

Jeane Kirkpatrick, former United States Ambassador to the United Nations, interview in her office in Washington, D.C., on 25 May 1993, with Antonio de la Cova.

DE LA COVA: My question is, if you could explain what the Reagan Administration policy was toward Cuba regarding the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement, because President Reagan seemed to abide by it through both terms.

KIRKPATRICK: Right, I think that's probably true. First of all, nobody knew what the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement really was, that's the trouble. There was a great deal of ambiguity about it, there's always been a great deal of ambiguity about it, and there was, to my knowledge, no special effort made during the Reagan years to explore again the full content and implication of the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement, I don't think there was. I repeat, to my knowledge, I think, but President Reagan it seems, had no interest in anything except for peaceful relations with Cuba, let's put it that way. It was certainly not the intention of the administration to provoke anything with armed conflict with Fidel Castro. On the other hand, we were quite determined about doing our best to implore to Fidel Castro to cease the export of subversion and revolution in the Caribbean and also in Central America, although that we didn't link specifically to the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement, although it was both dealt with in the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement.

DE LA COVA: The Reagan Administration took reprisal against Libya in 1986 for a bombing in Berlin that killed an American, yet, Cuba was sponsoring Puerto Rican terrorists right here on U.S. soil. The Machetero group and the FALN, they were setting off bombs in New York, and the Macheteros were even killing U.S. sailors down in Puerto Rico in 1982. They also participated in a seven million dollar robbery of Wells Fargo in Hartford, Connecticut.

KIRKPATRICK: Right.

DE LA COVA: Half the money was sent to Cuba.

KIRKPATRICK: Right.

DE LA COVA: And they even fired anti-tank rockets at the FBI and Marshals offices down in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the weapons were traced back to Viet Nam through Cuba.

KIRKPATRICK: I would say a couple of things about that. One, I don't know how much anyone in the Reagan Administration knew about that. It was not the subject of a specific session of any NSC [National Security Council] meeting which I recall.

DE LA COVA: None of these terrorist acts?

KIRKPATRICK: The general question of Cuba's participation in terrorist acts aimed at American citizens was, to the best of my memory, time passes, and my memory is not perfect, to the best of my memory, it was not the subject of an NSC discussion. I don't know how much....

DE LA COVA: NSC?

KIRKPATRICK: NSC or NSPG [National Security Planning Group]. Elliot Abrams may remember such discussions, but I don't, and he may have seen part of them. A lot of the specific.... Once there was going to be U.S. action, unless there was serious consideration of U.S. action, an issue didn't get all the way up to the NSC unless [*unintelligible*] and they were for the Latin American Policy Group, Central America Policy Group, which would have brought together members of the State Department, and Defense Department at an operational level, and I wouldn't have know about that, because I just didn't have a role in it. But when it got to the level of U.S. action, or there was serious consideration of U.S. action, or at, you know, something like the Libyan bombing for example, that was expected from the NSPG.

DE LA COVA: My concern here is that President Reagan, before coming to office was talking about we ought to blockade Cuba for their involvement in Angola, we ought to take stronger measures. He even advised it to Gerald Ford in 1976, but then he comes to office, and we see that there are no hard-line measures against Cuba. That Cuba is really running amok, that there are....

KIRKPATRICK: Let me tell you what I think, a comment on that. One thing I would point out is that, everyone was aware of a Soviet presence in Cuba. That gave a kind of heavy seriousness to the track record of Cuba, limiting possible U.S. action and consideration. I think that that probably affected the way President Reagan thought about it. You know, the one subject that I remember early in the Administration considering action in relation to Cuba, at the NSC level, was in relation to the Marielitos. And when non other than the Governor of Arkansas [Frank White] was about to expel them from a base in Arkansas and that was what prompted Ronald Reagan what to do about that. You know that story?

DE LA COVA: No, I am not aware of that.

KIRKPATRICK: It tells you something about Ronald Reagan and how he was approaching Cuba at this point. The question was, what was the U.S. going to do about it, these are the criminally insane. Everybody else had already been resettled.

DE LA COVA: Right, about fifteen hundred were left.

KIRKPATRICK: That's right. Eleven hundred, as I recall. In any case, they were all certifiably criminally insane and dangerous, and the question was what do we do with them, presuming we are going to have to do something different with them, and Ronald Reagan had this idea. His idea was to send them back to Cuba. That by doing that, it would solve the problem of dealing with these Marielitos and would solve the problem of... we would also have taught Fidel Castro how to treat us.

DE LA COVA: I'm sorry, but that had been discussed by the Carter Administration back in

1980. They had been asking Cuba to take these criminals back.

KIRKPATRICK: Right, that's right.

DE LA COVA: Twenty five diplomatic notes were sent, and Castro just turned all of them down.

KIRKPATRICK: Well, the Reagan Administration didn't take this up until we were confronted with the issue of what to do, this was an action issue, what to do now with these people. The U.S. government didn't have time to think some disposition of them because Clinton was, I guess he was then Governor of Arkansas. The Governor of Arkansas was fixing to remove them from the state.

DE LA COVA: Why didn't the Reagan Administration take stronger measures?

KIRKPATRICK: Wait a minute, I'm going to tell you. The President said, what he'd like to do is send them back to Cuba, and that had a lot of *terra facie* appeal to a lot of people around the table, including me, I'm afraid. For immediately, the question was, how could you possibly land them somewhere, amphibious landing craft, and just put them, let them out on the beaches. Well, said somebody, President Castro will think we are invading Cuba. Well, said someone else, we can send a message that we are not invading Cuba, that we are bringing back the Marielitos. That was one possibility. Another possibility was that we didn't want to leave the impression that we were invading Cuba, another possibility was suggested, I don't remember whether it was Reagan self-suggested, or somebody else suggested it, take them off to Guantanamo, and at a certain hour of the day open the gate.

DE LA COVA: Governor Bob Graham of Florida.

KIRKPATRICK: This was in the NSC meeting when somebody suggested, and somebody else said, well, you couldn't, you wouldn't want to turn them loose on the civilian population. Yeah, well, you give them notice, that at three o'clock on Friday afternoon you are going to open the gate and the people are going to be pushed off the U.S. base at Guantanamo. The greater census was in amphibious landing craft and the decision was made at that meeting to ask that Cap Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense, should investigate, what kind of military facility, what kind of ships and boats and carriers would be required and how and when it was feasible. In about a week Cap came back with the report that it would have taken just about half the U.S. Navy to deliver the Marielitos back to Cuba. That's when I got my first lesson in just how reluctant the Pentagon is to use force right away. Because that was really what... See, now, it's just really thought nobody is going to do this, because it was such an enormous undertaking, as they saw it to strike it. The thing it was so, Ronald Reagan backed off, and then we decided to look for some prison or some disposition for the Marielitos in Washington. That was one early interaction of Ronald Reagan with Cuba which I saw personally and heard personally, there's a couple of these. There's one other one, and it was in an NSC meeting, or maybe an NSPG meeting. Alexander Haig was Secretary of State, in which he made his famous that back to the source statement, and I remember vividly Richard Allen said to me walking out of that meeting,

did I hear what he heard. I said, I think so, and that Al's eyes were great big. He said, Haig is going to get us into war if we let him, and I said, I think that's what he said. Well, Ronald Reagan didn't let him, that's all he could say. Ronald Reagan demonstrated from very early in the Administration that he had, not only no intention of the [unintelligible] and military inside of Cuba, but that he wasn't going to let it happen then, and that was just clear right from the beginning, and it remains so.

DE LA COVA: What do you feel is the reason for that after he had been posturing so strongly ?

KIRKPATRICK: Well, one, I think that Ronald Reagan was very reluctant to use force so strongly like that, in spite of his reputation to the contrary. I never saw a person more reluctant to use force than Ronald Reagan. That was one general reason. Another general reason was the Soviet dimension, a desire not to develop a confrontation with Cuba because it would involve a confrontation with the Soviet Union. The State Department was, as usual, extremely, extremely reluctant, really, even to accept facts about the Soviet buildup in Cuba and everybody knew it. Our Defense Department did not soft pedal the fact, the State Department did. When I, actually, after I was named, but before I was sworn in I delivered a speech, which I had already written on Cuba in which I alluded to the Soviet bases and projects servicing the Soviet nuclear subs, nuclear propelled and nuclear carrying, weapons-carrying subs. In retribution I got an explosion out of the State Department denying it, and started accusing me of reckless talk, kind of. A friend of mine who is in Navy Intelligence provided the specifics, because I had already checked with them before I made my speech, and my language is very precise and very correct. You know, in 1984, when I gave my, if I may say so myself, my famous speech at the Republican Convention in Dallas, I referred again to the presence of Soviet nuclear subs that were on our coast. And there was a message put out by the State Department, around the world, that my description was not consistent with the State Department's view of Soviet [unintelligible] facilities. By this time, I was at full war with the State Department and I got the White House now, to sent another message negating the State Department's message which negated my speech.

DE LA COVA: I recall that.

KIRKPATRICK: My point is simply this, it's to communicate the extent to which the State Department tries to understate, or not state, to tiptoe around the angry concerns of Cuba. there were people in the Cuba...

DE LA COVA: Cuba Desk?

KIRKPATRICK: Yeah, in the Cuban Desk at the State Department, and out of the Information Office, they tried to understate the Cuban role in the Guatemalan problem and the Cuban role, we had a tremendous amount of evidence on the trail of guerrillas and arms that Cuba had crossed into that one village and along the Mexican-Guatemalan border. And there was a great effort made by someone in the State Department, to generate desire to deny and to understate the Cuban role in Central America, but I think they failed to have some effect on Ronald Reagan's policies. But I don't think that was the principal effect. I think that the principal reason for his

policy regarding Cuba was first, the fact that he never used force unless he had to. He had a real genuine distaste for using force, a reluctance to use force, and also this persistence throughout the entire presidency, a persistency not to provoke confrontations with the Soviet Union. Libya is a little different. The Soviets didn't have the same presence and role in Libya. In addition to which, the Libyans were targeting Americans in a very specific, very bold fashion, beginning with that very early 1981 direct threat on the lives of the Reagan... There were five of us, we had known about that. They were being picked to enter the States. We know, we caught one of them, actually down there. There were three of them, down there in Mexico, three groups, and they targeted the President, and the Vice President, and the Secretary of State Haig, and Weinberger and me, but they had a general category of other things. This was 1981, it was kind of like a welcoming mat, it was very unfriendly and there was a lot of evidence on this. I don't know how much of it has been declassified, but I know because without the evidence, because I was personally involved. And because I was personally involved with a police force, a twenty-four hour security was attached to me. We had a lot, there was a lot of covert details on Libya, which cumulatively quite impressive. It went on, beginning in 1981 right on to the time of the bombing. And Ronald Reagan had an opportunity moreover to get madder and madder about this, and this, I repeat, I think it was related to the Soviet policy, in a way, although everybody knew that the Soviets were supporting him, he wasn't integrated, there weren't Soviets there in Libya.

DE LA COVA: Like the Soviet combat brigade in Cuba.

KIRKPATRICK: Right. You could take a strike at Gaddafi without seeming, or in fact, being, engaged in a confrontation with the Soviet Union, specifically, in a confrontation with the Soviets.

DE LA COVA: Even in the return of the Mariel criminals and undesirables in 1983, after the Grenada invasion, I recall that the House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution asking the President to return the Mariel criminals back to Castro with the Cuban prisoners of war taken in Grenada, yet no action was taken. I think that would have been a golden opportunity, when Castro received these people as heroes in the airport of Havana if a planeload of these crazies would have come down with....

KIRKPATRICK: Excuse me. [Interrupted by a telephone call].

KIRKPATRICK: Well, I think there were, there would have been, a lot of important times for doing that. Ronald Reagan didn't want, and he didn't have one.

DE LA COVA: One what?

KIRKPATRICK: A confrontation with the Soviets.

DE LA COVA: And he felt that even sending these Mariel prisoners back with the prisoners of war...

KIRKPATRICK: No, I didn't say that.

DE LA COVA: That was a golden opportunity.

KIRKPATRICK: Yeah, he just didn't want to do it. I think he thought it was more complex and involved, and he just didn't want to do it, he didn't want to take on that responsibility. He didn't really want a confrontation with Fidel.

KIRKPATRICK: [Is interrupted by a telephone call]

DE LA COVA: I see you have a plaque here from the Brigade [2506]. Was that presented to you when you went down to Miami? And a bust of Jose Marti.

KIRKPATRICK: Right. You are unusually observant, most people don't notice those at all. I tell you what, I used to have plaques for every one of the major freedom fighters, Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, and one by one, as I considered the fight basically retired, for one reason or another, I took them off the wall, leaving only this one. Cuba is yet to go.

DE LA COVA: Speaking of the Brigade, the Brigade 2506 asked President Reagan on a couple of occasions to establish a Cuban Contra program. This issue again was brought up when you visited Miami and spoke down there. Why do you think the Reagan Administration never...

KIRKPATRICK: They didn't want to have a confrontation with the Soviet Union. That's what I think. He never said that, but that would be my understanding. He was really focused now upon the Soviet Union. I think that by that time the Soviets had gone so far, with the Brigade and the submarine base...

DE LA COVA: And the listening post at Lourdes.

KIRKPATRICK: The listening post, exactly, at Lourdes, and they go so far, that it was more difficult than in the beginning. It was more difficult, it was a different issue almost and it would have been at the same time that Carter first discovered the so-called Soviet brigade. By now the United States had actually accepted the Soviet Brigade, but it was not a different issue, and I think Ronald Reagan was focused now on two other major, three other major goals in regard to the Soviets. One was to support the Contra program in Nicaragua, and Angola, Afghanistan and so forth, and he was very concerned. Ronald Reagan in a very real sense he was always engaged in confronting, but he was engaged in confronting, where the circumstances seemed right, and in the case of the freedom fighters that he was backing they were all engaging Communist governments that had not been brought to power yet. They were recent Soviet Communist acquisitions, thinking of a permanent control. Whereas Cuba was a thoroughly consolidated Communist state, with a very consolidated government and president by now, instinctively entrusted by the Soviets. So, it's a different kind of action. I think he saw it that way. I think probably we all saw it that way.

DE LA COVA: Because on two occasions, my friend Tomas Regalado, the reporter from Miami, directly asked the President if he'd be willing to denounce and abrogate the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement, and Reagan said that he saw no need to do that. Could you explain to me what this agreement is? I know it's very vague, and you have written about it, but what is your general impression here of the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement? What do you think it consists of, this hands-off-Cuba attitude?

KIRKPATRICK: I don't think there is a clear answer, really, and there isn't any clear answer I can really think of. The State Department is involved in both invoking the agreement and enforcing it.

DE LA COVA: Right, they kept it behind closed doors when Shultz testified about it in 1983. The twenty five letters were not revealed until 1992

KIRKPATRICK: Right, and they were very reluctant to do it. I tried, they declined to give me access to them, although I was a member of the Reagan Administration and of the Cabinet, and they wouldn't give me access.

DE LA COVA: To the letters? I believe that the agreement is apart from the letters, because Secretary of State Vance once said, when the issue came up in 1979, that the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement was a compendium of letters, conversations...

KIRKPATRICK: There is great ambiguity. There wasn't any treaty, agreement. It wasn't like a treaty you sign. There is a lot of ambiguity.

DE LA COVA: So, there isn't a document, per se, saying this is the agreement.

KIRKPATRICK: No, no, to the best of my knowledge, there isn't. But now the letters have been released. I think those are the full extent of the Kennedy-Khrushchev Agreement, as I understand it, and they did not, in fact, commit the United States to anything, except in conjunction with the Cuban respect for the people and territories of other countries in the hemisphere.

DE LA COVA: But I think that was Khrushchev saying in one of the letters, it would be hard for us to impose this on Cuba, and that those were Cuban internal affairs.

KIRKPATRICK: Well, that's right, but insofar as, but there's also Kennedy's letter, you know. I mean, this is the part about the agreement what you got is how each man is saving his understanding or what his demand is, and there isn't any explicit kind of posture in which you say, well, this is in, and this is out. It really was not emphasized during the Reagan Administration, it really wasn't.

DE LA COVA: What was not emphasized, the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement?

KIRKPATRICK: The Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement.

DE LA COVA: Was not emphasized?

KIRKPATRICK: It was not emphasized, it really, really, wasn't. Nobody wanted to talk about it, and I think that was the reason we did [*unintelligible*]. I believe that. It's surrounded by a kind of an aura, an aura of ambiguity, and then there's the Carter understanding on top of that.

DE LA COVA: The 1979?

KIRKPATRICK: Right.

DE LA COVA: But that was a public agreement when he said that he, came out in October 1, 1979, said that he reiterated, or reaffirmed the agreement when the crisis is over.

KIRKPATRICK: Yeah, but he really wasn't very clear about what he meant.

DE LA COVA: Right.

KIRKPATRICK: He didn't even have to be [*unintelligible*].

DE LA COVA: Curtis LeMay wrote in his book, "America is in Danger" in 1968 that in exchange for the removal of the missiles from Cuba, that all of the American missiles were removed, not only in Turkey, but in England and in Italy, and it came out to a total of 104 missiles.

KIRKPATRICK: I don't know that.

DE LA COVA: Later on, I found in my research, interestingly enough, when Secretary McNamara was called before Congress a few months later and asked if there had been any type of secret agreement, just outright lied and said, no, there was no agreement.

KIRKPATRICK: He lied about Turkey. We know he lied about Turkey.

DE LA COVA: He lied about everything. I have a direct quote on that. He just came out and said the President would not do such a thing. My basic view here, is that what we have during the Reagan Administration, and what we still have up to today has been this policy of continuity of the U.S. Government towards Cuba since 62. It's sort of a hands-off-Cuba, we'll just sort of let things ride, let Castro self-destruct, where even the Carter policy of promoting and increasing the cultural, sports, and educational exchanges with Cuba, even increased.

KIRKPATRICK: I mean, that was Carter.

DE LA COVA: Right, but this even increased during the Reagan Administration. We had the same thing, musicians and sports teams and educational people.



KIRKPATRICK: That was because it was doing that all over the world. That was a kind of thaw we were enhancing [*unintelligible*] back in 1985. I wasn't in government then, but I think the Reagan Administration generally wanted it as a matter of policy, enhancing a lot of cultural, sporting and different exchanges with generally the Soviets and the Soviet bloc, as an effort into detente, really, basically detente.

DE LA COVA: Because this is a continuation also towards Cuba.

KIRKPATRICK: I think so. I don't think it was more specific than that.

DE LA COVA: Finally, when Secretary of State Haig met secretly with the Cuban Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez in November 1981, was he acting on his own initiative, or under the President's orders? He later sent General Vernon Walters down to Havana in March 1982.

KIRKPATRICK: Right. What was he doing there?

DE LA COVA: He went down there to secretly negotiate...

KIRKPATRICK: What, about what?

DE LA COVA: To propose to Cuba to withdraw from Central America and in exchange the United States would give trade concessions to Cuba and ease up on the embargo, and things like that.

KIRKPATRICK: No, I don't think that was so. I think that was probably an exploration. We were exploring all kinds of things, all kinds of ways to try to deal with the problem of guerrillas in Central America and also spreading Marxist presence in the Caribbean, after all it was 1979 in Grenada and...

DE LA COVA: Nicaragua.

KIRKPATRICK: Nicaragua and Jamaica was...

DE LA COVA: Under Manley festering.

KIRKPATRICK: Under Manley festering, festering and boiling.

DE LA COVA: Cuba was sending weapons there also.

KIRKPATRICK: Right, I knew that. And there were feints made on some of the other Caribbean islands.

DE LA COVA: Martinique, some bombs going off down there.

KIRKPATRICK: Dominica. Eugenia Charles told me about them, seven of them. And there was Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and even Costa Rica for a while. You remember the kidnapping of John [*unintelligible*] in Costa Rica. So there was a lot of concern about the whole area, and there were a number of initiatives undertaken to try to conceive what might be done, and I suspected, I don't know that, but I would suspect it of Haig, that initiative was part of that, to probably get him to stop it. There was probably an approval, but that's different than an order. The Secretary of State has his sphere, an adequate authority, I think. A prudent Secretary of State would not undertake such a mission without checking it with the President, the Cabinet, or the National Security Advisor. I don't know whether Alexander Haig was as prudent, which is why he got fired. If you want an answer to that, seriously, though, I think you should talk to Richard Allen. Richard Allen would know the answer to that. He was National Security Adviser at the time of Haig, and he was aware of Haig's whole interest in the Cuba matter.