

REPORT: CUBA IN THE AMERICAS

U.S. policy reflects their desperation in making a last ditch attempt to overthrow the revolutionary Cuban regime. It is the final gasp of a dying policy, because as the older generation of exiles fades away, the seemingly “irrational” U.S. policy would follow them to the grave.⁴

BY LATE SUMMER 2003, RIGHT-WING CUBAN-AMERICANS WERE feeling betrayed. They had helped deliver Florida’s electoral votes to George W. Bush and believed they had gotten too little in return—despite the appointments of anti-Castro activists to key posts in the State Department,

the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Defense Department and the National Security Council. The Administration had also denounced the Cuban government rhetorically and backed resolutions condemning Cuba at the UN Commission on Human Rights; cut off semi-annual talks with Cuba on immigration; increased funding for dissident groups on the island; and directed the U.S. Interests Section in Havana to provoke the government’s ire by openly supporting these groups.⁵ But like Bill Clinton before him, Bush had waived Title III of the Helms-Burton Act, which allows U.S.

A SAFE HARBOR FOR LUIS POSADA CARRILES

When President Bush traveled to Argentina in November for a summit with Latin American leaders, he was greeted by a formal diplomatic denunciation of his Administration’s refusal to extradite international fugitive and convicted terrorist Luis Posada Carriles to Venezuela. This followed a similar pronouncement made a month earlier at a meeting of the Ibero-American Summit in Salamanca, Spain.

“We reaffirm our commitment to fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations,” stated an official communiqué, “and to deny refuge to the instigators, financiers, authors, supporters and participants of terrorist activities.” In a veiled reference to Posada, the leaders continued: “we support the efforts to extradite or bring to justice the person responsible for the terrorist attack on the Air Cubana jetliner in October 1976 that cost the lives of 73 innocent civilians.”

The case of Luis Posada Carriles has become an international embarrassment for the Bush administration. Ever since Posada illegally entered the U.S. using a false passport and showed up in Miami in March 2005 expecting to be granted political asylum for his early career as a CIA anti-Castro agent, his presence in the United States has created a major quandary for the White House. Should the President stand by his repeated commitment that no country should harbor international terrorists and expel Posada to Venezuela, where he escaped from prison in 1985 while being prosecuted for the Air Cubana bombing? Or should the Administration yield to its hard-line

anti-Castro constituents in Florida and protect Posada as an emblematic figure in the history of U.S. aggression against the Cuban Revolution?

Initially, the Bush Administration allowed Posada to roam free in the Miami area despite the fact that he remains a fugitive from justice in Venezuela, had publicly admitted sponsoring a string of hotel bombings in Havana in 1997 and was most recently apprehended in Panama in November 2000 with 34 pounds of C-4 explosives in a failed assassination attempt against Fidel Castro. Then-Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Roger Noriega publicly claimed that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) had no idea whether Posada was on U.S. soil. Only after Posada boldly began holding press conferences, and after a series of damning declassified intelligence records on his violent past created headlines around the world, did DHS agents finally take him into custody on May 17.

The declassified U.S. intelligence documents leave no doubt that Posada has been one of the world’s most unremitting purveyors of violence, whose modus operandi was the use of explosive devices. Consider a few examples:

July 1965: CIA sources in Mexico report on a Posada plot to blow up Cuban and Soviet ships in the port of Veracruz. “Posada said he was planning to place limpet mines on either a Cuban or Soviet vessel in the harbor of Veracruz, Mexico and had 100 pounds of C-4 explosives and detonators.”

Late September 1976: A CIA source describes a Caracas fundraiser held by Posada collaborator Orlando Bosch to raise money for anti-Castro operations. “A few days after the fund-raising dinner,” adds the source,

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nationals to sue over property nationalized by the Revolution, and his other moves seemed more symbolic than substantive. Faced with growing dissatisfaction in October 2003 from a small but aggressive segment of his electoral base, Bush offered this faction the promise of a major initiative against Cuba: the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. He mandated the Commission “to identify ways to hasten the arrival of that day” when “Castro’s regime is no more.”⁶

The outline of the new policy became clearly evident in the “Report to the President” released in May 2004 by the

Commission. The last five chapters of the 500-page report describe a post-Castro, U.S.-governed transition to a market democracy. As Wayne Smith, the former chief of the U.S. Interests Section, mockingly observed, the detailed plans lay out how the firm hand of the United States would guide Cuba’s transition by “setting up the right kind of schools, making sure the trains run on time and all such matters. We can be sure that contracts for Bechtel and Halliburton are already planned.”⁷

Appropriately, few analysts examined these pie-in-the-sky ideas. Attention focused on the first chapter—

by Peter Kornbluh

“Posada was overheard to say that, ‘We are going to hit a Cuban airplane,’ and that ‘Orlando has the details.’”

October 7, 1976: In the first intelligence cable following the bombing of Cubana Flight 455—which killed a number of Guyanese students on their way to medical school in Havana, and the entire Cuban Olympic Fencing team—the FBI reports that their source “all but admitted that Posada and Bosch had engineered the bombing of the airline” and that the Venezuelan intelligence service was “arranging for Luis Posada and Orlando Bosch to leave Venezuela as soon as possible.”

Posada and Bosch were both arrested in Caracas and held there. In September 1985, Posada bribed his way out of prison and escaped to El Salvador where he was gainfully employed as a key operative in Oliver North’s illicit Contra resupply operations. In 1997 he proudly told a *New York Times* reporter he was responsible for a string of bombings of tourist hotels in Havana that had injured 11 people and claimed the life of an Italian businessman. “It is sad someone is dead,” he stated, “but we can’t stop.”

Now 78 years old, Posada is clearly a lifelong terrorist. But for a good part of his career, the documents reveal, he worked for the CIA. A CIA record review conducted after the bombing shows that he became of “operational interest” to the Agency in April 1965, when he was recruited, for about \$300 a month, to be a trainer in the art of sabotage and demolitions. He then left the United States in the late 1960s to join the Venezuelan secret police and create a new base for violent anti-Castro operations. He remained on the payroll as an informant until early 1976.

This background is, perhaps, a key reason why the Bush Administration has failed to either prosecute



Hundreds of thousands of Cubans march past the U.S. Interests Section in Havana holding photos of those who perished aboard Cubana Flight 455 to demand the arrest and extradition of Luis Posada Carriles.

Posada as an international terrorist or expel him as an undesirable alien. As of November 2005, Posada was being held in El Paso, Texas on the low-level charge of illegal entry. But Justice Department lawyers appointed to press a judge to deport him to Venezuela essentially yielded to the unproven arguments of his defense lawyer that he would be tortured if returned to Caracas, or worse, turned over to Cuba.

In effect, the politics of U.S. antagonism against both Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Fidel Castro in Cuba have overridden the Bush Administration’s need for credibility in the War on Terrorism. President Bush once claimed that the community of nations could “create conditions so that those who use terror as a tool are less acceptable in parts of the world.” But his handling of the Posada case shows that there is a place where such terrorists are, in fact, accepted and even protected. ■