



U.S. academia: fertile ground for Cuba's intelligence services

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A former U.S. ambassador with a long diplomatic career, Victor Manuel Rocha, was arrested December 1st 2023, and has been sentenced to 15 years of prison for his guilty plea of serving as an agent of Cuba for three decades.¹ Rocha is the latest high-ranking U.S. official to have been spying for Cuba for ideological reasons. The story makes for the American version of the “Cambridge Five,” the spy ring of clandestine British Communists recruited at the University of Cambridge who went on to spy for the Soviet Union from the 1930s to the 1950s.²

Three former officials of Cuba's Intelligence Directorate (DI) have declared, based on their first-hand knowledge, that Rocha and four others previously charged for espionage are just the tip of the iceberg. Four have been convicted and one was able to flee overseas. Enrique García, José Cohen, and Orlando Brito, who defected in 1989, 1994, and 2002 respectively, penned an unprecedented open [letter](#)³ with three other of the leading historic defectors of the Cuban Communist regime. They warn that the Cuban Communist dictatorship has recruited a large number of agents in many countries and poses a serious and continuing threat to international security.

The Cuban regime has always devoted enormous resources to gathering intelligence and exerting international influence to advance its political, economic, and geostrategic interests. Cuba Archive, which coordinated the aforementioned missive, has used data provided by defectors to publish an estimate of the external reach of Cuba's intelligence services. It reports⁴ that at least 362 officers dedicated to the U.S. are handling around 4,657 intelligence relationships, of which 2,506 (60%) would likely be agents providing information clandestinely, and 1,370 (40%) would be “trusted” or “useful” relationships, which are publicly managed by Cuban intelligence officials posing as diplomats, journalists, academics, businessmen and others. In the United States alone, there could also be over 500 “illegals,” highly-trained Cuban intelligence officers operating under deep and long-term cover with assumed identities of other nationalities. Around 125 DI officers would be managing at least 1,625 intelligence relationships in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵

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¹ Gisela Salomon and Jim Mustian, “Former US ambassador sentenced to 15 years in prison for serving as secret agent for Cuba,” Miami, *AP*, Apr. 12, 2024.

² Haroon Siddique, “Confession of British spy for the Soviets made public for first time,” *The Guardian*, Sep. 23, 2019.

³ “The Cuban regime is a threat and must end,” Cuba Archive, Dec. 28, 2023, <https://cubaarchive.org/cuba-in-the-world/reports/>

⁴ “Estimated number of Cuba's intelligence relationships dedicated to working against the United States,” Cuba Archive, 2019, updated Mar. 2024, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/No.-Intelligence-relations-decided-to-US-3.2024.pdf>

⁵ “Relaciones de inteligencia de Cuba en Latinoamérica y el Caribe,” Archivo Cuba, 2019, actualizado diciembre 2021, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Relaciones-de-Inteligencia-Latinoam.pdf>

Cuba's spies, agents, and collaborators operate in the United States —the DI's primary target— and multiple countries within their respective governments, media, universities, churches, businesses, labor unions, and others, even at the highest levels and without raising suspicion. Recruitment is achieved through blackmail, payments in cash or exclusive businesses and privileges and, in most cases, by exploiting ideological motivations to “defend the revolution” or radical causes under the guise of social justice.

Infiltrating international academia has been one of Cuba's main objectives historically. It targets university graduates, especially from elite schools, because they eventually rise to positions of power in their respective countries —the high echelons of government, the intelligence community, and influential think tanks and media venues or go on to serve as top expert consultants and contractors. Among Cuba's most valuable recruits are the young university students who are eventually guided into infiltrating the most sensitive areas of their governments. According to a former DI official and signatory of the above-mentioned letter, Enrique García, recruiting in universities is a great intelligence investment because idealist young people are easily manipulated and, once recruited, they collaborate for many years and stay committed to the secret relationship even if they mature and realize their mistake.⁶

DI officer and letter signatory, José Cohen, has written that the KGB, which supported the DI with training and resources for three decades,⁷ had insisted since the 1960s on the importance of penetrating the academic world, particularly elite U.S. universities.⁸ The Cuban revolutionary government put this in practice very early on. By October 1960, having come to power less than two years earlier (in January 1959), just in Peru it had already made covert payments to eight professors at the University of San Marcos, each receiving US\$5,000 from a total of over \$350 thousand paid to a long list that included journalists, union leaders, and politicians.⁹

Rocha spied for Cuba for the 21 years of his State Department career (1981-2002) and thereafter in the private sector including as consultant to the Commander of the U.S. Southern Command. He had been recruited in 1973 during a trip to Chile¹⁰ soon after graduating from Yale University. In fact, Rocha declared at his court sentencing: “During my formative years in college, I was heavily influenced by the radical politics of the day.”¹¹ Although details are lacking, it is likely that a spotter agent at Yale had pointed

⁶ Enrique García, conversation with Maria Werlau, San Juan, Jan. 2024.

⁷ According to Cohen and other former Cuban intelligence officials interviewed on many occasions.

⁸ José Cohen, “El servicio de inteligencia castrista y la comunidad académica norteamericana,” Institute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami, enero 2002. (Cohen worked as a DI official in the Scientific-Technical Department and the U.S. Department until defecting to the U.S. in 1994.)

⁹ “Report on political expenses of this embassy” by the Cuban ambassador in Peru, Luis Ricardo Alonso Fernández, for the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cuba, dated October 4, 1960. This document was part of confidential files extracted in an assault on the Cuban embassy in Lima on November 16, 1960. It itemized payments amounting to US\$347,500 to a long list of individuals with detail of their names, affiliations, and amounts paid in US dollars. The Cuban ambassador ended his report with the following statement (translated from Spanish: “In general terms, I can responsibly affirm that at any moment in which a response to the armed aggression of Yankee imperialism against the Cuban Revolution is needed, there will be protests, acts of solidarity, strikes and insurrectionary movements agreed upon by left-wing parties and groups under the leadership of the Communist Party, according to the instructions received from Havana.” (Leovigildo Ruiz, *Diario de una Traición, 1960*, Miami: The Indian Printing, 1970, p. 346-350.)

¹⁰ Indictment, Unites States of America vs. Victor Manuel Rocha, U.S. District Court, Southern District of Florida, Case 23-cr-20464, Dec. 5, 2023.

¹¹ “15 years in prison for ex-US diplomat who secretly spied for Cuba for decades,” Miami, *Associated Press* and *NBC6*, Apr. 12, 2024.

him out and, after an in-depth assessment by the DI, he had been invited (under any pretext) to Allende's Chile, where the DI was operating freely from Cuba's embassy in Santiago.¹²

U.S. State Department officer Walter Kendall Myers, who was sentenced in 2009 to life in prison for spying for Cuba, earned his Ph.D. in 1972 at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C., and soon began teaching there.¹³ Cuba's DI guided him to seek employment at the State Department, where he allegedly proceeded to spy for over two and a half decades, including inside the Bureau of Intelligence and Research.¹⁴

Two other spies for Cuba, Ana Belén Montes and Marta Rita Velázquez, who also studied at SAIS, were recruited by Cuba as university students in the 1980s and instructed to climb to the highest positions in government—respectively at the Pentagon and USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development).¹⁵

Mariano Faget, a Cuban-American acting deputy director at the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) in Miami with 34 years of service, was convicted in May 2000 under the Espionage Act. Faget had a high-security clearance and access to classified information on Cuban defectors and law enforcement sources. He was sentenced to five years in federal prison by a sympathetic judge and a court case based on evidence of just one incident.¹⁶

At least Rocha, Myers, Montes, and Velázquez were recruited in college for ideological reasons. A review process with wanting adequate political-ideological filters allowed for all four to obtain security clearance despite well-known anti-U.S. activism and/or views prior to entering the government. All had access to highly sensitive information for many years as Cuba's spies. Myers and Montes as intelligence analysts could access top secret information from all U.S. government intelligence agencies about the entire world. This was also valuable to Cuba, which sells and shares information with other enemies of the free world.

Former DI officer Orlando Brito, another letter signatory, has written that since the mid-1980s, the DI—having already successfully infiltrated Cuban exile organizations—prioritized penetrating leading U.S. government agencies; given their close link to academia, universities in the United States, Canada, and Mexico were targeted for the DI's offensive work.¹⁷

According to Brito and Cohen, the DI performed in-depth studies of selected U.S. universities and developed a list for prioritized penetration. The targets included most of the Ivy League schools such as Yale, Harvard, MIT, Columbia, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, Duke, and Stanford; universities located near Cuba's diplomatic missions, such as in New York with Hunter College, and in Washington,

¹² In his 11-year career with the DI before defecting, former official Enrique García worked with seven Latin American countries including Chile. García is the author's companion.

¹³ "Cuba: friends in high places," Starfor, Jun. 10, 2009, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/cuba-friends-high-places>

¹⁴ Ibid; "Former State Department official sentenced to life in prison for nearly 30-year espionage conspiracy," Office of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of Justice, Jul. 16, 2010.

¹⁵ Details of Cuba's instructions to penetrate the U.S. government are included in their indictments. (Montes, who was the senior analyst on Cuba at the Pentagon (Defense Intelligence Agency) spied for 17 years for Cuba before being arrested in September 2001 and was sentenced to 25 years of prison. Velázquez, who was a senior USAID official in Central America, escaped to Sweden, which does not have an extradition treaty with the U.S). Daniel Goldman, *Spy schools: how the CIA, FBI, and foreign intelligence secretly exploit America's universities* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2017).

¹⁶ Paul Brinkley-Rogers, "INS official gets 5 years in spy sting," *The Miami Herald*, Jun. 30, 2001.

¹⁷ Orlando Brito Pestana, "La penetración del servicio de inteligencia de Cuba en el sector académico de Estados Unidos," Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, Nov. 30, 2015.

D.C. such as Georgetown and American; universities in Miami, home of a large Cuban diaspora; and Berkley in California.

Brito reports that Cuba’s intelligence center embedded inside its embassy in Mexico City handled the professors and students recruited in California. Select academic centers in other countries are also targeted, such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Institute of International Studies at University of Chile.¹⁸ Cohen reports that the DI accumulates information for each university, its professors with their contacts and relationships, and thousands of its students who are today working in different government entities.¹⁹

A former Cuban intelligence official who asks to remain anonymous²⁰ also points to the University of Denver as a preferred institution for the DI, where extensive academic exchanges with Cuba have been in place for years.²¹ He insists that it is not a coincidence that a man he considers to still be a loyal officer of Cuba’s intelligence services, Arturo López Levy, earned his Ph.D. there and taught classes in comparative politics and similar subjects.²² López Levy, he says, was his peer in the Intelligence services²³ and was especially trained and prepared with a “legend” to infiltrate U.S. academia, first by assuming his Jewish heritage, penetrating the Jewish community in Cuba, then traveling to Israel and eventually arriving in the U.S. From the University of Denver, he branched out and quickly became—likely enabled by other Cuba agents or collaborators—a preferred expert on Cuba in mainstream media and an influential activist advocating for exchanges and normalized U.S. relations with Communist Cuba.²⁴

In Cuban territory, the gigantic counterintelligence apparatus helps the DI recruit visitors to the island for academic congresses and exchanges or even for vacation. Abroad, it has systematically used Cuba’s embassies to target academic institutions. Cuba’s diplomatic presence is exceptionally large and does not correspond—as a comparative table shows—²⁵ to its size or economic position. There are intelligence centers in practically all of Cuba’s 126 embassies, which allows the DI a wide field of action, as its officers can operate with diplomatic façade and protection. According to Alcibiades Hidalgo, another

¹⁸ Confidential testimony of a former official of Cuban intelligence, op. cit.

¹⁹ J. Cohen, op. cit.

²⁰ Confidential testimony of a former official of Cuban intelligence, cited anonymously to protect this individual’s family in Cuba against reprisal, in many interviews with the author in person and by telephone for over a decade.

²¹ In January 2024, a 13-day “academic exchange program” in Cuba titled “Cuba Libre - Culture & Innovation” despite evident contradictions with widespread economic sanctions on Cuba required by US law (see the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996, 104th Congress Public Law 114, U.S. Government Printing Office, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-104publ114/html/PLAW-104publ114.htm>.)

²² “PhD student wants to bridge gulf between U.S. and Cuba,” University of Denver Magazine, Apr. 21, 2011, <https://magazine-archive.du.edu/academics-research/phd-student-wants-to-bridge-gulf-between-u-s-and-cuba/>

²³ According to a former peer in Cuba’s intelligence services, in 1992 Arturo worked as an officer of the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) M-XIX Department (Counterrevolution, working against Cuban exiles). From September 1993 to sometime in 1994, he studied at the Higher Institute of Intelligence “Adriana Corcho Callejas,” Course 24, along with 15 other officers of the DI and the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DIM). Afterwards, it was alleged that he had requested his discharge from the Ministry of the Interior.

²⁴ See Maria C. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela: a strategic occupation with global implications*, Free Society Project/Neo Club Press, 2019, p. 179-180; Maria Isabel Alfonso and Arturo Lopez Levy, “Cuban American group explains why it’s in Washington,” *Roll Call*, Jun. 25, 2014; Taylor Clark, Cuban Americans for Engagement make third trip to Washington, Latin America Working Group (WOLA).

²⁵ Cuba’s diplomatic presence - comparative table, Cuba Archive, June 2022, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Table-Comparative-diplomatic-presence.pdf>

of the signatories of the letter and former ambassador from Cuba to the U.N. in New York until 1993,²⁶ around 60% of the diplomats accredited to the mission were intelligence officers who reported to the head of the intelligence center and over whom he, as ambassador, had no authority.²⁷ Currently, as of January 2024, Cuba has 55 diplomats accredited to the U.N. in New York,²⁸ 12 more than in 2022 and 20 more than when Hidalgo was ambassador, which is hard to justify or explain in the context of an extreme economic crisis on the Island.

The DI also counts on many agents and collaborators from the enormous international solidarity network Cuba has built, which it reports as 1,649 friendship associations in 150 countries, 73 alumni associations in 62 countries,²⁹ and 109 “Parliamentary Friendship Groups” created in five continents to influence foreign policy in favor of the Cuban revolution.³⁰ It also conducts influence operations with writers, intellectuals, and students from its Casa Las Americas³¹ and has relations with at least 60 organizations dedicated to peace in 57 countries.³²

That Cuban agents have operated at such high levels inside academia for decades has had a multiplying impact over time, as every recruited agent is tasked with spotting individuals for the DI with characteristics and viewpoints that make them potential recruits. The issue is of such importance that in 2014, the FBI put out a private sector alert describing the DI’s aggressive work in academia.³³

It seems perplexing that so many people in privileged positions in free countries —away from the hardships imposed on the Cuban proletariat— are prepared to betray their countries to prop up a totalitarian dictatorship. This is especially baffling given that the Cuban “revolution” has evidently failed in its promise to improve the people’s lives. Arguably, one of the main reasons is that Western academia, with its prevalent disinformation about Cuba, offers the DI a favorable breeding ground.

In the United States —starting with textbooks used at high school level— instruction about Cuba is typically mired in a romantic vision of the revolution that ignores the real Cuba for the majority of the population and essential aspects of the history, failures, abuses, and high human cost of the dictatorship. Cuba’s wars and subversion in several continents are rarely mentioned as the South American dictatorships and Central American wars are shamed as U.S./CIA interventions without explanation of how they neutralized the communist Cuban-Soviet offensive. The evidence provided by defectors and available from the archives of the former Soviet KGB, German Stasi, and StB of Czechoslovakia is also ignored. Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela, its integration agenda for 21st century socialism in Latin America and the Caribbean, and its alliances with narco-guerrillas and nefarious states such as North Korea, Iran, Russia, and Nicaragua are also overlooked.³⁴ Finally, the U.S. “blockade” is blamed for all of Cuba’s problems without clarifying that the one-country sanctions allow many exceptions including the export of food and medicines, as well as what are Cuba’s primary sources of income: humanitarian aid, travel, and

²⁶ Alcibiades Hidalgo was also a member of the Central Committee of Cuba’s Communist party and a former Chief of Staff for Raúl Castro for ten years. He escaped to the United States in 2002.

²⁷ “Analistas: Cuba es un peligro para la Seguridad Nacional de EEUU,” *AmericaTeVe*, Miami, Jan. 3, 2024.

²⁸ United Nations, Protocol and Liaison Service, Permanent Mission of Cuba in New York Headquarters, <https://bluebook.unmeetings.org/>

²⁹ Nuria Barbosa León, “Cuba, un faro de solidaridad,” *Granma*, Dec. 27, 2022.

³⁰ Susana Antón Rodríguez e Iris de la Cruz Saborit, “Son creados 109 Grupos Parlamentarios de Amistad,” *Granma*, May 25, 2023.

³¹ Casa Las Americas, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casa_de_las_Am%C3%A9ricas

³² N. Barbosa Leon, op. cit.

³³ “Cuban intelligence targeting of academia,” Federal Bureau of Investigations, Sep. 2, 2014, <https://freebeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Cuban-Intelligence-Targeting-of-Academia.pdf>

³⁴ The author has described this at length in a book, see M. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela*, op. cit.

telecommunications. Claims that Cuba’s sovereignty must be respected fail to mention that it was hijacked 65 years ago by a police state imposing a one-party system on the people.

Recruiting agents within academia —and in general— has long been supported by the gigantic apparatus created in Communist Cuba for disinformation and propaganda, which Fidel Castro considered “the main food of the revolution.”³⁵ According to Ion Mihai Pacepa, former Director of Foreign Intelligence of the Romanian Securitate (secret police), Stalin had made disinformation the preferred ideological-psychological warfare tactic of the Soviets.³⁶ For his part, Soviet defector Yuri Bezmenov arrived in the West in 1970 warning that disinformation was a key piece of the KGB’s strategic playbook in its long-term ideological war against the United States.³⁷ The recovered files of the Stasi contain evidence that Cuban Intelligence had agents of penetration since the 1970s developing “measures of influence and operative disinformation against the U.S. intelligence community ... that had obtained very high-quality results.”³⁸

The myth built around Che Guevara, meant to extend to Communist Cuba, is a stellar example of how world public opinion can be deliberately molded (“disinformed”) with backing from academia. Pacepa, who was a general when he defected to the U.S. in 1978, wrote that shortly after Guevara’s death, Cuba’s intelligence services started a campaign, “Operation Che Guevara,” with help from the KGB and its satellite services to romanticize him and the Cuban revolution and disassociate their images from the mass executions and huge gulag of the 1960s.³⁹ A disinformation operation, Pacepa explained, is successful when the mainstream media publishes fabricated claims that its audiences come to accept as true. Bezmenov said that once ideological warfare, based on “active measures” in intelligence jargon, had succeeded in consolidating an idea, truthful information —even when presented with authentic facts and evidence— did not break the indoctrination.⁴⁰ He explained that the KGB’s ideological war against the United States had begun decades ago primarily in the universities and was a four-stage process over several generations to complete.⁴¹

Cuba’s recruitment efforts have been greatly aided by the advance in Western universities of the culture war, as proposed by the Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)⁴² —whose theory was

³⁵ “Un grave alerta de Guaicaipuro Lameda,” Las armas de Coronel (blog), Mar. 11, 2016.

³⁶ Ion Mihai Pacepa and Ronald J Rychlak, *Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism*, 2013; Mike Eckel and Eugen Tomiuc, Ion Mihai Pacepa, “Highest-ranking Soviet bloc defector to the west, reported dead at 92, Radio Free Europe, Feb. 16, 2021, (Pacepa was a two-star Romanian General and Chief of Foreign Intelligence for the Securitate of Rumania when he defected to the West in 1978.)

³⁷ Jorge Barrera, “Chaos agent”, *CBC News*, Feb. 5, 2022.

³⁸ Translation from Spanish. (Jorge Luis Vazquez, “La analista del DGCI, la Stasi y los topes: aspectos de la colaboración Stasi-Minint,” Berlin, Sep. 2007, in Baracutey Cubano, Feb 13, 2010, <https://baracuteycubano.blogspot.com/2007/09/la-analista-del-dgci-la-stasi-y-los.html>) This information comes from a Ph.D. thesis by a Major in Cuba’s counterintelligence, Zayda de la Caridad Gutiérrez, at the Stasi’s Security Institute, which was initially proposed in 1983 and completed in 1987, as well as the correspondence regarding this work. The title of the thesis, translated to English is “Fundamental aspects in the qualification of political-operative work against the U.S. special services for informational activities by the agents of penetration.”

³⁹ I. Pacepa and R. Rychlak, *Disinformation*, op. cit., p. 109-110.

⁴⁰ *Yuri Bezmenov: the life and legacy of the influential KGB informant who defected to the West*, Charles River Editors, 2024.

⁴¹ Yuri Bezmenov: “Deception was my job,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhAzGLb1j40> y “Yuri Bezmenov: psychological warfare subversion & ‘control of Western Society,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gnpCqsXE8g&t=2102s>.

⁴² Ver John Fonte, “Why there is a culture war: Gramsci and Tocqueville in America,” *Policy Review*, Hoover Institution, Dec. 2000-Jan. 2001; “Antonio Gramsci,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; Maria C. Werlau, “Venezuela’s

adopted by Fidel Castro as a mantra after the end of Soviet communism.⁴³ The anti-American, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonialist discourse prevalent in academia has for years proclaimed Communist Cuba as the victim of a David and Goliath struggle while disregarding the dictatorial nature of its regime. In the U.S., curricula on civic values have been discarded and the fundamental pillars of the democratic system are scorned, its failures incessantly criticized without balance or historical and comparative context. Capitalism is denounced in a pedagogical vacuum disregarding the prosperity created by free markets or the foundations of classic liberalism. Diverse viewpoints are scorned and even disallowed or violently silenced in academic settings in which open debate should reign.

It is easy for the DI to exploit all of the above, especially with the glamorizing aura surrounding Cuba of music, dance, beaches, mojitos, charming people, old cars and “picturesque” colonial ruins. The DI has always enjoyed a privileged allocation of financial and logistical resources; its numerous officers are carefully trained having been chosen from the most qualified students at a very young age. With consistent orders, they carry out long-term systematic offensive work without ethical, legal, and administrative constraints that prevail in democracies. Meanwhile, in governments of democratic countries, there is widespread ignorance of the threat posed by Cuba from a mixture of arrogance, ignorance, lack of vision, and the influence of Cuba’s agents in governments, the media, academia, and the business world. This all translates into a poor allocation of resources for effective counterintelligence, which already depends on the short-term and shifting priorities emanating from democratic systems subject to periodic elections.

Open and democratic societies with a strong rule of law have a structural disadvantage in stopping suspected foreign agents of dictatorial or enemy regimes. Because of strong free speech protections, proving that a scholar is acting as a foreign agent or is almost impossible and extremely costly.

The aforementioned letter from the six renowned defectors⁴⁴ urges governments to allocate sufficient counterintelligence resources, improve the security clearance process, control the accreditation of Cuban diplomats, adequately prepare government officials and legislators who work with Cuba, and alert target sectors (such as visitors, students, scholars, and business people) on the tactics of Cuba’s intelligence services.

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Criminal Gangs: Warriors of Cultural Revolution,” *World Affairs Journal*, Jul.-Aug. 2014; y M. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela*, op. cit.

⁴³ M. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ “The Cuban regime is a threat and must end,” op. cit.