

The Cuban Five and Covert Propaganda

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Last Nov. 27 marked nine years since the start of the manipulated trial against the Five Cuban anti-terrorist heroes (they were arrested more than 11 years ago). Inevitably, the date reminds us of another Nov. 27, in 1871, when in colonial Cuba eight innocent Cubans, medical students, were executed by firing squad. They were victims of the Spaniards' desire for vengeance. The Five are victims of the United States' hostile policy toward Cuba and of the frustration, rancor and blind intolerance of the Cuban exiles.

To conduct the trial in Miami—where media manipulation had already created a suffocating atmosphere against the accused—was in effect to recreate a Roman circus with “pollice verso” (thumbs down) already established.

But what we did not know then—although we suspected it—is that the government that prosecuted the Five is the same government that was paying numerous journalists to light the bonfire of the Inquisition.

The scandal came years later on Sept. 8, 2006 (the Five were already serving heavy sentences), when federal documents obtained by *The Miami Herald* revealed that at least 10 local journalists had accepted money from the U.S. government, payment for programming aired on Radio and TV Martí. Let's review the names of some of those mentioned by Oscar Corral (1) in his coverage: Pablo Alfonso and Wilfredo Cancio Isla of *El Nuevo Herald*; Helen Aguirre Ferre, editor of the opinion page and Ariel Remos, both of *Diario Las Américas*; Miguel Cossio, news director and Juan Manuel Cao, reporter, both of TV Channel 41; Carlos Alberto Montaner, who appears frequently on radio and television and whose articles are published in several newspapers; and Ninoska Pérez Castellón, of Radio Mambí. The highest paid was Pablo Alfonso, who received \$175,000 [\$253,300 as of Feb. 2009] and the lowest paid Ninoska Pérez, who received only \$1,550.

The payments were made by the “U.S. Office of Cuba Broadcasting,”—which manages Radio and TV Martí—to local journalists. To varying degrees these journalists shape public opinion about Cuba with their articles and commentaries, above all during the period of the judicial process against the Five. These payments constitute not only a very grave lack of ethics, but are also illegal because they violate restrictions established by Congress.

The restrictions clearly prohibit the use of federal funds to finance covert propaganda within the territory of the United States. The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) defines covert propaganda as information originating from the government which is not credited as such, and is published or broadcast from other sources.

In our specific case: the secret payments made through Radio and TV Martí—stations with federal agendas whose target is Cuba—to supposedly-independent journalists who reproduce similar agendas in other media, are in violation of the law. These same criteria regarding covert propaganda are explained in the 2005 White House memorandum (Office of Legal Counsel) in the scandal of Armstrong Williams, noted television commentator, when it was discovered that the administration of George W. Bush had paid him \$240,000 to publicly support his educational policy (“No Child Left Behind” Law).

I should point out, however, that Radio and TV Martí were not the only outlets for buying propaganda. They were also not the only ones that created the climate of hatred which made a fair trial impossible for the Cuban Five. In February 2006 it was revealed that 17 Cuban-American institutions were receiving funds from the “National Endowment for Democracy.” This and other federal agencies generously distribute millions of dollars to exile organizations and a wide variety of institutions, including universities.

Numerous publications are financed with these funds, ranging from traditional media to the Internet. The salaries of communicators, professors, researchers, political analysts and other intellectuals are paid as well.

I suspect that the names of persons and institutions that have been revealed up to the present, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act—in spite of obstacles to that information—are just a miniscule part of the reality. Astounding as well are the strange routes through which money passes to feed the propaganda against “the disobedient island,” as Noam Chomsky calls it (2). In August 1997, for example, when terrorist acts were being carried out against tourist installations in Havana, Luis Posada Carriles, from El Salvador, sent a fax to his associates in the United States. A copy of the fax was obtained by the New York Times and published in its July 12, 1998 edition. In the fax, Posada Carriles complained of the lack of response, in his judgment, by the mass media to the bombings and he ended warning, “If there is no publicity, there is no payment!”

Recently, on Sept. 9, 2009, the U.S.-based Partnership for Civil Justice, acting on behalf of the National Committee to Free the Cuban Five, filed a lawsuit in U.S. federal court for the District of Columbia against the Broadcasting Board of Governors because of its illegal refusal to divulge the government’s financing of journalists. The publication of the documents could destroy the credibility of dozens of journalists in southern Florida and probably the media companies where they work. It would expose the dual role of the government as prosecutor and as manipulator of the press in a trial where the jury was not sequestered, immersed the whole time in an atmosphere saturated with false information about Cuba and the Cuban Five.

Following are some results of the research I conducted about the conduct of some press outlets in Miami during the period from Nov. 27, 2000 until June 8, 2001—from the beginning of the trial against the Five, until they were convicted by the jury.

As astounding as it seems, in those 194 days *El Nuevo Herald* published 806 articles that could negatively influence the trial, not counting the hundreds of dispatches from some news agencies (EFE, Reuters, France Press and Associated Press) that also had tendentious information against Cuba and the Five.

In that same interval, *The Miami Herald* published 305 articles with the same characteristics, again, not counting the numerous news agency dispatches, almost exclusively from the Associated Press.

In total, just from these two newspapers alone, 1,111 articles were published—an average of more than five per day—on themes related to the Five, which gives one some idea of the media super-saturation that Miami was subjected to. 1,111 articles, and not one in favor, published—I repeat—in only two newspapers. Not all, of course, exhibited the same virulence, and not all the writers were as virulent. The spectrum ranges from those loaded with pure venom to those who try to be classified as objective.

But absolutely all of them contribute to reaffirming the stereotypes that are used in Miami to interpret reality about the Cuban Revolution and its leaders that the intolerant exiles have created and repeated endlessly for half a century.

Of the 806 articles in *El Nuevo Herald*, 120 are attributed to the “staff” or “staff services” including numerous editorials. Of the 355 in *The Miami Herald*, 67 are attributed to “Herald Staff” or “Herald Wire Services”, which demonstrates a strong commitment from the leadership of both newspapers to the anti-Cuba agenda, but much more from *El Nuevo Herald*.

Of the 686 other articles of *El Nuevo Herald*, 239 (35%) carry the byline of four journalists who—as we already know—received money from the government through Radio and TV Martí: 123 by Wilfredo Cancio Isla, 96 by Pablo Alfonso, 11 by Carlos Alberto Montané and nine by Olga Connor. It was a material stimulus that helps us understand their informational enthusiasm. Cancio Isla, for example, managed to publish three incendiary articles on the same day (Jan. 19, 2001). Rui Ferreira (he is not on the list of the 10) wrote 105 articles, but that high number relates to his assignment to cover the trial. The remaining 342 articles are shared among another 128 writers. The suspicious concentration of articles among a few writers is also notable, although to a lesser degree, in *The Miami Herald*. But I do not wish to mention names until I see the contracts between the government and the journalists that the Broadcasting Board of Governors is required to divulge.

Some of the articles were only possible to publish in the surreal world of Miami. For example, the one written by Cancio Isla on June 4, 2001—four days before the jury announced the guilty verdict—was titled, “Cuba used hallucinogens to train its spies.” Quoting an anonymous and mysterious ex-Cuban official as a source, “identified by his pseudonyms Alex and José,” Cancio Isla develops a whole fantastic story in which Cuba used hallucinogens to modify the behavior and control the minds of its agents from afar. What was the motivation for this absurd article?

By that time, Cancio and those who paid Cancio, could not understand how it was that Gerardo, Ramón, Fernando, René and Antonio had been able to maintain such a courageous and honorable conduct after almost three years of imprisonment, threats and harsh punishment. To explain it, they had to resort to a hypothesis in the realm of parapsychology. Yet, today, after 11 years separated from the outside world, the Five Cuban Heroes remain as firm as ever. What explanation can Mr. Cancio offer now?

We know that with government funds the Miami mass media consummated the infamy, but the public has a right to know the details.

Why, if it is required by law, and it is not a matter of national security, and the request for information was presented more than 10 months ago (Jan. 23, 2009), does the BBG not permit access to the documents? We know the answer.

It is because the trial of the Five was a political trial. With the exorbitant sentences that resulted from it, they wanted to punish not only the Five—whose guilt was not proven—but the rebel island as well. It was carried out in an atmosphere of hysteria created by the media and financed by federal funds—the extent of which no one knows. It culminated with Judge Lenard handing out life sentences and a double-life sentence as if she were aspiring to a Guinness record.

What the irregular trial did show is that the United States may be a country of laws but not a lawful country, and much less a country of justice. There is a difference, for those who may not be aware.

- (1) Oscar Corral: “10 Miami Journalists Take U.S. Pay”, The Miami Herald, September 8, 2006.
- (2) Noam Chomsky: “El problema de Cuba para los Estados Unidos, como resulta explícito en los documentos internos, es la desobediencia”. Entrevista con Bernie Dwyer para Radio Habana Cuba, 11th September 2009.