

When Castro Heard the News

by Jean Daniel

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Havana

It was around 1:30 in the afternoon, Cuban time. We were having lunch in the living room of the modest summer residence which Fidel Castro owns on magnificent Varadero Beach, 120 kilometers from Havana. For at least the tenth time. I was questioning the Cuban leader on details of the negotiations with Russia before the missile installations last year. The telephone rang, a secretary in guerrilla garb announced that Mr. Dorticós, President of the Cuban Republic, had an urgent communication for the Prime Minister. Fidel picked up the phone and I heard him say: “*Como? Un atentado?*” (“What’s that? An attempted assassination?”) He then turned to us to say that Kennedy had just been struck down in Dallas. Then he went back to the telephone and exclaimed in a loud voice “*Herido? Muy gravemente?*” (“Wounded? Very seriously?”)

He came back, sat down, and repeated three times the words: “*Es una mala noticia.*” (“This is bad news.”) He remained silent for a moment, awaiting another call with further news. He remarked while we waited that there was an alarmingly sizable lunatic fringe in American society and that this deed could equally well have been the work of a madman or a terrorist. Perhaps a Vietnamese? Or a member of the Ku Klux Klan? The second call came through: it was hoped they would be able to announce that the United States President was still alive, that there was hope of saving him. Fidel Castro’s immediate reaction was: “If they can, he is already re-elected.” He pronounced these words with satisfaction.

This sentence was a sequel to [a conversation we had held on a previous evening](#) and which had turned into an all-night session. To be precise, it lasted from 10 in the evening until 4 in the morning. A good part of the talk revolved about the impressions I recounted to him of [an interview which President Kennedy granted me this last October 24](#), and about Fidel Castro’s reactions to these impressions. During this nocturnal discussion, Castro had delivered himself of a relentless indictment of US policy, adding that in the recent past Washington had had ample opportunity to normalize its relations with Cuba, but that instead he had tolerated a CIA program of training, equipping and organizing a counter-revolution. He had told me that he wasn’t in the least fearful of his life, since danger was his natural milieu, and if he were to become a victim of the United States this would simply enhance his radius of influence in Latin America as well as

throughout the socialist world. He was speaking, he said, from the viewpoint of the interests of peace in both the American continents. To achieve this goal, a leader would have to arise in the United States capable of understanding the explosive realities of Latin America and of meeting them halfway. Then, suddenly, he had taken a less hostile tack: "Kennedy could still be this man. He still has the possibility of becoming, in the eyes of history, the greatest President of the United States, the leader who may at last understand that there can be coexistence between capitalists and socialists, even in the Americas. He would then be an even greater President than Lincoln. I know, for example, that for Khrushchev, Kennedy is a man you can talk with. I have gotten this impression from all my conversations with Khrushchev. Other leaders have assured me that to attain this goal, we must first await his re-election. Personally, I consider him responsible for everything, but I will say this: he has come to understand many things over the past few months; and then too, in the last analysis, I'm convinced that anyone else would be worse." Then Fidel had added with a broad and boyish grin: "If you see him again, you can tell him that I'm willing to declare Goldwater my friend if that will guarantee Kennedy's re-election!"

This conversation was held on November 19.

Now it was nearly 2 o'clock and we got up from the table and settled ourselves in front of a radio. Commandant Vallero, his physician, aide-de-camp, and intimate friend, was easily able to get the broadcasts from the NBC network in Miami. As the news came in, Vallero would translate it for Fidel: Kennedy wounded in the head; pursuit of the assassin; murder of a policeman; finally the fatal announcement: President Kennedy is dead. Then Fidel stood up and said to me: "Everything is changed. Everything is going to change. The United States occupies such a position in world affairs that the death of a President of that country affects millions of people in every corner of the globe. The cold war, relations with Russia, Latin America, Cuba, the Negro question . . . all will have to be rethought. I'll tell you one thing: at least Kennedy was an enemy to whom we had become accustomed. This is a serious matter, an extremely serious matter."

After the quarter-hour of silence observed by all the American radio stations, we once more tuned in on Miami; the silence had only been broken by a rebroadcasting of the American national anthem. Strange indeed was the impression made, on hearing this hymn ring out in the house of Fidel Castro, in the midst of a circle of worried faces. "Now," Fidel said, "they will have to find the assassin quickly, but very quickly, otherwise, you watch and see, I know them, they will try to put the blame on us for this thing. But tell me, how many Presidents have been assassinated? Four? This is most disturbing! In Cuba, only one has been assassinated. You know, when we were hiding out in the Sierra there were some (not in my group, in another) who wanted to kill Batista. They thought they could do away with a regime by decapitating it. I have always been violently opposed to such methods. First of all from the viewpoint of political self-interest, because so far as Cuba is concerned, if Batista had been killed he would have been replaced by some military figure who would have tried to make the revolutionists pay for the martyrdom of the dictator. But

I was also opposed to it on personal grounds; assassination is repellant to me.”

The broadcasts were now resumed. One reporter felt he should mention the difficulty Mrs. Kennedy was having in getting rid of her bloodstained stockings. Fidel exploded: “What sort of a mind is this!” He repeated the remark several times: “What sort of a mind is this? There is a difference in our civilizations after all. Are you like this in Europe? For us Latin Americans, death is a sacred matter; not only does it mark the close of hostilities, but it also imposes decency, dignity, respect. There are even street urchins who behave like kings in the face of death. Incidentally, this reminds me of something else: if you write all those things I told you yesterday against Kennedy’s policy, don’t use his name now; speak instead of the policy of the United States government.”

Toward 5 o’clock, Fidel Castro declared that since there was nothing we could do to alter the tragedy, we must try to put our time to good use in spite of it. He wanted to accompany me in person on a visit to a *granja de pueblo* (state farm), where he had been engaging in some experiments. His present obsession is agriculture. He reads nothing but agronomical studies and reports. He dwells lyrically on the soil, fertilizers, and the possibilities which will give Cuba enough sugar cane by 1970 to achieve economic independence.

“*Didn’t I Tell You*”

We went by car, with the radio on. The Dallas police were now hot on the trail of the assassin. He is a Russian spy, says the news commentator. Five minutes later, correction: he is a spy married to a Russian. Fidel said: “There, didn’t I tell you; it’ll be my turn next.” But not yet. The next word was: the assassin is a Marxist deserter. Then the word came through, in effect, that the assassin was a young man who was a member of the “Fair Play for Cuba Committee,” that he was an admirer of Fidel Castro. Fidel declared: “If they had had proof, they would have said he was an agent, a hired killer. In saying simply that he is an admirer, this is just to try and make an association in people’s minds between the name of Castro and the emotion awakened by the assassination. This is a publicity method, a propaganda device. It’s terrible. But you know, I’m sure this will all soon blow over. There are too many competing policies in the United States for any single one to be able to impose itself universally for very long.”

We arrived at the *granja de pueblo*, where the farmers welcomed Fidel. At that very moment, a speaker announced over the radio that it was now known that the assassin is a “pro-Castro Marxist.” One commentator followed another; the remarks became increasingly emotional, increasingly aggressive. Fidel then excused himself: “We shall have to give up the visit to the farm.” We went on toward Matanzas from where he could telephone President Dorticós. On the way he had questions: “Who is Lyndon Johnson? What is his reputation? What were his relations with Kennedy? With Khrushchev? What was his position at the time of the attempted invasion of

Cuba?” Finally and most important of all: “What authority does he exercise over the CIA?” Then abruptly he looked at his watch, saw that it would be half an hour before we reached Matanzas and, practically on the spot, he dropped off to sleep.

After Matanzas, where he must have decreed a state of alert, we returned to Varadero for dinner. Quoting the words spoken to him by a woman shortly before, he said to me that it was an irony of history for the Cubans, in the situation to which they had been reduced by the blockade, to have to mourn the death of a President of the United States. “After all,” he added, “there are perhaps some people in the world to whom this news is cause for rejoicing. The South Vietnamese guerrillas, for example, and also, I would imagine, Madame Nhu!”

I thought of the people of Cuba, accustomed to the sight of posters like the one depicting the Red Army with maquis superimposed in front, and the screaming captions “HALT, MR. KENNEDY! CUBA IS NOT ALONE. . . .” I thought of all those who had been led to associate their deprivations with the policies of President John F. Kennedy.

At dinner I was able to take up all my questions. What had motivated Castro to endanger the peace of the world with the missiles in Cuba? How dependent was Cuba on the Soviet Union? Is it not possible to envisage relations between Cuba and the United States along the same lines as those between Finland and the Russians? How was the transition made from the humanism of Sierra Maestra to the Marxism-Leninism of 1961? Fidel Castro, once more in top form, had an explanation for everything. Then he questioned me once more on Kennedy, and each time I eulogized the intellectual qualities of the assassinated President, I awakened the keenest interest in him.

The Cubans have lived with the United States in that cruel intimacy so familiar to me of the colonized with their colonizers. Nevertheless, it was an intimacy. In that very seductive city of Havana to which we returned in the evening, where the luminous signboards with Marxist slogans have replaced the Coca Cola and toothpaste billboards, in the midst of Soviet exhibits and Czechoslovakian trucks, a certain American emotion vibrated in the atmosphere, compounded of resentment, of concern, of anxiety, yet also, in spite of everything, of a mysterious almost imperceptible rapprochement. After all, this American President was able to reach accord with our Russian friends during his lifetime, said a young Cuban intellectual to me as I was taking my leave. It was almost as though he were apologizing for not rejoicing at the assassination.

JEAN DANIEL