

THE F.A.L.N. IN CONTEXT

"The propelling factor is the development of an armed struggle guided by a party whose policies can move the independentist sectors to a confrontation with the colonial institution and manage to reorganize these sectors—despite the climate of absolute repression—into a military instrument which successfully defeats the native bourgeoisie and its repressive forces and makes it necessary for the American government to massively intervene in Puerto Rico. Once this goal is achieved, the armed struggle of our people will become a massive movement dependent upon our military and political ability to hold the enemy's forces in check while the blows we deal at them in Puerto Rico and the United States cause tremendous economic losses and international pressure is brought to bear for the Yankees to withdraw from Puerto Rico."

—The FALN, Political Position, p. 3

The FALN (FUERZAS ARMADAS PARA LA LIBERACIÓN NACIONAL, 1974-1983) was a clandestine Puerto Rican revolutionary group based in New York and Chicago that aimed to liberate Puerto Rico from US colonization. Their actions involved placing over 100 bombs, mostly at corporate headquarters that they considered in partnership with the colonial government. Their bombing campaign was in retaliation for government brutality and strategically, they aimed to develop a rearguard struggle throughout the US in order to pressure the government to decolonize the island.¹

Their bombings vacillated between what they called symbolic violence (the majority of their bombs detonated at 1 a.m. in empty public spaces), potentially lethal violence (multiple incendiary bombs in very flammable sections of multiple department stores, timed to go off around noon on a weekday), and lethal violence (there were three deadly bombs in all including one bombing of a restaurant during the lunch hour).² Alongside the symbolism of their chosen bombsites, the group made typewritten communiqués that detailed their political position, the motives for their bombings, and their demands to the US government. These two things, the communiqués and the bombs were the only face or voice of the elusive FALN for years.

Often the FALN is lumped in with other radical US groups because they too were responding to years of civil rights struggles to end police brutality, intractable ghetto poverty, racism, and the extreme disenfranchisement of minorities in civil society. While many civil rights and left-wing groups pledged non-violence, a small percentage decided that bombs were the road to social justice and bombing became a sign of the times in the big cities. In fact, in eighteen months in the early seventies the FBI reported more than 2,500 bombs, over 99% of which were non-lethal.³

However, the FALN really wasn't like other radical groups due to its high level of organization, its aim to ignite a war of independence for Puerto Rico, its insistence on Prisoner of War status for those arrested, the specifics of its Marxist Leninist ideology, the context of the Puerto Rican diaspora, its connection to the socialist politics of Puerto Rico, and its solidarity with other armed groups on the island. Additionally, the FALN was an outgrowth of previous Puerto Rican revolutionaries' successes and failures in the ongoing, turbulent and often fragmented independence struggle⁴ that was fiercely repressed by the government.⁵ The young community activists that made up the known FALN membership religiously guarded their clandestine lives, learning from groups like The Young Lords and The Black Panthers who were relentlessly targeted by police, vilified by the press, weighted down under legal fees, and debilitated by the FBI's COINTELPRO program.

The FALN's decline began in April of 1980 in suburban Chicago when, by mere coincidence, police stopped eleven cadres as they were preparing for an armed robbery. By 1983, five more members of the group had been captured. During their trials they rejected the authority of the US courts and declared themselves prisoners of war under the protection of the Geneva Conventions.

The group's bombings could not be pegged to the individuals arrested, and only one member was tried for an actual bombing; the rest

¹ "Organizational Basis . . . Development of a 'rearguard' armed struggle throughout the breadth of the United States on internationalist principals of organization, which include the active participation of the American people in the armed struggle for the independence of Puerto Rico." —The FALN, Political Position, p. 1

² I analyzed their bombing campaign by corroborating two sources: the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (in solidarity with the FALN) published a booklet in 1979, Toward a People's War for Independence and Socialism in Puerto Rico: In Defense of Armed Struggle, which listed the each FALN bomb; and a police report, List of FALN Perpetrated Bombing and Incendiary Incidents, from 1974 to 1982.

³ "An obscure PR group, MIRA detonated bombs in two Bronx theatres in New York on May 1 1978. Eleven people suffered minor injuries when one device went off at the Dale Theatre during a showing of *Cactus Flower*. The second exploded beneath a seat at the cavernous Lowe's Paradise while a rapt audience watched *The Liberation of L. B. Jones*; when police ordered everyone to leave, the audience angrily refused, demanding to see the rest of the movie. When the theatre was forcibly cleared, a NYPD official said later, the audience "about tore the place apart." p 5 - 6, Days of Rage, Bryan Burrough.

⁴ Everyone recommended that I read *El País de Cuatro Pisos*, a 1989 essay that reflects on the complex stratification of Puerto Rican society and tries to explain why Puerto Rico has never achieved independence.

⁵ Puerto Rican government repression of the nationalist and independence movements is well documented and now bolstered by the declassifying of hundreds of FBI and police files that detail the illegal tactics that had been in use since the 1930s. For more information see the documentary *Las Carpetas*, 2012 by Maite Rivera, which is informed by the book *Las Carpetas*, edited by Ramón Bosque Pérez and José Javier Colón Morera, 1997.

were tried for seditious conspiracy and arms or explosives charges. Equal to the group's symbolic violence, the members received long symbolic sentences, punishment for crimes that the prosecutors couldn't actually pin on them⁶ but which they were saddled with in the court of public opinion.

In 1999 President Clinton offered clemency for 11 members of the group and in 2016 the remaining imprisoned member was given clemency by President Obama.

Virginia Colwell

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⁶ "Seditious conspiracy refers to plots aiming to 'overthrow, put down, or to destroy by force the Government of the United States, or to levy war against them, or to oppose by force the authority thereof.' According to Assistant United States Attorney Jeremy Margolis, this charge was a perfect fit for the FALN case, given that the evidence could not tie individuals to specific incidents and carried a punishment of no less than twenty years of imprisonment." From Effects and effectiveness of law enforcement intelligence measures to counter homegrown terrorism: A case study on the FALN, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, August 2012.