

Murder By Any Other Name

By Tom Wicker

In 1960, John F. Kennedy was a Senator running for President. No one would suggest that, as such, or as the scion of a powerful family, or as the exemplar of a new political generation, he had the right to have anyone killed, for whatever apparently useful purpose. After Jan. 20, 1961, he was President of the United States. By virtue of that title, can he be held under any moral, religious or ethical view of life to have had some right not previously his to order a specific human life extinguished in what he believed to be the national interest?

This is not the pacifist question whether any killing or any war can ever be justified. It is a question of simple decency—whether outside the exigencies and brutalities of warfare any political personage has the right to order the death of any other human being for the political purposes of the person who gives the order.

It certainly has not been established beyond reasonable doubt that President Kennedy, or any person colored with his authority, ever gave such an order. Yet, the evidence mounts in obscene detail that the murder—a word for which "assassination" is only a euphemism—of Fidel Castro was a subject of frequent, pointed and practical discussion in the Kennedy Administration—sometimes by the President himself.

Maj. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale says, for example, that he was ordered by Robert Kennedy, acting under John Kennedy's authority, to prepare con-

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tingency plans to depose Mr. Castro, and that in the operational planning for that purpose, Mr. Castro's murder may have been "contemplated."

According to an undisputed report by Nicholas M. Horrock in The New York Times, General Lansdale's planning operations formed only one "track" of what was a "frantic" search by the C.I.A. after the Bay of Pigs fiasco for some means of eliminating Mr. Castro's leadership in Cuba.

The indisputable fact is that any reasonable person who plans or helps to plan the deposition of a political leader by clandestine means has to take into account the likelihood that the deposed political leader will be killed—as, for instance, Ngo Dinh Diem was killed after being ousted in a military coup in South Vietnam. General Lansdale, in fact, has con-

ceded that he knew, in planning for the deposition of Mr. Castro, that "operationally down the pike something like this could emerge." Those who ordered the contingency planning could hardly have known less.

There is, moreover, evidence too rich in detail to be lightly dismissed that the C.I.A. plotted with well-known members of the so-called Mafia to murder Mr. Castro—the C.I.A. for political purposes, the other gangsters in vengeance for the loss of Havana as a source of gambling profits. Richard Helms, the former C.I.A. director, has conceded that there may have been contemplation and discussion of assassination plots although he insisted none were authorized.

The Associated Press has reported that the Rockefeller Commission, which is investigating the C.I.A., has obtained the minutes of a high-level Kennedy Administration meeting in which the assassination of Mr. Castro was discussed. Nobody has denied that report, and former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara tended to confirm that the commission has something when he said that he had told the commissioners that he did not recall any such meeting.

None of this smoke necessarily excuses Mrs. Still, why has no one who was responsible in that period responded with even a show of moral outrage? Why has no one fervently demanded that the highest American government leaders could even "contemplate" such a reprehensible idea as deliberate political murder? What did McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's assistant for national security and now the head of the Ford Foundation, mean when he told reporters that White House officials of his time discussed "how nice it would be if this or that leader" were not around?

On March 31, 1964, for another example, George Smathers, then the Senator from Florida and a close friend of John Kennedy, recounted in an oral history interview for the Kennedy Library (as reported in "Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy," by Richard J. Walton, at pps. 47-48):

"We had further conversation of assassination of Fidel Castro, what would be the reaction, how would the people react, would the people be gratified. I'm sure he [John F. Kennedy] had his own ideas about it, but he was picking my brain. . . . As I recall, he was just throwing out a great barrage of questions—he was certain it could be accomplished. . . .

"But the question was whether or not it would accomplish that which he wanted it to, whether or not the reaction throughout South America would be good or bad. And I talked with him about it and, frankly, at this particular time I felt, and I later on learned that he did, that I wasn't so much for the idea of assassination, particularly when it could be pinned on the United States."

Murder was not wrong; it was just ineffective—and by any other name would smell as rotten.

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Castro and the Kennedys

To the Editor:

I am sorry that Tom Wicker chose to rely in his June 2 column on the incomplete version of the George Smathers oral history as printed in Richard J. Walton's "Cold War and Counterrevolution." Had Mr. Wicker checked the Smathers transcript himself, he would have discovered that President Kennedy, in Senator Smathers' words, "finally said to me, 'George, I love to have you over, I want you to come over, but I want you to do me a favor. I like to visit with you, I want to discuss things with you, but I don't want you to talk to me any more about Cuba.'" And later: "I raised the question about Cuba and what could be done and so on. And I remember that he took his fork and just hit his plate and it cracked and he said, 'Now, dammit, I wish you wouldn't do that. Let's quit talking about this subject.' And so I said all right, it's fine with me. I appreciate this opportunity to come over and visit with you, and this subject I won't bring up again.' And I never did."

Quite apart from all the other reasons, moral and prudential, that led John and Robert Kennedy to reject the idea of assassinating Castro, it must be remembered that both men were deeply concerned, almost obsessed, with the fate of the Bay of Pigs prisoners. Nothing would have doomed these prisoners more certainly than an American attempt to kill Castro.

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER Jr.
New York, June 3, 1975

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