

The secret assassination report

# CIA TARGETS FIDEL



With commentary by the former  
head of Cuban State Security

*CIA  
TARGETS  
FIDEL*

Secret 1967  
CIA Inspector General's  
Report on plots  
to assassinate Fidel Castro



OCEAN PRESS

Cover design by David Spratt

Copyright © 1996 Ocean Press

Introduction Copyright © 1996 Ocean Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN 1-875284-90-7

First printed 1996

Printed in Australia

Published by Ocean Press,

GPO Box 3279, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia

Fax: (61-3) 9372 1765

*Distributed in the United States* by the Talman Company,

131 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012, USA

*Distributed in Britain and Europe* by Central Books,

99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN, Britain

*Distributed in Australia* by Astam Books,

57-61 John Street, Leichhardt, NSW 2040, Australia

*Distributed in Cuba and Latin America* by Ocean Press,

Apartado 686, C.P. 11300, Havana, Cuba

*Distributed in Southern Africa* by Phambili Agencies,

52 Jeppe Street, Johannesburg 2001, South Africa

# *CIA TARGETS FIDEL*

## *Publisher's note*

*This previously secret CIA report is reprinted as it was declassified in 1994. It has been retyped from the original document. All spelling, punctuation, annotation and underlining are as in the original. The deletions are blacked-out as they are in the document. These deletions remain to be declassified by the CIA. All "Comments" interspersed throughout the document are those prepared by the report's CIA authors.*

*Preceding the 1967 report by the CIA Inspector General is an interview with Division General Fabián Escalante, former head of Cuba's counterintelligence body. Escalante is Cuba's foremost authority on CIA covert operations against Cuba and the attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro.*

*Ocean Press titles of related interest*

THE SECRET WAR  
CIA covert operations against Cuba 1959-62  
*by Fabián Escalante*

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM  
Castro, Khrushchev, Kennedy and the Missile Crisis  
*by Carlos Lechuga*

ZR RIFLE  
The plot to kill Kennedy and Castro  
*by Claudia Furiati*

ISLAND UNDER SIEGE  
The U.S. blockade of Cuba  
*by Pedro Prada*

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION AND THE UNITED STATES  
A chronological history  
*by Jane Franklin*

GUANTANAMO: THE BAY OF DISCORD  
The story of the U.S. military base in Cuba  
*by Roger Ricardo*

# *Background to CIA assassination plots against Fidel Castro*

*Interview with Division General Fabián Escalante,  
former head of Cuban State Security*

I have read the report by the CIA Inspector General on the attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, a report written in 1967 and declassified only recently. I must confess that when I first picked up the report, I did so with some scepticism, since I expected a rather dry document. But two aspects of the report immediately caught my attention: its fascinating subject matter and its style, for it read very much like a spy novel. However, far from fiction, it portrays a crude reality.

The coldness with which the report admits that criminal plans had been drawn up against the president of a neighboring country — Cuba — and that other assassination attempts had been made in different parts of the world also gripped me. The fact that the report was made at the request of Richard Helms, then Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (who had been named to that post less than a year earlier), showed that he had no documentary proof of “undercover actions” in his files — which the report admits. This gave him plenty of room for using the defense of “plausible denial.” In fact, Helms continued those assassination plots right up to his replacement in February 1973.

## 2 *Introduction*

The authors unblushingly admit not only to assassination attempts, but also to the use of the Mafia (bluntly referred to as "hoodlums" or "thugs") and Cuban counterrevolutionaries, in close coordination with U.S. government officials.

This "secret — eyes only" document has now been published 27 years after its writing. Originally prepared in response to probing by U.S. journalist Drew Pearson about the assassination schemes, the report notes that in his March 7, 1967, column Pearson "refers to a reported CIA plan in 1963 to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro. Pearson also has information, as yet unpublished, to the effect that there was a meeting at the State Department at which assassination of Castro was discussed and that a team actually landed in Cuba with pills to be used in an assassination attempt. There is basis in fact for each of those three reports."

The report also admits that on November 22, 1963, Rolando Cubela, CIA agent AM/LASH, was given a pen-syringe to be used in assassinating Castro: "It is likely that at the very moment President Kennedy was shot a CIA officer was meeting with a [CIA] Cuban agent in Paris and giving him an assassination device for use against Castro."

Because of this and other information in the report, I decided to seek the comments of a prominent member of Cuban State Security who had recently released some secret information from Cuban files concerning the links between the plans to assassinate Fidel Castro and the plot that finally, using the mechanisms created under Operation ZR/RIFLE, ended the life of President Kennedy.

Division General Fabián Escalante Font was a member of the Cuban Ministry of Interior unit that countered the CIA's schemes; later on he headed the Cuban Department of State Security. At present, he is delving more deeply into these matters and working on a book on the main assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, based on Cuban State Security secret documents.

Though starting to gray at the temples, Escalante is still a young man. Tall, thin and with a rather mysterious or reserved manner, as well befits a spy chief, he has an extraordinary



memory for facts, names and dates — undoubtedly developed in his years of evaluating reports from widely dispersed sources that had to be put together like a jigsaw puzzle to find out what the enemy to the north was really up to. Far from being a cold personality, when moved he speaks with great passion about each of the many operations in which he has taken part.

The dialogue which follows took place in a house in Havana on a suffocatingly hot morning.



*Question: Both the investigations of the U.S. Senate in 1975 and the recently declassified report of the CIA Inspector General recognize that there were eight plots to assassinate Fidel Castro, but most of them, according to the investigators, were never implemented. Would you like to comment on this?*

Escalante: The U.S. Senate Committee that investigated the assassination attempts against Fidel Castro in 1975 examined those activities that unexpectedly began to be exposed in the late 1960s. In 1966 and 1967, the U.S. press published some reports about the mafioso John Rosselli, saying that he had worked to overthrow the Cuban government by trying to assassinate Fidel Castro at the beginning of that decade. Another of the plots that was made public to some extent was the AM/LASH case involving Rolando Cubela Secades, who had been a commander in the Rebel Army and who was arrested in Cuba in 1966 for his participation in plans to assassinate Fidel. His trial brought out his close ties to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. It should be kept in mind that it was this same agent, Rolando Cubela, who was given a pen on November 22, 1963 — the day on which John Kennedy was assassinated — for use in killing Fidel Castro.

This coincidence led U.S. investigators to query why, at precisely the same time President Kennedy was assassinated, the CIA was giving one of its men, agent AM/LASH, an object to be used in another assassination — the plot against Fidel Castro. Thus, by the mid-1960s two main plots against Fidel Castro had

## 4 Introduction

been exposed — the Mafia plan later dubbed the poison pill plot and the CIA plot involving Cubela (AM/LASH) — as well as an earlier CIA plan to assassinate Fidel during his visit to the UN in September 1960. On that occasion, a CIA officer proposed to a U.S. police captain who headed Fidel's bodyguard that he kill the Cuban leader with an explosive cigar. Those were the three main plots that were known at that time.

Other schemes were devised later on, such as poisoning a diving suit, placing an explosive shell on the beach, putting chemical substances in a cigar which would cause temporary confusion and spraying LSD in a television studio that would give Fidel an attack of uncontrollable laughter. Another plan that was attempted in New York in 1960 involved putting thallium salts in Fidel's shoes to make his beard fall out — the beard was thought to be the key to his charismatic appeal as a legendary guerrilla.

It should be noted that these plots were made public as the result of the fallout from the Watergate scandal and the increasingly discredited image of the CIA. In fact, the U.S. Senate investigations in 1975 made no more than a superficial analysis of the CIA's attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro. If you read with close attention the Senate report and this one by the Inspector General, you will see that they tried to make readers believe that many of these plans were either not implemented at all or were aborted part way along. This was not so, as we can demonstrate.

*That is, they weren't just abstract plans but were supposed to be implemented — or, at least attempts were to made to implement them.*

Yes, such attempts were made. Many of these plans reached the implementation stage; Cuban Security units countered some of them, and others failed by chance or because of planning errors.

The first attempts to assassinate Fidel began prior to the triumph of the revolution. One famous plan in 1958 involved Eutimio Rojas, a traitor whom Batista's army bribed to kill Fidel while he slept in his camp in the Sierra Maestra mountains. But when it came to the decisive moment, Rojas chickened out.

A U.S. citizen was supposed to carry out the first assassination attempt that was planned after the 1959 revolution. It was to take place on February 2, 1959, when Allan Robert Nye landed near Havana in a light plane. Nye had made deals with some big names in organized crime — members of the gambling syndicate, which, as you'll remember owned a lot of property in Cuba such as big gambling casinos, big hotels, etc. He was planning to assassinate Fidel Castro near the former Presidential Palace. Armed with a powerful rifle with a telescopic sight, Nye waited at a hotel near the Presidential Palace for Fidel Castro to arrive at his office, which was located in the Palace at that time; he was arrested before he could fire a shot.

The following month, on March 26, 1959, Rolando Masferrer Rojas, the former head of one of Batista's death squads, who was then in the United States and in contact with the CIA, suggested another plot for assassinating Fidel, also near the Presidential Palace. Both the CIA and the gambling syndicate in Havana gave it their OK.

The most salient aspect of all the assassination plots against Fidel Castro following the triumph of the revolution in 1959 was the high degree of support they had in the CIA and the complicity of the U.S. government.

Two things bear this out. The first is that in early December 1959, Colonel J.C. King, head of the Western Hemisphere Division of the CIA, sent a memo to his chief, Allen Dulles, in which he stated that they would have to do away with Fidel Castro if they wanted to overthrow the Cuban revolution. He recommended this course of action officially. That report is part of the declassified material that appeared in the U.S. Senate's 1975 investigation. It marked the beginning of the legal framework for the CIA's plans to assassinate Fidel. That memo was written by the head of the Western Hemisphere Division, and Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, approved it.

The second thing showing the complicity in such plans of the CIA and the U.S. government was the role of the U.S. embassy in Havana. Cuban Security was working on a very important case, which we called the Opera Case. U.S.-Cuban

## 6 *Introduction*

relations hadn't yet been broken off. The United States had a strong embassy presence. Phillip Bonsal was ambassador and James Noel was head of the CIA station. Around 20 CIA operatives worked there, including Major Robert Van Horn, one of the military attaches. Van Horn was linked to a counter-revolutionary organization that was being formed in Havana and Miami, called the Anti-Communist Workers' Militia (MAO). A CIA agent called Geraldine Shapman headed the organization which was connected to several counterrevolutionary groups in Miami, including that of Rolando Masferrer Rojas. In December 1959, this group proposed to CIA officer Robert Van Horn that Fidel Castro be assassinated while visiting the Miramar home of Commander Ramiro Valdés — that an ambush be set there for this purpose. This plan was considered and sent on to the CIA for a decision and Lois C. Herber, a U.S. citizen who was in charge of Central America and the Caribbean in the CIA, visited our country in January and February 1960 to meet with the plotters and see how the plan was coming along.

In that period, we had two agents in the CIA center in the embassy: Comrade Luis Tacornal, known as Fausto, and José Veiga Peña, now a lieutenant colonel in the Ministry of the Interior. They met with both Van Horn and Herber and formed part of the commando group that was to carry out the assassination attempt. We were faced with the dilemma of what to do. If Fidel stopped going to Commander Ramiro Valdés' house the conspirators might become suspicious, and we wanted the operation to last long enough to enable us to learn what the CIA's plans were. Therefore our agents proposed to the CIA that, until the right time came for assassinating Fidel, they should first try to assassinate Commander Abelardo Colomé Ibarra, who was one of the chiefs of G-2 [Cuban State Security Department] at the time and is now Minister of the Interior.

Their proposal was accepted. A plan was drawn up for a shoot-out at the corner of First and B Streets where a skirmish took place in which blanks were used. That made it possible for our agents to take their weapons — which were to have been used in the attempt against Fidel — and "lose" them. Geraldine

Shapman's group hid our agents in different places, and the attack on Fidel was put off until November 1960, by which time the members of the group were arrested and their plans denounced.

I've cited this case because it took place at the end of 1959 and early 1960 — after Colonel King presented his memo — and because we have irrefutable proof of the involvement of the U.S. embassy and a CIA officer stationed in Havana who was supervised by a high-ranking CIA chief who came to meet with the plotters (including our agents).

That's why I said that the assassination attempts against Fidel began quite a while before December 1960 (the date given in the 1967 report); in fact, assassination attempts have been made against him for more than 35 years.

*The U.S. investigators say, however, that those things happened a long time ago and that the CIA doesn't approve of such practices now. Do you think the CIA still wants to assassinate Fidel?*

There's one important thing we should remember. All of the plans to assassinate Commander Fidel Castro have been related and very closely linked to the interests of the United States — and of course, to the CIA's obsession with overthrowing the Cuban revolution, which, as you know, is still very much alive. I could give you a lot of examples in this regard, but I don't want to cite the ones that are mentioned in the Inspector General's report. There is another one, however, that shows how closely the strategy of assassinating Fidel is linked to overthrowing the Cuban revolution. It was planned for 1962, in the context of Operation Mongoose, which was one of the largest operations the U.S. government has ever mounted against Cuba. It wasn't just a CIA operation but rather had the backing of the entire U.S. government, as a part of which an economic blockade was imposed against our country and the members of the Organization of American States — with the sole, honorable exception of Mexico — were forced to break off their relations with Cuba. Operation Mongoose also involved a plan which we called Operation Botín. It consisted of psychological warfare

## 8 Introduction

using subversive radio stations (the same ones that are now broadcasting against Cuba) and printed propaganda. Printed material was dropped on Cuba's coastline in plastic bags with straw inside to make them float; the bags also contained chewing gum. The propaganda called on the people to assassinate Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders offering a series of "bounties": \$150,000 for Fidel Castro, \$120,000 for Raúl Castro, \$120,000 for Che Guevara and \$100,000 for the President of the Republic. A price was listed for every Cuban official. Just imagine: thousands of pieces of propaganda sent to the Cuban people calling on them to assassinate their leaders with specific sums offered in payment! I think that this example shows just how far the CIA was willing to go and how great its effort was to try to assassinate Fidel Castro in those years.

*You have said that there were many more than the eight plots listed in the Inspector General's report and that they differed widely, including not only the use of agents but also actively encouraging and inciting people's own initiative, so to speak. That business of including chewing gum was quite ingenious — or, rather, disgraceful. Do you believe that assassination attempts are still being planned?*

Yes, of course. In fact, I've just spent a lot of time in the Ministry of the Interior's files doing research on the plots against Fidel over the last 35 years. We have documentation on 612 of them, but I think there were even more, because in the early years, when the Department of State Security was very new, it had little organizational skill. In many cases, when plans were implemented and our Security units frustrated them, they may not have been recorded.

Those 612 plots were in the 1959-93 period. Naturally, not all were of the same quality. Their level of planning wasn't the same. Conditions have changed, in both Cuba and the United States, so they had to be drawn up differently. The processes of planning and carrying out these 612 conspiracies differed from one to another. While it was fairly easy for their perpetrators up through the 1970s — having a base of operations both here and in

the United States which helped them to move the men, weapons and money they required — it became much more difficult for them in the 1980s.

We can identify several assassination plans that were drawn up subsequent to the Inspector General's report. For example, the CIA planned for Antonio Veciana's group to assassinate Fidel Castro while he was visiting Chile, Ecuador and Peru in 1971. In 1976 the CIA designed a plot for assassinating Fidel on his departure for Angola to attend the November 11 ceremony inaugurating the first national government to be established in that country. Here I'm talking about two relatively recent attempts. It goes without saying that there were others in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. I remember, for example, that the CIA and Cuban counterrevolutionaries in Miami planned to assassinate Fidel when he went to Venezuela to attend the 1989 presidential inauguration there. They failed, both because of the security measures we took and because of assistance from the Venezuelan authorities; moreover, the atmosphere there was such that the would-be assassins couldn't get close to Fidel Castro.

We learned so far ahead of time of other plans that were to be carried out in Cuba that we were able to neutralize them or cause them to be aborted right at the beginning, in the initial planning stage.

*Do you think it's important that these documents have been declassified? Previously, Cuba was the only one who was exposing these things. Now that these documents have been declassified, perhaps as a result of pressure which some sectors in the United States have brought to bear, don't you think this backs up what Cuba has been saying for so many years?*

Yes I do. It's important that these documents have been declassified, because they show not only that the CIA wanted to assassinate Fidel Castro, but also that the CIA set up a mechanism in early 1961 for assassinating other foreign political leaders who opposed U.S. policy.

## 10 *Introduction*

I think that many of the political phenomena that have appeared in the United States in the last 35 years have been related to this process — to the CIA's war against Cuba and the mechanisms that were created in that period. I say this because the ZR/RIFLE project was created in January 1961. That project is still in effect, using different names but with the same purpose of assassinating political leaders.

That same project was linked to the death of Orlando Letelier, who was Foreign Minister in Salvador Allende's administration, and to the assassination of General Omar Torrijos, President of Panama. (The Torrijos assassination was linked to Manuel Artime Buesa, a Cuban counterrevolutionary and CIA agent who had been imprisoned in Cuba.) ZR/RIFLE was also involved with many "coincidental" deaths that took place in the United States and the assassination of revolutionary leaders in Latin America — I'm referring to all of the assassinations, including those of political leaders such as Colombian presidential candidate Galan four years ago. It was part of that project because the U.S. intelligence community had accepted and recognized political assassination as a effective tool for applying U.S. policy.

The fact is that the CIA created its largest operational base in the world, with more than 400 case officers and over 4,000 agents (and its only such base in the United States) in Miami in 1962. This base even had planes, a navy and innumerable fronts for concealing its actions. The ultrasecret Operation 40, an anti-Cuba structure of the CIA which was later linked to the Watergate scandal through Frank Sturgis, Eugenio Martínez and others who worked on it, had its headquarters in that large operational base.

I have said before and continue to believe that President Kennedy's assassination was also the work of that same criminal conspiracy, which had been created for use against Cuba before he took office. Thus, it was used not only against Fidel Castro but against other leaders as well — even the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy.





After this dialogue, I found the Inspector General's report to be even more interesting reading. Escalante is now working on a new book on the assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, who remains one of the most hated — and most loved — of world leaders today.

Mirta Muñiz  
Havana  
September 1994

*Translated by Mary Todd*