

Defense Statement presented by René González Sehwerert at his Sentencing Hearing in Miami, Friday, December 14, 2001

"I have no reason to repent."

Before I begin, I would like to propose an experiment to those present in the courtroom today: close your eyes, and imagine that you are in downtown New York. Now, when the first firefighter comes along, look him straight in the eye, very seriously, and tell him to his face that nothing happened on September 11. That it is all a lie. Nothing but camera tricks. It is all pure paranoia and propaganda. At this point, if your own shame or the poor firefighter has not made you swallow your tongue, then you are eminently qualified to have been a prosecutor in this case.



Rene & wife Olga with oldest daughter Irma González Salanueva

And now, with the permission of this Court, I will begin.

Your Honor:

Months ago, in one of her efforts to sweep the subject of terrorism against Cuba under the carpet, using the twisted logic of her confused argument on intent and motivation, Mrs. Heck Miller told the court that we could leave the political speeches until this point in the trial. Even back then, when all of the prosecutors' political hatred had been unleashed on us through the conditions of our confinement, the manipulation of the evidence, and, even worse, the use and abuse of my own family to blackmail, hurt and humiliate me, I was far from imagining just how important it would be for the prosecution in this case to pour out all of its political rancor on us.

Nevertheless, after six months of listening to these same prosecutors shoving their prejudices down the jury's throats over and over again, I can still tell Mrs. Heck Miller that she was wrong. I do not need to speak of my political beliefs, which I do not in any way renounce, to say that I condemn terrorism, that I condemn war, and that I feel profound contempt for those people, so completely obsessed with their hatred and petty interests, who have devoted so much time to harming their country by promoting terrorism and fostering a war on which they squander all the courage that they do not have and that others, also their victims, will need on the battlefield.

I do not need to talk politics, because I believe that innocent people should not have to die for those reasons, in Cuba, here in the United States, or anywhere else in the world. And I would do what I did and take the risks that I took for any country in the world, including the United States, regardless of political considerations.

I firmly believe that you can be a Catholic and be a good person, that you can be a Jew and be a good person, that you can be a capitalist, a Muslim or a Communist and be a good person; but there is no such thing as a good person who is also a terrorist. You must be sick to be a terrorist, just as you must be sick to believe that there is such a thing as a good terrorist.

Unfortunately, not everyone feels the same way. When it comes to Cuba, the rules

apparently change, and some people think that terrorism and war are good things to do. And so we have a prosecutor like Mr. Kastrenakes who defends José Basulto's right to break the law as long as it is announced on television. We have an expert on terrorism like Mr. Hoyt, who believes that ten explosions in a one-year period would constitute a wave of terrorism in Miami, but not in Havana. We have an air safety expert for whom the acts of provocation perpetrated by Brothers to the Rescue against Havana, widely publicized on television, would be a different thing if they were perpetrated against Washington, because they would be, according to him, more urgent and verifiable. We have people who for 40 years have publicly advertised themselves as terrorists, yet the prosecutors to my left only seem to have noticed it when they testified in this case for the defense. Agents Angel Berlinguerí and Héctor Pesquera, the latter no less than the head of the local FBI office, proudly appear as guests on the same radio stations, with the same people and on the same programs that violate federal laws by openly raising funds to organize terrorist activities or defend terrorists around the world.

Meanwhile, Caroline Heck Miller calls for these nice terrorists to be judged in heaven, while Mr. Frómeta, after trying to buy nothing more than a couple of surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank weapons and a bit of highly potent explosive, is considered a good father, a good citizen and a good person, who might deserve something like a year of house arrest from the South Florida District Attorney's Office. This, your Honor, as far as I know, is called hypocrisy, and it is also criminal.



Olga Salanueva and Ivette González, wife and daughter of René.

And when this same office fights to keep me in the Special Housing Unit for as long as possible, when my family is used as an instrument to break my will, when my daughters are only allowed to see their father twice during the 17 months of this isolation and the only way I can watch the first steps taken by my little girl is through a 12th-floor window, then I can only feel proud of being here, and I can only thank the prosecutors for giving me this opportunity to confirm that I am on the right track, that the world still needs a lot of improving, and that the best thing for the people of Cuba is to keep the island clean of the element that has taken over so many souls here in Miami. I want to thank them for allowing me to prove myself against their hatred and resentment, and for this pride I feel after having lived through the most intense, useful, important and glorious days of my life, when this courtroom seemed too small to hold all of the truths spoken, and we watched them squirming with impotence as they fought to hide each and every one of those truths.

And if an apology will make them happy, then I will offer them one: I am very sorry that I was unable to tell their agents that I was cooperating with the Cuban government. If they had an honest stance towards terrorism, I could have done so, and together we could have found a solution to the problem. When I think of those endless discussions about the specific intent to break the law, I realize that this situation goes far beyond the question of whether failing to register oneself is illegal or not. And that is because, unfortunately, even if foreign agents could advertise in the yellow pages here without being registered beforehand, we, being Cubans, would have to remain incognito for such basic tasks as neutralizing terrorists or drug traffickers, something we should be doing together, if a logical approach could prevail. I am also sorry if the anti-Castro affiliation of the criminals I fought brought them closer to certain officials or members of the Attorney General's Office. I feel very badly about this, honestly.

Actually, this whole issue of Cuban agents has a very simple solution: Leave Cuba alone. Do your job. Respect the sovereignty of the Cuban people. I would gladly say good-bye to every last spy who returns to the island. We have better things to do there, all of them a lot more constructive than watching the criminals who freely walk the streets of Miami.

I do not want to pass up this opportunity to address the many good people we have had the chance to meet during this trial.

First of all, I want to thank the U.S. marshals for their professional behavior, their decency, their courtesy and their anonymous sacrifice. There were times when we good-naturedly consoled each other for being the only people in the courtroom whose needs were not taken into account in the time schedules, and we all laughed together about it. But they were always disciplined and did their duty well.

I also want to thank the translators, Larry, Richard and Lisa. They did a first-class job and were always available whenever our families or we needed their services. I offer them my sincerest gratitude for their hard work and decency towards everyone. It must be a privilege for this court to have a team like that. My best wishes to Mr. Londergan as well.

I also wish to extend my deepest respect to the members of the U.S. military who testified, whether for the prosecution or the defense, and who spoke sincerely, as well as to the officials, experts and agents who were honest. I would have liked to see more honesty among the latter group, and I would have gladly acknowledged it here.

To all of them, who could very well represent the best of the American people, I extend my highest regards and my assurances that there is an entire nation of people just a step south of here who do not harbor the slightest animosity towards their big northern neighbor. The Cuban people and the country of Cuba have been systematically slandered throughout this trial by individuals who either do not know, or do not want to know, or are not interested in knowing what Cuba really is. I am going to take the liberty of reading an excerpt from a letter written by my wife on July 30:

"René, there are constant shows of support here for us, the families, and for all of you. Yesterday, when I took bus 58 home from Mom's house, a number of people recognized me, and Ivette was talking to everyone. Because it's carnival time, the bus filled right up when we went through Centro Habana, and Ivette decided to act up when it was time for us to get off; she sat herself down on the steps of the bus and refused to get up. You can imagine what it was like, the bus full of people, me trying to pick her up and not being able to, Ivette glued to her spot and everyone pushing. Then a woman came up to me; she squeezed my hand and gave me a prayer card she had suddenly pulled out of her purse, entitled, 'A Happy Home.' And she said, 'At my church we pray for the five every day, and we pray for their children to have a happy home, like Jesus did, because they were over there so that all children would have a happy home as well.'

"She kind of caught me by surprise, I almost didn't have time to thank her because I had to get off the bus quickly, but I realized that this is the way we Cubans are. And today we are more united than ever, regardless of beliefs or religions, everyone with their own faith, but all united in the same cause. I am going to keep the prayer card as a memento."

I feel obliged to stop reading here to clarify that I am not a religious person. I do not want the prosecution to distort my words later and claim that I have brought God into this courtroom out of hypocrisy.

Your Honor:

As you can see, I do not need to air my political beliefs here to talk about Cuba. Others have done it in the framework of this trial throughout three years, oozing irrational hatred. And this hatred is even more absurd when you realize that it has been bred at a gut level, that it is a visceral hatred aimed at something that they simply do not know. It is truly sad to be taught to hate something that you do not even know.

And so there have been people here speaking with impunity against Cuba, offending a nation of people whose only crime is having chosen their own path, and having defended that choice successfully, at the cost of enormous sacrifices. I am not going to give anyone the benefit of distracting myself with all the lies told here about Cuba, but I will refer to one that was so monstrous as to amount to disrespect for this courtroom and the jury:

When Mr. Kastrenakes stood up and said, in front of this symbol of American justice, that we had come here to destroy the United States, he showed how little that symbol and that justice matter to him, and he also showed how little respect he had for the jury. Unfortunately, he was right with regard to the latter.

The evidence in this case, history, our beliefs, the education we received, none of this supports the absurd idea that Cuba wants to destroy the United States. The problems of the human race cannot be resolved by destroying any country; for too many centuries, empires have been destroyed only for similar or worse empires to be built on their ruins. Any threat to this nation is not going to come from a people like the people of Cuba, where it is considered immoral to burn a flag, whether it is from the United States or any other country.

If you allow me, as a descendant of industrious and hard-working Americans, with the privilege of having been born in this country and the privilege of having grown up in Cuba, I would tell the noble American people not to look so far to the south to see the threat to the United States.

Cling to the real and genuine values that inspired the founding fathers of this nation. The lack of these values, pushed aside by other less idealistic interests, is the real threat to this society. Power and technology can become a weakness if they are not in the hands of cultured people, and the hatred and ignorance we have seen here towards a small country, which nobody here knows, can be dangerous when combined with a blinding sense of power and false superiority. Go back to Mark Twain and forget about Rambo if you really want to leave your children a better country. Every alleged Christian who was brought up here to lie after swearing on the Bible is a threat to this country, in view of the way their conduct served to undermine these values.

Your Honor:

Having written these words in preparation for my sentencing, scheduled for September 26, the tragic and horrendous crimes of September 11 have obliged me to add a few reflections that I cannot fail to share with this court. I must be very tactful, to ensure that nobody can accuse me of capitalizing on these abominable acts in my own favor. But there are times when we must speak certain truths, no matter how painful they may be. It is very much like telling a son or daughter, a brother or sister, when they have made a mistake, and we want, out of love, to help them avoid making that same mistake in the future. It is in that spirit that I want to speak through you with this message to the American people.

The seeds of the tragedy that has plunged this nation into mourning today were sown many years ago. We were led to believe that by shooting down civilian planes and bombing schools, in a place as distant as it was unknown, certain individuals were fighting for freedom, simply because they were fighting communism. I would never blame the American people for that lack of vision; but those who provided the missiles and created an image of those people that did not match their criminal acts were also committing the crime of

hypocrisy.

And I am not looking back into the past to rub it in anyone's face. I merely want to invite you to look at the present and reflect on the future, by sharing the following reflection with this court: "Yesterday's hypocrisy is to today's tragedy what today's hypocrisy will be to tomorrow's tragedy." We all have a responsibility towards our children, which goes beyond political prejudices or the petty need to earn a salary, hold on to an ephemeral political post or ingratiate ourselves with a handful of tycoons. That responsibility obliges us to put aside today's hypocrisy, so that we can give them a tomorrow free of tragedies.

There has been an attempt to judge the five of us in the name of this hypocrisy, and now that it is my turn to face my sentence, I realize that, unlike my comrades, I do not even have the right to consider myself a victim. The way in which I conducted myself perfectly coincides with the description offered in the charges brought against me. If I had come to this trial, it was out of solidarity with my brothers, and in order to speak certain truths and refute the lies with which the prosecution tried to exaggerate my activities and present me as a danger to American society.

Therefore, I do not even have the right to ask for clemency at a moment like this, a moment at which this court will have seen who-knows-how-many converts, some genuine, others false, some finding God after signing a pact with the Devil, all of them using this podium to show their repentance. I cannot judge them, and each will know what to do with his dignity. I also know what to do with mine, and I would like to believe that you would understand that I have no reason to repent.

Yet, I will always feel obliged to ask for justice for my comrades, accused of crimes they did not commit and sentenced on the basis of prejudices by a jury that passed up a unique opportunity to make a difference. They never attempted to obtain any secrets from this country, and as for the most monstrous accusation, it was merely a matter of a patriot defending the sovereignty of his nation. Quoting the words of a good Cuban and friend, who despite having come to this country for disagreeing with the Cuban government is still an honorable person, I want to take advantage of this moment to pay tribute to the worthy Cubans who live here as well, and to refute, along the way, another of the lies spread by the prosecution regarding our feelings towards the Cuban community: "Those boys were convicted for the crime of being honorable."

Over two years ago I received a letter from my father, in which he said, among other things, that he hoped a jury would be found in which the values of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln prevailed. It is shameful that he turned out to be wrong.

But I have not lost hope in the human race and its capacity to pursue those values. After all, I do not think that Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln themselves represented the majority during the era in which they left their mark on the history of this nation.

And as these three sordid years go down in history, and a mountain of arguments, motions and technicalities come to bury a story of blackmail, power abuse and the most absolute contempt for such a highly praised justice system, polished to a shine it never had, we will continue to appeal to those values, and to the American people's vocation for truth. And we will do so with all the patience, faith and courage that we draw from the crime of being honorable.

Thank you very much.

René González Sehwerert