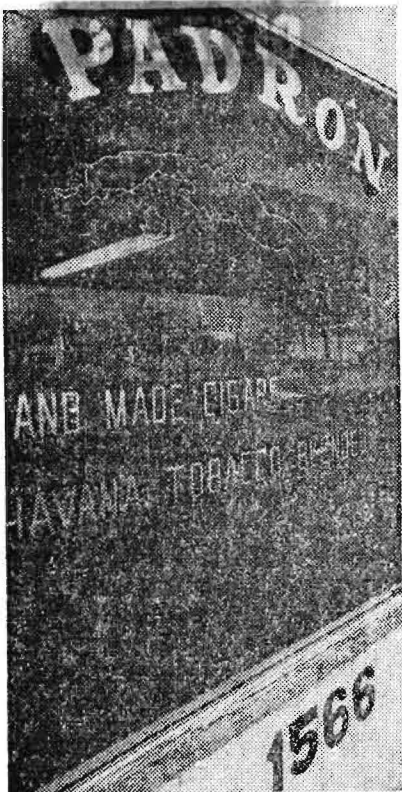


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Padron Cigar Factory
... target of bomb

Extremism Often Leads To Crime

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Herald Staff Writer

Cynics sometimes say that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. But law enforcement officials say that in the confused world of Cuban exile extremism, yesterday's political activist is

becoming today's extortionist, drug trafficker or contract killer.

Eighteen years have passed since some 2,000 Cuban exiles tried to retake their homeland from Fidel Castro in a three-day invasion that failed at the Bay of Pigs.

It has been nearly a decade since the CIA stopped supplying arms to exiles and actively promoted sabotage against the Cuban government.

Three years have gone by since exiles bombed former Chilean cabinet minister Orlando Letelier and blew up a Cuban passenger plane with 73 people aboard off the coast of Barbados.

IT HAS BEEN only three weeks, however, since 18-year-old Rodolfo Padron, Jr. arrived at his uncle's Flagler Street cigar factory on a Saturday morning to find a newspaper-wrapped package leaning against the smoky, tinted plate glass display window.

The package contained a bomb. An alarm clock showed the bomb was timed to go off before dawn, but it short-circuited, possibly because of dampness.

No one has taken responsibility for placing the bomb, but federal and local authorities are treating it as the first politically motivated exile terrorist act in more than a year.

Orlando Padron, the target, is one of the "Committee of 75" exiles who negotiated with Fidel Castro to secure the release of political prisoners from Cuban jails.

TALKING WITH CASTRO is treason to hardline anti-Castro militants. The bomb reminds Padron and a half million other Cuban exiles that terrorism is as much a part of exile life as hand-rolled cigars.

Three similar attacks in the New York area the same day made the same point.

Increasingly, however, law enforcement officials, and exiles themselves, believe that exile terrorists are often criminals who cloak themselves in politics as a ruse.

"The terrorist is a mercenary who doesn't have any political ideology," says Padron, a curly haired 52-year-old who chain smokes his own brand. "If the bomb had something to do with Cuba, why didn't they put it in Cuba?"

Sgt. Paul Janofsky of the Metro Police Organized Crime Bureau says there are no more than "a couple of hundred" political militants who are active among Dade county's half a million Cubans.

"WE KNOW that a lot of people who are involved in terrorism are also involved in crime to line their own pockets," said Janofsky. "We know they're into drugs, extortion, prostitution. Some bombings in the past have been nothing other than personal vendettas or extortion."

FBI Special agent Joe Dawson, who puts the number of exiles actually engaged in terrorism at "between 50 and 100," says that the transition from political activism to plain, garden-variety crime is easy for "swashbuckling guys" who are essentially playing "the same game" in the underworld as they once did on raids against Cuba.

"In the past, certain segments of the Cuban community were not opposed to this terrorism, but I honestly believe now that the Cuban population does not go along with it," Dawson said.

"It was always tough obtaining witnesses, either out of fear or out of sympathy," he said. "I would say that now the sympathy part is out."

THE FEAR LINGERS. It is fueled by telephone threats, gift-wrapped bombs, extremist political pamphlets and small-circulation weeklies dripping with hatred.

It is a subculture the Anglo population of Miami never sees, a fiery netherworld where freedom of expression is a luxury that carries a risk of terrible retribution.

"Personal security for any citizen in this community is very deficient," Padron said. "They catch criminals faster in any Central American country than they do here."