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R493

The United States Senate

ATwood

Report of Proceedings

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Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental
Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities

Record #157-10011-10126

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U.S. Senate
Select Committee on Intelligence
Approves Release of this Document
Date 6/21/94 J.H.

Thursday, July 10, 1975

Washington, D.C.

NO OBJECTION
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

10/25/94

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TESTIMONY OF
William Atwood

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EXECUTIVE SESSION

- - -

Thursday, July 10, 1975

- - -

United States Senate,
Select Committee to Study Governmental
Operations with Respect to
Intelligence Activities,
Washington, D. C.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 4:15 o'clock
p.m. in Room S-128, the Capitol, the Honorable Frank Church
(Chairman of the Committee) presiding.

Present: Senators Church (presiding), Hart of Michigan,
Mondale, Huddleston, Tower, Baker and Schweiker.

Also present: William Miller, Staff Director; Frederick
A. O. Schwarz, Jr., Chief Counsel; Curtis R. Smothers, Minority
Counsel; Charles Kirbow, Michael J. Madigan, Frederick Baron
and Charles Lombard, Professional Staff Members.

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P R O C E E D I N G S

The Chairman. Would you please stand and be sworn?

Do you swear that all the testimony you will give at this proceeding will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. Atwood. I do.

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1 TESTIMONY OF WILLIAM ATWOOD

2 Mr. Schwarz. Will you state your name and address for
3 the record, please?

4 Mr. Atwood. William Atwood.

5 My business address, I'm the publisher of News Day, 550
6 Stuart Avenue, Garden City, New York.

7 Mr. Schwarz. Mr. Atwood, I know you're here on very short
8 notice, and as a procedural matter, we inform all of the
9 witnesses that they have their right to counsel, and if you
10 want counsel, you can leave to get counsel.

11 Mr. Atwood. I know.

12 Mr. Schwarz. Now in the fall of 1963, were you at the
13 United Nations?

14 Mr. Atwood. I was there as a Special Advisor to the U.S.
15 delegation with the rank of Ambassador.

16 Mr. Schwarz. Were you asked by President Kennedy to
17 explore the possibility of a rapprochement with Fidel Castro of
18 Cuba?

19 Mr. Atwood. Yes.

20 That's a simple way of saying it. I can go over it the
21 way it happened in more detail, if you'd like, but it was, in
22 fact -- yes, approaches were made and contact was established
23 and this was done with the knowledge, approval, and encourage-
24 ment of the White House.

25 Mr. Schwarz. And you approached the Cuban man at the

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1 United Nations?

2 Mr. Atwood. Carlos Lochuga, the Cuban delegate.

3 Senator Baker. Mr. Chairman, I hate to interrupt. I'm
4 not quite sure I caught that.

5 The question was, were you authorized to negotiate a
6 rapprochement with Fidel Castro and was the answer that you
7 were authorized by the White House to undertake certain
8 negotiations?

9 The answer seems to be not quite the same as the question.

10 Mr. Atwood. Yes, I was.

11 Senator Baker. Did the President of the United States
12 authorize you to do that?

13 Mr. Atwood. Yes, but that didn't come for a little while.
14 The feelers were made or originally came, one might say from
15 their side.

16 Senator Schweiker. When was that?

17 Mr. Atwood. Well, I will refer to notes that I made from
18 my diary. I can tell you exactly when it started. It started
19 in [September 5th of 1963 when Lisa Howard, an American broad-
20 casting correspondent who just came back from Cuba, said that
21 Castro would be anxious to talk to us to establish some kind of
22 communications with us.]

23 I spoke with Averell Harriman about it and with Adlai
24 Stevenson, who was then my boss. They asked me to do a memo
25 about it. I had been to Cuba in '59, and one reason I was

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1 interested in this was because I had tried to talk
 2 with Castro at the time and he appeared to be rather malleable
 3 and not quite as set in his ways as he became later, so at that
 4 point Harriman said it would be useful for me to talk with
 5 Robert Kennedy. This was on September 19th.

6 Meanwhile, I made a date with Robert Kennedy on the 19th.
 7 On September 20th, Stevenson said he had talked to the President
 8 about the advisability of establishing contact with Cubans at
 9 the UN, and he had gotten the okay to go ahead, where we could
 10 have direct contacts with them.

11 So I then told Miss Howard to set up the contact, that is
 12 to have a small reception at her house so it could be done very
 13 casually, not as a formal approach by us, we certainly didn't
 14 want that to be the case, and since I had not only Howard's
 15 input but the Cuban, the Guinean Ambassador. I might say,
 16 I served as Ambassador to Guinea prior to this assignment --
 17 had told me he was then the Ambassador to Cuba, ~~the same~~
 18 ~~the same thing Miss Howard had said that Castro was~~
 19 interested in some kind of a conversation with us.

20 Following that, on the 23rd, Miss Howard set up this
 21 party. [I met La Chuga. He said that Fidel Castro had hoped
 22 to contact or get in touch with President Kennedy in '61 and
 23 then came the Bay of Pigs, and that was that.] But that he'd
 24 been very much impressed by that speech that the President made
 25 in June of '63 in which he talked about world diversity and

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1 we referred to our talk in '59 and he said another talk might
2 be possible and useful at this time, and that was the first rea
3 indication. At this point, I said I'm no longer a private
4 citizen but a government official and we agreed that the
5 current situation was different, at the same time, things were
6 a bit abnormal and he said the Cubans were very much annoyed at
7 the exile rate, the CIA ^{raids} ~~rate~~ on Cuba, as well as the freezing
8 of their assets.

9 The next step was my visit to Washington on September 24th
10 when I came down to see Robert Kennedy who was then Attorney
11 General. His position was -- I showed him the memoranda, which
12 I had prepared on what had happened up to that point. [He said
13 that a trip to Cuba which is what LaChuga had suggested would
14 be rather risky, said it was bound to leak and said it might
15 result in some kind of Congressional investigation or something
16 Anyway, it might be a problem. But he did think the matter was
17 worth pursuing through UN channels, and he would be talking to
18 Averell Harriman and Bundy about it.]

19 At that point, LaChuga said he would be making a very
20 violently anti-American speech on November 7th and not to worry
21 too much about it, so Stevenson asked me to help prepare a speech
22 in reply. On the 27th of September, I saw Lochuga again, told
23 I could not accept any invitation to come to Cuba, but I would
24 be glad to keep in touch with him and he could talk with
25 anyone who wanted to come up and he said he would notify Havana

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1 I then got a call from Bundy on October 2nd, and he said
2 that -- Chase, I think his name was Peter Chase, one of his
3 assistants -- is the person to be in touch with, and to keep
4 him apprised of all developments.

5 [I later again got a word from Jean Daniel, the French
6 correspondent who had come back from Havana saying Cuba seemed
7 ripe for a conversation. So this also came from another source
8 a Greek town planner named Doxiati, who said that Castro was
9 very much interested in some kind of normalization relation,
10 but that Che Guevera and Raul were opposed.]

11 October 21st, I got a call again from Bundy's office asking
12 me what was new. I said, well the ball is now in the Cuban's
13 court.

14 On the 28th, I saw Lochaga again at the UN who said that
15 Havana didn't see exactly how a talk would be useful now, but
16 he would be glad to maintain continuous contact with me anyway.

17 The 4th of November I briefed Stevenson on these develop-
18 ments and meanwhile, [Miss Howard had been on the phone with
19 Rene Valao who was Fidel Castro's aide at that point, and who
20 was one of the so-called pro-Americans in the group and who
21 suggested that I get in touch with him by telephone.]

22 I then briefed Bundy on this on the 5th of November
23 [Bundy told me that the President was more in favor of pushing
24 towards an opening toward Cuba than was the State Department,]
25 the idea being -- well, getting them out of the Soviet fold and

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1 perhaps wiping out the Bay of Pigs and maybe getting back into
2 normal.

3 Chase then said. Bundy wanted a chronological memo about
4 the entire thing. I might say I have forgotten one point. Wh
5 [I first told Adlai Stevenson about this demarche or approach
6 by the Cubans he said he liked it, but, and I quote, he said
7 the CIA, unfortunately, is still in charge of Cuba. But he
8 said -- he still offered to take it up with the White House.]

✓✓

9 Anyway, we're now on November 12th, and I went to Miss
10 Howard's apartment where she said he had set up a phone call to
11 Havana with Valao. We never could get through the bad
12 connections, but she had spoken to him before I arrived and
13 he had suggested that I come to Marianao from Key West and
14 talk directly with Fidel Castro, because they wanted to avoid
15 going through Havana.

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16 Bundy called me the same day to say that the White House
17 favored preliminary talks with Valao at the UN but not down in
18 Cuba and told me to tell Valao this. I finally reached Valao
19 on the telephone on November the 14th and delivered a message
20 about his coming here. He said -- and that we wanted to discuss
21 agenda.

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22 [He said he would send instructions to LaChuga and that he
23 would -- or rather Castro, through him, to LaChuga, that they
24 should discuss an agenda with me.] He was very cordial on the
25 telephone.

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1 [I reported this to Bundy on the 19th of November -- by the
2 way, my call to Valao was the 18th -- he said that after their
3 agenda had been received, the President wanted to see me at the
4 White House and decide what to say and whether to go or what
5 we should do next.] That was the 19th of November, three days
6 before the assassination.

7 On the 29th of November, LaChuga had seen Miss Howard
8 and he wondered where things stood now. I passed the word to
9 him that I didn't know, but that until we were told differently
10 that we would continue our conversation.

11 On the 2nd of December he confirmed getting a letter from
12 Valao and he wanted to know if anything had changed again. He
13 said he was authorized to talk to me in general terms.

14 I called the White House, Chase in this case, to say that
15 the ball was now in our court.

16 [On December 4th, LaChuga again looked me up at the UN;
17 said he now had a letter directly from Castro approving the
18 detailed talks and an agenda. Again, I informed Chase.

19 He said the decision would take some time now because all
20 our policies were under review.]

21 This went on. I kept seeing LaChuga and LaChuga would say
22 he was waiting for an answer, and I kept saying well the door
23 isn't closed, I just don't know.

24 On the 17th of December the President, this time President
25 Johnson, came to the Waldorf to meet with the delegation at

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1 Stevenson's apartment and told me that he had read my Cuban
2 memo recapitulating the events of the discussions in the fall
3 with interest and that was that. And I then was in Washington.
4 Averell Harriman asked me about the Cuban project. I said I
5 didn't know, that it was lying down in Chase's office in the
6 White House and that he told me he'd get back to me after the
7 holidays.

8 Well, that ended my diary in '63. I then went to Kenya
9 as Ambassador in February of '64. [However I do recall that
10 some time in January I again called Chase and I said, well, if
11 this thing is going to be continued I would suggest either
12 John Case or someone on that mission. He said, well, it doesn't
13 look as though it's going to be continued now because it's an
14 election year, or whatever the reason was, and anyway we'll keep
15 it in mind but that it was a dead issue.]

16 The interesting thing, I think in terms of your investiga-
17 tion is that whatever was going on in terms of assassination
18 plots, certainly there seemed to be two tracks, because [it seems
19 hard for me to believe that the Executive would be approving this
20 type of negotiation while other covert operations were happening
21 although it could conceivably have happened.]

22 The Chairman. If it did happen, what we are in search of
23 is an explanation.

24 I think your testimony is helpful. Certain inferences
25 can at least be drawn. But it is very helpful.

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1 Mr. Atwood. The only part, I might add one thing. I was
2 there in '59. I did know at that time that certainly assassina-
3 tion was very much in the air. I had gone down -- I was then
4 Foreign Editor of Look Magazine -- and I spent quite a lot of
5 time with Castro and at that time -- when I returned I was told
6 quite flatly by Julio Lobo, who was the man in sugar that Castro
7 would not live out the year, there was a contract out on him.

8 Senator Baker. Did he say by whom?

9 Mr. Atwood. He didn't say.

10 The Chairman. Can you fix the date again?

11 [Mr. Atwood. This was 1959. While I was down there,
12 I actually went to a party. I was told that there were some
13 CIA men. I had no reason to believe they were or they weren't.
14 There were discussions seriously, they were talking quite
15 openly about assassinating Castro. This was in July of 1959
16 and plans were being made.]

17 As a matter of fact, I was introduced to two alleged
18 assassins, people who had been selected to do the job, which
19 actually dumfounded me. But I think, seeing the security, the
20 sloppy security that surrounded this man, the determination of
21 these people to do away with him, it occurred to me that he
22 probably wouldn't live out the year. I'm surprised, frankly,
23 that he did.

24 The Chairman. Where was this party?

25 Mr. Atwood. Just outside of Havana near the Havana

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1 Country Club.

2 The Chairman. At whose house?

3 Mr. Atwood. I don't recall whose house it was. It was
4 some wealthy Cubans or Americans, I don't recall the name.

5 Senator Tower. You said they actually were identified
6 as CIA people?

7 Mr. Atwood. I was told later that one of them was a CIA
8 person.

9 Senator Tower. But you had no confirmation?

10 Mr. Atwood. I had no way of knowing. I wouldn't testify

11 The Chairman. This was the discussion among certain rich
12 Cubans and Americans?

13 Mr. Atwood. And Americans. They were saying we are going
14 to do away with this man, he's a maniac and --

15 The Chairman. I know. But did that discussion in 1959
16 that you heard identify the CIA as the Agency for handling the
17 assassination?

18 Mr. Atwood. I was told by one of the people at the party
19 that a CIA man was present at the party.

20 The Chairman. That's all. The discussion generally
21 related to assassination?

22 Mr. Atwood. Very specifically to assassination.

23 The Chairman. But it related to assassinations generally.
24 It did not relate to any connection between the United States
25 government or the CIA and an assassination plot?

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1 Mr. Atwood. No, it didn't.

2 Mr. Schwarz. Did some Cubans tell you during your
3 discussions that Castro knew that efforts had been made to
4 assassinate him?

5 Mr. Atwood. Oh, yes.

6 I was back in Cuba in 1970 and they were, I believe,
7 convinced of this fact that there were continuous efforts being
8 made.

9 Senator Baker. What was the question, Fritz?

10 Mr. Schwarz. Whether some Cubans told him that Castro knew
11 that efforts had been made to assassinate him.

12 Senator Baker. When was this?

13 Mr. Schwarz. His testimony was in 1970 he was told that.

14 Mr. Atwood. I was invited down there in 1970 and I was
15 told that in 1970 and I was told that again, and I have been
16 in touch with the Cubans at the UN since then from time to time
17 and again they keep saying this.

18 Senator Baker. We've got a warning for a roll call. Could
19 you stay just a few more minutes until we come back?

20 Mr. Atwood. Certainly.

21 (A brief recess was taken.)

22 The Chairman. Let's go back on the record, and save time,
23 because I think Senator Baker had another question.

24 Senator Baker. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

25 You indicated, I believe, that you heard in 1970 in Cuba

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1 conversations about what Castro knew of alleged attempts on
2 his life, is that correct?

3 Mr. Atwood. Yes.

4 Senator Baker. Could you give me a little more informatio
5 about that, Mr. Ambassador?

6 Mr. Atwood. I went down there at the invitation of the
7 Cuban-U.S. mission with whom I picked up some relations, not
8 because I had any idea they would impress me with their
9 achievements, but because I had had these conversations and I
10 expressed the desire to see my old friend Lochuga again and
11 so my wife and I went down.

12 And while we spent several days down there, this came up
13 on several occasions, and they said, well, there is no question
14 but that the CIA had been conducting raids, [continuous raids
15 on Cuba from Florida and Grand Turk Island and that they had
16 tried to assassinate Fidel.]

17 So I --

18 Senator Baker. I assume Fidel knew that if they knew
19 that.

20 Mr. Atwood. Of course he would know about it.

21 Senator Baker. Did they give you any more information
22 about that other than the general statement?

23 Mr. Atwood. I said, well, no and they had produced at
24 Press Conferences prior to that, they had produced evidence and
25 pieces of equipment which could have come from anywhere, G.I.

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1 olive drab, canned peaches.-- it didn't necessarily prove
2 anything, but they were convinced in their own mind that this
3 had happened. And my only response was, I said I really
4 haven't been in the government now for some time and I just find
5 it very hard to believe. I think that what might be happening
6 is that some free-lancers, that is, Cuban exiles, might be
7 engaged, could possibly be engaged or something like that, but

8 Senator Baker. How did they react to that suggestion?

9 Mr. Atwood. They just smiled knowingly. It was under-
10 standable. In Communist countries, you know, once you're in a
11 company you don't ever leave it. They might have been leftover
12 part-time help from the Bay of Pigs, but as far as they were
13 concerned, this was ordered and orchestrated from Washington.

14 I personally find it hard to believe, but at this point,
15 I don't know.

16 Senator Baker. Well, I think it's beyond dispute in this
17 record that it was in fact orchestrated from Washington time and
18 again.

19 What I am reaching for is how much of that information might
20 be available to Castro, particularly whether you heard any
21 conversation by any Cuban about any possible past retaliations
22 or future retaliations?

23 Mr. Atwood. Retaliations?

24 Senator Baker. For the attempts on Castro's life against
25 the United States.

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1 Mr. Atwood. Oh, no, never.

2 Senator Baker. Or against any person in the United States

3 We have some information that there was a published

4 interview with Castro saying he was aware of the CIA attempts

5 on his life and if they didn't stop he was going to have to

6 take measures or take steps of some sort.

7 Mr. Atwood. No, I never heard anything like that down

8 there. On the contrary, the question of look how we treat you

9 Americans and you won't even let our people out of New York

10 City.

11 Senator Baker. I noticed in an interview on Barbara

12 Walters on the Today show, I believe, that Castro indicated that

13 he knew all about the CIA efforts and offered to help this

14 Committee or to give us information about it.

15 Mr. Atwood. That would be very interesting.

16 Senator Baker. How would we go about that?

17 Mr. Atwood. Well, I suppose there are channels.

18 Senator Baker. Could you help us?

19 Mr. Atwood. We have already tried. As a newspaper, we

20 have offered to go down there and get the evidence and

21 publish it, but we were told to write a letter and they would

22 see what they could do.

23 Senator Baker. Do you think it is likely that they would

24 give us any information if we requested it?

25 Mr. Atwood. I know that the Cuban delegate to the UN, Mr.

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1 Tiottillio LaCosta, who was very high in various kinds of
2 organizations in Cuba, whatever their CIA is, I'm sure he was
3 in that. I'm sure he knows all about this. He could conceivably
4 be approached. I think it would be worth trying. He's a very
5 personable -- I don't know. He'd have to get orders, he'd have
6 to get instructions from Havanna. I don't know.

7 [Senator Baker. Did you ever hear any conversation among
8 responsible Cubans that relates the Kennedy assassination to
9 the assassination attempts against Castro?

10 Mr. Atwood. Never, never.

11 I felt that there was a genuine feeling on Castro's part
12 that he could have gotten along with Kennedy, I think, because
13 he told Jean Daniel, this French correspondent who was present
14 with him at the time of the assassination, he told me later that
15 he was very upset and said it's too bad because I think he and
16 I could have gotten along.]

17 That is hearsay. That is what Daniel told me.

18 The Chairman. Just one question.

19 During the period you were attempting to establish a
20 channel of communication with Castro, and getting responses that
21 were not discouraging, did you keep the State Department advised
22 of those responses, or did you deal directly with the White
23 House?

24 Mr. Atwood. Well I kept Stevenson involved, which was,
25 as far as I was concerned, the State Department. He was my

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1 superior. The chain of command would go from him to the
2 Assistant Secretary of State for IO. I don't think he went
3 there. I think this was all classified Top Secret and I think
4 [the only people involved were Stevenson, the President,
5 Harriman, Robert Kennedy, Bundy, Chase, myself and of course
6 Lisa Howard, who was sort of the go between.]

7 The Chairman. Do you have any reason to believe the
8 Secretary of State, Mr. Rusk, was advised of the response you
9 were receiving from the Cubans?

10 Mr. Atwood. It is possible he was not, possible, because,
11 as I mentioned earlier, someone, I think Stevenson, or someone
12 I quoted was stating that the President was much more in favor
13 of this sort of thing than the State Department would have
14 been.

15 The Chairman. Well, the reason I ask you that question
16 is we just had testimony from Secretary Rusk at which he said
17 he was aware of the effort that was made periodically to
18 establish better relations with Fidel Castro, but that every
19 overture that we made in that direction received no affirmative
20 response. Yet your description of your exchange with Mr.
21 Lachuga suggests that you were receiving a rather encouraging
22 response.

23 [Mr. Atwood. Yes, which leads me to believe that Stevenson
24 was probably talking directly to the White House and not
25 through the State Department.]

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1 The Chairman. One more question.

2 Mr. Schwarz. At the time you were pursuing Mr. LaChuga,
3 Mr. Daniel the journalist, went to Cuba and met with Castro
4 himself. Prior to going to Cuba, in order to meet with Mr.
5 Castro, did the journalist, Jean Daniel, meet with President
6 Kennedy in the White House?

7 Mr. Atwood. Yes, I believe he did. I arranged an
8 appointment with Bundy, I know, and I think Bundy then talked
9 with the President.

10 The Chairman. Any further questions?

11 Senator Baker. Mr. Chairman, I might just say, not as a
12 question but as further explanation, we have in some of the
13 documentation I can't locate, a study by the CIA to try to
14 determine how much Castro might have known about our attempts
15 on his life, and that is why I was reaching for whatever
16 information you could give us. I wasn't trying --

17 Mr. Atwood. I realize that. I don't know what the reasons
18 might be for withholding it if they have it. I don't know.
19 Maybe no one has asked them.

20 Senator Baker. Thank you.

21 The Chairman. Thank you for coming, Mr. Atwood. Your
22 testimony is another brick in this wall, and it's helpful.

23 Senator Baker. It's also a record, the shortest witness
24 we've had so far.

25 (Whereupon at 4:47 o'clock p.m., the Committee proceeded

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to other business.)

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