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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

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Cuban Intelligence Targeting of Academia^a

The academic world—primarily defined as schools, colleges, universities, and research institutes—provides a fertile environment in which foreign intelligence services can operate. Consequently, the Cuban intelligence services (CuIS) are known to actively target the US academic world for the purposes of recruiting agents, in order to both obtain useful information and conduct influence activities.

Vulnerabilities Within Academia: By its nature, the academic world encourages free thinking and informational exchanges in an open environment. Arguably, such networks are required for research institutes and academicians to accomplish many of their objectives. Within academia, there are clear incentives to build institutional networks to thoroughly explore a wide range of ideas. For instance, it behooves a researcher to develop direct access to primary sources or populations that will assist in actual

Basics of Intelligence Collection

Intelligence collection is the process of gathering information for use by decision makers. This can include entirely unobtrusive activity that is inherently passive. For instance, open source information, such as from news and media outlets, can be gathered, analyzed, summarized, and passed on to the principal who awaits the information. Sometimes, this requires placing officers or agents in foreign countries to facilitate access to the open source media. Clearly, the advent of the Internet has significantly increased access to this type of open source information, permitting some intelligence services to conduct some degree of open source collection without leaving their headquarters. Intelligence operatives can also maintain overt relationships with individuals in positions to provide open source information on topics of interest to a foreign government. Some of these individuals may even be unwittingly providing information of interest.

Intelligence can also be collected clandestinely using methods that are often illegal within the target country in question. Clandestine methods include the identification of individual targets in positions to provide information of use to an intelligence service. Intelligence operatives from a foreign power can build clandestine relationships with targeted individuals who may pass on useful information. In these instances, an individual is recruited to wittingly pass information to a foreign government. A creative intelligence service may even approach an individual under false pretenses where they pose as representatives of another government. In this case, the individual is fooled as to the true recipient of the information being passed. At any rate, individuals passing proprietary or classified information are in violation of US laws.

^a The information in this article is largely derived from self-admitted former Cuban intelligence officer, Jose Cohen, who defected in 1994. Mr. Cohen wrote an article titled, “Castro’s Intelligence Service and the US Academic Community,” that was published in 2002 as a part of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies Monograph Series.

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research. Unfortunately, such an atmosphere is exploitable by an intelligence service, which can use this open environment to identify and target individuals of interest. The researcher looking to obtain direct access to sources of information may have to build networks that run through foreign governments. What's more is that a foreign intelligence service may actively target such a researcher by using various lures, such as the establishment of cultural and academic exchanges.

Targets Within Academia: The academic world offers a rich array of targets attractive to foreign intelligence services. US government (USG) institutions draw on academia for personnel, both for entry level staffing and for consultation from established experts. A segment of the population, both students and faculty, is bound for work within the USG. Another segment is likely to have contact with USG information and policies through many other venues, including work with research institutes and numerous forms of contract work. First, many of these individuals may have access to useful information that can be passed to the CuIS. Second, some of these individuals are in a position of influence. They can assist in directly influencing the US policymaking process or in shaping public opinion on Cuba.

The Cuban Intelligence Services: Given the academic environment, it is not surprising why the CuIS, as well as other foreign intelligence services, target US academia. The situation provides a favorable environment to operate in and a significant target base to exploit. However, one additional reason the CuIS target this sector is because the cash-strapped Cuban regime's general lack of resources does not permit an extensive reliance on monetary incentives for recruiting sources. Therefore, the CuIS have perfected the work of placing agents that includes aggressively targeting US universities under the assumption that a percentage of students will eventually move on to positions within the USG that can provide access to information of use to the CuIS.

The CuIS devote a significant amount of resources to targeting and exploiting US academia. A large part of the work and effort of CuIS departments targeting the United States is devoted to influencing American and Cuban-American academics, to recruiting them if possible, and to converting them into Cuban intelligence agents. Likewise, students from these universities are the subjects of assessment and

Basic Types of Intelligence Operatives

Intelligence Officer – A professionally trained intelligence operative employed by a foreign intelligence service. Such an officer is often deployed to foreign countries by his/her home intelligence service, often under cover as a diplomat at an embassy or a consulate. From here, the officer can attempt to identify, assess, target, and recruit and run agents who have access to information of interest to the intelligence service.

Agent – This is a general term that covers a broad range of operatives. Essentially, an agent is an individual who performs tasks for a foreign intelligence service, often after being recruited by an intelligence officer. Such an individual may work in an organization that possesses information of value to a foreign government. Alternatively, an agent may also provide services, such as identifying potential recruits or assessing a targeted individual's willingness to be recruited by a foreign intelligence service. Agents do not necessarily have a clandestine relationship with the foreign intelligence service they are working for. For example, some agents may be in a position to maintain what appears to be a completely overt, legitimate relationship with a foreign intelligence officer. Also, some agents can even be unwitting in that they are not necessarily aware that they are being manipulated and providing information to a foreign intelligence service.

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recruitment because many of them, after completing their studies, are going to hold important posts in private enterprise or the USG.

The CuIS will also use various front organizations to approach US targets. For instance, the CuIS have developed a network of collaborators and agents located in Cuban universities and cultural centers, who are used to recruit and influence their counterparts in the United States or third countries, under the guidance and instruction of Cuban intelligence officers, who instruct them on what steps to follow.

Recruitment Methods: The CuIS will use a variety of methods and tactics to exploit individuals and organizations in order to achieve their objectives. This process includes identifying favorable individuals to target, gathering information on these individuals, and conducting an actual recruitment.

The CuIS will obtain publicly available information on universities, including details on programs of study, post-graduate programs, scholarships, and organizations. This includes personal information on a university's executives and professors, such as political tendencies. The CuIS target specific universities due to their prestige and importance and their proximity to the Cuban diplomatic establishments in New York, New York, and Washington, DC. This information can be collected directly by intelligence officers under diplomatic cover assigned to the United States or through their recruited agents. It is also logical to assume that given the pervasiveness of academic information available on the Internet, any foreign intelligence service is capable of collecting a great deal of this information from its home country.

There are many ways in which individuals of interest can be brought to the attention of the CuIS. For instance, CuIS operatives attempt personal contact with university officials, often through exchange programs between Cuban and US institutions. Individuals of interest can also be referred by other

A Recruitment Example

Provided by a self-admitted Cuban intelligence officer, the following is a possible scenario of how the CuIS might recruit an individual at a US university.

The Cuban intelligence officers located at the Cuban Mission to the United Nations in New York, New York, or the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, DC, obtain a published work by a specific professor or student (hereinafter referred to as the "targeted individual") from a university the CuIS are monitoring. The material is studied and processed by an intelligence officer in Havana, who is in charge of directing the effort. This officer makes contact with a Cuban agent within Cuba, possibly a co-opted Cuban academic. The pair will analyze the published work and design a plan of action that may include a personal letter to the targeted individual in the United States. The letter will suggest a "genuine" interest in starting a friendship or contact regarding the topic of the article. The personal letter becomes a pretext for the Cuban intelligence officer stationed in the United States to use for initial contact with the targeted individual.

The targeted individual now has contact with a Cuban "diplomat" who is interested in his/her work. The Cuban intelligence officer has a starting point from which to build a relationship and assess the targeted individual in terms of motivations, weaknesses, and current and future access to information. Through meetings, meals, and even invitations to visit Cuba, the CuIS will take months or years to assess the targeted individual. Other Cuban agents in contact with the targeted individual, possibly due to their location at the university, can support this assessment effort.

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intelligence agents. This contact will result in the collection of additional personal information, such as names, addresses, telephone numbers, family information, motivations, ambitions, and weaknesses. This information will assist the CuIS in determining if there are intelligence possibilities and what the best operational approach to take in targeting the individual. Furthermore, the CuIS maintain files for information collected through the years on universities, professors, and students. These files include information on contacts and relations of various individuals of interest to the CuIS, all of which can be useful in this process.

The relationships the CuIS develop do not necessarily result in the recruitment of clandestine agents. The CuIS will develop individuals who do not have access to secret information, but because of the individual's political position, or political tendencies, he/she can be used unwittingly to support Cuban interests. Some of these individuals may not be told openly that they are working for the CuIS, even though it may not be too hard for them to figure out. The relationship may openly appear to be a benign mutually beneficial friendship.

The CuIS will use multiple methods to gain the cooperation of an individual target. This can include appealing to the individual's political or ideological leanings. For instance, someone who is allied with communist or leftist ideology may assist the CuIS because of his/her personal beliefs. Similarly, someone with economic motives can be paid. The Cuban regime does not have unlimited funds to draw on, but can offer privileges and opportunities to invest in Cuba or to negotiate exclusive business deals. Some individuals are promised business opportunities once the US embargo is lifted. Such individuals can be feted in Cuba with extravagant, all-expense paid tours.

If necessary, the CuIS will also use more coercive tactics to gain control of an individual. Compromising information about an individual of interest is noted by the CuIS. This can occur passively through observation or actively through a deliberate attempt to compromise the individual target. This can include compromising videos or recordings obtained through various means including sexual entrapment. One place for this compromise to occur is when visitors travel to Cuba for planned tours. Ultimately, the CuIS can obtain control of an individual in exchange for keeping the compromising information secret.

Hazards of Travel to Cuba: Not surprisingly, a key venue the CuIS use to identify individuals of interest is Cuba itself. The CuIS will actively exploit visitors to the island. For instance, academic travel to Cuba is targeted by a specific department of the CuIS. This department is supported by all of the counterintelligence resources the Government of Cuba can marshal on the island. Intelligence officers will come into contact with the academic travelers. They will stay in the same accommodations and participate in the activities arranged for the travelers. This clearly provides an opportunity to identify targets. Reports are written on visitors that may result in targeting opportunities for the CuIS. It is also worth reiterating that while a targeted individual is in Cuba, he/she is particularly vulnerable to CuIS attempts to obtain compromising information that may create opportunities for coercive CuIS recruitment practices.

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Tasking: Once recruited by the CuIS, an agent is generally tasked to provide information. The CuIS should already have a fairly good idea of what that agent is currently in a position to provide. However, with the longer term in mind, the CuIS can direct the recruited agent into fields that may permit greater access in the future. For instance, agents can be directed into certain fields of study, which can lead to employment in USG agencies with access to more valuable information. Agents are also in a position to pass on names of other potential recruits to their Cuban masters, regenerating the recruitment cycle.

Influence Opportunities: Another priority of the CuIS is influence operations in support of Cuban policies. Many individuals who are targeted in academia are well positioned to assist the CuIS in helping portray the image of Cuba that the Government of Cuba desires. The free flow of information in academia actually assists such Cuban efforts. In fact, those CuIS contacts in academia lacking access to USG information may hold commensurate value to the Government of Cuba by assisting in this public relations campaign.

The many individuals, including academics, businesspeople, religious leaders, political leaders, journalists, and students, who are exposed to Cuban officials or are invited to Cuba to participate in events, conferences, and tourism can be presented a crafted image of Cuba that may ultimately be disseminated to the United States by the visitors. Many of these visitors may even be passing on this positive image of Cuba unwittingly based on their one visit. At the same time, recruited Cuban agents will also actively propagate disinformation developed by the Government of Cuba and the CuIS. For instance, the CuIS have also been known to use agents, possibly academics or journalists, to write books or articles that present the GOC in a favorable light.

Conclusion: Academia has been and remains a key target of foreign intelligence services, including the CuIS. The CuIS actively target academia to recruit agents and to support Cuban influence operations. Unfortunately, part of what makes academic environments ideal for enhancing and sharing knowledge also can assist the efforts of foreign intelligence services to accomplish their objectives. This situation is unlikely to change, but awareness of the methods used to target academia can greatly assist in neutralizing the efforts of these foreign intelligence services.

Influence Operations

In addition to collecting information, foreign intelligence services will sometimes engage in influence activities. The objective of these activities can range from portraying a specific image, usually positive, to attempting to sway policymakers into particular courses of action. Overt contact between intelligence officers and policymakers, government officials, academics, and even average citizens can assist in shaping views of a particular country.

Of the more insidious nature, foreign intelligence services can plant disinformation or propaganda among unwitting individuals or task recruited agents to actively disseminate such information. For instance, a foreign intelligence service can draft news articles and books or create video and audio programming to disseminate a particular view to a wide audience.

Per the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, which was enacted in 1938, any US person acting as an agent of a foreign principal in a political or quasi-political capacity must make periodic public disclosure of his/her relationship with the foreign principal, as well as activities, receipts, and disbursements in support of these activities. Disclosure of the required information facilitates evaluation by the government and the American people of the statements and activities of such persons in light of their function as foreign agents.

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