

Part VII

The Question of Assassinations

In his testimony before the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations, Intelligence Activities, Richard M. Bissell, formerly CIA's Deputy Director for Plans, testified fully and completely to the role that he, Sheffield Edwards, and William Harvey played in negotiations with Robert Maheu and Mafia figures John Rosselli and Momo Salvatore Giancana on plans for the assassination of Fidel Castro. In addition to the individuals just named, it also appears highly probable that Allen Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence (and possibly both Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy) was aware that Castro was an assassination target. Unfortunately the Senate Committee Report and the media coverage of the investigation of the Central Intelligence Agency's participation in assassination plots made it appear that the Mafia involvement was a fundamental part of the Agency's response to President Eisenhower's March 1960 authorization for CIA to be principally responsible for the ouster of Fidel Castro. In fact, the activities of

Messrs. Bissell, Edwards, and Harvey, with Mahen and the Mafia remained strictly compartmented and isolated from the officially authorized Project JMWARC -- the Project which came to be known as the Bay of Pigs operation. Bissell himself stated:

I don't remember. I have no recollection that [there was] any specific other plot against Castro during this period when the Bay of Pigs operation was in preparation. I do remember my own feeling that the Mafia plot had a very real chance for success, and that it was not something to be depended on in any way. I don't remember others. 1/

Bissell also told the author of this history that:

Shef [Col. Sheffield Edwards, Director, Office of Security] would occasionally let me know what was going on [vis-a-vis the Mafia]. In effect, he and his immediate subordinate were case officers for that activity; and I don't think anybody else [was] involved. I think probably Tracy [Barnes] may have known about it, but I don't think anybody else involved with the Bay of Pigs operation knew anything about it, whatever. My recollection is that it never went to the Special Group, and that is the view of [McGeorge] Bundy. \* 2/

\* Interestingly enough, at the same time that Col. Edwards was concerned about the elimination of Castro, CIA's Deputy Director for Support, Col. L. K. White, noted:

Shef Edwards and I met with General Cabell and Jack Farman [on 22 March 1961] to point out to them that we were not  
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Jacob D. Esterline, who was Chief, WH/4, the component of Western Hemisphere Division specifically created to run the anti-Castro project, disclaimed either responsibility or knowledgeability about the Mafia connection.\* 4/ Richard D. Drain, who became Chief of Operations for WH/4 was more voluble on the subject of the assassination attempts which were reported by the Senate Select Committee. In an interview which touched, among other things on the planned assassination of Castro by the Mafia-types Drain commented:

furnishing the Director the personal protection which we should be furnishing in these critical times, particularly with regard to the dangers inherent in the Cuban situation. General Cabell agreed to talk with the Director about this, and to try to obtain his approval to increase Mr. Tighe's force to six people. 3/

\* Esterline claimed that on one occasion as Chief, WH/4 he refused to grant Col. J. C. King, Chief, WH Division, a blank check when King refused to tell take the purpose for which the check was intended. Esterline reported that King nonetheless got a FAN number from the Office of Finance and that the money was used to pay the Mafia-types. It was subsequent to the Bay of Pigs operation when he found out about this, and Esterline told the author of this history that he expressed his strong opposition to the funding of such activities to J. C. King. 5/

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I've been giving you lessons here about [how] a COPS should know a little about everything ... Well, I promise you, until it came out in 1975, this allegation, at least, that Shief Edwards and Mr. Mahen were working with the Mafia to assassinate Castro, concurrent with the Bay of Pigs Operation, that is the first time I ever heard about it. Ever! ... My thought, when I saw this, was Jesus Christ, I must have been a little over-compartmented, because we had spent a considerable amount of nervous energy figuring out how are we going to get a shot at the old son-of-a-bitch concurrent with the landing. If anybody with whom I participated in planning for that ... something that we never had figured out how to do, because so many of our agents went down just prior to the invasion. If anybody that was involved in that ever spoke a word about any other exercise going on to get Castro, I never heard it; and my initial reaction when all this came out, during this last year was ... well ... why did they give me the idiot treatment? Then it occurred to me that maybe there was very good reason for me not to know. You don't need to know ... compartmentation ... even from COPS is not unheard of ...

Well, mind you, I am not saying what I've just said in any kind of pique; and I certainly don't want to leave you -- on this tape recorder -- with the impression that had I known about this, I would have been opposed. I must say, I don't think I would have enjoyed the instrument very much -- whereas we put out an awful lot of bullshit to the Cubans about the restoration of democracy and all that. Those Cubans that were working with us were not, I submit, working for the re-establishment of the Mafia as a controlling factor in Havana. I had a helluva lot rather, in

contemplating the assassination of Castro, contemplated in the way that we were contemplating it -- that is, can we get a Rip Robertson close to him? Can we get a really hairy Cuban -- I mean a gutsy Cuban -- to be infiltrated with this one thing in mind? We surveyed all of our agent material to see who could take a shot at him, but the assassination of that charismatic guy, coincidental with the invasion, would have been a highly desirable thing. Whether the instrument to be picked should have included the Mafia, I think I might have questioned at the time. It was part of my job ... to ask, "Now wait a minute ... What are we doing here? ... If this comes out ... what will we look like?" Not only to ourselves, which is important, but to the Cubans." 6/

In light of Drain's comments about the desirability of having the good guys in the white hats eliminate Castro, rather than the Mafia guys in the black hats, a specific attempt was made to see what the official records revealed about such plans. Although far from satisfactory or complete, there is evidence to indicate that the white-hatted guys would have had no objection -- as reported by Mr. Drain -- if a successful assassination attempt could have been made. Contrary to General Cabell's reported put down of Assistant Secretary of State Livingston Merchant for Merchant's query about the possibilities of taking

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"direct positive action" against the Castro brothers and Che Guevara, WH/4 records reveal interest, and possibly limited, direct participation, in a number of such activities.\*

For the most part, however, the various pieces of evidence that seemed to implicate WH/4 in assassination plots against Castro or other of the Cuban leaders proved to be cold trails. The peripatetic Howard Hunt claimed, even prior to the Senate investigations, that after a visit to Havana in the spring of 1960, he prepared a report recommending among other things that the Agency should:

Assassinate Castro before or coincident with the invasion (a task for Cuban patriots) ... Barnes and Bissell read my report ... and said it would weigh in the final planning ... So far as I have been able to determine no coherent plan was ever developed within CIA to assassinate

\* As the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, Cabell pointed out to Mr. Merchant that such action was highly dangerous both in conception and execution, and, further, he indicated that it was beyond the Agency's capability. 7/ The Senate Select Committee chased its tail at some length over the interpretation of the term "direct positive action," as used by Merchant. Only someone (even a Senator) who consistently engaged and in omphaloskepsis would have a problem understanding the meaning to be anything other than assassination.

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Castro, but it was the heart's desire of many exile groups.\* 8/

In another instance, it appeared possible that an agent named L 67 a Cuban exile, might have been in training to make an assassination attempt because it was reported that he

was taken to the L 99 7 firing range where he was checked out in the use of the Special .38 Airweight semi-hammerless pistol; British Welrod pistol, single shot, a 9mm parabellum with silencer; carbine with folding stock; and a 7.65mm British Welrod with silencer. He is to be also checked out this week in the use of a sporting rifle with telescopic lens attachment.

It was revealed subsequently that upon his reinfiltration into Havana, L 67 had two principal sabotage missions -- one against the Esso refinery and the other aimed at the Havana Electric Company. 9/

In mid-July 1960, there reportedly was an internal Cuban attempt on Castro's life, an attempt in which neither WH/4 nor the Maria played a part. A cable from Santiago de Cuba reported:

\* Hunt alleged that when he asked Barnes about the status of his recommendation he was told that it was "in the hands of a special group." Jake Esterline and Jim Flannery (Executive Officer of the DDP at the time of the Bay of Pigs) both disclaimed knowledge of any memorandum prepared by Hunt. A search of WH/4 records failed to surface any such report.

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On 15 July 1960, the Cuban Government uncovered a plot to kill Prime Minister Fidel Castro Ruz on 26 July 1960 during his visit to Mina del Frio, an army camp in the Sierra Maestra mountains, between Bayamo and Manzanillo in Oriente Province. Three captains and approximately 100 soldiers had been arrested and more arrests are expected. 10/

In addition to Richard Bissell and Dick Drain, Jake Esterline the Chief of Project JMATE was also very emphatic in denying that assassination of Castro or the Cuban leaders was a part of the JMATE Program. In response to a question of whether various of the special arms that were being forwarded to the PM training sites were intended for use against the Cuban leadership, Esterline responded:

No, I think it [silenced weapons in particular] is for hit and run operations, where they could do their maximum damage and get out without necessarily alerting people ... I know of no -- within JMARC as I knew it -- I know of no attempt, no plans that were made to assassinate. As a matter of fact, the constant battle with Cubans during those years was to tell them that we weren't going to get involved in any assassination, that if there was going to be an overthrow, it was going to be, obviously, a bloody operation; but no Cubans were going to be sent in there, to "make an assassination attempt." 11/ It was going to be a ground-roots revolution. \* 11/

Some contradictory evidence, however, indicates that WH/4, if not principally responsible, was certainly

\* It is known that at least one assassination plot against Castro and his advisers -- an attack by four men using US rifle-grenades -- was proposed by anti-Castro Cubans to COS Havana, but the COS gave the originator of the plan "no encouragement whatsoever." 11a/

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aware of some sort of planned assassination activity.

One of the principals of WH/4 recorded that on 24 February 1961 he:

Asked Ed [Stanulis], Dave P[hillips], [Ed] Hinkle, [Bob] Moore, and Jake [Esterline] why not proceed with Operation AMHINT to set up a program of assassination. 12/

Although the author of that remark was Chief of Operations for Project JMATE, he was unaware, as reported earlier in this chapter, of the Mafia connection; but he had indicated that one of his hopes was that the invasion might lead to the death of Castro.\* In response to a specific question about the AMHINT program, all he could say was:

I said that I was not failing to give some attention to the business of assassination. Now, here on the 24th of February, when I asked Ed, Dave Phillips, Hinkle, Moore, and Jake "why not proceed with Operation AMHINT to set up a program of assassination," either none of those bastards knew anything about Sheffield Edwards and Mahau in the Mafia ... or some of them did, and didn't see fit to say "Drain, take your AMHINT and stuff it. We've got this thing pretty well

\* See pp. 279-281.

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covered." What I would love now [is] to see an outline of AMHINT. \* 13/

About the same time that the AMHINT program was mentioned, WH/4 apparently was involved in a disinformation action where reports of an attempt to assassinate Che Guevara were to be directed at Cuba from the CIA controlled radio transmitter on Swan Island. The WH/4 Propaganda Notes for 27 February 1961 mentioned that: " I. phoned following line to Wilkinson for Swan . . . (d) Attempted assassination of Guevara." ~~287~~ 15/

In a cryptic entry in his personal notes, Dick Drain indicated that the success of the disinformation play would be followed as "CI and D watch Guevara [sic] assassination attempt." The Counter Intelligence and Division D alert--Division D was responsible for intercepting radio traffic--would have been the most likely way to pick up word of an attempt on Guevara's life. There is no indication that this project was intended to do more than annoy the Cubans, but as suggested, WH/4 would not have objected if the broadcasts had stimulated someone to eliminate Che.

\* The author of this history has unsuccessfully tried to track down this particular project. AMHINT was related to the work of the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE), an anti-Castro organization inside Cuba. The only evidence that has been found which might have been related to an assassination attempt concerned an AMHINT request of 14 January 1961 for "Silenciadores Rifles de marilla telescopica." (A request for rifles with silencers and telescopic sights.) This might have had to do with a DRE plan to assassinate the Soviet Ambassador to Cuba rather than a plan to kill Castro. When the FOB in Miami heard about the plan against the Soviet official they "immediately sent ... [word] to AMHINT-1 forbidding planned 'atentado' [assassination]." 14/

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~~attempt" then the commission from Chief of Operations speaks  
eminently sensible, for Counter-Intelligence and Division  
D (which was responsible for intercept traffic) would be  
the two most likely sources to pick up information should  
an attempt be made on Guevara's life -- particularly since  
such an item probably would not be reported overtly ~~by~~ the  
Cuban press or radio.~~

One final item which was surfaced during the course of research concerning the possibility that WH/4 had actually included an assassination program as part of its operational planning concerns a carbon copy identified only as "Must Go List." The single sheet of unknown provenance lists and identifies in the following order eleven individuals:

Che Guevara - Minister of Industries  
Raul Castro Ruz - Chief of Cuban Armed Forces, and wife, Vilma Espin de Castro  
Blas Roca - International Communist leader and Secretary General of Communist Party  
Ramiro Valdez Menendez - Minister of Interior (G-2)  
Carlos Olivares - Deputy Foreign Minister  
Carlos Raphael Rodriguez - Communist leader, editor of newspaper *HOY*  
Lazaro Pena - Communist leader - labor movement  
Abelardo Colome - Deputy in G-2  
Captain Rogelio Acevedo - Chief of Militia  
Anibal Escalante - Communist leader  
Armando Hart Davalos - Minister of Education, and wife, Haydee Santamaria de Hart  
Pencilled in on the bottom of the paper is a note:  
"List forwarded E. L. by C/WH/4 in Nov [1960]." \* When

\* A copy of the list follows p. 287. The list should read Armando, rather than Armando, Hart.

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asked if he could identify the "Must Go List" the former Chief of WH/4 stated:

Well, I know all these people ... Some of them I know personally, like Armando Hart ... I entertained Hart in my home a number of times ... the miserable bastard. I have never seen that list in my life, but this is the whole top gang at that time. Now many of them were later eliminated from the power structure by Castro, and by Raul Castro ... They got rid of Olivares, and Roca was pushed aside ... Armando Hart was also half nuts at this point, and he still is. I guess he is still fairly prominent, but he is not really in the power structure. Abelardo Colome -- I don't even know who he is. I wish to help you, but I don't know. 17/

The former Chief of Operations for WH/4, in response to the question of whether the "Must Go List" meant anything to him, replied as follows:

No! Huh! "List forwarded E. L. by Chief WH/4" ... Eddie Lansdale ... E. L. would be Eddie Lansdale. Chief, WH/4 was Jacob D. Esterline. In November, I was there ... No "Big Daddy." Well, whether this "Must Go" is in terms of the assassination, or in terms ... [of] nobody, none of these people must be allowed to have a role in the new government. I guess "Must Go" came to pass eventually in the case of number one on this list, Che Guevara. Raul ... I myself, contemplating the future government, thought it might be interesting to try to keep Raul in, with Fidel out. Capture what magic there was in the name of Castro, but do it with that little homosexual, instead of with Fidel, the real man. I

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don't even know the rest of these guys --  
Hart, Escalante, etc. 18/

By way of summarizing, it would appear that CIA's official anti-Castro program as reflected in Project JMATE did not include assassination as an integral part of its operational planning, but would not have been averse to eliminating Castro or other of the Cuban leaders if the opportunity had been afforded. Based on records, however, WH/4's principals were in no way privy to, or participants in, the Mafia assassination planning at the time of the Bay of Pigs.

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