

War against Cuba and the fate of Ana Belen Montes

By Tom Whitney

She is a political prisoner, but more; Ana Belen Montes is a prisoner of war, specifically the U.S. virtual war against Cuba. She took sides in that war. At her sentencing in 2002 she told the judge that, "I engaged in the activity that brought me before you because I obeyed my conscience rather than the law. ... I felt morally obligated to help the island defend itself from our efforts to impose our values and our political system on it." And, "What matters to me is that the Cuban Revolution exists ... What's necessary is that there always be a Cuban Revolution." The FBI arrested Montes two weeks after September 11, 2001. To avoid a death sentence for treason, this high - level analyst for the U.S. Defense Intelligence Service pled guilty to conspiring to commit espionage for Cuba. Ana Belen Montes received no money. The former specialist in Cuban and Latin American affairs is serving a 25-year jail term.

The five Cuban anti-terrorist agents jailed in the United States between 1998 and 2014 - the Cuban Five - benefited from a U.S. and worldwide solidarity campaign, until now non-existent for Montes. That may be because the Cuban government stood up for its own citizens and because the Five gained favor for having monitored private terrorist groups and not the U.S. government primarily.

Now maybe Montes' time has come. An international campaign on her behalf has been building with committees taking shape in Latin America, Europe, Canada, and the United States. Three petitions, accessible [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), are circulating; one asks for her release, two for humane treatment. Defenders charge that in prison in Texas, Montes is isolated from the general prison population and prevented from receiving visitors, telephone calls and emails.

At the time of her trial the odds were slim that Montes could avoid harsh punishment. Fear and vengeance prevailed in the United States following the September 11 terror attacks. And official rhetoric cast Cuba as an enemy.

Reporting on Cuban espionage activities in early 2003, the New York [Times](#) cited policy makers affirming that "Mr. Castro's Communist government remains a threat to American national security." State Department official Otto Reich was quoted as saying, "These activities and others prove that they are a hostile country." According to the [Wall Street Journal](#) in 2002, State Department reports indicated that, "Cuba has at least some bio-weapons technology and has expressed concern that Cuba could share the science with rogue states."

Even in 2014, a right [wing website](#) was accusing Montes of being "one of the most damaging spies in US history." Allegedly Montes was "shaping US foreign policy on Cuba." Specifically, she authored a Defense Department report in 1998 claiming that Cuba represented no military threat to the United States. Her report is supposed to have covered up Cuba's non-existent chemical and biological warfare capabilities.

The prevailing notion of danger from Montes is hardly favorable to chances the U.S. government will soon ease her prison conditions or pardon and release her. Likewise, continuing U.S. hostility toward Cuba is bad news for Montes.

U.S. aggression against Cuba persists despite the restoration recently of bi-national diplomatic relations. The U.S. economic blockade remains, counterrevolutionaries inside Cuba still enjoy U.S. support and money, Cuban land in Guantanamo is still occupied, and the Cuban Adjustment Act, a cold-war legacy, remains in force.

Imprisoned as the result of her anti-government action, Montes is a prisoner of conscience. But beyond that and with the persistence of U.S. war against Cuba, or something very similar, Montes is, in effect, a prisoner of war.

On that account, the burgeoning solidarity movement on her behalf seemingly has little choice but to join with the ongoing push to end anti-Cuba U.S. aggression, which, from the start, has been cruel and, under international law, illegal. The thought here is that what happens to Ana Belen Montes will play out within that context to the advantage of both struggles.

Harsh U.S. treatment of Montes herself testifies to the persistence of U.S. all-but-war against Cuba. And the fight to normalize relations with Cuba fits within the larger category of generalized U.S. anti-imperialist struggle. So, logically, there are two struggles encompassing the campaign for Montes' freedom and for decent treatment in prison.

When Montes was arrested and prosecuted, her family's Puerto Rican origins may have given rise to suspicions she sympathized with Cuba and Puerto Rico's shared anti-colonial struggle. Maybe she does. But the Puerto Rican independence struggle, at least as represented by Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar Lopez Rivera, has taken up her cause unequivocally.

Lopez Rivera recently issued a [statement saying](#): "I think that every Puerto Rican who loves justice and freedom should be proud of Ana Belen. What she did was more than heroic." Thus it seems possible the campaign on behalf of Montes can escape isolation. Instead it could take on the colorings of two larger campaigns that are really the same: one to normalize U.S. relations with Cuba and the other to resist imperial overreach.