“Outlaw regimes” and the harboring of terrorists: the case of Posada Carriles

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In the run-up to the fifth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, President George W. Bush delivered a series of speeches aimed at recouping the fading credibility of his “global war on terrorism” and reversing the stunning growth in popular sentiment against the war in Iraq.

Similar phrases appeared in every speech. One theme that was monotonously repeated was the vow, made after 9/11, that states that harbored terrorists would be treated the same as the terrorists themselves.

On September 5, Bush declared: “We’re determined to deny terrorists the support of outlaw regimes. After September the 11, I laid out a clear doctrine: America makes no distinction between those who commit acts of terror and those that harbor and support them, because they’re equally guilty of murder.”

In another speech on September 9, the US president said, “After 9/11, I set forth a new doctrine: Nations that harbor or support terrorists are equally guilty as the terrorists, and will be held to account.”

And in his televised address to the nation on September 11 itself, Bush stated: “On September the 11th, we resolved that we would go on the offense against our enemies, and we would not distinguish between the terrorists and those who harbor or support them.”

In the aftermath of 9/11, this “principle” was invoked to justify not only the imminent invasion of Afghanistan, but also the subsequent attack on Iraq, for which the administration manufactured a phony connection between Al Qaeda and Baghdad. In the present situation, it is being used to prepare for military aggression against Iran, where, once again without any evidence, the administration is proclaiming an Al Qaeda link.

Given this pervasive theme, it is all the more extraordinary that the national media ignored an event on the day of the 9/11 anniversary that touched directly on the harboring of terrorists by a national government—in this case, the government of the United States.

Because of the Bush administration’s refusal to either deport or bring charges against a terrorist who organized the bombing of a civilian airliner in which 73 people were killed, a federal magistrate in Texas ruled that he should be set free. A federal judge must render a final decision, but if normal procedures are followed, within 30 days this mass murderer will be walking the streets of the US, a free man.

The October 1976 airline bombing—one of the worst acts of terrorism committed in the Western Hemisphere before 9/11—is only the most infamous in a series of terrorist crimes carried over the past 30 years by Cuban-born Luis Posada Carriles.

Barely two years ago he was released from a Panamanian prison in an extra-legal pardon by the country’s outgoing president, Mireya Moscoso. The pardon was widely believed to have been issued as a result of either official US pressure or bribes from Cuban exile groups, or both. Posada Carriles had been in prison there for nearly four years for plotting to kill Cuban President Fidel Castro and potentially hundreds of others by bombing a public conference held in conjunction with the 2000 summit of Latin American leaders.

He freely acknowledged his role in a 1997 bombing campaign against hotels and restaurants in Cuba, which claimed the life of an Italian tourist.

He helped organize the 1976 assassination of Orlando Letelier and his aide Ronni Moffit. Letelier, a former Chilean defense minister in the government of President Salvador Allende, who was at the time one of the most prominent opponents of the US-backed military dictatorship in Chile. The car-bomb assassination on Washington’s Embassy Row was then considered one of the worst acts of terrorism ever carried out in the US capital.

He has been linked to numerous other plots and acts of violence that extend right up to the present. On September 11, the same day that the magistrate in Texas issued his ruling, a wealthy south Florida developer and Cuban exile who served as Posada Carriles’s chief spokesman and paid his expenses pleaded guilty to a single conspiracy charge in federal court in Fort Lauderdale. The plea bargain arrangement stemmed from the police seizure last year of an arsenal of automatic weapons, ammunition, hand grenades and military explosives from an apartment complex he owned in south Florida

The *New York Times*—America’s “newspaper of record”—carried not a word on the extraordinary decision by the US magistrate in Texas to set free an infamous international terrorist—a ruling announced on the very day that the government and the media were focusing national attention on terrorism in conjunction with the 9/11 anniversary.

The reasons are clear. As far as the US ruling establishment is concerned, Posada Carriles may be a terrorist, but he’s “our terrorist.” As a right-wing exile from the Cuban revolution of 1959, he was recruited by the CIA for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961. He was subsequently trained by the US Army in

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intelligence.

There is documentary evidence that Posada Carriles stayed on the CIA payroll into the late 1960s, and ample indication that he remained one of the agency's "assets" for decades afterwards.

In the early 1970s, he moved to Venezuela, became a citizen of that country, and was appointed by the right-wing regime of President Carlos Andres Perez as head of DISIP, the country's secret police, where he directed the murder and torture of left-wing oppositionists. After Perez's fall, he headed a private security agency, from which he plotted the bombing of the Cuban airliner.

Arrested for the bombing, Posada Carriles escaped in 1985, thanks to bribes provided by the Cuban American National Foundation. He went to El Salvador where he directed the covert and illegal operation to supply the Nicaraguan contra terrorist army under the direction of Lt. Col. Oliver North, a Reagan White House aide who held the title of "counter-terrorism coordinator." Posada Carriles has been accused of using the supply operation in El Salvador as a conduit for shipping cocaine into the US.

After his release from the Panamanian prison, Posada Carriles hid for a time in Central America and then returned to the US, sneaking into the country without a visa. Hours after he held a press conference in south Florida in May 2005, he was picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and has been held in detention ever since.

While the normal procedure would have been to seek his deportation, no countries will accept Posada Carriles outside of Venezuela, where he is a citizen and is wanted for trial on the airline bombing, and Cuba, where he was born and is wanted in connection with that and other terrorist crimes.

While Venezuela has pressed for extradition, Washington has flouted its treaties with the country, whose president it sought to overthrow in an abortive 2002 coup. The US has defended its actions on the spurious grounds that if Posada Carriles were extradited to Venezuela, he would face torture. The savage irony of this pretense is twofold. First, while there is no evidence of government-sanctioned torture under the current Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez, the former CIA agent himself directed the torture of political dissidents while serving the same elements who now seek Chavez's overthrow. Second, the Bush administration is notorious for kidnapping alleged terrorists and sending them to foreign governments that practice torture, a practice known as "extraordinary rendition."

When the US government detained Posada Carriles, it decided to charge him only with a simple immigration violation—not with the myriad crimes he has committed around the world. Nonetheless, government officials clearly recognized his criminal past as a primary reason for keeping him behind bars.

In a letter to Posada Carriles obtained by *Time* magazine, an official with Immigration and Customs Enforcement explained why the agency wanted to continue detaining him:

"You have a history of engaging in criminal activity, associating with individuals involved in criminal activity, and participating in violent acts that indicate a disregard for the safety of the general public and a propensity for engaging in activities... that pose a risk to the national security of the United States."

Making a reference to the 1976 bombing of the Cuban passenger plane, the official continued, "Due to your long history of criminal activity and violence in which innocent civilians were killed, your release from detention would pose a danger to both the community and the national security of the United States."

While all this is acknowledged by the government, the Bush administration's Justice Department chose not to make such a case or present any evidence of Posada Carriles's crimes in court, which would allow his indefinite detention as a terrorist suspect.

Lawyers for the terrorist have pressed for his release. Under a 2001 Supreme Court ruling, the government is not allowed to detain foreign nationals who cannot be deported for more than six months.

The ruling of the federal magistrate in Texas was based on this ruling and on the fact that the White House and US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales have elected to do nothing to certify, as required by law, that Posada Carriles is a terrorist or a "threat to the community," or to detain him under terms of the USA Patriot Act, something that has been done repeatedly in the case of Middle Eastern immigrants not charged with any acts of terrorism.

In the end, Washington refuses to either charge Posada Carriles as a terrorist or abide by international law and extradite him to face pending charges in Venezuela because the US government is a full accomplice in his crimes. It knows that were he to be placed on trial, further evidence would emerge of US state-sponsored terrorism.

The Bush administration's protection of a mass murderer, airline bomber and assassin places it squarely within the category of an "outlaw regime" that "harbors and supports terrorists."

Nor is this a matter merely of the right-wing Republican ideologues in the White House. The silence of the media on the Texas magistrate's decision was in sync with the silence of the Democratic Party. Not a single major Democratic political figure has denounced the Bush administration's illegal protection of Posada Carriles or demanded his extradition to Venezuela.

The former CIA agent and asset, it should be recalled, carried out his crimes under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Moreover, the Democrats have increasingly sought to compete with the Republicans for the allegiance of the anti-Castro Cuban-American lobby, particularly the Cuban American National Foundation, which Posada Carriles once identified as one of his paymasters.

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