

# Cuba On Our Mind

by Tad Szulc

*Like the gnat in the ear of the ox, Cuba plagues America with a mighty pesteration.  
Except, of course, in Miami*

In November, 1961, seven months after the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, President John F. Kennedy invited me to the Oval Office at the White House for a private conversation about future United States policies toward Premier Fidel Castro. I had covered the April invasion from Miami as a correspondent for *The New York Times* and I had been highly critical in print of the whole enterprise. Now, the President said, he would welcome some constructive ideas. We chatted for a while about Cuba, then Kennedy leaned forward in his rocking chair and hurled a question at me:

"What would you think if I ordered Castro to be assassinated?"

I believe this is a virtually verbatim quotation of his words (one doesn't make notes at a private meeting with the President) and I remember being completely taken aback. I also recall blurting out a long sentence to the effect that I was against political assassination as a matter of principle and that, anyway, I doubted this would solve the Cuban problem for the U.S.

Kennedy leaned back in his chair, smiled, and said that he had been testing me because he was under great pressure from advisers in the Intelligence community (whom he did not name) to have Castro killed, but that he himself violently opposed it on the grounds that for moral reasons the United States should never be party to political assassinations. "I'm glad you feel the same way," he said.

This is the first time I am publicly recounting this conversation (the only other person present in the Oval Office was Richard N. Goodwin, then a Presidential assistant) because it stands out in my mind as an extraordinary example of the obsessive frustration and involvements with Cuba and Cubans that for well over a decade have permeated the United States government on the most senior levels. Nothing quite comparable has ever occurred between Americans and any other nation, near or far. The powerful United States and the little island ninety miles from home in the blue Caribbean have never been able to let go of each other. They have been set together as if in a Greek tragedy in which doom always seems impending.

To be sure, Kennedy vetoed the Castro assassination idea in 1961 after having taken full responsibility in April for the Bay of Pigs invasion. I cannot say to what extent he knew, that November, about a scheme elaborated by Military Intelligence officers soon after the Bay of Pigs (and of which I was vaguely aware at the time) to kill Castro and his brother Raúl, the Deputy Premier and Defense Minister, using Cuban

marksmen who were to be infiltrated into Cuba from the United States Naval base at Guantanamo on the island's southeastern coast. Perhaps this is what he had in mind when he talked to me.

Hearing Kennedy's rejection of assassination plots proposed to him by the Washington Intelligence community, I naturally assumed that no such thing would ever happen. In fact the Eisenhower Administration turned down in 1960 the recommendation of a C.I.A. operative to kill Castro.

But as I was to learn much later, the Central Intelligence Agency, presumably acting with President Lyndon Johnson's authority (unless it was another do-it-yourself undertaking), set in motion in late 1964 and 1965 a new secret plan to combine Castro's assassination with a second invasion of the island by Cuban exiles from bases located this time in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Some infiltrators were to be trained in the Dominican Republic. (Guatemala had been the site of training in 1960 and 1961.)

The new invasion was to be on a smaller scale than the Bay of Pigs. The scenario was to bring ashore some 750 armed Cubans at the crucial moment when Castro would be dead and inevitable chaos had developed. It was an incredibly wild scheme because the resolution of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, which brought the U.S. and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear confrontation, was based in part on Washington's commitment to let Castro be.

The existence of the assassination plot, hatched by the C.I.A. in Paris and Madrid, was disclosed by the Cuban government in March, 1966, after the designated gunman—a bearded Cuban physician and former Cuban Revolutionary Army major named Rolando Cubela—was arrested in Havana following investigations by Castro's counterintelligence agents, who had become suspicious of him.

Actually, the whole assassination-invasion plan had to be canceled when a rebellion unexpectedly erupted in the Dominican Republic in April, 1965, and President Johnson, fearful of "another Cuba," sent U.S. troops to invade that country. The Cuban scheme could not be pursued, and Cubela and his associates were left high and dry in Havana to be finally captured in February, 1966, along with a small arsenal of weapons, including an FAL automatic rifle equipped with telescopic sights and a silencer provided by the C.I.A. for Castro's planned assassination. Cubela was sentenced to death, but Castro commuted the sentence to a lengthy prison term.

Cuban revelations in 1966 about the Cubela plot had

\* KEY O.A.S. CITIES. VAGUE ALLUSION TO ROMERO'S STORY. AN OLD CIA PLOY. COVER ACTUAL PHOT WITH NOTIONAL AND EASILY RECOGNIZED FABRICATION. COLBY ON CIA TAPES: "THEY WERE DESTROYED IN THE NORMAL COURSE OF BUSINESS."

little international impact at the time. But, to the best of my knowledge, the plans for the simultaneous second invasion—known by the code name of "Second Naval Guerrilla"—have never been publicly revealed. I doubt that even Castro had learned much about them inasmuch as Cubela's knowledge was apparently confined only to his end of the broader plan.

The Central American camps were disbanded late in May, 1965, when the Dominican crisis convinced Washington that this was not a propitious time for a new Cuban adventure. Besides, we were already deeply involved in Vietnam. The blueprints for the "Second Naval Guerrilla" were probably quietly filed away in the archives of the C.I.A.'s clandestine-operations division. My information, based on recent interviews with men who participated in this project, is that during a period of about six months in 1964 and 1965, the C.I.A. disbursed \$750,000 monthly for the operation and that some \$2,000,000 in these funds remains unaccounted for. Subsequently, there were mysterious shoot-outs and deaths among Miami Cubans involved in the still-born invasion.

Also in 1964, idle Cuban pilots, veterans of the Bay of Pigs, were sent to the Congo by the C.I.A. as mercenaries to fly B-26 bombers on combat missions for the U.S.-backed Congolese government then fighting a leftist rebellion. The Cubans, under contract to CARAMAR (a C.I.A. dummy corporation whose initials stood for Caribbean Marine Aero Corporation), complained at the time that they were ordered to strafe and bomb villages and civilians. Nowadays, some of these pilots are in serious trouble with the law in Florida. One of them is serving an eleven-year prison sentence in Miami for traffic in cocaine and others are said to have acquired nasty criminal records. Another one has been recently charged with a killing in Miami.

And, of course, the whole tortured story has continued. We find that the same cast of characters, ranging from gung-ho Florida C.I.A. operatives to gullible or corruptible Miami Cubans and Cuban-Americans, reappeared on the scene in 1971 and 1972 as key personages in the Watergate affair. They were picked from the pool of naïvely patriotic, restless and un-

stable Cubans who are the heritage left by the C.I.A. in Miami.

In almost every case there was the irrepressible presence of the C.I.A. veteran E. Howard Hunt Jr., the political coordinator of the Bay of Pigs under the *nom de guerre* of "Eduardo" and the man who first recommended Castro's murder in 1960 and then helped to plan the 1965 assassination; James W. McCord Jr., associated with the 1961 invasion, the second landing operation, and the use of Cuban pilots in the Congo; and Bernard L. Barker (code name: "Macho"), who was Hunt's aide in 1961, and his teams of Cuban exiles first recruited for combat on Cuba's beaches and later for dirty work in the Watergate scandals. Eugenio Martinez, one of the Watergate raiders, was still on a C.I.A. retainer when the break-in occurred. Barker and his Miami commandos claimed Hunt had assured them that subversion against the Nixon Administration's opponents and the President's reelection would hasten the "liberation" of Cuba from Castro's rule.

Cuba shed Spain's rule in 1898, but independence came only after U.S. forces landed on the island, Teddy Roosevelt charged San Juan Hill and Americans, in effect, took over the country. For all practical purposes the island was governed by a series of American proconsuls inasmuch as the so-called 1903 Platt Amendment to the Cuban constitution gave the U.S. the right to intervene in Cuba's internal affairs. United States corporations, such as the United Fruit Company, were free to acquire thousands of hectares of land for sugar plantations. The Cuban elite educated its children at U.S. colleges and universities, producing generations of Cubans whose allegiances were mixed, to say the least, and whose principal interest was not to rock the boat so that money could keep coming in.

Havana flourished as the playground for wealthy Americans and tourists in general. It had spectacular nightclubs, splendid casinos, famous bordellos and every form of street prostitution and vice a visitor's heart could desire. Cuba was not a country to be taken seriously and the U.S. acted accordingly. When one thought of Cuba, what came to mind was the rumba