

# The Nation: The Posada File

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- A declassified dossier on Luis Posada can be found on the archive's website <http://www.nsarchive.org>

The CIA document, stamped Secret, is dated June 22, 1976, and titled "Possible Plans of Cuban Exile Extremists to blow up a Cubana airliner." A "usually reliable" source, described as a "businessman with close ties to the Cuban exile community," reports that an extremist group led by an anti-Castro terrorist named Orlando Bosch "plans to place a bomb on a Cubana airline flight traveling between Panama and Havana." The source says that the original plan for the attack called for two bombs to be placed on Cubana flight 467 on June 21. (This did not take place.) This intelligence report is disseminated to multiple US agencies, including the FAA, but there is no indication any action is taken, or that a warning is provided to Cuban authorities.

Less than four months later, on October 6, two bombs explode on Cubana Flight 455, which has just taken off from Barbados. The plane is carrying seventy-three people, including Cuba's teenage fencing team and eleven Guyanese citizens, most of them students on their way to Havana to attend medical school. All aboard perish when the plane crashes into the sea. A CIA source subsequently reports that sometime around the last week of September, another renowned anti-Castro exile in Caracas, Luis Posada Carriles, was overheard stating: "We are going to hit a Cuban airliner."

This past March, Posada sneaked into the United States using a false passport and requested political asylum.

Despite repeated demands for his arrest and extradition to Venezuela, where the crime was planned, US authorities made no move until May 17. Homeland Security officials finally detained him after he gave an interview to the Miami Herald in which he discussed the relative ease with which he'd been able to move around Florida and then held a press conference.

The international community is now waiting to see what the Bush Administration will do with him. Posada's case not only forces the question of whether, in the opinion of Washington, there are "good" terrorists and "bad" ones but also refocuses attention on the cozy relationships that existed in the 1970s between violent anti-Castro Cubans and US intelligence. Declassified documents raise issues about what kind of advance warnings the CIA and FBI had about the attack on Flight 455 and what actions they took--or failed to take--to stop it.

Shortly after the bombing, the Castro government accused the CIA of "directly" participating in the atrocity. Not only were the leaders of the likely responsible exile group, CORU, known to have past ties to the agency but the name and phone number of the FBI legal attaché (Legat) in Caracas, Joseph Leo, was found among papers of one of the two Venezuelans arrested in Barbados and charged with placing the bombs on the plane.

On October 8, 1976, two days after the bombing, Leo filed a teletype to FBI headquarters in which he admitted multiple contacts in the two years leading up to the bombing with one of the bombers, Hernan Ricardo, whom he described as a photojournalist passing intelligence on Cuban Embassy officials to the FBI "in the personal service of Luis Posada." During one meeting, "Ricardo suggested Legat might wish to make some suggestions regarding courses of action that might be taken against the Cuban Embassy in Caracas by an anti-Castro group of which he formed part,"

Leo wrote. His response, Leo claimed, had been to tell Ricardo that this was not part of the function of his office, and that in any event he "abhorred terrorist activities."

Just tapping Ricardo's phone might have revealed the entire terrorist plot against the plane. But no such investigation was contemplated, let alone undertaken. Instead, when Ricardo returned to Leo's office at the end of September and asked for an expedited US visa, Leo took his application. In reviewing Ricardo's passport, Leo noted that Ricardo had been in Trinidad on September 1--the day the Guyanese consulate in Port-of-Spain had been bombed--"and wondered in view of Ricardo's association with Luis Posada, if his presence there during that period was coincidence." Yet when Ricardo returned October 1 with a letter signed by Posada attesting to his employment in Caracas, Leo raised no concerns with the vice consul, and the visa was provided. The last thing Leo remembers Ricardo saying was that "he might also be visiting Barbados" on this trip.

These CIA and FBI documents are part of a massive file on Posada and the Cubana plane bombing, which has been only partly declassified. What is available so far does not indicate that the United States covertly orchestrated or supported the attack. But the files do indicate that the close ties between CIA and FBI officials and allies inside the Cuban exile movement enabled the bombing to go forward--despite ample intelligence that, if acted upon, could have prevented it. When the entire file is made public, as it should and must be, the degree of US responsibility will be more apparent. Now that the Bush Administration has detained Posada, how that information is used, as well as what happens to Posada, will say much about whether those cozy ties of the past have survived into the post-9/11 present.