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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

COMMUNIST CONTROL OF PANAMANIAN STUDENT GROUPS

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

Office of Current Intelligence

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OCI No. 2837/64

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
27 November 1964

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Communist Control of Panamanian Student Groups

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1. The Panamanian educational system has^(S) been both the target and the instrument of the Communists since the 1930's. The formation and control of student groups has been and continues to be a major tactic of the Communists. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Panama City has consistently and fully documented Communist success in these endeavors over the past several years.

2. The three most important student groups in Panama at present are the Union of University Students (UEU), the Union of Secondary Students (UES), and the Federation of Panamanian Students (FEP). The UEU and the UES are the principal component members of the parent FEP. The president of the FEP is Victor Avila, Communist party (PdP) militant for some years who returned on 22 November from his most recent trip to Moscow, where he spent about three weeks. Avila was the major student leader during the January 1964 riots and continues to dominate student political activities in Panama. He is almost certain of re-election as head of the FEP in December, although his leadership of the student movement is now being challenged by a "hardline" faction headed by Floyd Britton. Britton is a Cuban-trained advocate of violent revolution who was recently ousted from the PdP. He too was a leading agitator in January. President of the UEU is Rolando Armuelles, also a PdP militant as is Ceferino Torres, president of the UES.

5. The FRU's triumph in the UEU was followed in December 1962 by the election of Avila to head the FEP and the selection of other Communists for key posts. [REDACTED] the Communist strategy seems to have been guided by Manuel Solia Palma, a former FEP president. As education minister for most of 1964, Solis Palma also counseled and assisted the Communist student leaders in the key role they played in influencing former President Chiari to adopt a stiff anti-US posture.

6. The pattern of Communist activity among Panamanian student groups shows good planning, selectivity, realism, and adaptability to circumstances. The very involved and interdependent nature of the student groups and their influence in the administrative structure of the entire educational system make control of certain positions the key to domination and to the exclusion of other influence. For example, in the January 1964 elections the Communist directed FRU captured 44 of the 73 student seats on University governing bodies, ensuring FRU domination of both the Directorate and the Central Executive Committee of the entire UEU. (S)

7. [REDACTED] the Communists' concentration on placing their people in these key jobs enables them to ignore or override any opposition. To be effective any student must cooperate with the Communist top leadership, so moderates have lost influence in even minor posts.

8. With student affairs the most active field of Communist influence, leaders at the University became the key figures in the division of Communist forces which started in 1963. Militant Communists such as Floyd Britton, responsive to prodding from Cuba to adopt more revolutionary methods, broke with the pro-Soviet PdP leaders such as Avila, who prefer non-violent political action. This division weakened their hold on student groups during 1963. With encouragement from the then Minister of Government Marco Robles, moderate students regrouped their forces and seemed to have a good chance to win the UEU elections scheduled for December of that year.

9. The Communists delayed the elections until January 1964, when they felt sure of winning. Subsequently, the leading role played by Avila, Britton, and numerous other pro-Castro and pro-Soviet leaders in the riots and in ensuring the Chiari government's intransigence firmly entrenched them as spokesmen for Panamanian nationalism.

10. The struggle between the "hardline" pro-Castro group and the "softline" pro-Soviet element remains focused at the University and is growing more bitter. But Communist control is so effective that moderates have not even been able to take advantage of this split. For example, in March 1964, non-Communists marched out of a Communist-called national youth congress at the University and attacked the meeting as a poorly-attended failure. However, both Communist elements remained and, claiming to represent numerous organizations throughout Panama, issued extreme declarations as the sense of the entire congress. Neither could the moderates use the internecine Communist struggle to elect a University rector in 1964, although [REDACTED] the two Communist camps were split over their own preference. With control over 35 of the 42 students on the 180-member Council which governs the University, the Communist-directed FRU postponed the election of the rector for six months by intimidating moderate faculty and student members until the candidate of the "softliners" had a sure majority. The new rector is a man the Avila faction believes it can influence, while the candidate of the "hardliners" was the new Foreign Ministry coordinator of Canal talks, Ernesto Castillero Pimentel.

11. The Communists evidently count on three important assets in retaining their control of student groups. The first is the apathy or disgust of many students which inhibits any effective challenge to the present leadership. Another is the support and connivance of politicians from far left to far right who either count on student

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political support or dare not risk student opposition. As a result, former student leaders have become established and influential throughout the fabric of Panamanian economic and political life. Present student leaders can count on the support of these men. The other principal Communist asset is the evident Cuban and Soviet interest in keeping their collaborators in control of Panamanian student groups. Much of the substantial increase in travel to and from the bloc and Cuba this year has been by student leaders. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] they receive funds, guidance, or both in Havana, Prague, Moscow, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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