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Historical Notes On Posada Carriles, Alias Medina: Did Washington & San Salvador Aid Fugitive From Venezuelan Justice?

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Valdes and Barbara A. Kohl* The capture of US citizen Eugene Hasenfus by the Sandinista army on Oct. 6 has proven to be embarrassing for Washington and the Salvadoran government on several counts. In addition to questions on the extent of both governments' involvement in airlifting munitions and supplies to contra forces in Nicaraguan territory, it may be that Washington and San Salvador have acted as accomplices in providing refuge to a fugitive from Venezuelan justice. Early on in the investigation of Hasenfus's activities and contacts, the American prisoner informed the Sandinistas that two Americans Ramon Medina and Max Gomez were in charge of the contra airlift supply operation out of the Salvadoran Ilopango military air base. Investigations of the two men by the Sandinistas and foreign reporters turned up evidence that Cuban-American Ramon Medina and Luis Posada Carriles were one and the same person. Posada Carriles escaped from a Venezuelan prison in 1985, after being held for nine years on suspicion of planning a bombing attack which destroyed a Cubana airliner in October 1976. Seventy-three persons died in the aircraft explosion. Hasenfus reportedly identified a photograph of Posada Carriles as the man he knew as Ramon Medina. Posada has a long history in espionage. According to Radio Habana Cuba, before the Cuban revolution in 1959 young Posada was a policeman under the Batista regime. After arriving in the United States in 1960, he was recruited to train Cuban exiles in Guatemala in preparation for invading Cuba. Posada was an explosives expert, and pertained to Batallion No. 7 of the 2506 Brigade. When the Bay of Pigs invasion occurred in April 1961, however, Posada did not set foot on the island. (Some sources maintain that while he landed in Cuba during the invasion, he was rescued by a US Navy boat before April 21.) Knowledge of Posada's activities between 1962 and 1967 is rather sketchy. From 1962 to 1963, he participated in numerous hit and run attacks against Cuba from PT boats. His whereabouts and activities from 1964 through most of 1967 are unknown. On October 23, 1967 Posada arrived in Venezuela with a US passport (no. 123255, issued on July 25, 1967). Soon thereafter, he became a naturalized Venezuelan citizen. During the 1967-1976 period, Posada established and managed a private investigation company in Caracas called Industrial and Commercial Investigations (ICI). The company had a staff of 51 persons in Caracas, and a branch in Miami. Next, from 1968 to 1973 it appears that Posada also worked for the Venezuelan police during the Christian Democrat government of President Rafael Caldera. He was allegedly an inspector in charge of "operations" for the Venezuelan Department of Intelligence and Prevention (DISIP—the secret police). Cuban news agency PRENSA LATINA claims that Posada was also "chief of arrests" in the Venezuelan general police command (GIDEPOL). On October 6, 1976, a DC8 Cubana airliner exploded as it took off from Barbados. Two Venezuelan photographers were arrested. Planning of the sabotage was traced by Venezuelan and Barbadian authorities to Luis Posada Carriles, who was arrested on October 15, 1976. (Note: In Cuban exile and contra circles, Posada is also known as "Bumbum," in reference to his explosives expertise.) On August 18, 1985, Posada escaped from Venezuelan maximum security prison, San Juan de los Morros. The escape was apparently arranged at a price of $26,000 by Nicaraguan contra and Cuban exile contacts. In Fall 1985 the fugitive surfaced
in Miami. Posada was interviewed by a television station and rightwing Cuban exile newspapers. At that time it was rumored that he had undergone plastic surgery. In El Salvador, Posada alias Medina granted an interview to a Venezuelan television station in May 1986. He told the reporter that he would wage "war without end" against communism in Central America. Friends and associates of Posada Carriles, including his wife, who saw the program recognized him, despite his changed appearance, spectacles and beard. By June 1986 Posada Carriles alias Medina had rented a two-story house an exclusive neighborhood of San Salvador. According to the MIAMI HERALD (11/02/86), neighbors said he was often visited by Americans. An unidentified wholesaler in Miami who knew Posada in Venezuela before he was incarcerated, said that Posada's friends working in the contra supply network gave him a Salvadoran passport with the name of Ramon Medina, thereby permitting him entry into El Salvador. Phone receipts obtained by UPI from the Salvadoran telephone company pertaining to July and August of this year, revealed that "Medina" called his (Posada's) wife in Miami. Other calls were made to two Cuban exiles in Miami, one a physician, Alberto Hernandez, and the other, a veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Some interesting questions surrounding Posada's work history and connections remain: The Bay of Pigs invasion was organized by the CIA. Luis Posada Carriles was one of the instructors of the exile force while in Guatemala. Obviously he had been selected by the CIA for that job. Did Posada Carriles continue working for the CIA after the Bay of Pigs invasion? At what point in time, if ever, did he stop working for the CIA? Where did Posada obtain financial resources to establish a private investigation company with branches in the US and Venezuela? Was the company a front for the CIA? How did Posada manage to land a job with the Venezuelan secret police? Who "pulled strings" to get him the job? Why was Posada Carriles assisted in an escape from the Venezuelan prison [after NINE years] in precisely August 1985? How was the escape carried out, and how did he leave Venezuela? Is it possible that the prison escape was engineered by the CIA? What role, if any, did Joaquin Chafardett (former secretary general of DISIP) and Roberto Uzcategui (former DISIP chief when Posada worked for the Venezuelan police) play in helping Posada escape from prison? When exactly did Posada alias Medina arrive in El Salvador? Did Max Gomez know Ramon Medina's real identity? Was George Bush aware of his identity? Were CIA stations in El Salvador aware of Medina's identity? Who paid Posada Carriles alias Ramon Medina throughout his tour in El Salvador? [In addition to those mentioned in the text, the following sources were used to trace Posada Carriles' background: "Dossier 8494," or the Venezuelan court case of defendant Luis Posada Carriles (Venezuelan newspapers have published numerous accounts of the case since 1978); MIAMI HERALD, several issues, October- November 1986; NEW YORK TIMES, 10/24/76; Nicanor Leon Cotayo, CRIME IN BARBADOS (Budapest: InterPress, 1978).] [Nelson P. Valdes teaches sociology at the University of New Mexico, and is director of the LADB. Barbara A. Kohl is LADB managing editor.]