

Kennedy's Fears of Foreign Assassinations

Yael Trujillo on May 30, 1961.

Cuba abstaining.

Washington

Long before President John F. Kennedy was killed, according to a former White House aide, high U.S. officials including the President himself, voiced the thought that real or alleged involvement in foreign assassinations could unleash similar efforts here.

"If we get into that kind of thing, we'll all be targets," former White House aide Richard Goodwin quoted Mr. Kennedy as telling him in November 1961.

"He wasn't talking about people like you or me," Goodwin said in an interview. "He was talking about chiefs of state, such as himself."

Goodwin said the conversation with Mr. Kennedy took place at the White House just two days after the President raised the idea of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro's assassination in a talk with journalist Tad Szulc, then of the New York Times.

Szulc has said that Mr. Kennedy asked him, "How would you feel if the United States assassinated Castro?"

The journalist said he told the President it was a very poor idea and quoted Mr. Kennedy as responding: "I'm glad you feel that way because suggestions to that effect keep coming to me, and I believe very strongly that the United States should not be a party to political assassination."

The President's chief adviser on Latin-American affairs and chairman of a high-level Cuban task force at the time, Goodwin said he was present at the meeting with Szulc and, out of curiosity, raised the topic with the President again a couple of days later.

"I said it sounded like a crazy idea to me," Goodwin recalled. If it was then, he said, that Mr. Kennedy told him, "If we get into that kind of thing we'll all be targets."

According to Goodwin, Secretary of State Dean Rusk expressed a similar apprehension following the assassination of Dominican Republic dictator Ra-

The Central Intelligence Agency had informed the White House in mid May 1961 that it had already turned over some revolvers and carbines to Dominican dissidents who were later involved in the Trujillo assassination.

In a document now in the hands of the Senate committee investigating the CIA, the agency said it also stood ready, if authorized, to supply the dissidents with four submachine-guns and a small number of grenades which were in the direct custody of our station in Ciudad Trujillo."

Although Mr. Kennedy vetoed the transfer and personally ruled out U.S. involvement in assassination shortly before Trujillo was killed, Goodwin said suspicions of American complicity were raised when White House press secretary Pierre Salinger unwittingly announced the dictator's death to the world.

"It was a disaster," Goodwin recalled. The Dominicans did not announce Trujillo's death, but Washington was immediately informed by a cable from U.S. Consul General Henry Dearborn, who had been in close contact with the dissident group. The word was relayed promptly to Mr. Kennedy, who was in Paris meeting with French President Charles de Gaulle. Unaware that Trujillo's death was still a secret, Salinger casually informed the press on the morning of May 31, 1961.

Because of that, Goodwin said, "the Cubans thought Mr. Kennedy was involved. At least (Cuban Foreign Minister) Raul Roa did."

Salinger's announcement also pained officials in Washington.

"Rusk really blew up," Goodwin said. "He told me, 'If people think we did anything to Trujillo, they might look at this as a license to go after Kennedy.'"

Goodwin also recalled a talk with Mr. Kennedy following the August, 1961, conference in Punta del Este, Uruguay, where the Alliance for Progress charter was signed by the United States and 19 other American countries — with

Cuba's Ernesto (Che) Guevara also was at the conference and when he noticed Goodwin smoking a cigar, Che Guevara told an Argentine delegate "he'd bet I wouldn't smoke a Cuban cigar." Goodwin said he told the delegate he would if he could get any. Guevara responded through an intermediary with a box of 50 Havana cigars "inlaid with a Cuban seal."

"It had a handwritten card in it from Che," Goodwin related. "It said, in Spanish: 'Since I have no greeting card, I have to write. Since speaking to an enemy is difficult, I extend my hand.'"

Goodwin brought the cigars back to Washington and, he said, took the box to the President.

"He took one out and started puffing on it," Goodwin said. "Then he looked at me and said 'You should have smoked the first one.'"

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, Mr. Kennedy approved a secret campaign of economic warfare and underground sabotage — which came to be known as "Operation Mongoose" — in hopes of unseating Castro. Goodwin said the President's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, was named to overall command of it on Goodwin's recommendation in November 1961.

However, Goodwin said he felt certain that the President never authorized or condoned the CIA's secret plots and attempts to kill Castro, "and I don't think Bobby could have done it on his own without telling Jack." The former White House aide also said Robert Kennedy told him on a trip to Latin America in 1966 that he had "turned off" an effort to kill Castro, even after Mr. Kennedy's assassination and as late as 1965.

"The CIA was moving all the time," he said. "Why I don't know. My own theory is that it was the humiliation of the Bay of Pigs; they thought they could make up for that."

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