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## Puerto Rican Political Prisoners

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members of hated minority groups, with the crime defined in a highly expansive manner to reduce or eliminate the problem of proof" (Lewis, p. 344). The Nationalist Insurrection and Pedro Albizu Campos remain symbols of defiance to colonial domination among many Puerto Ricans.

*See also* Albizu Campos, Pedro; Muñoz Marín, Luis; Puerto Rican Independence Movement; Puerto Rican Revolutionary Organizations; Puerto Ricans; and Puerto Rico, Colonialism in.

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PEDRO CABÁN

**PUERTO RICAN POLITICAL PRISONERS.** The history of Puerto Rico's independence movement in the second half of the twentieth century is marked by a virtual state of war between the FBI and the Puerto Rican government on one side, and the Nationalist Party, the Macheteros, and the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) on the other side. These Puerto Rican revolutionary groups employed violence against government, corporate, and military targets in a campaign to overthrow U.S. colonial rule of Puerto Rico.

#### Actions in the 1950s

On November 1, 1950, two members of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico attempted to assassinate President Harry Truman. Oscar Collazo and Grisello Torresola, both residents of New York, carried out the doomed attack on Blair House, where President Truman was residing. Torresola killed one of the police officers who guarded the residence, and two other officers were wounded in the exchange of gunfire. In turn, Torresola was killed and Collazo was critically wounded, but recovered. Collazo was sentenced to death for the attempted murder, but one week before his scheduled execution in 1952, President Truman commuted the sentence to life

imprisonment. Collazo later explained, "It was not important if we did or did not reach President Truman. That was secondary. It was sufficient to create a scandal that focused world attention on the colonial case of Puerto Rico. And the assault was a success" (Fernández, p. 182).

The second notable attack occurred on March 1, 1954, when four members of the Nationalist Party shot at members of the U.S. House of Representatives. The attack was led by Lolita Lebrón, who shouted, "Viva Puerto Rico Libre" before she and her associates Rafael Cancel Miranda, Andrés Figueroa Cordero, and Irving Flores Rodríguez opened fire on the assembled congressmen. Five congressmen were wounded. Upon being arrested, Lolita proclaimed, "I did not come to kill anyone, I came to die for Puerto Rico!" The Nationalists, who did not resist arrest, were convicted of attempted murder and other crimes, and sentenced to death. President Truman commuted the sentences to life imprisonment. Pedro Albizu Campos, the Nationalist Party president, who had been pardoned for revolutionary activities in Puerto Rico, hailed the attack as an "act of heroism." Governor Muñoz Marín revoked the pardon and Albizu remained incarcerated for another decade.

#### Commutations of Sentences in the 1970s

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter commuted the sentences of Lolita Lebrón, Irving Flores, and Rafael Cancel Miranda after they had served twenty-five years in prison. Andrés Figueroa Cordero was granted clemency posthumously. He had died of cancer in March 1978 after having been released from prison because of his terminal illness. President Carter cited humane considerations for the commutations and said that the prisoners had served an "unusually long time in prison" and that "no legitimate deterrent or correctional purpose" was served by their continued incarceration. Their release coincided with Fidel Castro's release of several American CIA agents being held in Cuba on espionage charges. The Carter administration denied that there were any connections. For years, the Puerto Rican community had urged clemency. By 1977 a broad consensus existed among Puerto Ricans for the release of the jailed Nationalists. Four former governors of Puerto Rico joined with Robert García, the only Puerto Rican U.S. congressman, to urge the commutations. FALN had also demanded the release of the prisoners. The governor of Puerto Rico, Carlos Romero Barceló, stood virtually alone in opposing the pardons granted by Carter, stating that it would encourage terrorism and undermine public safety.

#### The FALN in the 1970s and 1980s

In 1974, FALN came to public attention as the latest Puerto Rican clandestine revolutionary organization

committed to armed revolutionary struggle. Between 1974 and 1980, FALN took responsibility for a series of bombings against federal government and corporate buildings primarily in Chicago and New York. On October 27, 1974, FALN took credit for detonating five bombs in front of mid-town banks and the Federal Reserve Bank. In a communiqué, FALN demanded "freedom for all Puerto Rican political prisoners and immediate independence for Puerto Rico." FALN is credited with seventy-two bombings and scores of incendiary attacks, attempted bombings, and bomb threats. Five people were killed and eighty-three injured in these attacks, which caused about \$3.5 million in property damage.

Ten FALN members were captured in Evanston, Illinois, on April 6, 1980. The ten were convicted of the rarely invoked charge of seditious conspiracy for plotting to oppose the government through illegal means, automobile theft, and illegal use and possession of weapons. Lengthy prison terms, ranging from 35 to 105 years, were imposed on Elizam Escobar, Alfredo Mendez, Ricardo Jiménez, Carmen Valentín, Carlos Alberto Torres, Luis Rosa, Dylcia Pagan, Adolfo Matos, Alicia Rodríguez, and Ida Luz Rodríguez. The FALN member Oscar López Rivera was arrested in 1981 and sentenced to fifty-five years for seditious conspiracy. Three other FALN members—Alejandrina Torres, Edwin Cortes, and Alberto Rodríguez—were arrested in 1983 and sentenced on October 5, 1985, to a federal penitentiary for thirty-five years for seditious conspiracy. None was ever charged with an act of violence that caused harmed to a person or property, and none had prior criminal records. In court, none of the FALN members presented a defense, and they refused to accept the authority of the court. They declared themselves to be prisoners of war and demanded to be tried by an international court.

### The Macheteros

In 1985, two hundred FBI agents descended on Puerto Rico and arrested eleven alleged members of the Macheteros. The Macheteros was a clandestine revolutionary organization responsible for a number of bombings of military and corporate targets in Puerto Rico. Its members were accused of robbing a Wells Fargo truck of \$7 million in Connecticut and using the stolen funds to finance its operations. The sixteen prisoners were moved in military transport to the United States, and some were held in preventive detention for up to three years, in violation of their constitutional rights according to a federal court. In April 1989, four Macheteros were convicted in a Hartford, Connecticut, federal court for the robbery. During the trial, one of the defendants, Juan Segura Palmer, a Harvard University graduate, declared that he refused to accept the legitimacy of the court and declared, "All I am guilty of is opposition to colonialism, which is a crime

against humanity, like apartheid" (*New York Times* 1988). Palmer was sentenced to sixty years.

### Activism to Free Political Prisoners

A number of organizations including The National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War, Prolibertad, and Ofensiva '92 spearheaded a successful international campaign to gain the release of the political prisoners. The movement generated support by citing the punitive sentences and length of time the prisoners had been incarcerated, the abusive prison conditions, and violation of their human rights. Nilda Pimental, director of the Campaign to Free the Political Prisoners, said, "When you see the sentences given to them there is no other way to explain it. They were made an example in order to discourage others from engaging in anti-colonial work" (Fuentes, p. 2). In November 1993, supporters of Puerto Rican political prisoners submitted a formal application to the federal government requesting a presidential pardon and a grant of unconditional release of the prisoners. Public opinion in support of a presidential pardon intensified. By the late 1990s, the movement had garnered international support. The Fellowship of Reconciliation, composed of eleven Nobel laureates, members of Congress, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, leaders of all three Puerto Rican political parties, and former president Jimmy Carter, called on the Clinton administration to grant the prisoners unconditional release. The massive protests against navy bombing of Vieques were linked to the political prisoners' campaign and generated increased pressure on Clinton to grant clemency.

On August 3, 1999, President Clinton offered a conditional clemency. According to the White House chief counsel, "What the president did, based on the recommendation of counsel, was grant clemency on a case-by-case basis that recognized the serious nature of the crimes that they were convicted of but also took into account the excessive nature of the sentences that were imposed 20 years ago. The persons here were not convicted in cases involving death or serious injury" (Galvin). Clinton's clemency decision was unequivocally opposed by the FBI and law enforcement agencies. The clemency that was offered was not an unconditional pardon, rather it imposed conditions comparable to those associated with paroled prisoners that restricted their right of association with the other released prisoners and limited their travel. Eventually, twelve of the political prisoners signed the documents required for their release, which included a statement renouncing the use of violence. Two declined the offers, and Carlos Torres was not granted a clemency because prosecutors described him as the leader of FALN. In addition, Oscar López Rivera and Haydee Beltrán Torres remained incarcerated as political prisoners.

Puerto Rican opposition to U.S. colonial rule has taken many forms. Clandestine armed revolutionary opposition has been one violent form of resistance Puerto Ricans have often used in their struggle for independence from both Spain and the United States. As long as some Puerto Ricans hold the belief that their country is under illegal armed occupation, armed resistance against the United States will erupt. The federal government is aware of the intensity and durability of these political beliefs and will be vigilant and quick to use its legal and police powers to eliminate the *independentista* challenge to its authority.

See also Lebrón, Lolita; Puerto Rican Nationalist Uprising and Puerto Rican Revolutionary Organizations.

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**PUERTO RICAN REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATIONS.** The Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) and the Boricua-Macheteros Popular Army (Macheteros) are two of the most prominent clandestine revolutionary organizations to have fought for Puerto Rico's political independence. However, they were not the first groups to pursue clandestine armed resistance to U.S. colonial rule. The Nationalist Party, which virtually ceased to function by the late 1950s, was also a revolutionary organization, but its strategy was one of overt confrontation with the colonial authorities.

The Commandos of Armed Liberation (CAL) was the first clandestine organization committed to waging armed revolutionary resistance in Puerto Rico. This highly secretive group was established in 1967 and took responsibility for a series of bombings of U.S. businesses that "exploited Puerto Rican workers" and of hotels in San Juan that catered to the tourist trade (*Arm the Spirit*, interview with Cortes). The Independent Revolutionary Movement in Arms (in Spanish, Movimiento Independentista Revolucionario Armado or MIRA), a parallel clandestine organization, was also formed in 1967 and took credit for a number of bombings in New York City. MIRA and CAL merged to form FALN in 1974. FALN and the Macheteros, which was established in 1978 and led by Félix Ojeda

Ríos, may have operated independently of each other until September 1979, when these clandestine organizations joined forces.

FALN and the Macheteros are committed to achieving Puerto Rico's independence through armed revolutionary struggle. FALN called for unifying "all necessary forms of revolutionary struggle . . . to overturn colonialism through a protracted people's war for independence" (*Arm the Spirit*). Clandestine revolutionary movements such as FALN justify the use of violence to combat the violence that they believe the United States inflicts on Puerto Rico through military oppression and economic exploitation. The revolutionary movements draw on United Nations Resolution 1514 to justify their actions. The resolution asserts that the "subjugation of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights" and that "all armed action or repressive measures of all kinds directed against dependent peoples shall cease to enable them to exercise . . . their right to complete independence." These clauses are seen as applicable to Puerto Rico and constitute the legal basis for revolutionary activity to attain sovereignty.

Since FALN and the Macheteros believe that colonialism is a crime against humanity, they repudiate U.S. colonial authority as illegal, and advocate all available means, including armed resistance, to gain independence for Puerto Rico. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recognizes that FALN and the Macheteros characterize their activities as "acts of war" against invading forces and that, when arrested, they consider themselves to be prisoners of war who must be treated as such according to the Geneva Conventions. The vast majority of Puerto Ricans do not support the use of violence to compel the United States to change their nation's political status into either a state of the Union or an independent republic.

The FBI, operating through COINTELPRO and in unison with Puerto Rican police forces, has waged a particularly aggressive campaign to disrupt the activities of legitimate independence organizations. COINTELPRO is the acronym of a domestic counterintelligence program developed by the FBI to infiltrate and disrupt dissident and revolutionary organizations. The FBI has routinely violated the civil rights of Puerto Ricans in its determination to undermine movements and organizations—legal as well as clandestine—that struggle for Puerto Rican independence. The FBI's virtual sole purpose for operating in Puerto Rico appears to have been to hunt down and prosecute nationalists, socialists, and independentistas. Advocates for revolutionary resistance argue that under these conditions open calls for overthrow of U.S. colonial rule are politically suicidal. FALN member Alberto Rodríguez notes that the organization "developed clandestine methods of organization in order to neutralize U.S. government