

Turncoat analyst an effective spy for Cuba, book says

A new book reveals that Cuban spy Ana Belen Montes had access to top U.S. secrets and passed on damaging information.

The Miami Herald
Oct. 14, 2006

WASHINGTON - Cuban spy Ana Belen Montes gave Havana detailed information on U.S. eavesdropping programs against the Castro government, allowing Cuba to mount effective counterintelligence and deception operations for years, according to a new book on U.S. intelligence failures.

The book, by Washington Times defense writer Bill Gertz, also describes Alberto R. Coll, a Cuban American and former deputy assistant secretary of defense in the early 1990s, as "an apparent spy" -- a charge Coll vehemently denied.

Montes, of Puerto Rican descent, was a senior Cuba analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency, enjoying near-unfettered access to top secrets until she was caught in 2001. She is now serving a 25-year prison term.

Gertz writes that she leaked so many significant U.S. secrets to Havana that some U.S. officials rank her with Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen, the infamous spies for Moscow who sent dozens of U.S. agents to their deaths.

"Montes was the first national-level analyst from the intelligence community known to have turned traitor and the most damaging Cuban spy arrested to date," the book says, quoting from a still-classified damage assessment report on Montes. Such reports are written by counterintelligence investigators to assess the harm done by spies.

U.S. intelligence officials consulted by The Miami Herald confirmed that Gertz's book reflects the intelligence community's assessment of the Montes case, although some of the more sensitive information remains under wraps.

Gertz has written several books on intelligence matters. He told The Miami Herald that he spoke to a number of U.S. officials, some of whom had seen the Montes damage assessment report, for his latest book, *Enemies: How America's Foes are Stealing Our Vital Secrets and How We Let it Happen*.

SYSTEMS COMPROMISED

U.S. officials believe Montes did the greatest damage by giving Cuba information on U.S. electronic eavesdropping systems, which were the primary sources of U.S. intelligence on Cuba since Washington had long found it all but impossible to recruit spies within the island, Gertz wrote.

During a briefing from the National Security Agency she received in 1999, Montes "learned about every single NSA eavesdropping program targeted against Cuba and Latin America," according to Gertz's book.

She also learned about current and proposed electronic spying systems by taking part in planning sessions for future imagery and other intelligence gathering programs, the book adds.

Montes had access to an intelligence community computer system, the Corporate Information Retrieval and Storage system, that includes information from the CIA, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the NSA, FBI and other sources, Gertz wrote.

The book notes that Montes also sat on an interagency group known as the Hard Target Committee, which discussed operations in places like Iran, China and North Korea.

Through Montes, the Cubans obtained a clear picture of what Washington knew and did not know about Cuba, allowing Havana to carry out "a robust denial and deception program," according to the damage assessment report.

Some of her disinformation included a 1998 U.S. intelligence report that downplayed the threat of Cuban armed forces and its bioweapons capabilities, and a 1993 paper that said the Cuban military wanted closer ties with the United States, Gertz wrote.

The book also says there are "indications" that her spying may have led to the deaths of some U.S. agents in Latin America but provides no details. Court records showed Montes leaked the identities of four U.S. agents in Cuba, who were not harmed.

The damage assessment report however paints an embarrassing picture for U.S. spy-catchers: Montes met her Cuban handlers, posing as businesspeople, students or academics, at Washington restaurants more than 100 times, sometimes twice a week.

BELIEVED IN HER CAUSE

Montes, who pleaded guilty to spying charges, told a Washington courtroom that she had spied for Cuba out of conviction that U.S. policies were causing undue suffering to the Cuban people, and that she was paid little or no money by Havana for her work.

According to Gertz, Cuba recruited her around 1985 and she first came under U.S. suspicion in 1994, when the Cubans detected a highly secret electronic surveillance system. She underwent a polygraph test and passed it.

ARRESTED IN 2001

Montes came under suspicion again in 2000, when Cuban officials uncovered a U.S. agent working in Cuba for a special intelligence program, Gertz wrote. Montes was one of the few U.S. officials familiar with the operation. The FBI placed her under surveillance and arrested her in 2001.

Gertz's book also notes the case of Alberto Coll, who pleaded guilty last year to a charge of lying about a trip he made to Cuba in 2003. He had claimed he was visiting relatives, but he later acknowledged he was visiting a lover.

Coll, a Republican who became critical of the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba in the late 1990s, was fined \$5,000 and resigned from his job as chairman of the Strategic Research Department at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island. He now teaches at DePaul University College of Law in Chicago.

Gertz says officials told him they believe that Coll had been "recruited" by Cuba, "in part by using a female agent to seduce him."

Gertz quotes an unidentified FBI official as saying "there is more to that case" than the illegal visit, but Gertz does not say that Coll leaked any secrets.

In an e-mail to The Miami Herald, Coll denied the allegations as "outrageous slander."

While he did violate the travel laws to Cuba, he said "this is a far different matter from engaging in treason or espionage" and that the "U.S. Justice Department, the U.S. Attorney for Rhode Island, and a respected federal judge [appointed by President Reagan] agreed with me."

Coll said the woman he met with in Cuba was a childhood friend, not a Cuban agent. He said it was "deeply offensive to all women in Cuba to suggest that a Cuban woman who falls in love with a prominent American must be a government agent."