



BRIEFING

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# Havana Syndrome or Washington Syndrome?

Dr José Ramón Cabañas Rodríguez

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MEMO Publishers  
Oasis Business Centre  
468 Church Lane  
London NW9 8UA  
t: +44 (0)20 8838 0231  
e: [info@memopublishers.com](mailto:info@memopublishers.com)  
w: [www.memopublishers.com](http://www.memopublishers.com)

## Havana Syndrome or Washington Syndrome?

### Dr José Ramón Cabañas Rodríguez

Jose Ramon Cabañas Rodriguez is the director of the Research Centre for International Policy (CIP), Havana, Cuba.

Rodriguez served in the Cuban diplomatic service for 37 years. In the domestic service, he has been deputy director of the US and Canada at MINREX, director of consular affairs and of Cubans residing abroad, director of document management and deputy minister of foreign relations. In the external service, he served in Canada and was ambassador to Austria, Slovenia and Croatia, permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, head of the Cuban interests section in Washington, and later Ambassador to the US.

He has been a member of a number of Cuban delegations to the United Nations General Assembly.



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A man with alcohol on his breath enters a room where students gather and beats one of the young men. Again and again, he demands that the young man acknowledge the paternity of the child that his daughter carries in her womb. The young man receives so many blows that he is exhausted. When the offended assailant returns home, he discovers that the pregnancy test that he found in his daughter's room was not hers, but instead belonged to a neighbour.

This simple anecdote could illustrate the history of health symptoms that some US officials in Havana began to report and link to an alleged attack, just as the presidential elections that brought Donald Trump to power in Washington were held. The exceptional events were raised within the embassy by a few staff members that were not related to diplomatic functions. Later, the alleged malaise spread to a broader group of employees.

On 17 February, 2017, the then-US chargé d'affaires in Havana sent a complaint to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX) about alleged "attacks" against his staff, which had theoretically occurred since November of the previous year. There was no talk at that time of diseases or symptoms. Immediately, Cuban experts began to investigate, without ever questioning why the information was not shared with them from day one.

Paradoxically, those affected did not go to receive medical attention in the clinics where they were always treated in Havana, the same way their Cuban counterparts in Washington had done until then, and continue to do so today.

Five days after the first report, Cuban officials met with the head of security at the US Embassy and realised that he was not aware of what was happening

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among the people he was supposed to protect. A few hours later, this individual's name appeared on a list of alleged victims of the so-called attacks, and was subsequently evacuated to the US.

Cuba willingly offered to collaborate in the clarification of facts, indicating that cooperation with US agencies was key. Expediently, protection measures for diplomats' headquarters and residences were strengthened, and new communication channels were opened.

At the request of the highest level of the Government of Cuba, a police investigation was initiated, and an inter-institutional and interdisciplinary scientific committee of experts was appointed to analyse the reports. The investigations concluded that there was no evidence to demonstrate any attack and that such a wide variety of symptoms could not be attributed to a common cause.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) visited Havana four times to conduct its own analysis with complete freedom. Their conclusions coincided with the opinion of Cuban experts that there was no evidence of attacks. However, the State Department rejected the FBI's proposal to conduct part of the investigation at the [Centres for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) in Atlanta, which also had long-standing scientific exchange experience with Cuban counterparts.

Meanwhile, from January 2017 until the middle of the same year, officials of the US Embassy in Havana requested a large number of visas on behalf of close relatives or friends to allow them to travel to the island, and also covered the procedures to travel to other Cuban provinces for touristic purposes on countless occasions. This behaviour did not correspond with the attitude of a group that feels subjected to any external harassment.

In private diplomatic meetings, US officials in both Washington and Havana used the term "attacks" to refer to inexplicable events, while their Cuban counterparts warned against hasty conclusions and urged the delivery of concrete evidence.

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All the limited information transferred to the Cuban side through the diplomatic channel seemed designed to mislead and document inaccurate facts. On one occasion, it was a small-scale map of the city of Havana with large red dots in different locations, which did not specify the exact place where the narrated event could have taken place. In another instance, there were recordings of strange sounds that, when measured and compared with other recordings, indicated that they corresponded to the hum of common insects on the island.

After the Cuban diplomatic security service agreed with the US Embassy on a mechanism to alert the authorities in real-time about the occurrence of the incidents, on several occasions it was not employed at all, and on other occasions, the information arrived very late.

The State Department limited itself to a brief line of messages: something had happened in Havana, and the Cuban side had to explain it, even without them precisely stating what had happened. In sporting terms, it was the closest thing to a shooting practice against a moving target.

The US Government then began to transfer a group of US officials and their families from Havana, who paradoxically made public their misunderstanding of the measure and their desire to return to their posts. That is to say, they did not share the theory of the attacks, or at least considered them of such relative importance that they could afford to return. However, they were denied this possibility, and most were quickly redeployed to other functions.

In August, and with the same level of imprecision with which the subject had been dealt with until then, the news made its way to the US media. Months later, another journalist coined the term of an alleged syndrome associated with the name of the Cuban capital. Consequently, and in a disciplined fashion, then put together theories and speculations based on statements and alleged leaks, intentionally inaccurate and sensationalist, from various official federal sources.

When the press reports of that time are reviewed, it can be seen that the information about the alleged attacks was disseminated to the American public through specific journalists and media outlets; the rest only echoed without

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asking uncomfortable questions or questioning the official story. Cuban officials located and spoke with the directors of these media outlets, who could never deny that their journalists were being used by unidentified sources from the US Government, who created more confusion without seeking an explanation. Nor could they justify the periodic reiteration of the issue, despite there being nothing new to report.

There was speculation about [alleged weapons used in the attacks generating sounds waves](#), of which there are no records of manufacturers, plans or fingerprints. They were awarded unproven capabilities, unproven by science.

In the absence of consensus on a possible “murder weapon”, there was then talk of likely protagonists of the attacks, who without anyone documenting that they existed, could be “dissident” forces among Cuban officials who, by the way, gained absolutely nothing by damaging the bilateral relationship, or third country actors. In any case, the real dissent was in Washington, among those who wanted to [reverse President Barack Obama’s policy towards Cuba](#) and were in great need of a good argument, tangible or not, to begin taking measures to guarantee the process of regression.

Before long, a significant portion of the American public believed both in “sonic attacks” and that McDonalds and Coca Cola constitute a healthy diet.

It was Cuba and not the US that requested a meeting of foreign ministers to discuss the matter, held in Washington on 26 September, 2017. At the meeting, it was evident that the highest level of the State Department was not informed of the details of the investigations that the FBI had conducted in Havana.

It was striking that then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, a former senior executive at ExxonMobil, a company where millions of dollars are spent in the search for fossil fuels, only if there is hard and pure evidence that it is located in specific beds, proceeded to damage the bilateral relationship with Cuba without any material proof.

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During that visit to Washington DC, the Cuban foreign minister directly presented his arguments in Congress to eight senators and the minority leadership of the House of Representatives, and these counterparts appreciated the exchange. Until then, Congress had held (and did so later on) several private hearings on the subject, but absolutely none of them offered useful data from the Government, not even under the veil of the most hermetic legislative secrecy.

From Capitol Hill, the Cuban minister departed for the [National Press Club](#), where he met with a prominent group of US reporters covering foreign policy. The Cuban minister then asked a long list of questions about the inconsistencies in the case, which still remain unanswered to this day. The impact of his presentation in the US press, however, was marginal.

In successive subsequent exchanges, the State Department acknowledged that it had no information on the medical preconditions of its diplomats before leaving for Cuba, or other destinations, so it could not affirm, nor rule out, which symptoms presented by several recently arrived officials (who were dissimilar) to Havana had no cause in a condition that they suffered from well before. However, the State Department needed to give some veil of credibility to such inconsistency, and an article finally appeared in the [Journal of the American Medical Association \(JAMA\)](#) conveying that, although it was written to give a scientific nuance to the accusation against Cuba, it nevertheless added more doubts to what had already been said, and did not raise a conclusive thesis. The Cuban side did not even have to question it because the editorial board of the publication was in charge of it, while the same edition distanced itself from the text.

As Cuba continued to insistently request a meeting between scientists from both parties to analyse the issue, it was only in 2018 that the State Department agreed to allow a group of officials from that agency to welcome an official Cuban delegation. The latter presented all the inconsistencies in the case, while the US side always replied with passages taken from the [JAMA article](#). However, in a show of uncommon professional solidity for the time, the US

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employees made it clear that they never proposed to the leadership of the federal agency to refer to the events in question as “attacks”.

On that occasion, the Cuban experts took the initiative to meet in person with renowned US counterparts in specialisms related to the case, from neurology to psychiatry. There was complete agreement in the approach from both parties. In the absence of finding a venue to host a press conference to present the results of the debate, the Cuban Embassy summoned media leaders who had followed the issue for many months. There was a lively exchange of questions and answers, the journalists wrote their dispatches, but their respective editors did not consider the content to be newsworthy that day and little was published.

At this point, perhaps it is worth presenting a sample of questions that scientists and observers from various countries (not just Cuba) raised early on:

*Dr Colleen G. Le Prell, director of the audiology programme at the University of Texas: “The audiologist community wonders what the cause of the symptoms could be described in these cases because no one has a good explanation for it... The sudden onset of hearing loss without an audible source is very unusual.” (Newsweek, 29 August, 2017).*

*Andrew Oxenham, psychologist at the Laboratory of Auditory Perception and Cognition at the University of Minnesota: “I cannot explain to myself that disease and hearing loss are related to sound... There is no way that an acoustic device can cause hearing damage using inaudible sounds. You cannot stimulate the inner ear in a way that could cause harm.” (BuzzFeed News, 30 August, 2017).*

*James Jauchem, retired biologist and scientist who investigated the biological effects of acoustic energy in the US Air Force research laboratory: “The elements that researchers have to declare that it is an acoustic weapon are not known.” (The Verge, 16 September, 2017).*

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Joe Pompei, former Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher, founder and president of Holosonics: "There has never been any kind of physiological response that reflects the symptoms that have been reported caused by sound waves of any kind." (*Business Insider*, 29 September 2017).

Jurgen Altmann, physicist at the Technische Universitat Dortmund in Germany: "I would say that it is quite implausible... I do not know of any acoustic effects that can cause symptoms of concussion." (*The New York Times*, 5 October, 2017).

Jun Qin, acoustic engineer at Southern Illinois University: "Sound through the air cannot shake your head... Ultrasounds cannot travel a long distance." (*The New York Times*, 5 October, 2017).

Adam Rogers, journalist for the publication *Wired*, specialising in technological issues, pointed out: "The adventures of the encounter between 007 and the X-Files in Cuba continue." (*Wired*, 5 October, 2017).

The opinions in agreement were endless and continue to be four years later. There came a time when the creators of the syndrome jumped from the sonic explanation of the attacks because it was becoming unsustainable, to [speculation about microwaves](#), which also became unsustainable according to science.

The already-coined "[Havana Syndrome](#)" was a useful argument for the US before its own public opinion and third parties to justify the closure of the consular services of its embassy in the Cuban capital. It also helped to vindicate the discontinuation of immigration and citizenship services there, to decline the Cuban diplomatic presence in Washington, the issuing of travel alerts to Cuba, the reduction of the flow of visitors to the destination and putting into question the commitment of the Cuban authorities regarding security for foreign diplomats on their territory.

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But what would Cuba have gained if it had actually harassed US officials in some way? Could anyone in their right mind consider that the Cuban authorities wanted a regression in the bilateral relationship that could additionally lead to new blockade measures?

There was no crime, no victims, no evidence, no murder weapon and no motive either. So, on what was the accusation based that was launched against Cuba?

Tillerson then retired from the State Department, and the new Secretary of State Mike Pompeo assumed the role, expressing: "The precise nature of the injuries suffered by the affected personnel is unknown, and if there is a common cause for all the cases, it has not yet been settled down." But Pompeo came from running the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the agency to which most of those insisting they had been attacked belonged.

For some months, the alleged attacks appeared to be a bilateral issue between the US and Cuba, and, if a third party was referred to, it was in terms of "some power interested in harming US officials," which, as a result of new speculation, was identified as Russia.

However, the official US narrative took an unexpected turn when a US official displayed symptoms of the syndrome - some distance from the Caribbean - in China in April 2018. Curiously, there were no excesses in the conduct of the State Department, and none of the measures implemented in the case of Cuba, still in force, were taken against the Asian nation. Although other US officials in the same country tried to join the epidemic of attacks, the official version only registered one, and soon it was no longer in the headlines.

The story was made even more unlikely when two different people were registered as showing symptoms of the "[Havana Syndrome](#)" in the US in April 2021, and later, other US officials in Germany and Austria joined in August 2021. In these events, Washington did not demand additional security from



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Berlin or Vienna (or from itself) for the comfort of its nationals, nor was the flow of national visitors to those destinations reduced.

Suppose all the speculations that were woven regarding Cuba were true. How is it now possible to explain that an evil power moved through half the world, including the US capital, with a “weapon” that was calculated to be the size of a war tank, which would have to emit a sound intense enough to cause brain damage, with a directional ability so perfected that it would only hit selected people and not those who were a few metres from the target?

And the inevitable happened, the theory that was created to damage relations with a foreign country was used by the alleged victims to file lawsuits in US courts under the accusation that the State Department and other agencies did not adequately protect their employees. The hunter became the hunted.

All this time, Cuba observed an attitude of total attachment to science, sharing the opinions and analyses of Cuban experts who analysed, studied and exchanged the limited information available and offered cooperation without launching unsupported speculations. However, after a long period of facing the only punitive measures that Washington implemented for the “attacks”, there is the right to think about some generalisations.

Most of the official victims are not diplomats, but are linked to US intelligence agencies. They shared physical and isolated spaces in their country’s embassies abroad, but also specific technology in their workplaces and common habits, conditions and demands that surely forced them to face intense mental and emotional stress.

It would be worthwhile for US agencies to spend more time on introspective exercises, and if they are unwilling to do so, at least show a more coherent attitude towards tackling the problem as a whole. If none of this is possible, it would be expected that they could rectify what they inherited from the previous administration, implemented with the frank purpose of causing an irreversible setback in the bilateral relationship with Cuba.

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Thanks to the professional declassification work of the [US National Security Archive](#), in February 2021, three reports were published on Havana Syndrome written by the Department of State, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine](#). All of them reflected on what happened regarding the issue during the Trump years: the lack of cooperation of the employers’ agencies of those affected with whom they carried out the investigations, no access to those involved, the decisions precipitated by political motivations and the absence of a theory to explain the attribution of diverse symptoms to a common cause.

In particular, the aforementioned State Department report suggested that Trump’s decision to dismantle the Havana Embassy in early 2018, in response to alleged “sonic attacks” against his diplomatic staff, was a plagued political “response”, a total mismanagement, a lack of coordination and non-compliance with regulations. The same text revealed that the former president decided to reduce 60 per cent of the consular staff in Havana and deactivate the operation of the embassy without having any proof that Cuba was behind the mysterious health problems affecting its officials.

[The report stated](#): “The decision to draw down the staff in Havana does not appear to have followed standard Department of State procedures and was neither preceded nor followed by any formal analysis of the risks and benefits of continued physical presence of US government employees in Havana.”

The confession of parties, and the relief of evidence.

We will agree that the next time someone demands proof of paternity, they must first show the evidence of a pregnancy, or, at the very least, not resort to extreme positions.

**MEMO**●

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