

McCone's Telcon Gaffe

By David M. Barrett & Max Holland

No matter how controversial the use of drones to kill al-Qaeda or Taliban leaders in Afghanistan or Pakistan may be, historians in the future won't have to struggle over ambiguous, fragmentary evidence about who ordered them. Everyone understands it was President Barack Obama.

It wasn't always so clear-cut.

In stark contrast, a half-century later there is still a lingering controversy over whether the Central Intelligence Agency's efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro (and some other Third World leaders) were ever authorized by Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. By the CIA's own admission, we do know the Agency was involved in attempts to kill/overthrow Castro as the leader of Cuba. But the doctrine of plausible deniability meant there was no paper trail—an express order—traceable from the CIA back to the Oval Office. Consequently, various defenders of these presidents have often claimed (the late Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. comes to mind) that it was unthinkable that President Kennedy would ever have given an order to “eliminate” Castro. More objective observers, noting the cold-blooded qualities required of and sometimes displayed by presidents, consider it entirely likely that in some cryptic, unrecorded way, Eisenhower and Kennedy did tell their heads of the Central Intelligence Agency to do so.[\[1\]](#)

Curiously, since it was the CIA that attempted to kill Castro in the Eisenhower-Kennedy era, the question of whether its directors authorized those attempts might seem more easily answered. Indeed, evidence is reasonably clear that Allen W. Dulles, who served Eisenhower as director of central intelligence (DCI) for eight years and then Kennedy for nine months, sanctioned such operations.[\[2\]](#)

The record regarding John A. McCone, whom Kennedy appointed as DCI in the autumn of 1961, has been unclear and even bizarre. Specifically, is it possible that the CIA carried out assassination plots without his approval or even in the face of his disapproval? It seems an absurd proposition if not a very disturbing one. Following the Bay of Pigs debacle in April 1961, in which Washington failed, in almost the most humiliating way possible, to overthrow Castro, some critics blamed the president for not authorizing sufficient air support for the Cuban exiles organized by the CIA to carry out the operation. Kennedy then chose McCone to succeed Dulles precisely because McCone

had a widespread, well-deserved reputation as an aggressive, capable administrator and a ferocious Cold Warrior. He was also a Republican who might well have been Richard Nixon's secretary of defense had the GOP won the 1960 election. As Kennedy once privately observed to his brother Robert, the selection of McCone was "useful."[\[3\]](#)

Nonetheless, when evidence of the CIA assassination plots surfaced publicly a decade and a half later, the retired McCone insisted he had not known of any such plans. McCone advocated many aggressive actions against the Cuban leader's regime, but claimed to have feared excommunication from the Catholic Church if he even discussed, much less approved, assassination plots. Yes, he recalled, a few colleagues in the Kennedy administration had occasionally made passing remarks about getting rid of Castro, but he had always squelched those suggestions.[\[4\]](#)

A Senate select committee headed by Frank Church (D-Idaho) in the mid-1970s investigated, among other things, assassination plots from the Eisenhower-Kennedy era. Several CIA and other Kennedy administration officials had vague memories of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara raising the idea at a 10 August 1962 meeting, and McCone was supposed to have fiercely objected to the topic being discussed. Yet the official, detailed notes from that meeting do not show the topic being raised, and McNamara and other key officials who were there claimed to recall no such conversation.[\[5\]](#)

Former DCI Richard M. Helms, who served as the deputy director of Plans (covert operations) under McCone, chose not to illuminate Church committee members about the particulars of that August 10 discussion. But on the general question of whether McCone knew of assassination plots carried out by the CIA while he was DCI, Helms stated that McCone "was involved in this up to his scuppers . . . I don't understand how it was he didn't hear about some of these things that he claims he didn't."[\[6\]](#)

Now, however, new and dispositive evidence is available derived from a meeting held eleven days later. We recently found notes from a cryptic telephone call McCone made to Secretary of State Dean Rusk on 21 August 1962, notes that have sat unnoticed for years in a box at the National Archives. They support the claim that while McCone opposed any open discussion of assassination proposals, he was witting and did not oppose the efforts as a matter of principle.

The telephone transcript shows a troubled McCone calling Rusk at 6 PM about a meeting held at noon that day in the secretary's office. Originally, the gathering had been scheduled to discuss problems in South Vietnam, but the evening before, the eight participants had agreed "to stretch out" the meeting so "they [could] talk further about Cuba." And as it turned out, Cuba had dominated the agenda.[\[7\]](#)

The sudden shift in focus was for a good reason. US intelligence was reporting that the Soviet Union had brought 5,000 or so personnel into Cuba in the previous seven weeks; dozens of ships had docked, and tons of equipment had been unloaded "under maximum security." The timing of the build-up coincided with a trip Raúl Castro had

recently made to Moscow. In point of fact, of course, the build-up was just getting started, and would culminate in the Cuban missile crisis two months later.[\[8\]](#)

The noon meeting could hardly have been held at a higher level. In addition to Rusk and McCone, the participants had included Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the de facto overseer of Operation MONGOOSE, the covert program designed to undermine and overthrow Castro's government; Defense Secretary McNamara; Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson; General Maxwell Taylor; General Lyman Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and McGeorge Bundy, the president's special assistant for national security affairs. Nonetheless, something was said during the elite meeting that troubled McCone.

McCone's own official notes of the meeting show that there was a general consensus the situation in Cuba "was critical and that the most dynamic action was indicated." McNamara "expressed strong feelings that we should take every possible aggressive action," and Robert Kennedy wondered what "aggressive steps could be taken." Yet the meeting ended on an "inconclusive" note.[\[9\]](#)

What was discussed, although not reflected in the DCI's official notes, was the subject of McCone telephone call to Rusk. (Like other senior State Department officials, the secretary of state had a staffer transcribe the gist of his telephone calls; whether McCone knew this is unknown.) A "question came up this a.m. in connection with an individual that should not come up in mtgs.," McCone said. He added that he "does not think we should countenance talking or thinking about that." Rusk was the opposite of the hard-charging, often-agitated McCone. The secretary almost never raised his voice, speaking instead in a monotone, and had a personality that some found calming and others thought just plain dull. Characteristically, Rusk tried to calm the DCI down. "Given the particular 8 people" involved in the meeting, Rusk observed, he was not worried that the forbidden subject had been broached. He agreed, nonetheless, that such a sensitive matter should not have been discussed so openly, in a minuted meeting.[\[10\]](#)

Seemingly mollified, McCone then "mentioned he and Sec sitting down" to talk privately—presumably about the forbidden matter—but that in any other forum the "Sec should take posture of not countenancing it." Again, "Sec agreed." McCone then asked Rusk to pass this understanding onto Alex Johnson, Rusk's representative to the Special Group Augmented, which oversaw covert action against Cuba.[\[11\]](#)

Given the context of the admittedly brief telephone call, it is hard to believe the "individual" discussed in the morning meeting was anyone other than Fidel Castro. And the posture McCone advised Rusk to adopt—not to countenance talking about it—exhibits a fine understanding of how plausible deniability was constructed and supposed to work. It did not mean there was to be no chain of authority and command—only that the decision should not be traceable to senior officials, much less the ultimate authority in the Oval Office.

Although the telcon transcript clarifies several aspects regarding McCone's knowledge of the assassination efforts in 1962, it doesn't answer all questions. Left unaddressed is what McCone knew about an entirely different set of plans in the fall of 1963, specifically, the [plot to eliminate Castro through the offices of Rolando Cubela, aka AMLASH](#), a disaffected Cuban revolutionary. After the 1962 missile crisis, McCone's stock with the Kennedy brothers fell dramatically. They resented his willingness to accept so much of the public credit for uncovering the Soviet missiles before they could become operational, and he was not privy to the administration's most sensitive secrets.[\[12\]](#)

So if the director of Central Intelligence was not fully witting when it came to the hyper-sensitive assassination plot of 1963, who instructed the CIA to proceed? The best evidence from across the decades points to Robert Kennedy. As Richard Helms told Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on 4 January 1975 over breakfast, as press reports about "massive" wrongdoing at the CIA began to be circulate in the wake of Watergate,

all these stories are just the tip of the iceberg. If they come out, blood will flow. For example, Robert Kennedy personally managed the operation on the assassination of Castro.[\[13\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) Schlesinger's authorized biography of Robert Kennedy absolved the Kennedy brothers of knowledge and responsibility for the assassination plots against Castro, e.g., "The agency, without consulting superior authority, resuscitated the assassination project on its own." Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 489.

[\[2\]](#) US Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), [92-99](#).

[\[3\]](#) Item 9A.6, 4 March 1963, Transcript and recording of Cassette C (side 2), Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy Library.

[\[4\]](#) US Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, [99-100](#), [164](#).

[\[5\]](#) Ibid., [105](#), [164](#).

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[6] Ibid., [100-101](#).

[7] “Telephone call from Sec. McNamara, 11:40 a.m.,” and “Telephone call from Mr. McCone, 6:04 p.m.,” both 20 August 1962, show the evolution of the meeting's agenda. In “Transcripts . . . telephone calls,” Box 46, Executive Secretariat, Secretary of State Rusk, Department of State Records, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[8] Document No. 5, “[[McCone](#)], [Memorandum on Cuba, 20 August 1962](#),” in Mary S. McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), 19-20.

[9] Document No. 382, McCone, “[[Discussion in Secretary Rusk’s Office at 12 o’clock, 21 August 1962](#),” in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X: *Cuba 1961-1962* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), 947-949.

[10] “Telephone call from Mr. McCone, 21 August 1962, 6:04 p.m.,” “Transcripts . . . telephone calls,” Box 46, Executive Secretariat, Secretary of State Rusk, Department of State Records, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[11] Ibid.

[12] David M. Barrett and Max Holland, *Blind over Cuba: The Photo Gap and the Missile Crisis* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 87-92, 146n5.

[13] Kissinger quote cited in Max Holland, “[[Why RFK Shunned the Inquiry into His Brother’s Assassination](#),” *Boston Globe*, 18 September 1998.