

Vladimir Montesinos: the rise and fall of "our man in Lima"

Bill Vann

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Recent reports of Vladimir Montesinos's role in bribing a Peruvian legislator and smuggling guns to the Colombian guerrillas are only part of a long record of criminal activity carried out in collaboration with both Peruvian and US authorities.

The cashiered Peruvian army captain became one of the most powerful political figures in the country through a lifetime of maneuvers, betrayals and vendettas, while unleashing one of the most brutal campaigns of repression in recent Latin American history.

All evidence points to the Peruvian intelligence chief's intimate ties to the US Central Intelligence Agency. Much like Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega in the 1980s, Montesinos served as a key collaborator in Washington's anti-narcotics and anti-guerrilla operations in the region for years, only to be reviled for his well-known corruption and repression once he no longer served the CIA's purposes.

Born into a family of Peruvian Communist Party members (two of his cousins rose to the position of secretary general within the pro-Moscow Stalinist party), Vladimir Ilyich Montesinos entered the Peruvian army in 1966. Two years later, Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado led a military coup, establishing a "Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces." The military regime adopted a left-nationalist posture and sought to acquire weapons from the Soviet Union. Both of these moves aroused concern in Washington and increased scrutiny by US intelligence.

According to published accounts in Peru, during this period Montesinos approached a Russian KGB agent in Lima, offering to provide documents on the strategic relations between Peru, Chile and Ecuador. Some military colleagues suspected the approach was a provocation mounted by the CIA with the aim of

blocking an arms deal.

After a 1975 coup in which Gen. Francisco Morales Bermudez overthrew Gen. Velasco and began orienting the regime more directly towards Washington's orbit, Montesinos, then a captain, made his own more precipitous turn. Forging military passes and obtaining a passport, he flew to Washington where he met with CIA officials.

Upon his return, the Peruvian foreign ministry issued a note of protest. Montesinos was arrested and his house searched. The military jailed him and began to prepare charges of "treason to the fatherland," an offense punishable by death. Instead, higher-ups in the military command intervened and he was charged merely with abandoning his post, disobedience and falsifying documents. Drummed out of the army, he was sentenced to a year in jail.

After his release, Montesinos worked briefly as a taxi driver and then obtained a license to practice law. His specialty was defending drug traffickers, particularly leading figures in the Peruvian and Colombian cocaine cartels. Working with a network of corrupt judges, prosecutors and police, he managed to keep clients caught and arrested with large quantities of drugs out of prison.

The drug connection brought Montesinos into contact with top circles within the government, and he became a senior advisor to the country's chief prosecutor. There he was placed in charge of investigations into massacres of civilians by the country's military during the bloody war against the Shining Path guerrillas. He not only worked to cover up such crimes, but established an arrangement to turn over to the SIN (National Intelligence Service) the names and addresses of civilians who provided accounts of atrocities to the ministry of justice as well as those of relatives of the

“disappeared.”

It was during the 1990 election that Montesinos made himself useful to Alberto Fujimori, suppressing charges over the presidential candidate's past evasion of property taxes on various real estate deals.

While assuming no formal post in the regime, Montesinos became the new president's chief advisor. His principal aim was a purge of the top ranks within the armed forces and police, beginning with his personal enemies. At the same time, he worked to expand the power of the SIN, which exerted ever-growing power over the other security agencies.

Using the civil war against Shining Path as a justification, the SIN employed ever more brutal methods of repression. Under Montesinos' direction, a death squad known as the Colina Group was formed, carrying out massacres of workers and students.

The anti-guerrilla campaign was also used as the excuse for disbanding the parliament and sacking the judiciary in April 1992. In the generalized repression that accompanied the coup, the ex-captain made sure to have intelligence agents abduct one of Peru's leading journalists, Gustavo Gorriti, in retaliation for having written an article some seven years earlier about Montesinos' peculiar history.

Once reformed, the parliament became a servile rubber stamp for Fujimori. In 1996, it voted down a resolution calling for the formation of a commission to investigate Montesinos and another resolution that merely called for the government to clarify his position within the SIN.

In the same year, Demetrio Chavez, a prominent drug trafficker, was arrested on narcotics charges. After revealing that he had paid \$50,000 a month to Montesinos for protection, he was accused of collaborating with the guerrillas and jurisdiction over his case was transferred to the military courts. He was later produced, showing obvious signs of torture, to recant his previous accusations against Fujimori's adviser.

Shortly afterwards, a Peruvian television station revealed that Montesinos had an income of \$700,000 in 1995, an amount many times his official salary. Government officials explained that the adviser had earned the money from “foreign sources,” a phrase that most observers took to mean the US Central Intelligence Agency.

After the same television station reported instances in which former SIN agents had been killed or tortured for leaking information, its owner, Baruj Ivcher, was deprived of his Peruvian citizenship, his property seized and the channel turned into a propaganda mouthpiece for the government. Another investigative report published at the end of last year found that Montesinos had more than two million dollars in just one bank account. Again, government officials responded that his money had come from foreign sources.

Asked last week about Montesinos' reported links with the CIA, White House spokesman Joe Lockhart refused to comment.



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