Portugal: inquiry concludes bomb killed Prime Minister Carneiro in 1980

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A new parliamentary inquiry into the deaths of the Portuguese prime minister and defence minister in 1980 has concluded they were the victims of a bomb blast on board their aircraft.

Prime Minister Francisco Sa Carneiro, Defence Minister Adelino Amaro da Costa, along with their wives, the Head of Cabinet Patricio Gouveia and two pilots were all killed on December 4, 1980 when their plane crashed at Camarate, in the suburbs of the capital Lisbon.

Three previous parliamentary inquiries in Portugal had hinted at an assassination plot. One suggested an accident and the others decided there was no conclusive evidence either way.

In December 2004, Nuno Melo, president of the latest commission of inquiry, announced, “We have evidence of an explosive device placed under the floor of the pilot’s cabin, which had sufficient strength to damage control cables and injure the pilots.” Melo explained that chemical analysis of the plane wreckage demonstrated the presence of potassium and lead, which can be used to make a bomb. “It seems sufficiently clear to me that the Cessna 421A crashed at Camarate during the night of December 4, 1980 due to sabotage,” Melo stated.

Melo also suggested that a possible motive for the assassinations was illegal gun running from Portugal to Iran during the 1980 Iranian hostage crisis. The seizure of 52 hostages in the US Embassy in Teheran was the culmination of the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79. Following the overthrow of the last government appointed by the Shah of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini assumed power. The inability of President Carter to secure the hostages’ release contributed to his unpopularity and helped spell defeat for Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election.

According to the commission, da Costa had cancelled a shipment of guns from Portugal to Iran which then resumed five days after his death. More guns were sent from Portugal to Iran on January 22, 1981—two days after President Reagan’s inaugural speech, during which he announced the release of the hostages.

Other evidence presented to the commission alleges that the guns, re-labelled as farm machinery, were shipped with the help of Army Marshall Costa Gomes, who was Portuguese president from 1974-1976, and Admiral Pinheiro de Azevedo, who was prime minister in 1975. Two former members of the right-wing terrorist group Commandos in Defence of Western Civilisation (Codeco) admitted they knew who had planted the bomb.

The theory that the ministers were assassinated to cover up a secret US arms deal with Iran involving shipments via Portugal has been pursued by Ricardo Sa Fernandez, the lawyer representing the relatives of the crash victims, who is also a former Portuguese finance minister.

In his book, *The Crime of Camarate*, Sa Fernandez claims the intended victim of the plane crash was actually da Costa. He says da Costa had discovered documents showing that Portuguese army officers secretly helped send arms to Iran in a deal between officials linked to 1980 presidential and vice-presidential candidates Reagan and George Bush Senior, and intended to raise the issue at the United Nations Security Council.

The documents included profiles of Portuguese army officers who used a “slush fund” set up by the Portuguese army to finance undercover operations during its colonial wars in Africa, investigations into the theft of arms from NATO stores, and records of shipments using false certificates from Portuguese ports.

That Portugal was a favoured intermediary in illegal US undercover operations was confirmed by a US Congressional inquiry in the mid-1980s into the Iran-Contra scandal. It found evidence that Lisbon airport was used in the movement of missiles from the US to Iran to provide funds for the right-wing death squads in Nicaragua.

Rumours that US-Iran arms shipments had started in 1980 circulated for several years before former Iranian president Abol Hassan Bani Sadr referred to them in a 1987 article in the *Miami Herald*, a few months after the Iran-Contra scandal broke.

A few journalists investigated Bani Sadr’s allegations but

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it was a 1991 *New York Times* op-ed piece by Gary Sick—a former naval officer and National Security Adviser specialising on Iran—that created a storm. Sick, once a skeptic, had become convinced that there might be some truth to the allegations.

Sick explained that whilst researching his book, *October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan*, he interviewed many individuals who independently told him that the Iranians were allegedly rewarded with arms and spare parts for their largely US-made weaponry in return for keeping the hostages in captivity until after the election.

Sick says Republicans were concerned that Carter might be re-elected if he managed to get the hostages released. The Reagan-Bush campaign manager William Casey—a former spy chief in World War II and Reagan's future CIA director—is alleged to have held secret meetings with envoys from the Iranian regime in the months leading up to the autumn 1980 elections.

Sick stated that Iran suddenly broke off negotiations with the Carter administration over the hostage issue until just before the election. The hostages were then released moments after Reagan's inauguration, and arms worth hundreds of millions of dollars shipped to Iran to help in its war against Iraq. Israel appears to have been a key intermediary. Israel's oil came from Iran, and arms sales to Iran were central to its economy. Moreover, Israel regarded Iran as a counterweight to Iraq and Saddam Hussein.

Sick also pointed out that Reagan replied to a question about his involvement in the hostage release by stating, "I did some things actually the other way to try and be some help to get the hostages out of there." He refused to elaborate saying "things are still classified". According to Sick, it was "the first time anybody involved in the 1980 Reagan campaign has said they were doing anything about the hostages. It directly contradicts what they've all been saying repeatedly: That no person was involved, that they wouldn't touch that issue with a 10-foot pole, that they were keeping it at absolute arm's length."

Sick reached the conclusion that the seeds of the Iran-Contra scandal were planted during the 1980 election, which he described as a "covert political coup".

Journalists working for various news organisations, including the Public Broadcasting Service documentary "Frontline", ABC News "Nightline" and the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, took up Sicks' allegations. Some, such as *Newsweek* and the *New Republic*, called the *October Surprise* allegations "a conspiracy theory run wild" and "the conspiracy that wasn't".

An "Open Letter from Former American Hostages in Iran", dated June 13, 1991, called for an unbiased, bipartisan congressional investigation with the power to subpoena witnesses and documents. It stated: "For the last ten years there have been rumours, reports and allegations of foul play in the 1980 presidential election. The thought that any American, whether a private citizen or government official, may have participated in delaying release of the hostages for political gain is distressing. Until recently, these allegations have been dismissed as unsubstantiated. But substantial enough information has been presented by respected and persistent investigators to warrant a thorough examination of this matter."

Congress initiated two investigations. The Senate investigation concluded that Casey was "fishing in troubled waters" by having "conducted informal, clandestine and potentially dangerous efforts on behalf of the Reagan campaign to gather intelligence" on Carter's hostage negotiations. However it found that, "by any standard, the credible evidence now known falls far short of supporting the allegation of an agreement between the Reagan campaign and Iran to delay the release of the hostages" (*Committee on Foreign Relations 1992*, p115).

The House of Representatives report declared that, "There was no October Surprise agreement ever reached" and "wholly insufficient credible evidence" to suggest the Reagan campaign ever communicated with the Iranian government.

However, several questions remained unanswered including, how it was possible for Reagan to effect the immediate release of the hostages and resume arm sales so quickly, why no evidence was available about Casey's whereabouts on key days and why secret tape recordings of arms dealers involved in the shipments were not released.

Whatever the truth of the *October Surprise* allegations, it is clear that at about the time of the Portugal arm shipments and da Costa's death the US ruling elite were effecting a change of foreign policy—backing Iraq to prevent a wave of Muslim fundamentalism throughout the Gulf states, and financing and arming a *jihad* (holy war) by Mujaheddin fighters against the Moscow-backed regime in Kabul in order to undermine the Soviet Union. Under the plan, an estimated 35,000 Islamic militants from the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and the Philippines were trained and armed to fight in Afghanistan, prominent amongst them being Osama bin Laden.

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