

In the spring of 1963, Donovan returned to Havana several times to negotiate with Castro the release of two dozen Americans—three of them were CIA operatives—imprisoned in Cuban jails on charges of spying and sabotage. During the course of their meetings, Castro for the first time raised the issue of restoring relations. Given the acrimony and hostility of the recent past, “how would the U.S. and Cuba go about it,” he asked Donovan. “Do you know how porcupines make love?” Donovan replied. “Very carefully. And that is how you and the U.S. will go about this issue.”

When Donovan’s report on Castro’s interest in talks to normalize relations reached the desk of President Kennedy, the White House began considering the possibility of a “sweet approach” to Castro. Top aides argued that the U.S. should demand that Castro jettison his relations with the Soviets as a pre-condition to any talks. But the President overruled them; he instructed his top aides to “start thinking along more flexible lines” in negotiating with Castro, and made it clear, according to declassified White House documents, that he was “very interested” in pursuing this option.

On his last trip to Cuba in April 1963, Donovan introduced Castro to a correspondent for ABC News named Lisa Howard who had traveled to Havana to do a televised special on the Cuban revolution. She replaced Donovan as the central interlocutor in a protracted secret effort to set up the first serious face to face talks on better relations. When she returned from Cuba, the CIA met her in Miami and debriefed her on Castro’s clear interest in improved relations. In a top secret memorandum that arrived on the desk of the president, CIA deputy director, Richard Helms, reported that “Howard definitely wants to impress the U.S. Government with two facts: Castro is ready to discuss rapprochement and herself is ready to discuss it with him if asked to do so by the U.S. Government.”*

Predictably, the CIA adamantly opposed any dialogue with Cuba. The agency was institutionally invested in its on-going efforts to covertly roll back the revolution. In a secret memo rushed to the White House on May 1, 1963, CIA Director John McCone requested that “no active steps be taken on the rapprochement matter at this time” and urged only the “most limited Washington discussions” on accommodation with Castro.

But in the fall of 1963, Washington and Havana did take active steps toward actual negotiations. In September Howard used a cocktail party at her E. 74th st. Manhattan townhouse as cover for the first meeting between a Cuban official, UN Ambassador Carlos Lechuga, and a U.S. official, deputy UN Ambassador William Attwood. Attwood told Lechuga that there was interest at the White House in secret talks, if there was something to talk about. **He also noted that “the CIA runs Cuba policy.”** Following that meeting, Castro and Kennedy used Howard as an intermediary to began passing messages about arranging an actual negotiation session between the two nations.

On November 5, Kennedy’s secret taping system in the Oval Office recorded in a conversation with his national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, on whether to send William Attwood, who was serving as a deputy to U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson at the United Nations, to Havana to meet secretly with Castro. Attwood, Bundy told the President, “now has an invitation

to go down and talk to Fidel about terms and conditions in which he would be interested in a change of relations with the U.S.” The president is heard agreeing to the idea but asking if “we can get Attwood off the payroll before he goes” so as to “sanitize” him as a private citizen in case word of the secret meeting leaked.*

On November 14, Howard arranged for Attwood to come to her home and talk via telephone to Castro’s top aide, Rene Vallejo, about obtaining the Cuban agenda for a secret meeting between in Havana with the Cuban commandante. Vallejo agreed to transmit a proposed agenda to Cuba’s UN ambassador, Lechuga, to give to the Americans. When Attwood passed this information onto Bundy at the White House, he was told that when the agenda was received, “the president wanted to see me at the White House and decide what to say and whether to go [to Cuba] or what we should do next.”

“That was the 19th of November,” Attwood recalled. “Three days before the assassination.”

Kennedy’s Final Act

But Kennedy also sent another message of potential reconciliation to Castro. His emissary, a French journalist named Jean Daniel, had met with Kennedy in Washington to discuss Cuba. Kennedy gave him a message for Fidel Castro: Better relations were possible, and the two countries should work toward an end to hostilities. On November 22, Daniel passed that message to Castro, and the two were discussing it optimistically over lunch when Castro received a phone call reporting that Kennedy had been shot. “This is terrible,” Castro told Daniel, realizing that his mission had been aborted by an assassins’ bullet. “There goes your mission of peace.”

Castro then accurately predicted: “They are going to say we did it.”

Amidst the ongoing controversies over conspiracy theories, what is lost in the historical discussion of the assassination is that John F. Kennedy’s very last act as president was to reach out to Castro and offer the possibility of a different bilateral relationship between Havana and Washington. Fifty years later, the potential Kennedy envisioned for co-existence between the Cuban revolution and the U.S. has yet to be realized. As part of commemorating his legacy, his vision for a détente in the Caribbean must be remembered, reconsidered, and revisited.

Peter Kornbluh directs the Cuba Documentation Project at the National Security Archive in Washington D.C., and is co-author, with William LeoGrande of the forthcoming book, Talking With Cuba: The Hidden History of Diplomacy between the United States and Cuba.

***You can read or hear many of these cited primary sources from the NSA’s website & the url above.**

WI Coalition to Normalize Relations with Cuba

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