

11 de October, 2022

The Honorable Christopher Coons, Chairman
The Honorable James Lankford, Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Ethics
220 Hart Building
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Investigation into defamation campaign by Senator Marco Rubio

Dear Chairman Coons and Vice Chairman Lankford,

The undersigned file this complaint to denounce unethical and baseless attacks by Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) against us. Senador Rubio has launched a campaign of defamation and intimidation against Carlos Lazo, a high school teacher and U.S. veteran who resides in the state of Washington, and against Puentes de Amor (“Bridges of Love”). Puentes de Amor is a U.S.-based organization founded by Mr. Lazo that promotes diplomacy and peaceful relations between the United States and Cuba. In his attacks, Senator Rubio has targeted not only Mr. Lazo, but U.S. citizens who support Puentes de Amor and participate in monthly car caravans organized to support the lifting of U.S. sanctions imposed on Cuba.

Puentes de Amor educates the public and elected officials about the need for improving the relationship between the Cuban people and the United States. Members of Puentes de Amor and other advocates who support an end to the embargo to Cuba march in caravans every month in different cities across the United States. They protest the decades-long U.S. embargo against Cuba, which was made worse by the 243 additional sanctions added under former president Donald Trump. Puentes de Amor - and its supporters who are being targeted by Mr. Rubio - have asked President Biden to lift U.S. sanctions that prevent Cuban American families from sending money to their families in Cuba, as well as have encouraged the White House to lift travel restrictions that currently prevent and limit Americans from visiting Cuba. In addition, the undersigned support the idea of creating “bridges of love” between the people of Cuba and the U.S. through economic, cultural and scientific cooperation. Finally, Puentes de Amor and its supporters have organized and participated in delivering humanitarian aid to Cuba in the face of an on-going economic and humanitarian crisis, including bringing milk to pediatric hospitals and medical equipment to first responders after a super oil tank explosion in August 2022.

On August 5, 2022, Senator Rubio publicly called for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to investigate Mr. Lazo, his organization and citizens across the country that organize peaceful car caravans on a monthly basis to call attention to U.S. policy towards Cuba.¹ Mr. Lazo is a United States citizen and decorated war veteran of the Iraq war. He served in the U.S.

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<https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2022/8/icymi-rubio-fbi-must-investigate-puentes-de-amor>.

military for 10 years, including his deployment in Iraq. He is an immigrant who has lived in the United States for more than 30 years. Mr. Lazo is a proud U.S. citizen who believes the best way to serve his adoptive country - the United States - is by creating bridges of love between the United States and Cuba. Mr. Lazo - the veteran, teacher, father and U.S. citizen - is a high school educator who believes that the best approach towards his country of origin, Cuba, is through diplomacy, direct bilateral engagement, and peaceful dialogue among our two countries. Mr. Lazo's views that fruitful diplomacy is the most effective policy towards Cuba coincide with that of millions of Americans, over a hundred members of Congress, and former President Obama. Mr. Lazo has testified in the U.S. Senate requesting the lifting of sanctions that, above all, hurt families in both the U.S. and Cuba.

Senator Rubio's baseless attacks and calls for law enforcement investigation against Mr. Lazo and others who support Puentes de Amor, are in essence a persecution campaign to target citizens for peaceful activism simply because they advocate for a policy position different from that of Senator Rubio. While Senator Rubio characterizes Mr. Lazo and Puentes de Amor's peace activism as "spreading communist propaganda," nothing could be further from the truth. Citing absolutely no evidence, besides his own personal disagreement with Puentes de Amor's position in opposition to U.S. sanctions, Senator Rubio's call for law enforcement to directly interfere with and repress protected constitutional activity not only constitutes improper and unethical conduct, but potentially unlawful as well.

The Senate Ethics Manual condemns "improper conduct which may reflect upon the Senate," and notes that such conduct "has provided the basis for the Senate's most serious disciplinary cases in modern times."² This Committee has jurisdiction to investigate all members whose conduct can be deemed improper and which reflects on the institution as a whole. Ensuring that members of the Senate do not abuse their office or powers is incumbent to preserving the integrity of the institution. Senator Rubio's conduct harkens back to the dark era of McCarthyism, where the chambers of the Senate were used by its members to target, harass, defame, silence, persecute and imprison citizens whose political and policy views differed from Senators like Joseph McCarthy or Marco Rubio. Allowing a U.S. Senator to use his position to target and harass peace activists should be of concern to the entirety of this body, especially when the positions advocated by Mr. Lazo, Puentes de Amor, and the participants in the monthly caravans are the exact ones adopted and promoted by a former U.S. President. In fact, Senator Rubio's call for FBI intervention includes the fact that there are "Obama-era holdovers in the Biden administration" who may be supportive of diplomacy - an area that squarely belongs to the executive branch to engage in.

As the manual notes, "'improper conduct' can be given meaning by reference to generally accepted standards of conduct, the letter and spirit of laws and Rules, and by reference to past cases where the Senate has disciplined its Members for conduct that was deemed improper, regardless of whether it violated any law or Senate rule or regulation." As this body is more than aware, Senator McCarthy was censured by the Senate for his smear tactics,

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https://www.ethics.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/f2eb14e3-1123-48eb-9334-8c4717102a6e/2003-senate-ethics-manual.pdf, p. 432.

defamation campaigns and persecution of anyone he believed to support the ideology of communism, whether there was a basis in fact or law for such harassment.

Senator Rubio's public request of the FBI to investigate a veteran and teacher and the supporters and participants in caravanas and bridges of love, as well as citizens who promote diplomacy and bilateral engagement, with no substantive proof of any illegal activity - much less being an unregistered agent for a foreign government - not only sets a terrifying precedent for all peace activists, but is directly out of the McCarthyism playbook. Allowing for a renewed effort to revive long condemned and rejected persecution practices by Senators simply because citizens and constituents disagree with their views, reflects on the institution as a whole and presents a threat to the very institutions and processes of democracy.

Sincerely,

Carlos Lazo
Elena Freyre
Pete Seidman
Hebel Morales
Libre Sankara
Giancarlos Castellanos
Nancy Cole
Maria Victoria Betancourt
Victor Nieto
Medea Benjamin
Arturo Lopez-Levy
Ivet Ros Perez
Max Lesnick
Lyn Leon