

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS: Terrorists welcome - if they're anti-Castro

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Let's see if we can make sense out of this: On Tuesday, Washington denied visas to a number of Cuban scholars - I repeat, scholars - who had been invited to participate in an academic conference in Las Vegas.

Yet, in what amounted to a suspension of the war on terror, a few weeks ago, Pedro Remón, Guillermo Novo Sampol and Gaspar Jiménez - three Cuban-Americans with long and proven ties to terrorist activities in this country and abroad - were given a celebrity welcome to the U.S.

Terrorists yes, scholars no? It doesn't make any sense.

On Sept. 28, the U.S. Interests Section in Havana informed the Cuban authorities that they had turned down the requested visas of every single one of 61 Cuban scholars who were supposed to take part in the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) convention in Las Vegas Oct 7-10.

Such action was based on Section 212, an executive order issued during the Reagan administration that allows denial of visas on the grounds that it is not in the interests of the U.S. to grant visas to persons who are employees of the Cuban government and/or members of the Cuban Communist Party.

"In short," said Michael Erisman, a political science professor at Indiana State University and a member of LASA, "it is a blanket authorization to deny visas, since

practically all Cubans, and certainly all Cuban academics, are government employees, just as those of us in the U.S. who work at public institutions are government employees."

Yet Remón, Novo and Jiménez, who along with former CIA operative Luis Posada Carriles had been in a Panamanian prison, accused of plotting to assassinate Fidel Castro at a summit of Latin American leaders in 2000, had no problems with federal authorities.

The fact that, according to the charges, they were planning to use 33 pounds of explosives to assassinate Castro at the University of Panama did not raise any red flags with immigration authorities. Those authorities happily looked the other way when the three men returned to the U.S. through the Opa-Locka airport in Florida.

Officials in Washington did not seem to mind that the explosives the men intended to use were enough to destroy an armored car, damage everything within 220 yards and kill not only Castro but dozens of Panamanian university students as well. Recently, the men had been sentenced to seven to eight years in prison for endangering public safety.

But on Aug. 28, they were pardoned by outgoing Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso, who many believe was pressured to do so by Washington. And, outrageously enough, the trio arrived in Florida to great fanfare just in time to commemorate the third anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on American soil. It seems that for all its rhetoric about democracy, what really scares this administration the most is a free exchange of ideas.

"We expected some casualties, but never a blanket denial of visas," said Erisman. "This case is, at least to the best of my knowledge, the most extreme application - and abuse -

of the Section 212 provisions in terms of the size of the group that has been denied visas."

Terrorists yes, scholars no. Whatever happened to the war on terror? Call it opportunism or call it hypocrisy - it doesn't make much difference. The fact is that this is an election year and Florida must be won. And candidate Bush seems willing to go very far to woo the ultraconservative Cuban-American vote. Last time I looked, this was called hypocrisy.

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