

For Castro, there was always tomorrow

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

"One day the good Lord will take Fidel Castro away."

With these words, uttered in the presence of TV cameras at the Naval War College, President George W. Bush responded to queries about the newest revelation in a half century of troubled U.S. relations with Cuba.

He spoke what many will acknowledge as a simple truth. Yet some may wish the president had added, "Such matters are better left to the Lord than to the CIA."

At issue, as the president spoke, was an unprecedented CIA acknowledgment of its own sordid past - the revelation of repeated efforts to assassinate Castro. Our secret intelligence agency has at last admitted to a series of aborted attempts on the bearded Cuban's life - incidents that have long soured U.S. diplomatic initiatives in Central and South America. Along with countless U.S. citizens, Latin nations were left to wonder why this all-powerful government, through 10 administrations beginning with Dwight Eisenhower's, not only denied recognition to an offshore entity the size of Ohio, but tried repeatedly to kill its leader.

Modern history offers no comparable example of a great power investing so much effort, treasure and prestige to humble a tiny rival. Castro was an annoying gadfly, all right. By playing a Soviet card in defiance of the Monroe Doctrine, he made his island a willing conduit for the Kremlin in Cold War days. But Washington's response was always out of proportion to the threat.

First was a fiasco called the Bay of Pigs - a military invasion plotted under Eisenhower and carried out by the Kennedy administration just over 45 years ago. It was destined to leave 1,150 brave Cuban expatriates abandoned in Havana prison cells until Robert Kennedy bargained their release with \$28 million worth of tractors and bulldozers.

Events that followed - first revealed by a Senate select committee in 1975-76 and now confirmed in large part by last month's tell-all on matters the CIA incredibly calls "family jewels" - uncovered evidence of at least eight U.S.-sponsored assassination attempts against Castro in the 1960s. Were it not for their evil intent, the merry mix-up of those efforts suggests a Marx Brothers comedy.

Examples: Knowing the man's fondness for cigars, the CIA arranged to provide some choice stogies packed with deadly botulism. When these initial gifts didn't get through, our agents bought off Castro's Cuban mistress, supplying her with poison capsules to use in bumping him off. These, we learn, melted unexpectedly in a jar of cold cream. Next, divers were dispatched to plant rare seashells underwater in an area where the dictator often snorkeled - and rigged to explode if he sought to extract them. Again, the best laid plans of our

intelligence experts went awry.

Convinced, perhaps, that their problem called for more accomplished assassins, those wily ones turned to the underworld. John Roselli, a Mafioso marked for deportation on gambling fraud, was told his ouster could be stayed if he removed Castro. Roselli's eager acceptance marks him as a baseless fellow unworthy of our sympathy. But we now know that Cuban agents in this country smelled out the plot. Roselli was found hacked to pieces, his remains stuffed into an oil drum floating in Dumfounding Bay outside Fort Lauderdale.

As the late wordmaster Casey Stengel might have inquired, "Can't anybody here play this game?"

Castro, some may have chosen to forget, replaced an American-supported despot, Fulgencio Batista, in a 1959 revolution that cost several large corporations their Havana holdings and halted a \$100 million-a-year casino, bordello and drug operation run by the mob. Indeed, Batista and the underworld's notorious Meyer Lansky fled to U.S. soil on the same day.

It is depressing to note that Cold War fears, combined more recently with a politically significant concentration of anti-Castro emigrants in and around Miami, has prompted almost every president to treat the guy like dirt. A possible exception might be made for Gerald R. Ford. Appalled as most Americans must have been by those earlier revelations of CIA malfeasance, Ford issued the celebrated Executive Order 11905 in February 1976. Its pertinent wording: "No employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination."

Ford's order was reaffirmed by President Carter two years later, and again by Ronald Reagan. Today we must make do with the pious hope of our top leader that the good Lord will not bungle things as outrageously as the CIA has done.

From "Waste him" to dominus vobiscum (The Lord be with you) in a little less than 50 years. Maybe that's progress.

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