

Anti-Cuba Terrorist is Still a Terrorist

By Laura Carlsen | May 13, 2005

On October 6, 1976 a Cuban civilian airplane took off carrying 73 persons, including the members of a teenaged fencing team. The plane was blown to bits shortly after departure, leaving no survivors.

The attack was the work of a terrorist bomb planted on board the civilian jet. Months later, the Venezuelan police arrested the suspected terrorists and put them behind bars to await trial for the massacre.

Islamic extremism had nothing to do with this attack. But the same kind of blind hatred and fanatic disregard for human life in service of a “cause” motivated the killers. Luis Posada Carriles, the virulently anti-Castro explosives expert considered the mastermind of the bombing, escaped from the Venezuelan prison in 1985. Not only was he unrepentant, but judging from his subsequent actions, he was determined to kill again.

Fifteen years later Posada Carriles was once again accused of terrorism, this time a thwarted attempt on the life of Cuban President Fidel Castro in Panama at a meeting of the Summit of Latin American Leaders. Due to the overwhelming physical evidence against him and his past record, he was convicted and sentenced to eight years in prison.

Posada Carriles had previously admitted to involvement in a string of 1997 hotel bombings in Havana, in an attempt “to make a big scandal so the tourists don’t come anymore,” according to a *New York Times* interview in 1998. The bombings resulted in the death of an Italian tourist. Posada’s chequered career also includes stints as a gunrunner to the Nicaraguan contras, an ultra-secret security guard to Guatemalan ex-president Vinicio Cerezo, and a member of the Venezuelan secret service.

In a move that flew in the face of all rules of human decency and diplomacy, Panama’s President Mireya Moscoso pardoned the known killer in 2004 just before leaving office. Still a fugitive for the airline bombing, Posada Carriles fled recently to Florida where his lawyer, Eduardo Soto, filed an asylum petition on Posada’s behalf.

The Bush government now finds itself in a quandary. It has staked its resources and its legacy on the “global war

on terrorism” and Posada is an international terrorist by every known definition of the term, with the blood of scores of civilians on his hands. Yet, as emphasized in his asylum petition, he was trained in the U.S. and served as an agent of the CIA (1960-1967). And the “cause” he fought for is a major priority of the Bush administration—the ouster of Fidel Castro.

In the United States, public outrage at the asylum petition has been growing. Meanwhile, the Venezuelan government is clamouring for extradition. The Cuban government wants an immediate trial for the numerous crimes in which Posada is implicated but has agreed to extradition to Venezuela. Posada just wants to live out his days in Florida after a life dedicated to the “fight against the Communists,” as he described his adventures to the *New York Times*. But his has become a very sticky situation.

The Bush government has three legal options, none of which fit with its own political agenda. The first is to arrest Posada for illegal entry. This would anger the anti-Castro Cuban community in Florida and legal proceedings could open up old wounds caused by illegal and violent activities sponsored by the U.S. during the Cold War. Extraditing him to Venezuela to stand trial would strengthen the growing Castro-Chavez tie and present a face of rightwing terrorism that contradicts many of the politicized definitions currently used. Granting Posada Carriles asylum would be the ultimate hypocrisy in the “war against terrorism” and erode the government’s credibility and moral authority both at home and abroad.

Another route—to deny that Posada is in Florida and arrange for him to be spirited off to a “safe place”—would be an act of cowardice and dishonesty.

The Bush administration should set ideologies aside and view the Posada case as a golden opportunity. It is an opportunity for the U.S. government to dispel widely expressed suspicions around the world that its war on terrorism has ulterior motives, and to stand on the princi-



ple that terrorism is a threat to humanity from across the political spectrum. It is also an opportunity to apply international law above geopolitical interests.

Taking the high road by forcing a confessed international terrorist to face trial would strengthen the fight against terrorism, and the global alliances that are necessary to win it.

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