

Radio Progreso Miami

## **Guillermo Novo and me**

By Saul Landau

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Twenty-two years ago, in the hallway of the Washington, D.C. Federal Court Building, Guillermo Novo threatened me. So, when I read that on November 18, 2000, Panamanian cops had arrested him on an assassination charge, I felt the pleasant tingle of relief. Novo has reached the age – mid sixties – where his back goes out more than he does. Yet, instead of starting their own anti-Castro AARP chapter, he and three other rabid Cuban geriatrics allegedly went to Panama to whack Cuba's president. The Cuban leader went to Panama for an Iberian Summit in the Fall of 2000 and Cuban security agents tipped off the Panamanians to search the car the group had rented. It contained 30 pounds of explosives and appropriate detonating material plus fingerprints that matched some of the defendants.

The four men (Guillermo, Luis Posada Carriles, Pedro Remon and Gaspar Jimenez) claim that Fidel had set them up for a frame. Their lawyers argued that the ever wily Fidel lured them to Panama because he knew that these old geezers shared common obsessions: they had all sworn to kill him and had participated in previous assassinations. They justified their lethal deeds as necessary steps in their holy war against the Caribbean demon.

Guillermo Novo reminds me of Jason or Freddy, except that his violence took place in real life and not in movies. I remember the cold chill of that morning in the courthouse hall in 1981. An appeals court had reversed on procedural grounds his conviction for eight counts of conspiracy to

assassinate Orlando Letelier. At the new trial, the jury had just acquitted him and co-defendant Alvin Ross of conspiracy charges (Letelier, a former Ambassador and 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 on September 21, 1976).

The jury had also acquitted Ignacio Novo, Guillermo's younger brother, of aiding and abetting the conspiracy. The panel did convict Guillermo of lying to the grand jury about his knowledge of the murder plot. The judge ruled, however, that he had already served the time he would have been given.

As the courtroom emptied, the two Novo brothers, Ross, their families and supporters used the hallway to continue their buoyant celebration. Then Guillermo saw me staring at them – in dismay, since I could not understand how the jury could have come to such a verdict in light of the overwhelming evidence presented.

Looking at me murderously, he hissed and then, as if continuing his conversation with Ignacio, said in Spanish “Now we can finish off the rest of these communist pigs.”

I responded maturely by sticking out my tongue and blowing a loud raspberry.

Guillermo's eyes narrowed, his mouth opened a fraction of an inch as if fangs might come out and then he took a few belligerent steps toward me. I instantly wished I could take back my gesture.

Luckily for me, FBI Special Agent Robert Scherrer stepped between us and opened his jacket, showing Guillermo his holstered gun. Novo backed away. Scherrer said some nasty-toned things I couldn't decipher and Guillermo and

company made for the elevators.

“That was stupid,” Scherrer told me, shaking his head in disbelief. “That man is a murderer.” Scherrer then provided me with what he knew of Novo’s life, starting with his 1964 arrest for firing a bazooka at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, through a variety of drug arrests – no convictions – and finally his role as organizer of the gang that helped DINA, the Chilean secret police, to assassinate Letelier.

The 1964 bazooka incident exemplifies Novo’s character. According to the December 23, 1964 New York Times, Guillermo and Ignacio “bought the bazooka, a portable rocket launcher, for \$35 in an Eighth Avenue shop and rebuilt it.”

He waited for the time at which Cuba’s Che Guevara was scheduled to address the UN General Assembly and then fired the shell “from the East River waterfront ” in Long Island, facing the UN building across the river. The shell, said the Times, “landed in the East River about 200 yards short of the 38-story United Nations Secretariat building, sending up a 15-foot geyser of water.”

Guevara had been verbally attacking U.S. policy when the incident took place. He laughed it off, saying “it gave added flavor to his speech.” Investigators said the bazooka “had been elevated to about 20 degrees, so that the shell had traveled only about 800 yards. If it had been elevated at a higher angle, it could have carried as far as 1,300 yards, and shattered the glass and concrete facade of the United Nations building, causing many casualties among the 5,000 persons there at the time.”

In the 1960s, Guillermo and his brother had linked their political fortunes with an overtly fascist anti-Castro group

called the Cuban Nationalist Movement. According to FBI Agents Carter Cornick and Scherrer, whose police work helped crack the Letelier Moffitt assassination case and point the finger at the highest levels of the Pinochet government, Novo pursued his violent anti-Castro activities throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Scherrer claimed that “he tried to finance them through drug dealing. But we could never make a charge stick.” Guillermo’s reputation as a tough guy included an incident where, to show his courage and machismo, drove his car into a brick wall at high speed.

By 1975 Guillermo and Ignacio had already forged links with General Pinochet’s secret police. Indeed, FBI Agents Scherrer and Carter Cornick, who was the point man on the Letelier case, were convinced that the Novo brothers had played key roles in the assassination of anti-Castro exile Rolando Masferrer whose death directly benefited Jorge Mas Canosa, the man who went on to lead the Cuban American National Foundation, the most powerful anti-Castro pressure group in the nation.

Masferrer, a Senator in Batista’s Cuba, won his notoriety for leading a small army known as “Masferrer’s Tigers.” Prior to Castro’s assumption of power in January 1959, these thugs attacked violently factions that opposed the Batista regime. In exile in Miami, he bought and published a Spanish language newspaper named Libertad. But he also continued his better-paying occupation: the extortion of small and easily intimidated business people in south Florida.

Masferrer, a master of anti-Castro slogans, supported violence against the Cuban revolution. But his efforts had brought no results and the more ambitious exiled Cubans began to think of his rhetoric and his purported militant actions as a front for his “business” activities. Masferrer stood as an obstacle to Mas Canosa’s plans to forge an

effective and unified counter revolution, which would include meaningful violence and political pressure.

In the early fall of 1975, Masferrer's bodyguards discovered Ignacio Novo stooping under Masferrer's auto. According to Agent Scherrer, "the heavies dragged Iggy into the office and stuck his head in the toilet. Then they stripped him and threw him into the street. I guess they figured they had scared him."

Shortly afterwards, on October 31, 1975, Masferrer started his car and died as a bomb planted under the car exploded. The bomb went off under his car – a bomb very similar to the one that killed Letelier. "So I always figured the Novos had done that job and maybe gotten Townley," said Scherrer, referring to Michael Townley, the Chilean DINA agent who later recruited the Novos into the Letelier plot. "I thought Townley did them a favor [making the Masferrer bomb]. Then, about a year later, he asked them for a favor [helping him assassinate Letelier]."

Shortly after Guillermo Novo left the courthouse in 1981, he forged official links with the Cuban American National Foundation, becoming a member of their "Information Commission."

"What," asked Agent Scherrer rhetorically, "did Guillermo know about information? Look at his jobs – doorman, used car salesman and professional assassin. How does that qualify someone to hold a post on the information commission?"

In late 1981, I received a phone call from Ricardo Canete, a former pal of Guillermo's who had subsequently testified against him at both trials. He told me that Guillermo had put out a "hit" on me and to watch my step.

Scherrer verified the information. "Yes," he said, "you're a target of convenience." As I broke out into a cold sweat talking to him on the phone, he explained that I should not travel to Union City, New Jersey, where Guillermo and his thugs still lived, and to keep a low profile if I went to Miami. "I doubt they'll come to Washington just to get you. You're not that important," he laughed.

I've taken Scherrer's advise. Once, a few years ago, in a Miami restaurant I thought I saw him and lost my appetite. The murderous look that he wore on his face that day in the courthouse will remain engraved in the fear section of my brain.

Almost three years after their arrests, a Panamanian judge ruled that sufficient evidence existed to bring Guillermo and the other still maturing terrorists to trial. What ever happened to the saying: "Old daredevils never die, they just get discouraged." Not these guys. May the trials begin and justice prevail – swiftly!

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