

# Miami airplane shooting: Washington's "war on terrorism" comes home

Bill Van Auken  
9 December 2005

The most chilling aspect of the brutal state killing of Rigoberto Alpizar, the 44-year-old Costa Rican immigrant gunned down while fleeing an American Airlines Boeing 757 in Miami Wednesday, is the utter absence of any statement of remorse by government officials.

Rather than publicly acknowledge that a horror and a tragedy had resulted from the use of lethal force against an unarmed and innocent man, spokesmen for the Bush administration and various state agencies praised those who killed him and virtually celebrated the spilling of blood on American soil in the so-called "global war on terrorism."

The initial facts that have emerged from the shooting are appalling. Alpizar, a US citizen who left his native country 20 years ago, was returning with his wife from South America, where they had participated in missionary work with her uncle, a Michigan dentist who provides free treatment to the poor.

As the two were boarding a connecting flight in Miami bound for Orlando, Florida, Alpizar became extremely agitated, bolted up the aisle and tried to flee the aircraft. It was then that he was confronted by two undercover air marshals.

Passengers said that his wife was running after him shouting, "My husband is sick, my husband is sick." Others heard her pleading, saying that he was bipolar and had not taken his medicine. She told them that it was her fault for persuading him to get on the plane.

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, affects an estimated 2 million American adults. It is characterized by severe mood swings that can include provocative or aggressive behavior.

Alpizar's wife of 20 years, Anne Buechner, is a project director with the Council on Quality and Leadership, a not-for-profit agency that assists people with disabilities and mental illness.

Alpizar fled the aircraft after being confronted by the

plainclothes marshals. It was then that passengers heard five or six shots fired. A spokesman for the Federal Air Marshal Service, Dave Adams, told the press that Alpizar had "run up and down the aisle yelling, 'I have a bomb in my bag,'" CNN reported. Passengers interviewed, however, said that they didn't hear him say anything.

After the shooting, the marshals claimed that Alpizar had told them that he had a bomb and that they shot him after he failed to obey orders to put the bag down and appeared to reach into it. Given the unsupported claim by the spokesman about Alpizar yelling he had a bomb, this version of events is also suspect.

The only thing that is clear is that a man suffering from mental illness acted in an agitated fashion and was shot to death while fleeing.

What happened next was a police response that was far more berserk than anything that the slain passenger had done. Police and federal agents stormed onto the plane and ordered every passenger to put their hands on their heads and not to move.

John McAlhany, a Florida construction worker on the plane, told the *Miami Herald* that other passengers were "treated roughly" by the cops.

"They put a gun to the back of my head and said, 'Put your hands on the seat,'" he said. "That was more scary than anything else."

McAlhany continued: "I don't know if they shot an innocent man or not. I don't think he was armed or had a bomb. I think he had a mental illness. I don't think they really had to shoot him."

After being held on the plane at gunpoint for an hour, the other passengers were ordered off—again with their hands on their heads. They were then held at the airport for questioning, the last of them released nine hours after the incident.

Meanwhile, law enforcement agents blew up Alpizar's luggage on the tarmac, confirming that he was carrying no

bomb or other weapon. All of the other passengers' bags were searched using explosive-sniffing dogs.

In Costa Rica, the slain man's 72-year-old father said that his relatives were stunned by the killing. "I cannot believe what has happened to my son," Carlos Alpizar Fonseca told the San Jose daily *Nación*. "I cannot get over the fact that they gunned my son down like a criminal."

Neighbors of Alpizar in the town of Maitland, Florida were equally shocked by the killing. They described him as friendly and helpful, having never shown signs of volatile behavior. Louis Gunther, who said he was looking after the couple's home while they were in South America, said, "Everybody is talking about a guy I know nothing about."

The fatal shooting has shed some light on the secret air marshal program initiated in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. While the number of such marshals, their procedures and even their names are all classified information, there are reportedly between 3,000 and 4,000 currently riding undercover on American passenger planes. It is now clear that they have been given shoot-to-kill orders.

Even if the marshals' account is taken at its face value, the sudden lethal response to Alpizar's actions is at best questionable. First, his bag had been inspected three times before he boarded the plane—once before boarding in Ecuador, once in clearing customs and a third time before boarding the connecting flight in Miami. The odds of getting a bomb on board were minuscule. Second, he was shot after leaving the plane.

David Laird, the former security director of Northwest Airlines and head of an aviation security consulting firm, called the decision to shoot the passenger "a terrible call." In an interview with UPI, he pointed out that if he indeed had had a bomb, the shooting could have caused him to trigger it.

No such questions, nor the slightest indication of regret, however, were forthcoming from Washington. Instead, the fatal shooting was hailed as a success.

"They did an outstanding job," Adams, the marshals service spokesmen said of the two agents who shot an innocent man to death.

"Their training showed they made the right decision, though there turned out to be no bomb in the bag," Department of Homeland Security spokesman Brian Doyle told the media.

Asked about the shooting at a White House press conference Thursday, Bush spokesman Scott McClellan declared: "...the air marshals that were on this flight

appear to have acted consistent with the extensive training that they have received, and that's important to note. And so we are appreciative of all that our air marshals do day in and day out in terms of trying to protect the American people."

The most enthusiastic response, however came from Congressman John Mica, a Florida Republican whose district office is located in Maitland, the same town where Rigoberto Alpizar lived.

"This shows that the program has worked beyond our expectations," the Congressman said of the slaying. Mica is chairman of the House transportation subcommittee on aviation.

Asked on CNN television news whether the marshals shouldn't be able to distinguish someone suffering from mental illness from a terrorist—as many of Alpizar's fellow passengers did—Mica replied contemptuously, "Air marshals don't have time for counseling."

Mica is typical of the right-wing element that dominates in Washington. Earlier this year, he delivered a speech declaring the treatment of detainees at Guantánamo "too good for the bastards" and dismissing the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib by declaring, "I saw worse things at fraternity houses in college than what our troops were involved in."

Summing up his attitude to the gunning down of a mentally ill airplane passenger—one of his own constituents—Mica declared, "This should send a message to a terrorist or anyone else who is considering disrupting an aircraft with a threat."

Official Washington's celebration of the fatal shooting of an innocent man fleeing a commercial airliner, however, sends another message entirely. It is a message of a brutal society, increasingly indifferent to human life, and prepared to inflict the methods of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and Fallujah on its own citizens.

What those like Mica and the Bush White House welcome in this bloodletting is that the "war on terror" has come home. They see in the killing of Rigoberto Alpizar an act that will serve to intimidate the public at large and an affirmation of the unfettered powers of the state and its security forces to act as judge, jury and executioner.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**