

The Miami Herald
January 1, 2009

After 50 years, questions about Cuba still hound Wieland

BY ALFONSO CHARDY

William Arthur Wieland's name has now faded from memory, but the former State Department official made headlines half a century ago -- blamed for Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista's downfall and Fidel Castro's rise to power, even though privately he derided Castro as communist and dangerous.

As Castro's guerrillas fought Batista's soldiers on the island, Wieland labored in obscurity in Washington, writing memos that described Castro as moderate. When Castro claimed victory and imposed communism, Wieland's career and credibility lay in ruins as he defended himself against allegations he was himself a communist agent.

In the end, Wieland was cleared and even defended by President John F. Kennedy during a news conference -- but Wieland retired in disgrace without ever receiving an ambassadorship he had coveted.

A review of declassified U.S. documents and other records, plus interviews with Wieland's colleagues and his widow, do not resolve the issue of whether he was pro-Castro.

What the documents and interviews show is that Wieland had contradictory views in private and public and failed to reconcile them or relay them properly to colleagues and supervisors.

Whatever his private misgivings about Castro, Wieland did not articulate them forcefully until he testified in 1961 and 1962 when Congress investigated him. By then it was too late. Castro was in power and Wieland's influence on Cuba policy had evaporated.

There is no question Wieland played a key role in shaping Cuban history through policy recommendations. But why Cuban exiles and their conservative American allies singled him out as chief "villain" behind Castro's victory remains somewhat of a mystery.

After all, Wieland was only a mid-level State Department official. He had more powerful bosses, people like assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs Roy Rubottom and John Foster Dulles, who oversaw foreign policy as secretary of state.

Yet, neither Dulles nor Rubottom drew the level of invective eventually unleashed against Wieland.

The reason may be that Wieland had a little-known Cuba connection that made him all the more deserving of attack in the eyes of Cuban exiles who came to view him as Castro's man in Washington. The source of the controversy was an allegation to the State Department that Wieland was a communist who had previously used aliases that he failed to disclose to his bosses.

Wieland's origins are uncertain and his efforts to conceal parts of his background intriguing. For example, he did not have a birth certificate to prove he was William Arthur Wieland born on the date he claimed he was born.

In his State Department application, Wieland failed to disclose he had been fired from a Havana newspaper job for allegedly "pirating" wire stories from one news service to another.

And in a national security disclosure form, Wieland replied "none" in the section that asked whether he had ever used a nickname or alias.

Born in New York City of parents of European descent, Wieland partly grew up in Cuba when his biological father died and his mother married a Venezuelan-American who then took the family to the island.

Wieland often gave his name as Guillermo Arturo Montenegro -- the Spanish-language form for William and Arthur and the last name of his stepfather -- and even enrolled at Villanova College as William Montenegro.

As a result, some exiles have speculated that Wieland and Castro might have become friends on the island or that Wieland himself may have once belonged to the Cuban Communist Party.

While Wieland denied both allegations in congressional testimony, a State Department official who investigated his background suggested that Wieland was deceptive because he did not disclose his Spanish-language name.

'He said a former name in his estimation did not fit the definition of `alias or nickname,' " Otto Otepka, the investigator, told the congressional panel that investigated Wieland.

Wieland testified in 1962 that he met Castro in April 1959 when Castro visited Washington to address the American Society of Newspaper Editors and meet with then Vice President Richard Nixon.

But Roger Rojas Lavernia, a founder of Batista's state security service known as Bureau of Repression Against Communist Activities, said his own research indicates that Wieland and Castro might have met on the island prior to 1959.

"There is no definitive proof," Rojas Lavernia said. `` But it's possible."

Rojas Lavernia has in his possession a picture of Wieland and Castro together. But Rojas Lavernia said he was not sure whether the picture was taken in Havana or in Washington when Castro visited the U.S. capital.

Critics say Wieland helped Castro because he recommended a halt to U.S. arms shipments to Batista, strongly denied to senior policymakers that Castro was a communist and instructed the last U.S. ambassador to Batista to receive a briefing before traveling to Havana for an interview with prominent journalist, Herbert Matthews of the New York Times. Supporters, however, maintain Wieland was merely seeking to prompt Batista to leave Cuba and pre-empt Castro's takeover through a moderate coalition government.

A transcript of Wieland's testimony shows he claimed to have authored or co-authored memos warning supervisors and colleagues about Castro before his 1959 triumph. But no such memos could be found at the National Archives.

"It was my belief that if Castro won he would be far worse than Batista for Cuba and dangerous to the United States," Wieland testified in 1962.

Grayston Lynch, a former CIA official involved in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, wrote in his 1998 book *Decision for Disaster: Betrayal at the Bay of Pigs*, that Wieland and Wieland's boss -- Rubottom -- were responsible for Castro's triumph.

"Rubottom and Wieland," wrote Lynch, `` decided that if [Castro] could not generate enough support inside Cuba to overthrow Batista, they would simply force the dictator out. And they did."

Typical of Wieland's portrayals of Castro in internal government documents was a memo he wrote to Rubottom Feb. 19, 1959 -- slightly more than a month after the triumph of Castro's revolution.

It says that while "Che" Guevara and Raúl Castro are radicals surrounded by pro-communists, Fidel Castro "and what might be described as the elements within the 26th of July movement and their allies" are geared `` towards moderation and the establishment of a prosperous democratic Cuba with honest government."

Wayne Smith, who interviewed Wieland for his 1987 book *The Closest of Enemies*, said Wieland was enjoying retirement but remained resentful.

Wieland's widow, Annemarie, said her husband was so angry at being blamed for Castro's takeover that he refused to talk to her about that period.

"I had to screen his calls because some people would call saying he was a traitor," she said.

Annemarie married Wieland in 1973 after his first wife died. He died of cancer on Sept. 23, 1987. He was 79.

Miami Herald staff writer Luisa Yanez contributed to this report.

Milestones in William Arthur Wieland's Life

1907: Born in New York City, ostensibly on Nov. 17, 1907 -- though he did not have a birth certificate to prove it. Because of a "clerical error," he said later, his certificate read William Robert Wieland, born Nov. 20, 1907.

1911: Wieland's father dies.

1915: Wieland's mother marries Venezuelan-American Manuel Ralph Montenegro and Wieland begins calling himself Guillermo Arturo Montenegro.

1923: Stepfather takes family to Cuba, but Wieland stays behind to finish school.

1925: Joined family in Havana and enrolls at Ruston Academy, a school for American expatriates.

1926: Quits Ruston and returns to U.S. to enroll at Villanova College as William Montenegro.

1927: Enlists in U.S. Cavalry as Monty Wieland and falsifies birth certificate to appear older.

1930: Mother dies in Havana.

1932: Joins Havana Post as reporter.

1937: Fired from Havana Post for "pirating" Associated Press stories, but later joins AP in Washington to cover State Department.

1941: Applies at the State Department but does not provide copy of his birth certificate. Hired and posted to Rio de Janeiro as press spokesman.

1957: Promoted to policy job at the State Department in Washington.

1959: Recommends quickly recognizing Castro-led government and writes memo describing Castro as moderate. Meets Castro during a State Department luncheon when Castro visits U.S. capital in April.

1964: Assigned to embassy in Australia.

1968: Retired from foreign service as consul general in Melbourne.

1987: Dies in Hollywood, Md., at age 79.