

Accused Spies Were Told To Blend In

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Flashy lifestyles and big bucks are for espionage movies, not Cuban spies. Blend in, their bosses in Havana tell them. Don't spend lots of money. Be inconspicuous.

If Manuel Viramontes is a spy, as the feds allege, he followed directions.

Cloked in mystery, Viramontes made few friends, isolating himself in a Northeast Miami-Dade County, Fla., apartment and keeping contact seemingly only with his subagents.

According to the federal government, Viramontes, a captain in the Cuban military, came to Miami with orders to infiltrate the U.S. Southern Command and discredit Cuban exile groups by manipulating the media and political institutions through a smear campaign.

Viramontes' low-profile life came to an abrupt end Sept. 12 when FBI agents raided his apartment, arrested him and carted off his computer and boxes of diskettes and videotapes. He is one of eight men and two women who are charged in the case.

According to neighbors, Viramontes passed himself off as a single man, with an ex-wife in Mexico. But investigators said he actually had a wife, code-named "Bonsai," in Cuba. At one point, prosecutors said, he wrote her a letter marking their eighth wedding anniversary.

Viramontes was the kind of neighbor people like - quiet and polite. He resided in apartment 305 at 18100 Atlantic Blvd. in Northeast Miami-Dade. He claimed to be from Puerto Rico and kept a small flag in his apartment and a bumper sticker on his car professing his love for the island. It's not clear whether he had a job.

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