

Charles Lewis

Orchestrated Outrage About Cuba

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Underneath the inaccurate statements and ad hominem attacks by Roger E. Hernandez ["The Cuban Influence," op-ed, Feb. 3] against the Center for Public Integrity for its recent investigative report, "Squeeze Play: The United States, Cuba, and the Helms-Burton Act," our facts, figures and overall findings remain unchallenged.

Since 1979, we found, individuals and organizations with a direct, identifiable interest or stake in the future of Cuba have poured more than \$4.4 million into the U.S. political system. Of that amount, approximately \$3.2 million, or 73 percent, has come from trustees and directors of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF).

CANF and its chairman, Jorge Mas Canosa, have created a lobbying force that is, dollar for dollar, arguably the most effective in Washington. CANF and its allies, the Cuban American Foundation and the Free Cuba PAC, have pushed for—and gotten—three things. First, the creation of Radio Marti and TV Marti, the broadcasting operations that have cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$280 million. Second, the passage of the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act, which eliminated U.S. subsidiary trade with Cuba. And third, in 1996, the passage of the Helms-Burton act, which took the unprecedented step of imposing U.S. law on the subsidiaries of foreign companies.

Nearly four decades after Fidel

Castro seized power, and despite a near-constant drive by the United States to get rid of him, he is still ruling Cuba and—more than ever—we are straining our alliances to free the hemisphere from its last dictatorship. How did this happen? Why has the United States taken such a hard line against Cuba in comparison with other countries, such as China, that also have dictatorial regimes and equally egregious human rights records? Why has so little meaningful debate been heard on Capitol Hill over U.S. policy toward Cuba?

Much of our work at the Center for Public Integrity—we've issued 27 investigative reports in six years—has focused on the political process and how it sometimes can become distorted. And so it seemed like a perfectly reasonable undertaking to examine U.S. policy toward Cuba and the forces behind it.

The orchestrated reaction and public campaign against our study are actually a metaphor for the influence—and tactics—of the Cuban American National Foundation and its supporters. The day *before* our study was released at a Washington news conference, CANF was already circulating attack information about the center to journalists and others. CANF's supporters in Congress took to the radio airwaves in Miami. The

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office of New Jersey Sen. Robert Torricelli went so far as to brand us "racist." In his similarly intemperate comments, columnist Hernandez blasted the center for "using racial stereotypes to attack an ethnic group." The demonization of the messenger was completed by repeated references to the Arca Foundation, which made a grant of \$25,000 to the center, accounting for less than half the cost of the study. Over the years, the Arca Foundation has funded organizations and conferences to promote a dialogue with Cuba, which we detailed in a separate chapter titled "The Cuba Hustlers" about companies and other groups interested in Cuba. Two other foundations helped to underwrite our research, but they weren't hammered. None of these groups contributes to politicians and political parties. Nine other foundations, conservative and liberal, formally declined to support this year-long project.

Unlike many not-for-profit organizations, the Center for Public Integrity has always identified up-front—as we did in our news conference and on page two of our Cuba study—our specific sources of support. Arca and the other 20 foundations that contributed to us in 1996 knew at the outset that they could have absolutely no role in our investigations. In-

deed, we have lost many donors over the years that became unhappy with our findings.

Imagine my chagrin, however, at being called a racist—that's a first—considering that it was the Center for Public Integrity that pointed out a year ago that a co-chairman of Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign had taught hate groups how to develop militia capabilities and worked with such white supremacist groups as Aryan Nation. "Squeeze Play" is about the evolution of U.S. policy toward Cuba, and about a political organization's successful efforts to affect public policy. It is not about an ethnic group—period. Such distinctions are understood by most readers, including the distinguished Cuban American journalists on the Center for Public Integrity's board and advisory board.

It seems to me that Hernandez and the Cuban American National Foundation want to have it both ways. The conservative faction of the Cuban American exile community discovered in the early 1980s how to wield political power and influence in Washington as effectively as any organization. But anyone who has the temerity to note its inordinate potency as a political force is viciously slammed and smeared with the ignominious epithet of "racist."

The writer is the founder and executive director of the Center for Public Integrity.