

Former career US diplomat charged with secretly spying for Cuban intelligence for decades



A former American diplomat who served as U.S. ambassador to Bolivia has been arrested in a long-running FBI counterintelligence investigation, accused of secretly serving as an agent of Cuba's government, The Associated Press has learned.

AP

BY JOSHUA GOODMAN AND ERIC TUCKER

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MIAMI (AP) — A [former American diplomat](#) who served as U.S. ambassador to Bolivia has been charged with serving as a secret agent for Cuba's intelligence services dating back decades, the Justice Department said Monday.

Newly unsealed court papers allege that Manuel Rocha engaged in "clandestine activity" on Cuba's behalf since at least 1981, including by meeting with Cuban intelligence operatives and providing false information to U.S. government officials about his travels and contacts.

The complaint, filed in federal court in Miami, charges Rocha with crimes including acting as an illegal agent of a foreign government and provides a vivid case study in what American officials say are long-standing efforts by Cuba and its notoriously sophisticated intelligence services to target government officials who can be flipped.

The 73-year-old Rocha, who was arrested at his Miami home Friday, was due in court later Monday and it was not immediately clear whether he had a lawyer.

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His two-decade career as a U.S. diplomat included top posts in Bolivia, Argentina and the U.S. Interests Section in Havana in the mid-1990s. The Justice Department did not reveal how Rocha attracted the attention of Cuba's intelligence operatives nor did it detail what information he may have provided while he was in government.

The charging document traces Rocha's illegal ties to Cuba back to 1981, when he first joined the State Department, to well after his departure from the federal government, when he took on lucrative private sector jobs — most recently as a senior business adviser to an international public relations firm.

The FBI learned about the relationship last year and arranged a series of undercover encounters in downtown Miami between Rocha and someone purporting to be a Cuban intelligence operative.

During one such meeting, the affidavit says, Rocha said he had been directed by the government's intelligence services to "lead a normal life" and had created the "legend," or artificial persona, "of a right-wing person."

"I always told myself, 'The only thing that can put everything we have done in danger is — is ... someone's betrayal, someone who may have met me, someone who may have known something at some point,'" Rocha said, according to the charging document.

In another meeting last year, Rocha referred to Cuba shooting down two unarmed planes sent by the Miami-based group of exiles Brothers to the Rescue in which four opponents of Castro's government were killed in 1996.

There's no indication in the complaint that Rocha aided the Cubans with the military operation — a major flashpoint in more than [a half-century of brinksmanship](#) between the communist-ruled island and its right-wing opponents in Miami. But at the time he served as a senior political officer at the U.S. special interest section in Havana.

"I lived through it, because I was in charge," Rocha said. "That was a time of a lot of tension."

Born in Colombia, Rocha was raised in a working-class home in New York City and went on to obtain a succession of liberal arts degrees from Yale, Harvard and Georgetown before joining the foreign service in 1981.

He was the top U.S. diplomat in Argentina between 1997 and 2000 as a decadelong currency stabilization program backed by Washington was unraveling under the weight of huge foreign debt and stagnant growth, triggering a political crisis that would see the South American country cycle through five presidents in two weeks.

At his next post as ambassador to Bolivia, he intervened directly into the 2002 presidential race, warning weeks ahead of the vote that the U.S. would cut off assistance to the poor South American country if it were to elect former coca grower Evo Morales.

“I want to remind the Bolivian electorate that if they vote for those who want Bolivia to return to exporting cocaine, that will seriously jeopardize any future aid to Bolivia from the United States,” Rocha said in a speech that was widely interpreted as an attempt to sustain U.S. dominance in the region.

The gambit angered Bolivians and gave Morales a last-minute boost. When he was finally elected three years later, the leftist leader expelled Rocha’s successor as chief of the diplomatic mission for inciting “civil war.”

Rocha also served in Italy, Honduras, Mexico and the Dominican Republic, and worked as a Latin America expert for the National Security Council.

After his retirement from the State Department, Rocha began a second career in business, serving as the president of a gold mine in the Dominican Republic partly owned by Canada’s Barrick Gold.

More recently, he’s held senior roles at XCoal, a Pennsylvania-based coal exporter; Clover Leaf Capital, a company formed to facilitate mergers in the

cannabis industry; law firm Foley & Lardner; and Spanish public relations firm Llorente & Cuenca.

John Feeley, who ended a long diplomatic career serving as U.S. ambassador to Panama, said he was “saddened and shocked that my former mentor turned out to be a career Cuban mole.”

Feeley, who retired from the State Department over differences with President Donald Trump’s administration, said that the last time he saw Rocha he was surprised by how a diplomat who had served administrations of both parties had so fully embraced Trump’s brand of politics.

“It is beyond ironic that he cultivated this cartoonish persona and that everyone apparently bought it,” he said.