

Friends of terrorism
Bush's decision to bring back Otto Reich
exposes the hypocrisy of the war against terror
by Duncan Campbell
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His name may sound like that of a character from a Mel Brooks musical but Otto Reich is real enough. He has just been appointed by President Bush as assistant secretary of state for western hemisphere affairs -- and both the manner of his appointment and the role he will now play have profound implications for a part of the world often disregarded since September 11.

Over the last year President Bush has attempted to bring back into office people who were discredited during the US interventions in Central America in the 1980s and 1990s. One such appointment was that of Elliott Abrams, who had two convictions in 1991 for misleading Congress about the so-called Iran-contra affair. He was pardoned by President Bush's father in 1992 and now enjoys the title of head of the "office of democracy and human rights". Another was John Negroponte, the former US ambassador to Honduras, who was accused by his predecessor of turning a blind eye to the atrocities committed there against leftists because it was felt necessary to remain on good terms with the Honduran government. Negroponte was quietly confirmed as US ambassador to the UN shortly after September 11. But the third appointment is by far the most controversial and potentially divisive.

Otto Reich is a rightwing Cuban American whose key policy objective is the overthrow of Fidel Castro's regime and whose support base is the Cuban-American community in Florida. President Bush's brother, Jeb, is depending on this community's votes and backing as he runs for re-election as governor of the state later this year.

Otto Reich came to prominence during the Reagan administration when he was appointed head of the office of public diplomacy within the state department. According to the national security archives, Reich used this role to pursue his own agenda to such an extent that in 1987 the Comptroller-General of the US, a Republican appointee, found that some of the efforts of his office were "prohibited, covert propaganda activities ... beyond the range of acceptable agency public information activities". A letter of September 30 1987 concluded that Reich's office had violated "a restriction on the state department's annual appropriations prohibiting the use of federal funds for publicity or propaganda purposes not authorised by Congress".

He staffed his unit with CIA and Pentagon "psychological warfare" specialists and discredited journalists whose work the Reagan administration did not like. His office wrote bogus editorial pieces under the names of Nicaraguan contras and got them published in the mainstream media. He reported directly to Oliver North.

Reich also served as US ambassador to Venezuela and was alleged to have used his influence to try and get a US visa for a convicted terrorist, Orlando Bosch, jailed in Venezuela in 1976 for the bombing of a Cubana airliner with 73 people on board. Bosch had already been convicted of a terrorist attack in Miami on a Polish merchant vessel bound for Cuba and jailed in the US.

According to US justice department records: "the files of the FBI and other government agencies contain a large quantity of documentary information which reflects that, beginning in the early 1960s, Bosch held leadership positions in various anti-Castro terrorist organisations ... Bosch has personally advocated, encouraged, organised and participated in acts of terrorist violence in this country as well as various other countries."

Amazingly, Bosch was granted a pardon by George Bush senior in 1990 and is now in Florida, apparently untroubled by the current president's commitment to rooting out terrorism in all its forms. Although many countries seek Bosch's extradition he remains free, protected by the same government that warns other countries that they are either for or against terrorism.

The Democrats on the Senate foreign relations committee had already made it clear that they would oppose Reich's appointment, not least because of the Bosch factor. So President Bush made a "recess appointment" at the beginning of January, which meant that he could side-step the Senate confirmation and avoid the damaging questions which Reich would be asked.

That a terrorist (by any definition of the word) such as Bosch should receive a blessing from the Bush family is revealing enough. That President Bush has decided to protect Reich from questioning on the subject by avoiding exposing him to the Senate foreign relations committee is just as disturbing. So what has Reich's relationship with Bosch actually been?

Ann Louise Bardach, who knows as much about this area as any journalist in the US, writes about Reich in her forthcoming book, *Cuba Confidential*: "a half dozen declassified CIA and state department cables leave little doubt that Reich used his position to lobby for Orlando Bosch, a man who the Bush justice department had concluded had participated in more than 30 terrorist actions."

When the *Guardian* reported the allegations about the Reich-Bosch connection last year, the US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage wrote to deny the report, insisting Reich had advised that Bosch was ineligible. "It is unfair and destructive to the US democratic process that the president's nominees be pilloried," wrote Armitage. The letter must have made Reich chuckle since he himself was a master of the art of pillorying his opponents through the dishonest use of his office.

But the whole point of the Senate hearings was that these cables and Reich's role in them would have been exposed. Reich has been extremely coy about his relationship with Bosch. In response to the Senate foreign relations committee's question, "Do you consider Orlando Bosch to be a terrorist?", Reich wrote: "I do not have sufficient knowledge of Mr Bosch's criminal activities to pass judgment on his legal status." This is impossible to believe.

Reich later moved into the corporate lobbying business to work on behalf of Bacardi rum, which has paid him \$600,000, according to the *New York Times*. Bacardi has an enormous financial stake in the overthrow of Castro, as it would allow them to take over their old distilleries. Although Reich is no longer employed by Bacardi, you do not have to be a cynic to see a dangerous conflict of interest. He also participated in drawing up the Helms-Burton legislation which has fiercely tightened the US embargo on Cuba, a mean-spirited operation that strips Cuba of copyright protection and is opposed by almost every other country in the world.

The contra war which Reich so heartily endorsed was an attempt to overthrow a democratically elected government, often using attacks on civilian targets. The Bosch affair also highlights the strange double standards involved in condoning terrorism against Cubans while abhorring it elsewhere. The US has chosen to keep al-Qaida and Taliban prisoners in Cuba at their Guantanamo Bay base. So while men accused of terrorism are kept on land acquired in an old colonial war and held by force, a safe haven is given to a man happy to promote terrorism against Cuba.

Colombia, Argentina and Peru are in crisis. There are plenty of qualified Latin American hands who could have filled Reich's post and helped build bridges. President Bush's choice is a sad echo of the shabby days that so discredited his father's and Ronald Reagan's administrations in their dealings with Latin America.

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