

H-Diplo

The Assassination of Kennedy Fifty Years Later: The Cuban Question Mark¹

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The assassination of John F. Kennedy was intimately linked, if only in a subliminal fashion, to American actions against Cuba at the beginning of the 1960's, which in turn formed part of an aggressive and interventionist policy that marked the early phase of the Cold War.

The assassination itself was carried out by a sole killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, out of his admiration for Fidel Castro and his animosity toward the American Government and its President.

The question that remains open after fifty years gone by is whether Castro, who was perfectly aware of the Kennedy brothers' plots against him – thanks to a Cuban double agent who had proposed to the CIA that he assassinate Castro – had ordered his intelligence services to collaborate with Oswald in his action. Until now, nothing solid has emerged to support this thesis.

In December 2006, *The Atlantic*, the prestigious magazine founded in Boston in 1857, published a list of the 100 most influential Americans in the history of the country. The list included, besides presidents, also writers and others, including...baseball players. But the list did not contain the name of John F. Kennedy. This was certainly not due to inadvertence. It was a slap, the motive behind which was unclear...unless it was a relic of the religious wars – Kennedy having been the first Catholic president of the United States.

I was astounded when I heard about the article in *The Atlantic*. Because, in spite of the meager legislative accomplishments of John Kennedy's Administration and the brevity of his tenure – the 'thousand days' – cut short by the horrible attack at Dallas on November 22, 1963, it was he, and virtually he alone, who extricated the United States from one of the worst dangers in history –the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

At the end of the afternoon of October 27, 1962, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara paused on the steps of the Pentagon to look at the sunset, thinking at that moment that he

¹ A slightly different version of this essay appeared in French on October 9, 2013 in *Questions internationales* (No. 64, November-December 2013, 110-114), a publication of "La Documentation française."

might never see a sunset again² – because on that day the Missile Crisis had reached its paroxysm: earlier in the day a U-2 observation aircraft had been shot down and its pilot killed. The attack had been carried out by Russian troops on orders of Fidel Castro.

I cite this anecdote of Robert McNamara to show that the margin between a political solution to the crisis and a nuclear holocaust was extremely thin throughout the thirteen days of the crisis – during which time the President warded off the insistent appeals by most of his senior military officers for an immediate attack on Cuba. In particular, Curtis LeMay, the head of the Air Force and the most hawkish of these officers, was disrespectful toward the ‘young’ President in person and railed against him during the latter’s occasional absences from the Situation Room.

The famous thirteen days comprised the period between the discovery of the missiles by the American U-2 airplane on October 15, 1962 and the move toward a political solution when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev announced on October 27 that he was removing the missiles from the island since Kennedy had agreed not to invade Cuba. During these thirteen days, the Soviet missiles had not become operational, giving President Kennedy a window of sufficient time to ponder a prudential solution to the crisis while avoiding the risk of a nuclear war with the USSR.

Another, and not negligible accomplishment of the Kennedy brothers at the dénouement of the crisis was their success in convincing the Soviets not to mention publicly that the solution that was found was more of a give and take than a humiliating retreat by the USSR: it was the withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey against the departure of the Soviet missiles from Cuba. Attorney General Robert Kennedy succeeded in convincing the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Anatoli Dobrynin, that, because of the U.S. legislative elections that were coming up in the following month, the Turkish side of the agreement had to remain secret – otherwise President Kennedy would look weak before American voters. The Soviets stuck to their word, respecting the agreement made by the two interlocutors. But because of this fact, and from the point of view of public relations, the Soviet Union came off as the loser in the missile crisis.

The danger had been so great during the missile crisis that President Kennedy made an effort to ensure that such a situation should never arise again. A hot line was established between the White House and the Kremlin. In addition, the first agreement on nuclear disarmament – the Limited Test Ban Treaty – was signed in the summer of 1963.

A year after the missile crisis, on Friday, 22 November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated at Dallas. The back story to this act still remains mysterious, from the fact that the killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, was himself shot dead before the end of the weekend. Fifty years later, the shadow over this incident persists. One can certainly situate the motivation of the assassin, Oswald. He was a great admirer of Fidel Castro. He had participated earlier that autumn in a rally in New Orleans in support of the Cuban regime. Subsequently, he sought to

² Sheldon Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2005), p. 186.

get a visa for Cuba at the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City. It was granted but only after the fateful weekend of 22-24 November.

What remains unknown is the question of contacts Oswald might have had with agents of the powerful Cuban intelligence service, the Directorate General of Intelligence (DGI), in Mexico City or elsewhere. And in the final analysis, the question remains open as to whether Fidel Castro himself might have been implicated in the assassination of the young American President. With fifty years having gone by, nothing concrete has emerged as to the involvement of the Cuban government or Cuban intelligence in the assassination; which leads to the conclusion -- provisionally -- that Oswald acted on his own, out of his admiration for Castro. Perhaps after the death of Castro more will be learned about the role of the Cubans.

Nevertheless Castro, because of his reckless temperament, and because of the information he possessed concerning the plots of the Kennedy brothers against his person, would make a perfectly credible sponsor of an operation to assassinate the President.

At the moment of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Castro seemed to want to bring on a nuclear holocaust which, though it would destroy the island of Cuba, would in his mind open the way to a communization of the world. The French newspaper *Le Monde* published on 23 November 1990 a series of letters exchanged between Castro and Nikita Khrushchev, in which the Cuban leader asked Khrushchev to initiate a nuclear war in the event that American forces attacked Cuba. (Subsequently the letters were published elsewhere, notably in *The Armageddon Letters*.³)

In sum, Fidel Castro was prepared to sacrifice his country for the benefit of a future world of communism. In a message to Khrushchev on 26 October 1962, Castro wrote, inter alia, the following:

If...the imperialists invade Cuba with the goal of occupying it, the danger that this aggressive policy poses for humanity is so great that following that event the Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialists could launch the first nuclear strike against it.⁴

The message was clear, although implicit: if the Americans invaded Cuba, the Soviet Union should launch a nuclear attack against the United States.

In a message of 27 October, Khrushchev informed Castro that a solution was in sight, as President Kennedy had promised not to invade Cuba. Khrushchev advised Castro not to be carried away by his emotions and not to respond to provocations, such as the attack he ordered against an American U-2 airplane on 27 October, which claimed the life of the pilot. "Yesterday you shot down one of these [planes] while earlier you didn't shoot them down

³ James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Armageddon Letters*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2012.

⁴ Blight and Lang, 117.

when they overflow your territory. The aggressors will take advantage of such a step for their own purposes.”⁵ (At this point, Khrushchev may have thought that Castro had gotten completely out of hand and that he had better, as a result, find some sort of solution with President Kennedy. It was on the same date as the shutdown, 27 October, that Khrushchev accepted the public compromise proposed by his American counterpart – that is, the withdrawal of the missiles in return for a commitment by the United States not to invade Cuba).

Castro replied the next day, 28 October. The following is an extract:

Earlier isolated violations were committed without a determined military purpose or without a real danger stemming from those flights. This time, that wasn't the case. There was the danger of a surprise attack on certain military installations. We decided not to sit back and wait for a surprise attack...⁶

In a following message of 30 October Khrushchev made it clear he was perfectly aware of the implications of Castro's reckless proposal:

In your [message]...you proposed that we be the first to launch a nuclear attack on the territory of the enemy. Obviously you are aware of what could follow. Rather than a single strike, it would have been the beginning of a thermonuclear war.⁷

Castro replied on 31 October to Khrushchev's letter of the 30th. Here is an extract:

We knew, and one must not think otherwise, that we would be annihilated, as you indicated in your letter, if there was a nuclear war. But that didn't lead us to ask you to withdraw the missiles. That did not lead us to yield.⁸

James Blight and Janet⁹ Lang in *The New York Times* on October 26, 2012 recounted Khrushchev's unvarnished reaction to Castro's letter of October 26:

According to his son and biographer, Sergei Khrushchev, the Soviet premier received that letter in the midst of a tense leadership meeting and shouted, 'This is insane! Fidel wants to drag us into the grave with him!' Khrushchev hadn't understood that Mr.

⁵ Blight and Lang, 122

⁶ Blight and Lang, 151-52

⁷ Blight and Lang, 156

⁸ Blight and Lang, 162.

⁹ This lack of capitalization of Janet Lang's first name accords with her preference.

Castro believed that Cuba was doomed, that war was inevitable, and that the Soviets should transform Cuba from a mere victim into a martyr.

Shortly after this exchange of letters, Khrushchev sent the seasoned diplomat, Anastas Mikoyan, to Havana to continue the discussions with the Cuban leaders. The following is an extract of an exchange between Mikoyan and Che Guevara on November 5, 1962:

Guevara: Even in the context of all our respect for the Soviet Union, we believe that the decisions made by the Soviet Union were a mistake. ...

Mikoyan: But we thought that you would be satisfied by our act. We did everything so that Cuba would not be destroyed. We see your readiness to die beautifully but we believe that it isn't worth dying beautifully.¹⁰

Fidel Castro, at a later time, had a different story to tell. In a report of an interview with Castro at Havana, published in *The Atlantic* on October 16, 2012, Jeffrey Goldberg recalled that he had had the following exchange with Castro a couple of years earlier:

Does what you recommended [that the Soviets launch a nuclear attack against the U.S.] still seem logical now? Castro answered, 'After what I've seen, and knowing what I know, it wasn't worth it all'.

As to the knowledge Castro had of American intentions against Cuba and against Castro himself, the Cuban leader was amply informed. After he had seized power, Castro became aware of the hostility of the United States towards his regime.

Even before he became President, John Kennedy had been alerted by his advisers of the danger that the new revolutionary regime in Cuba represented, and the possibility that Fidel Castro might invite the Soviets to establish forces on the island. A Soviet base 150 kilometers from American territory could not be permitted in the midst of the Cold War.

There followed the disaster of the Bay of Pigs, an operation inherited from the administration of Dwight Eisenhower, and during which Kennedy refused coverage of the landing beach by the U.S. Air Force, thereby clinching the failure of the operation.

The humiliation of the Bay of Pigs fiasco only doubled the determination of the Kennedy brothers to remove Castro. In October 1961, a covert operation, codenamed Mongoose, was launched against the Cuban regime, with at its head Robert Kennedy, then the Attorney-General. A so-called Augmented Special Group was created in the White House and set about planning lethal attacks on Castro himself and conducting sabotage operations on the island. Virtually all of these activities either failed or did not see the light of day.

¹⁰ Sergo Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, 2012, 335-36.

But the essential point here is that Castro was well aware of the lethal intentions of the Kennedy brothers, and this could have incited him to retaliate against the American President, using his own Cuban intelligence service, the DGI. In fact, the DGI did use a “dangle” to learn about American intentions towards Castro and the Cuban Government.¹¹

In 1961, a DGI agent, Rolando Cubela, let it be known through an intermediary that he was against Castro and was seeking a contact with the Americans.¹² Later, in July 1962, Cubela met with a CIA officer during the World Youth Festival at Helsinki. The contact was dropped shortly afterwards, when Cubela refused to take a polygraph test.

In 1963, when the tempo of plots against Castro intensified, and as a result of a decision at CIA, a Spanish-speaking American operations officer, Nestor Sanchez, met with Cubela at Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Thirty years later the fact that from the outset Cubela had been a double agent was confirmed by a Cuban agent of the CIA.¹³ Thus it was that very early on Castro became aware that the Kennedy brothers were trying to have him killed.

The venue suggested for meetings between Sanchez and Cubela was Paris. Presumably this was at Cuban instigation, as Cuba had an embassy there and thus had agents available for counter-surveillance. By an irony of fate, a meeting was scheduled for 22 November 1963. By that point the CIA was preparing to have delivered to Cubela in Cuba a rifle with telescopic sights – ironically the same type of weapon that Oswald used against Kennedy. The assassination of the American President the same day cut off further attempts to assassinate Castro, although the CIA contact with Cubela was maintained until December 1964.

In sum, because of Castro’s temperament – his apocalyptic wish for the nuclear obliteration of Cuba followed by the communization of the world, plus the fact of the information from Cubela of the Kennedy brothers’ plans to assassinate him, Castro may well have decided to strike at Kennedy before he himself was attacked. It is worth noting in this regard that on September 7, 1963 at Havana, Castro gave an interview to an American journalist, Daniel Harker, in which he warned the Americans not to try to assassinate Cuban leaders, as otherwise “they themselves will not be safe.”¹⁴

The Castro regime, whether or not it was involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, had every pretext to do so. In this regard, it is well to keep in mind the role of the CIA in the early

¹¹ Edward Jay Epstein, *The Annals of Unsolved Crime, Epilogue*, Brooklyn NY, Melville House, 2012, 316.

¹² The account that follows on the Cubela affair is drawn from Epstein, *The Annals of Unsolved Crime, Epilogue*.

¹³ Epstein, 316.

¹⁴ Epstein, 316-18

days of the Cold War and its interventions overseas, which today can appear excessive. Moreover, the ease with which the CIA overthrew the regime of Jacobo Guzman in Guatemala and that of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran created an atmosphere of invincibility around the CIA and gave rise to the idea that covert action was an effective tool of its own, between war and diplomacy. This led to the botched operation of the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. But this failure only redoubled the efforts of the Kennedy brothers to do away with Castro.

During the entire period of the Cold War the CIA seems to have underestimated the capabilities of Cuban Intelligence. In this regard, it is interesting to recall that, during the 1980's, several dozen Cubans, supposedly agents of the CIA, had been in reality double agents run by the Cuban DGI.¹⁵ They had even been trained by the DGI in how to overcome the polygraph. One could speculate that, because of the high degree of professionalism of the DGI, that organization has been able to conceal all these years an involvement with Oswald. The mystery remains.

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¹⁵ Brian Latell, *Castro's Secrets*, Lanham MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2012, 10.