

PROLOGUE



The Teflon Assassin

Meet it as I set it down

That one may smile and smile and be a villain.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Luis Bernardo Urbina Sánchez. So this is him, I thought to myself, not knowing what to expect. I had been anticipating our meeting for several days—wondering what he was like, how I would interview him, and why he would agree to talk to me about his career. Across from me sat the retired Colombian general, an alleged murderer and paramilitary coordinator during his long cold war career in the army.¹

The fifty-eight-year-old man did not look like an army officer, much less someone accused by international human rights organizations of terrible crimes. He wore dark slacks, a sport jacket, and a tie. Longish black hair speckled with gray curled from beneath a cloth cap and covered the nape of his neck. A neatly trimmed, full beard softened the lines of his face. Tortoiseshell glasses framed his large brown eyes, and a pleasant smile spread across his face when he shook my hand. There was nothing unsettling about this attractive, middle-aged man. How, though, does one recognize a killer—dark aviator glasses, a pencil-thin mustache, a permanent scowl, an arrogant swagger, and a protruding gut? Urbina possessed none of the stereotypical features of the brutish Latin American army officer. He reminded me less of the stiff, uniformed men who strode the corridors of the Colombian defense ministry than of my male colleagues in academia.

He glanced around the room as I fumbled with my tape recorder, but he made no attempt at small talk. Folding his hands on the table, he sat up straight, smiled, and waited for me to begin. Urbina was the last of a series of Colombian, Honduran, and Bolivian alumni from the U.S. Army's School of the Americas (SOA) whom I interviewed during the summer of 2001. He was doing his old friend, Nestor Ramírez, a favor. The two men had trained at the SOA together in 1985, and General Ramírez—now the second-in-command of the Colombian armed forces—had asked him to talk to me. Ramírez wanted to showcase Colombian SOA graduates who had stellar careers in the top ranks of the military, but the human rights violations attributed to Urbina were apparently irrelevant to the commander and left him unimpressed; indeed, Ramírez himself stood accused of a 1986 revenge slaying that was never investigated.² Perhaps Urbina, for his part, also wanted to use me to proclaim his innocence. He would soon tell me that his hands were clean and that he had nothing to hide.

“So why don't you tell me about your military career,” I asked.

Luis Urbina did not want to be a soldier, he said. His father owned a modest cattle ranch and had worked hard as a veterinarian in the small Colombian town of Nemocón to support a large family of ten children—five girls and five boys. Luis and his brothers were like other provincial young men of their generation whose families expected them to pursue careers in the army or the priesthood. Luis chose the latter and studied in a seminary until he was eighteen. Then, as he tells the story, he “fell in love with a girl.” The unplanned consequences of this romance got him kicked out of the seminary and thinking about a career in the army. It was not long before he was packing his bags and heading to the military academy in Bogotá. His army training lasted several years, and when he finished in the mid-1970s, he began a series of postings around the country.

Urbina walked me step-by-step through his career and his rise through the ranks. He spoke in a matter-of-fact manner that demonstrated little eagerness to enhance his image as a key player in the Colombian army's long war against leftist insurgents. He was engaging and urbane, and he spoke in an easy, relaxed manner. There was no reason to posture: he was, after all, a general, and he knew that I understood the importance of rank.

Urbina rose to head the Department of Administrative Security (DAS) from within the Colombian army's secretive intelligence apparatus.³ He spent much of his career with specialized units attached to brigades and battalions located in areas where guerrillas of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas

Revolucionarias de Colombia), the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), and other organizations were active. The intelligence units and the operatives who commanded them were the linchpins in the military's counterinsurgency campaign, the interface between state security forces and their vicious paramilitary allies—the so-called self-defense forces. Intelligence agents cultivated relations with paramilitary groups and coordinated their activities. Sometimes they worked temporarily with the paramilitaries, but at other times they paid them to murder selected individuals. Information about the guerrillas and their unarmed sympathizers flowed freely between the army and the paramilitaries, many of whom were themselves former military officers.

The human rights violations attributed to Urbina took place between 1977, when he was a captain in the Second Brigade's intelligence unit, and 1989, when he was a colonel in the DAS. They began with the disappearance of Omaira Montoya Henao and Mauricio Trujillo in the coastal city of Barranquilla. The pair was snatched off a street and then brutally tortured; Omaira Montoya was never seen again. Evidence linked Urbina to the crime, but he was not investigated.

In 1986, Lieutenant Colonel Urbina, recently returned from the School of the Americas, managed a regional intelligence network from the headquarters of the Fifth Brigade, located in the highly conflict-ridden Middle Magdalena region of central Colombia. There was nothing high-tech about his operation. "I'm an old soldier," he explained, "so for me you can never replace human intelligence [with technology]." But putting an intelligence network together was not easy. "You recruit people. It is more a question of common sense than training. To teach a person to become a good director of a network is very difficult. You invent things and you get results . . . it takes a long time to really learn how to do the work." During the two years that Urbina spent with this unit, William Camacho Barajas and Orlando García González were detained by an army patrol in the town of San Gil. They were registered under false names, taken to the Fifth Brigade's intelligence unit, and never seen again. Ten months later, Mario Alexander Plazas disappeared; his burned cadaver was discovered in the town of Piedecuesta. A Fifth Brigade intelligence agent confessed to the murder, stating that Urbina ordered the disappearance, torture, and execution of the young man. Urbina, however, was neither questioned nor linked officially to the crime. Shortly thereafter, paramilitaries and army intelligence agents dressed in civilian clothing murdered the mayor

of Sabana de Torres, Alvaro Garcés Parra. Urbina was again fingered by an insider as the intellectual author of the crime, but no official questions were asked. The army rewarded Urbina for his service in the Fifth Brigade by promoting him to full colonel.

By 1989, Urbina had earned a ticket to Bogotá and a job in the DAS, where he allegedly coordinated a nationwide paramilitary network that disappeared and murdered individuals identified as guerrillas or guerrilla sympathizers. During his tenure as an army spy chief, he maintained close ties with a former U.S. colleague from the School of the Americas who worked in the embassy. “The Americans,” he said, “gave me cars. They equipped units, and they set up communications systems for me. We achieved good results.” Indeed, the first Bush administration was assisting the army’s counterinsurgency campaign with rising levels of military and intelligence aid. Although this support was earmarked officially for an escalating war on drugs, U.S. officials knew that the Colombian military would cooperate in the drug war only if the aid allowed them to pursue the guerrillas, their main adversary.⁴ So when Urbina targeted the insurgents and their civilian sympathizers, the protests of these U.S. policy-makers were muted, if audible at all. “The army is the primary entity charged with fighting subversion,” explained Urbina, “and we began to hit the subversives using the U.S. aid to fight the drug traffic.” During this period, Amparo Tordecilla disappeared, kidnapped by a group of men who approached her in a taxi. Her cadaver and those of others were later discovered in a clandestine cemetery on the outskirts of the city. One of the individuals who participated in the abduction claimed that the taxi belonged to the army and that it was under Urbina’s control.

None of this affected Urbina’s career in a negative way. In 1991, the government sent him to Venezuela as its military attaché. It had opened negotiations with the FARC in Caracas, and the subject of amnesty for the insurgents was on the table. Urbina, like other military hard-liners, opposed any kind of amnesty that “sold out the country.” He manipulated the government negotiators with intelligence that he fed them about the guerrillas and eventually took credit for the collapse of the talks. “They broke off the negotiations and that is what I wanted,” he explained. “It was a good action.” When he returned to Colombia, the army wasted little time in promoting him to brigadier general. Of the sixty-two men who graduated with him from the military academy, Urbina was one of only five to make general.

Urbina mentioned the Tordecilla case during our interview, making vague references to the matter but then brushing it aside with comments like “I’ll tell you about it later.” He felt more comfortable blaming human rights organizations for the troubles in which he and other military officials found themselves. According to the general, human rights groups worked in league with the guerrillas, drug traffickers, and common delinquents to attack the integrity of the armed forces. “If a commandant does the right thing in his operations and hits the subversives hard, it’s easy to denounce him and to say that he was the one who disappeared such-and-such a person.” He then mused about the fate of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. “Just take the Pinochet case,” he said. “Pinochet is paying the consequences of something that he probably wasn’t even aware of. The consequences are terrible. Here in Colombia we are heading in the same direction . . . I go to get my ticket to travel to the United States and they have me figured as a delinquent . . . a bandit.”

Later in our conversation he referred obliquely to a book published by a group of human rights organizations that delineated a series of allegations against members of the Colombian armed forces.⁵ “Because of this book, a lot of people lost their [U.S.] visas,” he complained.

“Do you appear in the book?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, looking at the table. “But what I am telling you is that they [guerrillas and human rights organizations] are repressing the people who are hitting them. Yes, I am in the book, but I haven’t even been investigated for what they say because [the charges] are lies. And they involve my brothers who had nothing to do with what happened.”

I pressed him to explain his version of the events in the Tordecilla case, but he offered few specifics. “When I was the director of army intelligence,” he began, “they say that a woman who was the lover of a guerrilla commander was disappeared. . . . There were many details. People were saying many things, that there had been an army car. . . . They said that the car that they had seen was one of mine, that the car belonged to the army and was under my orders. I can’t always know where all of the army’s intelligence cars are. . . . They investigated me but I got out from under the problem in 1999. Now I don’t have anything to do with it.”

Nowadays nobody sees much of Urbina. He retired from the armed forces in 1995 and, like many of his army colleagues, joined the burgeoning private security business. He sold his services for five years to a private,

U.S.-owned transportation company that operated in Colombia, protecting outgoing airplane cargoes from infiltration by drugs. He was well paid for his efforts. “I bought a good apartment,” he told me. He also purchased a new car and was secure enough financially to leave this employment and go into business for himself. With four other retired army officers, Urbina founded his own security firm that specialized in protecting cargoes trucked overland by private entrepreneurs.

He resides in an upscale part of northern Bogotá, an area that has been relatively untouched by the rising violence in Colombia. His wife is worried about his safety and would like to leave Colombia, but Urbina maintains that a retired officer belongs in his country, although he acknowledges that many people would like to kill him. The general maintains a low profile: he does not talk to the press, he avoids public events, the beard and glasses are part of a new look cultivated since he left the armed forces, and when he travels to other parts of Colombia, he uses a false name. Urbina enjoys golf and plays a couple of times a week at a club frequented by other army officers. He also visits the United States from time to time. How, I ask, does he enter the United States without a visa. “I’ve had a visa for a long time,” he says, “and besides, they have certainly realized that [none of the charges] are true. I don’t know. I go to the United States with no problem.”

Urbina’s career embodies the issues of military training, U.S. complicity, human rights, and impunity that shaped the bloody history of the cold war in Colombia and much of Latin America. These issues and their complicated legacy are at the core of this book. Urbina expresses no regrets about the past, despite the numerous, serious allegations made against him by human rights organizations that have presented what they consider to be evidence of his culpability. Impunity is widespread in Colombia, as it is elsewhere in the Americas, and none of the charges against Urbina have stuck. The general is unrepentant. Knocking on the table, he exclaims, “I have done nothing wrong, nothing more than serve my country.”