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**The Cuban Connection:
Drug Trafficking
and the Castro Regime**

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The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking and the Castro Regime

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"The evidence of the Castro regime's involvement in drug trafficking is voluminous and compelling. So is the evidence that Fidel Castro's block by block network of domestic spies makes him aware of everything of consequence that happens inside Cuba."

---Miami Herald Editorial
April 8, 1993

Introduction

Writing about Cuba's involvement in narco-trafficking is a complicated task. The secretive nature of the international drug trade coupled with Cuba's pervasive and paranoid internal security apparatus makes finding the proverbial "smoking gun" difficult at best. In addition, thirty-five years of intense ideological hostility between the United States and Cuba makes any accusation by the former easier to refute by the latter. Nevertheless a sufficient body of information has been reported and compiled by government agencies, grand juries, informants and defectors to unmistakably tie Cuba to the drug trade. This paper will bring together much of the available information to demonstrate that the Cuban government has been and is probably still involved in the narcotics trade for both financial and ideological purposes.

Cuba and the Drug Trade

The precise date that Cuba began to involve itself in narco-trafficking is not known. One scholar convincingly argues that Cuba's entry into the narcotics trade had its origins in the early 1960's. When Cuba and Czechoslovakia signed military and security assistance agreements, Czech intelligence operatives trained Cuban agents to produce and distribute drugs and narcotics into the United States.¹

¹ Joseph D. Douglas, *Red Cocaine: The Drugging of America*. Atlanta: Clarion House, 1990, p. 20.

Major General Jan Sejna, a high ranking member of the Czech Ministry of Defense and Communist Party, is reported to have been present at two meetings with Cuban Defense Minister Raúl Castro. At these meetings between Cuban and Czech officials which took place throughout the mid-1960s, Raúl Castro and/or his associates within the Cuban Defense Ministry actively discussed the issue of drug trafficking as an ideological weapon to be used against the United States.²

In addition to these claims, a secret Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) intelligence report obtained by *The Miami Herald* states that Cuba's drug involvement dates to at least 1961. In that report, a confidential informant reported that at a meeting held in Cuba that summer, the issue of setting up a cocaine trafficking network was discussed by high ranking government officials.³

The United States did not publicly accuse Cuba of narco-trafficking until 1982. On November 5, 1982, it was reported that a federal grand jury in Miami had indicted four senior Cuban government officials on charges of conspiring to use Cuba as a safe haven while transporting drugs into the United States from Colombia.⁴ The four officials were Fernando Ravelo Renado, former Cuban Ambassador to Colombia; Gonzalo Bassols Suárez, former Deputy Chief of Mission under Ravelo; René Rodríguez Cruz, a member of Cuba's intelligence service and President of the Cuban Institute of Friendship with Foreign Peoples (ICAP); and Vice Admiral Aldo Santamaría Cuadrado, the Commander of the Cuban Navy. In addition to the four Cubans, 10 other persons were charged.

The United States built its case around the testimony of Colombian-born drug trafficker Juan Crump, a protected federal witness who agreed to cooperate

² Ibid., pp. 87-88.

³ *The Miami Herald*, November 20, 1983, p. 20.

⁴ *The Miami Herald*, November 5, 1982, p. 1A; and *The New York Times*, November 20, 1982, p. 1.

with prosecutors in return for a reduced sentence. According to the testimony, Crump introduced Ravelo to Jaime Guillot Lara, a known Colombian drug dealer. Guillot Lara agreed to smuggle guns to Colombia's M-19 guerrilla group in return for Cuban assistance in smuggling drugs into the United States.

Although the four Cubans charged were important members of the Cuban Communist Party and the government, Vice-Admiral Santamaría's indictment proved particularly embarrassing to the Cuban government. As a long-time associate of Fidel and Raúl Castro, Santamaría had impeccable revolutionary credentials. One of his brothers had been tortured and killed in the struggle against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, and his sister, Haydee, was one of the highest ranking women within the revolutionary elite. While none of the four Cuban officials were ever arrested, their indictment served to tarnish Cuba's international image and brought U.S.-Cuban hostilities into a new realm.⁵

Shortly after the indictments, on February 7, 1983, an unnamed former Cuban intelligence officer testified before the District Court for the Southern District of Florida in Miami. During his testimony, he described Cuba's involvement in the drug trade as a deliberate campaign to destabilize the United States.⁶

Two months later, on April 30, a Senate hearing was called to draw further attention to the previous year's indictments. During the hearings, Deputy Assistant

⁵ Vice Admiral Santamaría served as Commander of the Cuban Revolutionary Navy from 1965 until he was inexplicably removed in 1984. He is believed to still have an official function but is not on active duty and his responsibilities are unknown. Ravelo Renado went on to become Cuba's Ambassador to Nicaragua, another country that the United States would later accuse of complicity in narco-trafficking. As President of ICAP, Rodriguez Cruz was responsible for coordinating visits by influential foreigners to Cuba. Cuba later tried to post him to a diplomatic assignment in Brazil but withdrew his nomination after Brazilian press reports highlighted his controversial past.

⁶ The District Court of the United States for the Southern District of Florida, Number 82-643-Cr-JE, Miami, Florida, February 7, 1983.

Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs James H. Michel stated that: "We have a report that the Communist Party Presidium, and specifically Fidel Castro, in early 1979, considered a scheme to begin dealing with narcotics smugglers, using Cuba as a bridge and support base for the networks to the United States as a means to aid Cuba economically and to contribute to the deterioration of American society."⁷ Michel further testified that the United States had obtained evidence "confirming that Cuban officials had facilitated narcotics trafficking through the Caribbean for at least the past two years" although the evidence itself was not presented.⁸

At the same Senate hearing, a former Cuban intelligence officer also accused the Castro regime of narco-trafficking. Using the alias "Mario Estévez González", he detailed how in one operation some 23,000 pounds of marijuana and 10 million methaqualone tablets were to be shipped to Florida from Cuba. The smugglers were to share their profits with Cuban government officials.⁹

Estévez González had testified earlier in the month before a hearing called by Senator Alphonse D'Amato to discuss the growth of the crime rate among Cubans in the United States since the Mariel boatlift. During that testimony Estévez González stated that he personally had earned the Castro government \$7 million from drug sales. Estévez went on to claim that of the 125,000 Cubans who came to the United States during the Mariel exodus, 3,000 were Cuban agents and of those, 400 were used to bring drugs from Colombia, through Cuba, to the United

⁷ *The Washington Post*, May 1, 1983, p. 1.

^x *Ibid.*

⁹ *The New York Times*, May 1, 1983, p. 30.

States.¹⁰ Of interest is the fact that René Rodríguez Cruz, one of the four Cubans indicted in 1982, was the Cuban government official responsible for organizing the Mariel boatlift.

As the issue of Cuban drug trafficking began to receive widespread publicity, the United States elevated the level of attack. Vice President George Bush, on a visit to Miami in May 1983, stated that some of the drugs entering the United States from other countries in Latin America, did so through Cuba. He cited this fact as further proof that Cuban President Fidel Castro did not desire to reach a peaceful accommodation with the United States. He also stated that Cuban supported drug operations were politically motivated to destabilize the United States.¹¹

The issue of Cuban narco-trafficking receded from the headlines as the United States found itself preoccupied with other more pressing problems in Central America, particularly in El Salvador and Nicaragua. However, by the end of the decade the lull in accusations by the United States and official denials by the Cuban government came to a halt. A series of high profile Cuban defections and grand jury indictments served to once again highlight Cuba's involvement in narco-trafficking which in turn led to the most serious political crisis in the Revolution's short history.

On May 28, 1987, the Deputy Commander of the Cuban Air Force, Brigadier General Rafael del Pino, landed a small twin engine airplane at Key West, Florida, and requested political asylum for himself and several members of his family. Although the contents of his official debriefings are not known, General del Pino has publicly accused the Cuban government of wholesale corruption. Del

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, April 6, 1983, p. B4.

¹¹ *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1983, p. A10.

Pino was especially critical of the CIMEX Corporation. CIMEX was a Ministry of the Interior front company charged with circumventing the United States economic embargo and with acquiring much sought after foreign exchange. Del Pino has stated that he witnessed several illegal operations at a private airport at Cayo Largo. According to the general, Cayo Largo was a resort for foreign tourists closed to Cuban citizens that was also used "for the secret, unlawful operations of the Castro regime."¹²

During the following week, on June 6, another important Cuban official defected to the United States. Major Florentino Aspillaga, an Interior Ministry intelligence officer, defected from his diplomatic post in Czechoslovakia. According to Aspillaga's later declarations, Cuba was actively operating as a narcotics transit point moving drugs from Colombia into the United States. Colombian drug traffickers were said to maintain a fleet of 13 ships and 21 aircraft that operated inside Cuban territory. This fleet was under the protection of an elite commando unit that deployed only with Fidel Castro's personal approval.¹³ Prior to these accusations, Aspillaga had accused the Cuban government with high level corruption within the Cuban Ministry of the Interior¹⁴ Even before del Pino and Aspillaga's defections, another significant defection from Cuba directly implicated high ranking members of the Cuban government in the narcotics trade.

Major José Antonio Rodríguez Menier, also an intelligence agent within the Ministry of the Interior, defected to the United States from his position as Deputy Chief of Security at the Cuban Embassy in Budapest. A career intelligence operative who had once been an assistant to the Cuban Minister of the Interior,

¹² Cuban American National Foundation, *General del Pino Speaks*, 1987, p. 45.

¹³ *El Diario de Las Americas*, May 21, 1993, p. 1.

¹⁴ *The Washington Post*, August 11, 1987, p. A18.

Rodríguez publicly accused his former organization of drug trafficking. According to Rodríguez, the Cuban government is an active participant in the drug trade. The Special Troops unit of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) coordinates all drug shipments. In addition, Rodríguez directly implicated the Interior Minister, Major General José Abrantes, his Vice Minister, Major General Pascual Martínez Gil, and the MININT Chief of Intelligence, Major General Germán Barreiro, among others.¹⁵ Rodríguez also accused Cuban President Fidel Castro of personally profiting from the drug trade since 1982 stating that Castro keeps 80% of the hard currency generated by the CIMEX Company's drug trafficking operations in banks in Panama.¹⁶

During this period, events in other nations also had an effect on Cuba's identification with narco-trafficking. On February 5, 1988 the United States indicted Panamanian strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega. Noriega was charged with 12 counts under a broad conspiracy statute of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. Fifteen co-defendants were also indicted including Panamanian military officers, a former diplomat, as well as members of Colombia's powerful drug cartels. During the pre-indictment hearings, the Grand Jury heard from José Blandón, a Panamanian diplomat considered to be a close civilian confidant of General Noriega.

Blandón testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Communications and stated that in late June 1984, he, Noriega and another Panamanian military officer met with Fidel Castro in Cuba. The purpose of the meeting was to mediate a dispute between Noriega and the Colombian cartels. According to the available information, Noriega was tipped off

¹⁵ *El Diario de Las Americas*, June 6, 1988, p. 1.

¹⁶ *The Washington Post*, August 26, 1989, p. A17.

by the United States Government as to the location of a cocaine processing plant within Panama. Forced to raid the facility, Noriega earned the enmity of the Colombian drug lords who had paid him a \$5 million bribe in order to use Panamanian territory.

To protect himself against retribution, Noriega solicited Fidel Castro's assistance to peacefully resolve the issue. According to Blandón, at Castro's suggestion, Noriega agreed to refund the bribe, the confiscated cocaine, and a helicopter that was captured during the raid. In addition, he also agreed to release 23 individuals arrested during the operation.¹⁷ Blandón's testimony before the Senate subcommittee was considered particularly damaging due to his close association with General Noriega as well as the fact that he was neither a defector or an indicted felon. His accusations could not easily be dismissed.

Throughout this period, evidence continued to mount against the Cuban government and its connections with the drug trade. Yet, United States officials were hesitant to directly accuse Fidel Castro or his brother Raúl as drug traffickers. This situation began to reverse itself after a string of South Florida drug convictions.

On July 25, 1988, five members of a Miami-based drug ring were convicted of smuggling \$10 million worth of cocaine into the United States through Cuba. Federal prosecutors presented evidence at the trial showing that the ring smuggled two loads of cocaine totaling 700 kilograms. The cocaine was brought from a farm in Colombia to a military base at Varadero, Cuba. From there the cocaine was loaded onto small boats that were escorted out of Cuban territorial waters by the Cuban Coast Guard. According to United States Attorney Dexter Lehtinen, "The evidence in the trial demonstrated that Cuban territory was used with the

¹⁷ *The Washington Post*, February 11, 1988, p. A42.

knowledge, approval and cooperation of the Cuban government."¹⁸ Lehtinen also stated that "these were not simply a few, rogue, low-level Cuban officials . . . this demonstrated knowledge at the highest levels of the Cuban defense establishment."¹⁹ The shipments of cocaine were alleged to have occurred in March and May of 1987. One of the co-conspirators, Rubén Ruiz, would at last provide the direct link to Cuba's leadership which would rock the very foundations of the Cuban Revolution.

Rubén Ruiz's father, Reinaldo Ruiz, was a relatively successful Cuban exile businessman who decided to go to Panama to pursue business opportunities. He started a travel agency that specialized in selling Panamanian visas to desperate Cubans wishing to leave the island. The visas were arranged by members of the Panamanian National Guard who collected fees for their services.²⁰ While in Panama Reinaldo Ruiz accidentally ran into a younger cousin, Miguel Ruiz Poo, the manager of *Interconsult*, a semi-official Cuban government office in Panama. Ruiz Poo was also an intelligence officer of the Ministry of the Interior.

Not long after renewing family ties the two cousins began a profitable business relationship. The elder Ruiz provided his Cuban cousin with assistance in skirting the American trade embargo against Cuba and business flourished. Reinaldo Ruiz made a considerable amount of money while his cousin kept his superiors in Havana happy with U.S.-made goods. Before long, the issue of transporting cocaine was surfaced.

When Reinaldo Ruiz suggested that they diversify their operations to include drugs, Ruiz Poo was non-committal. During a visit back to Havana, Ruiz Poo

¹⁸ *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1988, p. A6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Andrés Oppenheimer, *Castro's Final Hour*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992. pp. 23-24.

informed his superior within the MININT, Major Amado Padrón Trujillo, about the business venture. Using his Colombian-born wife's connections to the cartels, Reinaldo Ruiz offered to provide two aircraft to transport the cocaine from Colombia to the United States through Cuba.²¹

To insure the seriousness with which Ruiz saw the venture, one of the pilots would be Rubén Ruiz. All that the elder Ruiz desired from the Cubans was permission to land in Cuba and to maintain the cocaine on the ground for a few hours until it could be picked up by boat. Padrón could not commit to such a scheme since there was an understanding that drugs could be flown over Cuban airspace in exchange for the trafficker's commitment to ship weapons back to Colombian guerrilla movements. Using Cuban soil was a unique request that would require higher approval.²²

Eventually, Ruiz and Ruiz Poo found their way to Colonel Antonio de la Guardia, a highly respected officer within the MININT who was interested in what they had to say. Colonel de la Guardia was not only one of Fidel Castro's favorite officers but was also the head of the Ministry of the Interior's MC Section. The section, whose initials stood for "convertible currency" in Spanish ("*Moneda Convertible*"), was charged with setting up business enterprises and front companies throughout the world that would circumvent the United States embargo and earn Cuba hard currency.

Unbeknownst to all, the co-pilot that would fly the missions with Rubén Ruiz, Hu Chang, was also an informant of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Using a hidden camera and recorder, DEA agents recorded 50 hours of tapes detailing the intricate scheme to use Cuban territory to transship

²¹ Ibid., p. 27.

²² Ibid., p. 28.

drugs into the United States. The younger Ruiz even bragged about the time that a Cuban Air Force MiG aircraft escorted him into Cuban airspace.²³

On February 23, 1988, Reinaldo Ruiz, his son Rubén, and fifteen others were indicted for smuggling cocaine into the United States through Cuba, Haiti, and the Turks and Caicos Islands. Reinaldo Ruiz was held without bond after prosecutors presented a tape recording of Ruiz saying that “. . . the money went into Fidel’s drawer.”²⁴ Ruiz was eventually sentenced to 17 years in prison in return for his testimony.

A few days after members of the Ruiz ring were arrested, the news of alleged Cuban complicity reached Havana. Fidel Castro dismissed the allegations of Cuban involvement as “. . . lies from top to bottom.”²⁵ When questioned by a reporter about the accusations of Cuban involvement in drug trafficking, Fidel Castro stated that “. . . it is a miserable and absolute slander” and “no other country has fought against drugs more systematically than Cuba.”²⁶ Nevertheless, Fidel Castro authorized an internal investigation headed by his brother Raúl to look into the charges.

Fidel Castro’s denunciations of the drug trafficking charges and the subsequent internal investigation signaled trouble for Colonel de la Guardia and others involved in the operation. While Fidel Castro had previously authorized overflight operations and contacts with the Medellin cartel, the Cuban leader had always discouraged having cocaine physically touch Cuban soil. Colonel de la

²³ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

²⁴ *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1988, p. A18.

²⁵ Oppenheimer, *Castro’s Final Hour*, p. 52.

²⁶ *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 1989, p. A14.

Guardia was left in doubt as to how much Fidel Castro really knew about the MC Section's narcotics smuggling operations.

In addition, the disclosure of the Ruiz-de la Guardia connection could not have come at a worse time. Since the beginning of the Revolution there has existed strong personal and professional rivalries between the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) and the Ministry of the Interior. Under Major General José Abrantes, a long-time, trusted revolutionary, the MININT had become a powerful and dangerous rival to Raúl Castro and the MINFAR. Responsible for Cuba's national police, foreign intelligence, counter-intelligence, special operations, firefighters, and border guard troops, the MININT had developed into a parallel political and military force.

Ministry of the Interior personnel flaunted their privileged status and access to consumer goods not available to the more spartan MINFAR. It was just a matter of time before Raúl Castro and José Abrantes would clash. By undertaking the investigation into possible MININT wrongdoing, Raúl Castro had another agenda to undertake. Not only did Raúl Castro wish to destroy MININT's independence and power, but he was also out to rid himself of any possible contenders as Fidel's successor. The Miami indictments offered Raúl Castro a clear reason to prove that the MININT was guilty not only of conducting sloppy and cavalier operations but also of causing the Cuban Revolution and its Maximum Leader tremendous national and international embarrassment and humiliation.

As MINFAR investigators gathered evidence about the MC Section's operations, de la Guardia began to worry. When word reached Cuba that de la Guardia might defect to the United States, his fate was sealed²⁷

²⁷ Oppenheimer, *Castro's Final Hour*, p. 58.

What followed was a wholesale purge of the MININT by Raúl Castro. Major General Abrantes was fired and arrested. He was replaced by newly promoted Lieutenant General Abelardo Colomé Ibarra.³⁰ As the only 3-star general in Cuba, Colomé was now the third ranking official in Cuba behind Fidel and Raúl Castro. Also removed from the MININT were Vice Minister, Major General Pascal Martínez Gil, Chief of Intelligence, Major General Germán Barreiro, Chief of Immigration, Brigadier General Robert González Caso, and Brigadier General Armando Valdéz González, the Commander of the Border Guard Troops. All of these officers and many others throughout the MININT hierarchy were replaced by MINFAR officials.

Major General Abrantes, once one of the most trusted and powerful men in Cuba, was sentenced to 20 years in prison. He later died of a suspicious heart attack on January 19, 1991. Before he died, Patricio de la Guardia claims that Abrantes confided to him in prison that Fidel Castro was aware that cocaine was being transshipped through Cuba. In addition, in 1988, Fidel Castro had asked Abrantes to sell 10,000 kilograms of cocaine on the European market for \$50 million. The cocaine had been confiscated during seizures by the Cuban coast guard.³¹ In a letter smuggled out of prison and published in the United States, Patricio de la Guardia stated that “nobody in charge at MININT questioned the source of the suitcases stuffed with hundreds of thousands in small denominations that Tony [de la Guardia] personally gave to Abrantes and Barreiro” . . . “I am more

book entitled, *Causa 1/89*. The book contained edited transcripts of the trials as well as newspaper clippings from *Granma* attesting to the trial's public interest in the case.

³⁰ During a telephone conversation between this writer and Major Florentino Aspillaga on October 17, 1994, Aspillaga discussed the serious political and ideological rivalries between the MINFAR and MININT. Aspillaga also referred to Colome Ibarra as “Raul Castro's whore.”

³¹ Oppenheimer, *Castro's Final Hour*, p. 127.

On June 14, 1989, *Granma*, the official Cuban Communist Party newspaper, announced the arrest of Major General Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez. A decorated combat hero who had recently been named Commander of Cuba's powerful Western Army, Ochoa would eventually be charged with complicity in narco-trafficking. Ochoa's arrest just before he was to have taken command of Cuba's largest ground force and the haphazard way in which he was included in the narco-trafficking conspiracy led many observers to believe that a purge was being undertaken by the Castro brothers with the drug investigations as political cover. Ochoa was known to be a popular soldier who advocated economic and political change as the solution to Cuba's myriad of socio-economic and political problems. The day before Ochoa's arrest, Diocles Torralba, Cuba's Minister of Transportation, was fired and arrested for corruption.

During the military and civil proceedings reminiscent of Stalin-era show trials, Ochoa dutifully acknowledged his culpability to all of the charges leveled against him and publicly exonerated both Fidel and Raúl Castro. After a highly publicized Honor Tribunal and Court Martial, stiff sentences were handed down to de la Guardia, Ochoa and numerous co-defendants. General Ochoa, his aide Captain Jorge Martínez Valdéz, Colonel Antonio de la Guardia, and Major Amado Padrón were sentenced to death. Colonel de la Guardia's twin brother, MININT Brigadier General Patricio de la Guardia, and Captain Miguel Ruiz Poo were each sentenced to 30 years imprisonment.²⁸ The remaining eight defendants, mostly MC Section operatives, were sentenced to from 10 to 30 years imprisonment. After a unanimous vote of the Council of State not to grant clemency to the condemned, Ochoa, de la Guardia, Martínez and Padrón were shot on July 13, 1989.²⁹

²⁸ *Granma*, July 10, 1989.

²⁹ After the trials, the Cuban government went to great lengths to distance itself from the drug trade and those involved. The Government foreign language press, Editorial Jose Marti, released a

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³¹ Oppenheimer, *Castro's Final Hour*, p. 127.

than sure that my brother, Colonel Antonio de la Guardia Font, was more than authorized to carry out the undercover operations for which he was found guilty and executed."³²

In assessing the Ochoa-de la Guardia trial it appears that Fidel and Raúl Castro hoped to bury long-standing allegations of Cuban drug smuggling along with their potential political rival. The Cuban leadership would be seen ushering in a new beginning in the international arena by publicly addressing the drug charges head on and then laying the blame at the feet of others. Former Brigadier General Rafael del Pino, who believes that Cuba is unquestionably involved in the narcotics trade, stated that Fidel Castro "is sufficiently intelligent to realize that he has failed . . . and he prefers to pass into history as an honest and convinced Marxist who erred rather than a vulgar narco-trafficker."³³

While Fidel Castro was able to bury the ghost of narco-trafficking, American officials remained unconvinced that the Cuban government was absolved of official wrongdoing. United States prosecutors continued to proceed with renewed vigor a legal case against the Cuban leadership. A drug-based indictment against one or both of the Castro brothers would have far-reaching political and diplomatic implications.

In April 1993, federal prosecutors with the United States Attorney's office in Miami seriously contemplated indicting MINFAR Minister Raúl Castro and other top Cuban officials on racketeering and conspiracy charges. The 17-page draft indictment listed 15 co-conspirators. According to the draft indictment "the

³² *The Miami Herald*, August 2, 1992, p. 1C.

³³ Rafael del Pino, *Proa a La Libertad*. Mexico City: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 1990, p. 398.

Cuban Government facilitated the transportation and distribution of large quantities of cocaine destined for the United States, including South Florida.”³⁴

What was significant about the draft indictment is that it names the Cuban Government in general, and the MINFAR and MININT in particular, as criminal organizations subject to U.S. racketeering laws. Among those to be named were: Raúl Castro; Manuel Piñeiro Losada, Chief of the Cuban Communist Party's Americas Department; former Interior Minister Abrantes; current Interior Minister Colomé and General Nelson Blanco, coordinator of narcotics deliveries through the Port of Varadero. Other, lower ranking members of the MINFAR and MININT were also to have been indicted.

Although the draft indictments were prepared, they were not executed. Legal scholars were to later opine that the U.S. case was weak given the credibility of witnesses considered crucial for a successful indictment. Former Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega refused to testify against Raúl Castro and convicted drug smuggler Carlos Lehder's testimony would be considered tainted.³⁵

Although the United States did not pursue the indictments at the time, it could still take up the matter if more compelling and reliable evidence becomes available. The fact that U.S. authorities are still interested in linking Cuba to narco-trafficking became apparent as recently as February 1994. A video tape found among slain drug lord Pablo Escobar's personal files alleges contacts made between General Raúl Castro and members of the Medellin cartel. A tape recording by an Escobar associate named "David," an alleged Cuban narco-trafficker but could not add anything new to the United States case.³⁶

³⁴ *The Miami Herald*, April 8, 1993, p. 1A.

³⁵ *The Miami Herald*, April 10, 1993, p. 1A.

³⁶ *The Miami Herald*, February 9, 1994, p. 9A., and February 11, 1994, p. 20A.

United States authorities appeared to get closer to an indictment of the Castro regime when it was reported that the Drug Enforcement Agency's Miami Field Division was investigating a direct link between narco-traffickers and Fidel Castro. On July 25, 1996, *The Miami Herald* led its front page with a highly detailed article about a 5,828-pound cocaine bust that originated in Colombia and had traveled through Havana with the personal approval of Fidel Castro.

According to *The Miami Herald*, in early January 1996, a Colombian freighter filled with consumer goods and 13,200 pounds of cocaine docked in Havana. The consumer goods were given to the Cuban government who in turn authorized the transshipment of the cocaine onto smaller vessels. Cuban naval craft even provided an escort. What made this particular tale of Cuban involvement plausible is the fact that among the items seized in the drug bust was a photo taken of the trafficker with Fidel Castro. So concerned was the Cuban government that in June 1996, highly publicized drug busts were undertaken in Cuba to dampen the possible political impact of this seizure.³⁷

Conclusions

From the evidence available it appears that the United States has developed enough of at least a circumstantial case to formally indict Fidel and/or Raúl Castro in addition to their high ranking associates. Whether the evidence makes the case beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law is another matter.

If Cuba's political and military leadership are indicted on drug charges it is presumed that they will become international political pariahs. Would the U.S. be compelled to ask for their extradition if they travel to a third country? Will the U.S. continue to conduct diplomatic negotiations with a government led by

³⁷ *The Miami Herald*, July 25, 1996, p.1.

indicted drug traffickers? By indicting an entire government hierarchy, would the U.S. limit its political options if it must later have to negotiate with the Cuban government?

Although Cuba's extensive involvement in the support and facilitation of narcotics smuggling into the United States is well-known, Washington's policy towards Cuba appears confusing and inconsistent. After a delegation of current and former Members of Congress visited Cuba from December 9-13, 1996, their final report called for increased cooperation in the field of counter-narcotics between the United States and Cuba, to include developing joint interdiction strategies.³⁸ In a bizarre twist of politics, on February 28, 1997, during its annual anti-narcotics certification process, the U.S. Department of State certified Cuba and Mexico but continued to decertify Colombia. In other words, the United States is willing to put pressure on Colombia in hopes of causing a change in government in expectation that a successor regime will comply with U.S. expectations and become fully certified. Meanwhile, Cuba gets a State Department certification of approval while that country maintains in power virtually the same government repeatedly accused and indicted of narcotics trafficking. This action not only politicized and trivialized the certification process but is also perceived as an affirmation of current Cuban policy.

More alarmingly, on March 6, 1997, four members of Cuba's MININT and Frontier Troops (*Tropas Guardiafronteras*) were allowed to testify on behalf of United States federal prosecutors in a drug smuggling case in Miami. Among the four was a lieutenant colonel intelligence officer. This was a far cry from the relatively recent days when the United States was issuing indictments against high ranking

³⁸ Report by The Delegation of the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress Visit To Cuba, December 9-14, 1996, p. 10.

members of the same government these individuals represent. United States Representative Lincoln Díaz-Balart (R-FL) went so far as to accuse U.S. federal prosecutors of covering up Cuba's ties to narco-trafficking.³⁹

In the world of high stakes diplomacy, the appropriate signals have already been sent. With the very public Ochoa-de la Guardia trial, Fidel and Raúl Castro tacitly admitted past indiscretions, exonerated the principal actors (themselves) and allowed Cuba to be on its best international political behavior and start anew with the United States. The United States, in turn, has continued to pursue the issue halfheartedly, raising the specter of an drug indictment just often enough to let Havana know that all is not forgotten. Nevertheless, former MININT Major José Rodríguez Menier believes that Fidel Castro is only buying time until more favorable political conditions allow him to continue in the lucrative drug trade.⁴⁰

Cuba's strategic geographic location, need for foreign exchange, knowledge of the drug trade and history of diplomatic duplicity makes it difficult to believe that the Castro regime has ceased all connections with the drug trade. It is likely that Castro will continue to support limited narco-trafficking operations on a smaller scale and with more compartmentalized operations. Only when the specter of a U.S. indictment and/or an international scandal appear evident will the Castro regime take meaningful steps to cease or curtail its involvement in these financially lucrative and ideologically rewarding ventures.

³⁹ *The Miami Herald*, March 8, 1997, p. 2B.

⁴⁰ José Antonio Rodríguez Menier, *Cuba Por Dentro: El MININT*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1994, p. 79.

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The views expressed in this monograph are those of the author as a result of independent research, and not of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.

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