

RFK OK'd Sabotage Against Cuba in November 1963

By Max Holland

Ever since the Church Committee's investigation of the intelligence community in the mid-1970s—if not earlier—it has been well known that Robert F. Kennedy was deeply involved in the Kennedy administration's efforts to subvert and overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro. RFK regularly attended meetings of the so-called Special Group of the National Security Council, which directed and coordinated US policy toward Cuba, including most covert operations. And as Harris Wofford observed in his 1980 book, [*Of Kennedys and Kings*](#), within the Special Group the attorney general

was the driving force behind the clandestine effort to overthrow Castro. From inside accounts of the pressure he was putting on the CIA to “get Castro,” he seemed like a wild man who was out-CIAing the CIA.

Still, extant records specifying RFK's direct involvement are few and far between.

One of seven documents released by the National Archives in response to a [Judicial Watch lawsuit](#), however, is an [EYES ONLY memo](#) that reveals Robert F. Kennedy personally signed off on a sabotage operation against Cuba in November 1963.

The [November 1963 document](#) released to Judicial Watch is a brief, one-page proposal for a “low-key sabotage operation” with the plan to be accomplished by a commando group on or about 8 November 1963. Using demolition charges and incendiaries, the commandos were to destroy a pier and warehouse on the northern coast “as part of our continuing long-range program.”

Sterling J. Cottrell, the coordinator of Cuban affairs, submitted the sabotage proposal to Robert Kennedy on November 4. The next day, the operation was one of several items discussed at a [special meeting of the Special Group](#) (SG), which included RFK; McGeorge Bundy, the president's national security adviser; John McCone, CIA director; Richard Helms, CIA deputy director for plans; U. Alexis Johnson, deputy undersecretary of State for political affairs; Cyrus Vance, secretary of the army; Dr. Albert “Bud” Wheelon, CIA deputy director for science & technology; Colonel Ralph Steakley of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Bruce Cheever, deputy to Desmond FitzGerald, the head of the CIA's Special Affairs Staff, which ran espionage, paramilitary, and other intelligence operations against Castro.

EYES ONLY
SECRET

4 NOV 1963

4-13

FROM THE COORDINATOR OF CUBAN AFFAIRS
TO THE SPECIAL GROUP

SUBJECT: Proposed Infiltration/Exfiltration Operation
For 8 November 1963

1. The purpose of this memorandum is to present for your consideration and approval, the initial infiltration/exfiltration operation for the month of November 1963. Additional proposals for operations during the month of November 1963 will be presented at a later date.

2. The proposed operation is as follows:

OPERATION : 3111
DATE : o/a 8 November 1963
PLACE/
PURPOSE : A low-key sabotage operation against a warehouse and pier at Nazabal on the coast of Northern Las Villas. This operation will be accomplished by a commando group landing on the pier and destroying the pier and warehouse with demolitions and incendiaries. This operation, if successful, will reduce dockage and storage facilities as part of our continuing long-range program.

3. It is requested that approval be granted for the conduct of the operation outlined in paragraph 2 above.

RM



Declassified under the provisions of the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act of 2002 (PL 107-326)

EYES ONLY
SECRET

By _____ NARA, Date 9/21/79



Cheever presented the proposal, which had been given the designation No. 3111, to the Special Group. The SG tentatively approved the operation along with two others: No. 3112, a sabotage operation directed against a sawmill located in northern Oriente province; and No. 3115, which involved the infiltration of a radio operator to provide communications for a “ratline,” an emergency escape route for Agency assets and agents in Cuba.

At the conclusion of the November 5 special meeting, Mac Bundy put all three operations in a “fail safe” status. They were to proceed as planned “pending concurrence

in each case by higher authority”—meaning until the president himself signed off on them. The next day, however, President Kennedy [disapproved](#) all Cuban operations scheduled to run before November 12. Thus, only one of the three operations, No. 3115, received presidential sanction.

In the mid-1990s, the [November 4 document](#) was one of seven identified by the [Assassination Records Review Board](#) (ARRB) as “assassination-related” and contained in the papers of Robert F. Kennedy. But none of the seven were released, [according to the ARRB](#), by the time it ceased operating in September 1998. Records in the RFK papers required the express permission of an RFK Donor Committee before they could be released. As of January 2011, according to an internal memo from the John F. Kennedy Library, the seven documents remained closed because the RFK Donor Committee “never formally ruled to open them.” However, after Judicial Watch filed the lawsuit it turned out that six of the documents were in fact open to the public because copies of them existed in files *not* controlled by the Donor Committee. They had already been released and were available in the JFK Assassination Records Collection at the NARA II facility in College Park, Maryland. Only the document cited above had not been made part of the Assassination Records collection.

The [Judicial Watch lawsuit](#) was filed subsequent to a December 2012 Freedom of Information Act request by *Washington Decoded's* editor [Max Holland](#). Upon notification that all seven documents were open to researchers, the lawsuit was dropped. Nonetheless, further steps are being taken to ensure the availability of all government records in the RFK papers that are related in any way to the JFK assassination.

Villanova Professor [David M. Barrett](#), a member of Washington Decoded's editorial board, provided the documents about what happened to proposed operation No. 3111.