

*Remembering Cuba*

There was, however, no dearth of recommendations for action. My desk was soon heaped with CIA and Defense proposals for a variety of covert activities; for the escalation of propaganda aimed at the Cuban mainland; for the formal expulsion of Cuba from the OAS. It looked like action. It sounded like action. But it all came partially, the need for the illusion of action. But it all came very little.

The Defense Department assigned Ed Lansdale to work with me to devise measures for the overthrow of Castro. (Lansdale had an almost legendary reputation as the man who had helped defeat the communist insurrection in the Philippines.) Together we called upon the National Security Agency, the CIA, even the Joint Chiefs of Staff, exhorting the chieftains of American power to conjure plans that might lead to Castro's undoing. After the first week while we sat in my office preparing another in a series of endless memoranda, Lansdale looked toward me. "You know, Dick, it's impossible."

"What's impossible?" I asked.

"There is no way you can overthrow Castro without a strong, indigenous political opposition. And there is no such opposition, either in Cuba or outside it."

He was right, of course. And although we kept trying, it was hopeless from the beginning. Within two weeks I drafted a memorandum for the president, which came to much the same conclusion that had unjustifiably discredited Bowles: that our most effective "immediate" steps would be an effort to organize collective action, help democratic parties in other countries, and — most important of all — accelerate the Alliance for Progress. "This program," I wrote Kennedy, "with its emphasis on social and economic advance is the real hope of preventing a communist takeover."

As for more immediate threats, I concluded that the spread of Castroism was a very real danger, but that "in the last six months there has been a significant decline in Cuban effectiveness . . . because of the growing isolation of communist-fidelista elements from the Democratic left as Castro's pro-Soviet bent has become more apparent" (most communists in Latin America were essentially nationalists, with no desire to substitute Soviet mastery for American) ". . . in fact, most of the greatest danger spots . . . do not owe either their existence or their strength to Castro, but to local and independent leadership. *This danger would continue to*

There was, however, one possibility that had not occurred to me, which I heard for the first and only time at a meeting of the Cuban task force sometime around the middle of May. About twenty people were gathered at a conference table in the State Department, when Secretary of Defense McNamara, having sat through an hour of inconclusive discussion, rose to leave for an earlier appointment and, firmly grasping my shoulder with his right hand, announced, "The only thing to do is eliminate Castro." I listened, puzzled, thinking, Isn't that just what we have been talking about for a month? when the CIA representative looked toward McNamara and said, "You mean Executive Action." McNamara nodded, then, looking toward me: "I mean it, Dick, it's the only way." I had never heard the phrase "Executive Action" before. But its meaning was instantly apparent. Assassination. Two different thoughts raced through my mind. Could he really mean it? Did we do such things? And: It's absurd — even if you killed Castro you would accomplish nothing. His brother Raul or Che would take his place, both, if anything, more fanatic, more devoutly pledged to international communism, than Fidel.

After McNamara left I continued the meeting without reference to his remark, although the CIA representative, on his return to Langley, carefully prepared a memo "for the files" recording the "suggestion" of the secretary of defense. It was the first and only time that I heard a serious suggestion of assassination, although with the dissolution of the task force and the establishment of a more permanent anti-Castro operation, my own involvement in anti-Cuban actions came to an end. (In 1966, while traveling through Latin America with Bobby Kennedy, he remarked, "I'm tired of all these Latins attacking me for going after Castro. The fact is that I'm the guy who saved his life." What did he mean? I don't know. For just at that moment we were approached by a mutual friend who wished to introduce us to two very beautiful Latin ladies.)

I do not know if we tried to kill Castro — and there is much evidence that we did — but, if so, the effort is only added testimony to the futile vanity of "covert operations."

“Remember my ambition” *PTL Wm*

240

*The Kennedy Years*

contented lieutenants and a smoothly functioning apparatus.

In late October, at a press conference, Kennedy was the “criticism of our handling of inter-American affairs” by “advisers in the White House duplicating and some riding people in the State Department.”

“My experience in government,” Kennedy said, in a long and semiapologetic reply, “is that when things are controversial, beautifully coordinated, and all the rest, it may there is not much going on. . . . So if you really want harmony and goodwill, then the best way to do it is not anything. . . . So we are attempting to do something about America, and there is bound to be a ferment. If the ferment duces a useful result, it will be worthwhile. . . .”

Right on, I thought. But my enthusiasm was premature.

The following afternoon I stood in the Oval Office, waiting McGeorge Bundy to complete a conversation with the president so that I could inform him of my recent discovery that the had been engaged in covert operations in the Dominican Republic, had actually transferred some small weapons to a group wished to overthrow Trujillo by assassination. Looking toward Kennedy said, “You know, Dick, maybe we’d be better off if you were in the State Department, closer to the action.” He paused for a moment, then waved his hand as if brushing the idea aside. “Hell,” he said, speaking to some undefined space between me and the attentive Bundy, “if Dick goes over there, we’ll never hear anything about Latin America.”

After Bundy left, I told Kennedy what I had learned. He reacted angrily. “Tell them no more weapons. The United States is not to get involved in any assassinations. I’d like to get rid of Trujillo, but not that way.”

Although he had dismissed the idea of my departure, I was now aware that it was on his mind. So I was not wholly unprepared that November day in 1961 when I stood on the porch outside the Oval Office of the White House watching Kennedy walk across the South Lawn toward the helicopter that awaited his departure for a weekend at his Virginia estate. Glimpsing me as he neared the steps of the helicopter, Kennedy beckoned toward me. As I approached him, he smiled, leaned over, spoke loudly into my ear over the noise of the spinning rotors. “You know, Dick, I think you’ll be more effective in the State Department.” I did not reply.

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“I’ll announce it next week.” Then, mounting the steps, “We’ll talk about it when I get back.” The decision had been made. For now. And although the White House days were over, Kennedy in the future, the many conversations with Kennedy in the future, the discussion never took place.

talk for a while about whether [Big Nurse is] the root of trouble here or not, and Harding says she’s the root of most of it. Most of the other guys think so too, but McMurphy isn’t so sure any more. He says he thought so at one time but now he don’t know any more. He says he don’t think getting her out of the way would make much difference; he says that there’s something bigger going on, make much difference; he says that there’s something bigger going on all this mess and goes on to try to say what he thinks it is. Finally gives up when he can’t explain it.

— Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

To recall the emotions of my brief, decisive encounter with Kennedy is like taking an archaeologist’s pick to the surface of an ancient community, hoping to penetrate through the barrier-named layers — city heaped upon city, each carefully, carefully, constructed on the ruins of its predecessors — to reach the primeval settlement that was the predecessor of all to come. I am a different person from the young man who, on that uncommonly mild and brilliant November afternoon, was told of his admiration for a man he admired, and more than admired. Were the same situation to recur, I would feel differently, respond differently, behave differently. At least I think so. The perverse elusiveness of emotional recollection, further distorted by the irrepressible desire for self-deception, makes all memoirs, including this one, a partial misrepresentation; and, incidentally, makes great poetry possible. “Memoirs,” Justice Frankfurter once told me, “are the most unreliable source of historical evidence. Events are always distorted by refraction through the writer’s ego.” (I.e., the spectrum is not the light.)

Having unburdened myself of this admission, let me tell you exactly how I felt. I was saddened; not stunned, but suffused with a milder melancholy more like that of a rejected lover. It was not a defeat. At least it didn’t appear to be. As a deputy assistant secretary of state I would have direct, daily authority over the implementation of Latin American policy; my ties to the president