

Castro 'Frightened' After JFK Killing

NSA Intercept of Foreign Agent Is Among Newly Released Papers

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Cuban Premier Fidel Castro appeared "frightened, if not terrified" after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy because he felt it might trigger a U.S. invasion of his island.

The assessment was sent on Nov. 27, 1963, to a European nation by one of its agents in Havana and intercepted by the National Security Agency, the super-secret U.S. intelligence organization. The two-page report, code-worded TOP SECRET DINAR, was one of dozens of NSA documents made public yesterday by the Assassination Records Review Board, a tiny agency set up three years ago to try to obtain and make public all records related to the 1963 Kennedy assassination.

The first to be obtained from NSA, the records shed no new light on the president's murder, but they offer a striking, historic glimpse at the NSA's worldwide eavesdropping capabilities.

According to one of the documents, in fall 1963 the agency was intercepting an average of 1,000 messages a day. After Kennedy's murder in Dallas, it initiated a computer search of all available Signals Intelligence traffic (SIGINT), using accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's name as the main reference point. All U.S.-Cuba traffic also was examined.

The two-page report on Castro's reaction dealt primarily with the Cuban leader's televised speech on the evening of Nov. 23, 1963, in the wake of reports about Oswald's arrest, his pro-Castro credentials and his pre-assassination attempts to get a visa to Cuba. By nightfall on Nov. 22, the day

Kennedy was murdered, Cuban army and navy units, the NSA records show, had already been dispatched to beef up strategic positions around Havana and on the north coast of the island.

On television, "Fidel, emotional and uneasy, tried ... to refute the accusations which were then appearing and to twist them so that the assassination would appear as the work of the Ultra Reaction, of the extreme racists of the Pentagon, who are fanatical supporters of war against Cuba and the Soviet Union," the NSA-intercepted dispatch said.

"Although it was only the third time I had witnessed a speech by Fidel," the European agent reported, "I got the immediate impression that on this occasion he was frightened, if not terrified."

Other officials, the dispatch said, expressed surprise at Castro's "hasty jump into the arena," but Castro was plainly worried that the assassination would "provide the excuse which up to now was lacking to justify internationally an invasion of Cuba."

The dispute over whose side Oswald was really on continues to this day, fueled by critics of the Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald, acting alone, killed the president. In any case, in a 1978 Top Secret memo prompted by the House Assassination Committee's inquiries, NSA said that it had looked at its records again and again and, while there wasn't much to go on, felt it could safely say:

"A thorough review has revealed no intelligence material revealing or suggesting Cuban involvement in the assassination of President Kennedy."

Most of the 84 NSA documents released yesterday were censored and

several were considered so sensitive even today that the review board simply summarized them in its own words. One of these, from January 1964, dealt with high-level reactions of other foreign leaders, who, the intercepts said, tended by then to regard the assassination as "the work of a radical fanatic rather than a conspiracy."

Other intercepts reflect a similar progression in the thinking of Warren Commission member John J. McCloy. The first, a Dec. 4, 1963, message from a European who had been speaking with McCloy, quoted McCloy as stating "that he has serious doubts of the credibility of the investigation to date."

McCloy, the message continued, "does not eliminate the possibility that the attempt on Kennedy was made by two persons."

By late January 1964, however, McCloy, in a conversation with an Eastern European official, said that "from materials at his disposal, he was more and more convinced that Oswald committed the crime by himself."

"In a lengthy monologue, he condemned accusations that the commission intends, in the name of public interest, to gloss over the evidence of the assassination and with its authority support the [one assassin] conclusions reached by the FBI," the review board said in summarizing this intercept. "He [McCloy] will not permit any distortions or concealment of the facts."

McCloy's Eastern European listener seemed skeptical, stating in his message back home that "McCloy's statements confirm the opinion that the commission is mainly interested in proving that the assassination was not linked with any foreign centers."

Use in
Conclusion

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