUMMOND CASE**

According to testimony by paramilitaries who operated in the region, Jorge 40’s forces contracted with the Alabama-based mining company Drummond, which operates the La Loma coal mine in northern Colombia. Several paramilitaries have been convicted for the 2001 assassinations of two trade unionists that were protesting the quality of food in Drummond’s employee cafeteria. Drummond faces a lawsuit in the U.S. brought by family members of AUC victims alleging the company’s role in supporting war crimes.42 The Drummond case has become something of a campus cause in the U.S. In 2010, a student activist served a subpoena to ex-President Álvaro Uribe, who was then a guest lecturer at Georgetown University, to compel his testimony in U.S. court about alleged ties between military forces, Drummond, and the AUC. Drummond has denied any relation with the AUC.

**THE DAS AND THE AUTODEFENSAS**

Historically, officials of Colombia’s intelligence agency—the Administrative Security Department (DAS)—have been tied to the paramilitary movement. Colombian judicial authorities now accuse General Maza Márquez, director of the DAS in 1989, of conspiring with the autodefensas to assassinate Luis Carlos Galán, a popular presidential candidate.43 Dramatic TV imagery of this killing—which has been blamed on Pablo Escobar—shook the world. Colombia’s Inspector General’s Office has also asked prosecutors to investigate a former Chief of Intelligence of the DAS, Alberto Romero, for allegedly having worked with the AUC to kill two left-wing presidential candidates, Bernardo Jaramillo and Carlos Pizarro, in 1990.44 Pizarro was shot on a commercial airplane by an assassin who emerged from the bathroom in mid-flight.

According to testimony by ex-paramilitaries, José Miguel Narváez, the sub-director of the DAS during President Uribe’s first term, was a guest at paramilitary camps in the 1990s, where he lectured on the moral legitimacy of killing leftist civilians.45 In 2002, President Uribe appointed Jorge Noguera (who had run Álvaro Uribe’s 2002 presidential campaign in the department of Magdalena) as director of the intelligence agency.46 Noguera was convicted in September 2011 for putting the DAS at the disposition of the AUC, and specifically for conspiring with Jorge 40’s forces to murder a university professor from the northern coast.47
A child’s drawing shows how a combined army—paramilitary force killed six members of the “Peace Community of San Juan de Apartadó.” The massacre took place in the town square of the village of La Unión, Antioquia. According to survivors, paramilitaries did the actual shooting while troops of the 17th Brigade of the Colombian army secured the perimeter and an army helicopter provided aerial support.

The “Peace Community” was founded in March 1997 by peasants displaced by violence, as an autonomous zone that would practice pacifism and bar the presence of any armed groups within its borders. The participants in this experiment have paid a heavy price for their declared neutrality. As of 2011, according to Amnesty International, armed actors, primarily paramilitaries associated with the army’s 17th Brigade, have killed over 170 residents of the Peace Community. The FARC has also killed leaders and members of the community, apparently for refusing to collaborate with the guerrilla’s objectives in the region.
Sister Gabriela Montoya, a nun belonging to the Inter-Franciscan Commission of Justice and Peace organization that supports the Peace Community, burns the last of the bloody clothes that remained at the massacre site. The bare patches show where the victims fell; they were shot so many times that the vegetation was burned from the ground.

The most notorious of the massacres in the Peace Community took place between February 21 and 22, 2005, when paramilitaries of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) entered and killed eleven persons, including two children between the ages of five and six years, whose throats were cut. A captain of the army, Guillermo Gordillo, was later convicted of collaborating in the crime, having confessed that some 100 soldiers from the 17th Brigade provided logistical support for the massacre.
The most notorious massacre in the Peace Community took place between the 21st and 22nd of February, 2005, when troops of the AUC paramilitary army killed eight persons, including two children, five and eight years of age, whose throats were slit. The autodefensas dismembered a number of the victims and through the parts into a nearby river. Army captain Guillermo Gordillo was later convicted for collaborating in the crime, after confessing that close to one hundred soldiers from the 17th Brigade provided logistical support for the massacre.iii
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