

By George Crile III

Was the CIA's Man in Havana a Double Agent? The Riddle of AM LASH

AM LASH is the cryptonym the CIA assigned to the senior Cuban official it had recruited in 1961 to kill Fidel Castro. The Agency's dealings with AM LASH, which continued up to a disastrous end in 1965, encompassed the longest standing and, on the surface, the most likely to succeed of its numerous plots on Castro's life. It therefore seems a remarkable suspension of curiosity that the Senate Intelligence Committee, in its investigation of the CIA's assassination activities, passed so lightly over this critical chapter.

To begin with, any examination of AM LASH's history would suggest that he had for many years been far too close to insanity to be relied on in any sensitive operation. And from this a larger question presents itself. Was AM LASH actually a conscious double agent for Castro, or was he perhaps so transparent and emotionally exploitable that he unwittingly provided an equivalent service? And if so, and if Castro had become convinced that the United States would stop at nothing to kill him, could Castro have felt compelled to strike first?

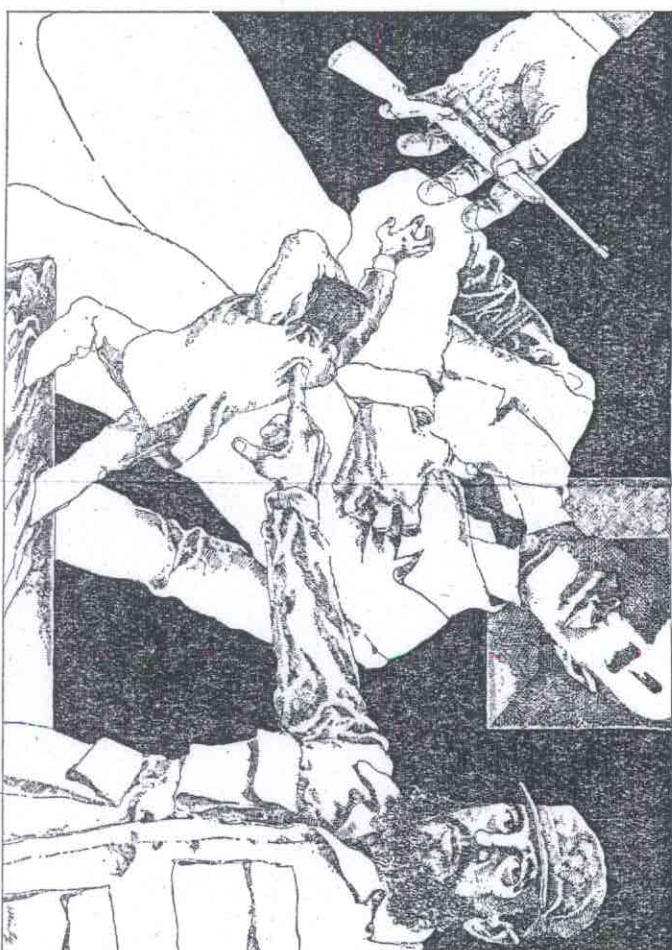
AM LASH has never been publicly named. But his history is well known among Cuban exiles in Miami. He was a Cuban doctor, a former commandante of the rebel army, a hero of the revolution. Rolando Cubela, an intimate of Castro. The CIA persuaded the Senate Intelligence Committee not to identify Cubela, who is now in jail in Cuba. It maintains that alerting the Cubans to his role in early CIA plots would expose him to reprisals.

But this argument is specious. The Cuban government is filled with men who know Cubela and his history and who must have read the Church Committee's report. It is difficult to believe that Cubela now has any secrets from his captors. The only people who stand to gain from continued secrecy are those all too eager conspirators at the CIA. For the rest of us this story is essential if we are to begin to make sense of the events surrounding the secret but deadly struggle that was being fought in the autumn of 1963.

The Tortured Assassin

IT IS HARD to understand Cubela fully. It is necessary at once to introduce a Cuban exile in Miami, Jose Aleman, whose assertions are sufficiently important to make it worth reviewing his record for reliability.

Crile is Washington editor of Harper's magazine and is writing a book on the CIA's Cuban operations.



By John Steiner for The Washington Post

Aleman was educated in the United States at Worcester Academy and then at the University of Miami. During the 1940s, his father was perhaps the most powerful man in Cuba. Nominally minister of education, he was a heavily guarded hoarder and hoos, whose most revealing coup was to back a truck up to the Cuban treasury and make off with the Republic's foreign reserves. In Miami, he

bought up most of Key Biscayne, retained Sen. George Smathers as his lawyer and invested as heavily in American politicians as in American real estate.

His son chose a different path. A young, handsome idealist, he became, like Castro, a revolutionary against the Batista regime. While Castro was in the mountains, Aleman

was helping to direct the most active and dangerous part of the revolution in Havana. He and four other young men — including Eugenio Rodriguez Martinez, the Watergate burglar — formed an underground cell that provided the arms for the almost successful attack on the Presidential Palace in 1957. Cubela was then one of the leaders of the student revolutionaries at the University of Ha-

vana, and he began to work closely with Martinez and Aleman.

There were many nasty things we had to do to bring on the revolution, Aleman reflects. The most difficult was the decision to kill Bianco Rico, Batista's chief of military intelligence. The revolutionary logic of that day called for spurring sadistic officials because of the hatred they aroused. "Rico treated everyone like a gentleman. He wouldn't even torture people," Aleman explains. So he had to be done away with. "Rolando [Martinez] and I participated in the decision to get rid of him," and the man whom they assigned to kill him was Cubela.

In October, 1956, Cubela shot Rico through the head in the fashionable Montmartre night club. As he died, Rico caught Cubela's eyes and, Cubela believed, smiled understandingly at him. Cubela escaped to Miami where he moved into the Trade Winds Motel, one of the properties (including also the Miami Stadium) which Aleman owned there.

A large number of revolutionaries had been forced to flee Cuba at that time and many ended up staying at Aleman's expense at the Trade Winds. Cubela was now a hero among these exiles, but he was tortured by the memory of Rico's dying smile. He was convinced that Rico was talking to him at night and he had a nervous breakdown. Martinez, who had also gone into exile, shared a room with him and served as his confessor and analyst. After a few months Cubela appeared to have recovered and returned to Cuba to join Castro's second front in the Escambray mountains. Castro made him a commander, then the highest rank in the Army, and when Batista fled Cuba on New Year's Day 1959, he swept into Havana several days before Castro and led the force that seized the Presidential Palace.

The Plotting Begins

IT IS HARD to imagine the confusion that marked the first year of revolutionary government. Not all the revolutionaries supported Castro. Many, and particularly those who had worked in Havana, mistrusted Fidel deeply but not more than he mistrusted them. Cubela had always been suspicious of Castro. But now he was one of the towering figures of the revolution, with an independent following. Castro needed his support, and Cubela responded to his advances by accepting an offer to become head of the politically powerful Federation of students at the University.

AM LASH, From Page C1

Cubela exalted in his new-found status as a triumphant revolutionary. He drove about Havana in a gigantic touring car, drinking and womanizing. He was blissful in his dissipation until he killed a woman in a car accident, and again began hearing Rico at night. As before, he took to calling Aleman whenever he heard the voice.

Aleman, now convinced that Castro was a Communist, had decided that Fidel had to be eliminated. He says that he went with another revolutionary friend to convince Cubela to take on the assignment. "He was very upset when we came to him," says Aleman. "He said, 'I'm a nervous wreck. I'm just getting better, and now you want me to kill Castro. I don't see the Communists, but if I recover, maybe I will — I won't say yes, I won't say no.'" Aleman was then paying for a psychiatrist for Cubela, and he persuaded the analyst, who shared his political views, to try to convince Cubela that the only way to exorcise Rico was by assassinating Castro.

The man who accompanied Aleman was Jose (Pepin) Naranjo, an old revolutionary colleague who shared Aleman's mistrust of Castro. But not long after the meeting Castro invited Naranjo to join his government as minister of interior (director of all the nation's police forces). It was a move on Castro's part to win support among the rival factions of the revolution. Understandably, Aleman was alarmed; he expected to be arrested. But nothing happened. It was a time of political paranoia and Aleman assumed that Naranjo had decided to keep quiet so as not to arouse Castro's suspicion.

When considering the possibility that the Cubans were aware of Cubela's later CIA plotting, it is worth bearing Naranjo's subsequent story in mind. By 1960 he had risen meteorically to a position of total trust with Fidel: it was he who tasted Castro's food to make sure it wasn't poisoned. Today he is constantly at Fidel's side. In a CBS documentary narrated by Dan Rather last year, Naranjo was seen taking Castro's gun and bandalero from him when Fidel settled back to relax. Somewhere along the line he proved his loyalty and managed to maintain Castro's trust — a not inconsiderable feat given the fact that Cubela was his number two man in the Interior Ministry at the time of his recruitment by the CIA. It is of some importance that Aleman told me about his meeting with Cubela and Naranjo a full six months before the Senate assassination report made the first public reference to AM LASH.

In 1960, several months after talking

to Cubela, Aleman went into exile in Miami. He was to play no further role in Cubela's life. But Cubela himself had by then become a Manchurian candidate, at least vulnerable to the suggestion of killing Castro, but also a colossal security risk to whoever tried to tap his services, as he was being tapped by the CIA at the time of Kennedy's assassination.

Taking Risks

OPERATION MONGOOSE, the secret war that the United States waged against Cuba after the Bay of Pigs, was not a CIA initiative. It was the product of the Kennedys and soon resulted in the establishment in Miami of the largest CIA station in the world — with an estimated 400 American case officers and about 2,000 Cuban agents — charged with the sole task of destroying Castro. But by 1963 Mongoose was a demonstrable failure. It was at this point that AM LASH emerged as the Agency's last hope to accomplish, with a single blow, the goal that had so stubbornly eluded them.

Cubela's relationship with the Agency had begun at his initiative in 1961 when he contacted both the CIA and the FBI, expressing a desire to defect. But Cubela was the rarest of assets — an agent in the very heart of the enemy system — and the CIA did not want him to leave. His case officer's as-

signment was to ensure that AM LASH "stay in place and report to us."

At the beginning of September, 1963, Cubela finally agreed to stay if he "could do something really significant for the creation of a new Cuba." He told his case officer he would like to plan Castro's "execution."

It was very shortly after this, on Sept. 7, 1963, that Castro summoned an Associated Press reporter, Daniel Harker, to issue an extraordinary threat: "United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe."

"There can be no question," observed Raymond Rocca, the CIA's liaison officer with the Warren Commission, "that this represented a more than ordinary attempt by [Castro] to get a message on record in the United States." Indeed, it was unprecedented — even for Castro, who was in the habit of making all kinds of accusations and threats in the course of his seven and eight-hour-long speeches.

One possible explanation for the

warning was the CIA's recent paramilitary activities in Cuba. After the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, Kennedy, living up to the spirit as well as the letter of his non-invasion agreement with Khrushchev, had suspended the massive secret war the CIA had been waging against Cuba. But then in August, 1963, he suddenly reversed his position and authorized 15 new commando raids; by the end of the month the Agency had hit two major industrial targets.

But however infuriating such strikes might have been, they hardly endangered Cuban leaders. Could Castro somehow have learned of the CIA's AM LASH plotting? Cubela was not exactly a good security risk; even his case officers were aware of their agent's instability. One described AM LASH's "mercurial" temperament, telling how Cubela had proposed Castro's "execution," only to become deeply disturbed when the case officer used the word "assassination." "It was not the act that he objected to," the case officer wrote, "but merely the choice of words used to describe it. 'Eliminate' was acceptable."

To the frustrated CIA men running the Cuban secret war it must have seemed an acceptable risk to put up with Cubela's disturbed state of mind. It was certainly worth giving him the assurances he demanded as a precondition to carrying out his plan. According to his case officer, he requested military supplies, a device with which to protect himself if his plots against Castro were discovered and a meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

The meeting was set for Oct. 29. Kennedy did not attend, but Desmond Fitzgerald, a social friend of the Kennedys and the CIA man in charge of the Cuban task force, did; he presented himself as Kennedy's personal representative. Cubela was apparently satisfied with Fitzgerald's credentials, for the two arranged to meet in Paris again on Nov. 22, when Fitzgerald was to give him an assassination device and to finalize plans.

At the meeting that day, Fitzgerald gave AM LASH a ballpoint pen rigged with a hypodermic needle the point of which was so fine that its victim would not notice the injection. According to a later CIA inspector general's report, "It is likely that at the very moment President Kennedy was shot, a CIA officer was meeting with a Cuban agent... and giving him an assassination device for use against Castro."

"This fellow was nothing but a double agent," concluded Sen. Robert Morgan (D-N.C.), a member of the Intelligence Committee who was briefed by William E. Colby, then CIA director, on the AM LASH plot but was told nothing of Cubela's earlier history. "When



United Press International

Manuel Artime, a leader of the Bay of Pigs brigade and of CIA-backed guerrilla raids on Cuba, is still an active exile leader.

Colby told us we'd been meeting with AM LASH in Geneva, Paris and Madrid, it occurred to me, how could the guy get out of a little country like this so easily? Colby said he could do it because he was a high official. I asked Colby who he [Cubela] was really work-

ing for and Colby said, 'Senator, that's always a problem.' I was struck by how naive these people at the CIA seemed to have been."

But perhaps a more reasonable conclusion, based on Cubela's instability, is that, even if he were not a double agent, the Cubans were at least able to find out what he was conspiring to do. For one thing, the Cuban intelligence — the DGI — and the Soviet KGB are close working partners, and it is unlikely that one or the other organization would have left so senior and peculiar an official as Cubela unsurveyed on his frequent trips abroad.

Cubela's ultimate fate seems to support this theory. According to the CIA inspector general's report, FitzGerald left the meeting "to discover that President Kennedy had been assassinated. Because of this fact, plans with AM LASH changed and it was decided that we would have no part in the assassination of a government leader — including Castro — and would not aid AM LASH in this attempt."

But the CIA did continue to plot with AM LASH for another year. Incredibly, the Agency apparently did not try to find out if there was something beyond coincidence in the simultaneous events in Paris and Dallas. A case officer continued to meet with Cubela until a few months later, when a decision was made to cease all direct contact between Cubela and American case officers, choosing instead to work through exile agents as "cutouts."

"AM LASH was told and fully understands that the United States Government cannot become involved to any degree in the 'first step' of his plan," Cubela's case officer wrote after Kennedy's death. "FYI," he added, "this is where B-1 could fit in nicely in giving any support he would request."

In the Senate Intelligence Committee's report, B-1 is simply described as the leader of an anti-Castro group. In real life he is Manuel Artime, the political chief of the CIA's Brigade 2506 at the Bay of Pigs and after that Kennedy's designated Cuban leader to organize and direct the large CIA-sponsored commando operations run from bases in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. (Artime is also the godfather of Howard Hunt's son and was actively involved in Hunt's activities at the time of Watergate.)

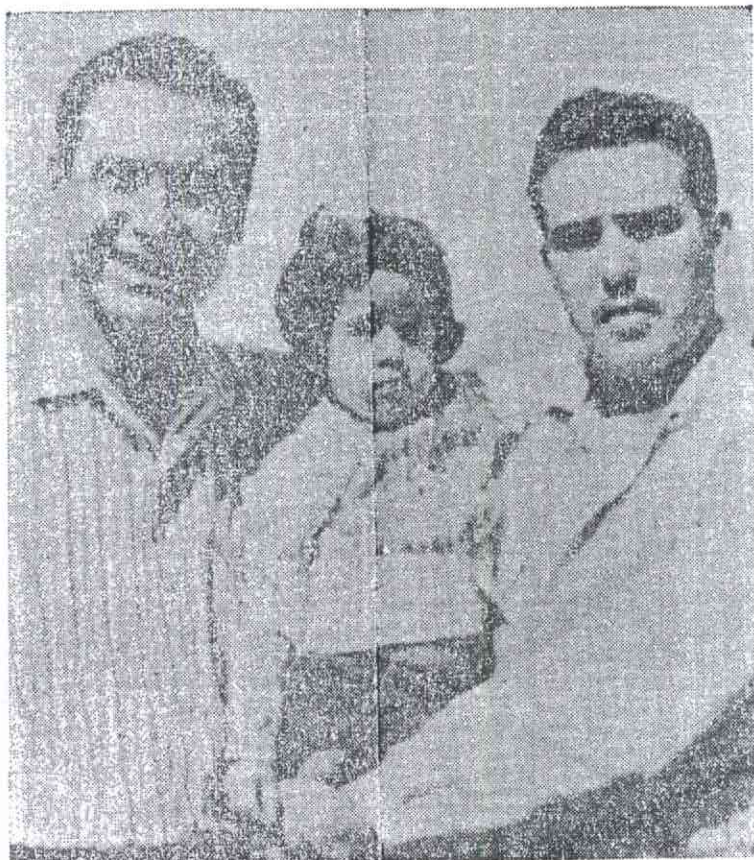
Up until 1965 Artime's Central American efforts had little if any success. It had taken him months to get organized, partly because of the Agency's esoteric method of doing business. There were meetings in foreign countries, Swiss bank accounts, arms to be purchased through intermediaries in Luxembourg and through cover corporations. When the MRR (Revolutionary Recovery

the MRR (Revolutionary Recovery Movement) finally got under way in 1964, it was a well-trained and equipped force. Arttime says that Robert Kennedy sent his congratulations via Arttime's case officer after the first commando raid.

But subsequent operations were not successful. Things always seemed to go wrong now that the exiles were left without American case officers to direct them. The Agency provided Arttime with up-to-date intelligence, but the raiding parties inevitably would land in the wrong spot, run into bad weather or meet some other obstacle. Morale was low at the camps and there were rumors of smuggling activities and embezzlement of funds. As before, the Cubela plot offered a last hope for a touchdown pass when the game seemed all but lost.

Planned Rendezvous

ARTIME openly acknowledges his part in the final Cubela plot. His descriptions of the arrangements made with Cubela, which he related months before the Senate assassination investigation, coincide with all of the senators' findings. Ironically, neither Cubela nor Arttime knew that their initial contact had been secretly arranged by the CIA. An inspector general's report explained that the Agency "contrived to put B-1 and AM LASH together in such a way that neither of them knew that the contact had been engineered by CIA. The thought was that B-1 needed a



AM LASH — Rolando Cubela — holds a friend's daughter in this Miami photo from pre-revolution days. With him, left, is Pepin Naranjo, who helped recruit him to kill Fidel Castro.

man inside and AM LASH wanted a silenced weapon, which CIA was unwilling to furnish to him directly. By putting the two together, B-1 might get its man inside Cuba and AM LASH might get his silenced weapon from B-1."

Arttime, who faithfully reported all of his plans to his case officer, provided Cubela with a silencer and some "small, highly concentrated explosives." The two men worked out elaborate arrangements for Cubela's role in the new Cuban government after the revolution and for the logistics of his escape. Arttime was to land with his commandos as soon as Cubela struck. The assassination itself was to be carried out at Verdadero Beach, where Castro was planning to spend the Easter holidays at a house once owned by the DuPonts. Cubela stayed at a house close by; from there he planned to use the high powered rifle.

"I had the U-2 photo of the beach," Arttime remembers. "At that moment we had 300 boys [his commandos] and I put them all in the mother ships and in the communication ship with the two

PT boats ready for the attack. Cubela was supposed to call somebody in New York and say something like 'Look, the tobacco that they smoke now in Miami is not good. The good tobacco is now in Spain because it's the Cuban tobacco.' That would mean Fidel was in the

house and the plot was on." The call was to be relayed to the CIA communications bank in Miami and immediately to Arttime's commandos at sea. "But the call never came."

The circumstances surrounding the latter Cubela plot were suspicious from the start. By the time the final arrangements were made in 1965, they had become ludicrous. "I think Cubela's real motive was a desire to continue his playboy life," says Arttime. "I met him once in Rome, twice in Spain, and he was always drinking and having a good time. I gave him a lot of money and he spent it like mad." Several of the exiles involved in the plot turned out to be every bit as unreliable. They began to boast about the plan; it became an open secret in Miami.

In June, 1965, the CIA finally terminated all contact with AM LASH and his associates. The explanation cited by the Church Committee report was "for reasons related to security." What apparently alerted the Agency to the questionable nature of the whole enterprise was a strong indication that the Cuban exile agent it had used to put Arttime and Cubela together was actually working for Castro.

It was not until the beginning of 1966 that the Cuban authorities got around to arresting Cubela. He was charged with treason, including the attempted assassination of Fidel Castro.

At his trial in 1966 no one condemned Cubela more harshly than Cubela himself. He called for the maximum sentence for himself — to be shot against the wall — and he seemed to confess to everything. But he did not mention — nor did the prosecutors ask him about — his earlier CIA plots. There appeared to be a studied attempt to avoid any public mention of Cubela's plotting before 1964. Finally, Castro himself intervened on Cubela's behalf to ask for clemency. The would-be assassin was sentenced to 25 years in prison but is now reported to be at a state rehabilitation farm.

The Central Question

ALTHOUGH the events presented here strongly suggest that Kennedy and Castro were locked in a fierce secret struggle until the end, there is another, often cited body of thought which believes the two men were seeking a mutual understanding.

For one thing, in the fall of 1963, Castro had intermediaries approach America's deputy U.N. Ambassador William Attwood with an offer to open talks. Kennedy had authorized Attwood to take Castro up on the offer and they had agreed to a secret meeting in Cuba. Kennedy had even sent an unofficial peace feeler through Jean Daniel, a

French journalist who left Washington in mid-November to interview Castro. Daniel, who was lunching with Castro at the moment of Kennedy's death, later portrayed the Cuban as being genuinely shocked and bereaved by the news.

But U.S. Cuban policy since the Bay of Pigs had been boldly and consistently duplicitous, and no man knew this better than Fidel Castro. One need only listen to his fury in October after a hurricane had ravaged Cuba and the CIA had followed with a major commando strike: "What does the United States do as we are mobilizing to recuperate from the hurricane?" he asked rhetorically. "They send saboteurs, arms and pirate ships and explosives . . . These were not the ordinary counter-revolutionary bands . . . The importance is that it is an action carried out by an organism of the United States government."

Later in the month Castro captured two of the Agency's Cuban commandos, but he waited a full week before forcing them to go on television to confess to their assignments. Coincidentally, this was two days after AM LASH's meeting with FitzGerald — the meeting at which AM LASH appears to have become convinced that the Kennedys were backing his plot. The commandos gave a surprisingly full account of their mission; they even gave the names of their case officers and the location of their bases in Miami. Castro was infuriated by the glib U.S. denials of involvement and by the refusal of the American press to report the attacks even when confronted with evidence they could easily substantiate. "You can see," he railed, "that in this free press they boast of, the press, the wire services, the CIA, everyone acts in unison, elaborating and developing the same lie in order to disguise the truth."

Perhaps the central question here is whether Castro knew of Cubela's plotting and thus knew that the CIA and probably much higher authority was still trying to kill him. To Sen. Morgan, there is little doubt of this. He thinks Castro, after learning of Cubela's plotting, first tried to deter the CIA with his public warning and that he then retaliated when he learned of Cubela's subsequent meeting with FitzGerald — now believing the Kennedys themselves were responsible. "Just exactly how it happened I don't know and I don't know if we'll ever know," but "there is no doubt in my mind that John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated by Fidel Castro or someone under his influence in retaliation for our efforts to assassinate him."