

Kennedy's Last Act: Reaching Out to Cuba

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The 50th anniversary of the violent death of U.S. president, John F. Kennedy has yielded a long kept secret: in the aftermath of the assassination in Dallas, Fidel Castro sent a back-channel message to Washington that he wanted to meet with the official commission investigating Kennedy's murder, to dispel the swirling allegations that Cuba was responsible.* The Commission, headed by Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Earl Warren, sent a young African-American staff lawyer, William Coleman, on a clandestine mission to rendezvous with the Cuban leader on a boat in the Caribbean.

They talked for three hours, Coleman recalled in the first interview he ever gave on the Top Secret meeting to investigative reporter Philip Sheanon. Despite pressing the Cuban leader on Cuba's ties to Lee Harvey Oswald and his mysterious visit to the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City before the assassination, Coleman reported back to Warren that he "hadn't found out anything to cause me to think there is proof [Castro] did it." Indeed, despite Playa Giron, the missile crisis, assassination plots and the trade embargo, Castro insisted that "he admired President Kennedy."

Secrets and Conspiracy Theories

In the United States, the anniversary of the young president's death has generated massive media coverage—special television documentaries; a slew of new books and articles, a new Hollywood movie. Inevitably, the many conspiracy theories as to who killed Kennedy and why are once again being debated. The Warren Commission concluded that Oswald, a deranged loner and self-declared Marxist, acted alone when he shot the president. But U.S. government secrecy, particularly the fact that the CIA withheld information on its Top Secret efforts to kill Castro, and on its surveillance of Oswald when he visited Mexico City—protecting its extensive intelligence gathering operations in Mexico—fueled suspicions of a cover up. **Nor did the White House share the extraordinary details of significant developments in Kennedy's attitude toward Cuba—a country central to any historical discussion of the president's shocking murder in Dallas fifty years ago.**

Almost immediately following the assassination on November 22, 1963, enemies of the Cuban revolution began planting accusations that the pro-Castro Oswald had conspired with Cuba to kill the president. In New Orleans, where Oswald had created a one-man "Fair Play for Cuba" committee, a CIA-backed exile group, the Revolutionary Student Directorate (DRE), published its newsletter on November 23 with a picture of Castro next to a picture of Oswald. Six days after the assassination, CIA director John McCone reported to the new president, Lyndon Johnson, that a Nicaraguan intelligence agent in

Mexico City named Gilberto Alvarado had "advised our [Mexico] station in great detail on his alleged knowledge that he actually saw Oswald given \$6500 in the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City on September 18th." Alvarado claimed the money was payment to kill the president.

The CIA was immediately suspicious about the credibility of this intelligence because the FBI had concrete proof that Oswald was in New Orleans on September 18th; immigration documents showed he did not travel to Mexico City until September 26. Alvarado was held in a CIA safe house and then turned over to Mexican authorities for further questioning. He failed a CIA-administered polygraph test, and retracted his statement. According to a Top Secret CIA report titled "Assassination of President Kennedy," Alvarado "admitted to Mexican authorities his story was a fabrication designed to provoke U.S. into kicking Castro out of Cuba."



Castro himself saw a very different conspiracy at work. On November 23rd he broadcast a statement on Cuban radio in which he labeled the Kennedy assassination "a Machiavellian plot against our country" to justify "immediately an aggressive policy against Cuba...built on the still warm blood and unburied body of their tragically assassinated President." Oswald, he stated, may have been "an instrument of the most reactionary sectors that have been planning a sinister plot, who may have planned the assassination of Kennedy because of disagreement with his international policy.

At the time of this dramatic statement, **Castro knew something about Kennedy's international policy that the rest of the world did not: at the time of his assassination Kennedy was actively exploring a rapprochement with Cuba, and working secretly with Castro to set up secret negotiations to improve relations.** In November 1963, Cuba had no reason to assassinate Kennedy because they were engaged in back channel diplomacy that could possibly lead to normalized relations. Indeed, at the very moment Kennedy was killed, Castro was meeting with an emissary he had sent to Havana on a "mission of peace."

Secret U.S.-Cuban Talks

The talks between Cuba and the U.S. began, ironically, around Washington's bald act of aggression—the paramilitary invasion at Playa Giron. In the aftermath of Cuba's victory over the CIA-backed brigade, the President and his brother, Robert Kennedy sent a lawyer named James Donovan to negotiate the release of over 1000 captured brigade members. During the course of several negotiating sessions in the fall of 1962, Donovan brokered a deal to supply Cuba with \$62 million in food and medicine in return for the release of the prisoners. He not only won their freedom but the trust of Fidel Castro as well.