

## *Castro's Secrets: The CIA and Cuba's Intelligence Machine*

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**Reviewed by Thomas Coffey**

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Oswald's third shot killed President Kennedy. The president had refused to let his Secret Service agents station themselves on the rear bumper of his convertible limousine. They were thus too far away to have any hope of jumping on the president in time to take the shot. If only they had known what Castro did—that Oswald had shouted months before, when refused a visa to Cuba, that he was going to “kill Kennedy for this.” Castro, who reenacted the assassination and wrongly concluded Oswald's rifle was incapable of firing that many shots in so brief a time, knew more than he told, and the question in the mind of author and former National Intelligence Officer for Latin America Brian Latell is how much more. His book, *Castro's Secrets*, is part tour de horizon of the Cuban intelligence service and part intelligence brief on the Cuban leader's culpability in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Drawing on interviews of Cuban defectors, recently declassified CIA documents, a 1978 congressional investigation, and second-hand sources, the book is fascinating at times, yet it is uneven and scattershot in its approach. The first part has a spy-versus-spy flavor, with US intelligence officers on the losing side, according to the many Cuban defectors Mr. Latell interviewed. Castro's intelligence service discovered and flipped more than four dozen of CIA's Cuban spies. Castro made the General Directorate of Intelligence (DGI) his own personal entity and was well aware of seemingly every CIA agent's movements in Cuba and whatever plots the CIA hatched in Miami. And as if flipping CIA agents was not enough, Cuban intelligence would “dangle” prospective agents to CIA handlers. When the defection of a major counterintelligence officer in 1987 blew open the story, Castro rubbed it in by showing on Cuban television tapes

made of CIA case officers and then their agents at drop sights.

The DGI's impressive record was the result of expert training, good morale, and a vast amount of sympathy to the Cuban cause. Manuel Piñero, known as “Redbeard,” the first head of the DGI, learned the spy business from the Soviets, particularly that double agents were the first line of defense. The DGI recruited very young—sometimes in their teens—Cubans who were among the most supportive of the Cuban revolution. One defector described the ease with which agents were doubled this way: “When we learned a certain case officer was interested in a certain Latin American in a third country, we'd beat them to the punch.” They were true believers; 95 percent of Cuban agents were not paid, according to one defector.

Even when beaten at the game, in the author's telling, there were moments of respect for the good trade-craft of the other side. One Cuban case officer could not help but admire the professionalism of his CIA counterpart's handling of a flipped agent. And when this Cuban officer defected, one of the first people he wanted to meet was this CIA case officer.

The author's attempt to resolve some Cuban cold cases loses dramatic impact after a while, the stories ending with the same punch line: “Castro did it.” Finding closure for some of these tales at times reads like the stuff only a Cuban insider could love, fodder for a good barroom conversation among case officers.

Latell does not attempt to look at the big picture of what this spy competition meant for the interests of both countries. Castro has remained in power despite extreme US hostility to his rule. Score a big one for superb counterintelligence. Of course, this comes as little shock, given that most security states are defined

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by a repressive and effective security apparatus with lots of agents. And while Castro and his system did survive it hardly thrived. Many of Cuba's best and brightest departed for the shores of Florida.

Castro's attempts to spread the revolution to the rest of Latin America in the 1960s, on the other hand, were unequivocal failures. The capture, with some assistance from the CIA, and killing of Che Guevara was a major setback. This failed campaign forced Castro to be more brazen in his support of rebels in Angola and Mozambique in the 1970s and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador during the 1980s. Arguably, Castro's biggest success on this front is Chavez's Venezuela, but this victory seems to matter little now with the Soviet military presence no longer a concern. When it did matter, CIA intelligence helped thwart a Havana-sponsored insurrection against Venezuelan President Romulo Betancourt in the 1960s.

The latter part of the book indirectly homes in on the big picture surrounding the Kennedy assassination. In it, Latell appears to be creating a testimonial against Fidel Castro as a person and as a leader and uses it to create a case for Castro's complicity in the murder of President Kennedy. This he does along the following lines:

- Castro is a murderer. The Cuban leader got his start as a thug, and murdered two of his rivals to make a name for himself while gaining control of the streets.
- Castro is an avenger. Not one to be crossed, Castro targeted high-level defectors and nearly killed one of Mr. Latell's main sources. He had more success targeting those responsible for Che Guevara's death. He also may have had a hand in the death of a non-compliant leader of the Salvadoran guerrillas.
- Castro supports assassination of foreign leaders. The DGI trained the killers of Nicaraguan strongman Anastasio Somoza when in exile, and similarly trained hit squads nearly killed Venezuelan President Betancourt and Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet while they still held office.
- Castro has a martyr complex. At the height of the Cuban missile crisis, Castro put pressure on a Soviet commander to shoot down a U-2 spy plane. He also wrote an "Armageddon letter" urging Khrushchev to initiate a first nuclear strike against the United States if Kennedy ordered an invasion of Cuba. The letter

so stunned the Soviet leader that he moved to immediately end the crisis before Castro did anything reckless. Soviet leaders never forgot this and essentially told Castro he might very well be on his own if the Reagan administration decided to invade Cuba.

- Castro is a liar. A master at giving false comfort to his perceived enemies, Castro would often lure unsuspecting officials back to Cuba only to have them jailed on trumped up charges or killed. Castro denied vehemently having any role in the murder of his gangland competitors. One of his most deceitful acts was the Mariel boatlift of more than a 100,000 Cubans to the US mainland; he painted the boatlift as a magnanimous gesture when it was actually a monstrously cynical act that included the release of more than 17,000 Cuban criminals and psychiatric patients.
- Castro is a control freak. Many of the defectors Latell interviewed swear that Castro was into the minutiae of Cuban intelligence—the DGI was his baby. That's what boosted morale and made it the elite government entity in Cuba.

Portraying Castro as a dangerous and powerful die-hard who had a vengeful streak allows the author to speculate on how this makeup fits into the murder of Kennedy. First, Castro denied knowing of Oswald even though two sources swear the Cuban leader told them he knew of Oswald's threat to kill Kennedy in early October of 1963 at the Cuban consulate in Mexico City. In the most damning charge, a defector claimed that Castro directed him to direct communications interception gear to Texas, *three hours before the assassination of Kennedy*. There is no substantiation of this claim from any other source.

Castro knew the Kennedy brothers were trying to kill him. He had "definitive," as Latell describes it, proof. Three weeks earlier a double agent, who was supposed to murder Castro and lead a military coup, got the CIA to show proof of high-level US government support for the operation: it sent a friend of Robert Kennedy, Desmond Fitzgerald, who ran Cuban operations on a day-to-day basis, to meet with the doubled agent. With that visit, Castro had confirmation of what he no doubt had suspected. A month and a half earlier, Castro warned in an interview with a Reuters journalist, "US leaders would be in danger if they helped in any attempt to do away with the leaders of Cuba.... [Such acts] will be answered in kind." Few

CIA analysts knew of the assassination plots, and so they ignored these comments, taking them as more bluster from the Cuban leader. On 22 November, at 12:30 p.m., Lee Harvey Oswald shot John Fitzgerald Kennedy twice. The president was declared dead within an hour.

Given what he knows, Mr. Latell absolves Castro of charges that he helped plan the assassination, but he still holds Castro “complicit” for having had a “passive but knowing” role. What galls Latell, indeed he finds it “despicable,” is that Castro from the evidence available likely knew Oswald was going to or might possibly kill the president that day and did nothing to warn Kennedy. This indictment strikes this reviewer as a moral stretch, given that Castro, as the Latell demonstrates, knew the Kennedys planned to kill him. Why would he feel obligated to provide warning? CIA sabotage and paramilitary operations were at their highest level since the Bay of Pigs and Castro had to have felt under siege, his own life and regime in danger. He owed President Kennedy nothing.

With Kennedy gone, Castro had weathered the storm. Lyndon Johnson, who sensed bad karma in the whole covert action program (“Kennedy was trying to kill Castro, but Castro got to him first”), dismantled that “damn Murder Incorporated.” Kennedy’s death paradoxically hampered attempts to get a better handle on whether Castro was involved in any plans to preemptively kill the president. Johnson wanted the issue to go away. Robert Caro’s biography of LBJ portrays Robert Kennedy as critical of the Warren Commission’s Report, believing there was more to the assassination; nevertheless LBJ wanted the case closed and never called for or initiated another investigation. Castro said all the right things about Kennedy to calm suspicions. As Mr. Latell notes, DCI John McCone kept the Warren Commission in the dark about operations targeting Castro, thus closing a major avenue of investigation while the trail might still have been hot and people’s memories still fresh. The main person in the know today is old, sick, and out of office, and he is not talking. Any further discoveries about Castro’s culpability are likely to go with him to the grave.

