

June 15, 1964

Cable from Dutch Embassy, Havana (Reinink), 15 June 1964

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Summary:

First Secretary of the Dutch Embassy in Cuba, K.W. Reinink sends a cable to Amsterdam concerning a talk with Fidel Castro. Among the issues discussed are Dutch-Cuban relations, Cuban industrial development, the economic conditions of Cuba and the sugar trade.

Credits:

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DATE OF DISPATCH: 15 June 1964

FROM: Havana.

ORIGINAL INITIALED BY: KWR [K.W. Reinink, First Secretary of the Embassy]

TO: NERECODI [Dutch Government Code Service, The Hague]

BY COURIER

SECRET

Regarding the visit by Fidel Castro, vide my 30, the following should still be relayed. The prime minister arrived unannounced. The streets in the vicinity of my house had been cordoned off for his arrival. Castro's car was followed by four others filled with soldiers armed with submachine guns. The car in which he was seated also contained a four-man bodyguard. When they reached the front door Fidel jumped out of his Oldsmobile and kept his finger on the bell until the girl who was on duty and had been dozing in the noon heat opened the door. He entered and asked if I were at home. The girl confirmed this but said I had just a short while ago gone to take some rest. "When?" Fidel asked, and, when he heard this was about an hour ago remarked that this was long enough and instructed her to call me.

Usually the prime minister is accompanied by René Vallejo, his personal physician and confidant. However Vallejo had been sick since about a week, said Fidel, who had already installed himself in the living room and had also already undertaken a search for my cigars. He did not want whisky but tea because the evening before, with the British, he had drunk enough alcohol. At the reception given by Ambassador Watson on the occasion of "Queen's Birthday" Castro had already approached me twice: the first time with a question about the whole complex of Dutch-Cuban relations with regard to the extensive talk I had with him in March of this year and the second time more specifically about matters of agriculture and cattle breeding. Yet a serious conversation had not proven possible at those times, because of the heterogeneous company present and not least due to the inseparability of Aleksandr Alekseyev, the Soviet Ambassador, who is in the habit of not losing Fidel from his sight for an instant, as if he were his aide.

Under his arm Fidel carried the Spanish translation of André Voisin's "Sol, herbe, cancer," a scientific treatise intended for veterinarians. In this he had read that the Dutch professor Seekles (Utrecht) had remarked in a presentation at the Congress for Comparative Pathology in Madrid in 1952 that the livers of more than half of the Dutch cattle showed a serious shortage of copper. Voisin had made a rather alarming comment about this fact. Fidel had made some remarks about this at the British Embassy. Upon coming home he had however wondered if his remarks might not have offended the Netherlands, especially because perhaps by now a remedy had been found for the ailment in question and therefore the problem need not be acute anymore. It had by no means been his intention to make offensive remarks with respect to the Netherlands, which he esteemed highly because of its achievements in the areas of agriculture and industry. The Netherlands were an example for Cuba to follow. I tried to ease the prime minister's mind by assuring him that the Netherlands were not offended and that his remarks at the British Embassy would in no way be considered negative criticism. Yet Castro urged me to inform him as soon as possible of the current state of affairs regarding the disease observed by Seekles. He would then make the necessary corrections in public and announce those pieces of information from the Netherlands that could also be of importance to his cattle breeders. They could and would learn much from the Netherlands. Any cattle imported from the Netherlands would, he had decided, be brought to Isla de Pinos [Isle of Pines], an island near the south coast of Cuba. There it would be easier to control it and isolate any possible cases of foot-and-mouth disease. In Cuba there was great anxiety for this illness and thus his institutions kept stubbornly resisting the

import of sperm from the Netherlands for the artificial insemination that is practiced here too. Yet he wanted to procure Dutch cattle and said he hoped that the appropriate [or "qualified" - trans.] Dutch exporters would display the requisite activity. I said that I imagined only few prime ministers would be so intensively engaged in all these specificities of their economy. According to Castro this might be the case but that was the result of there being only few prime ministers who, like him, had so few experts at their disposal. Therefore it was necessary for him to busy himself with all aspects of the national economy and read the necessary books. He would like to take on a large number of experts from the Netherlands both in the areas of agriculture and cattle-breeding as in the area of industry. Perhaps it would also be possible to have a number of Cuban agricultural engineers take a course in the Netherlands.

Fidel requested an extensive briefing about the Dutch reaction to our talk of March this year. I pointed out that the Netherlands does not have state trade and that the government therefore plays a much more passive role in regular trade than for example in the communist world. The contents of the mentioned talk had immediately been brought to the attention of the Dutch Government which, as I explained, had so far as possible informed potentially interested commercial circles. This had essentially meant the end of the government's task. Fidel immediately scented something politically suspicious. He said he understood very well that the Dutch authorities in most cases could do little more than publicize information they possessed. He, from his side, wanted to trade with the Netherlands "without noise and publicity," analogously to the trade with Spain. Cuba had signed contracts with Spain for the purchase of sheep for a total of 60,000,000 USD and not a letter had appeared in the press. The case of the Leyland-contract had been mishandled by the British. It had been written and talked about in England from the outset which had needlessly politicized the issue. As far as relations with the Netherlands were concerned this had to be avoided, especially [the risk] that The Hague would be subjected to pressure from Washington.

He again extensively discussed the desiderata regarding trade with the Netherlands formulated earlier. There was an urgent need for dairy installations, equipment for the projected sucro-chemical industry, parts for the existing, partially antiquated sugar plants, and at least one new, large sugar plant. I repeated that his wishes were known in the Netherlands yet Castro insisted that I again present his suggestions to the Dutch Government and personally keep him informed of all that could interest him with regard to Dutch-Cuban relations. He noted my private phone number and said that I need not call him but that he would be in touch.

After an hour Fidel Castro said goodbye and left his copy of Voisin's treatment about pathological symptoms in cattle as a gift. I got even by offering the prime minister two Edammer cheeses. Fidel drove away, followed by his bodyguard, amidst loud cheering and applause from a crowd of scholarship students who had gathered near my house.

Castro made a tense impression. It is clear that he, to put it graphically, is fighting a losing battle, drowning in the countless problems which his internal and external policies have caused. As he had done during the first meeting, this time he again complained about the inexperience of staff members and technical and official institutions. He does not only want to be the spiritus rector [a Latin expression meaning "guiding spirit" - trans.] in the most divergent of areas of his society but also thinks he must gain in-depth knowledge of all related technical and scientific aspects. He does not only want to bring his agriculture and cattle-breeding to a higher level but also master the specialized knowledge of agronomists, phytopathologists, and veterinarians. In the same way that Khrushchev was for a long time - and perhaps still is - obsessed with the growing of corn, Castro is possessed by agriculture and cattle-breeding. A few days ago he even had a complicated book about certain agricultural questions distributed to his ministers and other high officials which they,

as the vice-minister of Foreign Relations told me, are now diligently studying because they know that Castro can subject them to a sort of examination at any moment.

Castro also made the impression of a restless fairly lonely man who enjoys the occasional company of others than his usual flatterers and unquestioning admirers. There seemed to be no immediate, concrete reason for his visit this Saturday afternoon. He could have summoned me at any time that suited him. Moreover I had upon being asked already let one of his confidants know that I had no important notifications for the prime minister. I had then informed said confidant of the Dutch position in the same way as I now explained it to Castro himself.

It is also clear that the prime minister realizes that in matters of economy he cannot expect more from the USSR and the other communist powers than what they are currently willing and able to do for Cuba. He is aware of the many drawbacks associated with his one-sided orientation toward the "peace camp." Castro is therefore striving, most likely with full consent and support from Moscow, for a substantial improvement of economic and political relations with Western Europe and even seems to want to force such an improvement.

Fidel Castro's behavior displays the same traits that secured him success in the underground struggle against Batista: audacity bordering on recklessness, willpower and an almost maniacal doggedness and tenacity. He is, however, psychologically not very stable, intelligent but hurried, impatient, and short-tempered. His unstable state of mind and irritability probably explain why he believes the Netherlands to be offended by a public remark about lack of copper in the liver of our cows and his impatience to apologize for this.

Reinink 31.