

# Trafficking for a Cause: A Historical Analysis of Cuban Governmental Involvement in the Western Hemispheric Drug Trade

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## Introduction

Cuba's intelligence service has consistently proven themselves to have an effective, proficient, and capable security service, on par with United States (US), Russian, and Chinese services, despite the island nation of Cuba being technologically behind most other nations.<sup>1</sup> It is also seriously economically disadvantaged.<sup>2</sup> What's more, it has undergone rather substantial political changes in the past few years.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the Republic's intelligence and security service still outranks many others and is certainly a near peer adversary.

Historically, the Ana Montes case rates as one of the worst penetrations of the US government and perhaps the worst counterintelligence (CI) danger in US history.<sup>4</sup> However, it is not the only case, as other examples of Cuban infiltration include longtime officials with the US State Department and former Immigration and Naturalization Service.<sup>5</sup> The very recent news and allegations against former US Ambassador Victor Manuel Rocha, who once was the second-in-command of the Cuban Interests Section and was a senior advisor to the US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), being an agent for the Cuban government further point to Cuba's capabilities.<sup>6</sup> Not only is Cuba engaging in intelligence operations against the US through infiltration, but through alliances with China and surveillance actions against Cuban immigrants as well.<sup>7</sup>

Not only has Cuba acted in this context, but in other, far more insidious ways of taking direct action against their primary antagonist, the United States of America. One way of going about this has been using narcotics to weaken and cause chaos amongst the US's populace, deepen ties with non-state actors in Latin America, and gain additional funds in which to conduct their operations.

## Cuba's Intelligence Service and Narcotics

The exact time when Cuba became involved in narcotics trafficking is difficult to pinpoint. There are some indications of government involvement throughout

the 1960s and early 1970s, however, public records or historical documents attesting to the fact are slim. It has been documented by some academics that Cuba made narcotics trafficking a key part of their policy since 1961.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, federal executives claim to have received intelligence reports or have found evidence of such Cuban involvement throughout the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> Defectors from foreign intelligence services in the Eastern bloc and federal agents also claimed to have directly witnessed or heard information relating to Cuban intelligence direction or involvement in the drug trade.<sup>10</sup>

However, there is little additional, concrete evidence or corroboration of these claims. Attempts to access the original documents mentioned previously or audio tapes of undercover operations to corroborate these claims have been unsuccessful or denied based on national security; with most of the information available based on third-hand information or hearsay.

The first conclusive piece of evidence of Cuban involvement in the drug trade came in 1979 when, according to two US government witnesses, Jaime Guillot Lara and Johnny Crump (a Colombian lawyer and drug smuggler) met with Cuba's Ambassador to Colombia, Fernando Ravelo-Renendo, in 1975.<sup>11</sup> This meeting was the beginning of a close friendship between Crump and Revelo-Renendo.<sup>12</sup> This friendship grew and culminated with Crump becoming godfather to Ravelo-Renendo's daughter.<sup>13</sup>

Crump initially began transporting weapons to rebels fighting against Augusto Pinochet in Chile, but his activities soon expanded beyond weapons.<sup>14</sup> In 1979, Crump introduced Guillot-Lara (a prominent drug trafficker with ties to the left-wing urban guerilla 19th of April Movement) to Ravelo-Renendo and Gonzalo Bassols, his second-in-command at the Cuban Embassy to Colombia.<sup>15</sup> During this meeting, a relationship was formed between the three in which drugs would be trafficked to Cuba in return for weapons, a drug scheme which "had been cleared by" Fidel Castro himself.<sup>16</sup>

According to government informants, eyewitnesses providing state's evidence, and intelligence gathered through criminal investigations, drug laden planes and ships under Guillot Lara's command would harbor in Cuba for final transport to the US and would also transport firearms, weaponry, and other materiel from Cuba to Colombia for usage by the 19th of April (M-19) Movement.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Guillot Lara "transferred funds" to 19th of April guerillas via a Panamanian bank as well.<sup>18</sup> Crump personally flew on some of the aircraft from Colombia to Cuba and was assured that drugs were dropped off in Cuba by Guillot Lara, as detailed in a 1991 interview with PBS *Frontline*:

"[I disembarked from] the plane to a Cuban government car that was waiting for us in the airport. I mean, there's no way that you can go to any country with no

passport, with nothing like that, landing from another country in an international airport and have a car waiting for you right there in the field. It has to be with the OK of that government, that country... Everything was paid by the Cuban government. The hotel, you had to sign, like, you are a guest from the Cuban government because they don't let me pay for the hotel."<sup>19</sup>

According to some academics (and partially confirmed by a 2017 obituary), Ravelo-Renendo was an intelligence operative and had strong ties to Cuba's foreign intelligence service.<sup>20</sup> This is not a stretch to believe given the level of interconnectivity between Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the country's military and government intelligence apparatus.

The relationship between the Cuban Embassy and the drug traffickers appeared to be quite solid, with drugs and weapons being ferried to and from Cuba and Colombia. From 1979 to 1981, for a period of two years, the operation seemed to go smoothly, bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Cuban government.<sup>21</sup> However, in March 1981, Colombian authorities arrested a few M-19 guerillas with weaponry which came from Cuba, upon which the Colombian government "[broke] off diplomatic relations with Havana and [expelled Ambassador Ravelo] and his staff".<sup>22</sup> From midsummer to November 1981, the US and Colombian Coast Guards, on a joint operation, intercepted two boats and an aircraft owned and operated by Guillot Lara, which carried Cuban weapons intended for M-19 alongside three guerillas who provided additional information on the smuggling mission.<sup>23</sup>

Further damaging operations were the arrests of both Crump and Guillot Lara, both of whom shed light on Cuba's operations in the Western Hemisphere involving the drug trade.<sup>24</sup> In addition to this, Mario Estebes Gonzalez, a Cuban agent arrested in New York provided information to the US government and testified that "his principal mission was the distribution of cocaine, marijuana, and *methaqualone*[sic] tablets in New York, northern New Jersey, and Florida."<sup>25</sup> He also testified witnessing a high-ranking Cuban Navy official permit "the unloading of narcotics at [a small island off the Northern Coast of Cuba] brought in by ... Jaime Guillot Lara."<sup>26</sup>

This information would prompt a US federal investigation resulting in federal indictments in November of 1982. The US Attorney's Office of the Southern District of Florida (USAO-SDFL), in their indictment, claimed that Jaime Guillot Lara, Fernando Ravelo-Renendo, Gonzalo Bassols, Aldo Santamaria-Cuadardo (the Cuban Naval official mentioned by Estebes), and other Miami based drug traffickers and Cuban intelligence operations:

“[did] knowingly, willfully and unlawfully combine, conspire, confederate and agree, together with each other, and with diverse other persons who are both known and unknown to the Grand Jury, to commit certain offenses against the United States [and, in the importation and possession of methaqualone pills and marijuana] . . . used and caused to be used facilities in interstate and foreign commerce, including the telephone, and traveled and caused others to travel in interstate and foreign commerce between the Southern District of Florida, Colombia, Cuba and elsewhere, with the intent to promote, manage, establish, carry on and facilitate the promotion, management, establishment and carrying on of an unlawful activity, said unlawful activity being a business enterprise involving controlled substances.”<sup>27</sup>

In return for their cooperation and testimony, both Crump and Estebes did not face charges as they obtained either full or partial immunity in addition to (presumably\*) relocation, new identities, and US federal protection. Guillot Lara, while awaiting extradition from Mexico to the United States, apparently fled to Cuba where he apparently died in 1991 after a long detainment.<sup>28</sup>

While this indictment progressed and increased federal attention was focused on Cuban involvement in the drug trade during the 1980s, drug traffic coming from Cuba into the US continued unabated. Continued US Congressional testimony and government informants added corroboration to the claims already made by Guillot Lara, Crump, Estebes, and other Florida drug traffickers named in the indictment.<sup>29</sup> Alongside this effort, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) investigated the claims throughout the 1980s, as first disclosed in an August 1982 conference report for the National Intelligence Council (NIC) which stated:

“[due to high-level government figures involvement] we believe this activity was approved at the highest levels of the Cuban Government. It almost certainly was not a case of corruption by mid- or low-level Cuban officials. . . . Given the level of Guillot’s Cuban contacts and the political implications of the arrangements, the operation was almost certainly approved at the highest levels of the Havana government.”<sup>30</sup>

As evidence of Cuban involvement mounted and grew, with additional investigations, the topic reached a boiling point during the lead up to the grand jury indictment of Panamanian dictator General Manuel Noriega (which eventually resulted in the 1989 Operation Just Cause to remove him from power) which

\*While attempts were made by the author through interviews and FOIA requests to ascertain the whereabouts or eventual status of both Crump and Estebes, these attempts were unsuccessful and resulted in no further information on either individual after the mid-1980s.

included eyewitness testimony.<sup>31</sup> After the indictment, the allegations of corruption in the Cuban government and official sanctioning of drug trafficking became too serious and threatening to the Cuban policymakers to ignore.

In June of 1989, Cuba arrested and charged 14 members of its intelligence service and military high command with a number of crimes including treason, money laundering, and drug smuggling.<sup>32</sup> These individuals included not only Cubans who were long alleged by defectors and US government informants to have been involved in the drug trade, but also national heroes like General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez.<sup>33</sup>

A public and nationally televised trial was held the same month during which all individuals charged by the courts confessed to their crimes. Seven of them (including Ochoa) were sentenced to death and the other seven received prison sentences ranging from fifteen to thirty years.<sup>34</sup> The seven sentenced to death were executed by firing squad a few days later.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, a few days later, other senior leaders of Cuba's intelligence service and military forces were arrested as well.<sup>36</sup> These senior leaders were then replaced by individuals handpicked by Fidel and Raul Castro.<sup>37</sup>

These massive changes to Cuba's intelligence service and military forces, which continued into the 1990s, brought a decline in drug trafficking. By the mid-90s, US law enforcement officials testified before Congress that there was no evidence of further official sanctioning of narcotics trafficking by the Cuban government; Cuba's experiment with drug trafficking had come to a climactic and publicly humiliating end.

### ***The Culpability of the Castro Brothers***

Throughout the federal criminal investigations, Congressional hearings, and investigative news reports on the subject, much discussion was made about the culpability of Fidel and Raul Castro in the press, with some indicating that both must have had knowledge and others stating that the trial was a sham, meant instead to remove political enemies.<sup>38</sup> Some defectors from Cuba's intelligence service also stated they had either overheard conversations, came across evidence that indicated the Castro brothers' involvement, or otherwise had direct evidence of alleged meetings in which Castro and others discussed drug trafficking and production operations.<sup>39</sup>

The CIA, in 1984, made a clear and unequivocal statement in a heavily redacted interagency intelligence memorandum. While stopping short of identifying who exactly was behind the operation or what the exact purpose was, the CIA stated"

“Cuba is currently supporting drug trafficking...We judge that Fidel Castro is fully cognizant of and condones the drug-related activity that is taking place with the support of Cuban officials...The key Cuban participants are officers of the Interior Ministry or America Department of the Cuban Communist Party’s Central Committee...Their participation strongly indicates a sanctioned government policy, rather than an arrangement for personal gain.”<sup>40</sup>

Brian Latell, a longtime CIA analyst and Latin America expert for the agency, wrote a memorandum expressing his “personal interpretation of recent developments” in July of 1989, after the executions, in which he asserted:

“it is unlikely that Castro micromanages any other realm as totally as the clandestine, intelligence, and special operations than enthrall him...Given his proclivities and interests, it seems quite improbable that Castro did not approve, and carefully direct the involvement of MININT’s MC Department in drug dealing” while also arguing that Castro orchestrated this entire trial in order to “Eliminate a popular and distinguished general [Ochoa] who had somehow challenged the regime’s authority, and make Ochoa and the other defendants examples for anyone else who would question his hegemony...Evade personal responsibility for the most objectionable charges [assisting drug traffickers] that have tarnished Cuba’s international reputation...Enhance his and Cuba’s image and maneuverability internationally by adopting an aggressive, righteous campaign against drug trafficking...Establish a basis for improving Cuba’s relationship with the United States, with a view especially toward getting early relief from the economic embargo...[and] Improve Cuba’s badly strained relations with Moscow.”<sup>41</sup>

Certainly, the CIA appears to be convinced that the Castros knew of drug trafficking efforts as of 1984 and this view is reflected not only by the aforementioned defectors from both Cuba and other Latin American countries’ intelligence services, but also non-profit organizations, academics, former federal law enforcement executives, and retired CIA analysts and case officers. It was the consensus of many individuals at the time that the drug trials of 1989 were simply for show: that a pre-determined outcome had already been decided and that the Castros did so to avert any national blame or deny any personal responsibility.

In the early 1990s, after the Noriega trial and working off information and witness testimony gathered, the USAO-SDFL considered charging multiple Cuban officials with “conspiracy and racketeering for allegedly providing safe passage for Medellin cartel cocaine loads” over Cuban airspace and through waterways.<sup>42</sup> No indictment went forth however as prosecutors felt uncomfortable given the “questionable testimony of admitted drug smugglers.”<sup>43</sup> Making matters worse, federal investigators were unable to locate credible information beyond “high hopes and fourth-hand [evidence].”<sup>44</sup> From a legal standpoint, the evidence

was hardly enough to make an indictment stick and would have surely been a tough case to prove in court, not to mention the political issues with bringing forth such a case.

However, others, including the Chief of the US State Department's Cuba Interests Section at the time, career Latin American analysts at the CIA, and senior law enforcement executives in Florida, have maintained that while it is possible Fidel or Raul Castro knew, based on Cuban insider views and collected intelligence, the trials were not meant to eliminate a political threat.<sup>45</sup> Richard Gregorie, the USAO-SDFL's lead attorney during the 1982 indictments, having left the Attorney's Office in early 1989, ascertained through his own "experience and interpretation" that "Ochoa and other Cuban officers were dealing in narcotics, not necessarily without Castro's knowledge, but without his approval."<sup>46</sup>

Naturally, given the levels of secrecy that both the Cuban and American governments have with their intelligence records and documents, having a clear and complete view of Fidel and Raul Castros' involvement is impossible. Without reviewing records that are currently labeled classified or are sealed to the public, being able to make a certain assessment of either individual's culpability or total level of involvement in the drug trade is not possible. Certainly, through a surface level reading of the evidence against Fidel and Raul, it would seem their guilt assured. Yet, without evidence beyond insinuation or coming from individuals with much to gain from revealing incriminating details, it would be difficult to concretely and authoritatively state that either Fidel or Raul Castro approved of Cuban involvement in the drug trade beyond the 1979-to-1981 timeframe.

### **Cuba's Drug Trafficking Network as a National Security Strategy**

Cuba's involvement in the drug trade is a fascinating example of accomplishing multiple foreign policy goals through covert action. This article, for simplicity's sake, will examine Cuba's actions between 1979 and 1981. During this period, Cuba utilized drug traffickers/smugglers to transport weapons to ideologically aligned guerilla groups throughout Latin America, while in turn provided safe passage and served as a hub for drug traffickers heading to the US—such a policy accomplished many objectives for Cuba.

First, by using drug traffickers to transport their weaponry, Cuba successfully used a non-state actor to ferry much needed weaponry and materiel to a fellow non-state actor state Cuba desired to support. This practice minimized the direct risk to Cuba's own personnel while also providing an additional layer of concealment to Cuba's involvement, while at the same time they were still able to coordinate operations and delegate duties to individuals who had far more skill,

resources, and expertise to going unnoticed by government agencies and law enforcement.

Second, ensuring a consistent flow of narcotics into the US (mainly via Florida, but also via New Jersey, New York, and other prominent ports of entry), distracted local, state, and federal government agencies and resources from other pressing issues to more directly combat the proliferation of drugs and other associated forms of crime that ensued. It also ensured the diversion of funds to pursue drug rehabilitation and counternarcotics task forces; thus, reducing funds available for other criminal justice and national security efforts, such as counterintelligence. Furthermore, the spread of addiction was designed to destabilize families and whole communities.

From a Cuban standpoint, this was exactly the kind of reaction expected and constituted a huge psychological win, as it would directly harm individual Americans and their communities, divert federal and state funds and resources away from other policies which may impact Cuba negatively, and (in the event of an armed conflict) could be used to disarm a potential enemy force. From a policy standpoint, Cuba could also then point to the flow of narcotics and proclaim this to be a purely American problem, one sparked by Capitalist indulgence and excess while remarking that Cuba itself had no such problems. Not only would this allow them to, internally, gain a better level of self-importance in the Western Hemisphere, it would allow the country to grow beyond the Soviet Union's shadow and become a regional power in their own right.

Finally, this strategy would have provided Cuba with much needed long-term income. The Cold War, at this time, was still in full swing and full of intense moments, but clearly winding down with the ascension of Gorbachev, the Soviet's long slog in Afghanistan, and a dwindling economy. Desiring not to be continually financially reliant upon the Soviet Union, Cuba needed to gain additional forms of income and, by providing safe passage for drug traffickers, gained a cut of the profits from drug sales in the US.

In short, the successful execution of this strategy would have been able to provide Cuba with 1) supply ideologically aligned, maligned non-state actors in foreign countries where a proletarian revolution was underway, 2) make war against their main ideological and physical enemy, and 3) gain US dollars and further income in a time when they were desiring to be seen as independent from superpower benefactors. This policy of enabling drug trafficking in return for arms shipments accomplished a variety of key policies for Cuba in an ingenious way which limited their own personnel involvement and risk of being uncovered.

However, this would have been a best-case scenario and, clearly, Cuba's involvement was successful for only a short period of time and eventually unraveled.



In-between March and November 1981, the entire operation Cuba had undertaken unwound and resulted in serious consequences; not only was it revealed to the world that Colombian drug traffickers were transporting weapons on Cuba's behalf to left-wing guerillas, but Colombia kicked out Cuba's entire diplomatic team from the country and severely damaged any official relations the two nation-states held.

It is the author's belief, based upon the available evidence, that from 1979 to 1981, Cuba did coordinate drug trafficking missions with individual Colombian drug traffickers, doing so with the knowledge of Fidel/Raul Castro. However, when the operation was uncovered and the Cuban mission in Colombia was ordered to leave, the Cuban government eventually halted all operations. Sometime between 1982 and 1984 the Castro brothers ceased drug trafficking as an official policy but allowed lower-level intelligence agents, military officers, and others to engage in such activities as it still contributed to their overall foreign policy goals. By 1989, when it became clear that this would pose a political problem for the Cuban government, the Castros took steps to distance themselves, arresting and sentencing the main conspirators. They did this, not to eliminate political threats but rather to conceal their own clandestine operations for the two-year period in the very early 1980s.

The most likely rationale for departure from this strategy was that while drug trafficking was successful for a short amount of time, the fallout from it was massive. Not only did Cuba lose official diplomatic relations with Colombia and had their clandestine operation unveiled, but it was apparent that these operations were not as economically successful as initially desired. One of the drug traffickers originally indicted in 1982, David Lorenzo Perez, testified before Congress that while Cuba was to "receive one-third of the profit of the marihuana sale," Guillot Lara kept the nearly half a million profit for himself.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the strategy's only real success was in making war against the US populace, a strategy which Cuba could easily perform via many other less risky and low profile operations.

Fulton Armstrong, a career CIA analyst with much expertise in Latin America, stated it best by faulting Castro for giving his subordinates ample space to conduct covert or clandestine operations with minimal oversight, stating Castro "must have known that he created a system in which they could abuse that power."<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Cuba's involvement in the drug trade divulges much about how Cuba's intelligence services think, operate, and function in covert and clandestine operations. It demonstrates Cuba's intelligence services propensity to engineer missions to conceal their official involvement, their ability to make inroads with non-state actors who can prove capable and effective (to a certain degree), and their ability to

accomplish various foreign policy and military goals at once while expending little resources, time, and energy. While the operation was uncovered somewhat quickly, this was not due to the fault of Cuban intelligence operatives or high command, but rather due to those whom they contracted the work out to.

Cuba's use of drugs and narcotics to sow chaos amongst their enemies and achieve their foreign policy goals in Central and Southern America is truly exemplary and they deserve credit for developing such a masterful clandestine plan to achieve so many goals at once. However, this case should also be a warning to take care in planning and always ensure that the individuals an intelligence service is working with can carry out the mission. Furthermore, involving illicit criminal networks requires individuals who are incorruptible and not susceptible to their own vices. Had proper oversight and control been carried out, it is highly likely that Cuba's clandestine mission would have remained clandestine and only the subject of murky innuendo and insinuation.

With Cuba's recent deep penetrations of the US government, it is important to remember that Cuba's military and intelligence apparatuses are exceptional and despite the ongoing political strife in the island country, are capable of carrying out substantially complex and effective operations. Their service is capable of deep penetration, multifaceted covert activities, and is always willing and ready to do battle with their longtime adversary, the US. Cuba's security apparatus should not be underestimated; if anything, overestimation would serve the US Intelligence Community better. ◻

## Notes

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