

Unlikely Assassin

Once again the "Cuban Connection" has been raised to explain the assassination of President John Kennedy. But this time it carries the imprimatur of the United States Senate. Senator Richard Schweiker released last week the report of the CIA subcommittee that investigated the killing of President Kennedy. The report is 106 pages long and deals with many of the current theories held by assassination buffs. I cannot deal with all of these, but want to shed some light on one raised by Schweiker.

Although the report comes to no clear conclusion, it does cite testimony, memos and material that raise the possibility that Castro might have ordered Kennedy's death in retaliation for CIA attempts on his life.

I do not want to defend or criticize the Schweiker report nor the various theories. I do want to put forth what Fidel Castro said about these theories. To my knowledge, in the last two years Castro has spoken five times about the assassination of President Kennedy—in July and September 1974, again in May and August 1975, and recently in April of this year when he proclaimed in a public speech in Havana that he had nothing to do with the killing of President Kennedy.

But his personal and private conversations during the 1974 and 1975 meetings are far more interesting and comprehensive, and reveal in greater detail his own thoughts and feelings, not only in the words but in the style and mood of the conversations.

In July 1974 Frank Mankiewicz and I spent four days with Castro, including 13 hours of formal interviewing in Castro's office, making a television documentary for CBS. During this interview and in private conversations, we talked with Castro about Kennedy and the assassination. We asked Castro point-blank whether John Kennedy was killed in retaliation for an attempt on his own life. Castro paused, reflected, puffed on his cigar and gave a clear and detailed answer—in part as follows: "I have not read this in any serious American publication . . . there are so many imponderables behind President Kennedy's assassination that it would be a good thing if this were known someday. I have heard that there are certain documents that will not be published until after 100 years and I ask myself why. What secrets surround the Kennedy assassination that these papers cannot be published? . . . We have never believed in carrying out this type of activity of assassination of adversaries . . . and our own background proves it . . . we fought a war . . . we were not trying to kill Batista. It would have been easier to kill Batista than to have fought the Moncada. Why? Because we do not believe that the system is abolished by liquidating leaders, and it was the system that we

opposed . . . it went against our political ideas to organize any type of personal attack against Kennedy . . . we understood what the implications were, and we were concerned about the possibility that an attempt would be made to blame Cuba for what had happened, but this was not what concerned us most. In reality, we were disgusted, because, although we were in conflict with Kennedy politically, we had nothing against him personally, and there was no reason to wish him personal harm."

In addition, Castro made another private point—one he repeated to Senator James Abourezk in August 1975. "We would have been foolish to harm Kennedy," Castro said, "because Kennedy was thinking of changing his policy toward Cuba. Kennedy's negotiators were in Cuba at the time of the assassination."

Castro was referring to a November 1963 visit by French journalist Jean Daniel who, before he traveled to Cuba, was personally asked by President Kennedy to

transmit messages to Castro. Castro described the meeting to me: "As I was listening to everything Daniel was telling me about his conversation with Kennedy, the news broke over the radio that an attempt had been carried out against Kennedy's life. In reality, I tell you personally, and I think I speak for all my fellow revolutionaries—we all felt a reaction of pain, of great displeasure . . . it was really such a shame, such a tragic ending to Kennedy's life."

As indicated in his discussions of July 1974, Castro has been sensitive to the fact that some people might want to make a connection between the Kennedy assassination and Cuba as a result of activity in the "Fair Play for Cuba Committee" and Oswald's application for a visa to Cuba. As Senator McGovern remembers the conversation, Castro "expressed dismay over a possible association and was frightened at the prospect of circumstantial evidence." In that conversation Castro said, "My God, if that [the visa application] had gone through, it would have looked terrible." In his conversation with me, Castro went into further detail: "It is very interesting that this man—Oswald—who was involved in the assassination, traveled to Mexico a few months prior to the assassination and applied for a permit at the Cuban Embassy to travel to Cuba, and he was not given the permit. We had no idea who he was. But I asked myself why would a man who committed such an act try to come here. Sometimes we ask ourselves if someone did not wish to involve Cuba in this, because I'm under the impression that Kennedy's assassination was organized by reactionaries in the United States, and that it was all a result of conspiracy.

"What I can say is that he asked permission to travel

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to Cuba. Now, imagine that by coincidence he had been granted this permit, that he had visited Cuba for a few days, then returned to the United States and killed Kennedy. That would have been material for provocation . . ." In a later conversation with Saul Landau, Castro added, "Luckily the bureaucratic process prevailed and our consular officer routinely denied Oswald's visa. We had never heard of him."

A look at the historical context seems to indicate that what Castro said has the ring of truth. Why would Castro kill Kennedy at the very moment that Kennedy had clearly indicated to personal messengers in Cuba on November 22 that the US wanted to start a new

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dialogue? At no time under Castro's rule has Cuba been accused of assassinating or plotting to assassinate its adversaries. During the fighting in the mountains there was never a reported Castro attempt on Batista's life. And lastly, why would a small country like Cuba attempt the assassination of the President of the United States, when discovery and proof of that act would have meant certain and clear military action and probably destruction of Castro's Cuba?

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