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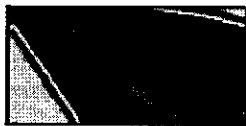
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Published Saturday, June 9, 2001

Verdicts justify suspicions of many area exiles

NEWS ANALYSIS

BY CAROL ROSENBERG
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For activists in the crusade to topple Fidel Castro, Friday's sweeping espionage convictions of five spies from Havana proved to outsiders what some have been arguing all along.

Sometimes, what appears to be sabotage really is sabotage. And dirty tricks do exist.

Or, as Joe Garcia, the 38-year-old executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation put it: "Yes, Castro is among us."

Born in the United States, Garcia said he grew up skeptical, too. "In America, we're not used to being spied on. It's not like the '50s, when J. Edgar Hoover was in everybody's closet," he said.

But he and other activists argued that Cubans and non-Cubans should no longer ridicule as "paranoia" some exiles' suggestions that they were being watched.

Messages from Havana to the spies, intercepted by the FBI and used as evidence at the trial, showed that the agents were tasked to stir up infighting among exile groups and Cuban-American politicians' campaigns.

Defense lawyers argued that the intelligence agents were mostly snooping on militant groups — characterizing Garcia's influential CANF as one of them — to prevent Miami-inspired terror attacks on the island.

"I do think it's tremendously unfortunate," said Garcia, a

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lawyer, "that the Cuban community was once more characterized for someone else's interest. We were victimized in order to get someone off."

DEFENSE TROUBLING

Although the verdicts suggest the tactic didn't succeed, some Cuban leaders were troubled by the nature of the defense, saying the spies' U.S.-paid lawyers were trying to score points on Castro's behalf.

The men used the trial to parade Castro's gripes against the exile community inside a downtown Miami courthouse. Cuban government witnesses were considered credible enough to be questioned in Havana and have their sworn testimony included in a U.S. court record. And, another sore spot, no Cuban Americans were among the jurors who heard the case.

"Can you imagine having a Cuban official swearing on the Bible to tell the truth?" said Ernesto Betancourt, a former Radio Marti director, who was troubled by defense arguments.

Acquittals could have given "a tremendous boost to Castro's propaganda," he said.

On learning about the convictions, he said Friday night: "I am extremely pleased. I think the legal system was able to withstand Castro's efforts to confuse it. It was quite a defeat for Castro." Betancourt said Cuba sent agents to infiltrate the radio station during his 1984-1990 tenure.

In the end, the six-month trial cast a spotlight on Cuban spy craft, with jurors buying the government's case that the squad colluded to steal U.S. military secrets.

But the defense claimed no secrets had actually been obtained, and lawyers cast the spy ring's members as bit players in the four-decade struggle between Cubans across the Straits of Florida.

"I think most people were disappointed in these spies," said sociologist Lisandro Pérez at Florida International University, who argued the trial de-mystified the world of Cuban espionage.

IMAGE OF THE SPY

Stereotypically, he said, Cubans in Miami imagined the spy from the island as "slick, a seducer of women, handsome, with cellular phones" -- a lothario along the lines of Juan Pablo Roque, who was indicted as a co-conspirator in the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-down and who returned to Cuba a day before the Feb. 24, 1996, MiG attack on the planes.

Spy master Gerardo Hernández was, in fact, convicted of conspiracy to murder in the shoot-down Friday, for supposedly warning Roque to avoid the doomed air mission.

But those tried "looked bush league. They had to support

themselves," Pérez said.

Veteran defense attorney Al Krieger, who once defended New York mob boss John Gotti, said the case didn't generate much cloakroom conversation at the federal building.

Krieger said many in Miami are "a little jaded by all the anti-Castro expressed sentiments. How many times can you hear it? How many times can you be exposed to it without being just tired of it? I don't think many people perceive Castro as a threat to the United States."

Moreover, the trial never captured national political attention, said University of Miami professor Joaquín Roy, stripping it of any suggestion that its outcome would have consequences in the struggle for control of the island.

"Compare this with the real sensitive issue of how to deal with Colombia, and Cuba disappears off the screen," said Roy, who teaches international relations.

To some degree, the case hardened suspicions in the Cuban activist community, said Ramón Saúl Sánchez, founder of the Democracy Movement whose anti-Castro flotillas were a target of infiltration.

STEREOTYPES

"Certain things that came out of this trial and certain traits and activities and lives might deepen stereotypes in terms of looking at people more suspiciously," he said, explaining that movement old timers are a bit more skeptical of recent arrivals from Cuba.

By demonizing exiles and demythologizing the work and lives of Cuban spies, attorney Pedro Freyre said, the agents' lawyers were using the long established courtroom ploy of "the best defense is a good offense, so you crucify your opponent."

Freyre, chairman of the organization Facts About Cuban Exiles, said the trial may have unfairly contributed to the stereotype that Cubans in Miami are militants bent on war with Castro.

"The problem is, you should consider that the situation in Cuba has lasted 40 years and the level of violence is minimal. More people died in a bad weekend in El Salvador," during its civil war than across the four decades of Cuban-exile activism, he said.



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