

By Lawrence Wilkerson

From [The Havana Note](#) | Original Article

Several nights ago (6 April), I watched “Will the Real Terrorist Please Stand Up” at the West End Cinema in Washington. Six months ago, Saul Landau, the filmmaker, had given me an earlier rough-cut version on DVD that I had watched, but I was not prepared for the final version with all of the added footage gained by Saul’s recent sojourn in Cuba itself and the slap-in-the-face showing on the large screen.

But the added footage from the island and the bigger screen were not all that made the final version more electrifying. It was, all in all, the *pro*-Cuba aspect of the film that stunned me.

And it was clear that this pro-Cuba aspect was not conjured by the filmmaker but by history. Perhaps, I told myself, I knew much of this history, intellectually, academically. But I had never seen it so graphically put before me, in such a tight, cinematic package that seemed to leap off the screen almost in synch with the beating of my pulse.

The backdrop of the film was the U.S.-Cuba relationship from the 1959 revolution to the present. That relationship was portrayed quite accurately, leaving no doubt why Theodore Roosevelt referred to the island as “that infernal little Cuban Republic” even though TR pre-dated the revolution by a generation-plus. That is chiefly because the one-sided nature of U.S. policy has been the same from 1823 to the present. TR’s remark demonstrated well before the Cuban revolution, well before the dictator Fulgencio Batista, well before the U.S. mob took over Havana, well before Fidel Castro shouted “¡*Bastante!*” from the Sierra Maestra, well before Jesse Helms displayed his latent racism toward Cubans, just how badly the U.S. had treated its island neighbor since the beginning of our republic. So badly, in fact, that the portrayal of it, however evanescently, by a master filmmaker made one want to weep for his country and its policies. I doubt there was a single person in the audience that night who felt any differently, except perhaps the several Cubans who were present who, indeed, probably wept for *el coloso del norte* as well but for different reasons.

And then there was the main point, the point embodied in the film's title.

Clearly shown and vividly documented was the fact that the United States sponsors terrorism. In Posada Carriles and Orlando Bosch alone, there are overtones of Osama bin Laden and Aman al-Zawahiri, the nefarious leadership of *al-Qa'ida*. In the film, Carriles and Bosch as much as tell us this in their own words. Moreover, they seem to rejoice in it, as they live today undisturbed and unmolested in Miami; indeed,

*as heroes*

among the ignorant Batista-like refuse whose mother's milk sustains them. Neither man has even the redeeming feature of religious asceticism that some would argue gives bin Laden and Zawahiri a grudging respect; instead these two terrorists seem precisely what the film depicts, criminal thugs.

Whether it is bringing down a Cuban airliner with more than 70 people on board—including the young people on the Cuban fencing team—or murdering a young Italian man in a Havana hotel, these terrorists appear to take joy in what they have done, declaring in so many words and facial expressions that such deaths are the collateral damage of war. War? Yes, a war waged from the territory of the United States—the state of Florida primarily—and against another sovereign country. A war that continues to this day with the United States doing almost nothing to stop it and, as the film depicts in subtle ways, from time to time even aiding and abetting the terrorists who are waging it.

Once, of course, the dictates and fears of the Cold War afforded a patina of credibility to this war waged from our own shores and against the laws of our own land. As a U.S. soldier for 31 years, I participated in that twilight struggle most of my professional life, so I understood its demands however imperfectly they were sometimes met. But the Cold War ended almost 20 years ago. Not the case, however, with the undeclared war against Cuba.

Perhaps the best cinematic summary of this reality was rendered in the film by none other than the current chairman of the U.S. House of Representative's Committee on Foreign Affairs, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who declared for all to see and hear that she would welcome the assassination of Fidel Castro. No matter how cynical one may have become, that is an astonishing scene. A U.S. Congresswoman asking for the murder of another country's leader—a most egregious, unbelievable demonstration of this undeclared war with Cuba.

Most vividly and disconcertingly, however, the film goes on to portray this continuing illegal war

through the case of the Cuban Five. These are the five Cuban intelligence agents who, in the 1990s, were dispatched to Florida to help the government in Havana defend itself better in this undeclared war.

We know a little of their story. After infiltrating the Cuban-American terrorists ranks in Florida, they accumulated information about planned terrorist activities against Cuba. Alarmed at what they learned, they informed their government in Havana. That government, itself now alarmed, confided in the FBI, hoping that that law enforcement organization would act on the evidence thus accumulated and break up the terrorists ranks in Florida. Instead, the FBI—no doubt at the prompting of the White House—used the information to identify the five Cuban agents, then arrested them. Afterward they were tried in a Miami Court—like trying an Israeli spy apprehended in Iran in a Tehran court. Surprise, surprise, the Cuban Five were not only convicted, twelve years later they are still rotting in U.S. federal prison with the “worst” of them having been awarded two life sentences-plus.

At the very worst, these five Cubans were “foreign agents operating on U.S. soil”, an offense warranting 18 months in jail under U.S. law. As the film makes quite clear, however, usual U.S. practice—for Russians like Anna Chapman, e.g.—is deportation. Instead, these men still languish in jail. Perhaps had they been sexy, provocative women...?

When the film ended and the short, crisp vignettes came on, interspersed among the film’s credits, the main points were hammered home adroitly by some of the film’s principal characters.

As these characters summed up from the screen, I don’t believe there was any doubt in anyone’s mind in that audience—Cuban or American—who the “real terrorist” in the U.S.-Cuba relationship actually is.

The question that had to be buzzing around in everyone’s mind, however, as they walked out of the theater—again, Cuban and American—was what to do about it?

Just like the failure to close the U.S. prison at Guantánamo Bay, the extension of the draconian provisions of “the national security cover-up” methodology in courtroom after courtroom across America, the civil liberties-usurping parts of the Patriot Act, the military tribunals for the likes of

Khaled sheik-Mohammad, and on and on in the litany of dangerous and illegal acts by the U.S. Government in the name of perfect security and corrupt, special interest politics, the affair of the Cuban Five, and all it represents about the U.S.-Cuba relationship, stains the very fabric of our democratic republic.

Recently, a long-serving veteran of the CIA wrote a heavily-redacted yet still extremely eloquent and convincing memoir of his days in that agency, days that included the most intense period of our so-called Global War on Terror during the George W. Bush administrations. Here is one of his final conclusions in that memoir:

“I saw that a few of our leaders, in their insularity and sanctimonious certainty, corrupted the laws and started to corrode our social compact. We can take actions, however, to diminish such men, and that reaffirm our society’s commitment to our principles, our institutions, and the rule of law.”

That is the answer to our question and Saul Landau has taken a powerful action.

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