

from The Nation . March 8, 1993 Beat the Devil JANET RENO'S COERCED CONFESSION by Alexander Cockburn

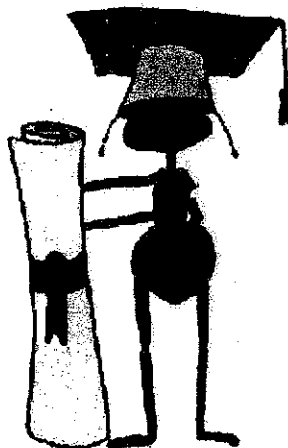
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Beat the Devil

JANET RENO'S COERCED CONFESSION
by Alexander Cockburn

Janet Reno used a 17-year-old undocumented Honduran worker to help her win a fierce re-election battle for Dade County prosecutor back in 1984. Ileana Fuster, the young woman in question, received a ten-year prison sentence as a reward for testifying against her husband, Francisco, who pulled six life terms plus 165 years.

What is troublesome here is the manner in which Clinton's nominee for A.G. pressured Ileana to turn against her husband. If outlined in a human rights report the methods endorsed by Reno would justly be called brainwashing. They included isolation, quasi-hypnosis, conditioned response and kindred mind-bending techniques.

Having presided over the reduction of the young Honduran woman to psychic flotsam, Reno then huddled next to her, holding her hand while the prosecutor's hired "psychologists" guided Ileana through the catechism that produced her own confession and her husband's ruin.

The Country Walk case in Miami was a benchmark in the growth of our own century's echo of the Salem witch trials, the "ritual abuse" persecutions that have landed scores of innocent people in prison with hard time. It began less than a year after the McMartin preschool case started in Los Angeles in 1983 [see "Beat the Devil," February 12, 1990]. The account of it that follows is drawn from a compelling report by Debbie Nathan, now being published in Issues in Child Abuse Accusations (Vol. 5, No. 1, available by calling 501-645-8881). Another account of the case, Unspeakable Acts, by Jan Hollingsworth, and an ABC docudrama based on her book are both seriously flawed by Hollingsworth's financial, political and personal ties to parents and investigators involved in the prosecution.

In 1984 Francisco Fuster, a 36-year-old Cuban immigrant, was running a home-based babysitting service with Ileana in the wealthy Miami suburb of Country Walk. The case began when a

3-year-old boy asked his mother to "kiss my body. Ileana kisses all the babies' bodies."

As a Miami-based anthropologist, Rafael Martinez, consultant to the Dade County Medical Examiner's Office, told Nathan, in traditional Latin American cultures "kissing and hugging is common with children up to three and four years old. It is common for females to kiss children all over the place -- including on the genitals."

In the North American culture of those early Reagan years, on the other hand, adults were learning that kissing and hugging of young children, or even more genteel contact with them in a day-care center, could swiftly lead to charges of oral copulation, sodomy, forced consumption of mind-altering drugs and alcohol, anal penetration with a crucifix, obscene magic ritual, unregulated transport of minors by broomstick across state lines and kindred phantasms of the circuit riders of Satanic abuse.

All this lay in store for the Fusters, whose clientele were soon being interviewed by Joseph and Laurie Braga, retained by the state as "expert" interrogators of children, though their skills were most conspicuously displayed in hectoring their tiny subjects and forcing them with remorseless leading questions into following a predetermined agenda of incrimination.

Nathan's transcription of one such interrogation -- in which 4-year-old "J.L." bravely insists, in the face of outrageous leading questions by Mrs. Braga, on the Fusters' kindness and proper behavior -- is searing. Bullied and cajoled, "J.L." finally accepts the prepared script. God help the psyches of all these involuntary bearers of false testimony.

The Dade County prosecutor's office soon found out that Francisco had done time in New York for manslaughter, and had also been convicted of lewd assault for fondling a 9-year-old girl. On the other hand, his ex-wife denied he had exhibited any paraphilia, and other family members said his relations with children were affectionate, nonviolent and nonsexual. With one exception, no child lodged at the Fusters' displayed any physical sign of sexual molestation. The exception, Francisco's son, was deemed to have tested positive for gonorrhea of the throat. I say "deemed" because Nathan reports that the testing method then in vogue has since turned out to be utterly unreliable. Three years after Fuster's conviction researchers at the Centers for Disease Control showed that the test could not distinguish the gonorrhea culture from others occurring normally in both adult and juvenile throats (irrespective of sexual activity). When the C.D.C. examined samples from children who had supposedly tested positive for the bacterium that causes venereal gonorrhea, more than a third of the samples turned out to contain a different organism. The Fuster child's sample was destroyed before a retrospective analysis of it could be made.

Darkness at Noon

Throughout the interrogations the Fusters vehemently insisted on their innocence, and the case was threatening to become a

political liability for Reno. In her re-election campaign against a strong challenger she was promising "justice" -- that is, convictions.

Nathan gives an admirable account of how Reno's political emergency dovetailed with a crisis for the Fusters' defense attorney, Michael Yon Zamft, who was finding that public hysteria over the Country Walk affair was imperiling his larger career ambitions. His solution was to sever Ileana's case from Francisco's and "persuade" her to confess that yes, she was an abuser, but only because she had been acting under duress. Francisco's defender thus became his prosecutor. The only inhibition to this agenda was Ileana. She told a chaplain at the jail where she was being held that the district attorney and her lawyer wanted her to say things about her husband that weren't true. Ileana was terrified of being held in solitary. She'd already experienced such treatment during the first seven months of her imprisonment, sometimes being kept naked under a "suicide watch," and she found it unendurable. By the summer of 1985 she was back in isolation again. Although she had now been separated from her husband for a period as long as they had been married prior to her arrest eleven months -- Ileana, eight weeks into solitary, insisted on his innocence.

A psychologist was mustered who duly declared that Ileana was a "needy child" under Francisco's domination. He announced that he could "get her to respond in any way that I pushed her... and she would be interested in pleasing me, so I wouldn't be mad at her." All that was now required was a confession, and Yon Zamft recruited another psychologist, Michael Rappaport, who with his partner, Merry Sue Haber, ran a Miami business called Behavior Changers. You could say that Rappaport had experience in the field, having done time in Fort Leavenworth military prison for adultery and sodomy with two women he was counseling. He himself was ordered by the Florida Department of Professional Review to be under the supervision of a psychologist -- namely his partner, Haber.

Rappaport visited Ileana in her cell at least thirty-four times, putting her through "visualization" exercises, contrasting the lenient treatment she would receive consequent upon a confession with the dire punishments ahead if she were uncooperative. "It's a lot like reverse brainwashing," he later told Nathan. "We just spent hours and hours talking to her.... It's kind of a manipulation. It was very much like dealing with a child. You make them feel very happy, then segue into the hard things."

While this exercise in applied mental disintegration was going on, Ileana was, according to Rappaport, receiving a surprising number of visits from prosecutor Reno, whose involvement in the case had become fanatical.

Ileana broke on August 21, stating during a polygraph test that she and Francisco had molested the children. Confessions were conjured out of her in subsequent depositions, often with Reno holding her hand while Rappaport hugged her. As Nathan puts it, "When viewed chronologically, Ileana's 'confession' depositions also suggest that many of her statements were confabulations or fabrications cued by her jailhouse visitors."

The material in the confessions echoed many of the staples of ritual abuse charges. The Bragas were enthusiastic missionaries for the "discoveries" about such "ritual abuse" then being elicited in the McMartin case in Los Angeles. Reno, similarly obsessed, had already been active in urging changes in evidentiary law to allow the admission of videotaped charges leveled by children and other star-chamber innovations advocated by the burgeoning ritual abuse lobby.

Snakes and Snake Oil

Ileana, prompted and coached by Rappaport, had been led into a world of fantasy. She said Francisco had hung her in the garage by her hands and his son by the ankles, and that he had also rubbed feces on her legs and put snakes on both her and the children's genitals. When a lawyer probed this accusation, she answered, "Well, I remember a snake." "What about a snake?" the lawyer said. "Having bad dreams about it," responded Ileana. If she failed to recollect an atrocity on the stand, Rappaport would take her aside for private counseling and then return her to give the appropriate responses that she remembered "a tool thing" or "crowbar" Francisco put "around" her vagina; that Francisco took a gun and placed it on Ileana's vagina and fired it; that he poured acid on her blouse.

In her statement to the judge Ileana set her confession in perspective: "I am not pleading guilty because I feel guilty... I am innocent of all those charges. I wouldn't have done anything to harm any children... I am pleading guilty to get all of this over... for my own good."

She was sentenced to ten years, served three and a half, and was deported to Honduras, having divorced Francisco while in prison. As have many victims of these persecutions, she turned to "Jesus," was "born again" and is now sequestered from journalistic inquiry by an evangelical cult. Francisco is in prison, still insisting on his innocence, while his nemesis, Janet Reno, heads for Washington.

Meanwhile, the Ritual Abuse Task Force, a subcommittee of Los Angeles County's Commission for Women chaired by "psychologist" Myra Riddell and comprising therapists, alleged victims and religious leaders, recently claimed that Satanists are poisoning them, along with other therapists and survivors of Satanic abuse by means of a pesticide pumped into their offices, homes and cars. They invited the county's chief of toxic epidemiology to listen to their allegations, which he categorized as "outrageous."

It's doubtful Reno will be given any trouble about the Country Walk case in her confirmation hearings, or about a later one involving a Dutch youth, who was similarly isolated for long months before being found innocent of abuse charges. The January/February Ms. has a pseudonymous article once again promoting the ritual abuse myth.

And guess who's behind all this ritual abuse? According to the lore of the ritual abuse lobby, a man called Dr. Green or Greenbaum is the leading promoter of Satanic child abuse in the

United States. As a Hasidic teenager in a concentration camp he supposedly learned the essentials of the cultic lore from the Nazis, adding his own cabalistic embroidery. So, ritual abuse ends up as a subset of anti-Semitism. Pass that cup of Christian blood.

The "Personally" Cop-Out

Aside from her role in the Fuster case I find most bothersome Reno's equable statement at her first news conference after being nominated: "I'm personally opposed to the death penalty... but I probably asked for it as much as many prosecutors in the country, and have secured it, and when the evidence and the law justify the death penalty I will ask for it, as I have consistently...."

The idea used to be that if laws or policies are morally and intellectually repugnant to you, you should reject appointments that will require you to enforce them. Reno's position isn't qualitatively different from that of Adolf Eichmann, who said he had a personal distaste for the Final Solution, though his career situation compelled him to make topological calculations as to how many Jews could be wedged into a cattle car on the way to the death camps.

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Alexander Cockburn's column "Beat the Devil" appears biweekly in The Nation. Subscriptions: \$48 per year to PO Box 10763, Des Moines, IA 50340. Editorial Offices: 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011.

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