

Florida college professor and wife arrested as Cuban spies

Covering up for US-backed terror

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The arrest of a middle-aged Florida college professor and his wife as alleged spies for the Castro government has all the earmarks of a politically motivated prosecution aimed at diverting attention from Washington's backing for terrorism directed against Cuba.

Arrested by federal agents last Friday were Carlos Alvarez, 61, a professor in Florida International University's education department since 1974, and his wife Elsa, 55, a counselor in the university's psychological services department.

Federal prosecutors claimed that Alvarez had carried out espionage for Cuba since 1977, and his wife since 1982. Both are naturalized American citizens who came to the US from Cuba in their youth.

The nature of this so-called spying, however, is far from clear. Justice Department officials acknowledged that there is no evidence that the pair passed any classified documents or information on US military or security matters to Cuba. They likewise admitted that there is no indication they received any money from the Cuban government.

Rather, the information that the government alleged was provided to the Cuban government concerned the activities of the rabidly anti-Castro exile organizations that have carried out terrorist attacks against Cuba.

Moreover, US Attorney Alexander Acosta indicated that the case is based largely upon voluntary statements that the couple gave to the FBI last summer. "We believe the statements are, in fact, a confession," Acosta told the Associated Press. This odd formulation suggests that the statements may well, in fact, be nothing of the kind.

The actual federal indictment does not include any charge of espionage. Rather, the couple is accused of failing to register as "agents of a foreign government," a charge that essentially amounts to failing to fill out a government form, and which is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

This has stopped neither the government nor the south Florida media, however, from hyping the case as a dramatic

apprehension of Cuban spies. US Attorney Acosta, for example, told the local press, "Whenever spies transmit some type of information to the government of Cuba there is a danger to the United States." Citing the couple's connection to the university, Acosta told the Spanish-language daily *Nuevo Herald* that "these individuals were in contact with youth, they wanted to influence them at an age in which they are very impressionable."

This last scurrilous accusation has no basis whatsoever in fact and amounts to an attempt to whip up an atmosphere of hysteria against the couple within Miami's right-wing Cuban émigré circles. Other federal officials have admitted that the pair made no effort to convince students to support Cuba.

A judge ordered the couple held without bond in the Miami Federal Detention Center. They have five children, including a 12-year-old daughter.

Friends and colleagues interviewed by the *Miami Herald* expressed shock at the arrests, describing Carlos Alvarez as a pillar of the university. "Carlos is an excellent person, a dreamer, who sought national reconciliation for many years," Maria Cristina Herrera, founder of the Institute of Cuban Studies, told the paper. "I'm sick over this," she added.

"My concern is that people tend to be considered guilty before there's any evidence," said Damián Fernandez, director of FIU's Cuban Research Institute. "These things tend to stick."

Meanwhile, Miami's virulently anti-Castro Spanish-language mass media has seized upon the indictment, using it to intimidate Cuban-Americans who have advocated normalization of US relations with Cuba.

The timing of the arrests provides ample grounds for suspicion that Washington has its own political motives in pursuing the case. The latest spy allegations come barely two weeks before a US immigration judge in El Paso, Texas is set to hand down a ruling on CIA-trained anti-Castro

terrorist Luis Posada Carriles.

It is widely anticipated that Posada, who has enjoyed the protection of US administrations for more than 40 years, will ultimately be released on parole.

He is wanted in Venezuela for the 1976 terrorist bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner in which 73 people were killed. In the decades since, he has been implicated in numerous terrorist operations, including the bombings of hotels and tourist sites, in which an Italian citizen was killed in 1997, and in attempts on the life of Castro.

While the government of Venezuela formally sought his extradition last fall to face murder charges in that country, the Bush administration has rebuffed this demand and has instead held him on a minor immigration charge of entering the US illegally.

Ironically, US immigration authorities ruled out sending him to Venezuela, where Posada holds citizenship, after his lawyers claimed he would face torture in that country. Aside from the fact that there is no evidence to support the claim that torture is routinely practiced today in Venezuela, Posada himself has been accused of torturing prisoners when he worked for the Venezuelan secret police under a US-backed regime in the 1970s. Moreover, there is ample evidence that Washington is carrying out torture against “enemy combatants” and alleged terrorists in its worldwide network of CIA and military detention centers.

The US administration has a powerful motive for protecting Posada and preventing his facing trial for his crimes. He worked for years as a paid agent of the CIA, and such a trial could well expose Washington’s decades-long involvement in terrorism against Cuba and other perceived opponents of US interests in Latin America.

It was largely for this reason that Bush’s father in 1990 freed Orlando Bosch, Posada’s co-conspirator in the airplane bombing and numerous other terrorist acts. Bosch today enjoys US permanent resident status and protection by the US government in Miami.

The arrest of the Alvarez couple in Miami also came barely a month before a US appeals court in Atlanta is to hear oral arguments concerning the so-called “Cuban Five,” who have been jailed since 1998 on charges of spying upon and infiltrating anti-Castro émigré groups.

After their conviction in a 2001 trial, Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino, and Antonio Guerrero were sentenced to life in prison. Two others, Fernando González and René González, were given 19- and 15-year sentences, respectively.

Last August, an appellate panel overturned the convictions, ruling that the trial judge had wrongly denied a defense motion to change the trial’s venue from Miami, out of concern that the anti-Castro exile groups had created a

political climate in which a fair trial was impossible.

Now the full 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals has taken the relatively rare step of reviewing the panel’s decision, hearing government arguments for the reinstatement of the convictions.

The government’s determination to make the convictions stick found perverse expression at the end of last month when the US attorney’s office in Miami filed a motion to block the court from receiving amicus briefs filed by legal organizations raising democratic and human rights issues relating to the case.

The three-judge panel that threw out the convictions found that a new trial was required due to a “perfect storm created when the surge of pervasive community sentiment and extensive publicity, both before and during the trial, merged with the improper prosecutorial references.” The court barred the defendants from introducing any evidence related to the terrorist violence carried out by the groups they were charged with spying upon. The “prosecutorial references” included a summation that branded Cuba as a terrorist nation and claimed that the defendants had been “sent to ... destroy the United States.”

The real connections were precisely the opposite. As in the latest arrests, there was no evidence that the activities of the five Cubans involved any relay of classified information about the US to Cuba or had anything to do with a supposed breach of US security. Rather, the principal “crime” of which the five were accused was spying on groups given free rein in Miami to carry out violent attacks aimed at destroying Cuba.

Speaking before a hand-picked audience in Louisville, Kentucky on Wednesday, George W. Bush repeated the mantra that he invoked to justify the US invasion of Afghanistan four years ago: “If you harbor a terrorist, if you provide safe haven to a terrorist, you’re equally as guilty as the terrorist.”

Bush’s assertion stands as a damning self-indictment. Washington protects and sponsors Posada, Bosch and other terrorists, while ruthlessly persecuting those charged with uncovering and foiling their murderous actions. An administration that has justified its every action in the name of a “global war on terrorism” is in reality one of the world’s foremost practitioners of state-sponsored terrorism.



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