

*Betrayal in the Barrio:*

# Rafael Marrero and FBI Repression against Chicago's Puerto Rican Independence Movement

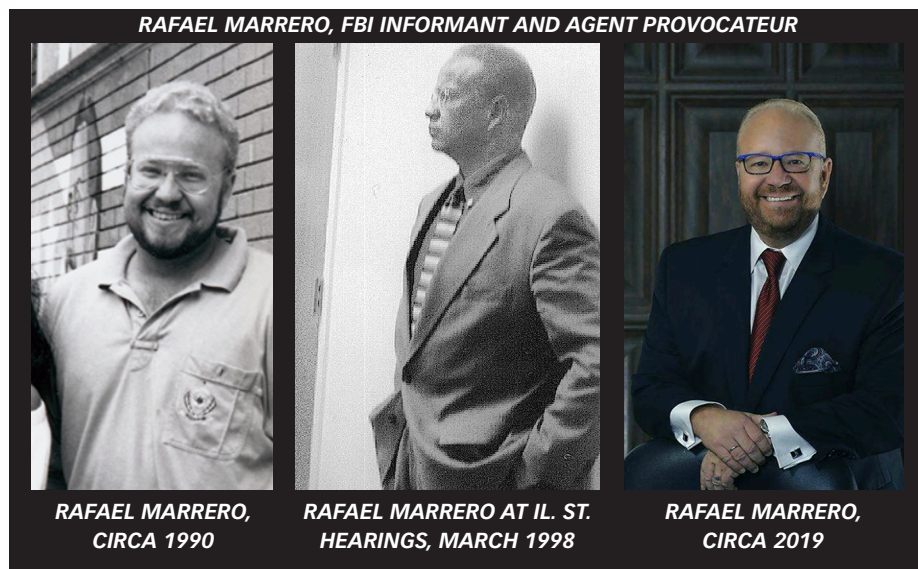
*The National Boricua Human Rights Network*

## INTRODUCTION

The FBI has a long and sordid history of political repression. Employing a wide range of tactics, it has sought to disrupt, destroy and neutralize national liberation movements and radical left organizations for decades. One egregious episode began in the late 1980s, when the FBI planted an agent-provocateur in the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC). The PRCC was founded in 1973 by a group of community activists which included Oscar López Rivera, Carmen Valentín, Carlos Alberto Torres, Ida Luz Rodríguez, José E. López, Rev. José A. Torres, Alejandrina Torres, Dr. James Blaut, and América Sorrentini. The PRCC emerged as an outspoken proponent of Puerto Rican independence and was the life force of international campaigns to free Puerto Rican political prisoners and prison-

ers of war. It also set out to create decolonizing "parallel institutions" responsive to the needs of community residents. The FBI alleged that the

leaders, slander community organizations, and recruit community members to commit violence. Although Marrero participated in violent



PRCC and its leadership were the above ground face of the Puerto Rican revolutionary organization, the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN). With the intent of "neutralizing" this radical project, the FBI recruited and handsomely paid Rafael A. Marrero to criminalize community

acts for which others paid time in prison, he was never even criminally charged for these actions. Instead, after he emerged from the Witness Protection Program, he began to accumulate personal wealth and professional prestige in the heart of Miami's conservative Cuban community. Thirty years after his life

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as an agent-provocateur, he hawks himself as an expert on helping minority businesses access the federal marketplace, while hiding his deplorable past.

Marrero might have put his past behind him. But members of Chicago's Puerto Rican community have not forgotten him or his role as an FBI agent-provocateur. He harmed many lives, damaged reputations, and impaired important community-based work. Although the FBI and Marrero forced the PRCC and its members to divert their energy and resources to self-defense, the attacks also strengthened the community's resolve. After expending considerable effort in rebuilding relationships and reputations, the PRCC today thrives and has broadened support for its bold vision.

## HISTORY OF COINTELPRO

In the 1950s, the FBI launched its secretive Counter Intelligence Program. COINTELPRO, as it is more commonly known, was created to squelch dissent at any cost. Its overt and covert tactics included infiltrating political

and community organizations with agents-provocateurs; harassment through the legal system; spreading fake, defamatory news to discredit community leaders; disrupting political organizing; spreading fear and distrust; and far more destructive moves, such as false imprisonment and assassination. While this illegal

Identity Extremists," tracked its members, and infiltrated its chapters with government and right-wing agents-provocateurs. The following history will hopefully serve as an example of not only this repression and its insidious damage, but of a community's subsequent struggle to repair and rebuild.



government program was allegedly dismantled after a 1975 U.S. Senate Select Committee found rampant abuse, the government continues to use the same and similar tactics to illegally spy on and disrupt current movements. This was seen in the aggressive surveillance of the Muslim community after 9/11. More recently, the FBI has falsely labelled the Black Lives Matter movement as "Black

The Puerto Rican Independence Movement, in Puerto Rico and in the diaspora, has long been high on the FBI's list of political targets. In Chicago, FBI surveillance of Puerto Rican activists intensified after the 1966 Division Street Riots. In this period, it aimed to weaken and destroy various organizations, including the Young Lords, a politicized Puerto Rican gang modeled on the Black Panther Party.

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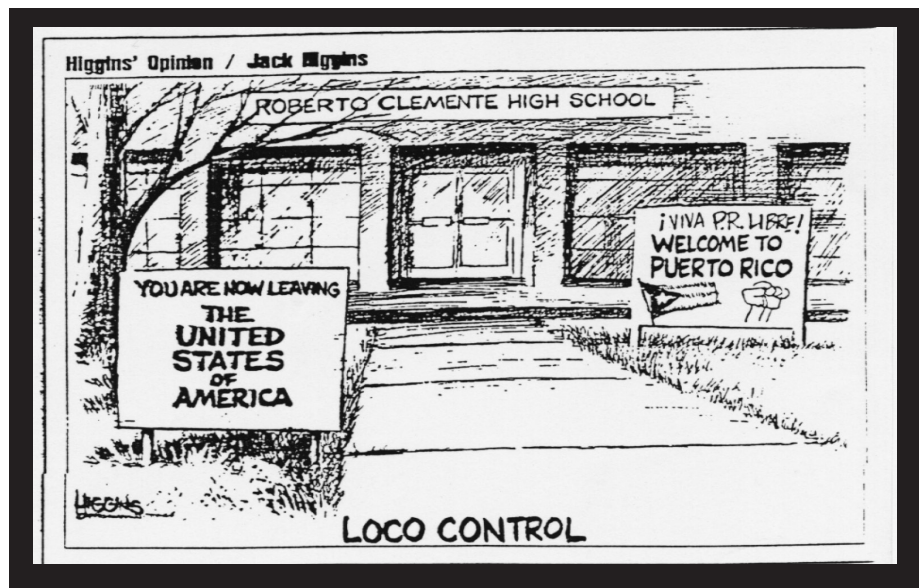
By the mid-1970s, the lion's share of FBI attention in Chicago focused on the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC).

### **A PLANT SETTLES IN CHICAGO**

The FBI found in Marrero a hard worker and a malleable, ingratiating person who un-

José E. López, Executive Director of the PRCC and leader of the pro-independence organization, the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional. López was a long-time FBI target as a result of his leadership position in the independence movement in the diaspora, as well as his staunch resistance to government efforts to destroy

political prisoners serving the equivalent of life in prison for seditious conspiracy, a political charge for conspiring to overthrow or to destroy by force the Government of the United States in Puerto Rico. Not only did Marrero insinuate himself into the leadership core of the community; even more perversely, he insinuated himself into an activist family. He married Evelyn Rodríguez, whose sisters—Lucy and Alicia—were then political prisoners, and whose mother, Josefina, was a spokesperson for the international freedom campaign for her daughters and the other political prisoners. As if that were not sufficient, he readily abandoned his wife and their daughter after causing profound damage to the PRCC and other organizations, where he also sowed discord and division.



derstood the key role Chicago's Puerto Rican community played in the independence movement and in the diaspora. The FBI hoped to use him to disrupt, destroy and neutralize this work. Lying about his educational and professional credentials, Marrero moved from Puerto Rico and settled in Chicago. Over time, he worked his way close to

the movement. This included going to jail for refusing to testify at a 1977 federal grand jury investigating the movement. He is also the brother of Oscar López Rivera, then wanted by the FBI for clandestine activities as part of the FALN. José E. López was also a key architect of the campaign for the release of the two generations of Puerto Rican

### **MARRERO ORCHESTRATES 1992 BOMBING**

Marrero knew that the campaign for the release of the Puerto Rican political prisoners had amplified and grown beyond the initial anchoring support of militant independentistas and allies of con-



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science. To foment discord in the campaign and the movement, he began to bait activists by claiming that the PRCC leadership had “gone soft” and abandoned its militant politics for electoral politics. Marrero then began to lure disaffected activists to promote Puerto Rican independence through violent means. Well aware that the issue of clandestine armed struggle was controversial and would adversely affect the growing support and the possibility of winning presidential commutation for the political prisoners, he formed a clandestine organization, the Frente Revolucionario Boricua (FRB, Boricua Revolutionary Front). Among those he recruited was José Solís Jordán, a DePaul University professor who Marrero had “befriended,” as well as other community activists. Of course, none of those Marrero recruited were aware that he was an FBI agent-provocateur.

In the name of his pseudo organization, Marrero planted two pipe bombs at a military recruiting center on December 10, 1992, in Chicago. One explosive started a fire. No

one was hurt or killed. Years later, as the statute of limitations was set to expire, Marrero, under the direction of the FBI, wore a wiretap to record Solís making incriminating

then revealed its main objective: it offered to drop all charges against Solís on the condition that he name José E. López as the intellectual author of the bombing.



*Rafael Marrero with  
US Congressman Mario Diaz Balart*



*Rafael Marrero with  
Ramiro Cavazas, CEO of the  
US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce*



*Rafael Marrero with US Senator Rick Warren*

statements about the action. Soon after, Solís was charged with conspiracy, attempted destruction of government property and illegal possession of explosives. The FBI

As is the case with government informants, the prosecution’s case against Solís rested on Marrero’s testimony. For this, he received not only immunity from prosecution,

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but also cash payments in excess of \$100,000, among other benefits. The FBI essentially bought his testimony. During the trial, Marrero admitted to planning and executing the

rero' word - an FBI plant -- the jury found Prof. Solís guilty on all counts. He was sentenced to 51 months in prison, leaving his wife alone to support their five children.

ment of José Solís Jordán. He also aided the FBI in a wave of grand juries, supposedly to investigate the 1992 bombing. The U.S. government has a long and shameful history of using the grand jury as a repressive tool to coerce people to testify against their own movements and to jail them if they refuse to be used as the government's political pawns. U.S. authorities, and Marrero, were well aware of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement's proud history of resistance to the grand jury. Marrero supplied the FBI with the names of several other Chicago-based independentistas, including Juan Marcos Vilar, Diana Vázquez and Ruben Rivera, who were among several subsequently subpoenaed to a federal grand jury. Vilar, a respected teacher at the local Roberto Clemente High School, was at the time the chair of the national committee in the U.S. for the release of the Puerto Rican political prisoners. Fortunately, no one went to jail, although the subpoenas sowed anger and fear in the community.



Scott

Rafael Marrero

bombing, claiming Solís' participation. Solís vehemently denied any role in the bombing and challenged the FBI's claim that he had confessed to the action. Largely on Mar-

### **THE FBI & GRAND JURY**

Marrero's work for the FBI did not end with the bombing and subsequent imprison-



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## THE PROPAGANDA OF EL PITO

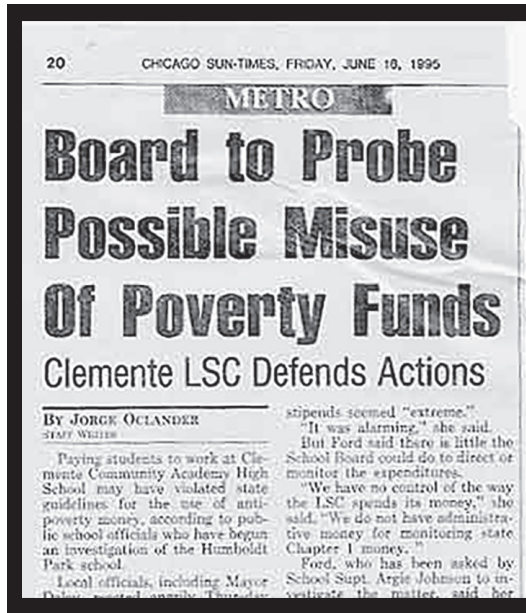
Using a staple COINTELPRO tactic, Marrero, again at the FBI's direction, assembled a team that included right-wing, pro-statehood interests, real estate developers interested in furthering the gentrification of the community, and disaffected criminal elements

the local school reform movement and the campaign to free the Puerto Rican political prisoners.

## CONTROVERSY AT ROBERTO CLEMENTE HIGH SCHOOL

Roberto Clemente High School, in the heart of Chica-

racist teachers, Clemente's LSC developed an innovative school reform plan. Drawing on critical pedagogy, the plan had four objectives: 1) to develop a curriculum that addressed the needs and aspirations of its youth; 2) build a program that emphasized self-discipline (with the idea to end the presence of profes-



RAFAEL MARRERO AT DEMONSTRATION, CIRCA 1992



COVER OF AN ISSUE OF "EL PITO"

in the community, to anonymously publish and distribute a vulgar broadside known as El Pito. Littered across the community, it used "fake news" and lewd cartoons to mock and defame José E. López and other leaders and local elected officials. Through El Pito and Marrero, the FBI sought to undermine the credibility of individuals and organizations that supported

go's Puerto Rican community, emerged from a long battle by Puerto Rican parents and activists. In the late 1980s, the Local School Council (LSC) Reform of 1988 gave the LSC the authority to set budget priorities, develop school improvement plans and, most importantly, the power to hire and fire principals. Strengthened by struggles against

sional security); 3) transform the local school council into a real instrument of democratic government; and 4) transform the school into an effective community of support services.

The FBI made these school reforms the unlikely target for its next round of repression, insidiously seeking to delegit-

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imize the community's ambitious plan for its school. Once again, Marrero served as a key player. He alleged that the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional had misappropriated Chapter I state anti-poverty funds through the LSC. These funds, he charged, were used to finance the independence movement and the campaign to free the political prisoners. He also claimed that there was a "huge patronage scam" to employ parents to monitor the school instead of security officers and metal detectors. Armed with Marrero's allegations, a conservative local state representative ideologically opposed to Puerto Rican independence launched a state investigation and public hearings.

The prosecutor at the hearings, former assistant federal prosecutor Steven A. Miller, who had a history of persecuting the Puerto Rican independence movement, refused to allow Marrero to respond to questions about Marrero's relationship with the FBI, posed

by State Rep. Constance "Connie" A. Howard, the only African-American member of the nine person panel. Miller responded falsely stating

to produce any evidence that the Roberto Clemente High School's LSC violated the state requirements governing the use of Chapter I monies.

To the contrary, the evidence showed that the Chicago Public Schools approved the LSC's use of Chapter I funds, and that the use of the funds was well within the existing guidelines for Chapter I use. While an audit of Clemente did find some irregularities in documentation and equipment inventories verifying Chapter I expenditures, there was no evidence of any illegal activity, and no evidence that these

irregularities were the product of a conspiracy by Puerto Rican independentistas. Nonetheless, the investigation and hearings, widely covered in the local press, with hysterical headlines like "School Funds Used to Push Terrorists' Release," cast a dark shadow over the school reform and severely undermined reputations of school administrators, teachers, community leaders, and the PRCC.



that he didn't know whether Marrero was involved in FBI investigative activities -- he most certainly did know -- and arguing that any such information should remain secret. In order to keep Marrero's relationship with the FBI from being exposed, the hearings were terminated.

The investigation and hearings, which cost over 1 million in taxpayer dollars and empaneled four or five grand jurors from 1992 to 2002, failed

## WHERE WE ARE TODAY

Today, after years of feeding at the FBI trough, Marrero lives comfortably in Miami, touting himself as the chief operating officer of a premier business management consulting company to assist minority businesses in accessing federal government contracts and funding. Now rooted in a new "community" of ultra conservative Florida Cubans, he boasts of having worked directly for the son of Jorge Más Canosa, the man who the CIA trained for the Bay of Pigs and who founded the Cuban American National Foundation, his life dedicated to trying to overthrow the Cuban Revolution. Not surprisingly, the ingratiating Marrero used his company's social media to cheer the death of Fidel Castro, and to seek out advantageous photo opportunities, such as with Florida Congressman Díaz Balart. Even as Marrero has apparently moved on from his betrayal of Chicago's Puerto Rican community, the PRCC and its leaders have struggled for years to repair the individual and organizational reputations he sullied. They have worked to rebuild relationships that infiltration and government

cooperation undermined. They have labored to reimagine the PRCC and become an organization that foundations could trust with grant monies, so that they may continue to provide much needed services. These post-Marrero efforts at repairing, rebuilding and reimagining, while arduous,



have borne fruit. Most of the Puerto Rican political prisoners -- including Marrero's two sisters-in-law -- were released by presidential commutation in 1999. The PRCC has never been stronger, with fifteen programs providing services to the community, including the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School, serving youth pushed out of Chicago Public Schools; the Consuelo Lee Corretjer Child Care Center; El Rescate, a shelter for LBGTQI youth; Vida/SIDA, a pioneering HIV/AIDS prevention program; and many more programs and services.

Today, progressive and radical organizations are swelling

with activists seeking an end to the colonial and systemic racism that defines this country's history. Fake news, bogus charges, and the targeting of community activists by media and legal means are on the rise. With these new agendas for change, and #BLM and #DefundPolice protests and struggles continuously in the news, making headlines such as the New York Times, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," government use of the infamous tactics of COINTELPRO and

the repression of liberatory community activism is sure to increase. As such, it is important to return to the rarely discussed and vaguely remembered history of FBI repression against Chicago's Puerto Rican independence movement. This history offers important lessons for today's movements and our collective future.

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*The National Boricua Human Rights Network is composed of Puerto Ricans in the US and their supporters that educates and mobilizes the Puerto Rican community, the broader Latin American community and other people of conscience regarding issues of justice, peace, and human rights.*