

Elliott Abrams, former Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs of the Reagan Administration, interviewed in his office in Washington, D.C., on 27 May 1993, by Antonio de la Cova.

DE LA COVA: What was really the over-all Reagan Administration policy towards Cuba when the Administration came to power? Was there really any interest in overthrowing Castro? You read my [Hofstra University] paper, you know what my focus here is, if there was a continuity, and I want your opinion on that. Am I wrong, or am I on the right track?

ABRAMS: I did not have anything to do with Cuban policy until 1985. So I can't tell you what the initial Cuba policy was like. I talked already about that. By the time I got involved in Latin American policy in mid 1985, there were two strands, I would say, three when possible. One was to fight against Cuban subversion in Central America and elsewhere in the region. A second was to work with Cuba on a few issues. One of which was, I suppose, the hijacking agreement, another of which would be the immigration agreement, and a third was southern Africa. And there were always, as you know, conversations between not only the Interests Section but at times Mike Kozak. I always refused to meet with the Interests Section.

DE LA COVA: You refused to meet?

ABRAMS: Yes.

DE LA COVA: Any reason for that?

ABRAMS: As a matter of principle. We didn't have diplomatic relations and I thought they could conceivably use such a meeting as propaganda purposes. But as you know, the statement which is frequently made, that such and such would happen, so many things would be solved if we would only talk to them, is a ridiculous statement, because in fact there were talks going on about something or other often, and there was no difficulty in communicating through diplomatic channels. Then we come to the third strand of policy, and that is, what about Cuba itself, about the internal situation. America gets fair to say, that there was no real effort to overthrow the government. There was an effort to prevent, there was an effort to avoid doing anything that helped the regime. For example, we were very unhappy about Cuban participation in various international sporting events, and we tried to make that very difficult for them. And we had long arguments and fights with Pan-Am games people in 1987 or whatever year it was, and we did not try the Carter style rapprochement with them, and we attacked them much more than they had ever been attacked before in the United Nations, in the Human Rights Commission. But, with respect to overthrowing the regime, for example, covert action to overthrow the regime, for example, real efforts to subvert that regime, that was not something that the Administration was interested in.

DE LA COVA: Was not something they were interested in?

ABRAMS: No.

DE LA COVA: Was part of this due to the secret agreement between Kennedy and Khrushchev?

ABRAMS: Yeah, I think so. I think if you were of a mind to do things, you would reach that question very quickly: I'll present you with a program and then someone will get rid of him. You can't do that because of the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement. We never got there, at least not in the period that I was involved with it. We never got to contemplating any serious action in Cuba which could be considered a violation of the agreement.

DE LA COVA: You talked about the interest in talking with Cuba about hijackings. In November of 1984, the immigration agreement had been signed, but then on January 1, 1985, Ishmael LaBeet, a prisoner that had killed eight people in the Virgin Islands, hijacked a plane to Cuba. I believe State asked on three different occasions for Cuba to return him, in January, February and March 1985. Do you know anything of that matter?

ABRAMS: No, I was not in the Latin American Bureau then, I don't remember any of that.

DE LA COVA: Because I found it interesting that when Cuba refused to return him in March, after the third time, the process for Radio Martí speeded up.

ABRAMS: I don't know.

DE LA COVA: And the station came out in May of 1985. You also talked about the programs of cultural, sports and educational exchanges, but they did seem to increase, they seemed to continue, this policy that had been set out by Carter.

ABRAMS: I think that's fundamentally right. The problem there, you know, generally speaking, nobody is interested in Cuba, except the Cuban-American community. However, that's not quite true, the left is interested in Cuba. And the one place that you see that, is cultural, educational and athletic programs, where there had been created a kind of pro-Cuba attitude. There was a pro-Cuba attitude and they were constantly trying to pressure the Administration. Well, you know, a singing group, an orchestra, a band, a violinist, a shot-putter, whatever. Our attitude towards that was, that we would not try to close that loophole, it just didn't matter that much, for the cultural events. There were times when we permitted them and there were times when we didn't. We were tougher than the Carter people, but we did not close it down. I don't remember the outcome of... The attitude of the Pan-Am Games people in Indianapolis was, sports and politics don't mix. We did not want the Cubans there, and so, we made all sorts of trouble about charter flights, and things like that. I would say it was a kind of half-way house. We tried to be an obstruction, but we did not say: No more.

DE LA COVA: Because something later happened when the Tropicana Cabaret review visited the U.S. At first it was denied, then they let them come. And some of the academics that were coming in the program were later denounced by DGI defectors as being Cuban intelligence operatives.

ABRAMS: Yeah. That's what we, you know, assumed, in any group, athletic, musical, whatever, they certainly had the DGI. You're only guessing quite what the percentage was, but they certainly had

their agents, and that's one of the reasons why we didn't like it. But when you do that, you start getting editorials in The Washington Post, The New York Times, and the city, whatever city it is, and the congressmen, and the senators: what do you mean? This is crazy! All we are asking for is this singer, this violinist. How can it? So, on some of those occasions, it just wasn't worth it. I would though, one thing, disagree with DGI. I would say that one of the things that, one of the problems we had in dealing with Cuba was, we had no intelligence. There were countries, you would expect a place like El Salvador, that were very well covered. But even, you know, take a country that wasn't all that important to us, like Bolivia, or Colombia, Venezuela, important for drugs for the Cubans. We had some idea of what was going on, but in my opinion, the intelligence on Cuba was very poor, almost non-existent, and it came out at a certain point in the late 1980s, that virtually of all the people who had been American intelligence assets went back doubles.

DE LA COVA: Right, that's after the Azpillaga defection.

ABRAMS: Right. So, that's surprising we didn't know what was going on.

DE LA COVA: Although at the same time, Cuba accused the United States of running an espionage network out of the Interests Section down there, and named, I believe, about twenty Americas there.

ABRAMS: No comment.

DE LA COVA: You replaced Langley Motley, I believe it was April 1985.

ABRAMS: July.

DE LA COVA: What was the reason for that? Why was he dismissed?

ABRAMS: I haven't a clue. I just got a call one day from Shultz, if I would do this.

DE LA COVA: From Shultz?

ABRAMS: Yeah, from his assistant on his behalf, and then I met with him later that day. I don't know. I've hardly ever seen any speculation about it, that's kind of funny. I don't know.

DE LA COVA: Some people feel that he wasn't, that he was replaced because he wasn't following the Reagan hard-line towards Cuba.

ABRAMS: I doubt that, because he had no great interest in Cuba, but he certainly had no ideological reasons to be soft on Cuba, and he was replaced by Shultz, who was no hard-liner on these issues, as you can see from his memoirs, he was I think what you call a moderate. And so, I don't know the answer to your question. It's a good question.

DE LA COVA: I recall that one of the first things you did regarding Cuba, was when you met with

the Cuban bishops in September 1985.

ABRAMS: Yeah.

DE LA COVA: When they came to the United States. Do you recall what that meeting was about, or what was discussed?

ABRAMS: I have a very vague memory of meeting with them, and it may be wrong, but my memory is that we were all struck by the fact that there were some Catholic churches that when they were oppressed, for a fact, Chile, for example, there were some in Eastern Europe where the Church had become the center of opposition, in Poland, and there were some places in this hemisphere where that happened, like Chile, where the Church was the center of opposition to Pinochet. As a matter of fact, that's true in a lot of the South American countries, and we were struck by the non-protesting nature of this visit. They didn't want to talk about all the terrible things that were happening to the Church, the prejudice against it, the difficulties for *libertad*. They really were here more to help the regime, I think it's still very clear. I mean, they, I don't know if they saw themselves that way or not, but in essence, they were asking for everything to be sweet, and calm and smooth, they were not here asking for more militant behavior against Castro.

DE LA COVA: Were they asking for American concessions?

ABRAMS: As I recall it, they were against the embargo because it hurt the people of the island. Some of the history of this new... we, early on, it wasn't 1985, it might have been 1985, it certainly was 1986. I remember testifying in the House on religious freedom in Cuba, House Human Rights Subcommittee. And I testified that there wasn't any, and it was terrible. But there was two representatives of the Catholic Church in the United States, Tom Quigley and Father Bryan Hare. And I'll never forget Quigley saying: "the Church in Cuba is a quiet Church." We were amazed! It turned out that was, of course, the way the bishops were acting too. No protest, no outrage, no opposition to the regime. They took whatever crumbs the regime gave them. But I remember the bishops, as I say very vaguely, but I remember them as being basically arguing that, let's improve bilateral relations, that was the main line.

DE LA COVA: In November 1987, when the U.S. government began pursuing this line of condemning Cuba before the U.N., the first vote that went down, there were about five Latin American countries that voted in favor of Cuba. The news media reported that you met later with five of these Latin American diplomats to raise a protest.

ABRAMS: About what?

DE LA COVA: That they had not voted with the United States, that they had voted...

ABRAMS: Yes, that's true. We did that repeatedly.

DE LA COVA: Let's see, just to give you the direct quote, that you met in Washington with the Ambassadors of Argentina, Peru, Venezuela and Colombia, all large recipients of American economic aid, to register objections to their anti-U.S. vote. The same message was later sent to the Mexican Ambassador.

ABRAMS: Venezuela and Argentina are not large recipients of U.S. aid. But yes, we did, we always did, because, you know, the argument we made was, this business about not criticizing dictatorships comes from days when Strossner wouldn't criticize Trujillo. You are democratic governments now, you should quit it. And of course, there were two reasons, I would say, why they wouldn't help criticize Castro. One was this old tradition that you don't comment on the internal affairs of somebody else, and this is a terrible tradition, and they're eliminating it, step by step, now. And the other was fear, blackmail. At one point, the Prime Minister of one of those countries said to me, Do you know what Castro could do here?

DE LA COVA: Do here, meaning where?

ABRAMS: Here, in my country, in Boli[unintelligible]. With one signal from Castro, you could have all the trade unions out on strike, you could have thousands of students throwing stones at the university and closing down classes, you could shut down the whole downtown area of the city. And I said, "that's blackmail, that's extortion, and you let Castro do that," and he said, "well, yes." So, it took years for them to move forward in the [unintelligible].

DE LA COVA: Let's talk about the U.S.-Cuba immigration agreement. At the time, I believe, you had some type of disagreement with Vernon Walters about the usefulness of the agreement. He said that the immigration agreement, the second time, when it had been renewed, he said was an inappropriate moment.

ABRAMS: I have no memory of this. Have you talked to Mike Kozak?

DE LA COVA: No, I haven't.

ABRAMS: Do you know who he is?

DE LA COVA: Yes, he negotiated the treaty.

ABRAMS: Yes, he's still in the State Department. Right now he's working on Haiti, but he's still around. He did this. I really have no memory of when...

DE LA COVA: You rejected Walters' criticism and called the accord "a significant diplomatic achievement that would make a major contribution to human rights."

ABRAMS: Well, one thing we were not going to have was the U.N. Ambassador determining Cuban policy. And I think I probably would surprise, I'm surprised now, that Walters would have thought

that he would be consulted on something like the Cuban immigration agreement. He, as U.N. Ambassador, a lot of people think makes you the auxiliary Secretary of State, but it doesn't. It's got nothing to do with U.N. The details of it, I just don't remember. One thing the Reagan Administration was very clear on, they did not want another Mariel.

DE LA COVA: They did not want another Mariel.

ABRAMS: Did not want another Mariel.

DE LA COVA: But why didn't the Reagan Administration take a tougher stance towards Cuba with this immigration agreement. There were suggestions that the criminals be sent back on an expandable ship. Governor Graham suggested they be put in the Guantánamo Naval Base and pushed across the fence there, and even during the invasion of Grenada in 1983, the Congress passed a non-binding resolution to send them all back with the Cuban prisoners of war. Yet, why does the Administration spent seven years going to the negotiating table and not take a tougher stance against Cuba on this issue?

ABRAMS: What would a tougher stance have been, military force? For direction, we are putting people back across the border, is a military confrontation with Cuba. Reagan didn't want that. If you remember, George Bush used force an awful lot more than Ronald Reagan. Reagan did not like using force, and did not, I think it's fair to say, if you look at that agreement, and you look at it in the context of eight years, that they were the capsule that was really not on Reagan's agenda. In a situation like this, the immigration agreement was seen, in large part, not as a matter of foreign policy, not as a potential tool against Castro, but as a way to solve what was in essence an immigration problem, and to a certain extent, a potential domestic political problem.

DE LA COVA: Also, in the situation with Cuban officials involved with drug trafficking into the U.S., in November 1982 there were four Cuban officials who were indicted. Yet, the Reagan Administration seemed not to have taken any steps, even towards bringing these people to the U.S.

ABRAMS: How would you do that?

DE LA COVA: Well, for example, one of them, René Rodríguez Cruz, one of the indicted people was travelling in West Germany, and the U.S. could have asked West Germany...

ABRAMS: When was that?

DE LA COVA: He was indicted in 1982, and he was travelling in West Germany in 1984.

ABRAMS: Yeah, again, it was before my time. I don't know whether anything was done in an effort to get him. I'm quite confident the Germans would never have done it.

DE LA COVA: Also, the same situation arises with Cuban-sponsored Puerto Rican terrorism on U.S.

soil. We see that Puerto Ricans were setting off bombs in New York City, they were murdering American sailors down in Puerto Rico in 1982, they were firing anti-tank rockets at the FBI and Marshals offices down in Puerto Rico, and publicly stating: This is in reprisal for the invasion of Grenada. And they robbed seven million dollars from a Wells Fargo depot in Connecticut, and Attorney General Edwin Meese came out and said, we know half the money is in Cuba and the person involved on the inside in the robbery is in Cuba. Yet, again, we don't see any type of reprisal against Cuba to the extent that was carried out during the Libyan bombing.

ABRAMS: Because you are in the middle of the Cold War, and bombing Cuba is not the same as bombing Libya, because Cuba is a Soviet vassal, and Reagan did not want a confrontation with the Soviets over Cuba. I'll give you another example. We proposed at various times quarantining Nicaragua to prevent the arrival of Soviet arms, directly or transhipped through Cuba. Could never get anybody to go for that because, what happened, every day, every morning, you wake up and you have a confrontation with the Soviet Union if it's a Russian ship, and they are waiting to shoot. Are you going to sink it? They had no taste for that, the Administration. The confrontations with the Soviets were diplomatic or they were through third world proxies. The use of force was also indirect, I mean, Libya, which is not a Soviet satellite, Grenada, which was trivial, or the use of proxies, like the Contras, the Afghan Mujahadin, and UNITA. When it came to direct confrontations, the Administration didn't want them. That's Haig's reason for not going to the source. It just did not happen.

DE LA COVA: But the Administration didn't even want to use Cuban exile proxies in their fight against Castro, while they were backing all the other groups.

ABRAMS: Yes, because, I would say, partly because in the case of Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Angola, you did not really have a consolidated government as such as you did in Cuba. It's probably more important, the others did not bring you into a confrontation with the Soviets, direct confrontation, and they did indirectly, but it's not the same as a U.S. vassal, as a Soviet vassal.

DE LA COVA: Even in the question of broadcasting to Cuba, like Radio Martí, the U.S. has this policy that they're going to broadcast to Cuba, but when Cuban exile organizations like Huber Matos' CID, or Alpha 66, or the Brigade, set up their own stations to broadcast to Cuba, or the CID even later tried to beam TV reports to Cuba, the FCC came and cracked down on them, saying you can't do this.

ABRAMS: That was not a political decision that the Administration made. We were handed that decision by the FCC, and we could never see a legal way around it. TV Martí is another thing. TV Martí's reaction did, although it may or not have been a good idea [*unintelligible*]. Technically very difficult to do TV, then jam it, but the FCC decision was not, I think, a politically dictated decision. It was a factual decision which was then not reversed on political grounds.

DE LA COVA: I understand that even within the State Department there were conflicts between people in there that wanted to take a harder line towards Cuba, and others that wanted to take a

softer line.

ABRAMS: I'm sure that's true. It's always true.

DE LA COVA: Can you expand on that? Who wanted to take a harder line, because there was a lot of turnover in U.S. Interests Section chiefs in Havana.

ABRAMS: Who were the people?

DE LA COVA: Taylor was down there.

ABRAMS: And then he was replaced by Kamman. Is that how it was? Well, Taylor was not in favor of rattling their cage very much. This is J. Taylor; was more of a traditional diplomat. Kamman was more suspicious than I think, less susceptible to... I think it's an institutional thing in this sense. You are a diplomat, you are a career diplomat, you've been doing this your whole life, you've done it in five different countries. Now you go to Cuba, you want to do it again. And all of these restrictions make it impossible for you to do what everybody else in the diplomatic corps is doing, and what you used to do. And Taylor didn't like that and kept trying to expand his ability to reach out inside Cuba and talk to more people in the government, for example. And so, he and I had some fights about that. Ultimately he lost, most of the people left. Kamman was by...

DE LA COVA: Taylor left?

ABRAMS: Well, he finished his tenure. Kamman was by personality more reserved, and more scholarly, and was a Sovietologist, and viewed this in a sense as a kind of paid vacation from Kremlinology to being with a Soviet satellite, where there are a lot of Russians around, and where he could speak Russian all the time. So, he found it intellectually fascinating, but he didn't have the desire to go socialize and get out more and be a more traditional ambassador. In that sense, we had fewer conflicts between the Bureau and Kamman. There's something about Walters you mentioned, I didn't remember. José Sorzano was with the NSC for part of this period of the Administration. We didn't see him with the hard-liners, but it's true, though I really don't remember him contesting very much.

DE LA COVA: He eventually resigned because of that.

ABRAMS: Because of what?

DE LA COVA: Because he claimed the Administration had not taken a harder line against Cuba and Panama.

ABRAMS: The United States certainly did not take a hard line against Panama. A terrible mistake because it led to the invasion, and a lot of lives were lost. And we all protested, we all argued about that, and lost the argument. I don't remember many arguments in favor of a hard-line, harder-line

Cuba policy. At least I remember José arguing with me. Now maybe he felt that we were doing all we could to toughen up the policy, and that we were losing for whatever reason.

DE LA COVA: Is there anything else you would like to add to the interview that comes to mind?

ABRAMS: Well, one thing that we did do with respect to Cuba that I think can be exaggerated, but can also be underestimated was, we did lay the foundation very well, and it was built on by Bush, to make Cuba a pariah at the U.N. You go back to 1980, Cuba was sitting pretty, at one point they chaired, I think, the U.N. Human Rights Commission. Think of it.

DE LA COVA: No, the Security Council.

ABRAMS: Yeah, but they were members of the Human Rights Commission.

DE LA COVA: Right, they were members of the Human Rights Commission, but they chaired the Security Council.

ABRAMS: And we really plugged away at that. Credit goes to Jeane Kirkpatrick, Mike Novak, Ed Shifter, me, a lot of people, and as time went by, and this is during the Cold War, it became easier when the Czechs and the Poles were on your side. More and more countries began to distance themselves when Cuba became controversial for the first time. I think that was an important first step in changing the way Cuba is viewed in the world, from an essentially positive view, to an essentially negative view.

DE LA COVA: But again, Cuba alleges that the U.S. is pressuring a lot of these countries, and they even refused the U.N. reporter to enter Cuba.

ABRAMS: That's alright. The purpose of this was in the long run to improve the situation in Cuba, but nobody thought it would improve it shortly. The purpose was to hurt Castro in the international scene. To reduce his prestige, to sully the name of his regime. And when the U.N. votes for a special rapporteur, and they don't let him in, it certainly that's good, because he wasn't going to achieve much inside anyway. This way it's clear to everybody how bad Castro is, how much in the outside the consensus is.

DE LA COVA: The last question would be, looking in your crystal ball, what do you see for Cuba in the future?

ABRAMS: Well, I think I have been too optimistic with respect to the decline of the regime. I really thought it would go the way of Eastern Europe, but I have taken a further look at it. I think it's, the truth is, that it is not fundamentally a Communist regime, and by that let me be very precise. It is not like say, the Czech regimes, were it didn't matter who the leader was, or East Germany, it really didn't matter. It is an old-fashioned tyranny using the old...

DE LA COVA: Caudillismo.

ABRAMS: It really is, using, of course, the powerful intellectual and political tools of Communism to make it even worse than any caudillo ever was. But the fact that it is a caudillo regime means it's hard to get rid of, because a lot of caudillos stayed until they were dead. Franco being an example.

DE LA COVA: Trujillo.

ABRAMS: Yeah, so I think, and it also shows you why the collapse of Communist regimes doesn't automatically mean that this one goes. When does it go? I think it goes if he gets sick enough to die. If he gets a heart attack, a stroke, then I think things begin to crumble fast. I have a mixture of optimism and pessimism. The optimism is on the economic side, for all the obvious reasons. If you draw up a list of what does it take to succeed economically, and you look at for example, El Salvador, and say, as I do, if you compare that list, that's looking pretty good, they are going to grow. Even better for Cuba, because the nature of the people and the diaspora and the American market, and so forth. However, I have some doubts about the political situation. It isn't easy. It's not easy anywhere. We see this in Guatemala, Perú, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, it's never easy. When you had a country that has been under a Communist regime for this long, and had a mixed political background before then, why assume that you'll have a velvet revolution? And there are other problems. For example, what is the role of the exile community? What about the race question, which gets into the exiles again? This can be a divisive factor in a free Cuba.

DE LA COVA: And one of the problems with that race question is that Castro has put mostly blacks in the repressive...

ABRAMS: Yes.

DE LA COVA: ...apparatus.

ABRAMS: So I think part of this is luck. If you ask, why is it that everybody needs a George Washington? We were lucky. Uruguay was lucky, they had Sanguinetti. The Venezuelans needed one too, and they got Pérez. The Haitians got Aristide. Sometimes, it's more than just the system. I really think there is such a thing as luck too, and maybe there will be a Martí figure. Maybe there will be some bum, maybe there will be a thief, like Pérez. Maybe there will be a divisive figure like Aristide, who wants to make sure that people who deserve punishment, in his view deserve punishment, get punished. So I think the real problem that Cuba has to face after Castro is whether the economic progress that is easily possible will be disrupted by political instability. And I hope that the answer to that is no, and maybe the answer will be no. But I'm just not sure the answer is no.

DE LA COVA: I see possibly a repeat of what happened in Cuba in 1959, with the overthrow of Batista, and 1933, with the overthrow of Machado, when the populace went out in the street and hunted down the State Security people and dragged them through the streets. There was a lot of bloodshed.

ABRAMS: Yes, it's natural. It happened in France when the Nazis were defeated, the occupation, a lot of people had scores to settle. The nationalistic backlash. I guess I should add one other thing, there is always the danger of a really violent end of the regime. I don't think the problem is so much, Castro doing something crazy like bombing Florida. Because if he was crazy enough to give the order, the air force wouldn't be crazy enough to take the order and do it. But I think what is conceivable is to have some uprisings here and there, food riots, student riots, that turn into something, and some of the police won't put it down, and then the army is having to put it down, and some of the police defending it. That kind of thing, particularly if Castro is ill, or a rumor that he is ill...

DE LA COVA: Like in Rumania.

ABRAMS: Yes, that's possible to me, and number one, that's a reason for real bloodshed. Number two, if it goes on for a few days, not three months, a few days, were there is a real uprising here and there, and there, and it's being put down readily by Castro, you are going to have very, very loud calls for American intervention.

DE LA COVA: Or the OAS to do that.

ABRAMS: My hope is, that as in Rumania, the regime collapses, once that starts. I don't think it's going to start tomorrow, but I hope once it starts, it goes very fast. You don't want the regime to crumble slowly, you want it to crumble fast to avoid bloodshed.

DE LA COVA: But possibly, with American intervention, you might rally nationalistic anti-Americanism.

ABRAMS: I'm not in favor of American intervention in that situation. You have another problem. I think you are right, there is the danger that, that helps Castro. There is another danger. If you put enough troops, you can get rid of it fairly quickly.

DE LA COVA: Like Grenada.

ABRAMS: Well, like Panama. And the reason I say that is, you will cripple the successor regime if it comes in on the backs of American soldiers. That's bad. What you want is a regime that can really stand up and say, we had a revolution in this country and the Communists hijacked it under Castro's leadership. Thank God that's over and now we return to the authentic democratic revolutionary tradition to build a new Cuba. And you steal the nationalist banner. But you can't do that now. The Americans could do it, very hard, look at Endara. I mean, he had a great situation, because he was really elected president. He really was. Still, he has never been able to work himself out from under.