

Lewis H. Diuguid

The Basque and the CIA

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Juan Bautista Arechavaleta offers a special perspective on American intelligence activities, that of a former small-time spy with a heavy complaint against his erstwhile employer, the CIA.

As a poor Basque immigrant in Venezuela in the 1950s, he met an American working out of a shipping firm. Before long, he was rifling postal boxes to photograph their contents, or staking out the airport to see who turned up to talk with some European Communist on a flight passing through.

For two years, he recalled recently, "It fell to me to identify and investigate the friends of bankers and businessmen, doctors and dentists, to search their apartments when they weren't there, and to work in factories with workers having Marxist ideas."

Dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez' police heard about the Basque with Communist connections and jailed him. His experience in The Bishop, as the political prison was then called, left him in such a broken condition that he has not been able to hold a steady job since.

Is Arechavaleta, who now is 49 and speaks little English, telling the truth, or does he simply find it convenient to blame his own troubles on the CIA? The agency's operating principles of silence and deniability impede any absolute conclusion.

But the story checks out where it touches on verifiable facts. And an ex-CIA agent in Caracas in those days says it rings true, right down to the preferred use of the intensely anti-communist Basque community there. More than one State Department political officer, motivated by opposition to undercover intelligence, has painted just such a picture of CIA-style information gathering.

The value of the practice is questionable. Says one diplomat, "Everything the CIA learns from its paid informers I can find in the newspapers." But the practice appears to continue. The current investigation of the bombing of a Cuban airliner focuses on Cuban exiles in Caracas—a group with the staunch anti-communism of the Basques and with an affinity for the CIA that has survived a string of disasters beginning with the Bay of Pigs. Several principals in the alleged bomb plot are reputed to have worked for the CIA.

Arechavaleta might still be a loyal conspirator today if he had not come to feel that the agency abandoned him in The Bishop.

"I learned by a clandestine communication that they wouldn't forget me but that meanwhile I should keep quiet and



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they would put aside part of my salary," he said.

His first eight days there were the roughest: "I received nothing to eat, my legs became paralyzed temporarily and one eye shut . . . but I didn't talk."

He had been putting his spy earnings into the purchase of a little walk-up hotel but in the lengthening confinement he lost it to the mortgage bank.

After six months in The Bishop, the shattered Basque was given a change of clothes in a cardboard suitcase and put

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aboard a Pan Am flight for Panama. He recuperated, got a new Spanish passport, wrote angry letters to his old Caracas contacts, and was put in touch with "two CIA agents named Robert and Smith."

They kept him in spending money until, a few weeks later, they said his talents were needed in Bogota, Colombia. There he was contacted by an American named Williams "who said an anti-communist organization was forming like the one in Caracas. . . . He said not to worry about the back salary, it was just that funds were short because the new budget hadn't been ap-

proved." But nothing happened and before long Williams suggested that there was an opening for a good operative in Ecuador.

Instead, Arechavaleta turned back to his larger "family," the Basques, one of whom lent him some money and got him a seaman's visa to the United States.

"When I got to New York I went straight to the FBI building, on Third Avenue if my memory serves, and asked them to give me my back pay," he said. It must have been quite a scene for the taut, wiry little man, who spoke no English.

The FBI said it could not speak for the CIA and moved him off, "accompanied to the elevator by three FBI agents to make sure I left the building."

By his account, he spent the next years scraping by visa crises, finding a wife and working at improbable jobs—including stints as chef at a couple of Washington's more pretentious French restaurants.

Then came some bad checks, the only crime he specified although there may be others. When he called one day at The Washington Post to tell his story, he declared that the New York police were following him, just waiting for an extradition order. He is back in Caracas now but I can still hear his cry: "Authorities of New York! I am not the principal *bandido*. The CIA is."