

The New York Times, July 12, 1998: Key Cuba Foe Claims Exiles' Backing

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[M] IAMI -- A Cuban exile who has waged a campaign of bombings and assassination attempts aimed at toppling Fidel Castro says that his efforts were supported financially for more than a decade by the Cuban-American leaders of one of America's most influential lobbying groups. influential lobbying groups.

A BOMBER'S TALE
Taking Aim at Castro

The exile, Luis Posada Carriles, said he organized a wave of bombings in Cuba last year at hotels, restaurants and discothèques, killing an Italian tourist and alarming the Cuban Government.

Posada was schooled in demolition and guerrilla warfare by the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1960's.

In a series of tape-recorded interviews at a walled Caribbean compound, Posada said the hotel bombings and other operations had been supported by leaders of the Cuban-American National Foundation. Its founder and head, Jorge Mas Canosa, who died last year, was embraced at the White House by Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton.

A powerful force in both Florida and national elections, and a prodigious campaign donor, Mas played a decisive role in

persuading Clinton to change his mind and follow a course of sanctions and isolation against Castro's Cuba.

Although the tax-exempt foundation has declared that it seeks to bring down Cuba's Communist Government solely through peaceful means, Posada said leaders of the foundation discreetly financed his operations. Mas personally supervised the flow of money and logistical support, he said.

"Jorge controlled everything," Posada said. "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."

Over the years, Posada estimated, Mas sent him more than \$200,000. "He never said, 'This is from the foundation,' " Posada recalled. Rather, he said with a chuckle, the money arrived with the message, "This is for the church."

Foundation leaders did not respond to repeated telephone calls and letters requesting an interview to discuss their relationship with Posada. But in a brief statement faxed to The New York Times, the group denied a role in his 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."

THE RECLUSE Talking on His Terms, After Years of Silence

[P]osada, 70, has long refused to talk to journalists; his autobiography, published in 1994, provided only a sketchy account of his dealings with the foundation's leaders.

But in two days of interviews, he talked openly for the first time about those relationships and how they figured in a fight to which he has devoted his life, a fight that has left

him far from his declared goal of toppling the hemisphere's last Communist state.

His motives for agreeing to the interviews are not easy to pin down. Posada, who has survived several attempts on his life, told a friend recently that he was afraid he would not live long enough to tell his story.

For the first time, Posada also described his role in some of the great cold war events in which Cuban exiles were key players. He was trained for the Bay of Pigs at a camp in Guatemala, but did not participate in the landing on Cuban beaches after the Kennedy Administration withheld air support from the first wave of rebels, whose attack quickly foundered.

It was Cuban exiles like Posada who were recruited by the C.I.A. for the subsequent attempts on Castro's life.

Jailed for one of the most infamous anti-Cuban attacks, the 1976 bombing of a civilian Cubana airliner, he eventually escaped from a Venezuelan prison to join the centerpiece of the Reagan White House's anti-Communist crusade in the Western Hemisphere: Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North's clandestine effort to supply arms to Nicaraguan contras.

Posada denied any role in the Cubana bombing, which killed 73 people, many of them teen-age members of Cuba's national fencing team.

He agreed through an intermediary to meet with The New York Times, provided his current residence and alias, and the location of the interviews, were not divulged.

Some of what he said about his past can be verified through recently declassified Government documents, as well as interviews with former foundation members and American officials.

But he made several claims that rest solely on his word, including an assertion that he has agents inside the Cuban military and that American law enforcement authorities maintained an attitude of benign neglect toward him for most of his career, allowing him to remain free and active.

Posada said all payments from the exile leaders to him were made in cash, and he said he did not know whether the money came from personal, business or foundation accounts. He said that the money was used for his living expenses and for operations and that Mas told him he did not want to know the details of his activities.

In the interviews he was generally expansive on broad questions of philosophy but evasive on specifics. He spoke in Spanish and English, with difficulty, his speech distorted by the severe damage done to the nerves of his tongue in a 1990 attempt on his life.

Posada said he was angered by recent newspaper accounts of his activities and eager near the end of his life to put his version of events on record, perhaps reinvigorating a movement he sees as lacking energy and direction since Mas's death.

The exiles' foundation, created in 1981, has sought to portray itself as the responsible voice of the Cuban exile community, dedicated to weakening the Castro regime through politics rather than force. Thanks to that approach and millions in campaign donations, the foundation became one of Washington's most effective lobbying organizations and a principal architect of American policy toward Cuba.

Any evidence that the foundation or its leaders were dispensing money to Republicans and Democrats while underwriting bombings could weaken the group's claim to legitimacy. That kind of activity could also violate the Logan

Act, which makes illegal any "conspiracy to kill, kidnap, maim or injure persons or damage property in a foreign country."

Posada's remarks hinted that the foundation's public advocacy of purely nonviolent opposition to Castro was a carefully crafted fiction. Asked if he functioned as the military wing to the foundation's political wing, much as the Irish Republican Army does for Sinn Fein, he replied, "It looks like that," and laughed.

THE MONEY Assertions and Denials on Sources of Support

[I]n the interviews and in his autobiography, "The Roads of the Warrior," Posada said he had received financial support from Mas and Feliciano Foyo, treasurer of the group, as well as Alberto Hernández, who succeeded Mas as chairman.

Dr. Hernández and Foyo did not respond to repeated requests for comment, and it was unclear whether they were aware of how Posada might have used any money they provided. In his autobiography, Posada said foundation leaders helped pay his medical and living expenses and paid for his transportation from Venezuela to Central America after his 1985 jailbreak.

At times, Posada said, cash was delivered from Miami by fellow exiles, including Gaspar Jiménez, who was jailed in Mexico in the 1976 killing of a Cuban diplomat there. Jiménez is now an employee of the medical clinic that Dr. Hernández operates in Miami, according to employees at the office.

Jiménez did not respond to requests for comment.

When the bombs began exploding last year at Cuban hotels, the Government there asserted that the attacks had been organized and paid for by exiles operating out of Miami, a claim it bolstered with the videotape of an operative confessing to carrying out some of the bombings.

More recently, reports in The Miami Herald and the state-controlled Cuban press tied the operation to Posada. However, he told The New York Times that American authorities had made no effort to question him about the case. He attributed that lack of action in part to his longstanding relationship with American law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

"As you can see," he said, "the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. don't bother me, and I am neutral with them. Whenever I can help them, I do."

Posada gave conflicting accounts of his contacts with American authorities. Initially he spoke of enduring ties with United States intelligence agencies and of close friendship with at least two current F.B.I. officials, including, he said, an important official in the Washington office.

"I know a very high-up person there," he said.

Later he asked that those comments be omitted from any article and said it had been years since he had had these close dealings.

An American Government official said the C.I.A. has not had a relationship with Posada "in decades," and the F.B.I. also denied his assertions. "The F.B.I. does not now have nor have we ever had a longstanding relationship with Posada," said John F. Lewis, Jr. who as assistant director in charge of the national security division supervises all counterintelligence and counterterrorism work for the agency.

Declassified documents unearthed in Washington by the National Security Archives support Posada's suggestion that the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. had detailed knowledge of his operations against Cuba from the early 1960's to the mid-1970's.

G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel to the 1978 House Select Committee on Assassinations, said he had reviewed many of the F.B.I.'s classified files about anti-Castro Cubans from 1978 and had noted many instances in which the bureau turned a blind eye to possible violations of the law. As he put it, "When I read some of those things, and I'm an old Federal prosecutor, I thought, 'Why isn't someone being indicted for this?' "

On one point Posada was direct and unrepentant: he still intends to try to kill Castro, and he believes violence is the best method for ending Communism in Cuba.

"It is the only way to create an uprising there," Posada said. "Castro will never change, never. There are several ways to make a revolution, and I have been working on some."

Within militant Cuban exile circles, Posada is a legendary figure, celebrated for his tenacity and dedication to the anti-Castro cause. He has at various times also worked for Venezuelan, Salvadoran and Guatemalan intelligence or security agencies because, he explained, he wanted "to fight against the Communists, the people who helped Cuba."

But the Cuban Government regards him as a terrorist and a "monstrous criminal" responsible for numerous acts of violence against official installations and personnel, on the island and off, and has called on the United States to curb his activities.

Posada proudly admitted authorship of the hotel bomb attacks last year. He described them as acts of war intended to cripple a totalitarian regime by depriving it of foreign tourism and investment.

"We didn't want to hurt anybody," he said. "We just wanted to make a big scandal so that the tourists don't come anymore. We don't want any more foreign investment."

The bombs were also intended, Posada said, to sow doubts abroad about the stability of the regime, to make Cuba think he had operatives in the military and to encourage internal opposition. "People are not afraid anymore," he said. "They talk openly in the street. But they need something to start the fire, and that's my goal."

THE BOMBINGS A Mastermind Reveals Some Key Secrets

[F] or several months the attacks did indeed discourage tourism. With a rueful chuckle, Posada described the Italian tourist's death as a freak accident, but he declared that he had a clear conscience, saying, "I sleep like a baby."

"It is sad that someone is dead, but we can't stop," he added. "That Italian was sitting in the wrong place at the wrong time."

In Havana last September, authorities arrested a 25-year-old Salvadoran, Raúl Ernesto Cruz León, and accused him of carrying out a half-dozen of the hotel attacks. Posada said Cruz León, whom he described as a mercenary, had been working for him, but said "maybe a dozen" others reporting to him remained at large.

The hotel bombings were organized from El Salvador and Guatemala, Posada said. Explosives were obtained through his contacts there, and subordinates in turn recruited

couriers like Cruz León to take the explosives into Cuba and detonate them in carefully selected targets.

"Everything is compartmentalized," Posada said. "I know everybody, but they don't know me."

"This was an inside operation in Cuba," he added, explaining that he was now trying to think of another way to disrupt the Cuban economy and demonstrate to the Cuban people that Castro's security apparatus is not all-powerful and all-knowing. "Very soon there will be exciting news," he predicted.

Posada said he had several ongoing operations, including one that resulted in Cuba's capture of three of his colleagues in early June. "Castro is keeping this a secret," he said. "I don't understand why."

In response to several questions about operational details that he clearly did not want to answer, he jokingly said, "I take the Fifth Amendment."

While agreeing to allow the interviews to be taped, he declined to be photographed, saying he did not want to provide Cuban agents with any information that would help them hunt him down. "The reason that I last so long is that nobody knows how I am," he explained. "Not having pictures of my pretty face has kept me alive a long time."

In Guatemala in 1990, he was attacked and gravely wounded in what he describes as an assassination attempt mounted by his enemies at Cuban intelligence. He was hit with a dozen bullets, one of which shattered his jaw and nearly severed his tongue, requiring several rounds of reconstructive surgery.

He said that during his long recuperation in El Salvador, some of his expenses were paid by Dr. Hernández, the

current chairman of the Cuban-American foundation, whom he described as "a great Cuban patriot and a dear friend." Just last year, he said, a Houston surgeon whom he also described as a friend flew to El Salvador and performed further surgery on him.

Posada detailed instances of support from foundation leaders throughout his career. Mas, he said, helped organize his escape from a Venezuelan prison in 1985, and then helped settle him in El Salvador, where he joined the White House-directed operation that led to the Iran-contra scandal.

"All the money that I received when I escaped from the jail," he said, "it was not that much, but it was through Jorge."

Posada said Mas was also very much aware that he was behind the hotel bombing campaign last year. But the two men had a longstanding agreement, he said, never to discuss the details of any operation that Posada was involved in.

"He never met operators, never," Posada said. "You ask for money from him, and he said, 'I don't want to know anything.' " Any discussion was "not specific, because he was intelligent enough to know who knows how to do the things and who doesn't know."

Mas, he added, "was afraid of the telephone."

"You don't talk like that on the telephone."

Asked when he had last visited the United States, he answered with a laugh and a question of his own: "Officially or unofficially?" A State Department official said Posada was reported to have visited Miami in the summer of 1996.

Posada acknowledged that he has at least four passports, all in different names. He regards himself as a Venezuelan citizen, but he has a Salvadoran passport bearing the name Ramón Medina Rodríguez, the nom de guerre he assumed during the Iran-contra affair, and a Guatemalan passport issued in the name of Juan José Rivas Lopez.

He also reluctantly admitted to having an American passport. But he would not discuss how he had obtained it or disclose the name in it, saying only that he occasionally uses it to visit the United States "unofficially," and had once used it to gain refuge in the American Embassy when he was caught in the middle of a revolution in the West African country of Sierra Leone.

"I have a lot of passports," he said with a laugh. "No problem."

He added, "If I want to go to Miami, I have different ways to go. But I don't go. You can't control Customs people. They can do anything."

"Then," he said, "Your friends can't help you."

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