



Kennedy and the Cuban Connection

Conspiracy theories are fashionable, sometimes even fruitful, as in the case of Watergate. So it is not surprising that recent revelations of the Senate Intelligence Committee have resurrected an old question: what connection, if any, did the Castro government have with the assassination of John F. Kennedy?

Current speculation is that the Cuban dictator, having learned of CIA plots against his life, decided to strike back, returning violence for violence, with consequences that are now history. Indeed, the recent report of the Schweiker-Hart task force, while finding no hard evidence to support this theory, did uncover some interesting new leads. More than that, it established that a CIA-FBI "cover-up" had deprived the Warren commission of vital information that prevented it from seriously exploring the possibility of Castro's involvement and that consequently "there is no longer any reason to have faith in its picture of the Kennedy assassination."

And so we may well have a reopening of the investigation. At last.

Given all this, it seems appropriate to examine the record of the period. A small but interesting body of published testimony and reminiscences describes and amply documents a little-known campaign of accommodation launched by Washington and Havana in the weeks preceding that fateful day in November 1963. Actually, the origins of this tentative and ultimately ill-fated rapprochement may be traced to the previous spring, when Castro, increasingly dependent on his Soviet sponsors, found himself obliged to embrace the banner of "peaceful coexistence" in order to obtain economic and military agreements needed to assure the continued development of his revolution. In practical terms, this meant the normalization of relations with the United States.

A MESSAGE FOR CASTRO

It was not until September 1963, however, that this campaign began to show results. At that time, William Attwood, an adviser to the U.S. delegation to the United Nations, told his superiors he had word that Castro wanted an accommodation. John Kennedy got the message and approved a "discreet contact" with the Cuban U.N. representative, Carlos Lechuga. Subsequently, communications were established and meetings held

to discuss the prospect of negotiations.

By early November, Kennedy had decided to push toward an opening with Cuba in hopes of taking Castro out of the Soviet fold and erasing the memory of the Bay of Pigs. The Americans sought a meeting to draw up an agenda for later discussions. On Nov. 18, this message was transmitted to Havana. Shortly thereafter, Lechuga was instructed to set forth such a plan for U.S. consideration.

Even as these developments were unfolding, a second dialogue was taking place through an unofficial envoy—the French journalist Jean Daniel. On Oct. 24, Kennedy had received Daniel in the White House. The President, it seems, had learned of the Frenchman's forthcoming visit to Cuba and had decided to seize the occasion to send Castro a message. The essence of this communication was a strong hint that the United States would be willing to normalize relations *providing* certain conditions were met. What were those conditions? One, clearly, was an end to Castroite subversion. The U.S. had a special responsibility to contain Communist expansionism. As long as Havana continued to export revolution, the economic "blockade" of the island would remain in effect.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Beyond this, not much was definite. The American negotiating position had not yet been worked out. Even so, hints of possible Cuban participation in the Alliance for Progress and of the desire of the United States to see a decline in Soviet influence on the island suggested further avenues for discussion.

Bearing this message and an invitation to revisit the White House upon his return, Daniel set off for Cuba. There he found a remarkably receptive Fidel Castro. Indeed, during the course of a six-hour interview the *lider máximo* found occasion to praise the American President for his sincerity, realism and "good ideas": Kennedy might yet understand that there could be "coexistence between capitalists and socialists, even in the Americas." Castro was convinced that normal relations could be restored "on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty." His country needed peace in order to concentrate on the socio-economic tasks of the revolution. The issue of subversion would not be an obstacle. Cubans would naturally "feel solidarity"

with their revolutionary brethren in other lands. But ultimately, each nation would have to determine its own destiny, and "if they choose regimes other than ours, this is not our business."

This was two days prior to President Kennedy's death.

I mention these developments because they provide an important—and perhaps crucial—frame of reference for Congressional investigators and the public alike. They are not, of course, proof of innocence. But they are suggestive: would Castro have been so intent on coming to terms with a man he was conspiring to kill? One may seriously doubt it. In point of fact, the assassination would bring a quick end to Washington's interest in accommodation.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Still, this is not to rule out the possibility of a "Cuban connection." Governments often behave in inconsistent and self-defeating ways. Indeed, even as the Kennedy Administration was taking these first covert steps toward rapprochement, the CIA was engaged in an attempt on Castro's life. If, due to a lack of political control and a prevailing atmosphere of cold-war hostility, U.S. agents could be conducting such activities in direct conflict with Presidential policy, it is not difficult to imagine similar distortions on the Cuban side. Only a few weeks earlier, Castro had publicly denounced U.S.-sponsored assassinations and even threatened retaliation. Might not some overzealous security officials have taken this for tacit authority to set up a "program of elimination"?

But all this remains speculation. It is possible to envision any number of scenarios that *might* have led to the fatal events of Nov. 22. In lieu of hard evidence, however, it seems only fair to give Castro the same benefit of the doubt that Kennedy has been accorded—namely, that he be considered innocent until proved guilty. It is hoped that the investigations to come will proceed on the basis of that assumption.

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