



FURTHER REVIEW

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Seventy years ago, four Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire in the U.S. House of Representatives. Five congressmen were wounded.

THE ATTACK

On the morning of March 1, 1954, Lolita Lebrón — a supporter of independence for her native Puerto Rico — and three other nationalists, all of whom had been living in New York, arrived via train at Washington’s Union Station.

They ate lunch and then strolled over to the Capitol Building. Their destination: the visitors’ gallery of the House of Representatives.

A security guard asked Lebrón if she was carrying a camera. Cameras were not allowed in the House gallery. She had no camera, but what the guard didn’t know: They had automatic pistols. And a plan.

The House of Representatives was voting to reauthorize a program that allowed migrant farmworkers to enter the U.S. from Mexico. Lebrón and her accomplices unfurled a Puerto Rican flag and yelled, “Viva Puerto Rico libre!” Then they pulled out their guns and began firing down into the House chamber.

Members of the House scattered. Speaker Joseph Martin, R-Mass., called a recess and ducked behind the rostrum.

More than 30 shots were fired. Five congressmen were hit. One — Alvin Bentley — was hit in the chest. Three heroic young congressional pages carried him to safety.

A congressman and a gallery spectator wrestled the guns away from the shooters. All four were arrested and hauled away in front of newspaper photographers.

The walnut table used by the Republican leadership still bears the scars from the attack.

“To this day, I can still hear those bullets going phht-dut, phht-dut alongside of me — those two bullets that landed above Bill Emerson and one alongside Bill Emerson, who was just eight feet away from me, to my right. I can still hear those bullets hitting that mahogany wall. Phht-dut.”

— Congressional page Bill Goodwin, at left in the photo above



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Rep. Alvin Bentley points to the bullet hole in his chest.

THE WOUNDED

Alvin Bentley (R-Mich.)
Shot in the chest and critically wounded
Served through: 1961
Died: 1969, age 50

Ben F. Jensen (R-Iowa)
Shot in the back
Served through: 1965
Died: 1970, age 77

Clifford Davis (D-Tenn.)
Shot in the leg
Served through: 1965
Died: 1970, age 72

Kenneth A. Roberts (D-Ala.)
Shot in the leg
Served through: 1965
Died: 1989, age 76

George Fallon (D-Md.)
Shot in the hip
Served through: 1971
Died: 1980, age 77

THE PAGES

Two of the 16-year-old pages who carried Bentley to safety later served terms of their own in the House.



Bill Emerson (R-Mo.)
On the right, pointing, in the photo above.
Served: Eight terms from 1981 until his death in 1996



Paul E. Kanjorski (D-Pa.)
Center, with glasses, in the photo above.
Served: 13 terms from 1984 until his defeat in the 2010 election



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Police found a note in Lebrón’s purse: “My life I give for the freedom of my country ... The United States of America are betraying the sacred principles of mankind in their continuous subjugation of my country.”

THE ATTACKERS

The attackers — Lebrón, Rafael Miranda, Irvin Flores Rodriguez, and Andres Cordero — were sentenced to 70-year terms.

In failing health, Cordero — at far right — was released in 1978. The others were released in 1979 after the release of a number of CIA agents that had been captured by Cuba. All four returned to Puerto Rico.



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Three of the four attackers are arrested by Capitol police.