

PROBERS READING THE SCRIPT

The Story of CBS and the Plot to Invade Haiti

By GUS CONSTANTINE
Star Staff Writer

The Columbia Broadcasting System has been accused in a confidential House subcommittee staff report of contributing close to \$80,000 to a 1966 plot to invade Haiti.

According to the report, CBS in return obtained exclusive rights to film illegal shipments of arms and training sites of the plotters preparatory to filming the invasion itself.

It also charges that the network has been trying to hide its involvement and that it rebuked a CBS cameraman for reporting the matter to federal authorities.

Richard Salant, president of CBS News, confirmed in New York yesterday that "CBS News filmed gun-running activities and training exercises as part of an investigative report on the activities of Cuban-Haitian exile groups."

But he denied that the network helped finance the invasion plans or that it had "any complicity in the plot."

Asked whether the network had knowledge whether law was being violated, Salant said:

"If you're involved in filming guns and training exercises, obviously you have knowledge of a violation of law. But our general position is that where the violation is generally known, or there is reason to believe that law enforcement agencies know about it, then we proceed without notifying them."

Salant said CBS News' expenditure for the "Haitian project" was between \$150,000 and \$170,000. "about \$120,000 of this went for external costs—travel, board, lodging and payments to non-staff personnel," he said.

Although CBS has been linked to the invasion attempt in earlier news accounts, details of the network's involvement have never been disclosed. The invasion itself never came off.

"This committee has an excellent picture of what took place," a member of the



RICHARD S. SALANT

House Commerce Committee said in an interview.

The report, which was prepared for the subcommittee last June 20, caused some agonizing in the Commerce Committee over whether to call a public hearing.

Information in the report led to subpoenaing of CBS films, financial records and logs in connection with the invasion attempt. Executive sessions were held at which CBS personnel testified.

In their report, staff members of the Special Investigations subcommittee accused CBS of irresponsibility and said the network may have violated six federal statutes, including the Neutrality Act, the Munitions Control Law, the Communications Act of 1934 and several firearms laws.

The probers recommended that the network be called to public account in open hearings before the Commerce Committee, which has authority to investigate broadcast licensing under the Communications Act.

Salant said he would welcome public hearings "at this stage." However, he said, "I'd have greater hope for such hearings getting at the truth if they could be held in a forum that offers the opportunity for cross-examination."

The invasion finally was broken up by customs agents on Jan. 2, 1967, in a raid at Coco Plum Beach, Fla. CBS had ended its involvement the previous November.

Seven men were indicted by

the plot. Six of them were tried and convicted in November 1967, while the charges against the seventh were dropped by the Justice Department. There is an appeal pending in New Orleans.

According to the Commerce Subcommittee staff report, the plot was hatched early in 1966 by Cuban and Haitian exiles as a two-step invasion which would seize Haiti from a base in the Dominican Republic, then use it as a jumping-off point to strike at Cuba.

The report contends CBS learned about it in March 1966, agreed in April to film invasion preparations, including weapons shipments and caches, and did so in June and at other times. It further contends that the network put up funds toward the rental of a yacht to serve as the invasion "flagship."

CBS pulled out of the operation in November, the report said, when a customs agent who had been kept informed of the plans told the network the planned invasion of Haiti would not be permitted.

Salant said CBS officials wanted to pull out as early as September but that customs agents called and asked them to continue.

"As things developed by late summer, I got the feeling of something smelly. I felt we were being had," Salant said.

Leading Figures

The leading "actors" in the "invasion" drama, according to the staff report, were:

• Rolando Masferrer Rojas, a 52-year-old Cuban right-winger known as "The Tiger." He controlled a private army in Cuba when Fulgencio Batista was dictator.

• The Rev. Jean Baptiste Georges, a Catholic priest and a former education minister under Haitian President Francois Duvalier.

• Julie Aton Constanze-Pelau, a Cuban conspirator who allegedly assisted CBS in its filming. He was recently shot in Miami.

• Julio Cesar Hormilla, a Cuban who lost an eye while participating in the filming of invasion training.

• Mitchell Wer Bell III, a munitions dealer linked to clandestine operations and up-

was hired by CBS as a consultant for the invasion story.

• Jay McMullen, CBS producer for the invasion story.

• Andrew St. George, a free-lance writer who tipped off CBS on the invasion plans and was hired by the network as associate producer and writer of the story.

• James Wilson, a CBS cameraman who informed federal authorities of the invasion plans.

• Eugene Maximilian, Haitian counsel to the United States and the target of an extortion attempt.

• Stanley Schacter, assistant customs agent in charge of enforcement at Miami, who kept track of the unfolding invasion scheme.

Plans Outlined

The subcommittee report says CBS' association with the conspirators began in March 1966.

The conspiracy took shape initially as just one more Latin intrigue in Florida to topple the regime of Cuba's Fidel Castro.

In this instance, the plan called for Masferrer to be installed as chief of Cuba while Father Georges took over Haiti, provided a two-stage invasion was successful.

CBS enters the picture through McMullen, a producer eager to film arms-smuggling activities. The special subcommittee's chief investigator, James P. Kelly, himself a former CBS employe, is said to have worked on a project with McMullen in 1965 to film illegal expert of surplus fighter aircraft. That project was dropped.

Familiar with the interests of the invasion planners and McMullen, Andrew St. George, free lance writer, is introduced in the report as the contact who approached McMullen in March 1966. St. George is said to have told McMullen of the preparation for a Haitian invasion, and asked if CBS was still interested in illegal munitions movements.

Wer Bell, identified in the staff report as a man with a background in arms sales to

Latin governments, is introduced by St. George to McMullen in April at Wer Bell's home in Powder Springs, Ga.

McMullen, said the report, was told of Wer Bell's efforts to find a suitable base in the Dominican Republic for Masferrer to launch his invasion.

Price Tag Cited

McMullen was also told, according to the report, that for a price, exclusive CBS filming of clandestine arms shipments, training exercises and the actual invasion could be arranged.

McMullen agreed to pay close to \$80,000 for these rights, the report says, and CBS hired St. George as associate producer and writer of the invasion story.

As a down payment, St. George delivered to Wer Bell \$1,500 given to him by McMullen, the report says.

In June, McMullen brought a film crew to a Miami house belonging to Masferrer's brother. An arms cache was photographed here and in other residences in the same vicinity.

Wer Bell was on location. So were immigration agents, who called to check on Masferrer's whereabouts. Masferrer was on parole and was barred from Florida. Mistaking the callers for FBI agents, McMullen hid in the closet, according to the report.

CIA Contact Noted

A CBS cameraman, James Wilson, contacted CIA agents in Houston while on a space shot assignment, the report says.

The CIA informed the FBI, who called on Wilson and referred him to U.S. Customs.

From that point on, according to the report, Stanley Schacter, assistant customs agent in charge of enforcement in Miami, was kept informed by Wilson of developments.

From time to time, the plotters sought funds from CBS and St. George was given money by McMullen to pay them, the report says. It mentions sums totaling almost \$3,000 to Masferrer, \$750 to Wer Bell for a trip to the Dominican Republic, \$500 to Father Georges to perform "voodoo" rites in order to inspire the troops and \$500 to Julio Aton Constanzo-Pelau, another conspirator, who doubled as film assistant for CBS.

A Comic Turn

Now the narrative shifts to New Jersey and takes a comic turn.

McMullen is told he can photograph a shipment of weapons from the Shiloh Hunting Lodge on Rt. 46 to Florida. He pays Masferrer \$380 for the story but the story fails to materialize. In the mix-up, the car carrying the weapons loses contact with the CBS film crew, according to the report.

Later, a van carrying weapons from New York to Florida breaks down in Macon, Ga., and the driver has only \$15 in cash. CBS provides financial help and a 1965 Mercury station wagon is sent to Macon to complete the trip, the report says.

McMullen then pays Wer Bell \$3,000 toward rental of a yacht, the Poor Richard, which would be the invasion "flagship." The leaky ship sinks. McMullen, says the report, gets \$2,500 back and Wer Bell keeps \$500 for "expenses."

CBS said yesterday it paid Wer Bell \$1,500 for the boat. Salant said, "I understand it was to be the invasion boat. We were going to be on it. The money was for board and lodging. Another \$1,500 was paid for a second yacht, which was used by St. George and later caught fire."

Suit Against CBS

During the filming of a training scene at Kendall Park, Fla., trainee Julio Cesar Hermilla was injured when a defective weapon exploded. He later lost an eye.

Hormilla sued for \$1 million, alleging that McMullen transported weapons to Kendall and distributed them to the men. After his injury, Hermilla charged, medical aid was delayed until CBS cameramen could photograph the incident.

Hermilla later settled his suit with CBS for \$15,000, the report says.

According to the report, Wer Bell, Masferrer and St. George showed up at the Miami office of Haitian Consul Eugene Maximilian and offered to end preparations for the invasion if Duvalier put up \$200,000.

When no answer appeared to be forthcoming, the staff report says the plotters offered through an intermediary to sell a tape of their conversation with Maximilian back to the consul for \$10,000.

But the Haitian diplomat reported the matter to Duvalier, to the FBI and to U.S. Customs.

Salant said CBS was not involved in, nor knew anything about this incident until Wer Bell approached McMullen and said he had the tape.

"McMullen said, 'Hell, I won't touch it,'" according to Salant.

A falling out then apparently occurred between Masferrer and St. George and the latter goes to Stanley Schacter, the same Customs official briefed earlier by Wilson, to tell his version of the invasion story.

St. George, says the report, now drops out of the picture. He is hospitalized with bad burns suffered in a yacht accident and McMullen hires Wer Bell as a story consultant at \$500 a week.

Another shift now takes place. The Dominican Republic is "uncooperative" over the use of its territory as a base for the Haitian invasion so the plotters decide to strike directly from the United States.

Appears a Scoop

A CBS crew is flown to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and the network hires its own flagship for \$2,500 to trail the rebel flotilla. NBC and ABC were struggling to catch up with the story but the "scoop," it appeared, belonged to CBS.

Nov. 20 is the day before the invasion. But that night, CBS correspondent Bert Quint, in Haiti, reported a battle raging in the streets between rebels and forces loyal to Duvalier.

There is reason to believe, the congressional staff report

says, that he was purposely fed misinformation by Duvalier to foil the invasion.

Schacter, meanwhile, informs Masferrer, Father Georges and McMullen that the invasion would not be allowed.

At this point, CBS ends its affiliation, the staff report says.

But Masferrer and his people shift to Coco Plum Beach and begin a new countdown. On Jan. 2, U.S. Customs officials take the "army" into custody and seize its armaments, including the transport vessel, the Elena G.

A grand jury then indicted the seven men, including Masferrer, Father Georges, Constanzo-Pelau and Wer Bell on charges they violated the Neutrality Act and the Munitions Control Laws.

Before the trial the Justice Department dropped Wer Bell as a defendant, and the congressional investigators reported that all attempts to get an explanation from Justice failed. The other defendants were found guilty and were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 60 days to four years. The verdict is on appeal in New Orleans.

In 1967 CBS refused to let officials of the Justice Department, Customs and the U.S. Attorney see the films it took in connection with the invasion plans, the report says.

According to the report, Bill Leonard, CBS vice president, rebuked Wilson for notifying the government.

Meanwhile, the House Commerce Committee continues to study the need for public hearings.