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International Intrigue Makes Miami the New 'Casablanca'

By JON NORDHEIMER
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MIAMI, Dec. 28 — In darkened corners of quiet cafes, they plan the overthrow of a government or seal a big drug transaction. Some speak of spy operations or transferring huge sums of money.

Secret meetings and plots of one sort or another seem to abound in Miami these days. It has become a city of international intrigue where foreign agents and competing ideological, political, criminal and industrial spies are as commonplace as palm trees and swimsuits.

Some people call it the new Casablanca.

Campaigns and Coups

Intrigue is the stuff of backrooms and coded messages. Tourists and business executives passing through rarely get a whiff of it. Even most of the area's 1.7 million population is unaware of it, except for the news accounts detailing the escapades of ad hoc adventurers and professional provocateurs.

"Miami's become a hub for a lot of things," says George DePontis, a political consultant who has advised Democratic politicians and Caribbean leaders on campaign strategy.

"There are 30 nations in the Caribbean Basin," he said, "and I think all of them use Miami as a bank to keep their money or a place to obtain gringo expertise to stage political campaigns or military coups."

The Central Intelligence Agency runs a large station in Miami. The local Federal Bureau of Investigation office is one of the largest in the nation. The same holds for the Drug Enforcement Agency and Organized Crime Strike Force operations of the Justice Department.

Smuggling Mixed With Politics

Their special interests often overlap. The huge profits that can be made smuggling drugs have attracted some exile groups seeking the money to buy arms and mount political and military campaigns.

The F.B.I. recently arrested eight men in Miami and charged them with plotting to use profits from smuggling cocaine to mount an expedition to assassinate Roberto Suazo Córdova, the president of Honduras. A ninth man, a Honduran general who is a military attaché in Chile, is still being sought.

With its busy international airport, luxury hotels and shops, bilingualism and Hispanic-flavored culture, Miami has become the perfect meeting place for Latin American and Caribbean intriguers.

It is also the key city in the hemisphere for those seeking to recruit adventurous mercenaries, according to Federal officials. They say the bars of some restaurants in Little Havana and its Spanish-speaking fringe neighborhoods, seem to attract men who, for the right price or right cause, will fly a shipment of cocaine into a remote Florida landing strip, or sign up for a weekend paramilitary expedition to Central America.

"The motto of this town should be 'Lets Make A Deal,'" said a Cuban lawyer whose clients are men who tend to be watched by other men.

One of those plotting to overthrow a government is Huber Matos, 66 years old, a former top lieutenant to Fidel Castro. He left Cuba after spending 20 years in prison for his anti-Communist views, but his target is now the leftist government of Nicaragua.

From a walled compound on the south side of Miami, Mr. Matos heads a group of Cuban exiles that he says is dedicated to fighting Communism wherever it shows itself in this hemisphere.

Volunteering to Fight

Mr. Matos and others within the group, Cuba Independiente y Democrática, have announced plans to organize volunteers to fight the Sandinista Government's forces near the Nicaragua-Honduras border. Mr. Matos was recently pictured on Miami television in fatigues talking to anti-Sandinista units in what was described as a border combat zone.

It is thought that the first anti-Sandinista guerrillas were recruited from among Nicaraguan exiles in Miami.

"It is my understanding that most of the Government's meetings with the Contras still take place in Miami," said a Cuban-American with a wide knowledge of intelligence operations.

Most of the flow of illegal drugs into the United States is coordinated in South Florida, according to law-enforcement officials. Columbian drug traffickers are now planning to establish processing labs for cocaine in Florida for the first time, the officials say.

Allegations of corruption in the Bahamian Government originated in Miami long before a Royal Commission undertook an investigation into the charges.

And deals to smuggle arms into Latin America are arranged in Miami over lunch, according to Federal authorities. They say that bands of mercenaries regularly use the wilds of the Everglades to break in new weapons or train recruits in guerrilla warfare.

Today at the Miami International Airport, tourists got a taste of the anti-Communist fervor that now grips Miami and is behind much of the political plotting. A Roman Catholic priest from Chicago, the Rev. Denis O'Mara, deported from Chile for protesting the

Government's alleged torture of political prisoners, was jeered after landing at the airport. Protesters greeted him with shouts in Spanish of "Communist!" and "Get out!"

Events have chased more rightwing exiles to Miami than socialists. But even Latin American leftist appears to feel at home in Miami. "They may be anti-Yanqui but they are not anti-Miami," said Gustavo Marin, a 37-year old Cuban-American lawyer who keeps informed on the machinations of international intrigue as they are carried out in Miami.

At the moment, Central American political intrigue dominates conversation in Miami because of political unrest in the region and the attention given it by Washington policymakers. But on any given day, attention can be turned to Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic or the Bahamas.

Seen as Nest of Conspiracy

Rolando Montoya, a Costa Rican economist who is now teaching in the Miami area, says that throughout Central America Miami has the image of being a nest of political conspiracy. A few months ago, he said, he heard a government leader in Honduras criticize his political opponents. The speech ended with a line that drew great applause: "If they don't like it here, they can go to Miami."

Bernard Benes, a Cuban-American banker who secretly helped the Carter Administration negotiate the release of political prisoners in Cuba, said that plots, "or talk about plots," are pervasive in Miami.

Rick's American Cafe in the motion picture "Casablanca," was the setting for a web of intrigue spun by plotters from several countries. In Miami, Mr. Benes said, conspirators discuss their plots over meals in a long list of Spanish-style restaurants.

"You go to a restaurant and if you could listen undetected you'd learn about conspiracies, political or drug-related," he said.

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Safe Place for Conversation

In an age of electronic eavesdropping, private yachts plowing along Biscayne Bay and other tranquil waterways are also considered a safe place for a delicate conversation, or on the tennis courts of the posh clubs that recruit rich Latins as members.

According to Mr. Benes' theory, four elements have made Miami a magnet for a mixed bag of Caribbean and Latin American strong men, revolutionaries, exiles, arms merchants, Colombian cocaine cowboys, spies and buccaneers of every calling.

"Geography, language, ambiance and money," Mr. Benes remarked the other day over a lunch of mackerel and rice at La Floridita, a downtown Cuban restaurant hidden beneath a shopping arcade on Flagler Street.

"Money, as in all things, is the most important reason," he explained.

"They all come to Miami because they like to be close to their money."

14 Pages of Banks

Miami's Yellow Pages contain 14 pages of listings for banks, and the banks of 14 foreign nations have offices here.

"As soon as you see some political unrest in a Latin American country you will notice a corresponding move in Miami banks as the agents of the government in trouble start making large deposits," Mr. Benes said.

Many wealthy Latin Americans like to keep funds in Miami banks where de-

posits will be safe and draw high American interest rates. Virtually every Miami bank has senior officials who speak fluent Spanish, executives recruited from the 650,000 members of the Hispanic population living in the area. Most are of Cuban descent, but more than a 100,000 are from other Latin American countries.

"A lot of people who stole a lot of money in Latin America are Army generals who speak no English," Mr. Benes said. "They feel very comfortable doing business with Miami banks."

For much the same reasons, Miami has a strong pull for those out of power

in Latin America who are plotting their return. Here, at the end of the Florida peninsula that juts like a long finger into the center of the subtropical latitudes, they enjoy all the conveniences of American life, especially communications, while the climate, language and even the food is little changed from their own homeland.

For nearly a century Florida has been a haven for Latin politicians and strong men seeking asylum or plotting a return to their native lands.

José Martí, the Cuban patriot, organized pro-independence and anti-Spanish movements in the 1890's among Cubans living in Tampa and Key West.

In 1933, the deposed President Edgardo Machado of Cuba arrived in Miami as an exile. In the 1940's, Fulgencio Batista worked from exile in Daytona Beach to organize the army plot that led to his successful 1952 coup d'état in Cuba. The man he overthrew, President Carlos Prio Socarras, went into exile in Miami Beach and immediately began plotting Batista's ouster by financing insurgents, including a guerrilla expedition headed by a young anti-Batista lawyer, Fidel Castro.

Castro's House Still Stands

The stone house in which Mr. Castro lived while in Miami to recruit men and raise funds still stands on Northwest Seventh Street in the city.

Several deposed leaders of Latin American nations have lived in Miami as exiles, most recently Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle of Nicaragua. These men usually are joined in exile by henchmen, business associates and militarists who move into houses or luxury condominiums prudently purchased before their downfall.

In many instances the hasty arrival of the entourage is followed in time by less prominent countrymen, who for ideological or material reasons carry on the fight to return the exiles to political power.

It was the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Cuban exiles to Miami in the early 1960's that established Miami as an international center of intrigue.

Raids Against Cuba

Almost from the beginning the exiles staged, with C.I.A. training and equipment, hit-and-run sabotage raids against Cuba from secret South Florida bases. Arms were ferried from Key West to Cuba, and a small army was trained for an abortive landing at the Bay of Pigs.

When the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 led to an understanding between Washington and Moscow that the United States would no longer encourage military aggression against Cuba, the exiles in Miami began to put their C.I.A.-training to use in other fields.

While most gave up arms and started to build legitimate businesses or careers, a few signed up as mercenaries to fight in the Katanga province of

Zaire and reportedly in other African countries. Others became involved in anti-Communist movements in Latin America.

"We were getting to be a remedial school for counterrevolution here in Miami," Mr. Marin said.

For others, overtrained and with no wars to fight, the riches of the growing drug traffic in the 1960's seemed almost heaven-sent.

Tactics Used for Smuggling

"The tactics they were taught by the C.I.A. for the infiltration of Cuba were applied to marijuana and cocaine smuggling," Mr. Marin said. "Even the islands used by the C.I.A. in those days as safe islands were used by the smugglers for storage of fuel, drugs or turned into landing strips for fleets of airplanes purchased in Texas."

The drug market was expanding at a time when the government of the Bahamas imposed a 200-mile fishing limit, putting some Cuban exiles in South Florida who were lobstermen out of work. With boat loans to pay off, many turned to drug smuggling, a more dangerous but far more profitable pursuit, according to local law-enforcement officials.

Miami, a small port reachable by miles of open water, soon became a major smuggling center for drugs, arms and illegal aliens. The Miami River, which threads through the city, was soon receiving and sending large shipments of illegal contraband.