

Washington Post: A Terror Suspect With Connections

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Friday, April 15, 2005; Page A25

washingtonpost.com

An accused mass-murdering terrorist has sneaked into the United States illegally and is skulking around. He is suspected of blowing up a civilian airliner in flight, directing a string of hotel bombings and plotting to kill a head of state. He's already escaped from prison once. You'd expect the Bush administration to ramp up to Threat Level Red, set the whole Homeland Security Department's hair on fire, rush Dick Cheney back to his lonely bunker, scour the countryside until the bad guy is found and then advise the warden at Guantanamo to expect a new guest.

But, no, it turns out that this is the drill only when the suspect's name is Mohammed. When his name is Luis Posada Carriles, and he's Cuban, and his alleged terrorist career was aimed at toppling or killing Fidel Castro, the procedure is different. You do nothing but wait patiently for him to surface and apply for political asylum. Oh, and you try to gauge the impact on presidential brother Jeb Bush and the rest of the Republican Party in Florida.

Posada goes by the unlikely nickname of "Bambi." His lawyer held a news conference Wednesday in Miami to confirm the rumors that Posada had sneaked across the Mexico-Texas border and was applying for asylum.

A Cuban exile and bitter, lifelong opponent of Castro, the 77-year-old Posada participated in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. According to his lawyer, Eduardo Soto, Posada later worked for the CIA in its campaign to destabilize the Castro regime.

Posada is alleged to have plotted in 1976 with Orlando Bosch, another exile now living comfortably in the United States, to bomb a civilian Cubana jetliner; 73 passengers and crew members were blown to bits. He was arrested in Venezuela, where authorities said the midair bombing was planned, but escaped from prison before his guilt or innocence was determined. Bambi turned up next in El Salvador, helping with Col. Oliver North's secret supply chain to the Nicaraguan contras.

Gunmen -- presumably sent by Castro -- caught up with him in Guatemala City in 1990 and nearly killed him. He survived, but bullets shattered his jaw, and his speech was reduced to a low, cryptic mumble.

He disappeared until 1997, when a series of bombs exploded in Havana hotels, killing an Italian tourist and injuring several others. A young Salvadoran confessed and was convicted; according to testimony at the trial, his airline tickets were picked up from a Salvadoran travel agent by a tall, elderly man who could speak only in a mumble.

In 2000 Posada was arrested for trying to kill Castro during a summit in Panama. He was convicted of endangering public safety and sentenced to eight years in prison, but the outgoing Panamanian president, Mireya Moscoso, pardoned him and his three co-conspirators last year. Posada melted into the shadows again, until the rumors started a few days ago that he was in the United States.

Now he's the problem of a man who has made all-out war against terrorism the centerpiece of his presidency -- and pandering to the anti-Castro lobby in Florida a keystone of his political strategy.

Bush has wasted no opportunity to turn up the pressure on Castro, tightening travel restrictions and choking the flow of money from relatives in the United States. On some level,

he must understand that all this bluster just makes Castro stronger, giving the Cuban leader an excuse (as if he needed one) to throw dissidents in jail and take back the limited economic freedoms he had allowed. When I last visited Havana, a year ago, his latest slow-motion crackdown was already underway.

With an ample supply of oil for the first time since the Soviet collapse (thanks to his friend and protege, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela), the 78-year-old Castro is showing more of his old revolutionary swagger than we've seen in ages. He seems ready to thumb his nose at the yanquis for another 46 years.

Obviously it's time to try something new -- lifting the travel ban, maybe, to flood the island with Americans and their counterrevolutionary ideas. But asked recently about Cuba policy, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said no change is anticipated. Since both Bush and Castro believe they profit politically by snarling at each other across the Florida Straits, the snarling will continue.

But now comes Luis Posada to complicate things. Come on now, Bambi, you don't really believe the Bush administration is cynical enough to let an accused serial bomber like you settle in the United States, compromising the fight against terrorism, in exchange for a few votes and campaign contributions from Miami, do you?

I didn't get that, Bambi. You're mumbling.

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