

The “Most Dangerous Spy You’ve Never Heard Of”, Ana Belén Montes, Should Be Known

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Ana Belén Montes gave classified information to Cuba for 17 years before her arrest in 2001 for espionage. Pleading guilty, she avoided conviction for treason, which carries the death sentence. She is called “the most dangerous spy you’ve never heard of.” 1 She deserves to be known now.

Her story shows the personal cost of some truths. I don’t mean suffering endured in prison, predictable result of breaking US law. I mean the cost of believing, as US citizen and government employee, truths about US state terror, supported by evidence. The truths are well-known, or at least readily available. But they’re not easily believed, even when known to be true.

By the time Montes began spying for the Cubans, the US had been carrying out a ruthless “war against subversion” across Latin America for decades. The targets were anyone who resisted, or might resist, US hegemony in the region. Operation Condor, formed in the early seventies, enabled multinational death squads to carry out state-sponsored cross-border political repression.


Unionists, peasant leaders, party activists, students, teachers, priests, nuns – indeed, whole social sectors – were targets. The CIA provided new forms of torture. In Uruguay, for example, a “parallel apparatus” used homeless beggars for torture training. In a soundproof room, instructors demonstrated the effects on the body of electric voltage and chemical substances. The test subjects died. 2. 

Image on the right is Fidel Castro attending an anti-terrorism conference in Havana, Cuba, on June 6, 2005.

In 2005, a special conference was organized in Havana on terrorism. Speakers from Latin America, the US and Europe presented research, often drawing upon declassified US documents, about CIA-inspired terror tactics of Operation Condor. The recurring theme, in presentation after presentation, was impunity: The data piles up. It is widely diffused. Yet somehow, in the public mind, it doesn’t matter.

The occasion for the conference was the entrance into the US of Louis Posada Carriles, was arrested and jailed in Venezuela (he escaped) for master-minding the shooting down of a Cuban plane, killing all aboard (1976). Posada confessed his responsibility to Ann Louise Bardach (*New York Times*). He walks free in the US despite the evidence. He celebrates his birthdays on camera, before the media.


In John Pilger's documentary, *War on Democracy*, Pilger interviews Sister Diana Ortiz, a US citizen raped and beaten by US servicemen protecting the dictatorship in El Salvador. Ortiz says,

"When I hear people express surprise about Abu Ghraib [site of US torture in Iraq], I ask myself 'What planet are they living on? Don't they know the history of our country?'"

It's not that they don't know the history. It is that they possess the facts, know they are true, and don't assimilate them. They *want* to think the US is "leader of the free world". It is not hard to see – thanks to books, documentaries, declassified documents, journal articles, and conferences – that US foreign policy has nothing to do with freedom and democracy. However, we have *to care* to know.

Ana Belén Montes says she doesn't want to be treated as a hero. True, she shouldn't have to be a hero. What she did was believe the obvious. She told the sentencing judge,

"I engaged in the activity that brought me before you because I obeyed my conscience".

 In 1960, apolitical Beat poet, Leroi Jones (image on the left, source: BK Nation), went to Cuba "determined not to be 'taken'". Returning to the US, in his famous "Cuba Libre", he denounced the "thin crust of lie that we cannot even detect in our own thinking".

Jones detected that "crust of lie" because of what he felt, in Cuba. He expected Cubans to be indoctrinated, even evil. Instead, he experienced them as happy, interesting and smart. He describes a feeling, a human connection. It contradicted his beliefs. He gave up the beliefs.

Jones could have dismissed his feelings as crazy, and maintained his web of beliefs. That would have been more comfortable, even praiseworthy. Instead, Jones returned to the US radicalized. The "thin crust of lie" was just that: a thin crust. There was more. Jones didn't want to be living the entire hidden iceberg of lies.

The "thin crust of lie", undetectable, explains a slogan of the anti-war movement: "There are no innocents". It means that a comfortable white life was collusion in the slaughter in Vietnam. Lifestyles generate and nurture values and beliefs. They support myths making it easy to explain away truths, even obvious ones. We offer our daily consent, quietly, comfortably.

Ana Belén Montes could have dismissed what she knew to be true about the US war on democracy. She is, in the end, a hero just because of what she believed, because she has believed it, and because she continues to do so.

Fidel Castro said about Che Guevara after his death that Guevara insisted on the power of example. There's a philosophical point here: We are interdependent creatures, always giving to and receiving from the beings, human and non-human, with whom we interact. It was Marx's naturalistic vision of who we are as human beings: part of nature, dependent upon others even for thinking.

Such naturalism is expressed also by smart, sensitive thinkers across the ages. The Buddha was one, as was José Martí, leader of Cuba's last independence war against Spain. It is simply a scientific fact that how we think depends, in ways we often do not know, on the people and stories we surround ourselves with. They speak to us silently, continually, at myriad levels. We don't think alone, contrary to the liberal/libertarian myth that we live "from within", hearing an "inner voice".

That "inner voice" is always the voice of others, indeed whole histories of others.

It's why certain examples matter so much and why they're worth working for. They may be all we have to see through the lies, well-known lies that they are. The hidden histories matter to what can be imagined, morally. It's no surprise we haven't heard about Ana Belén Montes. Such a significant example is hidden deliberately. The press, without evidence, suggests she was mentally ill.

Ana Belén Montes must no longer be hidden.

Speaking truth to power is relatively easy. Believing it is more challenging. Murdered Honduran activist Berta Cáceres said North Americans are too attached to our comfort. It affects moral imagination. For those of us who benefit from the US Empire, it is not possible to believe what is clearly true about that Empire without personal cost. It's just the nature of reason and its dependence on surroundings.

The "thin crust of lie" gets ever thicker. We need the example of Ana Belen Montes more than ever.³.

1. Jim Popkin *The Washington Post*
http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/feature/wp/2013/04/18/ana-montes-did-much-harm-spying-for-cuba-chances-are-you-havent-heard-of-her/?utm_term=.d3e99f7d9503
2. J. Patrice McSherry, "Death squads as parallel forces: Uruguay, Operation Condor, and the United States" *Journal of Third World Studies*. 24.1 (Spring 2007): 23
3. Useful sites:

<http://www.workers.org/2016/10/28/free-ana-belen-montes-now/#.WSFpxevyvlU>
<https://thesaker.is/tag/ana-belen-montes/>

<http://www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk/news/article/3336/ana-belen-montes-will-spend-her-60th-birthday-in-us-jail-with-another-10-years-to-serve>
<http://www.communistpartyofireland.ie/sv2016-09/08-ana.html>;

Susan Babbitt is author of Humanism and Embodiment (Bloomsbury 2014) and José Martí, Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Global Development Ethics (Palgrave MacMillan 2014).

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