



JFK & Castro: Lost History?

JAMES A. WECHSLER

In his final days on earth John F. Kennedy was actively and inquisitively responding to overtures from Fidel Castro for a detente with the United States.

That is the dramatic story unfolded by William Attwood, a key intermediary in the negotiations, in a new book called "Reds and Blacks" (Harper and Row) describing his experiences as a journalist-turned-diplomat in the Kennedy era.

Sen. Robert Kennedy reached in Washington yesterday, confirmed the essence of Attwood's report.

The saga of the secret Castro initiatives and the Kennedy Administration's cautious but affirmative, persistent probing belongs in any compilation of the inscrutable "ifs" of history. It has special relevance at this moment in the light of lurid rumors being leaked in Washington of a CIA plot, reportedly known to then Attorney General Kennedy, to assassinate Castro—and the simultaneous tale that Lee Oswald was Castro's agent in a counter-plot that led to John Kennedy's death.

The story recorded by Attwood blasts this fantasy and offers a wholly reverse version of the Washington-Havana relationship that seemed to be taking shape when John F. Kennedy was slain.

The unfinished episode began in September, 1963, when Attwood, now editor of the Cowles publications, was serving as special adviser for African affairs at the U.S. mission to the United Nations. He had initially been enlisted as a New Frontiersman in the role of ambassador to Guinea (and much of his book is a lively, unconventional retrospect on his African assignment). It was the Guinean ambassador to Havana who first breached to Attwood the possibility of a Cuban-U.S. rapprochement.

Attwood says he had received hints from other sources that Castro was growing restive under Communist pressures and was prepared to make "substantial concessions" to achieve an accommodation with the U.S. There were indications of a deepening rift between Castro and Che Guevara, the hard-line Communist who was said to regard Castro as "dangerously unreliable."

The reports seemed plausible to Attwood; a long session with Castro in 1959 "convinced me that he was too emotional to be a disciplined Communist, though naive enough to be swayed by Communist advisers."

Attwood suggested to UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and Averell Harriman that quiet contact be made with the Cuban delegation at the UN to find out "if in fact Castro did want to talk on our terms."

Harriman favored the idea but advised Attwood to explore it with Robert Kennedy "because of its political implications." Meanwhile Stevenson discussed the matter with President Kennedy, who approved the notion of Attwood conferring with Dr. Carlos Lechunga, the chief Cuban delegate, "so long as I made it clear we were not soliciting discussions."

At a party a few days later Lechunga told Attwood there was a strong chance that Castro would invite him to Cuba. Robert Kennedy said he thought it would be preferable if such a private session were held outside Cuba, possibly in Mexico.

The late Lisa Howard, the spirited TV correspondent who knew Castro well and tenaciously pursued for many long months a dream of U.S.-Cuban reconciliation, learned of Attwood's talks with Lechunga and was in telephone communication with Maj. Rene Vallejo, Castro's personal aide.

On Oct. 31 Vallejo told Miss Howard that Castro would welcome an unpublicized visit from a U.S. official.

On Nov. 5 Attwood met with McGeorge Bundy at the White

House; Bundy, he reports, said "the President more than the State Dept. was interested in exploring this overture but thought we should now find out just what Castro wanted to discuss before going into a meeting."

Vallejo called Miss Howard again to emphasize that the Cubans would accept any secrecy arrangements we proposed. He also said that Castro alone would be present—and specifically stated that Guevara would not be.

* * *

Bundy told Attwood that President Kennedy still favored preliminary private talks at the UN to ascertain whether Castro was "seriously interested" in discussing the points Stevenson had raised in a UN speech on Oct. 7. In that address Stevenson had said the U.S.-Cuban cold war could be ended if Castro stopped taking orders from Moscow and infiltrating other Latin American states, and returned to the democratic promises of his revolution.

Attwood telephoned Vallejo at a private Havana number and confirmed our readiness to listen to Castro. Vallejo said Castro would tell Lechunga to discuss an agenda for the conversation.

On Nov. 19 Bundy told Attwood that the President wanted to see him immediately after he met with Lechunga. The President, Bundy added, would be available except for "a brief trip to Dallas."

* * *

Soon after the assassination Attwood encountered Lechunga, who said he had been instructed by Castro on Nov. 23 to begin "formal discussions" with him.

"... I informed Bundy and later was told that the Cuban exercise would be put on ice for a while—which it was and where it has been ever since," Attwood writes.

If...?

modation with the U.S. there were indications of a deepening rift between Castro and Che Guevara, the hard-line Communist who was said to regard Castro as "dangerously unreliable."

The reports seemed plausible to Attwood; a long session with Castro in 1959 "convinced me that he was too emotional to be a disciplined Communist, though naive enough to be swayed by Communist advisers."

Attwood suggested to UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and Averell Harriman that quiet contact be made with the Cuban delegation at the UN to find out "if in fact Castro did want to talk on our terms."

* * *

Harriman favored the idea but advised Attwood to explore it with Robert Kennedy "because of its political implications." Meanwhile Stevenson discussed the matter with President Kennedy, who approved the notion of Attwood conferring with Dr. Carlos Lechunga, the chief Cuban delegate, "so long as I made it clear we were not soliciting discussions."

At a party a few days later Lechunga told Attwood there was a strong chance that Castro would invite him to Cuba. Robert Kennedy said he thought it would be preferable if such a private session were held outside Cuba, possibly in Mexico.

The late Lisa Howard, the spirited TV correspondent who knew Castro well and tenaciously pursued for many long months a dream of U.S.-Cuban reconciliation, learned of Attwood's talks with Lechunga and was in telephone communication with Maj. Rene Vallejo, Castro's personal aide.

On Oct. 31 Vallejo told Miss Howard that Castro would welcome an unpublicized visit from a U. S. official.

On Nov. 5 Attwood met with McGeorge Bundy at the White House; Bundy, he reports, said "the President more than the State Dept. was interested in exploring this overture but thought we should now find out just what Castro wanted to discuss before going into a meeting."

Vallejo called Miss Howard again to emphasize that the Cubans would accept any secrecy arrangements we proposed. He also said that Castro alone would be present—and specifically stated that Guevara would not be.

* * *

Bundy told Attwood that President Kennedy still favored preliminary private talks at the UN to ascertain whether Castro was "seriously interested" in discussing the points Stevenson had raised in a UN speech on Oct. 7. In that address Stevenson had said the U.S.-Cuban cold war could be ended if Castro stopped taking orders from Moscow and infiltrating other Latin American states, and returned to the democratic promises of his revolution.

Attwood telephoned Vallejo at a private Havana number and confirmed our readiness to listen to Castro. Vallejo said Castro would tell Lechunga to discuss an agenda for the conversation.

On Nov. 19 Bundy told Attwood that the President wanted to see him immediately after he met with Lechunga. The President, Bundy added, would be available except for "a brief trip to Dallas."

* * *

Soon after the assassination Attwood encountered Lechunga, who said he had been instructed by Castro on Nov. 23 to begin "formal discussions" with him.

"... I informed Bundy and later was told that the Cuban exercise would be put on ice for a while—which it was and where it has been ever since," Attwood writes.

If . . . ?