

CONFIDENTIAL

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, SEC 3.4
Project NND 973016
By HRM NARA Date: 12/17/96

April 19, 1959

Summary of conversation between The Vice President and Fidel Castro:

When Castro arrived for the conference he seemed somewhat nervous and tense. He apparently felt that he had not done as well on "Meet the Press" as he had hoped. He was particularly concerned about whether he might have irritated Senator Smathers for the comments he made with regard to him. I reassured him at the beginning of the conversation that "Meet the Press" was one of the most difficult programs a public official could go on and that he had done extremely well -- particularly having in mind the fact that he had the courage to go on in English rather than to speak through a translator.

The subjects we discussed were no different from those on which he had made public statements on several other occasions. A brief summary, however, might be of interest, particularly in view of the comments I made with regard to the positions he took.

I suggested at the outset that while I understood some reasonable time might elapse before it would be feasible to have elections it would nevertheless be much better from his viewpoint if he were not to state so categorically that it would be as long as four years before elections would be held. I urged him to state his position as being in favor of having elections at the earliest possible date and that four years would be the maximum amount of time that would elapse before elections were scheduled. He went into considerable detail as he had in public with regard to the reasons for not holding elections, emphasizing particularly that "the people did not want elections because the elections in the past had produced bad government."

He used the same argument that he was simply reflecting the will of the people in justifying the executions of war criminals and his overruling the acquittal of Batista's aviators. In fact he seemed to be obsessed with the idea that it was his responsibility to carry out the will of the people whatever it might appear to be at a particular time. It was also apparent that as far as his visit to the United States was concerned his primary interest was "not to get a change in the sugar quota or to get a government loan but to win support for his policies from American public opinion."

It was this almost slavish subservience to prevailing majority opinion -- the voice of the mob -- rather than his naive attitude toward Communism and his obvious lack of understanding of even the most elementary economic principles which concerned me most in evaluating what kind of a leader he might eventually turn out to be. That is the reason why I spent as much time as I could trying to emphasize that he had the great gift of leadership, but that it was the responsibility of a leader not always to follow public opinion but to help to direct it in the proper channels -- not to give the people what they think they want at a time of emotional stress but to make them want what they ought to have. I pointed out that it might be very possible that

the people of Cuba were completely disillusioned as far as elections and representative government were concerned but that this placed an even greater responsibility on him to see that elections were held at the very earliest date, and thereby to restore the faith of the people in democratic processes. Otherwise, the inevitable result would be the same dictatorship against which he and his followers had fought so gallantly. I used the same argument with regard to freedom of the press, the right to a fair trial before an impartial court, judge and jury, and on other issues which came up during the course of the conversation. In every instance he justified his departure from democratic principles on the ground that he was following the will of the people. I, in my turn, tried to impress upon him the fact that while we believe in majority rule that even a majority can be tyrannous and that there are certain individual rights which a majority should never have the power to destroy.

I frankly doubt that I made too much impression upon him but he did listen and appeared to be somewhat receptive. I tried to cast my appeal to him primarily in terms of how his place in history would be affected by the courage and statesmanship he displayed at this time. I emphasized that the easy thing to do was to follow the mob, but that the right thing in the long-run would be better for the people and, of course, better for him as well. As I have already indicated he was incredibly naive with regard to the Communist threat and appeared to have no fear whatever that the Communists might eventually come to power in Cuba. He said that during the course of the revolution there had been occasions when the Communists overplayed their hand and "my people put them in their place." He implied that this would be the situation in the future in the event that the Communists tried to come to power. As a matter of fact, in his attitude toward Communism, both internally and from an international standpoint, he sounded almost exactly like Sukarno had sounded to me when I visited Indonesia in 1953. In our discussions of Communism I again tried to cast the arguments in terms of his own self-interest and to point out that the revolution which he had led might be turned against him and the Cuban people unless he kept control of the situation and made sure that the Communists did not get into the positions of power and influence. On this score I feel I made very little impression, if any.

Speaking to him from a personal standpoint I urged him at the earliest possible moment to bring good strong men into his government and to delegate responsibilities to them in the economic and other areas where he presently was making many decisions. I tried to point out that unless he did this he would have a workload which would be so great that he could not provide the leadership and the vision that the Cuban people needed for the great issues. I put as much emphasis as possible on the need for him to delegate responsibility, but again whether I got across was doubtful.

It was apparent that while he paid lip service to such institutions as freedom of speech, press and religion his primary concern was with developing programs for economic progress. He said over and over that a man who worked in the sugar cane fields for three months a year and starved the rest of the year wanted a job, something to eat, a house and some clothing and didn't care a whit about whether he had freedom along with it. I of course tried to emphasize that here again as a leader of his people, he should try to develop support for policies which could assure economic progress with freedom rather than without it.

He indicated that it was very foolish for the United States to furnish arms to Cuba or any other Caribbean country. He said "anybody knows that our countries are not going to be able to play any part in the defense of this hemisphere in the event a world war breaks out. The arms governments get in this hemisphere are only used to suppress people as Batista used his arms to fight the revolution. It would be far better if the money that you give to Latin American countries for arms be provided for capital investment." I will have to admit that as far as his basic argument was concerned here I found little that I could disagree with!

We had a rather extended discussion of how Cuba could get the investment capital it needed for economic progress. He insisted that what Cuba primarily needed and what he wanted was not private capital but government capital. He gave me some rather confused arguments as to why plants that were licensed and/or owned and operated by the government would serve the best interests of Cuba better than privately owned enterprises. I told him quite bluntly that his best hope as far as the United States was concerned was not in getting more government capital but in attracting private capital. I explained that government capital was limited because of the many demands upon it and the budget problems we presently confronted. I pointed out that private capital on the other hand was expansible and that he would be serving the interests of Cuba far better by adopting policies which would attract it. I pointed out that there was competition for capital throughout the Americas and the world and that it would not go to a country where there was any considerable fear that policies might be adopted which would discriminate against private enterprise. At this point he, at considerable length, tried to explain why he had said and done some of the things which had appeared to be anti-private enterprise up to this time. Here again on this point I doubt if I made too much of an impression.

He explained his agrarian reform program in considerable detail justifying it primarily on the ground that Cuba needed more people who were able to buy the goods produced within the country and that it would make no sense to produce more in factories unless the amount of money in the hands of consumers was increased.

He rather bitterly assailed the United States press for what he called their unfair reporting of the revolution after he came to power. I, of course, tried to explain that speaking from some personal experience, it was necessary to expect and to learn to take criticism both fair and unfair. I would not be surprised if his sensitivity with regard to criticism might eventually lead him to take some rather drastic steps toward curtailing freedom of the press in the future.

He also spoke rather frankly about what he felt was a very disturbing attitude on the part of the American press and the American people generally. His argument went along this line: "yours is a great country--the richest, the greatest, the most powerful in the world. Your people, therefore, should be proud and confident and happy. But everywhere I go you seem to be afraid -- afraid of Communism, afraid that if Cuba has land reform it will grow a little rice and the market for your rice will be reduced -- afraid that if Latin America becomes more industrialized American factories will not be able to sell as much abroad as they have previously. You in America should not be talking so much about your fear of what the Communists

may do in Cuba or in some other country in Latin America, Asia or Africa -- you should be talking more about your own strength and the reasons why your system is superior to Communism or any other kind of dictatorship."

In my turn of course I tried to explain that we welcomed the industrialization and development of Latin America, that one of our best customers was Canada, for example, which was highly industrialized and that as economic conditions improved in any country this was not only good for that country but good for us as well. I also tried to put our attitude toward Communism in context by pointing out that Communism was something more than just an idea but that its agents were dangerously effective in their ability to grasp power and to set up dictatorships. I also emphasized, however, that we realized that being against Communism was not enough -- that it was even more important that we make it by our actions, by what we say and what we do abroad that we convince people every place that we want to help them achieve economic progress in a climate of freedom.

Several other subjects were discussed but none that I think are worth noting at this point. Significantly enough, he did not raise any questions about the sugar quota nor did he engage in any specific discussions with regard to economic assistance. His primary concern seemed to be to convince me that he was sincere, that he was not a Communist and that his policies had the support of the great majority of the Cuban people.

My own appraisal of him as a man is somewhat mixed. The one fact we can be sure of is that he has those indefinable qualities which make him a leader of men. Whatever we may think of him he is going to be a great factor in the development of Cuba and very possibly in Latin American affairs generally. He seems to be sincere. He is either incredibly naive about Communism or under Communist discipline -- my guess is the former, and as I have already implied his ideas as to how to run a government or an economy are less developed than those of almost any world figure I have met in fifty countries.

But because he has the power to lead to which I have referred, we have no choice but at least to try to orient him in the right direction.