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FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

FROM : AMEMBASSY, HABANA

377 DESP. NO.

TO : THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON.

September 9, 1953
DATE

REF : D-363 (Weeka No. 36), Sept. 4, 1953

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SUBJECT: Injury to Cardinal Archbishop Takes on Political Significance

The possible political effects of reports circulating regarding the head injury suffered on August 12, 1953 by Cardinal Manuel ARTAGA Betancourt, Archbishop of Habana, have become the subject of obvious official concern. It will be recalled that there were reports that the Cardinal had been injured by a gun-butt blow by one of a group of police who had entered his residence to search it for political refugees suspected of having been given asylum there. The September 7 issue of Time magazine carried an account of these reports.

The first public reaction to these reports came from Ramón VASCONCELOS, the director of the pro-Government Alerta. In an editorial on September 1 Vasconcelos, possibly with official inspiration, quite plainly although not directly accused the Communists of circulating the reports of police responsibility for the Cardinal's injury. He said: "... one should ask who are interested in setting face to face as bitter enemies the Government and Cuban Catholicism ... The Ortodoxos are Catholics, the Auténticos, the Progresistas, the Liberals, the Demócratas, the military and the civilians attached to the regime. Who then are not Catholics nor of the Government and hence are provocateurs dedicated to intrigue and inciting noxious passions in one or the other camp? To lower the prestige of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the person of its most eminent representative, as well as to raise the question of the responsibility of the Government with the intention of bringing them into conflict with no advantage either to the Government or to the Catholics; can be of importance only to those who believe neither in the Catholics nor the Government and hate them both with the same ferocity".

President Batista devoted to the Cardinal's injury a section of his "state of the nation" speech on September 4, the 20th anniversary of his first coming to power. In that part of his speech devoted to the threat of Communism and "insidious propaganda" Batista quoted part of the Time article and part of Vasconcelos' editorial. He accused Time of picking

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up its report "from Cuban exiles" and charged that the sowing of discord described by Vasconcelos is one of the "immediate objectives of Communism in Cuba". Batista thus lumped Communists and the PAIO opposition together as being responsible for the blaming of his Government for the Cardinal's mishap, which he described as a "lamentable accident".

In a pastoral letter made public on September 8, the Cardinal himself demolished the accident theory. The main purpose of the pastoral letter was to inform the faithful that he was leaving Cuba for Rome for a rest in accordance with doctor's orders. He also referred to rumors regarding his injury, however, and stated flatly that "what happened was nothing more than an unsuccessful attempt at a common crime", the authors of which were unknown to him but freely forgiven by him.

The glaring discrepancy between President Batista's "lamentable accident" and the Archbishop's "common crime" resulted in further statements and the release of more information.

The Minister of Information declared that the matter was a police case for settlement by the appropriate court in accordance with the acta (record of proceedings) signed by the Cardinal himself on the night of the happening. The acta was published in today's press and according to it the Cardinal declared to the investigating police official that he had fallen to the floor as a result of feeling ill and that his injury was purely accidental.

At the same time it was reported that the Cardinal's private secretary had declared that three men had secretly entered the Cardinal's residence and had penetrated into his private rooms where they had threatened him with pistols and demanded 45,000 pesos of church money which he had in his possession and which they wanted "for political purposes". The private secretary said that the Cardinal's shouts brought his aides to his assistance and the intruders fled before the police could arrive but not before hitting the Cardinal on the head with a pistol butt.

It is interesting to note that the Cardinal's private secretary was also said to have declared that the Cardinal was proceeding to Rome for "several months of rest" although in his pastoral letter the Cardinal had said that he expected "to return soon".

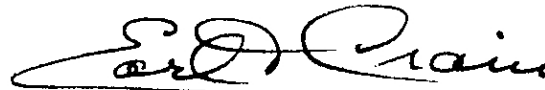
COMMENT

These conflicting accounts indicate that the injury sustained by the Cardinal was not an accident and that an effort

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was made to cover up what actually occurred. The acta signed by the Cardinal may mean that he was a party to this effort but it could be spurious or signed under duress during physical stress following the injury. In any case the effort to pass the matter off as an accident was a complete failure. Possibly, after Batista's September 4 speech, the Cardinal changed his mind about going along with hushing the matter up and accordingly gave the first hint of the version of armed felonious assault which was later elaborated upon by his private secretary and which is likely to become the official account of the occurrence. There remains the question, however, as to why such an account, if true, was not released immediately after the event, thus preventing the rumors and speculation that the original cloak of mystery provoked. One rumor, entirely unconfirmed, has it that there actually was an attempted robbery but that it was connived in by members of the Cardinal's household, which induced the Cardinal to attempt to suppress the true account. Because of its belated offering, it will be difficult for the "common crime" version to dispel suspicions that the Cardinal deliberately contradicted Batista in order to let the public know or infer that he really had been assaulted by the police but considered it wise to let his secretary describe the outrage in such a way as to afford some justification of a denial of police responsibility.

For the Chargé d'Affaires ad interim:



Earl T. Crain
Acting Counselor of Embassy