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The Castro Obsession

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Don Bohning. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005.

Reviewed by Brian Latell

For almost 50 years, Fidel Castro has relished telling audiences large and small of the hundreds of assassination attempts he has survived. Most recently, in June 2005, he regaled a crowd in a Venezuelan port city, saying it may have been the only time he has traveled abroad when there was no plan afoot to kill him. Such hyperbole has always been an essential ingredient in the imagery of invincibility and cunning that he promotes about himself.

Castro has had no higher priority from the outset of his revolutionary career than his personal security. Once in power he set out immediately to create intelligence and security services, both within and independent of the armed forces controlled by his brother Raul, that have reliably made him one of the world's most physically invulnerable leaders. When traveling abroad he typically surrounds himself with an entourage of hundreds of elite security and support personnel. Cuban intelligence has long been among the best in the world with a demonstrated ability to ferret out potential threats well before they coalesce.

The actual number of assassination attempts against Castro is unknown, but surely many times smaller than the impression he encourages of CIA and Cuban exile rogues perennially plotting against him. Not a single foreign-based assassination plan is known to have come close to succeeding and most, including all of those hatched in the CIA under pressure from the Kennedy administration, were laughably inept.

These are among the main themes that Don Bohning develops in *The Castro Obsession*, an excellent and much needed illumination in a single comprehensive volume of all the strange and counterproductive American covert schemes that Castro has survived. A Latin America reporter and editor for 40 years with the *Miami Herald*, Bohning documents the Kennedy administration's efforts, beginning with the Bay of Pigs and continuing until the assassination in Dallas, to bring Castro down. He is balanced and nuanced, especially when describing some of the zanier ideas that were bandied about at Agency headquarters—an exploding seashell assassination device, a depilatory to root out Castro's signature beard, LSD to cause him to flail into delusional gyrations during a public appearance.

Other authors and congressional investigators—notably the Church Committee in 1976—have covered portions of this ground, but none has tied all the threads together so neatly or made the case with such an abundance of declassified CIA documents and interviews with retired Cuba hands. Bohning quotes several ranking headquarters- and Miami station-based officers who were intimately involved in the 1960s covert campaigns, as well as another who was detailed to the Kennedy White House as a staff coordinator for special operations. Some of them apparently reminisced on the record for the first time.

Bohning's sources were unanimous in their disparagement of Robert Kennedy, and the author clearly sympathizes with them. The attorney general was "obsessed" with Cuba after the Bay of Pigs, a view that White House aide Arthur Schlesinger and other biographers have disputed even while admitting that the anti-Castro Operation MONGOOSE was Bobby Kennedy at his inexplicable worst. It was "his most conspicuous folly," Schlesinger has written. Tom Parrott, the CIA officer detailed to the White House, is quoted scorning the younger Kennedy as "arrogant and overbearing." Bohning adds that Bobby, as the unofficial overseer of Cuba clandestine operations, was "constantly on the phone with anyone and everyone involved, both US officials and Cuban exiles."

The author and his Agency sources are equally critical in describing the air force general whom the Kennedy brothers selected as day-to-day manager of MONGOOSE. Edward Lansdale, who had extensive covert action experience in the Philippines and Vietnam but no knowledge of Cuba, was a "quirky and flamboyant officer" with a chaotic management style. Sam Halpern, a respected senior operations officer who worked on MONGOOSE, told the author that Lansdale was "a con man." Former CIA Director Richard Bissell is quoted from his memoirs commenting that

Lansdale's "ideas were impractical" and that he "never had much faith they would be successful." Bissell said: "I was under stern injunction, however, to do everything possible to assist him. The Kennedys wanted action, they wanted it fast."

Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who became involved in covert Cuba operations in February 1963 as an aide to the secretary of the army, told the author that Lansdale was "the strangest duck I ever talked to. He was telling me about the Philippines. That's all he wanted to talk about. I didn't get anything on Cuba." Haig said he told his boss, Cyrus Vance, who later also served as secretary of state, that Lansdale was "a dingbat." But Bohning writes that Lansdale nonetheless "moved ahead self-confident and unfazed." He never lost the trust of the Kennedy brothers that he would somehow manage to bring Castro down.

Most in the CIA and the Pentagon had recognized by the middle of 1961, however, that nothing short of American military intervention could achieve that. National intelligence estimates and CIA current analysis had been making the point that Castro's position was rapidly consolidating as pockets of opposition to him were being wiped out. He still enjoyed strong popular support and the Cuban uniformed services had become ruthlessly effective. Previously, many scholars believed that CIA analysts and operations officers were working with profoundly differing sets of assumptions about Castro's staying power after the Bay of Pigs. But Bohning does a good job of showing how skeptical and reluctant most senior operations officers involved in MONGOOSE in fact were as they obediently carried out the administration's designs. Halpern is quoted telling the author that its planning "made no sense at all . . . . It's crazy." Few really thought that the covert operations would have much impact, and certainly not enough to bring down the regime.

Nonetheless, under pressure from the administration, wishful thinking about Castro's vulnerability was indulged. CIA Director John McCone—normally skeptical about the prospects for covert action success in Cuba—told a White House planning meeting that more acute economic hardship on the island would cause the military to oust Fidel. It is not clear if that was his personal opinion, or if analysts had briefed him along those lines, but no such thing was possible then, or at any time since Raul Castro took control of the armed forces in October 1959. Under his leadership, the Cuban military has been the most effective, loyal, and disciplined among all its counterparts in Latin America. Over the four and a half decades of the Castro brothers' political hegemony, there has never been a credible

report of coup plotting.

Bohning has done a useful service in bringing together nearly all of the relevant declassified information about covert operations against Castro from 1959 into the second year of Lyndon Johnson's administration. The author cites numerous documents declassified for the Kennedy Assassination Records Review Board and the Church Committee hearings, and other records extracted through Freedom of Information Act requests. He has missed very little in this admirable work.

One interesting bit of missile crisis history that had long baffled scholars, but was finally clarified several years ago with released CIA documents, did not come to Bohning's attention, however. During the run-up to the missile crisis, New York Senator Kenneth Keating was shrill in denouncing the Kennedy administration for minimizing the intensifying Soviet military build-up in Cuba. He insisted on the Senate floor that he had inside information that strategic missiles were being introduced. Bohning did not discover that it was noted playwright, former member of Congress, and ambassador Clare Booth Luce who was Keating's source.

Another, more pivotal, issue that Bohning makes little effort to explain is *why* the Kennedy brothers became so obsessed with Castro and Cuba. In all fairness to the president and the attorney general, it should have been emphasized that the Cuban leader posed a threat of almost incalculable dimensions to John Kennedy's reelection prospects and to critical American interests throughout Latin America and beyond. With the launching of Kennedy's ambitious Alliance for Progress just a month before the Bay of Pigs, his administration went head-to-head with Castro throughout Latin America with competing visions of progressive democratic reform, on the one hand, against violent revolutionary upheaval, on the other.

CIA Director McCone testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in February 1963 about Cuban government efforts to promote and support revolution in the region. He said that between 1,000 and 1,500 Latin Americans had traveled to Cuba the year before for ideological and guerrilla warfare training and that more had already gone in early 1963. "In essence," McCone said, "Castro tells revolutionaries from other Latin American countries: 'Come to Cuba: We will pay your way, we will train you in underground organization techniques, in guerrilla warfare, in sabotage and terrorism. We will see to it that you get back to your homeland.'"

Information from Soviet records has recently expanded our knowledge of the enormous scope of Cuban intelligence and subversive activities in Latin America. In the second volume of the *Mitrokhin Archives*, Cambridge professor Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin reveal that from 1962 to 1966 a total of 650 Cuban illegals were dispatched through Prague, most of them enroute to Latin America. During those years, powerful guerrilla movements, often employing terrorist methods, became entrenched in several countries.

Bohning might also have emphasized Castro's strategic and military alliance with the Soviet Union as a cause of the Kennedys' obsession. It was not until early December 1961 that Fidel announced he was a Marxist-Leninist, although by then the alliance with Moscow was well advanced. Soviet military supplies were pouring into Cuba during the summer of 1962 just as Operation MONGOOSE was reaching a crescendo. It was not a coincidence. Rather, it may have been inevitable, because of the miscalculations in the White House and the Kremlin, that the superpowers would face off in a nuclear showdown, all because of the Kennedys' Castro obsession.

Don Bohning is not the first author to argue that, through their anti-Castro militance, the Kennedy brothers were responsible for provoking the Cuban missile crisis. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev once ruminated about the new Cuban regime to members of his inner circle: "We must not allow the communist infant to be strangled in its crib." Khrushchev went to his grave insisting that he had made the decision to install the missiles in Cuba to defend the revolution against the determined efforts by the Kennedys to overthrow it. Bohning demonstrates with overwhelming evidence the extent to which Castro indeed was in the American crosshairs.

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