

The Ultimate Unmasking of Henry Kissinger: Ambassador Robert C. Hill and the Rewriting of History on U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Argentina’s “Dirty War”

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“(President Lyndon B) Johnson was certain in his own mind that (President Richard M.) Nixon had betrayed his country.” – LBJ aide Joseph Califano in 2000¹

“‘History will treat you well,’ Kissinger told [Nixon], in their last days at the White House. ‘It depends who writes the history,’ Nixon replied.”²

“(Kissinger’s) 50-year presidential meeting streak could yet be broken. So far, Joe Biden hasn’t sent him an invite. ‘I knew Biden when he was a senator, but I have had no contact with him since he has been president,’ Kissinger said matter of factly. ... President (Donald) Trump conveyed a characteristic of great decisiveness and very personal vibrancy. He was a unique phenomenon in American foreign policy.”³

¹ Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan, “Nixon’s Ultimate Betrayal,” *Vanity Fair* (September 2000); accessed August 21, 2022 at <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/2000/9/nixons-ultimate-betrayal>

² Farrell. *Richard Nixon: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), 554.

³ Salena Zito, “Every president invites Henry Kissinger to the White House – except Biden,” *New York Post* (July 9, 2022), accessed September 8, 2022 at <https://nypost.com/2022/07/09/henry-kissinger-every-president-but-biden-invites-me-to-white-house/>.

In 1987 it was revealed that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, nearly a decade earlier, gave a “green light” to murderous neo-Nazi generals in Argentina for their so-called “dirty war” in which tens of thousands of their fellow citizens and neighbors were abducted and tortured in clandestine concentration camps, many of whose bodies were disposed of in secret mass graves or thrown out of airplanes into the South Atlantic. It was shown how early in the time of terror Ambassador Robert C. Hill, a Republican political appointee in Buenos Aires and a life-long Cold War conservative, discovered the Secretary of State’s approval for the massacre. Although threatened by Kissinger associates with being fired, Hill nonetheless pushed forward to do what he could to pressure *mano a mano* a vicious regime—run by those he considered far-right “thugs⁴”—to end the bloodshed. Two years before the German American’s complicity went public⁵, the Argentine federal prosecutor who won historic convictions against Kissinger’s military junta associates closed his argument at the path-breaking trial with the dramatic invocation, “Never again!” It was a phrase enshrined by the Nuremberg war crimes trials and associated with the systemic, state-sponsored Hitlerian Holocaust.

Subject: Your conversations with Ambassadors Hill and
Syracusa and other notes. April 7th

1. Conversation with Ambassador Hill at Embassy Residence on March 28. The Ambassador discussed Henry Kissinger's role in the Argentine human rights situation. Hill said that he had made arrangements seven times for a Kissinger visit to Argentina. Each time the Secretary cancelled. Finally Kissinger decided to go to the OAS meeting in Santiago in June 1976. In the middle of the meetings, the Secretary wanted to visit Buenos Aires. This time the Argentines refused because they did not want to interrupt OAS activities being held in a neighboring state. Kissinger and Foreign Minister Guzzetti agreed to meet in Santiago.

The Argentines were very worried that Kissinger would lecture to them on human rights. Guzzetti and Kissinger had a very long breakfast but the Secretary did not raise the subject. Finally Guzzetti did. Kissinger asked how long will it take you (the Argentines) to clean up the problem. Guzzetti replied that it would be done by the end of the year. Kissinger approved.

In other words, Ambassador Hill explained, Kissinger gave the Argentines the green light. Within two weeks after

Memorandum of conversation between Robert C. Hill and
Patricia Derian. Photograph by author.

⁴ The precision was offered to the author in one of more than a dozen interviews with Hill’s son, William Graham Bowdoin Hill, who passed away September 29, 2015.

⁵ Martin Edwin Andersen, “Kissinger and the ‘Dirty War’”, *The Nation* (October 31, 1987).

In response to the revelations, coming more than a decade after Kissinger's green lighting of the 'dirty war' generals later convicted of mass murder, the former Secretary of State and his minions went into full damage control; their postmortem gaslighting lampooned an already-dead Hill. In a private communication Kissinger wrote, "The notion of Hill as a passionate human-rights advocate is news to all his former associates." Having once won the Nobel Peace Prize for signing a cease-fire agreement with North Vietnam, Kissinger's world-class efforts to rewrite history rested in part on energetically dissing a dead man who seemingly could tell no other tales.

What has become clearer only now is how Hill also was privy to a much larger scandal involving the efforts of the future national security advisor and Foggy Bottom chief to help sabotage peace talks with the North Vietnamese in the immediate run-up to the 1968 U.S. presidential election, a contest their boss—Richard M. Nixon—was poised to lose. Yet, what has been revealed up to now does not connect dots critical to detective history (something that, like in detective fiction, includes the physical records found in incident reports, crime reports and accident reports). Nearly half a century later, declassified federal documentation shows Hill knew exactly what Kissinger—someone still venerated today by the Washington Establishment as a highly influential figure in the Nixon Administration—had done. For it was Hill himself who played a key role in Nixon's pre-election efforts to derail the peace process.

"Ken Hughes is one of America's foremost experts on secret presidential recordings, especially those of (former President) Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon," wrote famed Watergate reporter Bob Woodward in a blurb for Hughes' book, *Chasing Shadows: The Nixon Tapes, the Chennault Affair, and the Origins of Watergate*, first published in 2014. "In this book he has expertly identified and explained one of the many drivers that put Nixon on the road to Watergate."

In the debate about whether the 37th president of the United States actually engaged in treason⁶ before he was elected, the Hughes tome is key to understanding Nixon's pre-Watergate penchant for both Madison Avenue image-making and political skullduggery. In it he shows how the former Republican Vice President, worried that

⁶ David Taylor, "The Lyndon Johnson tapes: Richard Nixon's 'treason,'" BBC News, March 22, 2013. "By the time of the election in November 1968, LBJ had evidence Nixon had sabotaged the Vietnam war peace talks - or, as he put it, that Nixon was guilty of treason and had 'blood on his hands.'"

his Democratic presidential rival was closing in on him fast in public opinion polls, was particularly concerned that the Paris peace talks with North Vietnam pushed by Johnson and avidly supported by then Vice President Hubert Humphrey would be the nail in his political coffin. Hughes' review of thousands of hours of declassified White House tapes conclusively showed how those negotiations were secretly undermined by Anna Chennault, a top Republican fundraiser with a Watergate East penthouse.

Citing the crusading work of Woodward and his Washington Post colleague Carl Bernstein, Hughes noted that the Watergate scandal that consumed his presidency was the result of five different, but related, wars Nixon quarterbacked: "against the anti-Vietnam War movement, the news media, the Democrats, the justice system and, finally, against history itself." He continued:

The Chennault Affair played an unacknowledged, largely unseen, role in all five of these Watergate wars, driving some of Nixon's most outrageous assaults on war critics, journalism, the opposition, justice, and history. The affair is a thread running through the Huston Plan, the Enemies List, and the Special Investigations Unit ("the Plumbers"), and it provides clearer answers to questions about some of the more outlandish decisions Nixon made. Why was his reaction to the leak of the Pentagon Papers so extreme? Why was he obsessed with getting his hands on all government documents related to his predecessor's decision to stop bombing North Vietnam in 1968? Why did he order the Watergate cover-up? ... (Y)ears of research have convinced me that the origins of Watergate extend deeper than we previously knew to encompass a crime committed to elect Nixon president in the first place. *Chasing Shadows* tells the story of that crime and its role in the unmasking of the president.⁷

On June 17, 1971, nearly three years after his election and more than a half century before the FBI executed a warrant approved by a federal magistrate judge to search the club and home at Mar-a-Lago of former President Donald Trump, seeking highly classified information, Nixon met with National Security Advisor Kissinger and senior White House staff to discuss putting into operation a key element of the Huston Plan. Named after his aide Tom Charles Huston, it focused on a proposed extensive use of covert official break-ins, wiretaps, and mail surveillance supposedly to fight domestic terrorism. Huston maintained that the Brookings Institution, a think tank less than a mile from the White House, "had a top-secret report on the bombing halt, written by some of the same people who oversaw the Pentagon Papers project." The White House recordings captured Nixon asking, "You remember Huston's plan? Implement it. ... I want it implemented on a thievery basis. Goddamn it, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it." Hughes noted that the soon-to-be impeachable

⁷ Hughes, *Chasing Shadows* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), p. x.

president had good reason to want the bombing halt file, if it in fact existed, as it potentially contained “politically explosive information” and was “a matter of survival.”⁸

When another senior Nixon aide noted that the bombing stopped less than a week before the 1968 election, playing to Nixon Kissinger interrupted, “You remember, I used to give you information about it at the time.” Kissinger was, Hughes noted,

reminding them of the secret role he had played as an informant to the 1968 Nixon campaign on Johnson’s bombing halt negotiations. Kissinger had worked as a consultant on a 1967 bombing halt initiative for LBJ, so when he visited the American negotiating team in Paris during the 1968 talks, members confided in him. He gained Nixon’s trust by betraying theirs.

Buried in Hughes’ footnotes, however, is a critical part of the story on Kissinger’s real role in betrayal. “Nixon defended Kissinger from the charge that he had provided the campaign classified information before anyone had the chance to level it,” Hughes noted.

A campaign memo, however, shows that Kissinger did not have to reveal details of the negotiations to imply that the advice he was giving Nixon was based on inside information. “The following is the report from the top diplomatic source who is secretly with us and has access to the Paris talks and other information: Our source feels that here is a better-than-even chance that Johnson will order a bombing halt at approximately mid-October. This will be tied in with a big flurry of diplomatic activity in Paris which will have no meaning but will be made to look important.”

When Nixon quoted this report in his memoir⁹, he omitted the reference to Kissinger’s access to the bombing halt negotiations. Nixon made it clear that Kissinger’s surreptitious campaign role impressed him: “One factor that had most convinced me of Kissinger’s credibility was the length to which he went to protect his secrecy.” He also acknowledged that Kissinger’s status as an informant played a role in his decision to make him national security adviser: “During the last days of the campaign, when Kissinger was providing us with information about the bombing halt, I became more aware of both his knowledge and his influence.”¹⁰

⁸ Hughes, *Chasing Shadows*, 2-3.

⁹ Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 323-26.

¹⁰ Hughes, *Chasing Shadows*, 176-77. In drawing the dots ever more closer, Hughes also cited top Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman, “Confidential—Eyes Only,” 27 September 1968, “WHSF 1-11” folder, Box 1, Nixon Presidential Returned Materials Collection: White House Special Files, Richard M. Nixon Library, http://nixon.archives.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/whsfreturned/WHSF_Box01/WHSF1-11.pdf (Note: Several attempts to access the document on 19 August 2022 resulted in the message “Page not found: The requested page could not be found.”)

Also relegated to the Hughes’ footnotes is a telling quote from a 28 May 2002 oral interview conducted with Richard V. Allen, in 1968 a key Nixon foreign policy adviser. Conducted by the University of Virginia’s Miller Center, where Hughes worked, Allen, who went on to serve as Ronald Reagan’s first national security adviser, stated flatly:

Henry Kissinger, on his own, volunteered information to us through a spy, a former student, that he had in the Paris peace talks, who would call him and debrief, and Kissinger called me from pay phones and we spoke in German. ... (H)e offloaded mostly every night what had happened that day in Paris.¹¹

Allen went on to claim that, “on the other hand, we had Anna Chennault, who was ... urging the South Vietnamese not to go to the peace table, saying that they’d get a better deal with Nixon. That eventually led to a lot of confusion.” Yet Allen assured, “She had no authority, no brief.”

Missing from the Hughes rendition, as pathbreaking as it was at the time, was any mention of the role of Hill (who in 1964 and then again in 1966 served as aide de camp as the former Vice President barnstormed around the country in support of the Republican election ticket) and what he knew as a Nixon confidant of Kissinger’s arguably treasonous involvement.



Article by Jack Anderson in the *Laconia Citizen* regarding the relationship between Ambassador Robert C. Hill and then former Vice President Richard M. Nixon.

¹¹ <http://millercenter.org/president/reagan/oralhistory/richard-allen>

“The Nixon people...massively, directly, and covertly, interfered in probably one of the most important negotiations in American diplomatic history,” remembered Richard Holbrooke, in 1968 a member of the U.S. negotiating team in Paris and a future U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.¹²

Hill’s involvement first turned up publicly in 2000, when Irish author Anthony Summers and American journalist Robbyn Swan constructed what, for critics, seemed a scandalous bridge too far even for Richard Nixon, the “ultimate betrayal.” Their book, *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon*,¹³ reported that it was Hill who first put Chennault in touch with Nixon and as a “Republican foreign-policy specialist” escorted the Chinese-born journalist-socialite to Nixon’s Fifth Avenue apartment, where the former Vice President and future President introduced her to the man who became the 37th president’s Attorney General, John Mitchell.

Chennault later told candidate Nixon that she could always be reached through Hill and in the weeks immediately before the 1968 elections, she was in direct contact almost daily by pay phone with Mitchell. National Security Agency (NSA) intercepts of the South Vietnamese president’s conversations, and CIA surveillance of that country’s ambassador in Washington, tipped off LBJ about Nixon’s conspiring with a wartime ally to sabotage the all-party peace talks. Although he ordered FBI physical surveillance and wiretaps of the South Vietnamese embassy and of Chennault, long-time Nixon ally and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover told Chennault about the countermoves. Meanwhile the Republican presidential nominee dissembled just long enough to win the White House by a less than one-point margin in the popular vote over Humphrey (who ironically feared his revealing the plot would have itself been seen as election dirty tricks). “Had it been made public at the time,” Summers and Swan concluded, “it would surely have destroyed Nixon’s presidential hopes at one stroke, and forever.”

“(Richard) Allen has always insisted Chennault was a ‘loose cannon,’ never authorized by the Nixon campaign, but newly discovered documents show that he was in close contact with her about the ‘October Surprise’ plot just days before the election,” wrote fellow Irish writer Shane O’Sullivan. The opening two chapters of the O’Sullivan book, *Dirty Tricks; Nixon, Watergate, and the CIA*,¹⁴ focused on “this treasonous operation in full and the consternation it caused at the highest levels of

¹² Summers and Swan, op. cit.

¹³ Summers with Swan. *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Viking, 2000).

¹⁴ (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2017), xvii.

government.” Tipping his hat to Hughes’ “fascinating” revelations published three years earlier, *Chasing Shadows* in part missed the “full story,” O’Sullivan noted, in part because it neglected Hill’s personal papers.

After Nixon met with Chennault in 1967 to recruit her for his campaign, she met later that year with the South Vietnamese president in Saigon to deliver “a message from Nixon requesting that (she) be recognized as the conduit for information that might flow between the two.” Meanwhile, Hill, chair of the Republican National Committee Foreign Policy Task Force since 1965,

wrote a memo anticipating an attempt by Lyndon B. Johnson to settle the Vietnam War during his 1968 bid for reelection. He accused Johnson of deliberately provoking the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964 and acting illegally by declaring war on North Vietnam without Congressional consent. He suggested preparing a study on the incident by ‘distinguished and objective scholars’ which could be used against the president ‘at the appropriate time.’

O’Sullivan adds to the Summers and Swan story of Hill being present at Chennault’s first meeting with Nixon, in New York, along with John Mitchell, Richard Allen, and Nixon’s long-time personal secretary (and friend of Hill) Rose Mary Woods, on February 16, 1968, two weeks after Nixon announced in New Hampshire that he was running for president. (Ironically, Woods and Mitchell were Chennault neighbors, with 7th floor apartments in Watergate East.)¹⁵ New Hampshire native “Hill may have set the ball rolling in mid-January, when Chennault’s calendar reads ‘Bob Hill—drop by to talk after dinner on Nixon.’” O’Sullivan noted that “Chennault attended a Foreign Policy dinner at the Mayflower Hotel at the end of the month, where she may have met Allen,” then a senior staff member at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace and someone who in January had met with CIA Director Richard Helms seeking informal help with a research project on national Communist parties around the world. Allen went on to become Nixon’s director for foreign policy research.

Dirty Tricks goes on to mention Hill’s critical role as a Nixon liaison to Chennault, whose stock ran high in October for several reasons, including her having raised \$250,000 for the GOP campaign. Most importantly, O’Sullivan uncovered key documentation showing that Hill remained in contact as Chennault helped put into operation the sabotage of the peace talks. She later told her biographer that “just Nixon, Mitchell, (Texas Republican Senator John) Tower, and Robert Hill ... all [then] dead, know of the campaign’s connections to the (Government of South Vietnam) through

¹⁵ O’Sullivan, *Dirty Tricks*, 4-5.

her.” While researching Hill’s papers at the Hoover Institution Archives O’Sullivan found “an intriguing handwritten note” of a conversation the future U.S. Ambassador to Argentina had with his friend and Nixon personal secretary Rose Mary Woods the day after the election. “Hill’s use of ‘Boss’ echoes Chennault’s and shows clearly that he was the intermediary between Nixon, Chennault, and (the South Vietnamese president) at this point.” As Nixon team “anxiety over news leakage kept festering,” Chennault noted, Hill continued to be supportive of her. O’Sullivan concluded that future Attorney General Mitchell and Hill “were clearly (Chennault’s) main contacts to Nixon, with Richard Allen acting as a ‘listener.’”¹⁶



Photo taken by U.S. Army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle on 16 March 1968, in the aftermath of the My Lai Massacre in South Vietnam, showing mostly women and children dead on a road, some of the hundreds of victims of mass murder. Found guilty of murdering 22 villagers, Lieutenant William Calley Jr., a platoon leader and the only one of 26 soldiers charged with criminal offenses to be convicted, was originally given a life sentence, but served three-and-a-half years under house arrest after President Nixon commuted his sentence.

On January 6, 1969, less than three weeks before Nixon’s presidential inauguration, the *Boston Globe* published a story, “Was Saigon’s peace talk delay due to Republican promises?” It quoted Chennault as saying, “You’re going to get me in a lot of trouble. I can’t say anything... we’re at a sensitive time... I know so much and can say so little.” Woods wrote a memo opposing Chennault’s bid for appointment as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Information. “This would be a disaster. The

¹⁶ O’Sullivan, *Dirty Tricks*, 16, 31-34, 42-45, and 51.

sooner we can keep her as far away as possible from the Administration—the better.” That same day, Richard Allen penned a note to Hill: “I miss our frequent telephone conversations—is there nothing new to report?”¹⁷

After an April 12, 1971 meeting with Taiwan’s outgoing ambassador, Nixon and Kissinger “welcomed Anna Chennault into the Oval Office for a short talk,” after which the president told aides to give her a “high-level title ... [but] it can’t be in government.” He later told Kissinger, “We have to finesse her.”¹⁸

Forty-six years later, Nixon biographer John A. Farrell noted that, of the “moles” the Nixon campaign had inside the Johnson Administration, “Harvard’s Henry Kissinger was a particularly indiscreet visitor to the American delegation in Paris—and so was not surprised when, five days before the election, Johnson announced a bombing halt to spur negotiations.” He pointed to evidence “how Nixon personally directed the skullduggery—conducting backstage negotiations with a foreign country in violation of U.S. law.” He goes on to quote the cheeky Kissinger in his memoir, *Ending the Vietnam War*: “Nixon never admitted this. It would have been highly inappropriate if true.” Farrell then noted that, “Under federal law, which bans private citizens from undercutting the government by negotiating with foreign powers, Nixon’s actions were potentially felonious.”¹⁹

In 2015, a year after Hughes’ tour de force on the self-recorded and self-inflicted Nixon bombshell, former *New York Times* correspondent Tim Weiner weighed in with a critical insight that gave further weight to Hill’s heft inside the Nixon inner circle and what he would have known about the (at the time future) Nobel Peace Prize winner Kissinger’s role in the 1968 campaign. Weiner noted that the “1968 Nixon campaign ... had the ability to tap wellsprings of cash whose ultimate source is still a mystery,” and how, four years after Nixon’s win of the presidency, “campaign cash in Mexican banks would provide a link in the chain of events that began the agonies of Nixon’s downfall.” In 1968, Weiner reported, Hill served as the Republican National Committee’s foreign policy chair and on September 29, 1968, told the campaign that

¹⁷ O’Sullivan, *Dirty Tricks*, 64.

¹⁸ O’Sullivan, *Dirty Tricks*, 58-59.

¹⁹ Farrell, *Richard Nixon: The Life*, 341-342. On August 18, 2022, Kissinger sought to cover his own tracks on CNN in an interview with former Obama chief of staff David Axelrod, “(W)hen Nixon was elected, I did not think that I would have any relationship with the Nixon Administration. ... Nixon ... needed me as a partner,” In “Ep. 502—Henry Kissinger the Axe Files with David Axelrod, accessed on September 2, 2022 at <https://www.cnn.com/audio/podcasts/axe-files/episodes/ed2284f3-8342-4104-94d5-af50021bc00>

“RN’s Committee in Mexico” had access to a “three to five million dollar (cache) to play with” that was controlled by Winston Scott, since 1956 the CIA’s station chief in Mexico City. As the Eisenhower Administration’s ambassador to Mexico from 1957 to 1960, Hill had worked closely with Win Scott on key intelligence and security issues. The millions of dollars in question, Weiner added, “remain untraceable.”²⁰

“A politically ambitious ... Kissinger was seeking high office in the next administration no matter who won,” Weiner wrote. “He was dealing with both parties, trading in the hardest political currency: secret information. ... On October 9, 1968, Kissinger called Mitchell with a report that LBJ would stop the bombing of North Vietnam and offer a cease-fire to the Communists. Kissinger’s tip proved accurate; with that inside information, Nixon began to plan his counterstrategy to lure South Vietnam away from the peace talks.”²¹

In an era before online journalism, one of those finessed and kept as far away as possible from the new emerging Nixon-Kissinger administration axis was Robert Hill. For nearly two decades, the already three-time U.S. ambassador to ever more important Latin American countries remained steadfastly loyal to Nixon, at the dawn of the New Frontier even refusing to accept an offer from Robert F. Kennedy to join his brother’s Administration as the American envoy to Lima. During Nixon’s transition to power, Hill’s name was in the official mix for Deputy Under Secretary of State for Administration and, even before the November elections, the top job at Foggy Bottom. In a letter to Nixon himself, former Naval Attache J.V. Heimark wrote that Hill had “in abundance” the qualities the soon-to-be elected Republican stated that he wanted in his Secretary of State. Heimark said that his personal knowledge included the two years he served under Hill’s “distinguished leadership while he was Ambassador to Mexico. ... During the seven years on three separate assignments ... I worked directly for 18 U.S. Ambassadors in eight embassies in Latin America, Ambassador Hill and one other were head and shoulders above the rest in both competence and performance.” Hill, he said:

²⁰ Weiner. *One Man Against the World; The Tragedy of Richard Nixon* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015), 20-21. Although Weiner also explored the Chennault affair, Hill’s key role was not included in it, nor was his later role in outing Kissinger for giving the “green light” to Argentina’s neo-Nazi regime.

²¹ Weiner, op. cit., 30.

(K)new how to get results (in improving relations with) a host government that was not very friendly, by using a variety of techniques. ... His code of ethics and morals is very high. The easy road is not for him unless it is also the right one. ... He has many good friends on both sides of the aisle in Congress.²²

A detective history eyewitness, Heimark singled out Hill as “able, earlier than most people, to recognize situations that are not in the best interests of the United States. (Fidel) Castro of Cuba is a good example. ... Opposing those who were Castro apologists was not easy right before as well as after Castro came to power.” “During the eight years I served in the Eisenhower administration I knew everyone of any importance ... personally, yet I saw Cuba fall and couldn’t do a thing about it,” Hill lamented in an unpublished oral history found at the Hill papers collection at Dartmouth College. “It completely broke my heart because my friend (Secretary of State John) Foster Dulles did nothing about it.” Unlike what happened in Argentina more than a decade and a half later when facing down Kissinger, Hill confessed, “*I never had the guts to go to where it would have caused me to be fired.*” (Italics added.)²³

In the 18 months before Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Hill tried to alert the American foreign policy establishment about the possibilities of a pro-Soviet take-over of a country 90 miles from the United States. Yet, Hill, the well-connected Republican political appointee whose interventionist inclinations were (as would be seen) generally shared by Democrats and Republican leaders alike, found that his efforts (and those of a small eclectic group of politicians and foreign policy and intelligence experts), to force a reexamination of U.S. policy towards Cuba were stymied in Washington, leading them to focus blame State Department foreign service careerists, some sympathetic to Castro’s rebellion. The Eisenhower Administration’s lack of attention to Latin America had left these lower-level Washington-based U.S. diplomats, “the Club” in Hill’s own words, invested with uncommon decision-making power in the region.

An April 1959 meeting of U.S. regional envoys held in El Salvador, little more than three months *after* Castro’s takeover in Havana, proved to be a high-water mark in

²² The transition recommendations, accessed on August 22, 2022, can be found here: https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/whsfreturned/WHSF_Box_21/WHSF21-16.pdf

²³ Oral 1962 history with Robert C. Hill, a copy which I obtained from the Dartmouth collection (herein referred to as “Anonymous oral history” as the identity of the oral historian and for whom s/he worked is missing), 88 and 142. <https://archives-manuscripts.dartmouth.edu/repositories/2/resources/990>

attempts to focus attention on the nature of *fidelistas* intentions, when Hill left the meeting thinking, as he was led to believe happened, that he had maneuvered the unconvinced into taking timely action. The failure of Hill's initiatives resulted in Washington's mobilizing for action months later, after plausible policy options to thwart Castro's by then overtly Marxist plans had been reduced to near zero.

Although Hill later blamed the insular "Club" and reporting in *The New York Times* for Castro being able to come to power,²⁴ in the years marked by the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis he also blamed himself for the Executive branch failure to devise a coherent anti-Castro policy when it might have made a difference. Risking losing both political viability and employment by pressing its case too hard, the advanced guard feared becoming the lost patrol: "I take a good deal of responsibility because I went so far but not far enough," Hill recalled in 1962, when he had already left the State Department.²⁵

The efforts of Hill and others who tried forcing a review of the conventional wisdom of the professional bureaucracy were unsuccessful, with a clear view in Washington of the insurrection in Cuba coming only months after Castro's seizing power, when it was way too late. In not heeding Hill's early warnings, the system was unable, despite a preponderance of evidence that would have allowed it to do so, to act in its own national security self-interest as seen at the time, a phenomenon in political affairs going beyond the U.S. experience well played by historian Barbara W. Tuchman in *The March of Folly; From Troy to Vietnam*.²⁶ Hill's role shows a political appointee outmaneuvered by a State Department career establishment seeking to restore a confidence shattered by McCarthyism but mired in its own views about the fast-paced changes taking place, and overconfident about its own ability to establish acceptable relations with the fiery new leader once he seized office on New Year's Eve, 1959.

Hill's self-perception as a foreign policy establishment outsider, despite his gold-plated Republican internationalist (and admittedly interventionist) credentials, also affected his strategy to force change in U.S. policy. (Even had Hill's counsel been heeded, however, the range of options that would have been open to policymakers at the time was limited at best, and forever shattered in April 1961 in the Bay of Pigs/ Playa de Giron disaster.) Finally, Hill's ethical dissent provides for a further reexamination of the enduring view held by historians and others that Castro was

²⁴ Mario Lazo. *Dagger in the Heart* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), 173.

²⁵ Anonymous oral history, 142.

²⁶ Tuchman, *The March of Folly* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

“forced” into an alliance with Moscow due to U.S. hostility to his revolution, rather than by a longstanding antipathy toward Cuba’s northern neighbor held by Castro and his closest associates, but also by most Cubans previously yoked to a corrupt, brutal military regime allied with Washington.²⁷

The Cuban *imbroglio* came towards the end of more than a decade of official U.S. inattention to (which is not to say lack of intervention in) Latin America, as other regions of the world, particularly Europe and Asia, received priority focus from policymakers. U.S. policy towards the region south of the Rio Grande, noted one scholar, “originated not in the White House but largely with U.S. officials in the field and in the lower levels of the State Department. ... As a result, ambassadors, embassy officials, and desk officers ... played a significant role in the creation and implementation of policy.”²⁸ It was at this level—“desk men” working from Foggy Bottom’s 4th floor Hill and other critics charged, rather than on the 5th, where the department top echelon’s offices were—that Cuba policy was made, at least until late 1958.²⁹

The low priority assigned to Latin America by the Eisenhower administration was reflected in the relative lack of regional expertise of several of the Administration’s

²⁷ That Castro was forced into the Soviet camp by U.S. hostility is argued most forcefully by Morris Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution: The United States and Cuba, 1952-1986*, (New York: Cambridge University Press). Wayne Smith, in what many scholars believe to be the most authoritative study of U.S.-Cuban relations since the revolution (*The Closest of Enemies: A Personal and Diplomatic History of the Castro Years* [New York: Norton, 1987]), held that “there may be some truth” to that view. Smith also found that the argument that Castro’s senior associates’ leftist views were evidence that his own position was “hardly persuasive,” 44-45. Cuba specialist Jorge Dominguez maintained that the evidence “clearly shows that Castro was not pushed into Soviet arms by the U.S. or by domestic conflicts” but did not offer a convincing rebuttal to those arguments (*To Make the World Safe for Revolution: Cuba’s Foreign Policy* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989], 20).

²⁸ Kyle Longley, *The Sparrow and the Hawk, Costa Rica and the United States During the Rise of Jose Figueres* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 160.

²⁹ See for example U.S. Ambassador to Havana Earl E.T. Smith’s testimony at the Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-Sixth Congress, Second Session, Part 9, August 27, 30, 1960, 52-53. Smith, whose first posting was an envoy to Cuba, observed: “I have learned from experience and observation that in our system the actions by the lower echelon and those who are influential in the lower echelon form our policy, and when those higher up act upon them, the policies have already been determined by events.” The characterization of “desk men ... career Foreign Service Officers who frequently look upon political appointees as here today and gone tomorrow,” contained in Earl E.T. Smith, *The Fourth Floor, An Account of the Castro Communist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1962), 227-228.

point men, both career foreign service officers and political appointees. Eisenhower's closest advisor on Latin America was his brother, Milton, who had no significant prior history in the region prior to his sibling's presidency. Career diplomat Roy R. Rubottom, Jr., assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, began learning Spanish upon his appointment to the top State Department portfolio dealing with the region. Secretary of State Dulles, who intensely disliked career diplomat and Sovietologist Charles E. "Chip" Bohlen, proposed sending Bohlen, then ambassador to Moscow, to Havana as head of the mission there in a clear sign of official disfavor, a diplomatic Siberia for a high-flyer like Bohlen, until the choice was vetoed by Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson. (Bohlen was instead made ambassador to the Philippines).³⁰

The person who ended up receiving the Cuba posting, Earl E.T. Smith, an entrepreneur and Republican fundraiser, never held a diplomatic post, did not speak Spanish, and became increasingly antagonistic to his own embassy staff.³¹ (In his first assignment as an envoy, to Costa Rica, where President José Figueres was a major figure in left-of-center democratic interventionism in the region,³² Hill himself had relatively meager credentials for the job. One of the youngest ambassadors ever—35—when he was named to the post in San José, Hill's experience in the region was limited to his work in the Washington, D.C. office of the W.R. Grace & Company, a worldwide enterprise engaged in trading fabric, fertilizer, machinery and other products. There Hill attended embassy parties, knew the appropriate State Department desk officers, and picked up "some" Spanish on a six-week trip through Latin America and subsequent visits to the region. That, however, was about to change. "Hill's biography reads like a satirical left-wing caricature of a '*yanqui* imperialist," the muckracking newsletter "Latin America" later noted.³³ "He has long-standing connection with the United States security and intelligence establishment.")

³⁰ Hill, who was assistant secretary of state for congressional affairs, said that he warned Dulles at the time: "Mr. Secretary, I can't take Chip Bohlen's name to the Congress—our Ambassador to Russia—where they know that you dislike him. Now this is downgrading Bohlen and taking him out of his life-time's experience, to where the Congressional wrath will be on your head." Lyndon Johnson told Hill: "Look, don't go any further unless you want to embarrass Dulles. ... We won't go along with it." "Transcript of a Recorded Interview with Robert C. Hill," Richard D. Challener, Interviewer, Littleton, New Hampshire, 26 August 1964, *The John Foster Dulles Oral History Project*, Princeton University, 38. See also Earl E.T. Smith testimony, op. cit., p. 119.

³¹ Anthony De Palma, *The Man Who Invented Fidel: Castro, Cuba, and Herbert L. Matthews of The New York Times* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006). Chapter 7.

³² See Longley, op. cit.

³³ Anon. Oral History, 12-13; Andersen, "Kissinger and the 'Dirty War,'" op. cit.



Photograph of the agreement to build a new U.S. embassy in Mexico (May 22, 1960). Among the U.S. delegation is Ambassador Robert C. Hill.

By the time he went to Mexico and took part in the lop-sided debate over Cuba, Hill's own experiences had prepared him to view the foreign policy bureaucracy as a functional elite that, as one historian noted, "more often than not, has had very different ideas about the world than the mass public,"³⁴ and which in a vacuum acted according to its own worldview and political, professional and often personal interests. Serving as assistant secretary of state for congressional relations under Dulles before he went to Mexico, Hill came to believe after observing the jockeying for advantage between the State Department and Congress in budget negotiations, that the attitude held at the assistant secretary of state level, "the bureaucratic level," toward Congress—the branch of government closest to the people—was one of "contempt and fear." There was a "great tendency in the government to withhold information" from Congress. It "always used to irritate me," he recalled later, "to be riding down from the Capitol after an

³⁴ Frank Ninkovich. *The Wilsonian Century; U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

appropriations hearing—and have the (foreign service) officers laughing in the car about how much they been able to get away with.”³⁵

Another earlier experience, this one affecting him personally, reinforced Hill’s view of himself as an outsider at Foggy Bottom, despite having served in the U.S. auxiliary foreign service in India and Burma during World War II and having attained increasingly important State Department positions leading to his Mexico ambassadorship. Hill later said he left his post in Costa Rica after little more than a year in San José, when State Department officials sympathetic to Figueres rallied to force him out, following an incident that he felt reflected poorly on the legendary Costa Rican at a delicate time in relations between the two countries.

Hill charged that he had discovered that Figueres was receiving information about sensitive embassy deliberations from the U.S. military attaché, who sold liquor from the embassy commissary on the local black market and lived dissolutely in a San José red light district. After embassy staff meetings in which sensitive subjects, such as the future of the United Fruit Company’s controversial holdings in the country and Figueres’ relationship to Guatemala’s leftist, democratically-elected government were discussed, the man, a reserve colonel, “after our staff meetings was going right to the presidential palace and reporting all that took place.”

Although the military attaché was temporarily removed from the office, the CIA official who had developed the information on the attaché was threatened with dismissal for revealing it to Hill. Soon after Hill received a letter, signed by Dulles but prepared by an aide, congratulating him on his “excellent performance under trying circumstances in Costa Rica,” and announcing his immediate transfer as ambassador to El Salvador. “They shifted me with all the power and glory, after 15 months in Costa Rica. ... This is how the career boys take care of anyone that doesn’t conform,” Hill said. “I knew when I went to Salvador that unless I protected myself while I was there, I was dead as a dodo bird.”³⁶ The lesson was one he would hold dear in his later relationship with Kissinger.

After the El Salvador posting (where he distinguished himself from other rightwing U.S. political appointees in the region by focusing a need for that country’s elites to aid the poor) and while he served as Dulles’ liaison to Congress, several of his Capitol Hill supporters, including Democratic Senators Mike Mansfield and Lyndon

³⁵ Anon. Oral History, 45-46.

³⁶ Anon. Oral history, 16-22.

Johnson and New Hampshire Republican Styles Bridges, promoted Hill for the post of assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs.³⁷ It was, Hill said assured Dulles in January 1957, a position he did not want because “the problems are so immense in Latin America that anyone that takes that job could easily have his throat cut,” a view the secretary disputed.³⁸ Instead, Dulles sent Hill as U.S. envoy to Mexico, from where in 1956 Castro launched his improbable invasion against the Batista regime, and from where U.S. intelligence services operated a primary listening post for regional events. “Long before the CIA emerged after the second world war as the major spy agency for Mexico, espionage and other types of clandestine operations by Secret Service and FBI agents, members of the consular and foreign service and U.S. military personnel had become common,” noted one analyst, including “highly technical, massive, clandestine operations.”³⁹

As a story last year in the *MIT Technology Review* noted, Win Scott (someone “very, very involved” in the 1973 Chilean coup that brought far-right General Augusto Pinochet to power, one of his sons later said) was the first secretary of the US Embassy in Mexico City ...

That was his cover; he was also the CIA’s most revered spymaster in Latin America. Secrets were a stock-in-trade for the silver-haired Alabaman: a former FBI cryptographer, he had arrived in Mexico City in 1956 and turned the CIA station into one of the most successful counterespionage operations in the world. He tapped the phones of the Soviet and Cuban embassies, controlled the airport, and even recruited Mexico’s President López Mateos as a valuable informant, marshalling the cruel and corrupt spies of the DFS (Federal Security Directorate, or DFS, Mexico’s secret police) into foot soldiers in America’s war with Moscow.⁴⁰

³⁷ Hill interview, *Dulles Oral History Project*, op. cit., 36.

³⁸ Hill interview, *Dulles Oral History Project*, *ibid.* Hill recalled: “Mr. Dulles started arguing with me. ... He said that I was wrong, that Latin America was coming along and democracies were emerging and that they were in capable hands. He just was impatient with me about my trying to tell him things were going awry in Latin America.”

³⁹ W. Dirk Raat, “U.S. Intelligence Operations and Covert Action in Mexico, 1900-47,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Intelligence Services during the Second World War: Part 2. (Oct. 1987), 615-638. His comments above can be found on pages 615, 618.

⁴⁰ Jeff Maysh, “The Lunik Heist; Inside the CIA’s audacious plot to steal a Soviet satellite; How a team of spies in Mexico got their hands on Russia’s space secrets—and tried to change the course of the Cold War,” *The MIT Technology Review* (January 28, 2021). A more balanced view of Scott, a key aide to CIA Director Allen Dulles and someone later described as a “virtual proconsul in Mexico,” can be found in Jefferson Morley, *Our Man in Mexico: Winston Scott and the Hidden History of the CIA* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2008). As Morley noted: “After all, here was a man who had socialized with heads of state, connived with felonious agents, stole state secrets, eavesdropped on embassies, photographed fellow travelers, blackmailed enemies, and subverted the law in the service of the global war on communism and its perceived allies. And he was trusted by the founding fathers of the CIA because they were, to a man, personal friends of his.” Retrieved August 22, 2022 at

Two years after the Soviets had launch Sputnik 1, putting Moscow in what many Americans felt was terrifyingly ahead in what became known as the “Space Race,” even as the CIA’s secret CORONA program saw seven U.S. rockets fizzle in failure, the Agency successfully carried out an operation in Mexico City in which they temporarily “‘borrowed’ the last propulsion stage for a Russian spacecraft “the size of a school bus” and chillingly similar to the Soviet missiles ready to launch against the United States.⁴¹ The CIA itself later noted that it:

...kept President Eisenhower regularly apprised on the progress of the Soviet space program, which became a subject of worldwide attention following the successful 1957 launch of Sputnik—the first artificial satellite and the first manmade object to be placed into earth's orbit. The Soviets' achievement, which indicated that they had intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking the United States, stunned the American public and set off a debate in the United States about the “Missile Gap,” and America's competence in science and technology.

CIA conducted a covert operation to access the Lunik display ... A team of CIA officers gained unrestricted access to the display for 24 hours, which turned out not to be a replica but a fully operational system comparable to the Lunik 2. The team disassembled the vehicle, photographed all the parts without removing it from its crate before putting everything back in its place, gaining invaluable intelligence on its design and capabilities. And the Soviets were none the wiser.⁴²

The heist happened after the Lunik left an exhibition at the Auditorio Nacional under the watchful eye of the Soviet secret police, with Havana, Cuba, being the next stop on its multinational and seemingly flawless public relations tour. The CIA, Hill later

<https://www.amazon.com/Our-Man-Mexico-Winston-History/dp/0700617906?asin=B00K7TMC54I&revisionId=d2413300&format=1&depth=1>

⁴¹ Jeff Maysh, op. cit; CIA, “Lunik on Loan: A Space Age Spy Story,” retrieved August 22, 2022 at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/collection/lunik-loan-space-age-spy-story>

⁴² CIA, “Lunik on Loan,” op.cit; See also, Sydney Wesley Finer, “The Kidnaping of the Lunik,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter 1967), Retrieved August 22, 2022 at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/THE%20KIDNAPING%20OF%20THE%20LUNIK%5B15732838%5D.pdf>. The successful effort came 15 years before, and in some ways foreshadowed, the CIA’s highly-classified Project Azorian to recover a Soviet submarine K-129 that sunk in March 1968 from the Pacific Ocean floor approximately 1,600 miles northwest of Hawaii, using in 1974 the specially-built Hughes Glomar Explorer recovery system. On Glomar, see Matthew Aid, William Burr and Thomas Blanton, "Project Azorian: The CIA's Declassified History of the Glomar Explorer." The National Security Archive, February 12, 2010. Retrieved August 22, 2022 – via GWU at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb305/>. The CIA’s Declassified History of the Glomar Explorer can be found here: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb305/doc01.pdf>

recalled, also “was continually collecting information ... on communist activities coming from Cuba ... voluminous information.”⁴³

“One of the worst scoldings I ever got was when I warned Dulles about Castro,” Hill would later recall. “He really told me off.” Eisenhower’s secretary of state, he said, had been “kept in the dark” about the ‘pro-Soviet’ leanings of the senior Cuban revolutionaries despite FBI Director Hoover’s later claim to have given the State Department information about Castro’s true ideological tendencies as early as 1955. Hill said that he had “several” discussions with Dulles about Castro and the situation in Cuba, with the older man replying: “I think your information’s inaccurate and I shall have to go along with information that we have in Washington, not the information that you’re bringing to my attention from the field.”⁴⁴ Hill kept up the his lonely drumbeat, even advising Cuba-bound fellow political appointee Earl E.K. Smith over lunch at the Chevy Chase Club to “ask for another Embassy rather than Havana, because this was one place which was going to blow up on Mr. Dulles and for some strange reason he did not see it coming”⁴⁵

It was immediately following the first staff meeting Hill held in July 1957 at the U.S. embassy in Mexico City that the new ambassador got a full rundown on Castro’s allegedly pro-Moscow orientation and that of his associates. Veteran foreign service officer and embassy political counsel Raymond G. Leddy, CIA station chief Scott, the FBI’s legal attaché John Speakes, and military attaché Benoid Glawe, asked to see Hill

to acquaint me with [what] they thought was a serious problem involving Cuba and Castro. ... They brought me a good deal of documentation ... it wasn’t raw intelligence, it was intelligence that had been refined, that indicated that Castro was dominated in his thinking by the Communists, and that he was ... somewhat under the influence of Moscow.

⁴³ Maysh, *op. cit.*; Anon. Oral History, 160. Intelligence assets stationed at the Mexico City airport, Hill said, aided agency operations tracking Cuban visitors in Mexico. “They also had the manifests of everyone who came in” (132).

⁴⁴ Robert C. Hill interview, New Hampshire, October 1972, *The Eisenhower Oral History Collection*, Columbia University Library, New York City, New York, 58; Anon. Oral History, 101, 110. Hill said that, although the FBI director might deny it, Hoover told him in February 1961 “that he had sent hard clear concise information on Castro” to the State Department since 1955.

⁴⁵ Hill interview, *Dulles Oral History*, *op. cit.*, 37. Hill’s warnings to Smith were also related by the latter in his book, *The Fourth Floor*, *op. cit.*, 119.

Because of Hill's relationship with Dulles, they hoped he would be able to get the information "to the highest level, including the President, so that a tragedy would not happen where Castro would come to power."

Obviously we failed. We tried every conceivable way. Mr. Dulles, sad part of it, I knew him so well but he was preoccupied with other parts of world and he just thought this was utter nonsense, and keep in mind his brother Allen Dulles was director of the CIA, so I made no headway there. We tried several times on Milton Eisenhower, desperately, before Castro came to power, and were blocked by ... State Department (official) William Wieland. So we were never able to get through on the danger of Castro.⁴⁶

Ambassador Earl Smith and others were convinced that the alternative to the corrupt and vicious Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, favored by U.S. business circles, organized crime, and their political allies in Washington, was not necessarily Castro. Smith later claimed that even until the summer of 1958, the United States "could have been instrumental in forming a broadly-based government in Cuba without Batista and without Castro. ... As the months passed after that, it would have been more difficult to exclude Castro" who "was not the only alternative for Cuba, nor did Castro single-handedly conquer the island of Cuba."⁴⁷ More conservative elements in the Cuban resistance grew "worried as options narrowed and it seemed more likely that Castro, by default, had been anointed Batista's successor."⁴⁸ (The worry grew exponentially when Frank País García, both a Castro ally and rival and the key organizer of the urban underground resistance, was killed by police on July 30, 1957.) However, even as late as June of 1959, Wieland, head of the State Department's Mexico and Cuba desk in Washington, was still claiming that there was no evidence of Communist infiltration in Cuba.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Columbia oral history, op. cit., 100-101. Leddy later told the U.S. Senate that since his arrival in Mexico in July 1957, "We received information from some local sources in Mexico and from the Embassy ... in Havana, and the Department of State. The information from Mexico showed Castro's Communist affiliations prior to his departure ... from Mexico to Cuba, and also showed the support of the Communists in Mexico for Castro when he already was in Cuba." "Communist Threat to the United States Through the Caribbean," Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-Seventh Congress, Part 13, March 20, April 26, June 1 and July 27, 1961, page 844.

⁴⁷ Smith, *The Fourth Floor*, op. cit., 229.

⁴⁸ De Palma, Chapter 11, 4.

⁴⁹ Leddy testimony, op. cit., p. 845.; See also, George Sokolsky, "These Days ... Robert Hill's Testimony," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 1961.; There were, and are, widely divergent ideas about when Castro actually embraced Communism and the possibility of an alliance with the Soviets. Some observers, such as Carbonell (op. cit., 32, 34) trace Fidel's pro-Communist views to the mid-1940s, when he was a university student. One senior diplomat testified that he recalled hearing Castro proclaim a "Communist revolution" during the *Bogotá* riots in the

Hill later admitted to a Senate Subcommittee investigating the “Communist Threat to the United States Through the Caribbean” in 1961 that he was “very busy getting started in Mexico as the Ambassador and much of 1957 went by before [he] could review the developments in Cuba regarding Mr. Castro. The intelligence reports from our Embassy in 1958 started to pick up—in 1959—showing more and more indications of Communism, pro-Communism—and Communists that were surrounding Fidel Castro.” Hill told an interviewer after he left his post in Mexico that, once he had the information developed in the files on hand, he “started badgering the CIA and the State Department” about the issue. Much of the reporting went to the CIA, but certain political reports “went through the machinery of State, where many copies would be made. We always tried to give the reason for interjecting ourselves into Castro as “Think of what would happen if we lose Mexico.”” As the situation throughout Latin America worsened, Hill later recalled, members of the United States Congress often appeared more in touch with events in the region than either Eisenhower or Dulles, a situation he attributed to the State Department. However, Congressional interest in Latin America, too, was not what was needed to bring the Cuba issue into focus, he said, even among allies on Capitol Hill such as Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, “a very preoccupied man” with whom he took up the subject. “In my personal opinion, they’ll only grab an issue when they see mileage in it. They could see no mileage in taking on Castro because look what the U.S. press did to build him up.”

Colombian capital in April 1948 (William D. Pawley testimony, U.S. Senate Internal Security Subcommittee hearings, “Communist Threat to the United States Through the Caribbean,” September 2, 1960, Part 10, p. 725; Pawley was the son of a wealthy businessman based in Cuba, and in World War II was involved in the organization and support of the legendary volunteer Flying Tigers, established by Anna Chennault’s late husband, Claire Lee Chennault. He took part in Operation PBSuccess, the 1954 CIA plot to overthrow the Guatemala government of Jacobo Arbenz after the elected president introduced reforms affecting the United Fruit Company). In Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky’s *KGB, The Inside Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990, 466-467), Andrew and Gordievsky, the latter a former high level British penetration agent inside the KGB, stated: “After release in 1955 from a Cuban jail, where he had been imprisoned for two years for organizing an attack on an army barracks, Castro spent a year in exile in Mexico and appealed to the Soviet Embassy for arms to support a guerrilla campaign against Batista. Although the request for arms was turned down ... (a KGB agent) was immediately impressed by Castro’s potential as a charismatic guerrilla leader, began regular meetings with him, and offered him enthusiastic moral support.” The long-time Communist leanings of Castro’s brother Raul, his wife, and his chief lieutenant, Argentine-born Ernesto “Che” Guevara, are much better documented. “In March 1953, a 21-year-old Raúl attended a Communist Party conference in Vienna representing Cuba. Quick to make friends, it was the personable Raúl who lassoed an invaluable contact while there—KGB agent Nikolai Leonov, who would play a central role in the 35-year Cuban-Soviet alliance,” in Ann Louise Bardach, “Obama’s Favorite Castro,” *Politico*, August 13, 2015, accessed on September 5, 2022 at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/obamas-favorite-castro-121342/>

There was no percentage on Capitol Hill to take on conventional wisdom promoted not only by the State Department, but also by the media.⁵⁰

In the aftermath of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's unholy anti-communist rampage and given the conservative identity of some of those who gave fullest throat at the time to charges about media bias, particularly that of the prestigious *New York Times*, in coverage of events in Cuba, complaints against the American Fourth Estate might have seemed overly shrill, except for some inconvenient facts. In 1957 the *Times* correspondent and editorialist Herbert L. Matthews' coverage, subsequently imitated by a small number of other reporters, of Castro's insurrection fell like manna from heaven for the small guerrilla band. Argentine-born Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara would later say that, for the besieged guerrillas, Matthew's brief visit to their camp, and his subsequent reportage in which he painted Castro as a romantic, Robin Hood-like revolutionary who was no Communist—in fact, local Communists did oppose him—had been worth more than a military victory. Castro himself would credit Matthews' reporting with helping to bring him to power.⁵¹

The last time Hill was able to raise the Cuba issue with Dulles was when the mortally ill secretary of state was in Mexico City in December 1958 for the inauguration of the new Mexican President, Adolfo López Mateos. Driving from the city to the airport en route to California early in the morning, Dulles turned to Roy Rubottom, the assistant secretary of state for American republic affairs, who Hill thought of as "a captive of the club," and said, "Dick, we've got to do something about Cuba. ... Can't we find some Cuban that we trust that can go down there and convince Batista of the wisdom of stepping aside? This thing is out of hand."⁵² When Rubottom asked the

⁵⁰ Anon. Oral history, pp. 117, 159, 161; Hill interview, *Dulles Oral History*, op. cit., p. 39.

⁵¹ DePalma, Chapter 2. Matthews himself claimed: "[I]t is really no exaggeration to say that the role we have been playing since February is of far greater importance to Cuba than that of the State Department. The articles on Fidel Castro and the Cuban situation which I did ... have literally altered the course of Cuban history, and the job I have done has also had a sensational impact on Cuban affairs."

⁵² According to Wayne Smith, op. cit, 34-35, Republican businessman William Pawley, the founder of *Cubana de Aviacion*, secretly met Batista on December 9, 1958, and, hinting that he represented President Eisenhower, urged him to step down—a proposal Batista "flatly rejected." Wayne Smith recounts that semi-official Pawley mission might have been unnecessary if Ambassador Smith had followed the instructions he received in Dispatch 292 the month before in which he was, among other things, to "express U.S. doubts that any internal solution could be worked out as long as Batista was in the country." Envoy Smith sat on the instructions, telling aides that the contents of the instructions might lead to chaos and, despite U.S. government reservations about recently held fraudulent elections, sent Batista a congratulatory telegram.

secretary who he had in mind, Dulles offered the name of a personal friend, former Cuban ambassador Emilio Núñez Portuondo—a well-known politician and diplomat who had resigned his post as prime minister after just 10 days when Batista announced his intention to suspend constitutional guarantees—who the secretary said he always regarded as “a very fine man.” Rubottom, Hill recalled, responded, “quick as a flash ... you know, Portuondo had some deals with Batista and we ... feel he would be the wrong man as the go-between for the United States and Cuba.”

Hill said that he had just written Rubottom a letter complaining that he was “sick and tired of receiving these communications from the Department of State” that questioned Portuondo’s “patriotism” and “loyalty,” noting that not only was he Dulles’ friend and a distinguished lawyer, but also that as Cuban representative to the United Nations “time and again” had defended U.S. positions, in addition to being a strong anti-communist. In the car to the airport, however, Hill “held back, because Mr. Dulles was ill, and I’d lost the battle anyway.”

Back at the embassy, the conflicted Hill sat down with Leddy and a small group of trusted staff to discuss the issue. “Is it worth it for me to get canned, to go to the White House to fight this one out?” The conclusion was I wouldn’t serve any purpose, but if I could stay in Mexico, I could keep fighting and we might be able to win.” Less than a month later, Hill and his wife, Cecelia, were celebrating New Year’s Eve at a dinner party at Rubottom’s house in Washington’s toney Wesley Heights neighborhood when the phone rang with the news that Batista had been overthrown. A few days later, two top CIA officials tried to convince him that events in Cuba had taken a turn for the better. And four months later, Dulles was dead.⁵³

Hill was in Helinski with his wife at the end of a vacation to the Soviet Union in March in 1959 when he received a cable that an ambassadorial conference for regional chiefs of mission was being held in San Salvador in April. “I told Cecelia I didn’t want to go to the conference since my position was known regarding Castro,” remembered Hill, a whistleblower more than a decade before Ralph Nader popularized the term. “It was just going to make more enemies for me.” Nevertheless, the couple returned a week early from their travels so that Hill could attend. Although he left the

⁵³ Anonymous oral history, 143-145. The officials Hill said he spoke with at the Metropolitan Club were J.C. King, chief of Western Hemisphere Division, and Lyman Kirkpatrick, the agency’s inspector general.

gathering convinced his warnings about Castro had finally gotten through in what Cuban lawyer and author Mario Lazo later called a “noteworthy diplomatic move,” Hill would later claim he was “double crossed” at the conference: “I couldn’t conceive that when we agreed unanimously on one position, it was not followed through.”⁵⁴

Regional meetings of U.S. ambassadors had been held without fanfare for several years, enabling diplomats exchange information and ideas about developments of interest to both the United States and to the countries in which they served. The meeting in El Salvador, however, coming as it did as the excitement generated from Castro’s victory swept countries south of the Rio Grande,⁵⁵ could not have escaped public notice, particularly when *The New York Times* and several other media organizations sent reporters to cover the event.⁵⁶ In addition to the envoys accredited to three island republics in the Caribbean, the five from Central America, also there were those from Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela, and the U.S. representative to the Organization of American States (OAS), the powerful Deputy Undersecretary of State for Administration Loy Henderson and Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs Rubottom.

For Hill, the event represented a last chance to put what he considered the real issues about Cuba that faced policymakers on the agenda, even as the time for action was drawing to a precipitous close. In January, Hill, an envoy to three Latin American countries, had been passed over as the new U.S. ambassador to Havana to replace Earl Smith, with the choice falling to a suave and soft-spoken member of “the Club,” Philip W. Bonsal. Perhaps to Hill reminiscent of previous State Department congratulations for his “excellent performance under trying circumstances in Costa Rica,” and the announcement of his immediate transfer as ambassador to El Salvador, the decision to name Bonsal, *The New York Times* reported, citing department officials, “was based on two considerations.

⁵⁴ Anonymous oral history, 144, 147. Unknowingly anticipating the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades later under the weight of its own economic mismanagement, Hill noted that he “was so mad about what I saw in Russia and the lies the American people had been told about the economic strength of Russia that I was purple.”

⁵⁵ “The hemisphere rejoiced at the overthrow of the Batista tyranny, looked with sympathy on the new regime, and welcomed its promises of political freedom and social justice for the Cuban people,” historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote later in a State Department White Paper. Retrieved August 23, 2022 at <https://www.loc.gov/rr/record/pressclub/pdf/FidelCastro.pdf>

⁵⁶ For a view of the conference by an anti-Castro Cuban still resisting on the island at the time the diplomats convened in El Salvador, see Néstor Carbonell, *And the Russians Stayed: The Sovietization of Cuba* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989), 62.

First, it was said, there was a widespread feeling in the Administration that the present circumstances made it desirable to send to Havana a career official of wide experience in Latin American affairs. ... The second reason for the selection of Mr. Bonsal, it was said, was a desire not to offend Mexico by shifting Mr. Hill, who arrived in Mexico City in May, 1957, and has been extremely popular there.⁵⁷

Even before the meeting opened in San Salvador, Hill had tried to bring Serafino Romualdi, the AFL-CIO labor organization's representative in Latin America and someone close to the U.S. intelligence community, who had just briefed him on Marxist infiltration in the Castro government, to the meeting to share his knowledge and insights with the other envoys. The effort to redouble the message was rebuffed by Rubottom, who said Romualdi's presence would be "inappropriate," adding that he doubted he would have additional information that was not already available to the State Department.⁵⁸

The first full day of deliberations, April 10th, held at the Inter-Americana Hotel in San Salvador, began with welcoming remarks by Henderson and Rubottom, who then passed out a draft communiqué, in which patience in dealing with Castro was recommended, that was to be issued at the end of the conference. Addressing himself to Henderson, a clearly frustrated Hill recalled his prior business experience at W.R. Grace and elsewhere when he declared that he'd "seen stacked board meetings" but that he "didn't expect to come to an ambassadorial conference and the first item is to agree to the communiqué that we're to issue after our deliberations. I object, or I'll leave the meeting." Hill later recalled that, in raising the question he found no support from his colleagues, "but this is the way the Club operates." He got so angry, he said, "I hit the table, and I said, 'You pull it back, or I'm out. ... Recess the meeting and withdraw the communiqué.'" He threatened to bring the matter before the press, reminding them

⁵⁷ E. W. Kenworthy, "U.S. Said to Pick Envoy to Havana," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1959.

⁵⁸ Anonymous oral history, p. 164; In a May 18, 1966 memorandum from Hill to Romualdi, Hill said the refusal by Rubottom "may well be one of the most tragic blunders involving Castro by the Department of State." Accession No. 5459, Box 9, F. 15, Serafino Romualdi papers, 1936-1967; Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. In his autobiography, Romualdi noted that his friend Hill frequently shared their doubts on Castro's "democratic professions," with Hill writing to him on January 21, 1959: "Do watch the Cuban situation carefully and give the Department the benefit of your views because I see grave trouble in the area for a considerable time ahead." Romualdi. *Presidents and Peons: Recollections of a Labor Ambassador in Latin America* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967), 223.

that “every member of the press in El Salvador today is a personal friend of mine, and I’m going to tell them gentlemen.”⁵⁹

The issue was temporarily put aside while other conference business was addressed. In a segment on “Developments in Cuba since Castro Assumed Power,” the new envoy to Havana, Bonsal, was reported to have described

the changes which Castro sought to make in Cuba’s domestic and foreign policies along reformist, nationalistic and somewhat socialistic and neutralist lines; and highlighted such problems of special concern to the US as the expansion of Communist influence in Cuba, the anti-American campaign fanned by Castro, and activities in Cuba directed at the overthrow of the Dominican, Nicaraguan and Haitian governments.

He reported that in personal conversations Castro was “very reasonable, whereas on television he is unpredictable,” adding that he “thought that Castro would be sufficiently busy with his own problems and would be susceptible to some extent to our influence.”

Bonsal later recalled that he

urged a continuance of the policy of a hopeful and watchful ‘wait and see’ which the American government had been pursuing. . . . I said that the United States would be making a serious mistake, even if it believed Cuban public opinion to be wholly misinformed as to Castro’s intentions—which I did not at the time—to take a hostile position before the Cuban people accepted the evidence some of us—not I—believed justified such a position. My views seemed acceptable to most of my colleagues and were, generally speaking, those to which the Department of State adhered at the time.

For his part, Hill hammered home concerns about a Soviet economic offensive in the region, and whether U.S. economic policy was being conveyed in a way to promote better understanding in the region. He also dissented strongly from Bonsal’s presentation, calling him—according to the envoy to Havana’s own recollection—“the chief architect of the Cuban disaster.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Anonymous oral history, 148-149. A dispositive account of part of the deliberations in San Salvador was contained in Mario Lazo, *op. cit.*, 184-186.

⁶⁰ “Summary Report, Meeting of United States Chiefs of Mission in the Caribbean Area, San Salvador, April 9-12, 1959,” U.S. Department of State. Hill complained that the document contained numerous errors of fact and opinion, and his copy, No. 21 of 100 printed, was heavily marked up with margin comments in his hand. Ambassador to Costa Rica Whiting Willauer later testified before Congress that, during a private conversation between himself, Bonsal and U.S. Ambassador to Colombia John Cabot, “much to my amazement . . . (Bonsal) said that (Castro) . . . wasn’t a bad fellow, and he thought that he probable could be handled, and he, Bonsal, would handle him, if he was left alone. He said he was in favor of a soft-glove approach . . . that Castro was a terrific person, physically and mentally, he was far from crazy, that he was not living on pills, and that he was not a Communist.” In “Communist Threat to the

The question about the meeting's final communiqué emerged again Friday night, the day before it was to be issued. Hill had not been asked to serve on the drafting committee and told Rubottom that he would cause trouble about it again the next morning: "I'm warning you now, I've got my own communiqué. Because if this communiqué says nothing, I'll issue mine." Rubottom and others, Hill, a former Dartmouth football player, recalled, "had an immediate huddle," emerging to say that the current Ambassador to Costa Rica Whiting Willauer, an old Hill friend, would serve on the committee.⁶¹ The next morning, the press was on to the story that a rift was in the making. Behind closed doors, Hill objected to the new communiqué once it had been read, saying, "There's not one word in that communiqué that tells the Latin American people and the American people the seriousness of Castro and communism in Cuba. That's why we're here, the threat of communism in the Caribbean." Keeping his calm, Hill then told the group, over Bonsal's objection, that he had a suggestion, one that, if it were not adopted, he would issue as his own communiqué, saying the conference was a "failure."⁶²

Hill then offered his idea, recalling that Dulles had, several years before, made a speech in which he suggestion that the most important international organization in the world was the Organization of American States, whose outstanding performance had made it a model for NATO and the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Now Hill suggested that the Secretary of State submit to the OAS for appropriate action all evidence of communist influence in the Castro government, with the hemispheric body convened to take action under the treaties of Caracas (which affirmed "the inalienable right of each American state to choose freely its own institutions" but condemned "any form of totalitarianism" and rejected extra-continental intervention), Bogotá, and Rio, the latter known formally as the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance.

Hill's suggestion, supported by Willauer, met with derision by "the Club." One envoy scolded Hill "I'm not going to help you try to run Latin American policy from Mexico. You've always wanted to be assistant secretary of state. You've been trying to

United States Through the Caribbean," op. cit, p. 871. Bonsal. *Castro, Cuba and the United States*. (Pittsburgh/London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 59.

⁶¹ Anonymous oral history, 150. According to Hill, they put Willauer on the committee, not him, "because they knew they could handle Whitey because it was late at night and (off the record) Whitey would get gassed up and sleepy and the work wouldn't be done. But they weren't going to have me around because I'd stay up all night with them and strangle the bastards if necessary."

⁶² Anonymous oral history, *ibid.*

run policy ...” To which Hill interjected, “Obviously I haven’t been very successful.” Bonsal then chimed in: “If you can’t be a team player, I would suggest you resign,” a sentiment echoed by John Cabot, the ambassador to Colombia who had succeeded Bonsal in Bogota. With that Henderson recessed the meeting, taking Hill into a back room to complain: “Now, Bob, you’ve always had a complex about the State Department.” Hill replied diplomatically: “Lloyd, I have no complex about the State Department; I love the State Department. Most of the personnel are wonderful guys. I love my staff in Mexico City because they’re all good guys. If they weren’t, I’d kick them out.” Hill recalled Henderson as saying, “I know you’d do it; don’t get excited now,” before turning to say to Rubottom, “I think we can live with this recommendation.” John Drier, U.S. ambassador to the OAS was brought in, reviewed the idea and concurred, “Yes, we can live with that.”

Rubottom, Hill recalled later, told Dreier to take the proposal into the adjacent room and tell the gathering that it was his “wish” and that it had been agreed upon, a move that was grudgingly accepted by the other envoys. It was, Hill thought, “a complete victory.” Although there would be merely a “veiled” reference to Castro in the communiqué, Hill said, the report to the Secretary of State spelled out that all the evidence about communism in Cuba would be submitted by the Department to the OAS for review using the Caracas resolution, “which was the first step to bring about the downfall of Castro. But it was never implemented. They let me have my one victory, but that was it.” Bonsal said later that, had the Hill recommendation been followed, it would have been “an entirely futile and indeed damaging proceeding in view of contemporary American and Latin American opinion even if Ambassador Hill had been able to convince our government that his evaluation of the intelligence on which he based his recommendation was sound.”⁶³

In the press statement issued at the end of the conference, issued two years before the disastrous Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón) invasion and three and a half years before the Cuban missile crisis, Cuba received no specific mention. “There was

⁶³ Anonymous oral history, op. cit., 151-154. Hill’s version is substantially borne out in Willauer’s testimony before Congress in 1961; see “Communist Threat to the United States Through the Caribbean,” op. cit., esp. pages 871-872, 880. Willauer vouchsafed Hill’s testimony before the committee as “one hundred percent correct.” Lazo cited Hill’s testimony to the effect that after the conference, Bonsal approached U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua Thomas E. Whelan “at his hotel and expressed the hope that the North Dakota Republican would use his influence with the Republican National Committee to get rid of Hill,” Lazo, op. cit., 186.; Bonsal, op. cit., 59-60. Bonsal admitted he recommended to Hill that he resign “if he could not be a team player” and that Henderson and Rubottom’s “cogent remonstrances” had “reduced him to a state of emotional contrition.”

discussion of widely published reports of activities in various countries directed at the overthrow of the government of other countries in violation of the charter of the OAS and other Inter-American agreements,” it noted. “The Conference observed that such reports are highly disturbing to the atmosphere of mutual trust essential to the continued cooperation and progress of the nations of this hemisphere and recommend to the Department that serious consideration be given to how the OAS might be helpful in restoring a more tranquil atmosphere in the Caribbean area.”⁶⁴

Two weeks after the conference, on April 24, 1959, Rubottom reported to the new Secretary of State, Christian A. Herter, who had been appointed two days earlier, that he

would like to think that the Conference, along with other measures ... made some contribution in leading Prime Minister Castro of Cuba to give public assurances that his Government would not intervene in the affairs of other Latin American republics and to cause his Government to take some action against revolutionary filibusterers assembling in Cuba. Although only time will tell whether Cuba lives up to these assurances, the general effect at the moment is to provide a needed relaxation of the tensions which have been acute in the Caribbean area since the beginning of the year.⁶⁵

When he returned to Mexico, an exultant Hill told his staff, “We’ve won a victory,” only to be cautioned by his own foreign service staff that celebration was premature, that “the implementation is the thing we’ve got to watch.” After several weeks went by, Hill received a copy of the memorandum of conference, which he described as “a complete and total whitewash,” with more than a dozen corrections to the record being necessary. He sent it back to Rubottom, saying that “customarily something like this is foreign to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and it did not reflect my point of view.”

The thing on the commie situation was sparse. I sent it back again. It never occurred to me because of the congressional horsepower I possessed that they would try to get away with it, but this is one thing you must always remember in dealing with the State Department ... if you don’t keep after the implementation and the follow-through ... if it’s contrary to what the underlings think should be done, they circumvent it and dissipate it until it disappears ... They never sent the evidence of Castro’s communism to the OAS, which is a violation of the agreement we had in El Salvador.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Three-page Department of State mimeo, “Press Statement on Conclusion of Chiefs of Mission Conference, San Salvador, April 9-11, 1959.”

⁶⁵ Secret Memorandum to the Secretary, Subject “Caribbean Chiefs of Mission Meeting, 1959,” April 24, 1959.

⁶⁶ Anonymous oral history, *op. cit.*, 153-154.

The OAS remained at the sidelines on Castro, Hill believed, “for only one reason”—because the United States had shown no leadership and Latin American nations were given no assurance that Washington would support them in their opposition to Castro. Even if the United States had lost a vote in the OAS, he reasoned, it still had major cards to play to force a different outcome, by acting unilaterally to impose a complete air and sea embargo against Cuba. “We had the economic power to put this thing in perspective,” he later told one interviewer.⁶⁷

Hill recalled later that in the “first critical months of Castro being in power, Bonsal’s influence (with President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles) was so great” that he was able to convince them “that we could deal with Castro, and that this was an orderly revolution, and that if we were patient with Castro he would come our way.”⁶⁸ Once back in Cuba from El Salvador, Bonsal said later,

The accounts of the meeting and the reports that filtered back to Havana by word of mouth were useful to me in my dealings with the Cuban government and increased my acceptability to the Cuban public. I appeared as one who had expressed views to his ambassadorial and departmental colleagues that were more or less in line with dominant Cuban opinion. In those days that opinion held that to accuse Castro of communism was primarily an almost blasphemous tactic of those in Cuba and the United States wishing to defend their properties and their privileges from the reforms—as yet largely undefined—on which the Cuban Revolution was bent.⁶⁹

Anti-Castro democrats, however, looked anxiously if unsuccessfully for a positive sign emanating from San Salvador, as news about summary executions of foes by the new regime began to spread fear among even its former allies and non-violent opponents. “The feedback we got indicated that Bonsal, champion of the policy of patience and forbearance, had prevailed in that pivotal conference,” recalled Nestor Carbonell, the scion of a prominent anti-Batista family that looked with trepidation on Castro’s ascendance. “At home we discussed the serious implications of such policy. We feared that Washington’s passiveness, far from taming Castro, would exacerbate the radicalism of his regime.”⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the CIA was still, according to Deputy Director Richard M. Bissell, in “doubt as to whether Castro was a committed Communist or just leftward leaning.” The CIA political action officer for Latin America who met with Fidel as part

⁶⁷ Anonymous oral history, op. cit., 154, 177.

⁶⁸ *The John Foster Dulles Oral History Project*, op. cit., 41.

⁶⁹ Bonsal, op. cit., 60.

⁷⁰ Carbonell, op. cit., 63.

of its essay of his intentions offered: “Castro is not only not a Communist, he is a strong anti-Communist fighter.”⁷¹

Back in Mexico, Hill set up briefings about the Castro threat for visiting U.S. dignitaries—senators, congressmen, top reporters and others—more than 80 in all. “We had a standing policy that no VIP came to Mexico without being briefed on the danger of communism and Castro in Cuba,” Hill recalled.

I didn’t do the talking; it was the CIA, the FBI, Army, Navy, air intelligence, and Ray Leddy, the most competent officer in Latin America dealing with the problem. It wasn’t Bob Hill blabbering; it was my staff and they’re reading from reports. We did this from the end of the Salvadoran conference right through to the day I left to come back to the United States.⁷²

Finally, on November 5, 1959, Secretary of State Herter told Eisenhower that Castro’s rule constituted a security risk for the United States and recommended building a coalition of Cuban opposition to his rule as an alternative for creating good U.S.-Cuban relations built on amenable (albeit questionable) political and economic policies. By then, the door for peaceful change had closed. The equivalent to a political moon landing was about to take place the next month, as the Soviets—who never discovered that the Lunik had been borrowed for the night in Mexico City—prepared for their rocket show, supposedly evidence of the “boundless creative abilities of Socialism,” to move on to Havana. It was only then that a CIA officer “stuffed the stolen parts and photos inside a diplomatic pouch and handed it to a driver, who raced to a small airfield. There... U.S. ambassador Robert Hill carried the loot onto a private jet headed for Texas.”⁷³

More than a decade after Cuban revolutionaries seized power, it was Bonsal, the man who Eisenhower sent to Havana rather than Hill, who admitted in backhanded fashion,

I was then and I remain convinced that these Cubans and Americans had insufficient evidence for the view they expressed in the winter and spring of 1959. Nevertheless, they have been proven right about Castro: by the end of 1961 the latter had proclaimed himself a Marxist-Leninist. The unheeded prophets have naturally not been backward with their ‘I told you so’s.’ Also, some of those who were trying to climb on the Castro bandwagon in 1959

⁷¹ Rufo Lopez-Fresquet, *My Fourteen Months with Castro* (Cleveland: World, 1966), 110.

⁷² Anonymous oral history, 155.

⁷³ Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine 1945-1993* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 97; Maysh, op. cit.

have revised their records so as to place themselves in the ranks of the allegedly clearheaded analysts and advocates of strong action.⁷⁴

Hill, who had been in the forefront in warning the State Department “to give no support to Castro, he was the wrong man,” did not need to embroider his own record. He himself admitted that the reports after he arrived in Mexico in the period 1957-1958 “were not voluminous because the issue hadn’t joined. We really got rolling after Castro came in, but we certainly warned them well in advance.” In 1962, Hill noted that before he complained about the situation in Cuba “I didn’t have many enemies in the Department,” but that now “of course I have collected a few because I opposed the Club.” He reported, for example, that a friend and former employee in Mexico, a veteran of the State Department security division, even avoided taking his calls on the office phones at State, preferring to return them from telephone booths, and even refused to let his young son vacation with Hill’s son (they were best friends) and his family, “because it might hurt him (the father) in the foreign service.” The example, he added, “though it’s petty” was “distressing because it shows the power of the Club: conform or you’re out; if not out, we’ll destroy you from within.”⁷⁵

Joined at the hip with Nixon and Kissinger in the 1968 electoral gambit called “treasonous,” according to a small but growing number of historians and political scientists, it was Hill’s own son, Graham, who invoked the mafia term, “made man,” when talking about his father’s role as a fully initiated member of the Nixon foreign policy inner circle. However, once inaugurated Nixon and Kissinger took one road, while that taken by Hill increasingly left him on the other side of a bifurcation of history.

In the case of Nixon, the impeachment process against him began on October 30, 1973 in the U.S. House of Representatives. It came following the series of high-level resignations and firings of those who, like Hill on Cuba, had said “enough” and challenged a conventional wisdom that, in their own case, had resulted in a 1972 Republican election landslide, a victory in which Kissinger also basked in the limelight, but one which resulted in what was commonly known as “the Saturday Night

⁷⁴ Bonsal, *op. cit.*, 61.

⁷⁵ Anonymous oral history, 101-102, 146. Hill’s military attaché, Col. Benoid Glawe, was also told by the Air Force that if he sent any more reports about Cuba while he was assigned as air attaché in Mexico City, he would be recalled from his post (156).

Massacre”⁷⁶ during the course of the Watergate scandal. In a paradigmatic case of impeachable behavior, the result was Nixon’s resignation and disgrace less than two years after his ballot-box triumph, following a bipartisan vote of the House Judiciary Committee’s adoption of three articles based on Article II, Section 4 of the Constitution dealing with “Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.”



Ambassador Bob Hill and then former President Richard M. Nixon.
Official White House photograph.

Graham Hill’s characterization of his father certainly fits comfortably in descriptions of Kissinger’s role in both the Watergate scandal and some of the worst crimes against humanity conducted under the U.S. standard. In Watergate, Dr. K lied in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about his authorization of illegal wiretaps of the phones of reporters and government officials, including ordering the FBI to listen in on the phones of National Security Council colleagues to see who had leaked news of the U.S. bombing of Cambodia and sitting in on pre-Watergate huddles in the White House about using the special “plumbers” unit to illegal spy on American citizens. During the Watergate investigations, wrote Pulitzer Prize winning investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, “Kissinger was permitted to slide by with his half-truths and misstatements. Only Richard Nixon (and) some men around (him), and

⁷⁶ See for example Ron Elving, “A Brief History of Nixon’s ‘Saturday Night Massacre,’” NPR, October 21, 2018, accessed on September 5, 2022 at <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/21/659279158/a-brief-history-of-nixons-saturday-night-massacre>

a few Watergate prosecutors ... understood the truth: Kissinger was involved.” Kissinger “had entered the White House on Inauguration Day with immense power and no illusions about its source,” Hersh noted. “He understood that his authority would never be disputed as long as he kept his sole client—Richard Nixon—pleased.”⁷⁷

White House tapes later revealed that, just as the Republicans accused Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey of doing in 1968, once in the White House Nixon and Kissinger discussed the most politically advantageous time to end the Vietnam War. As historian John A. Farrell noted, “Critics saw raw opportunism when Kissinger announced, at a White House briefing just days before the 1972 election, that ‘peace is at hand’ in Southeast Asia. It wasn’t.” Under Nixon, U.S. casualties in Vietnam totaled more than 21,000; Vietnamese deaths during the same time are convincingly documented more than half a million. “But the Nixon death toll wasn’t limited to Vietnam,” noted one U.S. scholar, in the time he and Kissinger orchestrated a war while dallying on peace.⁷⁸

He ordered the bombing and invasion of Cambodia, and also a secret war in Laos. Cambodian civilian deaths from the B-52 bombing probably total 100,000 to 150,000, and Cambodian wartime deaths from all causes in the Nixon years (1970-75—pre-genocide) probably total 300,000 to 500,000, according to Ben Kiernan of the Yale Cambodian Genocide Program. If we take the lower figure, that brings Nixon’s total to 800,000 ... And that does not include Laos, where the U.S. fought a secret war for many years.

The list of what in other cases the Washington Establishment would underscore as war crimes and crimes against humanity did not end there for Kissinger, part of, in the words of the Council on Foreign Relations, “his contributions to the country.” On May 4, 1970, following the National Guard firing on protestors at Kent State in Ohio, killing four and injuring nine, Kissinger claimed Nixon could “really clobber” student protestors once the military operation was a “success” in Cambodia.⁷⁹ Under Nixon, the National Security Advisor and Secretary of State favored using the “nuclear card” both during the tragic 1971 war between India and Pakistan and during the 1973 October War in the Middle East. Although he spent only eight years in public service, Kissinger protected and promoted vile dictators in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Greece, Peru, Portugal, Indonesia, Iran, Nicaragua, Spain, South Korea, and Uruguay, as well as Pakistan, at least. In 1989, he bitterly denounced the U.S. House and Senate for

⁷⁷ Jon Wiener, “Nixon was the Worst President,” *History News Network*, December 11, 2006, accessed on September 4, 2022 at <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/32897>.

⁷⁸ Farrell. *Richard Nixon: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

⁷⁹ Tim Weiner, *op. cit.*, 89, 91.

voting to impose economic sanctions on China after the massacre in Tiananmen Square. By 2001, critic Christopher Hitchens would dedicate in part his book, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, with a hopeful nod to his “brave victims ... whose example will easily outlive him, and his ‘reputation.’” By 2003, as noted in the conservative *Washington Times* magazine,

Kissinger had been forced to withdraw as the head of the commission created to study the failures of Sept. 11 (2001) after refusing to disclose the client list of his international consulting firm—a group that allegedly includes several notorious human rights violators. Victims’ families were concerned about potential conflicts of interest as he attempted to do the public’s business while still raking in millions of dollars from unnamed foreign countries and corporations.⁸⁰

Rather than the post of Secretary of State or that of Deputy Under Secretary of State for Administration, Bob Hill was, in 1969, chosen to be the U.S. ambassador to Madrid, from where he observed in the press and from visiting colleagues and friends such as Nixon senior advisors Robert Finch and Donald Rumsfeld (and a number of others), the machinations of Kissinger and their common “boss,” the latter a man who he already had begun to see as “basically a vulgarian” who was “personally somewhat repugnant.” While in Spain, still under the rule of rightwing dictator Francisco Franco, Hill began to evolve politically as well.

(He) went from being unalterably opposed to having any contact with the emerging opposition ... to a much more open attitude. ... (H)e would ... drop in and sit down and listen and have an exchange with the left about what was concerning them and what actually was going on behind the scenes in Spanish politics. He didn’t want to do it openly. ... But he was quite willing to do it quietly. As a result of these encounters and, as a result of his growing disenchantment with the Nixon White House ... he ... changed his positions on a number of issues fairly substantially before he finally left Spain.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Melvin Goodman, “Henry Kissinger: A Warmonger’s Lying Continues,” *Counterpunch* (August 2, 2022), accessed on August 31, 2022 at <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/08/02/henry-kissinger-a-warmongers-lying-continues/>;

Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (New York: Verso, 2001); Anthony Lewis, “Abroad at Home: Kissinger and China,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1989; Martin Edwin Andersen, “The Winter of Dr. K’s Discontent,” *Insight on the News*, January 7-20, 2003, which can be accessed at https://www.academia.edu/39610773/The_Winter_of_Dr_Ks_Discontent_Henrys_Kissingers_public_persona_of_selfless_service_cannot_mask_his_hubris_or_his_need_to_rewrite_history

⁸¹ Curtis C. Cutter oral interview conducted February 3, 1992 by Charles Stuart Kennedy of the Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training and found at <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004cut02/2004cut02.pdf>; particularly important, in light of evolving Spanish history, was the personal relationship he

In 1974, Hill's first year as ambassador to Argentina, the Peronist government signed a trade agreement with Cuba, while U.S. regulations dating from 1960 prohibited American subsidiaries abroad to trade with or have any financial transactions with the Caribbean island government. The new accord, remembered Cuba academic expert Wayne S. Smith, required Ford of Argentina, General Motors of Argentina, and a number of other American subsidiaries "to make cars and other products available to Cuba—for excellent prices set by the agreement." A former Marine Corps. combat veteran in the Korean War, Smith served in Cuba as a junior diplomat when the U.S. embassy was shut down in 1961 and returned to serve there from 1979 to 1982 as the Chief of Mission in Havana under Presidents Carter and Reagan.

The companies were incorporated in Argentina and were subject to Argentine law. And under international law, a government cannot impose its laws on the entities of a second country, and certainly not when those entities are within the borders of the second country. Fortunately, we had a very competent U.S. ambassador in Buenos Aires—Robert C. Hill. A staunch Republican, he believed in what was good for business—and this obviously was not. As he noted, 'We don't have international norms on our side here; this can only cause us extreme embarrassment and place our companies in needless jeopardy.' And so, he sent up strong recommendations that the regulations be brought into line with international law. In those years, the embargo regulations were entirely in the hands of the executive power and could be changed without congressional action. And so, the regulations were changed, in 1975. For the next 18 years, we respected international law; it was legal for U.S. subsidiaries to sell to Cuba, and many did.⁸²

As the dirty war went into overdrive in Argentina, Hill "backed his staff on human rights to the hilt," remembered former *New York Times* reporter Juan de Onís, who was stationed in Buenos Aires at the time. "Concerning Ambassador Hill, he was one of the most competent ambassadors I have ever worked with," wrote FBI Legal Attaché Robert W. Scherrer, someone who played a key role in uncovering the hands-on complicity of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, a Kissinger favorite, in the 1976 Letelier-Moffitt car bomb murders less than a mile from the White House and Kissinger's State Department. "The Ambassador did everything in his power to stop repression by the police and intelligence agencies without compromising the sources of

developed with Prince Juan Carlos who, on February 24, 1981, as King ordered the armed forces to take all necessary measures to crush an attempted coup by far-right paramilitary civil guards who had seized Spain's parliament. Cutter was a veteran U.S. diplomat and later an international consultant for the National Democratic Institute headed by former Carter Vice President Walter Mondale.

⁸² Smith, "Giving Mexico the Business," *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, February 24, 2006 Letter.

intelligence concerning rightwing terrorists provided by various Embassy components.”

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Is the State Department Trolling Henry Kissinger?

An official ceremony will honor a diplomat who paid a steep price to cross the master of realpolitik.



Henry Kissinger on Sept. 11, 1973. | Henry Griffin/AP Photo

By MICHAEL SCHAFFER

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A much-changed Hill, someone who knew where many of the most rotten foreign policy bones were buried in the Nixon and Ford Administrations because he was a privileged witness to their interment, came to find common cause on human rights as candidate Jimmy Carter was poised to win the presidency.

As the number of dead climbed towards what would end up being thousands of *desaparecidos*—men, women and children kidnapped, tortured and secretly executed at the hands of the military, Hill fought a rearguard action from the embassy in Buenos Aires,⁸³ his last ambassadorship. In September 1976 he prepared an eyes-only memorandum for an already complicit Kissinger urging that the U.S. vote against an

⁸³ This even though Hill and his family were themselves the object of several assassination attempts by armed leftists, beginning from the time they arrived in (Argentina) in mid-1974,” in Martin Edwin Andersen, “Henry A. Kissinger: A Premortem on the Real Friend of Enemies,” *A Contracorriente*, Vol. 19, Num. 3 (Spring 2022): 357.

Inter-American Development Bank loan on human rights grounds. Hill felt that it would strengthen his hand in dealing with the Argentines. The memo was given to Assistant Secretary of State Harry W. Shlaudeman, who asked the ambassador personally if Hill really wanted to send the memo to their boss, who had predictably already decided to vote for the loan. Shlaudeman suggested that the Secretary might fire Hill. Hill told Shlaudeman to send the memo.⁸⁴

In 1968 both Hill and Kissinger helped derail the Vietnam peace talks so that Nixon would win; a move called treason by Lyndon Johnson and a growing number of historians. Hill underwent a palpable process of cognitive dissonance and political redemption; Kissinger chose all manners of complicity in crimes heinous and cruel. Hitchens was a pioneer in bringing into the public debate the long-lasting malignant corruption of American values in U.S. foreign policy that was part and still undervalued parcel of the Watergate scandal; it remains to be seen whose example and reputation will ultimately triumph.

In memory of my friend and colleague Christopher Hitchens.

⁸⁴ Andersen, "Kissinger and the 'Dirty War,'" *The Nation*, op. cit.; Martin Edwin Andersen and John Dinges, "Kissinger Had a Hand in 'Dirty War,'" *Insight Magazine*, The Washington Times, January 4, 2002.