

The Coast Guard memorandum

Miami police have some new leads in their hunt for exile assassins. Too bad they couldn't get the information from official sources

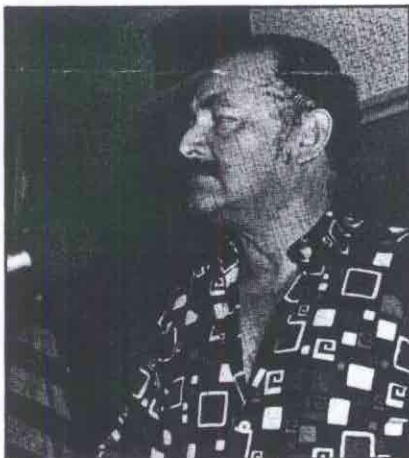
By Dan Christensen

Since April 12, 1974, Good Friday, when influential Cuban exile leader Jose Elias de la Torriente was shot to death by a terrorist sniper in the living room of his Coral Gables home, at least five other exile *caudillos* have been murdered: Luciano Nieves, Rolando Masferrer, Ramon Donestevéz, Jesus Gonzalez-Cartas and Juan Jose Peruero. Several others, like Emilio Milian, the outspoken former news director of WQBA radio, have been maimed or wounded. To date, only one of these attacks—the killing of “peaceful coexistence” proponent Nieves—has produced an arrest.

Four years after Torriente's death and the beginning of the assassination wave which has swept Miami to the notorious distinction of terrorist capital of the nation, secret information obtained by *Miami Magazine* and supplied to local police is now shedding new light on some of these killings—information denied the police by federal authorities.

The leads, contained in several documents from various federal agencies, were made available to *Miami Magazine* by an anonymous source who obtained the reports from the government under the Freedom of Information Act. The key document is an internal Coast Guard memorandum dated May 10, 1974—less than a month after Torriente's murder. At that time, copies were sent to the White House, FBI, CIA, Pentagon, State Department and other federal authorities. Here, in the memo's clipped officialese, complete with “censor” marks, are the major points:

“Information developed by Coast Guard Intelligence in Miami indicates that sometime in the next 25 to 35 days, an attack will be launched against Cuba. Attack may be directed against Cuban mainland South Coast Oriente Province or Cuban fishing fleet south of Andros Island [the Bahamas]. If latter objective selected, attack upon as many as 15 Cuban fishing vessels possible. Vessels to be used are U.S. Registry F/V [fishing vessel] Linda, F/V Struggle, unidentified express vessel



Masferrer



Torriente

owned and operated by (censored) of Miami and unknown number of small craft for assault work. Operation planned and financed by (censored). Other personnel involved include persons who have been undergoing training in Florida Everglades past four months under the leadership of Rolando ‘El Tigre’ Masferrer. [Masferrer, a well known Cuban senator and henchman of former dictator Fulgencio Batista, was blown to bits when a bomb exploded in his car on Halloween, 1975.] These persons include ex-members

of the U.S. Army and Navy.”

A second memo, stamped “Confidential” and issued by the State Department in response to the Coast Guard's findings, indicates that Masferrer, along with exile shipping magnate Teofilo Babun, were the major personalities behind the planned raids.

Significantly, the original (Coast Guard) memo adds that “the planning for this operation has been of a much higher caliber than any other in the recent past.” Coast Guard officials clearly believed this was a serious plot, not just more exile saber-rattling.

Exactly why the attack never took place is unknown and no one, including the Coast Guard, is talking.

LEADER

Metro Public Safety Department homicide investigators, taking a look at this new information—particularly the date of the memo in relation to Torriente's murder—and adding it to what they already know, believe that the 69-year-old Torriente, not Masferrer and Babun, was the original leader of the secret attack plan. As the initiator and driving force behind his Cuban Liberation Plan, Torriente was the first exile to seriously try to unify the highly fractionalized anti-Castro groups into a cohesive counter-revolutionary force. For several years in the late 1960s and early '70s, his efforts seemed to meet with little success, but by the time of his death, says Metro Detective Fabio Alonso, his Cuban Liberation Front had an estimated strength of “several hundred people” and Torriente himself was considered the “leading” freedom fighter in Miami.

It has long been known to Alonso and other detectives in the Metro Special Investigations Unit looking into political assassinations, that Torriente had called for a meeting of the group's sub-leaders (including Masferrer and Babun) several days before he was shot. From confidential sources, they learned that the meeting, eventually canceled, “was supposed to be something heavy,” says a Unit spokesman, but the exact nature of what was to be discussed could not be determined.

Now Detective Alonso speculates that it may have been about the planned attack on Cuba. “Suppose this conference was for Torriente to say, ‘I have received information that

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the authorities know what we are doing. That people in our organization are supplying them information and that we had better cancel our plans or change things around.' If that was so," Alonso continues, "perhaps someone inside the organization didn't like it and decided to eliminate him."

Another possible scenario would involve Fidel Castro. Tucked away as an "executive agreement" of the 1973 anti-hijacking treaty between Cuba and the United States was an arrangement to exchange intelligence information about terrorist activities. Did the U.S. give the attack information to Castro as a result of this treaty? No one knows. The State Department refuses to comment on the matter—even to homicide investigators—or to elaborate on what kind of intelligence was swapped.

One State Department spokesman did say, however, that despite Castro's abrogation of the treaty in 1976, after he accused the CIA of having engineered the crash of a Cubana Airlines plane which killed 73 people, its provisions are still being adhered to informally. Asked if that meant the intelligence exchange was still going on, he said, "I would assume so."

Even if Castro did know of the exiles' plans, there is no evidence that he learned of it prior to Torriente's death, a month before the Coast Guard memo was written. He would, however, have learned of it well before Masferrer's car was bombed in 1976.

That Castro would need such an excuse to have Masferrer killed is questionable at best because Masferrer had long been a thorn in his side. Along with Batista, Masferrer had been one of Castro's major enemies from the earliest days of the revolution. At one point, after Masferrer had fled to the U.S., Castro reportedly placed a substantial bounty on his head and several attempts were made to kill him.

Despite this, it is still conceivable that Castro, if he knew of the plot, could have retaliated. Detective Alonso says that he intends to ask the State Department if Castro was given the information, but says wryly, "Will I get an answer? Who knows?"

Teofilo Babun, the wealthy cargo shipper mentioned in the State Department memo, has long been involved in anti-Castro activities. Babun is co-owner with his three brothers of the Antillean Marine and Shipping Company. In December, 1971, the seizure by Cuba of their ships, the *Layla Express* and *Johnny Express*, caused what author Herbert L. Matthews called in his book, *Revolution in Cuba*, "the sharpest Cuban-American conflict since the missile crisis."

At the time, Castro accused the Babuns of being "known counter-revolutionary" elements who were working with the CIA, and claimed that he had ordered the ships seized because they had "carried out actions against Cuba." Interestingly, it was Jose Torriente and the Cuban Liberation Front which had previously claimed credit for the actions Castro cited.

When contacted by *Miami Magazine* for comment, Teofilo Babun, through a spokesman, refused to discuss "anything related to Cuba."

FAILURE OF COMMUNICATION

It is this kind of reticence—individual and

official—that has long stifled the murder inquiries. Secrecy, fear and suspicion, perhaps justified, that facts supplied to investigators will somehow find their way into Castro's hands, have all contributed to the problem.

What shocks Metro detectives most about the latest information is that they knew nothing about it until *Miami Magazine* relayed it to them. "I'm amazed that this information was around and we were never able to obtain it," says Alonso. "It must have been a very tight secret."

That Metro never received this intelligence is graphic evidence of the lack of coordination which exists between federal and local authorities. "There is very little cooperation from the feds," Alonso says. "Everybody has information and sources, and if we were working together in this investigation with that information who knows how far it could take us? Because we don't know what they have we can't

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be certain...[but] it has definitely hindered the investigation."

Bitterness on the part of local police is directed at two federal agencies in particular: the FBI and the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization. "The FBI gives us nothing," says Detective Julio Ojeda. "We let them come and look at our files, but they don't let us look at theirs. They don't work the homicides, so they don't know what in that file might be the missing link to a puzzle we've been looking at. Getting anything from them or anybody else is like pulling teeth. I'm still waiting to look at the Immigration files on Masferrer. Under the Privacy Act, we are supposed to get information if the case is a homicide. We haven't gotten it yet."

Lt. Gary Minium, a Metro homicide investigator, is equally frustrated. "We are subject to federal law which says that [federal agencies] cannot give out certain information to us. But now it's getting to the point that if I want something from Immigration I have to go over and kiss somebody's tail to get it. I can't even find out who's got a damn social security number. Every law enforcement agency in the U.S. is going through this because of the damn federal information and privacy act."

City of Miami police, who have jurisdiction over several terrorist cases including the Milan bombing, seem to have mixed feelings about the problems of federal-local cooperation. In the past, former Police Chief Garland Watkins complained publicly several times about lack of federal help. But veteran homicide detective Sgt. Mike Gonzalez sees things differently. "I almost always get cooperation from everybody," he says. "I think most people do who go after it in the proper way. I really believe that. Sometimes investigators use that as a kind of excuse."

Miami Mayor Maurice Ferre has been another consistent critic of federal participa-

tion in the terrorist investigations. "If this were happening in Boston and it was the IRA involved, I don't think the federal government would have taken the attitude that they've taken on this down here. They've been callous, ineffective and have given this investigation a low priority."

In response to such criticism, James McKenzie, FBI assistant special agent-in-charge, would only say that he felt there were "no problems" between the Bureau and local police: "It's a two-way street when it comes to exchanging information." He also said that he is not sure why Metro's homicide unit never received the intelligence contained in the government memos because knowledge of that kind was "routinely" passed on when localities had "primary jurisdiction."

SILENT STONE

Alonso and the other PSD homicide men charge that Senator Richard Stone has been

uncooperative, as well. They say that early in their investigation into Masferrer's death, it was learned that "El Tigre" had attended a meeting in Washington of the Inter-American Conference on Freedom and Security—a conservative platform which included guests from around the Western Hemisphere. The meeting was held in late September, 1975, just a month before Masferrer was killed. The police wanted to know what went on at that conference. Numerous official requests for information were made to Stone, who was a guest speaker at the meeting. All, according to Alonso, went unanswered.

"Here the man [Masferrer] is invited," Alonso says. "This committee pays his way. He goes and talks about whatever they wanted to know up there and a month later he's dead. It's certainly something worth looking into."

Contacting Senator Stone's office, *Miami Magazine* was repeatedly told he was "too busy" to comment on the charges, but his administrative assistant in Washington, John Flint, said, "It's my understanding that there was no contact on anything we might have had between our office and local law enforcement people." He added that any future inquiries by them would be addressed promptly. Metro cops say they will again try to speak with the senator.

The Stone incident, like the general problems between assorted federal and local authorities, is symptomatic of the complexities of the terrorist hunt. Literally dozens of leads are waiting idly for additional clues which might lead to the assassin(s)—clues that might already be in the hands of competing law enforcement agencies.

Armed with new information, Detective Alonso says that "new avenues of investigation" have opened up on the Torriente and Masferrer killings. But solutions remain as elusive as ever. ■