

From Jail, Colombian Warlord Ponders Long Years of Conflict

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IN his prison cell here on the outskirts of Medellín, Salvatore Mancuso reads Gandhi and self-help books. He taps notes to his lawyers into a BlackBerry. He gazes at photos of his 19-year-old wife and 8-month-old son. He listens to vallenato music on his iPod.

And he meditates on the meaning of war.

“There are no good men or bad men in war,” Mr. Mancuso, 42, Colombia’s paramilitary warlord extraordinaire, said in a long, meandering interview. “There are objectives, and the objective of war is to win by combating the enemy, and the enemy is not fought with flowers or prayer or song. The enemy is fought with weapon in hand, which produces dead men.”

As a commander and the premier strategist for the death squads that committed some of the worst atrocities in this country’s long internal war, Mr. Mancuso knows a lot about killing. He put into motion plans that transformed the paramilitary militias from an anti-guerrilla force into major cocaine traffickers and allies — some say masters — of high-ranking officials throughout Colombia’s government.

With that chapter of war ceding to a more subdued conflict, Mr. Mancuso now spends his days in prison alongside other paramilitary leaders as part of a deal to confess his crimes and pay reparations to his victims. This arrangement allows him to spend just eight years in confinement, and perhaps less, before returning to society.

His confessions have fed the slow-burning scandal over revelations of ties between paramilitaries and a web of elite politicians, army generals and spies, almost all supporters of President [Álvaro Uribe](#). In a country weary of war, Mr. Mancuso has become an uneasy reminder of how the conflict permeated so many areas of life.

“We were the mist, the curtain of smoke, behind which everything was hidden,” Mr. Mancuso, dressed casually in sandals and a black striped shirt and sitting in an ergonomic chair in his cell, said of the paramilitaries.

A child of privilege, Mr. Mancuso grew up near the Caribbean coast in Montería, the son of an Italian father, a prosperous businessman, and a mother who had been “Cattle Queen” in a regional beauty contest. After high school, his parents sent him to study English at the [University of Pittsburgh](#) while he took a break from civil engineering studies.

He returned from the United States to a country strained by guerrilla subversion, kidnappings and the rise of drug cartels. As a powerful cattleman by the mid-1990s, Mr. Mancuso formed a paramilitary organization ostensibly to protect the lives and property of his social class.

HIS own warpath allowed him to extend his power far from Montería to the nebulous border region with Venezuela, where the police in the frontier city Cúcuta respond to Mr. Mancuso’s authority to this day, according to [Human Rights Watch](#), which has tracked his activities for the past decade.

Mr. Mancuso denies this, saying he leads a quiet life in prison. But he says he understands the motivations that would push some of the 30,000 demobilized paramilitary fighters into shadowy new organizations that still carry out selective killings and export cocaine, describing them as “qualified labor.”

As Mr. Mancuso’s star rose during the bloodiest days of the war, he coordinated the killings of at least 86 people, according to the attorney general’s office in Bogotá. That number corresponds to Mr. Mancuso’s own confessions in recent months. In one of those sessions, he sobbed as he asked forgiveness for his crimes.

Victims’ groups, which contend that Mr. Mancuso oversaw hundreds of killings, see crocodile tears in such emotion. “It contradicts reality for someone like Mancuso to see themselves as heroes or martyrs,” said Iván Cepeda, the leader of a victims’ group whose father, a

senator, was killed by paramilitaries. “This peace process is fictitious.”

The demobilization process is also in danger of collapsing. Other paramilitary leaders said they would halt their confessions this week after a [Supreme Court](#) decision viewing the militias as common criminals, as opposed to political ones. The ruling could jeopardize the militia leaders’ hopes to re-enter Colombian society after revealing details of their crimes before prosecutors and victims.

Few things are as elastic as the truth as Colombia grapples with the fallout from its war, but Mr. Mancuso says he is prepared to set the record straight by writing a book about what took place during the conflict. Few people speak so clearly about the obstacles that prevent Colombia from moving beyond stalemate to peace.

War, Mr. Mancuso would have Colombia believe, pushes its actors into unsavory options. So does the situation that passes for a semblance of stability these days, he says, pointing to the \$5 billion in aid Washington has channeled to Colombia this decade to combat drug trafficking and insurgencies, only to see cocaine exports flow unabated.

THE Colombian authorities, Mr. Mancuso said, “don’t want to eradicate cocaine because the conflict generates so much international support that puts money on top of the table, and allows so much money under the table in the form of corruption.”

Assessing Colombia’s treatment of jailed paramilitary leaders, human rights activists fear that Mr. Mancuso will avoid paying for his crimes.

Under Colombia’s lenient rules, Mr. Mancuso could end up spending much less than eight years in a prison where he is already allowed amenities like satellite television in his cell, bodyguards, visits each weekend from his wife, Margarita, and their son, Salvatore, and a laptop computer with Internet access, said José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director for Human Rights Watch.

“This is Uribe’s gift to the leaders of paramilitarism,” said Mr. Vivanco, referring to the criticism surrounding the policies of President Uribe in relation to the militias.

Mr. Mancuso shrugs off such statements, saying the change he has undergone in prison has been “radical.” But innocence and guilt seem like malleable concepts to someone who speaks like a polished corporate executive of his decision to use drug trafficking to finance his activities, explaining he had no choice but to mimic the guerrilla insurgency’s methods.

“I could not lose the war,” Mr. Mancuso said.

“We have a narco-economy,” he added, as if Colombia wanted to be reminded of that curse. “We are a narco-society.”