

Castro Explains

Request for Soviet

Missiles

By Jean Daniel

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MEXICO CITY—A recent trip to the United States, and then to Cuba, has enabled me to establish a veritable dialogue between President Kennedy and Premier Fidel Castro.

Since my arrival in Mexico, where I wrote this article, I have been asked, from all sides, if the impressions that I had retained from these interviews could throw any light on the assassination of the President of the United States and on the possible future of relations between Lyndon B. Johnson and Fidel Castro.

I have answered the first question by relating the reactions of Fidel Castro, with whom I happened to be when he learned of the death of Mr. Kennedy. I answer the second question by reconstituting the Kennedy-Castro dialogue as a mere witness; in other words, I have limited myself strictly to what these two statesmen said to me.

I was received at the White House by President Kennedy on Thursday, Oct. 24, at 5:45 p.m. The rendezvous had been set for 5:30. I waited in the Cabinet room,

next to the office of the President. After a quarter of an hour, the President himself came out, as was his habit, to take me into his office. He excused himself for having made me wait, not out of courtesy or to make me feel important, but to explain a slight confusion in his schedule, which appeared to be very strictly organized.

While passing through the little room where the secretary sat, we saw Jacqueline Kennedy leaving by the French windows on her way to the private gardens of the White House. The President called her back so that I might be introduced.

Dressed Casually

It was still Indian summer in Washington. It was very hot, and the President, like Mrs. Kennedy, was dressed casually, which added to the extreme impression of youth and simplicity—so surprising to feel on entering these impressive surroundings. The President asked me to sit down on the semicircular couch in the middle of his office. He sat opposite the couch in his rocking chair. The interview was to last 20 to 25 minutes. It was interrupted only by a short telephone call.

Right away the President asked me how the situation in France was developing. After my answer, he spoke to me about Gen. Charles de Gaulle. He talked in a relaxed manner, like a man who had at last found comfort in indifference, after having been as exasperated as he was fasci-

nated.

John Kennedy was a man who liked to comprehend fast and resolve matters even faster. With de Gaulle, this had not been possible. One day, impatient at not being able to understand him, and bent on persuading, he had telephoned directly to de Gaulle. It had been in vain, but curiously enough, since the recent visit of Maurice Couve de Murville, President Kennedy had been less preoccupied by Franco-American relations. It was, according to him, a waste of time.

"We confirmed, Mr. Couve de Murville and I," said the President, "that we agreed on nothing, but we agreed that this total lack of accord should not harm the friendship between two great Western countries. I concluded that de Gaulle's strategy, which I do not understand very well, requires a certain tension with the United States. It appears that only this tension will give back to Europeans the desire to think for themselves and no longer to count lazily either on the dollars or the political impetus of the United States."

Disagreements Noted

President Kennedy continued, summarizing concisely and vigorously the disagreements between the United States and France. On Germany, nuclear policy, Europe, the notion of "independence," he told me what has since been published everywhere. However, he added that France had a curious way of manifesting her independ-

ence, particularly in regard to Viet-Nam and Cuba.

He said ironically that the French chief of state wanted to offer him lessons without taking any risk. He said that no one more than he appreciated advice, information and even criticism, but that he appreciated it even more when those friends who offered it were themselves committed to action.

I then asked President Kennedy what one could expect of the trip planned by Gen. de Gaulle next Feb-

ruary. He answered: "Absolutely nothing." But he quickly added, with a broad smile, as if savoring in advance the pleasure of the prospective visit: "All the same, it will be very exciting. Gen. de Gaulle is a historic figure, definitely the strangest great man of the epoch."

I then again returned to the subjects of Viet-Nam and Cuba. Here my notes are very precise and I will let the President of the United States speak:

"We do not have time to talk about Viet-Nam but I want to talk about Cuba. This conversation, however, will be much more interesting when you return.

"I have happened to read articles in the European press where it is charged that we Americans were blind to the evolution of the Cuban situation. I have just learned that Gen. de Gaulle himself feels that communism in Cuba is only the accidental and temporary form of the will to be independent from the United States. Naturally, one understands very well, about President de Gaulle, this 'will for independence' . . ."

He Becomes Emphatic

President Kennedy became emphatic. Punctuating his phrases with the short mechanical gestures that had become so famous, he said:

"I will tell you this: we know perfectly well what has happened in Cuba, to the unhappiness of all of us. I have followed personally, since the beginning, the evolution of these events with grave concern. There are few matters to which I have devoted so much attention. The conclusions that I have drawn go much further than

the European analyses. Here's what I think.

"I think that there is not a country in the world, including all the regions of Africa and including any country under colonial domination, where the economic colonization, the humiliation, the exploitation have been worse than those which ravaged Cuba, the result, in part, of the policy of my country, during the regime of Batista.

"I think that we spawned, constructed, entirely fabricated without knowing it, the Castro movement. I think that the accumulation of such errors has endangered all of Latin America. The Alliance for Progress has no other aim than to reverse this disastrous course. It is one of the most important problems, if not the most important, of American foreign policy.

"I can tell you that I understood the Cubans. I approved of Fidel Castro's proclamations in the Sierra Maestra when he sought, and rightly, justice and purity. I will tell you something else: in a certain sense, it is as though Batista were the incarnation of some of the sins committed by the United States. Now, we must pay for those sins. As far as the old regime goes, I agree with the first Cuban revolutionaries. That must be obvious."

International Problem

After a silence, which permitted him to note my surprise and my interest, the President continued:

"But it is also obvious that the problem has ceased being purely Cuban and has become international; I mean to say, Soviet. I am the President of the United States. I am not a sociologist; I am the President of a free country which has responsibilities in the free world.

"I know that Castro has betrayed the promises of the Sierra Maestra and that he has agreed to become a Soviet agent in Latin America. I know that through his error—out of a desire for independence, communism, or sheer folly—the world was at the edge of a thermonuclear war in October, 1962. The Russians themselves understood it well, at least after our reaction; but, as far as Fidel Castro is

concerned, I cannot discover whether or not he understands this, or even if he cares."

He smiled, then said:

"You will tell me on your return. It will not be by the method of Communist subversion that the people of Latin America will see justice and progress. Neither will it be by passing from economic oppression to a Marxist dictatorship that Castro himself denounced a few years ago.

"The United States has the possibility of doing as much good in South America as it has done wrong. I would even say that we are the only ones to have this capability. On the essential condition that communism does not take root there."

Two Questions Asked

President Kennedy stood up to indicate that our interview was at an end. I apologized for wanting to delay him for two rapid questions. The first one: Can the United States tolerate a socialistic economy? He answered: "And Sekou Toure? And Tito? A few days ago, I received Marshal Tito and our conversations were very positive.

Second question: What does the American Government expect from the blockade? Is the economic isolation of Cuba a punishment or a political calculation? Mr. Kennedy answered: "You are suggesting that the political effectiveness of the blockade is not sure?" He smiled.

"You will see when you get to Cuba whether or not it is. In any case, we cannot permit Communist subversion to take over the other countries of Latin America. Two dams are necessary to contain Soviet expansion: the blockade on one side and the tremendous effort to progress on the other. This is the essential problem. The two battles are equally difficult." He was silent a moment, then concluded: "The continuation of the blockade depends upon the continuation of subversive activities."

The interview was over. It occurred to me that President Kennedy himself had some doubts and that he was seeking a way out. The same evening, I gave a de-

itimate enemy, this Kennedy of whom Khrushchev had said to Fidel, "With him one can talk."

Certain Phrases Repeated

Three times, he made me repeat certain phrases, in particular those where Mr. Kennedy expressed his disapproval of the Batista regime, those where Mr. Kennedy had become impatient at the words of Gen. de Gaulle, and finally, those which accused Fidel of almost having been the origin of a war fatal to all humanity.

When I stopped talking, from the signs of passion that Fidel had been manifesting, I was expecting an explosion. Instead, I was given a long silence, and at the end of this silence, a recital calm, serene, often humorous, always well thought out.

I do not know whether or not Fidel has changed and whether the vociferous caricatures which are made of him in the Western world stem from the past. All I know is that, at no moment during the two entire days I spent near him (and during which a number of things happened), did Castro lose his calm and his balance. As I did for President Kennedy, I will leave the floor to him.

"I think that Kennedy is sincere," Fidel declared. "I also believe that the expression today of this sincerity could have a political significance. I will give you an explanation.

"I am not forgetting that

Kennedy conducted his electoral campaign against Nixon on the theme of a firm policy toward Cuba. I am not forgetting the Machiavellian tactics the deceits and the attempts at invasion, the pressuring and the blackmail, the organization of the counterrevolution, the blockade and, above all, all the steps of retaliation taken before, well before, there was the pretext and the alibi of communism.

Sees Difficult Situation

"But I believe that Kennedy inherited a difficult situation, that a President of the United States is never truly free. Kennedy is now experiencing this lack of freedom; he realizes that he has been deceived, particularly with regard to the Cuban reactions at the time of the attempted invasion of the Bay of Pigs. I also believe that he is a realist: he understands the impossibility of making us disappear along with the explosive situation in all of Latin America.

"There is one point on which I wish immediately to give you some fresh information. I have never done this up until now; but today they want to frighten the whole of humanity by spreading the idea that Cuba, and above all me, Fidel Castro, could at any moment provoke a nuclear war. So, the world must know the true story of the missiles.

"Six months before the installation of these missiles

in Cuba, we had an accumulation of information telling us of new preparations for an invasion of the island, preparations undertaken by the CIA, whose directors were mortified by the failure of the Bay of Pigs and by the fact that they saw themselves as ridiculous in the eyes of the world and ill treated by the American Government.

"We knew also that the Pentagon would lend its authority to the CIA preparations, but we had our doubts as to the state of mind of the President. Some even believed that it was only necessary to alert him, to alarm him, to cause the project to fail.

"Then, one day, the son-in-law of Khrushchev, Alexei Adzhubei, came to visit us before going to Washington. Upon his arrival in the U.S., Adzhubei was received by the chief of the American Government and they spoke, above all, about Cuba. One week after this interview, we received in Havana a copy of Adzhubei's report to Khrushchev.

Remarks to Adzhubei

"It was the copy of this report that started everything. What had Kennedy said to Adzhubei? Listen well to this. It is very important. He had said that the new situation in Cuba was intolerable for the United States and that the American Government had decided to tolerate it no longer.

"He had said that pacific

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tailed account of this conversation to two American colleagues who were intimate friends of the President. They were not surprised at the invitation extended by President Kennedy to see him on my return from Cuba. He had a devouring need of information, a need considerably greater since experience had taught him not to limit his sources of information to the official services.

Leaves for Havana

Consequently, the President lived literally with some of the press. He used the journalists. I do not believe that there is any other statesman who has



IPS Photo by March Riboud © 1963 Magnum Photos

Cuban Premier Fidel Castro emphasizes a remark by waving his arms during an interview with Jean Daniel.

better understood the importance of the news media.

After that, I left for Havana.

In that "Pearl of the Caribbean, perfumed in rum and bathed in a triumphant sensuality" — to speak like the American tourist brochures still found in Havana's hotels — I passed three full and intensive weeks. But I thought that I

would never be able to meet Fidel Castro.

I interviewed peasants and workers, writers and painters, militants and counter-revolutionaries, ministers and ambassadors. But Fidel remained inaccessible. I had been warned: he was engulfed; the consequences of the hurricane forced the Cuban government to revise, completely, its planning, and then, above all, he no longer wished to receive any journalists, from either the West or the East.

I had almost given up when, the day before I was supposed to leave (the capricious plane that connects Havana to Mexico happily left a day late), Fidel himself 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 didn't leave until 4 a.m. Of this extraordinary interview, I will relate only what constituted an answer to the words of President Kennedy.

Fidel listened to me; I mean, he listened to Mr. Kennedy through my voice, with a devouring and passionate interest: twisting his beard, pulling at his parachutist beret, adjusting, his maquis jacket, throwing a thousand sparkling malicious lights from the depths of his lively black eyes.

For a moment, I felt as though I were playing the role of this partner with whom he had as great a desire to discuss as to fight, that I was, in a way, this in-

coexistence had been deeply compromised by the fact that Soviet influence in Cuba altered the balance of power, destroyed the accepted equilibrium and (now Castro spoke detaching each syllable). **KENNEDY HAD REMINDED THE RUSSIANS THAT THE UNITED STATES HAD NOT INTERVENED IN HUNGARY**, which evidently was a way of exacting Russian nonintervention in the event of an invasion.

"Obviously the term 'invasion' was not pronounced, and Adzhubei, uninformed at the time, could not draw the same conclusions as we did. But when we had communicated to Khrushchev all our previous information, they began to interpret the Kennedy-Adzhubei conversation in our sense and they set about gathering information. At the end of a month, the Russian and Cuban governments became certain that a landing in Cuba might happen at any moment. There is the truth.

"What should we do? How could we be warned of the invasion? In Khrushchev we found the same preoccupations as we had. He asked us what we wanted. We answered him: arrange that the United States understands that to attack Cuba is to attack the Soviet Union. How to realize this aim? After this question the discussions and planning began.

"We thought of a proclamation, of an alliance, of classic military assistance. The Russians explained to us that they had a double preoccupation: save the Cuban revolution (meaning, their Socialist honor in the world) and at the same time, avoid a world conflict. In their opinion, if we settled for conventional armaments, the United States might not hesitate before invading. In that case, Russia would retaliate and it would mean an inevitable world war."

Stalin's Acts Cited

At this time, I interrupted Castro to ask him how one could be absolutely sure of Soviet intervention. After all, I said, Stalin certainly let down Markos, the chief of Greek Communist resistance forces, because of the division of zones . . .

"I know. But there is no relation between the two. Russia was too deeply engaged on our behalf.

Besides, since then, we have had every proof of the tremendous solidarity of the Soviet people and its leaders. You can see here for yourself how this solidarity is manifested.

"Another thing, with regard to Stalin: When I was in the U.S.S.R. and while others, somewhere else, were reproaching Khrushchev for being more conciliatory than Stalin with the capitalists, Khrushchev confided to me, and I will not repeat them to you, several examples illustrating the prudence and even the abdication of Stalin. He said, and I believe it, that Stalin would never have installed missiles in Cuba.

"It is true that it was said at that time that, on the other hand, if these missiles were installed, it was because certain internal problems pushed the Russians to use us to provoke the United States. What I can tell you is that the Russians did not want and do not want war.

"One has to go there, to see them work, to share their economic problems, to admire their tenacity in raising the standard of living of the workers, and one understands immediately that they are far, very far, from any idea of provocation or domination.

'Faced With a Choice'

"But, Soviet Russia was faced with a choice, an absolutely inevitable war (the result of their commitments as well as of their position in the Socialist world) if the Cuban revolution were attacked, or the risk of war if the United States did not withdraw in the face of the missiles, refusing to renounce destroying Cuba. They chose the Socialist fraternity and the risk.

"In these conditions, how could we Cubans refuse to share the risks taken to save us. It is, on the whole, a question of honor! No? You believe that honor does not count in politics? That we are romantics? Perhaps. Why not? In any case, we are militants.

"Briefly, we agreed on the installation of missiles. Moreover, it must be said that for us Cubans, it did not make much difference whether we died by a conventional bomb or by a hydrogen one. But all the same, we did not play with world peace. It is the United States who played with peace in using war as a

blackmail to stifle revolutions.

"Then, in the month of June, 1962, my brother Raoul and Che Guevara went to Moscow to discuss the arrangements for installing the missiles. The convoy arrived by sea three weeks later. The United States managed to learn that it contained armaments, of course, but it took them two months to discover that the armaments were missiles. Two months—that is more than we had calculated. For it is evident that it was a question of intimidation and not of committing an aggression.

"Now, if you wish, we are going to talk about the Alliance for Progress. I am going to tell you: in a certain sense, it is a good idea. It has marked a step forward. Even if one admits that it is tardy, timid, that it was done hastily, under pressure, despite all that, I can say, I admit that the idea itself constitutes an effort to adapt to the extraordinarily rapid course of events in Latin America.

"When we learn for example — did you read the morning papers? — that the Argentinians nationalized the petrol industry! The Argentine government! Do you understand—in the American stock exchange that must have caused more disturbance than Castroism. The Catholic and military conservatives in Argentina, the men most bound by American interests!

'Communist Scarecrow'

"Here, we talk about nationalization, agrarian reform — good! If the Alliance for Progress provokes that, it isn't bad, for it is in the direction of popular aspirations. When I think that between the United States and us, in the days of Eisenhower, or rather of Nixon, all the fuss started when we decreed an agrarian reform that affected—listen well to this—only the owners of more than 200,000 hectares! But yes, 200,000! (494,200 acres).

"But at that time, the reaction of the trusts was terrible. Today for the other countries, and because one brandishes the Communist scarecrow, the reaction of the American trusts is superficially more clever. They will select straw men to govern indirectly. But the difficulties will begin!

"That is why the good

ideas of Kennedy will come to nothing. It is very easy to understand and he, in this moment, he ought to perceive it because, as I told you, he is a realist.

"For years and years, the American policy, meaning the trusts and the Pentagon, not the Government, has relied upon the oligarchies. Prestige, dollars, power pass through the hands of a class that Kennedy himself told you about in speaking of Batista. Suddenly a President appears who aspires to lean on another class (which controls nothing) in order that the people have the impression that the U.S.A. no longer leans on dictators and that there is no longer any need to make Castro-type revolutions. So what happens then?

"The trusts see their interests compromised (barely, but all the same). The Pentagon thinks that its strategic bases are in danger, the powerful oligarchies of all the countries of Latin America alert their American friends, they sabotage the new policy. In short, Kennedy has the whole world against him.

Venezuela Cited

"The few liberal Presidents, or the supposedly liberal ones, who have been chosen as an instrument of the new policy, are either swept out like Bosch in Santo Domingo or are transformed. Betancourt was not a Batista. He has become one.

"In the face of all this,

how can the American Government believe seriously that Cuban subversion is at the root of all the explosions in the continent? In Venezuela, for example, do you know the situation? You believe that the Venezuelans need us, to understand what is happening in their country? Don't you think we have enough of our own problems?

"Right now, for myself, I only ask that we be left in peace in order to better the economic condition of the country, to apply the plans, to educate our young 'companeros.' This does not mean that we are not solidly with the people who suffer and fight, like the Venezuelans. But it is the people who make the decisions, and if they choose a kind of regime different from ours, that is not our business."

I asked Fidel, "What is the outcome? How can the situation develop? Even if the United States uses against you what you call the alibi of communism, it is nevertheless a fact that you have chosen communism, that your economy and your security depend upon the Soviet Union, and even if you have nothing to do with it, the United States considers that you are part of an international strategy, that you constitute a Soviet base in a world where peace depends upon the respect of a tacit division of zones."

"I do not want to answer you as to our ties with the Soviet Union," flared Cas-

tro. "I find that indecent. We have, for the Soviet Union, fraternal feelings of deep, of total gratitude. The Russians are making extraordinary efforts for us, which sometimes cost them dearly. But we have our own policy, which is not perhaps always the same (and we have proved this) as that of the U.S.S.R."

"I loathe insisting on this point, for to ask me to say that I am not a pawn on the Russian checkerboard is like asking a woman to cry out on the town square that she is not a prostitute."

"We Are on Our Feet"

"If the United States sees the problem as you have presented it, then it is true that there is no solution. But, in the end, who is the loser? Everything has been tried against us — everything, absolutely everything. And we are still living. Better and better."

"We are on our feet, and we are going to celebrate, with a greater brilliance than usual, the first of January, 1964, the fifth anniversary of the Cuban revolution. The United States' policy of isolation is less effective every day. We are increasing our trade with all the countries—even Spain! We have just concluded a deal for 300,000 tons of sugar with the Spanish."

"The blockade, on the contrary, creates the revolutionary atmosphere that we need in order to put the country to rights. We are in danger? We have always lived like that. Besides, you cannot imagine the number

of friends that one finds in the world when one is a victim of the United States. No, truly, for all these reasons, we are not the plaintiff, we solicit nothing."

"I will tell you something else: since the rupture and the blockade, we have forgotten the United States. We have neither hatred nor resentment. We don't think about it anymore. When I think what a problem diplomatic relations with the United States would be! The Swiss Ambassador represents them. I prefer dealing with him than with 200 members of an Embassy in which some of us would not fail to see some spies."

"I have just spoken to you as a Cuban revolutionary. But I must speak to you as a man who hopes for peace and I consider that the United States is a country too important not to influence the course of peace in the world."

"In this sense, I cannot prevent myself from hoping that a man will be found in North America (why couldn't this be Kennedy? There are some things in his favor), a man to brave unpopularity, to fight against the trusts, to tell the truth, and above all to let people act as they want. I ask nothing, neither dollars, nor aid, nor diplomats, nor bankers, or militarists. Nothing except peace, that we be accepted for what we are!"

"We Are Socialists"

"As for us, we are Socialist. The United States is capitalist. The countries of Latin America will choose what they want. All the same, in a time when the United States sells wheat to the Russians, in which Can-

ada feeds China, and de Gaulle respects Ben Bella, why wouldn't it be possible to make the Americans understand that socialism leads them not to hostility but to coexistence?"

"Why am I not a Tito or a Sekou Toure? Because the Russians have never done us such harm as the Guineans and the Yugoslavs complained of in the past, and because the Americans have never given us the help for which those same people congratulate themselves today."

"As to fearing the Soviet intentions in Latin America, with Cuba as go-between, this is like transferring to others one's own desire to dominate. You told me yourself a while ago that the Russians are tired of the Cuban affair. Economically, it is evident. That is why militarily it is better not to force the people to call on the Russians for help. Really, I believe that a man like Kennedy can discover that it is not in the interests of the United States to follow a policy that leads only to failures. With us, on the basis of mutual respect, of sovereignty, all can return to normal."

Fidel Castro said to me, in conclusion: "Since you are going to see Kennedy again, be a messenger of peace in spite of everything. I want to emphasize that I wish nothing, I expect nothing, and, as a revolutionary, the current situation does not displease me. But as a man, and as a statesman, I have the duty to indicate where the basis of an understanding can lie."

Fidel Castro spoke thus, two days before the death of President Kennedy.