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News

Alan Gross: A Prisoner Of The Cold War's Politics, *The Daily Beast*

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By R.M. Sneiderman

After Barack Obama emerged victorious from his bruising reelection campaign, perhaps no one—save the president himself—was more relieved than Alan Gross, a 63-year-old development worker serving a 15-year prison sentence in Havana on charges of trying to undermine the Cuban state. Gross, a former Obama campaign volunteer, filled out his absentee ballot from inside the prison hospital where he often passes his time watching Cuban baseball on television. His hope: with the election now over, the U.S. can negotiate with the Cuban government to get him out of prison.

Ever since Gross was arrested three years ago at a Havana hotel, analysts say talks between the two countries have been mired in Cold War politics. From the beginning, the U.S. government has said that Gross was merely trying to improve Internet access for Cuban Jews. In reality, Gross was setting up wireless networks outside the government's control as part of a provocative program by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Its aim: to promote democracy and weaken the iron grip of the communist state. Taking part in these programs is illegal on the island, yet the Cuban court made bombastic claims, and Gross's imprisonment has been denounced as "arbitrary" in a U.N. ruling to be released later this month.

Havana disputes the U.N. ruling and is still upset about USAID's democracy programs, but Cuban officials have reportedly said they know that Gross was not a spy and are willing to work out a deal to let him go. For more than a year now, Havana has been hinting at a tacit trade: Alan Gross for the Cuban Five, a group of intelligence agents imprisoned in the States for conspiracy to commit espionage, mostly on anti-Castro groups in Florida. With the election now behind him, Obama has some leeway, but a deal remains politically tricky. It could become more difficult if Sen. John Kerry joins the cabinet, thereby elevating Sen. Robert Menendez, a Cuba hardliner, to head the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "Menendez would have considerable clout in blocking the administration's efforts to change policy towards Cuba," said Peter Kornbluh, a Cuba analyst at the National Security Archive, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit.

In the meantime, the Gross family remains frustrated. **Last month, they filed a \$60 million lawsuit against USAID and Development Alternatives, the firm that hired Gross. The complaint says he received inadequate warning about the dangers of his mission, and lacked proper counterintelligence training to prepare him for dealing with the Cuban police state. USAID would not comment on the lawsuit, and Development Alternatives said it was "disappointed" by it. In the three years since he's been in jail, the once jovial and portly Gross has lost more than 100 pounds and has become consumed by his captivity. His elderly mother and daughter have developed cancer, and in a letter to Newsweek, Gross said both sides in this Cold War conflict appear to be blowing smoke. "Either way," he wrote, "smoking is hazardous to my health."**

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