

A hard look

Nov. 22, 1963: The clues point toward a Cuban link

By John Maclean
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — Manuel de Armas appeared on Havana television in April, said he spied for the Central Intelligence Agency for seven years and told how it had supplied a Cuban exile group with explosives for an assassination in Miami six months before.

De Armas is a defector, a Cuban exile who went back. Was he truly a disgruntled CIA man? Or was he actually an agent for Castro's secret police, as some who knew him say? Or was he a double agent? Or none of those things?

The de Armas story illustrates the web of intrigue that binds together the Cuban secret police, the CIA, terrorism in Miami and old stories of assassination plots.

From these murky waters, Senate investigators, newspaper reporters and spy-watchers suspect the biggest story left in Washington may emerge, a legitimate Cuban connection with the assassination of President Kennedy.

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"The key to the whole thing is to ascertain which side of the Cuban fence Lee Harvey Oswald was working and why," Schweiker said. "He may have been playing with both sides."

The Senate CIA inquiry has turned up an adequate assassination motive for Castro. The Senate Intelligence Committee disclosed evidence of at least eight plots to kill Castro by the CIA, some possibly known to him before Kennedy's death.

In addition, a long-ignored threat against Kennedy has turned up. On April 7, 1963, four months before Kennedy was killed, Castro called in an Associated Press reporter and said: "United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe."

The relationship between the plots against Castro and Kennedy's assassination took a grotesque turn on Nov. 22, 1963. On that day, a CIA agent gave a high official in the Cuban government a poison pen with which to kill Castro.

"It is likely that at the very moment President Kennedy was shot, a CIA officer was meeting with a Cuban agent . . . and giving him an assassination device for use against Castro," according to the record compiled by the Senate committee.

The Cuban official was identified only by the CIA code name AMLASH. But he has been named publicly as Ronald Cubela, a doctor, former officer in Castro's rebel army, and onetime close associate of the Cuban premier.

Cubela approached the CIA in 1961, asking for help in defecting from Cuba. The CIA realized how valuable he was in Cuba, and convinced him to stay. Eventually he was asked to kill Castro.

Cubela may have been a double agent, expressing a reluctance to kill Castro in order to make himself more credible to the CIA.

But a likelier theory is that he was found out by Castro, then was used to inform about CIA plots.

Cubela was a disturbed personality, haunted by an assassination he committed during the Cuban revolution. The CIA apparently was well aware of his imbalance and lack of discretion but still used him.

In any event, Castro arrested Cubela in 1966 for

The Senate Intelligence Committee voted last week to turn over new leads it has uncovered to a proposed intelligence oversight panel. A special task force of the committee will draft a report of its findings, and the full committee then will vote whether to make it public.

"There is an awful lot that we know now that the Warren Commission did not know that would have changed the whole thrust of what they were trying to do," said Sen. Richard Schweiker, R, Pa., co-chairman of the task force.

The Senate inquiry has focused on the commission's failure to find an adequate assassination motive for Lee Harvey Oswald. The commission concluded that Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963.

"Many factors undoubtedly were involved in Oswald's motivation for the assassination," the Warren Commission report said, "and the commission does not believe that it can ascribe to him any one motive or group of motives."

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attempted assassination and treason. He was sentenced to death. At that point, oddly enough, Castro stepped in and reduced the sentence to 25 years in prison. Cubela now is said to be on a minimum security farm.

The Cubela case reflects what Schweiker calls the "reverse mirror" effect, the difficulty of trying to establish identity and partisanship of those involved with Cuba.

The effect is equally startling with Cuban exile groups in the United States. On April 30, Emilio Milian left the radio station in Miami where he is news director after broadcasting an editorial against terrorism.

He turned the ignition key in his automobile and a bomb blew off both his legs.

He became the seventh victim in a wave of assassinations and assassination attempts that have left the exile community angered and bewildered.

Many believe the violence is the work of "Havana hit men" trained by Castro. The ease with which Cuban

agents infiltrate exile groups is legendary. They have only 90 miles of water to cross.

While the violence may simply be related to factionalism among the exiles, in the past, Cuban defectors have told of infiltration into the United States by scores of agents trained on the island nation.

An easy target, indeed, would have been the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, a pro-Castro group. The Warren Commission reported that Oswald visited the committee's offices in New York City, and then set up a chapter in New Orleans.

A trail leading to Cuba could implicate Cuba's main ally, the Soviet Union. Among other acts of cooperation, the Soviets set up the Cuban secret police on the Soviet KGB model.

However, Oswald's pro-Castro sympathies might lead in exactly the opposite direction. According to another theory, anti-Castro groups may have set up Oswald, fixing the blame on him because he was identified with Castro.

Many anti-Castro exiles turned against Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, blaming him for its failure.

In addition to the Warren Commission's report of

Oswald's association with the Fair Play for Cuba group and his trip to get a Cuban visa in Mexico, a new tie between Oswald and Cuba surfaced this spring.

According to this latest disclosure, a Cuban defector told the CIA in 1964 that Oswald may have been in touch with Cuban intelligence agents seven weeks before Kennedy's assassination. The defector's story had been reported to the Warren Commission but was kept secret.

The commission "saw no need to pursue this angle any further," according to a CIA memorandum made public in March. The defector, the commission said, had "no information linking (Oswald) to the Cuban intelligence services in any manner."

The defector, according to the CIA report, said he had no knowledge Oswald was a Cuban agent. However, he said he believed Oswald met three Cuban agents "before, during and after" the Mexico City visit in September and October 1963.

Assessing the Warren Commission probe into the Cuban link, the CIA said in 1975 that the commission should have left a "wider window for this contingency." This window may be opening.
