

Panama pardons anti-Castro terrorists

By Bill Berkowitz

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President Bush has made a point of repeatedly saying “You’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists.” In 2001, he told thousands of members of the 101st Airborne Division (Screaming Eagles) at Fort Campbell, Kentucky: “If you harbor terrorists, you are a terrorist. If you train or arm a terrorist, you are a terrorist. If you feed or fund a terrorist, you’re a terrorist, and you will be held accountable by the United States and our friends.” These remarks are at the foundation of the Bush Doctrine and his attempts to enlist other nations in the war against terrorism. What then to make of Panama’s recent decision to pardon four Cuban exiles convicted of plotting a terrorist attack?

On August 26, the outgoing president of Panama, Mireya Moscoso, pardoned four Cuban exiles involved in a 2000 plot to kill Cuba’s President Fidel Castro.

Did the Bush Administration help orchestrate the Panama pardons? Are they aimed at currying favor with Cuban exile community in the battleground state of Florida? If, as various news reports suggest, the pardoned terrorists wind up in Miami, will Florida, run by Dubya’s brother Jeb, be harboring terrorists?

The four pardoned Cuban exiles – Luis Posada Carriles, Gaspar Jimenez, Guillermo Novo and Pedro Remon – were among a group of six convicted in April 2004 “for their part in a failed attempt in 2000 to bomb a University of Panama auditorium where Castro was due to speak during a summit of Iberian and Latin American leaders,” Reuters reported. According to Saul Landau, a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, the plot was foiled by “Cuban security agents” who “tipped off” Panamanian authorities to “search the car the group had rented.” Panamanian officials found “30 pounds of explosives and appropriate detonating material plus fingerprints that matched some of the defendants.”

In April, a Panamanian court sentenced the Cuban exiles to prison terms of 7 and 8 years on charges of endangering public safety and falsifying documents, but ruled that there was not sufficient evidence to try them on charges of attempted murder.

According to the Miami Herald, Santiago Alvarez, a Florida “developer and friend of

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several of the convicted men,” and “fellow Miami exile” Ignacio Castro, “spearheaded the campaign to raise funds for the men’s defense,” and wound up raising about \$400,000.

At this point, the genesis of the pardons is unclear. According to press accounts, President Moscoso denied being pressured by the Bush Administration or any other country. She pointed out that her decision was based on humanitarian concerns – perhaps owing to the advanced ages of the terrorists. The decision angered Cuba, which had threatened to break off diplomatic relations. The pardons also ran counter to the views of Panama’s President-elect Martin Torrijos, who said he disagreed with the pardons and pledged to work to repair any damage to relations with Cuba once he takes office next Wednesday.

One thing is clear about the newly-pardoned Cuban exiles — they all have a history of involvement in terrorist actions, and are close to anti-Castro Cuban exile groups.

“In February 1986, [Pedro] Remon pleaded guilty in the United States to participating in a 1979 bombing at Cuba’s mission to the United Nations and of conspiring to kill the Cuban ambassador,” the AP reported.

Guillermo Novo, AP reported, “was convicted in the [September 21] 1976 murder of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier in Washington, D.C., but the conviction was overturned on appeal and he was acquitted in a second trial.” According to Landau, Letelier, who served as a Cabinet Minister in the government of Salvador Allende, “died along with Ronni Moffitt, his colleague at the Institute for Policy Studies, when a bomb planted under his car exploded.”

The case of Luis Posada Carriles, however, is of special interest because his career in terrorism has spanned several decades and U.S. presidential administrations. Posada has been linked to bombings, murders, assassination attempts, and drug running. For years he’s had close ties to, and has been supported by, the Cuban exile community in Miami. He was trained by the C.I.A., and worked with Alpha 66, a notorious terrorist organization which continues to maintain its headquarters in Miami.

Posada was also a “commander” in the Commanders of United Revolutionary Organizations (CORU), an organization founded by longtime terrorist Orlando Bosch. FBI and CIA documents revealed that CORU was “involved in more than 50 bombings and, quite likely, political assassinations,” Jane Franklin reported in *Granma International*.

He was convicted of the 1976 bombing of a Cubana airliner that killed all 73 people on board. After serving 8 years in a Venezuelan prison, he escaped in 1985. Posada Carriles acknowledged organizing Cuban hotel bombings that killed an Italian tourist and injured 11 other people in 1997.

In 1998 Posada Carriles told the *New York Times* that many of his efforts had been supported by Cuban-American leaders, most notably by Jorge Mas Canosa, the founder

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and head of the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF), who died the previous year. “Jorge controlled everything,” Posada told the New York Times’ Ann Louise Bardach and Larry Rohter. “Whenever I needed money, he said to give me \$5,000, give me \$10,000, give me \$15,000, and they sent it to me.” He admitted to having received nearly \$200,000 from the CANF.

The CANF denied having played any role in Posada Carriles’ operations, saying “any allegation, implication, or suggestion that members of the Cuban American National Foundation have financed any alleged ‘acts of violence’ against the Castro regime are totally and patently false.”

Winning the votes of Florida’s Cuban American community is a key to a Bush victory in November. At this point, he appears to be walking a tightrope between hardliners who are advocating even greater travel restrictions (as suggested by then White House National Security Adviser Otto Reich, Bush tightened restrictions on travel in June) and a more aggressive anti-Castro posture, and activists who favor more contact with the island. Bush has scheduled a pre-convention appearance in Miami as part of his campaign swing through several battleground states. The timely Panama pardon of four Cuban exile community favorites should make the Bush visit that much more triumphant.

Bill Berkowitz is a longtime observer of the conservative movement. His WorkingForChange column Conservative Watch documents the strategies, players, institutions, victories and defeats of the American Right.