

Puerto Rican nationalists to be released after two decades in prison

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9 September 1999

Eleven Puerto Rican nationalists, among the longest-serving political prisoners in America, are to be released this week after agreeing to the terms of a clemency offer from President Clinton. Their attorney said that the prisoners had agreed to the conditions imposed by the White House, after initial reluctance, in the face of a campaign by police, prosecutors and right-wing politicians, joined in by Hillary Clinton, to demand that Clinton rescind the clemency offer.

The clemency imposes significant restrictions on the political freedom of the prisoners. In addition to signing statements renouncing violence and agreeing not to join any organization advocating violence, they are effectively barred from participating in ordinary political life. One of the cruelest restrictions is a ban on associating with "known felons," a provision which automatically bars any of those released from meeting each other. Two of the prisoners are sisters—they will need special permission from Washington to visit each other—and another is the stepmother of a nationalist prisoner who remains in jail.

The FBI and the Justice Department are given the power to oversee the prisoners' parole, including random drug-testing and monitoring of compliance with the pledge to renounce violence. Given that both agencies strenuously opposed the release, there is good reason to fear they will seek to organize provocations and new frame-ups to return the released nationalists to prison. Jan Susler, the prisoners' attorney, said that Puerto Rican civil rights and legal defense groups would set up their own monitors to forestall such action by the federal police agencies.

The eleven offered immediate release from prison have already served a combined 200 years behind bars. All were arrested as young men and women—one was 19—and emerge from America's jails middle-aged. A twelfth prisoner, Juan Segarra Palmer, has been in prison "only" 13 years, and accepted a clemency offer which requires that he serve another five years of a 55-year sentence.

Two Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners, Oscar Lopez and Carlos Alberto Torres, refused the terms of the clemency. Lopez, a decorated Vietnam veteran serving a 55-year term, had an additional 15-year term imposed in 1988 as punishment for an alleged escape attempt. His clemency offer required him to serve an additional ten years in prison before his release. Carlos Alberto Torres, sentenced in 1980 to 78 years in prison, is the stepson of Alejandrina Torres, one of the eleven who accepted clemency.

Two other Puerto Rican political prisoners, Roberto Maldonado-Rivera and Norman Ramirez-Talavera, were released from prison in recent years after serving 12-year terms for a 1985 armored car robbery in Hartford, Connecticut. The Clinton clemency offer to them was to remit the unpaid balance of their outstanding fines. The two men have not yet responded.

All 16 prisoners and ex-prisoners were supporters of the Armed National Liberation Front (FALN) and the Puerto Rican People's Army (EPB), also known as the "Macheteros," which carried out a series of bombings and other armed attacks on US government offices and military installations in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The jailing of the FALN prisoners is one of the most savage and

remorseless acts of repression in recent American history. No evidence was presented linking any of the defendants to specific acts of violence. All were convicted of conspiracy and sedition charges after brief trials in which they refused to participate, on the grounds that they did not recognize the authority of the United States government. The sentences imposed ranged from 35 years to an staggering 105 years in prison—for Luis Rosa, a 19-year-old just out of high school.

Most of the victims of this judicial witch hunt were students, teachers and other professionals, many of them active in Puerto Rican neighborhood and cultural affairs in the city of Chicago, where the trials took place. All have remained intransigent opponents of American imperialism throughout their long terms in federal penitentiaries. The 11 to be released immediately include:

* Edwin Cortes, now 44, arrested in 1983 at the age of 28, sentenced to 35 years in prison

* Elizam Escobar, 51, arrested in 1980 at the age of 32, sentenced to 68 years, a renowned artist

* Ricardo Jimenez, 43, arrested in 1980 at the age of 24, sentenced to 98 years

* Adolfo Matos, 48, arrested in 1980 at the age of 29, sentenced to 78 years, related to a Puerto Rican nationalist who assassinated a US military governor after the 1937 massacre of independence supporters in Ponce

* Dylcia Pagan, 52, arrested in 1980 at the age of 33, sentenced to 63 years, a television producer and editor of *El Tiempo* newspaper.

* Alberto Rodriguez, 46, arrested in 1983 at the age of 30, sentenced to 35 years

* Alicia Rodriguez, 44, arrested in 1980 at the age of 26, sentenced to 85 years

* Ida Luz Rodriguez, her sister, 49, arrested in 1980 at the age of 30, sentenced to 83 years

* Luis Rosa, 39, arrested in 1980 at the age of 19, sentenced to 105 years

* Alejandrina Torres, 60, arrested in 1983 at the age of 44, mother of five children, sentenced to 35 years

* Carmen Valentin, 53, arrested in 1980 at the age of 34, sentenced to 98 years

The sentences against the FALN prisoners were outrageous, even by the brutal standards of the American justice system, and were designed to intimidate militant political opposition. In comparison, the average sentence for murder between 1966 and 1985 was 22.7 years, and for rape 12.4 years. Only 12.8 percent of all federal prisoners have received sentences greater than 20 years.

Even though most of these prisoners are from the Chicago area, they have been scattered throughout 11 federal facilities, as far away as Lompoc, California. While in prison they have helped teach literacy, Spanish, AIDS awareness, and other subjects to their fellow inmates, yet they have been subject to harsh treatment, including lengthy bouts of

solitary confinement and physical assaults.

Over the past two decades, the viciousness of the sentences imposed on the prisoners and their principled conduct in prison have won them widespread sympathy in Puerto Rico and in Puerto Rican communities in the United States. This growing support culminated in a demonstration August 29 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in which 150,000 people rallied to demand their unconditional release.

The march, which included tens of thousands of trade union members as well as representatives of student and professional organizations, was a broad reflection of all the political forces in Puerto Rico, with the exception of the right-wing statehood party, the PNP. In the last few weeks the White House has received petitions from some 100,000 people for the unconditional release of the prisoners.

The right-wing campaign against the release of the Puerto Rican prisoners has been fomented by police, prosecutors and politicians decrying "softness" towards "terrorism." However politically misguided the methods of the FALN, their actions pale by comparison to the systematic repression and terror employed by the US government and its police and military agencies against the people of Puerto Rico, going back more than 60 years.

One of the first major US government atrocities was the Ponce Massacre of February 1937, in the city of Ponce, Puerto Rico. The police surrounded and fired on a peaceful demonstration of supporters of the pro-independence Nationalist Party of Albizu Campos. Twenty civilians were killed, 150 were wounded. On October 30, 1950, US forces in Puerto Rico put down an uprising of 2,000 Nationalists. Two days later, two Nationalists, Oscar Collazo and Grisilio Torresola, tried unsuccessfully to assassinate President Harry Truman in Washington.

In response to the impact of the Cuban Revolution and the radicalization that was beginning to take place in Puerto Rico, the FBI initiated in 1960 an operation as part of its COINTELPRO program that specifically targeted the Puerto Rican independence movement, both in Puerto Rico and within the US. The FBI had instructions to disrupt and destroy the Puerto Rican left. Its actions included planting stories in several newspapers in 1976 and 1977 (including the *New York Times*) about a terrorist network that stretched from Chicago to California, Colorado, New Mexico, and the Caribbean. FBI infiltrators encouraged factional conflicts among independence leaders.

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Radio stations were threatened with the loss of their FCC licenses if they allowed pro-independence programming. FBI-generated defamatory articles were routinely printed in the mainstream media. High school teachers and public employees lived in fear of being fired for supporting Puerto Rican independence.

In 1973, *Claridad*, the organ of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), was firebombed.

Between 1973 and 1988, at least 170 beatings, shootings and bombings of pro-independence organizations and activists took place, not counting assaults and beatings at rallies and picket lines.

In 1975 the anti-independence violence escalated with the bombing of a rally in the Puerto Rican city of Mayaguez, in which two restaurant workers were killed. No one was ever arrested for those crimes.

In 1977 Teamster activist Juan Caballero disappeared. The FBI led investigators to the wrong body, after announcing that he had probably been killed by his own associates. When the ruse was discovered, the fingers of the cadaver were severed and sent to Washington for fingerprint investigation. The fingers were subsequently "lost."

In 1976 the son of Puerto Rican Socialist Party leader Juan Mari Bras was murdered. The FBI is suspected of having had a hand in the murder, or helping the perpetrators to escape. Many also believe the FBI was behind the firebombing of Mari Bras' home in 1978.

On July 25, 1978, two Puerto Rican youth, Carlos Soto and Arnaldo Dario, were enticed into bombing the TV tower on top of Puerto Rico's Cerro Maravilla Mountain by a provocateur, Alejandro Gonzalez. There they were ambushed by the police, forced to kneel on the ground, tortured and executed while begging for their lives. A witness courageously refused to remain quiet about the murders. A lengthy investigation revealed that the assassination had been planned in collaboration with the FBI.

The \$7.1 million robbery of a Wells Fargo facility in 1983 by the ERB was used as an excuse for blanket sweeps of socialists and independence activists in 1985. In August of that year, the FBI invaded the homes and offices of scores of *independentistas*, destroyed much of their property and confiscated their personal papers. Much of that material was later "lost." Thirty-seven *independentistas* were rounded up without ever being charged with any crime. Then-Attorney General Edwin Meese made no secret that the US government considered support for Puerto Rican independence as tantamount to terrorism.

The political backlash in Washington to Clinton's limited and grudging clemency offer is in stark contrast to the reaction in 1979. At that time, President Jimmy Carter granted clemency, with no conditions, to the five surviving Puerto Rican Nationalists who had been involved in two armed assaults in Washington DC: the attempted assassination of President Truman in 1950 and an attack on the House of Representatives in 1954.

None of those accepting clemency this week was convicted of any violent act, and their release was supported by Carter, 10 Nobel Peace Prize Winners, every Puerto Rican member of Congress, the Puerto Rican bar association and a host of other groups on the island. Yet both Republican and Democratic members of Congress began denouncing the clemency offer even before the prisoners had decided to accept it.

Particularly significant was the reaction in New York, home of the largest Puerto Rican community in the continental US. Both Democratic Senators, Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Charles Schumer, attacked the clemency offer, along with New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a Republican, and virtually every Republican congressman from the state.

Press attention has focused on the reversal of position by Hillary Clinton, the likely Democratic candidate to succeed the retiring Moynihan. Mrs. Clinton initially indicated, through her spokesman Howard Wolfson, that she supported her husband's offer of clemency. But as the clamor mounted from police, prosecutors and Giuliani, her likely opponent in the general election, she announced her opposition to the prisoner release in strident law-and-order terms.

The president also caved in to the right-wing chorus, announcing Saturday that he was imposing a deadline of Friday, September 10 for the prisoners to accept the clemency offer, or it would be withdrawn. Three days before the deadline, however, 12 of the 16 announced they would accept.

Far from being a humanitarian act on Clinton's part, the clemency offer has a more sinister side. With the closure of the Panama headquarters of the US military's Southern Command, many of its functions are being transferred to Puerto Rico. The White House may have concluded that clemency would be a useful gesture to diffuse opposition in Puerto Rico to an increased US military presence on the island. In recent years there have been frequent protests against the US Navy's use of Vieques Island, off the Puerto Rican coast, as a firing range.



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