

## Complicity and Authorization: The Role of the US Government in the Assassination Attempts of Fidel Castro

Jazlyn Madrid-Sanchez

University of Arizona

Foreign relations between the United States and Cuba have a long, and complicated history, and the Cuban Revolution and Cold War period in the mid twentieth century would prove to be a particularly establishing period for diplomacy between the United States and Cuba. The Cuban Revolution and the expulsion of the anti-communist, pro-American Fulgencio Batista government that dictated Cuba from 1952 to 1958 would end a long period of US rule over the neighboring island.<sup>1</sup> With the end of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the rise of Fidel Castro, a turning period for the neighboring countries that would ultimately result in heightened tensions and hostilities between the two states began. With the Cold War at its height, the idea of the US having a communist neighbor was more than enough to make the US turn to extreme action. If the newly instated communist government of Cuba could not be removed, their leader would have to instead-in one way or another. There are eight documented assassination attempts on the life of Fidel Castro- all of which occurred between the years 1960 and 1965 during the Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy presidencies- however, the history behind who authorized these attempts remains uncertain.<sup>2</sup>

There currently exists no known direct evidence of assassination authorizations of Fidel Castro on behalf of US officials. However, while there is no *direct* evidence, other evidence points to US involvement and the complicity of government officials. The idea of an assassination plot of a foreign leader being authorized without any prior knowledge on behalf of US officials is highly unreasonable at best. Official US documents point at another truth; during both the Eisenhower and JFK administrations, the CIA was authorized to carry out plans to assassinate Fidel Castro. Despite the lack of evidence surrounding who authorized the assassination of Fidel Castro, evidence shows that the CIA could not have acted alone in these plots, and that both Eisenhower and Kennedy were aware of the efforts against Castro. Despite never having authorized the assassinations on record; anti-Cuban action, covert operations, and damning testimonies from government officials demonstrate that both Eisenhower and Kennedy were complicit in the assassination attempts on Fidel Castro.

The end of the Cuban Revolution and establishment of a communist government in Cuba posed an obstacle for the United States' plans for global capitalist expansion and modernization. Because of the United States' commitment to expand capitalist economic development, anticommunism, and militarization- the establishment of this communist government proved to be incompatible with the US and their goals.<sup>3</sup> In a letter to British Prime Minister Macmillan, President Eisenhower expressed concern over the new Cuban government and stated that it

---

<sup>1</sup> Raúl Rodríguez, and Harry Targ. "US Foreign Policy towards Cuba: Historical Roots, Traditional Explanations and Alternative Perspectives." *The International Journal of Cuban Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 25. doi:10.13169/intejcubastud.7.1.0016.

<sup>2</sup> United States Senate, "Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: An Interim Report of the Select Committee To Study Governmental Operations With Respect To Intelligence Activities" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), November 20, 1975, 71. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94465.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Morris H. Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution The United States and Cuba, 1952-1986* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 132. <http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511664991>.

posed a threat to the security of the “Free World as a whole.”<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this being that the new Cuban government was not only anti-capitalist, it was explicitly anti-American, and while hostilities between the two countries are ultimately rooted in conflicts over socioeconomic politics, it is important to contextualize the actions and events that took place in the aftermath of the Revolution that further intensified the worsening relationship between the neighboring countries.

### **The End of Cuban-American Diplomacy and Rise of Counterinsurgency as Foreign Policy**

Cuba established diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1959, and economic Soviet support for the new economic development in Cuba that further distanced the island from depending on the American market only further intensified US tensions with both Cuba and the USSR.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet’s also further supported the growing conflicts between the neighboring countries by openly supporting and praising Cuba’s revision of contracts with American companies, the agrarian reform, and the persecution of Batista’s followers- all of which contrasted with American interests.<sup>6</sup> Tensions truly began to rise however, when Cuba nationalized all American owned companies in 1960. For context, the United States had held economic interests in Cuba long before the Cuban Revolution. In the late nineteenth century, sixty-two percent of *all* Cuban exports went to the United States, and by the early twentieth century, Cuba’s economy was “thoroughly dependent” on US consumption.<sup>7</sup> Following the US’s intervention in Cuba’s war of independence in 1898, the United States would usher in an era of military occupation, and established US neo colonial domination on the island, with the US further “extending its hegemonic design” over Cuba.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, when the revolutionary government took office in Cuba, it not only affected the U.S’s economic interests in Cuba, it impacted the United States’ hegemony over the island. It is important to understand that the US saw all challenges to its control as anti-American, and as a direct national security threat, particularly during the Cold War era.<sup>9</sup> Castro’s government challenged US hegemony, and this led to immediate tensions.

Prior to the nationalization of American companies, Castro visited Washington in 1959 and proposed a large-scale assistance program to the Eisenhower administration and was promptly “ignored” by the president.<sup>10</sup> Following the hostile trip to the United States, Castro would introduce an agrarian reform and later sign trade agreements with the USSR in the early winter of 1960. The US then retaliated by halting all sugar purchases from the island, and over the next several months, Cuba would nationalize US-owned corporations on the island, thus bringing economic ties between the neighboring countries to a halt.<sup>11</sup> Just days after Castro nationalized American oil, sugar, and mining companies, Eisenhower – in another letter to Prime Minister Macmillan – stressed that this was an “unjustifiable action,” one that posed difficulties

---

<sup>4</sup> President Eisenhower to Harold Macmillan, “Letter From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan,” Letter, July 11, 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Cuba, Volume VI*, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d551> .

<sup>5</sup> George J. Boughton, “Soviet-Cuban Relations, 1956-1960,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 16, no. 4 (1974): 449, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/174797>.

<sup>6</sup> Boughton, “Soviet-Cuban Relations”, 443.

<sup>7</sup> Raúl Rodríguez, and Harry Targ. “US Foreign Policy”, 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Raúl Rodríguez, and Harry Targ. “US Foreign Policy”, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Raúl Rodríguez, and Harry Targ. “US Foreign Policy”, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Raúl Rodríguez, and Harry Targ. “US Foreign Policy”, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Raúl Rodríguez, and Harry Targ. “US Foreign Policy”, 26.

and dangers not only for the US, but for their allies as well.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, only months after the nationalization of American companies and Eisenhower's alleged attempts at a "reasonable relationship" with Cuba after appointing a new Cuban ambassador,<sup>13</sup> Cuba would sever diplomatic ties with the United States in January of 1961.<sup>14</sup> These hostilities would ultimately precede the US's next course of action; counterinsurgency operations that intended on overthrowing Castro's government in Cuba.

Efforts against Castro and the Cuban government did not begin with assassination attempts.<sup>15</sup> Following the severance of diplomatic relations, the US would launch two operations in 1961; the Bay of Pigs Invasion, and Operation Mongoose. Launched on April 17, 1961, the Bay of Pigs operation was a US backed invasion consisting of a brigade of Cuban exiles known as Brigade 2506 that planned to invade Cuba in an attempt to overthrow Castro and his government. However, after being met with Castro's forces (which were larger and far more powerful), the brigade was defeated in under seventy-two hours: making the Bay of Pigs Invasion a complete failure.<sup>16</sup> The Bay of Pigs failure was, in short, a political humiliation for Kennedy. While Eisenhower was responsible for authorizing the operation in 1960, it was Kennedy who ordered major changes to the plan including changing landing sites and making the invasion a nighttime deployment rather than a day-time assault.<sup>17</sup> Less than three months into his presidency, Kennedy had launched a major assault against the island – and failed.<sup>18</sup> As for assassination, the CIA has consistently denied any correlation between assassination plots and the Bay of Pigs, claiming that any assassination plots against Castro at this time were completely "isolated" from the authorized Bay of Pigs operation.<sup>19</sup> Richard Bissell, the Deputy Director of Plans for the CIA during the Eisenhower and early JFK Administration claimed that while there was one assassination plot on Castro at the time involving members of the Mafia, those generally involved in the Bay of Pigs operation knew nothing about it.<sup>20</sup> However, there is proof that certain members of the CIA including the (unnamed) Chief of Operations for the Bay of Pigs project "hoped" that the invasion would result in the death of Castro, thus contradicting the CIA's previous statements of assassination being completely unrelated to this operation.<sup>21</sup>

Following the Bay of Pigs failure, Kennedy authorized the launch of Operation Mongoose, on November 30, 1961. Aiming to finally remove the communist government from power in Cuba, Mongoose set out to do what the Bay of Pigs invasion failed to accomplish. Unlike the full-scale invasion of the Bay of Pigs operation, Operation Mongoose consisted of

---

<sup>12</sup> President Eisenhower to Harold Macmillan, "Letter From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan," Letter, August 8, 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Cuba, Volume VI*, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d573>.

<sup>13</sup> President Eisenhower to Harold Macmillan, "Letter" July 11, 1960

<sup>14</sup> Carlos Olivares, "Telegram From the Embassy in Cuba to the Department of State," Telegram, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961–September 1962*, January 3, 1961, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d1>.

<sup>15</sup> US Senate, "Alleged," 72.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Jack B. Pfeiffer, *Volume III: Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959–January 1961* (Central Intelligence Agency, December 1, 1979), 278, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22204-document-05-cia-history-staff-official-history>.

<sup>20</sup> Pfeiffer, "Volume III," 278.

<sup>21</sup> Pfeiffer, "Volume III," 285.

covert actions aimed at weakening the communist government in order to eventually overthrow it. A National Security Council memo belonging to McGeorge Bundy, the US National Security Advisor under the JFK Administration from 1962 details the objectives of the operation as well as the actions being taken against Cuba. Some of these strategies included promoting anti-Cuban resistance and pro-American propaganda in Cuba, sabotaging Cuban production (including the sugar trade), political and psychological sabotage against the communist government, and producing anti-Cuban propaganda aimed at turning Cubans, Americans, and other Latin American countries against the Cuban government.<sup>22</sup> While some of these actions did take place, Castro and his government remained in power – thus making Operation Mongoose a failure of its own.

So why assassinate Castro? Why did the US choose to formally attempt to commit murder against a foreign leader? The answer is in the historical context; foreign relations between the US and Cuba continued to worsen, and the US continued to fail to overthrow Castro's communist government. However, there also exists a broader historical context. The idea that the United States would take on an action as extreme as political assassination due to personal conflicts with Castro is simply untrue. The assassination attempts against Fidel Castro represented something much larger; the United States's commitment to halt the spread of communism and maintain its capitalist hegemony. In regards to Latin America, the Eisenhower Administration was adamant that the US could only have friendly cooperation with anti-communist, authoritarian regimes, with former CIA Director Allen Dulles once noting that the US should "do nothing to offend the dictators."<sup>23</sup> If the 1954 CIA backed coup of a left-wing president in Guatemala, and the significant levels of economic aid sent to the left-wing Bolivian government in hopes of halting further radicalization of the ruling party during this same period proved anything, it was that the United States was more than willing to take action to halt the spread of Communism in Latin America.<sup>24</sup> To the US, Fidel Castro was a symbol of everything they stood against. Eisenhower was aware of what Castro represented in Latin America, and that the Cuban leader had "gained great prestige in Latin America."<sup>25</sup> Castro represented the fact that the United States had a communist neighbor that they had failed to topple while the Cold War was near its height. These extreme plots against Castro were not due to his personal relationship with US presidents, but due to what he represented on a larger global framework.

In regard to counterinsurgency operations, the United States was more than aware that their previous efforts against Castro's government were ineffective. In a 1963 memorandum, former CIA Director John McCone, who came into position following the Bay of Pigs failure, stated that while current actions such as economic sanctions being taken by the US against Castro would continue to give Castro trouble, these actions alone would not "bring Castro down."<sup>26</sup> While this document does not explicitly mention assassination plots, it makes it clear

---

<sup>22</sup> McGeorge Bundy, "Operation Mongoose: Main Points to Consider," Report, *National Security Council*, October 26, 1962, National Security Archive, 1-3. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/19629-national-security-archive-doc-18-national>.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Tunstall Allcock, "The First Alliance for Progress?: Reshaping the Eisenhower Administration's Policy toward Latin America." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 90. doi:10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00432.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Tunstall Allcock, "The First Alliance", 92.

<sup>25</sup> Louis A. Perez, "Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy toward Cuba." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 236. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875788>.

<sup>26</sup> John McCone, "Memorandum on Cuban Policy," Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency, April 25, 1963, National Security Archive, 1. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/18288-national-security-archive-doc-10-john-mccone>.

that the US understood that current strategies were not working in their favor, as previous counterinsurgency operations had failed to topple the communist government. The US then opted for another strategy that could potentially offer them more optimal results; political assassination, which was often referred to by the CIA as “executive action” against enemies of the state.<sup>27</sup>

There are at least eight documented plots involving the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro. Some of these plots include gifting Castro poisoned cigars, poisoning Castro with pills or a contaminated diving suit, rigging a seashell with explosives in hopes that Castro would come into contact with it, or poisoning Castro with a ballpoint pen rigged with a needle.<sup>28</sup> However, most plans never made it past the planning stage, and this is likely due to the definite consequences there would be for murdering the head of a state. Regarding Castro, the United States was aware that actions against Castro ultimately meant heightened tensions between the US and the USSR, due to Castro’s ties to the Soviets, and going as far as murdering the Cuban leader could potentially lead to an outright crisis between the US and the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> The only assassination plot that ever came to fruition was the CIA’s plan to collaborate with underworld figures in order to assassinate Castro with poisoned pills.<sup>30</sup> This particular plan began in August of 1960 when Bissell approached Colonel Sheffield Edwards, the Director of the Office of Security, and asked him if the Office of Security could provide the CIA with “assets” for a task requiring “gangster-type action”. The target of this plan was none other than Fidel Castro.<sup>31</sup> While Bissell and the CIA did find someone willing to assassinate Castro and teams were dispatched to Cuba, more than once, this plot ultimately failed as well.<sup>32</sup>

Despite staggering evidence of the CIA’s involvement and complicity in the plots to assassinate Castro, there still exists some denial of involvement within the Agency. For example, a 1963 memo in which McCone states that although he was aware of plans to “remove Castro,” methods on *how* the CIA planned to remove Castro were never made clear to him, implying that if there were any assassination plots being discussed, he was unaware of them.<sup>33</sup> However, despite personal denials or feigned ignorance: the CIA was more than complicit in the several attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro.

The CIA’s evident complicity in the assassination plots against Castro then begs the question of authorization. While it is clear that the CIA was responsible for these plots against Castro, the question of who authorized the assassination plots remains unclear. There are essentially two main claims regarding authorization: one claim is that the CIA was acting alone, and US officials were either unaware or did not authorize assassination plots against Castro. The other is that despite the lack of solid evidence, the CIA did not act alone in these plots and could not have, and that high ranking US officials *including* US Presidents had to be both knowledgeable and complicit in the authorizations of these plots.

<sup>27</sup> Loch K. Johnson, “Covert Action and Accountability: Decision-Making for America’s Secret Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1989): 86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600495>.

<sup>28</sup> US Senate, “Alleged,” 73-88.

<sup>29</sup> Louis A. Perez, “Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro”, 236.

<sup>30</sup> US Senate, “Alleged,” 71.

<sup>31</sup> Howard J. Osborn to Executive Secretary, CIA Management Committee, “Family Jewels,” Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency, May 16, 1973, National Security Archive.

[https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB222/family\\_jewels\\_full\\_ocr.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB222/family_jewels_full_ocr.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> US Senate, “Alleged,” 71.

<sup>33</sup> John McCone, *Memorandum for the Record: Special Group (5412) Meeting*, memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency, April 11, 1963, 2, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/18281-national-security-archive-doc-09-cia-john-mccone>.

It is notable to mention that documents regarding CIA involvement in assassination plots hardly mention the involvement of other government officials, particularly members of the executive branch. In a memorandum for President Ford written in 1975 following the Church Committee investigation, Philip W. Buchen, an attorney for the White House counsel, stressed the importance in further investigating the government's role in the assassination plots on Castro. Buchen stated that the materials compiled by the Church Committee "create the impression" that the CIA was acting alone. He then credits the lack of evidence on government involvement to unrecorded planning or conversations, and suggests further interrogation of former participants involved in these plots in order to obtain more information on government involvement.<sup>34</sup> Mere months later, President Ford would write a letter to Senator Frank Church urging the Select Committee to not release any findings on foreign assassination plots. Not only would the release of this information harm US interest, it would imply that the government considers assassination as an acceptable act- which would be "abhorrent".<sup>35</sup> The notion that the CIA acted alone in these plots attempts to shield US officials from complicity. However, while there is no solid evidence of government involvement, there is evidence that proves that the CIA was indeed *not* acting alone.

Despite the overall exclusion of US officials in documents regarding Castro assassination authorizations, discrepancies within testimonies from CIA officials point at other facts: the CIA did not- or could not-act alone, and US officials were more than aware of the ongoing plots to assassinate Castro. In a testimony regarding Castro plots, Bundy stated that he would be "surprised" if the CIA moved on with plans to carry out an assassination without coming to him first.<sup>36</sup> According to Bundy, it was unlikely that the CIA was carrying out these plans without some form of authorization from government officials. After all, how could the CIA act on such an important task such as political assassination without the approval of higher officials? J. Alan Wolske describes the circumstances of assassination in being allowed by a US President in this case as something that is not "wholly farfetched" considering the historical context. American presidents were committed to fighting communism during the Cold War era, and Castro posed a threat to this. Not only was his government communist, he had humiliated the United States in their prior failed counterinsurgency operations, and with the Cold War at its height, it is not difficult to envision that assassination authorizations were coming from the top.<sup>37</sup> Prior CIA officials have also testified to often being "pressured" to undergo covert intervention operations from high officials in the US government, including the Executive Branch. However, as covert action decisions are often made in secret, Presidential involvement in the authorization of CIA covert actions is not easily determined.<sup>38</sup> However, CIA testimonies debunk the idea that the CIA was acting alone. So, what really was the role of the Presidents?

---

<sup>34</sup> Philip W. Buchen to President Gerald R. Ford, "US Government Involvement in Plots to Assassinate Foreign Leaders," Memorandum, June 7, 1975, National Security Archive, 2-3. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21513-document-20>.

<sup>35</sup> President Gerald R. Ford to Senator Frank Church, Letter, October 31, 1975, National Security Archive, 1. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21514-document-21>.

<sup>36</sup> John Prados, *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power*, 1st ed., Discovering America Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 165, <https://www-degruyter-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/document/doi/10.7560/737624/html>.

<sup>37</sup> J. Alan Wolske, "Jack, Judy, Sam, Bobby, Johnny, Frank...: An Investigation into the Alternate History of the CIA-Mafia Collaboration to Assassinate Fidel Castro, 1960–1997," *Intelligence and National Security* 15, no. 4 (2000): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520008432630>.

<sup>38</sup> Gregory F. Treverton, "Covert Action: From 'Covert' to Overt," *Daedalus* 116, no. 2 (1987): 107-108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20025098>.

The eight official plots to assassinate Castro occurred between the years 1960-1965, with a majority of them taking place during the late Eisenhower and early Kennedy administrations. Despite the plausible deniability surrounding executive officials in this matter, discrepancies and implications within testimonies point at the US Presidents being both knowledgeable and complicit in the plots to assassinate Fidel Castro. The next portion of this essay will analyze the degree of complicity on behalf of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations and debunk the notion that the two Presidents either did not authorize, or were unaware of, the CIA's plans to assassinate Castro.

Arguably the most important evidence of the Eisenhower Administration's complicity in the assassination plots on Castro is the role former CIA Director Allen Dulles played in these plots/authorizations and his close ties to Eisenhower. To start, claims on whether or not Dulles was involved in the plots against Castro consists of several discrepancies. Church Committee findings state that it remains unclear as to whether or not Dulles was informed of the Castro assassination operations, and that even if Dulles was informed- an assassination authorization could only have come from President Eisenhower.<sup>39</sup> However, in that same Church Committee report, it is revealed that in 1959 Dulles approved a memorandum from J.C. King, head of the CIA's Western Hemisphere Division, in which the latter recommended that Castro be "eliminated", as the "disappearance" of Castro would accelerate the fall of the communist government.<sup>40</sup> This memorandum would be approved only months after Eisenhower ordered that the Special Group, which was a part of the National Security Council and included both Dulles and Bissell, meet at least once a week in order to discuss covert operations.<sup>41</sup> The first documented assassination attempt on Fidel Castro would take place soon after, in early 1960. Scholars have described Eisenhower's administration as the "golden age" of covert operations, and in regards to the same matter, both Eisenhower and Dulles were strong advocates of such actions due to their "ideological and moral rectitude" that essentially excused even the most "unsavory of activities" under Eisenhower's administration.<sup>42</sup> While this in no means solidifies involvement in assassination plans, under the historical context of the fight against communism during the Cold War, it does hold Eisenhower to a certain complicity, in that it asserts that the president was willing to allow covert operations in the name of anti-communist pro-American ideologies. If both Eisenhower and Dulles advocated for covert operations, it is not essentially improbable that they would advocate for more extreme covert actions, especially once the United States saw Cuba as a threat to US hegemony in Latin America.

Prior to 1959, Special Group meetings were infrequent due to the "special relationship" between Eisenhower, Allen Dulles, and his brother John Foster Dulles- the Secretary of State.<sup>43</sup> This close relationship between the President and the Dulles brothers made for a more informal relationship between Eisenhower, the State Department, and the CIA.<sup>44</sup> Another instance in which Dulles' involvement in assassination plots against Castro is made evident is in a CIA

---

<sup>39</sup> US Senate, "Alleged," 109.

<sup>40</sup> US Senate, "Alleged," 92.

<sup>41</sup> "Chronology," Report, Central Intelligence Agency, No Date, Mary Ferrell Foundation Archive, 1 <https://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=50352#relPageId=2>.

<sup>42</sup> David F. Rudgers, "The Origins of Covert Action." *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 259. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261206>.

<sup>43</sup> United States Senate, "Foreign and Military Intelligence - Book I: Final Report of the Select Committee To Study Governmental Operations With Respect To Intelligence Activities" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), April 26, 1976, 52 [https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94755\\_I.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94755_I.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> US Senate, "Foreign," 110.

memo regarding John Roselli, one of the mobsters recruited by the CIA in one of the earlier plots to assassinate Castro. This document explicitly states that individuals who were aware of the project, being the assassination plot, included several CIA officials including Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Allen Dulles was both informed- if not involved- in certain plots to assassinate Castro.

Another detail worth noting is that Dulles' men had trained Fulgencio Batista's secret police force, and the fact that Castro had managed to topple them during the Revolution gave Castro a threatening aura in the eyes of Dulles.<sup>46</sup> Dulles understood that neither Castro or his government would go down easily. Thus, it is no surprise that Dulles would be in support of extreme action such as political assassination.

To what extent does the close tie between Dulles and Eisenhower make the former President complicit? As Eisenhower's anti-Castro politics continued to escalate, he would continue to authorize anti-Cuban actions being proposed by Dulles, such as the Cuba Task Force created by Dulles in 1960 with the sole purpose of coming up with covert action plans for Cuba.<sup>47</sup> Despite official testimonies such as the one of Bissell who claimed that plans regarding Castro began in 1961, as mentioned previously, there is evidence of a failed assassination attempt in August of 1960- meaning that an assassination against Castro was authorized during the Eisenhower Administration.<sup>48</sup>

Proving the authorization of assassination plots against Castro in the case of Eisenhower is a bit more complicated, as covert operations against Castro began towards the end of the Eisenhower Administration. However, there is proof of *someone* authorizing an assassination attempt. Another piece of evidence that supports the idea that Eisenhower was in support of the plots against Castro, is the Bay of Pigs operation, which was initially proposed during Eisenhower's administration. While Eisenhower stresses that he "reserved" the decision to go ahead on the operation after approving it, that does not account for the fact that plans for the operation were "well down the track" once it came time for the president's approval.<sup>49</sup> Once again, seeing as how it is documented that the death of Castro was essentially a probable result of the Bay of Pigs operation, this points at the idea that, somewhere along the line, Eisenhower was aware that there were plans to murder Castro, and he did not outwardly oppose them. If anything, the former president may have approved of and authorized such plans.

While there is, admittedly, more information surrounding the JFK Administration and their role in the authorization of assassination attempts, Eisenhower was by no means innocent. Considering the involvement of Ellen Dulles, it is highly probable that Eisenhower was aware that Castro was the target of assassination.<sup>50</sup> Considering Eisenhower's close ties to Dulles, the fact that assassination plots against Castro began during his administration, added to the claim that an assassination authorization could "only" have come from Eisenhower at this time proves

---

<sup>45</sup> Howard J. Osborn, "Roselli, John," Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency, No Date, Mary Ferrell Foundation Archive, 1, <https://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=110935#relPageId=1>.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War*, First Edition (New York, NY: Time Books/ Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 254.

<sup>47</sup> Kinzer, *The Brothers*, 255-56

<sup>48</sup> David Belin, "Summary of Facts: Investigation of CIA Involvement in Plans to Assassinate Foreign Leaders," Report, *Assassination-Related Materials*, May 30, 1975, National Archives, 10, <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/releases/docid-32112745.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory F. Treverton, "Covert Action: From 'Covert' to Overt." *Daedalus* 116, no. 2 (1987): 108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20025098>.

<sup>50</sup> Pfeiffer, "Volume III," 277.



that -at least to a certain degree- Eisenhower was complicit in the authorization of assassination attempts on Castro.<sup>51</sup>

Plans for assassination began under the Eisenhower Administration, and continued under Kennedy's. The beginning of Kennedy's Administration would witness major anti-Cuban action, including the infamous Bay of Pigs failure, so it goes without saying that Kennedy was absolutely motivated to take Castro down. As mentioned earlier, the Bay of Pigs operation in itself was encouraging the assassination of Castro, despite this not being explicitly mentioned in the plan.<sup>52</sup> Kennedy understood that Castro's position was stronger than the US had previously believed (or hoped), therefore it would be unsurprising to learn that his administration is complicit in authorizing the assassination of Castro.

Unlike Eisenhower, who never personally or explicitly mentioned the assassination of Castro (on record), there does exist an instance on record in which Kennedy personally mentioned the possibility of Castro being assassinated. In a conversation with Tad Szulc, the foreign correspondent for *The New York Times* from 1953-1972 at the White House in 1961, just days before the launch of Operation Mongoose, Kennedy asked Szulc, "What would you think if I ordered Castro to be assassinated?" Szulc, known for breaking the Bay of Pigs Invasion story months before the operation took place,<sup>53</sup> told Kennedy that this was a "terrible idea", Kennedy agreed and told Szulc that he was "testing" him, as the US truly had no desire to take part in assassinations. Afterwards JFK would say that he asked the question because he was "under terrific pressure" from his advisors to authorize a Castro assassination.<sup>54</sup> This evidence is, in short, damning for Kennedy. Not only did Kennedy acknowledge that he was aware of assassination plots, he mentioned the consideration of authorization. The interesting thing to note here is that assassination attempts against Castro continued well after 1961, meaning that if JFK truly had no desire to authorize these plans, these later attempts never would have occurred. The fact that Kennedy was being pressured to make the authorization also invalidates the argument that the CIA was acting alone or plotting to assassinate Castro without authorization. And yet, there exists no concrete evidence of Kennedy directly authorizing an assassination.

From his inauguration in January of 1961, JFK had made his stance clear: America would "pay any burden" to prevail over the totalitarian forces of communism.<sup>55</sup> After a humiliating defeat at the Bay of Pigs and an ultimately unsuccessful attempt at sabotaging the Cuban government, it is truly unsurprising to see Kennedy consider authorizing an assassination. Despite the reasonings and evidence however, testimonies regarding whether or not the Kennedy Administration ever authorized an assassination are contrasting.

Similarly to what was seen in the Church Committee's investigation of the Eisenhower Administration's role in the authorization of Castro assassinations, testimonies on whether or not the Kennedy Administration authorized Castro plots are full of discrepancies. For one, high ranking Kennedy Administration officials insisted that no direct order was ever given for a Castro assassination. Yet, they also claimed that during the planning of Operation Mongoose, John McCone was never informed of any assassination activities. McCone would indeed testify that assassination would be "impermissible" without a direct order, and that in regards to

---

<sup>51</sup> US Senate, "Alleged," 109.

<sup>52</sup> Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Prados, *The Family Jewels*, 220.

<sup>54</sup> Tad Szulc, "Notes on TS Conversation with JFK, at White House," Notes, November 9, 1961, National Security Archive, 2. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/19619-national-security-archive-doc-08-tad-szulc-notes>.

<sup>55</sup> US Senate, "Foreign," 25.

Operation Mongoose, Castro's assassination was never "within the bounds" of the Operation.<sup>56</sup> However, McCone would later testify to discussing the "liquidation" and "removal" of Castro in a 1962 meeting discussing the next phase of Operation Mongoose.<sup>57</sup> This choice of language is interesting, as it implies but does not explicitly confirm the plans of assassination.

While McCone's testimony proves that the CIA was in fact discussing assassination during the planning of Operation Mongoose, it does little to prove any potential authorization on behalf of the Kennedy Administration. Although, if the CIA was making plans to assassinate Castro after stating that an assassination could not take place without direct authorization from Kennedy, it can be argued that the CIA was either continuing to pressure Kennedy into authorizing an assassination, or that Kennedy simply had authorized an assassination on Castro in the past and would likely do it again.

Kennedy's conversation with Szulc is not the only proof that he was more than aware of assassination plots, however. It should be noted that in 1962, two years after the CIA had tried to assassinate Fidel Castro with the help of underworld figures, Colonel Edwards (who was originally approached by Bissell in 1960 to help provide the CIA with gangster "assets")<sup>58</sup> and Lawrence Houston, then General Counsel of the CIA briefed Kennedy on the Agency's previous contacts with the Mafia.<sup>59</sup> Edwards would later state that President Kennedy never disapproved of any of the actions he had taken in the past (likely referring to the previous assassination plots including mobsters). As for Lawrence Houston, he would later testify that Kennedy was briefed on the plans to assassinate Castro with the help of the Mafia, and that Kennedy was very "unhappy" about this plan, but for different reasons. Kennedy was upset with *who* the CIA had worked with, because at this time, Kennedy was encouraging that the CIA "get after" the Mafia. In the end, Kennedy stated that if the CIA were to get involved with the Mafia in the future, they would have to see him first.<sup>60</sup> Houston's testimony is interesting for many reasons. For one, Kennedy seemingly never protested against the prospect of the CIA trying to assassinate Castro with the Mafia; he was more upset over who they were working with rather than the end goal of their plan. There also exists further proof regarding the CIA-Mafia plots against Castro that further implicate Kennedy. For one, despite the fact that the CIA was working with underworld figures, the Agency *must answer to the President*. Meaning that it was highly unlikely that Kennedy was completely in the dark in the plots against Castro.<sup>61</sup> As supporters of the Church Committee maintain, these plans involving the mafia against Castro prove that these plots were not a series of "misadventures" that occurred within the CIA, but a series of high-priority, concerted efforts against the Cuban leader.<sup>62</sup> JFK was described as being "obsessed" with getting rid of Castro, with Bissell testifying to the Church Committee that getting rid of Castro was a "policy of the time" and killing Castro was "within what was expected."<sup>63</sup> This goes to show that not only was Kennedy once again aware of the plans to assassinate Castro, he did not condemn them. Granted, it can be argued that because this specific plot occurred in 1960, under the Eisenhower administration, it was unnecessary for Kennedy to condone the plot at this time.

---

<sup>56</sup> US Senate, "Alleged," 148.

<sup>57</sup> US Senate, "Alleged," 164.

<sup>58</sup> Osborn to Executive Secretary, "Family Jewels," 1973.

<sup>59</sup> Phil Buchen, "Castro," Report, Central Intelligence Agency, June 1975, National Archives, 2, <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/releases/docid-32112987.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> Buchen, "Castro," 3.

<sup>61</sup> Wolske, "Jack, Judy, Sam, Bobby, Johnny, Frank," 106.

<sup>62</sup> Wolske, "Jack, Judy, Sam, Bobby, Johnny, Frank," 105.

<sup>63</sup> Wolske, "Jack, Judy, Sam, Bobby, Johnny, Frank," 23.

However, considering Kennedy's statement to Szulc on how it was immoral for the US to take part in assassinations,<sup>64</sup> why was it that Kennedy never openly condoned the actions and statements of either Edwards or Houston?

Earlier, in June of 1961, General Maxwell Taylor (former Senior Officer of the US Army) and his group reported recommended actions to take against Castro to President Kennedy. Taylor's group stressed that long term living with Castro as a neighbor was simply impossible, and recommended that active measures be taken to "force" the removal of Castro.<sup>65</sup> While it is important to note that there were no mentions of CIA activities pertaining to assassination in this report, Taylor's group's strategies for removing Castro - other than needing to be forceful - were vague. Meaning that although assassination was not explicitly mentioned, it was certainly implied. Whether or not Kennedy ever approved of these recommendations remains unclear, but the President was aware of forceful plans to remove Castro, and he was not condemning them, at least in the case of Edwards and Houston.

The ties between Kennedy and the authorization of assassination plots against Castro appear to be more evident than it appears. Church Committee findings report that there is a truly significant contrast between the involvement and knowledge of the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations in regards to efforts against Castro.<sup>66</sup> The evidence of Kennedy being both aware and possibly involved in the authorization of these plots is far greater than the known evidence surrounding Eisenhower. Kennedy was not only aware of the plots, he explicitly mentioned them and would later fail to condone them. While there is no concrete evidence as to whether or not Kennedy ever authorized the assassination of Fidel Castro, he was certainly complicit in these plots.

Ultimately, the complicity of US officials in the assassination plots against Fidel Castro is in the proof. The CIA was, in fact, not acting alone in these plots, and high-ranking officials including US Presidents were more than knowledgeable of the extreme efforts being taken against Castro. Both Eisenhower and Kennedy themselves are complicit in the authorizations of Castro assassinations to a certain extent. It goes without saying, both Eisenhower and Kennedy had their motives for authorizing the attempts on Castro. With the Cold War at its height, fears over a communist neighbor, and the increasing global pressures to topple Castro and his government, it is unsurprising to see that the measures taken by the US government did not occur unbeknownst to Executive Officials, or without their authorization.

---

<sup>64</sup> Szulc, "Notes on TS Conversation," 2.

<sup>65</sup> Buchen, "Castro," 3-4.

<sup>66</sup> United States Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports On Foreign And Military Intelligence - Book IV: Final Report of the Select Committee To Study Governmental Operations With Respect To Intelligence Activities" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), April 23, 1976, 140.  
[https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94755\\_IV.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94755_IV.pdf).