



Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe July 11, 2012

Portugal's Refusal to Extradite George Wright "Indefensible" Opening Remarks of Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman

In September 2011, hopes were raised high when the FBI announced that George Wright, a fugitive for over 41 years, had been located in Portugal and been taken into custody pursuant to a provisional arrest request from the United States. There were hopes for accountability, some justice, and, for the family of the man he murdered in Wall Township in 1962, for at least some closure to a nightmare.

In 1963, George Wright was convicted in connection with a gas station robbery during which Walter Patterson—a decorated World War II veteran and Bronze Star recipient—was beaten and shot to death. Wright was subsequently sentenced to 15 to 30 years but in 1970 escaped from Leesburg State Prison, now renamed Bayside State Prison. In 1972, he and four other men hijacked a Detroit-to-Miami flight – they flew the plane to Algeria, where Algerian authorities allowed them to disappear.

In 1976, four of the hijackers were located and arrested in France. France refused to extradite them to the United States, but tried them in France instead. Following conviction, two of the hijackers spent a mere three years in prison and two others spent 2 1/2 years. George Wright however was not among those caught. For 41 years, George Wright's whereabouts were unknown, and he built a life based on lies and deception.

When George Wright was located in Portugal last year, the Patterson family naturally thought that, as a convicted felon and prison escapee, he would be speedily returned to the United States to finish serving the sentence he received for the murder of Walter Patterson. Portugal after all, is a close ally, committed to the rule of law and has a longstanding extradition agreement with the United States. Shockingly, a Portuguese court rejected the United States' extradition request last November and efforts to reverse that decision have now ceased. The Patterson family, so deeply wounded by the murder of their beloved family member and then by the murderer's escape, now are bewildered—and angry at—Portugal's refusal to extradite George Wright.

Today's hearing will examine what happened in this case, what can be done to promptly return Wright to an American prison, and the broader questions it raises about the international extradition system.

I welcome Ann Patterson, Walter Patterson's daughter—who along with her family—has suffered irreparable harm from the brutal violence committed against her beloved father by George Wright. Words are inadequate to convey my abiding respect, empathy, and condolences to you and your family on your excruciating loss and my deep disappointment in Portugal. Ann will testify that:

“The \$70 that George Wright and Walter McGhee stole wasn’t enough. They had to beat my father beyond recognition. George Wright was identified by the imprints of the stock of his gun on my father’s skin. If there had not been such a beating, the doctors could have operated on the bullet wound to the abdomen and it is quite possible that Daddy would still be with us today.... The funeral home asked for a photo of Daddy so they could make him look like the picture. Does that sound odd to you? My father was unrecognizable in the casket. His wavy black hair with a touch of gray was replaced with straight black hair combed back. His face was all uneven and caked with make-up. I knew he was my Daddy by looking at his hands....George Wright is a convicted murderer who lived a life of violence, then fled and lived a life of lies. Now his past has caught up with him and he needs to come back here and serve his sentence.”

The Commission will also hear from R.J. Gallagher, a retired FBI Special Agent who has done extensive work on the case. And finally, we will hear from Jonathan Winer, Senior Director, APCO Worldwide, Washington, DC, and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Law Enforcement – widely respected for the skill and energy with which, during his tenure in the State Department, he built up the Department’s own capacities in international law enforcement.

On George Wright, Mr. Winer exposes: the utter indefensibility of the Portuguese court’s decision not to extradite George Wright; why Portugal can still do the right thing by revoking his citizenship, which he secured through immigration fraud; how the U.S. can still pursue Wright through INTERPOL.

Mr. Winer suggests—and I plan to follow up on this as well—that “Congress could strengthen the Executive Branch’s ability to analyze and apply these tools in cases of failed extraditions.” He proposes that this “could be facilitated through a Congressional mandate for an annual report on extraditions to Congress covering such issues as total extraditions by country, number of extraditions refused, reasons for refusal of extraditions, and steps taken by the U.S. in response to a refused extradition...”

Finally, let me note that the Commission had requested a representative of the Obama Administration to be here to answer questions on what has—and what can be done to bring George Wright to justice.

The Commission was informed that Bruce Swartz, Deputy Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, wasn’t available for today’s hearing. On

behalf of the Commission I will reissue my request for Mr. Swartz or any other appropriate official from the Administration to testify.

In like manner, the Commission invited the Portuguese Ambassador, Nuno Brito, who was also unavailable due to a scheduling conflict. The Commission will request Ambassador Brito's testimony at a follow-up hearing scheduled around his availability.