



Victor Manuel Rocha

- Age 73 at time of sentencing
- Resided in Florida
- Born in Colombia
- Naturalized as a U.S. citizen at age 28



CDSE

Center for Development
of Security Excellence

CASE STUDY

Espionage

WHAT HAPPENED

Rocha served with the U.S. Department of State (DOS) for over 20 years and held high-level positions, including an assignment to the National Security Council (1994 – 1995) and U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia (2000 – 2002).

Rocha began secretly working with the Cuban General Directorate of Intelligence (DGI) in 1981 while employed with DOS. He continued acting on their behalf as a covert agent until he was arrested in 2023.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) became aware of Rocha's potential espionage activity prior to November 2022. An FBI undercover (UC) agent known as "Miguel" contacted Rocha on November 15, 2022, via a telephonic messaging app. The UC identified himself as a representative of Rocha's "friends in Havana" and requested a meeting with Rocha. The UC was able to establish bona fides with Rocha by discussing information related to Rocha's past espionage related activities in Chile, which Rocha had not divulged to anyone but the DGI. Over a series of three meetings with the UC, Rocha described his espionage activities and openly celebrated his achievements as a covert agent of the Cuban government.

On December 1, 2023, federal agents conducted an interview of Rocha where he repeatedly denied any wrongdoing. The agents confronted Rocha with photographic evidence of his meetings with the UC, and Rocha subsequently refused to comment.

On April 12, 2024, Rocha pleaded guilty to conspiring to act as an agent of a foreign government, conspiring to defraud the United States, and acting as an agent of a foreign government without notice as required by law. Rocha received the statutory maximum penalty of 15 years in prison, a \$500,000 fine, three years of supervised release, and a special assessment. Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen commented "Today's plea and sentencing brings to an end more than four decades of betrayal and deceit by the defendant. Rocha admitted to acting as an agent of the Cuban government at the same time he held numerous positions of trust in the U.S. government, a staggering betrayal of the American people and an acknowledgement that every oath he took to the United States was a lie."

INDICATORS

- **Foreign Influence and Preference** – Rocha took frequent international trips, including multiple trips to Cuba to meet with his handlers. He admitted to an FBI UC that he had traveled to Havana via Panama utilizing a Dominican Republic passport rather than his U.S. passport; thereby avoiding detection by U.S. authorities.
- **Allegiance to the United States** – Rocha committed espionage against the United States by covertly assisting Cuba's intelligence services and their clandestine intelligence gathering mission against the U.S. Government.
- **Access Attributes** – Rocha routinely sought positions of trust with the U.S. Government that granted him access to nonpublic information, including classified information.

IMPACT

- The entirety of the harm caused by Rocha's actions is currently unknown to the public. As part of the plea deal, Rocha is mandated to cooperate with the U.S. Government in conducting a comprehensive damage assessment.
- U.S. Attorney Markenzy Lapointe for the Southern District of Florida stated, "I am mindful that Rocha's decades-long criminal activity on behalf of the Cuban Government is especially painful for many in South Florida. Rocha's willingness to cooperate, as required by his plea agreement, is important, but does not change the seriousness of his misconduct or his clandestine breach of the trust placed in him. Rocha's 15-year prison sentence, the maximum punishment for his crimes of conviction, sends a powerful message to those who are acting or seek to act unlawfully in the United States for a foreign government: we will seek you out anywhere, at any time, and prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law."

ADDITIONAL INFO

- Rocha presented himself as a Cuban agent throughout the meetings with the FBI UC. Per the criminal complaint, Rocha consistently referred to the United States as the "enemy" and used the term "we" to describe himself and Cuba. Rocha praised Fidel Castro as the "Comandante" and referred to his contacts in Cuba as "Compañeros," which translates to "comrades."
- Rocha routinely exhibited behavior consistent with training related to covert operations. During his meetings with the FBI UC, Rocha conducted surveillance detection routes (SDR) as a countersurveillance measure. He expressed several times the need to use code words or symbols, otherwise known as a "parole" in the intelligence community.
- In a November 2022 meeting with the UC, Rocha described his involvement with a "knock down of the small planes" in Havana. Further investigative actions determined two unarmed airplanes affiliated with a U.S. based opposition group were shot down in Havana in 1996, coinciding with the timing of Rocha's service in Havana with the DOS.
- After he retired from the DOS, Rocha worked in the prominent role of advisor to the Commander of the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). Of note, Cuba is in the area of responsibility in which SOUTHCOM operates.

Questions to consider:

- How can your organization proactively address the threat posed by insider threats? What measures are currently in place to detect this type of activity?
- How was Rocha able to avoid detection by the U.S. Government for almost 40 years? What motivated his actions?

Resources for further exploration:

- Foreign Intelligence Entity (FIE) Targeting and Recruitment Job Aid
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/insider/foreign-intelligence-entity-targeting-recruitment-methodology.pdf>)
- The Psychology of Spies Webinar
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Training/Webinars-and-Conferences/Webinar-Archive/The-Psychology-of-Spies/>)
- Potential Risk Indicators: Insider Threat
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/insider/INTJ0181-insider-threat-indicators-job-aid.pdf>)

Supporting Through Reporting!

Contact the appropriate POC to report any observed potential risk indicators:

Name: _____
Title: Supervisor/Security Officer/ITP

Agency/Department: _____
Senior Official/ITP Manager