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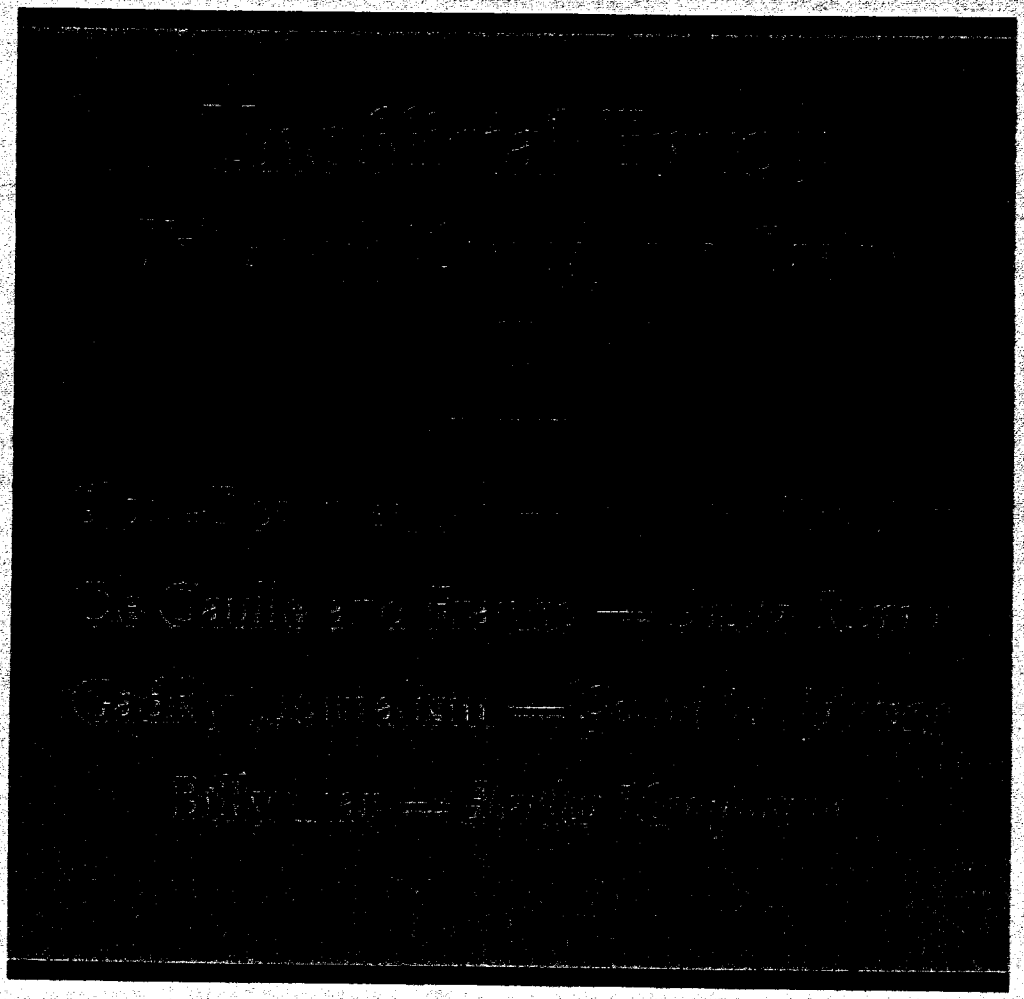

Unofficial Envoy

An Historic Report from Two Capitals

by Jean Daniel

A recent trip to the United States, followed by a journey to Cuba, made it possible for me to establish a "dialogue" between the late President Kennedy and Prime Minister Fidel Castro. Since my arrival in Mexico, where this article is being written, I have been asked whether the impressions I derived from these interviews could shed any light on the assassination of the President and on future relations between Lyndon B. Johnson and Castro.

Last week in these pages I answered the first question by describing the reactions of Fidel Castro, with whom I was visiting at the time, to John Kennedy's death. Here I shall explore the second question by reconstituting the Kennedy-Castro dialogue from the viewpoint of one who was a witness to it.

THE AUTHOR

President Kennedy received me at the White House on Thursday, October 24. My appointment had been scheduled for 5:30. I waited in the Cabinet Conference Room, and at 5:45 the President, following his usual custom, came to look for me himself so that he could escort me into his office. He apologized for the delay, not so much as a courtesy or to flatter me, but to explain the scheduling of his time, which seemed to be very strictly organized. As we passed through the small room where his secretary was working, we caught a glimpse of Mrs. Kennedy leaving by a French window on her way to the private garden of the White House. The President called her back to introduce me.

It was still Indian summer in Washington. The weather was very warm, and both the President and Mrs. Kennedy were very lightly dressed, thus enhancing the impression of youth, charm, and simplicity which was in rather surprising contrast to the solemnity of entering these august chambers. The President (athletic looking in his well-tailored suit, speaking with quick, abrupt gestures and a mobile expression but, at times, freezing up and becoming disconcertingly, almost, I would say, completely expressionless) invited me to be seated on the semi-circular sofa which was in the middle of his office. He sat in a rocking chair opposite the sofa. The interview was to last from 20 to 25 minutes, and it was interrupted only by a brief telephone call.

The President immediately asked me how the French situation was developing. After my reply, he spoke about General de Gaulle. He talked in a relaxed fashion, like someone who has at last found solace in indifference after having long been exasperated and fascinated. John Kennedy was a man who liked to get to the heart of a matter quickly, and make decisions even more rapidly. But this was not possible in dealing with de Gaulle, who is more difficult to handle than Khrushchev. One day, impatient at not understanding the General's reasoning and intent upon convincing him, Kennedy telephoned de Gaulle direct. All in vain. Oddly enough, however, since the recent visit of de Gaulle's foreign minister, Couve de Murville, to Washington Mr. Kennedy had ceased to be so deeply concerned about Franco-American relations. The truth is, he had *made up his mind* not to worry about them any more. According to him, it was a waste of time.

"Mr. Couve de Murville and I both verified that we didn't agree on anything," the President told me. "And we agreed that such total disagreement was hardly calculated to create a flourishing friendship between two great Western nations. I came to the conclusion that General de Gaulle's strategy, which is rather incomprehensible to me, requires a certain amount of tension with the United States. It would seem that only through this tension is it possible to restore to Europe the desire to think for itself and renounce its torpid dependence on American dollar aid and political guidance!"

President Kennedy went on to sum up, with conciseness and vigor, the points of disagreement between the United States and France. On the subject of Germany, nuclear policy, Europe, the idea of "independence," he told me what has since become public

knowledge. He added, however, that France had a strange way of manifesting its independence, particularly, for example, on the subject of Vietnam and Cuba. It seemed ironic and irritating to him that the French Chief Executive was apparently bent on telling him how the United States should proceed, without assuming any risks himself. He told me that no one was more appreciative than he of advice, information, and even criticism; but that these were all the more valued if the friends proffering them were themselves committed to a program of action.

I then asked Mr. Kennedy what could be expected from General de Gaulle's proposed visit to the United States next February. He replied: "Absolutely nothing." But he followed this up immediately and with a broad grin, as though savoring in advance the pleasure of the impending meeting: "It will be exciting, just the same. General de Gaulle is an historic figure; he is decidely the strangest great man of our time."

Relations with Cuba

Taking the initiative at this point, I brought up the subject of Vietnam and Cuba, saying that the Gaullists were not the only ones in France who deplored certain mistaken US policies. I pointed out that the first time I had the opportunity of meeting John Kennedy, he was a Senator and had just made a resounding speech on the subject of Algeria. Had the ideas set forth in that speech been faithfully applied in Saigon and Havana? Here my notes are very specific, and I shall let the late President speak through them:

"We haven't enough time to talk about Vietnam, but I'd like to talk to you about Cuba. Incidentally, our conversation will be much more interesting when you return, because Ben Bradlee [of *Newsweek*] tells me you are on your way to Cuba now.

"Every now and then I read articles in the European press pointing out that we Americans were blind to what was happening in the Cuban situation. I have just learned that General de Gaulle himself regarded Communism in Cuba as nothing but the accidental and temporary form of a will to independence from the United States. Of course it is very easy to understand this 'will to independence' around President de Gaulle."

John Kennedy then mustered all his persuasive force. He punctuated each sentence with that brief, mechanical gesture which had become famous:

"I tell you this: we know perfectly what happened in Cuba, to the misfortune of all. From the beginning I personally followed the development of these events with mounting concern. There are few subjects to which I have devoted more painstaking attention. My conclusions go much further than the European analyses. Here is what I believe.

"I believe that there is no country in the world, including all the African regions, including any and all the countries under colonial domination, where economic colonization, humiliation and exploitation were worse than in Cuba, in part owing to my country's policies during the Batista regime. I believe that we created, built and manufactured the Castro movement out of whole cloth and without realizing it. I believe that the accumulation of these mistakes has jeopardized all of Latin America. The great aim of the Alliance for Progress is to reverse this unfortunate policy. This is one of the most, if not *the most*, important problems in American foreign policy. I can assure you that I have understood the Cubans. I approved the proclamation which Fidel Castro made in the Sierra Maestra, when he justifiably called for justice and especially yearned to rid Cuba of corruption. I will go even further: to some extent it is as though Batista was the incarnation of a number of sins on the part of the United States. Now we shall have to pay for those sins. In the matter of the Batista regime, I am in agreement with the first Cuban revolutionaries. That is perfectly clear."

After a silence during which he was able to note my surprise and my interest, the President continued: "But it is also clear that the problem has ceased to be a Cuban one, and has become international – that is, it has become a Soviet problem. I am the President of the United States and not a sociologist; I am the President of a free nation which has certain responsibilities in the Free World. I know that Castro betrayed the promises made in the Sierra Maestra, and that he has agreed to be a Soviet agent in Latin America. I know that through his fault – either his 'will to independence', his madness or Communism – the world was on the verge of nuclear war in October, 1962. The Russians understood this very well, at least after our reaction; but so far as Fidel Castro is concerned, I must say I don't know whether he realizes this, or even if he cares about it." A smile, then: "You can tell me whether he does when you come back. In any case, the nations of Latin America are not going to attain justice and progress that way, I mean through Communist subversion. They won't get there by going from economic oppression to a Marxist dictatorship which Castro himself denounced a few years ago. The United States now has the possibility of doing as much good in Latin America as it has done wrong in the past; I would even say that we alone have this power – on the essential condition that Communism does not take over there."

Mr. Kennedy then rose to indicate that the interview was over. I apologized for keeping him to ask two quick questions. The first: Could the United States tolerate economic collectivism? He answered: "What about Sekou Touré? And Tito? I received Marshal Tito three days ago, and our discussions were most posi-

tive." Second question: What does the American government expect to gain from the blockade? Is the economic isolation of Cuba a punishment or a political maneuver?

Kennedy's reply: "Are you suggesting that the political effectiveness of the blockade is uncertain [smile]? You will see when you go to Cuba whether it is or not. In any case, we can't let Communist subversion win in the other Latin American countries. Two dikes are needed to contain Soviet expansion: the blockade on the one hand, a tremendous effort toward progress on the other. This is the problem in a nutshell. Both battles are equally difficult." (Silence.) Then, a last comment: "The continuation of the blockade depends on the continuation of subversive activities."

The interview was over. I did not really wish to suggest anything, since I had never been to Cuba and, on the other hand, I had heard from all sides tales of the privations the Cuban people were suffering owing to their isolated economic situation. But I could see plainly that John Kennedy had doubts, and was seeking a way out.

That same evening I recounted this conversation in detail to an American colleague – an intimate friend of President Kennedy, through whom I had obtained this interview – and to the editor of *The New Republic*. Both my confidants, who knew the President a thousand times better than I, agreed that John F. Kennedy had never before expressed himself so specifically and with such feeling on his understanding of the first phase of the Castro revolution. They hesitated to draw any political conclusions from his remarks. However, they were not surprised at Kennedy's invitation to come and see him again when I returned from Cuba.

In effect, John Kennedy displayed two basic characteristics in his exercise of power: first, an overwhelming degree of empiricism and realism. A man without a particular doctrine, he reacted decisively to events, and only to events. Nothing but the shock of collision with a problem was sufficient to make him come to a decision, and because of this, his decisions were unpredictable. At that point he had a consuming need for information, and this need had increased a great deal since experience had taught him not to rely solely on official channels.

After this, I went to Havana.

Night Session

In the "Pearl of the Antilles, rum-perfumed and steeped in triumphant sensuality," as Cuba is described in those American tourist folders still lying about in the hotels of Havana, I spent three closely packed and intensive weeks, but thinking all along that I would never get to meet with Fidel Castro. I talked with farmers, writers and painters, militants and counter-revolutionaries, ministers and ambassadors – but Fidel remained inaccessible. I had been warned: he was snowed under with work; as a result of the hurricane, the Cuban government had been obliged to revise its whole planning program; and then, above all, he no longer had any desire to receive any journalists, least of all Western newsmen. I had practically given up hope when, on the evening of what I thought was to be my departure date (the capricious plane which links Havana with Mexico happily did not leave the next day after all), Fidel came to my hotel. He had heard of my interview with the President. We went up to my room at 10 in the evening and did not leave until 4 in the following morning. Here, I shall only recount that part of that interview which constitutes a reply to John F. Kennedy's remarks.

Fidel listened with devouring and passionate interest: he pulled at his beard, yanked his parachutist's beret down over his eyes, adjusted his maqui tunic, all the while making me the target of a thousand malicious sparks cast by his deep-sunk, lively eyes. At one point I felt as though I were playing the role of that partner with whom he had as strong a desire to confer as to do battle; as though I myself were in a small way that intimate enemy in the White House whom Khrushchev described to Fidel as someone with whom "it is possible to talk." Three times he had me repeat certain remarks, particularly those in which Kennedy expressed his criticism of the Batista regime, those in which Kennedy showed his impatience with the comments attributed to General de Gaulle, and lastly those in which Kennedy accused Fidel of having almost caused a war fatal to all humanity.

When I stopped talking, I expected an explosion. Instead, I was treated to a lengthy silence and, at the end of that silence, to a calm, composed, often humorous, always thoughtful exposition. I don't know whether Fidel has changed, or whether these cartoons caricaturing him as a ranting madman which appear in the Western press perhaps correspond to a former reality. I only know that at no time during the two complete days I spent with him (and during which a great deal happened), did Castro abandon his composure and poise. Here too, I shall let Castro speak for himself, reserving only the possibility of correcting certain judgments on these two political leaders based on my own experiences in Cuba.

"I believe Kennedy is sincere," Fidel declared. "I also believe that today the expression of this sincerity could have political significance. I'll explain what I mean. I haven't forgotten that Kennedy centered his electoral campaign against Nixon on the theme of firmness toward Cuba. I have not forgotten the Machiavellian tactics and the equivocation, the attempts at

invasion, the pressures, the blackmail, the organization of a counter-revolution, the blockade and, above everything, all the retaliatory measures which were imposed before, long before there was the pretext and alibi of Communism. But I feel that he inherited a difficult situation; I don't think a President of the United States is ever really free, and I believe Kennedy is at present feeling the impact of this lack of freedom. I also believe he now understands the extent to which he has been misled, especially, for example, on Cuban reaction at the time of the attempted Bay of Pigs invasion. I also think he is a realist: he is now registering that it is impossible to simply wave a wand and cause us, and the explosive situation throughout Latin America, to disappear.

Why the Missiles Were Installed

"There is one point on which I want to give you new information right away. I have refrained from doing this until now; but today an attempt is being made to frighten all mankind by propagating the idea that Cuba, and in particular I, might provoke a nuclear war, so I feel the world should know the true story of the missile emplacement.

"Six months before these missiles were installed in Cuba, we had received an accumulation of information warning us that a new invasion of the island was being prepared under sponsorship of the Central Intelligence Agency, whose administrators were humiliated by the Bay of Pigs disaster and by the spectacle of being ridiculed in the eyes of the world and berated in US government circles. We also knew that the Pentagon was vesting the CIA preparations with the mantle of its authority, but we had doubts as to the attitude of the President. There were those among our informants who even thought it would suffice to alert the President and give him cause for concern in order to arrest these preparations. Then one day Khrushchev's son-in-law, Adzhubei, came to pay us a visit before going on to Washington at the invitation of Kennedy's associates. Immediately upon arriving in Washington, Adzhubei had been received by the American Chief Executive, and their talk centered particularly on Cuba. A week after this interview, we received in Havana a copy of Adzhubei's report to Khrushchev. It was this report which triggered the whole situation.

"What did Kennedy say to Adzhubei? Now listen to this carefully, for it is very important: he had said that the new situation in Cuba was intolerable for the United States, that the American government *had decided it would not tolerate it any longer;* he had said that peaceful coexistence was seriously compromised by the fact that 'Soviet influences' in Cuba altered the balance of strength, was destroying the equilibrium agreed upon and [at this point Castro emphasized his statement by pronouncing each syllable separately] *Kennedy reminded the Russians that the United States had not intervened in Hungary,* which was obviously a way of demanding Russian non-intervention in the event of a possible invasion. To be sure, the actual word 'invasion' was not mentioned and Adzhubei, at the time, lacking any background information, could not draw the same conclusions as we did. But when we communicated to Khrushchev all our previous information, the Russians too began to interpret the Kennedy-Adzhubei conversation as we saw it and they went to the source of our information. By the end of a month, the Russian and Cuban governments had reached the *definite conviction* that an invasion might take place from one moment to the next. This is the truth.

"What was to be done? How could we prevent the invasion? We found that Khrushchev was concerned about the same things that were worrying us. He asked us what we wanted. We replied: *do whatever is needed to convince the United States that any attack on Cuba is the same as an attack on the Soviet Union.* And how to realize this objective? All our thinking and discussions revolved around this point. We thought of a proclamation, an alliance, conventional military aid. The Russians explained to us that their concern was twofold: first, they wanted to save the Cuban revolution (in other words, their socialist honor in the eyes of the world), and at the same time they wished to avoid a world conflict. They reasoned that if conventional military aid was the extent of their assistance, the United States might not hesitate to instigate an invasion, in which case Russia would retaliate and this would inevitably touch off a world war."

At this point I interrupted to ask how Cuba could have been absolutely certain of Soviet intervention. After all, I said, Stalin certainly "let down" Markos, the Chief of the Greek Communist Resistance, because such help would have conflicted with prevailing zones of influence.

"I know," Castro replied, "but the two situations cannot be compared." Then he continued:

"Russia was much too deeply committed to us. Moreover, since then we have had every proof of the immense solidarity of the Soviet people and its leaders. You can see for yourself how clearly this solidarity is manifest here. Then there is something else, specifically apropos of Stalin. When I was in the USSR and others, outside Russia, were reproaching Khrushchev for taking a more conciliatory stand than Stalin toward the capitalists, Khrushchev confided to me several examples, which I will not repeat to you, illustrating the prudence, even the abdication of Stalin. He told me – and I believe him – that Stalin would never have emplaced missiles in Cuba.

"It is true that it was said then by other factions that the real reason for installing the missiles was because certain internal problems were driving the Russians to use us to provoke the United States. I am here to tell you that the Russians didn't want and do not today want war. One only need visit them on their home territory, watch them at work, share their economic concerns, admire their intense efforts to raise the workers' standard of living, to understand right away that they are far, very far, from any idea of provocation or domination. However, Soviet Russia was confronted by two alternatives: an absolutely inevitable war (because of their commitments and their position in the socialist world), if the Cuban revolution was attacked; or the risk of a war if the United States, refusing to retreat before the missiles, would not give up the attempt to destroy Cuba. They chose socialist solidarity and the risk of war.

"Under these circumstances, how could we Cubans have refused to share the risks taken to save us? It was, in the final analysis, a question of honor, don't you agree? Don't you believe that honor plays a role in politics? You think we are romantics, don't you? Perhaps we are. And why not? In any event, we are militants. In a word, then, we agreed to the emplacement of the missiles. And I might add here that for us Cubans it didn't really make so much difference whether we died by conventional bombing or a hydrogen bomb. Nevertheless, we were not gambling with the peace of the world. The United States was the one to jeopardize the peace of mankind by using the threat of war to stifle revolutions.

"And so in June, 1962, my brother Raoul and Che Guevara went to Moscow to discuss ways and means of installing the missiles. The convoy arrived by sea in three weeks. The United States was able to find out that weapons were being shipped in, of course; but it took them two months to discover that these weapons were guided missiles. Two months . . . in other words, longer than we had calculated. Because, of course, we were seeking intimidation, not aggression."

Alliance for Progress

The conversation now turned to the Alliance for Progress. "In a way," Castro said, "it was a good idea, it marked progress of a sort. Even if it can be said that it was overdue, timid, conceived on the spur of the moment, under constraint . . . despite all that I am willing to agree that the idea in itself constituted an effort to adapt to the extraordinarily rapid course of events in Latin America. Such as, for example, what we read in the papers this morning – did you see the news? That Argentina is nationalizing the oil industry? The Argentine government! Do you realize what that means? This will cause more commotion on the New York stock exchange than Castroism! The Catholic and military conservatives of Argentina, the factions most closely linked with American interests! There is talk of nationalization of industries there, of agrarian reform there . . . well and good! If the Alliance for Progress provokes these developments, then it's not doing so badly; all these things are consonant with the aspirations of the people. I can look back to the days of Eisenhower, or rather of Nixon, and recall the furore which broke out when the United States and Cuba together decreed an agrarian reform which was to apply, mark this well, only to landowners of over 200,000 hectares! Yes, 200,000! Yet the reaction of the trusts was terrible at that time. Nowadays, in the other Latin American countries, because the Communist banner is used as a bogeyman, the reaction of the American trusts is shrewder. They are going to choose strawmen, so as to rule indirectly. But there will be difficulties.

"This is why Kennedy's good ideas aren't going to yield any results. It is very easy to understand and at this point he surely is aware of this because, as I told you, he is a realist. For years and years American policy – not the government, but the trusts and the Pentagon – has supported the Latin American oligarchies. All the prestige, the dollars, and the power was held by a class which Kennedy himself has described in speaking of Batista. Suddenly a President arrives on the scene who tries to support the interests of another class (which has no access to any of the levers of power) to give the various Latin American countries the impression that the United Sates no longer stands behind the dictators, and so there is no more need to start Castro-type revolutions. What happens then? The trusts see that their interests are being a little compromised (just barely, but still compromised); the Pentagon thinks the strategic bases are in danger; the powerful oligarchies in all the Latin American countries alert their American friends; they sabotage the new policy; and in short, Kennedy has everyone against him. The few liberal or allegedly liberal presidents who were chosen as instruments of the new policy are swept out of office, like Bosch in Santo Domingo, or else they are transformed. Betancourt, for example, was not a Batista; now he has become one.

"In view of all these things, how can the American government seriously believe that Cuban subversion is at the root of explosions taking place all over the South American continent? In Venezuela, for example, are you familiar with the situation there? Do you think the Venezuelans need us to understand what's going on in their country? Do you think we don't have enough problems of our own? Right now I ask only one thing: Leave us in peace to better our country's economic situation, to put our planning into effect, to

educate our young *compañeros*. This doesn't mean we do not feel solidarity toward nations that are struggling and suffering, like the Venezuelan people. But it is up to those nations to decide what they want, and if they choose other regimes than ours, this isn't our business."

"We Have Always Lived with Danger"

I asked Fidel where is this all going to end? How will the situation develop? Even if the United States uses against you what you call the alibi of Communism, *it still remains true that you have chosen Communism*, that your economy and your security depend on the Soviet Union, and that even if you have no ulterior motives in this association, still the United States considers that you are part of an international strategy, that you constitute a Soviet base in a world where peace depends on mutual respect for a tacit division of zones of influence.

"I don't want to discuss our ties with the Soviet Union," Fidel Castro cut me short. "I find this indecent. We have none but feelings of fraternity and profound, total gratitude toward the USSR. The Russians are making extraordinary efforts on our behalf, efforts which sometimes cost them dear. But we have our own policies which are perhaps not always the same (we have proved this!) as those of the USSR. I refuse to dwell on this point, because asking me to say that I am not a pawn on the Soviet chessboard is something like asking a woman to shout aloud in the public square that she is not a prostitute.

"If the United States sees the problem as you have posed it, then you are right, there is no way out. But who is the loser in the last analysis? They have tried everything against us, everything, absolutely everything, and we are still alive and getting better day by day; we are still standing upright, and we plan to celebrate with greater festivities than usual, on January 1, 1964, the *fifth anniversary* of the Cuban Revolution! The United States' policy of isolating us economically is less effective with each passing day; we are increasing our trade with the rest of the world. Even with Spain! We have just sold a shipment of 300,000 tons of sugar to the Spaniards. Far from discouraging us, the blockade is maintaining the revolutionary atmosphere we need to stiffen the country's backbone. Are we in danger? We have always lived with danger. To say nothing of the fact that you have no idea how many friends one discovers in the world when one is persecuted by the United States. No, truly, for all these reasons, we are not suppliants, we ask nothing. I'll tell you something else: since the rupture and the blockade, we have forgotten the United States. We feel neither hatred nor resentment any more, we simply don't think about the US. When I think of the problems which diplomatic relations with the United States would pose! The Swiss Ambassador is representing the US at present. I prefer to do business with him than with 200 members of an Embassy among whom surely some spies would be spotted.

"I have just talked to you as a Cuban revolutionary. But I should also speak to you as a peace lover, and from this viewpoint I believe the United States is too important a country not to have an influence on world peace. I cannot help hoping, therefore, that a leader will come to the fore in North America (why not Kennedy, there are things in his favor!), who will be willing to brave unpopularity, fight the trusts, tell the truth and, most important, let the various nations act as they see fit. I ask nothing: neither dollars, nor assistance, nor diplomats, nor bankers, nor military men — nothing but peace, and to be accepted as we are! We are socialists, the United States is a capitalist nation, the Latin American countries will choose what they want. All the same, at a time when the United States is selling wheat to the Russians, Canada is trading with China, de Gaulle respects Ben Bella, why should it be impossible to make the Americans understand that socialism leads, not to hostility toward them, but to coexistence? Why am I not Tito or Sekou Touré? Because the Russians have never done us any injury such as the Yugoslavians and the Guineans have complained of in the past, and because the Americans have never given us any of the benefits for which these two nations congratulate themselves today.

"As to this matter of fearing Soviet intentions in Latin America through Cuba's subversive activities, this is just attributing to others one's own desire to dominate. You said yourself just a little while ago that the Russians have had enough of their Cuban involvement. Economically this is obvious. This is why, speaking from a military viewpoint, it is better not to force nations to turn to the Russians for help. Really, it seems to me that a man like Kennedy is capable of seeing that it is not in the United States' interest to pursue a policy which can lead only to a stalemate. So far as we are concerned, everything can be restored to normalcy on the basis of mutual respect of sovereignty."

In conclusion, Fidel Castro said to me: "Since you are going to see Kennedy again, be an emissary of peace, despite everything. I want to make myself clear: I don't want anything, I don't expect anything, and as a revolutionary the present situation does not displease me. But as a man and as a statesman, it is my duty to indicate what the bases for understanding could be."

All this was said two days before President Kennedy's death.

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