

Kennedy and Castro: 'No Smoking Gun but..

By Richard J. Walton

In not directly linking President Kennedy to the assassination attempts on Fidel Castro, the Senate intelligence committee acted just the way the House Judiciary Committee wanted to act in the Watergate affair.

The House wanted in the worst way to avoid impeachment, though it, and the nation, were morally certain of Richard Nixon's guilt.

For a time it based its reluctance to act on the absence of absolutely irrefutable evidence, the "smoking gun." But then the White House tapes provided the "smoking gun" and the Judiciary Committee had no choice but to proceed with the steps that made President Nixon's resignation inevitable.

However, the intelligence committee, which is headed by Senator Frank Church, has not found a "smoking gun," so while it brought the accusation right to President John F. Kennedy's door, it did not open the door.

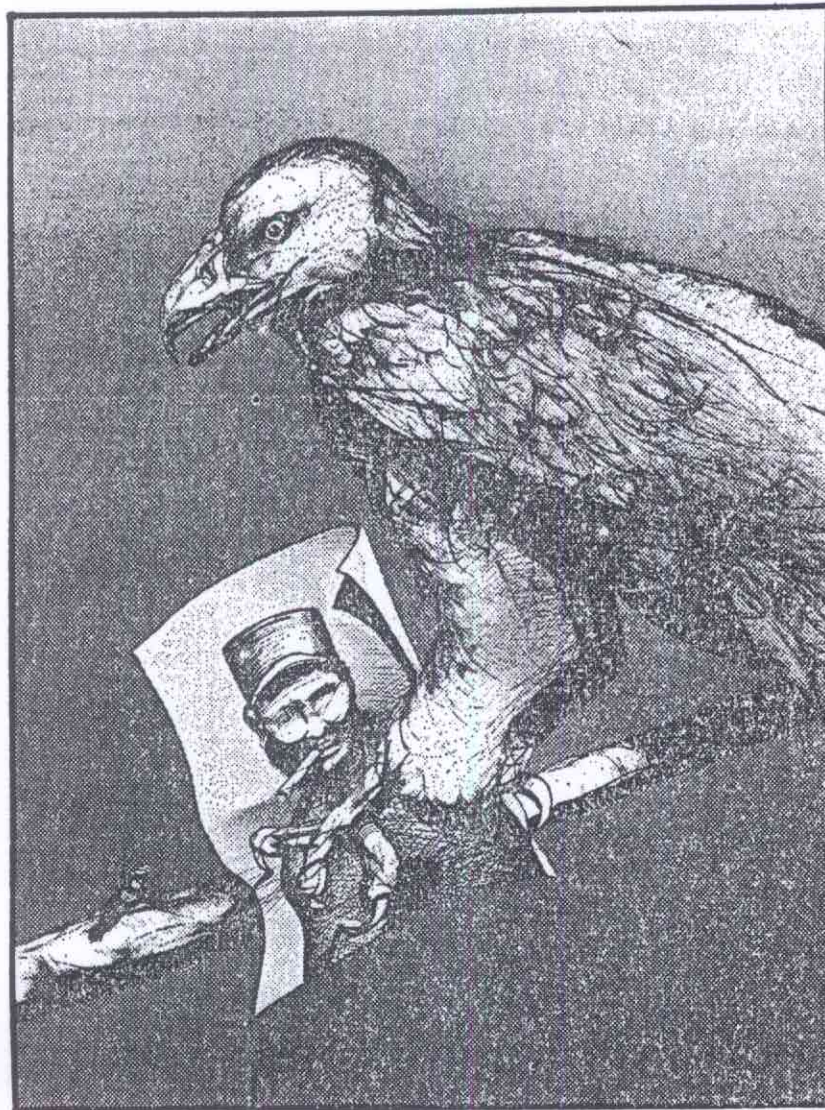
In not quite accusing President Kennedy, the committee was aided by another factor. With Mr. Nixon, the press was in full cry, helping the public become convinced that President Nixon was guilty. But that has not been so with Mr. Kennedy.

There was a flurry of stories when the Church committee released its report on political assassinations but then the press lost interest. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the press is less interested in seeking the truth about Mr. Kennedy than it was with Mr. Nixon.

The Senate committee relied on the narrowest, most legalistic interpretation of its mandate to avoid charging Mr. Kennedy with complicity in the attempts on Prime Minister Castro. But a jury might have found Mr. Kennedy guilty, so powerful is the weight of evidence and circumstance. And common sense will convince many that Mr. Kennedy had at least some knowledge of the schemes directed against Mr. Castro.

Mr. Kennedy's authorization of the Bay of Pigs operation demonstrates beyond question that he would have gone to great lengths to topple Mr. Castro. Before and, even more, after the Bay of Pigs, Mr. Kennedy was plainly obsessed with Mr. Castro, not only on the political level but on the personal as well.

Machismo was as much a part of Mr. Kennedy's character as it was



Marshall Arisman

'This was not idle talk'

of any Latin political leader. And Mr. Castro had humiliated him in front of the world. The evidence of the Church committee bristles with such tough talk as "get rid of," "knock off," "eliminate" Mr. Castro. This was not idle talk. The Kennedy Administration from the President on down prided itself on being made up of tough guys.

"Hard-nosed" was a compliment in those days. This was the Administration that radically escalated the military budget, sent the first combat

troops to Vietnam, encouraged coups against Rafael Leonidas Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam in which both were killed, and, toughest of all, that confronted Nikita S. Khrushchev with the threat of nuclear war.

Not only were these genuine tough guys, but the evidence of the Church committee demonstrates that assassination was discussed by or in the presence of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser; and the President's brother, Robert.

The first two were intimate advisers, and his brother was, of course, the President's alter ego.

The evidence further demonstrates, beyond question, that the Central Intelligence Agency had absolutely no doubt that the President wanted Mr. Castro removed by any means necessary. Even the C.I.A. would not attempt to assassinate a world leader without absolute certainty that it was authorized. The C.I.A. was not dealing with the naive but with perhaps the most worldly men ever to occupy the White House.

It is beyond the bounds of credibility that the President's own brother, several of his top advisers, and responsible officials at several levels of several agencies could be involved in discussions of plans to kill Mr. Castro without President Kennedy's knowledge.

He, remember, prided himself on knowing what was going on at all levels of his Administration, to the extent of petrifying lower-echelon officials by telephoning them directly to find out what was going on in their areas.

Just as with Mr. Nixon's men in Watergate, the Kennedy men would have done such things only if they knew their boss approved.

Then there is this: About four months after Mr. Kennedy's assassination—what a terrible irony!—Senator George Smathers, in an oral history recording for the Kennedy Library, told of a conversation with the President.

Mr. Smathers said: "We had *further* [emphasis added] conversation of assassination of Fidel Castro . . . he was certain it could be accomplished—I remember that—it would be no problem." The President could have been so certain only if he had discussed assassination within his Administration.

Mr. Smathers has not denied his statement, which was called to the attention of the Church committee. He did tell the syndicated columnist John D. Lofton last summer that he was "irked as hell" that a written transcript of his interview had been put with the open material at the Kennedy Library, instead of being sealed until 1980, as he said he had specified.

The Smathers statement, plus the evidence published by the Church committee, seems to establish beyond reasonable doubt that Mr. Kennedy was aware of the plans against Castro. No smoking gun but a pretty solid case.

Richard J. Walton is author of "Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy."