

Robert A. Hurwitch Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 05/04/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Robert A. Hurwitch was the Special Assistant for Cuban Affairs, Department of State (1962 - 1963). This interview focuses on the United States' economic policy in regards to Cuba during the Kennedy Administration, reactions of the people of the United States to Cuban policy, and the United States' economic investments in Cuba during Fidel Castro's takeover, among other things.

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Second Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT A. HURWITCH

May 4, 1964

Washington, D.C.

Interviewed by John Plank

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MR. PLANK: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Hurwitch of the State Department being conducted inside the State Department on the 4th of May, 1964. This is a sequel to an earlier recording session, the tapes of which have already been transcribed. The interviewer again is John Plank. Bob, when we were together last time we were talking largely about political, military and

subversive aspects of your involvement in developments of Cuban-US relations between 1960 and the time you left the Cuban Coordinator's Office. And we decided then that we would take up today some of the economic aspects -- the whole economic denial program and the general policy of the Administration toward Cuba and Cuba in the world in the economic sphere. Perhaps the sensible thing to do would be just to have you begin to talk a bit about what the economic policy was when you came into Cuban matters in November of 1960.

MR. HURWITCH: Be glad to, John. You recall for the first eighteen months or thereabouts of the United States relations with the Castro regime, or from about

January, 1959 to mid-year 1960, the policy of the United States Government toward Cuba, particularly insofar as trade was concerned, probably can be characterized as one of patience and forbearance. No action of an economic nature was taken with respect to the Castro regime in its negative sense until in July of 1960 it was determined that Cuba no longer provided a stable or reliable source of supply for sugar and at that time the Cuban sugar quota to the United States was set at zero. It actually did not take effect immediately. Some several hundred thousand tons of sugar came into the United States during the balance of 1960 but for all practical purposes after July, 1960, the Cubans

or the Cuban government could no longer count on the United States as the major, or any, market for its sugar. This was of considerable significance, John, as you recall. Cuba's major export commodity, major foreign exchange earner, was sugar. Cuba is the most efficient, cheapest sugar producer in the world and the United States with its great population doesn't begin to produce enough sugar for its own needs and traditionally Cuba has been the major source of supply for American sugar. And in the past we had been paying a premium for sugar that came into the United States from Cuba. Consequently, John, as you can see, having taken this step of setting the Cuban sugar quota at zero because Cuba

could no longer be regarded as a reliable source of supply was a major step in the field of economics directly affecting the relations between our country and Cuba.

I might mention that the reason why Cuba as a source of supply was no longer reliable was that, as you recall in February of 1960, Mr. [Anastas] Mikoyan came to visit Cuba and shortly thereafter Cuba announced that it would be shipping a substantial amount of its forthcoming harvest to the Soviet Union. This of course gave not only the Department of State but other departments, such as the Department of Agriculture, great cause for pause since sugar in our country like almost any country is an important commodity

politically, since you can recall easily when the price of sugar goes up, housewives particularly get disgruntled and therefore any administration in power is most desirous of keeping the price of sugar at a low level.

MR. PLANK:

You weren't in this particular job at the time the decision to take this step was taken. I know the rationale you are putting forward here is the one that is publicly accepted. Whether it is the full rationale or not is still up in the air somewhat. There were also, were there not, economic reprisals or denial aspects to this, that the decision to cut the quota owed not only to concern about future provision of sugar to the US market but also to a desire to bring Fidel to heel.

When you came into the Department, was this still being talked about, this aspect of it or just the fact that the decision had been taken, been accepted, and it was just known?

MR. HURWITCH: It was the latter, actually, that the decision had been taken. You will recall also that a speech shortly before that -- I forget the precise date but I think it can be easily obtained -- Che Guevara indicated that by his own ingress in economics that the United States paying a premium for sugar to Cuba was tantamount to economic imperialism or economic colonialism. This too, of course, I think all of these things, has^{ve} to be seen and thought about in the context of American public opinion which was quite excited about

Cuba and to hear and see and read in the newspaper that Che Guevara considers our paying over and above the world prices for sugar as economic imperialism and colonialism, immediately gives rise to a fair amount of pressure on any government to certainly relieve them of this colonial yoke.

MR. PLANK:

I think my question was really going to this, Bob, and wasn't at all well phrased. If you exclude the option of an overt and full-scale military invasion of Cuba and if the determination has been made that the United States cannot live comfortably with the Castro regime, then what is left to you? Well, you have diplomatic, which was not open. Then you have economic pressures which could be brought to bear, and in your discussions in the Department. . .

Really, what I want to ask you is what kinds of outcome were anticipated from the economic denial program and from the general . . .

MR. HURWITCH: Yes, right, I understand. I see. I think I ought to make it perfectly clear from the outset, John, that to my knowledge there was no one in any position of responsibility in the State Department or elsewhere in government who felt or believed that an economic denial program in and of itself would bring down the Castro regime. I don't think that there was anybody who had any illusions on that score. But it was perfectly clear that the Cuban economy was, in a sense, a Western-based economy. All of their industrial plants were for the most

part -- the industrial plant, the agricultural equipment, whatever they had, which was manufactured -- was basically from the West and a great deal from the United States. Clearly, if they were going to change from their Western orientation and enter the Sino-Soviet bloc or the Socialist camp, then they would have to shift over from a Western, or could be forced to shift over from a Western-based economy, to a Soviet one. It seemed desirable to move in this direction for a variety of reasons: one, to make the transition from the type of economic system that was prevalent before Castro came to power to a Communist, state-owned one as difficult as possible; secondly, to make it as burdensome as possible

upon the Soviet Union. I think those were the two major reasons from the economic-political standpoint, always with the thought in the back of our minds that through the economic denial program an atmosphere or a situation might be created in Cuba, that is, a situation which resulted in disgruntlement over probable rationing, friction in day-to-day life because of shortages of all sorts, possibly unemployment -- a number of these effects of an economic denial program which might translate itself into open active opposition to the regime. If, while admitting that only a certain proportion, and this is usually just a very small proportion, of a population goes into open and active opposition particularly against

a communist regime such as the Castro government, nonetheless even by creating a situation or an atmosphere of dissatisfaction in Cuba, it provided a cloak in an atmosphere for the active element to work in that was sympathetic to their aims. When you think of the clandestine guerilla fighter who has to go from farmhouse to farmhouse, if the farmers are disgruntled, the likelihood of their taking in these activists, anti-Castro fighters and hiding them, sheltering them, providing them with food -- such a likelihood was obviously enhanced if the people were dissatisfied, and dissatisfied in the economic sense with the Castro regime.

MR. PLANK: When you take this kind of decision of course, you think not only of what the

effects are going to be inside Cuba but also about what the effects are going to be, to use a standard word, to the image of the United States in the hemisphere, the image of the United States as seen from Western Europe. This of course is much more relevant today in May, 1964 than it was at the time these decisions were taken. Did you, in making these decisions to push the economic denial program as far as it was pushed, to exclude all shipments ^{from} to the United States except food and medicine, after a good deal of consideration of what our policy might be elsewhere on the kind of . . .

MR. HURWITCH: Yes. Well, as a matter of fact, John, pushing ahead from July, 1960 when the sugar quota was set at zero to October,

1960 which is just before I arrived when export controls were placed in effect which forbade the export of any US origin commodities with the exception, as you say, of food and medicine to Cuba, no further action, and that is particularly with regard to imports into the United States from Cuba other than sugar was taken until February, 1961, which was after the Punte del Este meeting on Cuba. That is, the United States took no further unilateral economic action but despite heavy pressure to do so . . .

MR. PLANK: Heavy domestic pressure?

MR. HURWITCH: Yes.

MR. PLANK: Are you saying, Bob, that the US market was open to Cuba exports until February, 1961?

MR. HURWITCH: Yes, that's right and this consisted primarily of tobacco of which there was, as I recall, some, probably, 40 million dollars' worth of tobacco that was imported into the United States which of course provided Cuba with dollars to do whatever she wished with it. But we, despite the obvious pressures to close this loophole, felt that it would be best not to get out too far in front of the hemisphere and to wait until hemispheric attitudes had jelled to the point where we felt we could all move forward together.

And this did occur as a result of the Punte del Este meeting on Cuba at which Cuba was excluded from the Organization of American States or the present government of Cuba was. It

was after that step had been taken that the United States imposed its embargo which then made it illegal to import anything of Cuban origin into the United States. So that by February of 1961 the only trade which was legally possible in either direction between Cuba and the United States was the shipment of United States foodstuffs, non-subsidized foodstuffs and medicine to Cuba.

MR. PLANK:

Well, Bob, to get back to this other dimension of our whole exercise here, during this period running from November of 1960 through this determination, that is, in February of 1961, that you were in the Department, you talk about "we" made the decision or "we" decided such-and-such. I would like to ask who the

"we" are. You did not have a task force. How were the decisions made during this period? With whom were consultations held?

MR. HURWITCH: These were decisions in which I participated; my immediate superior, the Office Director for Caribbean and Mexican Affairs; the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs -- at that time it was [Robert F.] Bob Woodward; and the White House, Mr. [Richard N.] Goodwin, Mr. Bundy. And eventually all of these steps had to be approved by the President.

MR. PLANK: When did Mr. Berle come into this picture?

MR. HURWITCH: Well, he had already left.

MR. PLANK: He was aboard when the Bay of Pigs . . .

MR. HURWITCH: Oh, yes. But he was primarily engaged

in other things. I don't remember ever having talked to Mr. Berle about this. It was quite possible that copies of papers and so on did go to him or he was consulted by my superiors but I myself never attended a meeting with him or chatted with him about it.

MR. PLANK:

I see. And again, getting back to the other theme that your indication of hardships imposed upon Cuban farmers or Cubans in the street would make them more receptive to the activities of anti-Castro elements, there is a dimension here that I would like to ask you about. Were you also concerned that this might also be counter-productive in the sense that Castro of course was trying to lay all the responsibility for the hardships on the United States and

the fact of economic aggression, so-called. How did that factor enter into your . . .

MR. HURWITCH: Certainly it was a factor. However, I think my feeling was, and seemed to be widely shared, that once the measures were taken and Castro had said that his own economic ills were the result of the Yankee embargo and so-called blockade -- but that was not a record he could play forever. On the other hand, to refrain from taking such action because Castro might do this, would paralyze us in almost anything we did. In any event he was inclined to say whatever he wanted to say about the United States and blamed the United States for his ills whether it was true or not. There seemed to be a certain amount of sense

of giving him some factual basis for these charges rather than -- and in that way to at least get some benefit on our side since we were getting all the negatives the other way.

MR. PLANK: As this program evolved, and I take it from what you say that it didn't really evolve in a systematic sense, you made a decision in July, 1960 -- you made a further decision in February, '61 -- and then of course after the missile crisis an even stronger determination was made with respect to free world shipping and so on.

MR. HURWITCH: That's correct.

MR. PLANK: But what kinds of consultations were held outside of government with peoples elsewhere, either hemispheric representatives or UN representatives?

MR. HURWITCH: We were in constant consultation and discussions with not only other nations of the hemisphere but also with our European friends and allies who were continuing some trade with Cuba. I don't know what the statistics are today, but I should be surprised that they are much different. As of the time I left, John, in August of last year, roughly 20 per cent or thereabouts, 15 to 20 per cent, of Cuba's trade was with the free world and the rest of her trade was with the Sino-Soviet bloc. Before Castro came to power and shortly thereafter, certainly, almost 100 per cent of the trade was with the free world. So 15 per cent, perhaps 20, but I'm inclined to think that it was 15 per cent of Cuba's trade is with the

free world now. Some of this is with foodstuffs but not entirely and I am inclined to believe that as long as Cuba has sugar and there is a world sugar shortage and Cuba is able to sell sugar in the free world, she's going to earn dollars or other convertible currencies and with that she is going to be able to purchase. I don't think it's possible to set up an air ^(CMT)~~type~~ sort of commercial blockade, if you like, or embargo of trade between Cuba and other free world countries. We can of course ourselves but even we ourselves. . . If the sugar that Cuba, would, for example, sell to Morocco and Cuba earned 10 million dollars from that, Cuba could today come and buy 10 million dollars worth of, if you like, wheat or medicines from the United States.

So it's true. She could buy it elsewhere and could buy other things with the 10 million dollars of a perhaps more useful nature perhaps to her industrial field or the industrial part of her economy. But I don't think that as long as she has money that it is possible to shut off all the sources of supply in the free world. There would always be somebody, if an extremist, black marketeers, who would buy it and tranship it in one fashion or another and Cuba, as long as she's got money, will be able to purchase. I don't think we ought to get involved in it personally, in any unrealistic practices which will really only result in alienating our friends and have questionable positive results as far as our

program toward Cuba is concerned.

MR. PLANK: This is really what I wanted to get to. Over time, while you were associated with this program, was the feeling in the Department and more broadly in the community that the program was having the results that had been hoped for?

MR. HURWITCH: Well, yes, as far as I was personally concerned, recognizing that the economic program itself would not bring down the Castro regime, I think it did contribute to the confusion and virtually chaotic economic conditions in Cuba. It has increased the burden upon the Sino-Soviet bloc. It has remained a symbol, if you like, or a posture on our part which stiffened the resolve of other countries, Latin

American countries particularly, to maintain a distant attitude toward Cuba. It's had these effects, certainly. What it has not brought about is the stimulation of a sufficient number of underground resistance activities to bring about Castro's downfall, but it wasn't really designed to do this. It was designed to create an atmosphere within which these other elements, the activists' elements, could work. The activists' elements themselves, given the virtually insuperable odds against which they were pitted, have not, obviously, succeeded in overthrowing Castro.

MR. PLANK:

The last time when we were talking you mentioned that you used to go up to the Hill and the junior congressmen wanted information from you; others had special pitches to make. Did you

find, when you went up to the Hill with respect to the economic denial program, understanding of the point of view you have just been discussing on the part of the congressmen and senators?

MR. HURWITCH: By and large, yes. I would say by and large there was a greater understanding of actions that we took, than a willingness to agree that there was something that we shouldn't do. I think, in typical American fashion, our sort of vigorous people and action-minded men are very reluctant to accept a recommendation which says, do nothing or don't do this. So I think it is always easier to explain why you are doing something vis-a-vis Cuba which is punitive than to say, theoretically you could do this but

the costs, politically and otherwise, would be too great. And these are difficult things to demonstrate in my judgment.

MR. PLANK:

During this period, particularly the 1962 period and the 1963 period in part also, there was a good deal of feeling that the Administration seemed to be caught between the upper and lower millstones. There were those who were saying that you were acting in a most inhumane fashion toward Fidel, that you should show him love and affection and receptivity. And then of course there were those who were saying that you had no Cuba policy, that it was just a stalling operation and that you were prepared to live with Castro forever, and both of these points

of view had spokesmen on the Hill, although obviously the latter point of view was much more vociferously expressed. I would be interested to know what kind of line you took on the Hill to meet the attack from both sides, as it were.

MR. HURWITCH: Well, once we ruled out military invasion or overt military action of any sort and once we indicated that we were not going to try to get along with Castro and it was evident that we obviously weren't going in that direction, we could then point to what we thought was, and I continue to think, an imposing list of measures, that we had taken to make life for Castro and his government as untenable as possible, or as difficult as possible. And then we would just

go over the list of things that we had done and ask what more could be done.

Some of the things that were suggested that could be done were in our judgment really of minimal value vis-a-vis Castro, harmful and sometimes of a serious nature to our relations, to our friends and allies, and really beneficial only in the sense that some American people and congressmen -- and I want to emphasize that I don't think that because some people have been particularly vocal on the Cuban issue that it necessarily reflects the down deep feeling of the broad masses of the American people -- there will be certainly some American people who would feel less frustrated. Just that

something, almost irrespective of what it was, was done and would somehow be lulled into the belief that it might be effective against Castro when anybody dealing with the situation would be perfectly persuaded that it would have only the most marginal type of influence.

MR. PLANK: This prompts the question. Did you as one of the principal architects of Cuban policy receive letters from the grass-roots, so-called? Did people know that you were there? Did people from Indiana or Utah write letters directly to you, Bob?

MR. HURWITCH: Not very frequently. They were addressed either to the Department of State or sometimes to the Cuban desk -- very seldom to me personally. By and large,

John, the State Department officers are an anonymous group other than the very top officers who do get perhaps even more publicity than they desire. But most of us, even on something as prominent in the news as Cuba, are known maybe to a few people but by and large our names do not appear in print. But the correspondence, irrespective of who it was addressed to, was pretty heavy.

MR. PLANK: Yes. Did a number of congressmen send letters over to you from their constituents?

MR. HURWITCH: Yes, I had one officer working full time answering congressional mail.

MR. PLANK: And these were for the most part letters from constituents to the congressmen?

MR. HURWITCH: Yes, that's right, and they invariably ran from one end of sort of the serious

thoughtful letter asking about policy, US policy, indicating how the rightists saw the situation. They really often-times were quite helpful -- to the absurd letters, the letter from the man who said he had a solution to the Cuban problem, that he had visited Cuba once many years ago and the one impression he came away with was how the people loved to dance. And his suggestion was that we ring the island just outside the three-mile limit with ships with loudspeakers and with phonographs and play dancing music all day long so that it could be heard in Cuba and that everybody would dance and nobody would work, and that this would so infuriate and frustrate the aims of the Castro government that he would give up in disgust. [Laughter]

MR. PLANK: Bob, there were substantial US investments in Cuba at the time of the Castro takeover -- in sugar, but not only in sugar, but about every dimension of the Cuban economy. Were you under any kind of direct pressure in your position from those sectors that felt themselves damaged by the Castro takeover to act in a way different from the way you were acting?

MR. HURWITCH: Well, no, not directly, John. I can't recall any occasion. You are right. I think there was 1.1 billion dollars worth of US assets, owned by US citizens or corporations, which were confiscated by the Castro regime. I am inclined to believe, although I can't demonstrate it, that a number of the activities of the exiles were financed on a voluntary basis by some of these corporations.

I think that some of these corporations and individuals knew their congressmen quite well and oftentimes I wouldn't be surprised when a congressman called me up advocating a particular line of action, was really doing it because of an important constituent, rather than that being necessarily that exercised about it himself. I don't mean to say that the congressman might be expressing a view that might not have been his own. It may or may not have been his own, but he may not have even thought of it at the time, to get in touch with me other than the fact that he was receiving a certain amount of phone calls or letters from his constituents whom he felt were important. So I think the influence upon me and the Department in that was

more indirect, and indirect along those lines, perhaps. A lot of these companies had good relations with the press and I wouldn't be surprised, though I can't demonstrate it, that some of the more militaristic kind of stories vis-a-vis Cuba that appeared in the press may have been inspired by contacts between the press and owners or officers of these companies.

MR. PLANK:

What sorts of things would they recommend? I know that they did take some direct action occasionally in impounding Cuban aircraft or impounding Cuban shipments of one sort or another. But in their dealings with the Department, what sort of things were they after? Were there primarily legal remedies or . . .

MR. HURWITCH: In their dealings with the Department, they did go to the claims division of the Legal Division and many of them have filed claims. When they will ever be processed I don't know, but that is one of the things that they did. And, as you say, whenever they had an opportunity to confiscate something and when that came into the courts, they asked the Department to be of assistance. But as far as advocating specific courses of action, I don't think, other than some of the more obvious ones -- why don't you invade Cuba or something like that -- I don't think they really had any ideas. But I do think that they often felt that their own role was one of making sure that there was no backsliding in the

Government on taking, if you like, a tough line toward Cuba. My own guess is that their own pressure was primarily designed to keep Cuba a bubbling issue and insure that whenever alternatives in policy were feasible that the more militant was chosen by the Government, the policy makers, et cetera.

MR. PLANK: Well, looking at it from the other standpoint, travel restrictions were imposed and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee which was established made an immense amount of noise. Did these people cause you any particular trouble? Did . . .

MR. HURWITCH: Well, yes. This was the other extreme and the Cuban policy and the Cuba action vis-a-vis Cuba by State Department officers has always been sort of Scylla and

Charybdis ~~is~~ course to be steered, and sometimes the channel that was to be cleared got to be pretty narrow with one group of people, as we've been talking, advocating militant action and there was another group of people, sort of well meaning people, people concerned that we had by our actions and attitudes forced the Castro government into the Soviet camp, which is just not true, and certainly the facts do not demonstrate it, don't bear this out. They range from this type of person to the person who was quite sympathetic to the Castro government and tried to exert pressure either through the FPCC, the Ban the Bomb groups, the various women's groups, the Quakers sometimes who felt that our policies were wrong and that

what we needed to do was to show a great deal of understanding for the Cuban situation and somehow, as a result of this, Castro and his followers of the 26th of July and communists would become different people and we could all get along just fine.

MR. PLANK: Did you notice any significant shift in the sorts of questions that were put to you and the sort of pleas that were made to you after the October, 1962 crisis, that is, did this have the effect of the changing attitudes or quieting certain sectors and exciting other sectors?

MR. HURWITCH: I think so. I think certainly those who said that Castro's revolution was sort of a garden variety nationalist reform movement found that this line

was no longer possible. Obviously permitting missiles into the country that endangered world peace was something far removed from a local reformist movement as some would have us believe. I think, although it is hard to be absolutely certain, but I am inclined to recall that the more militant advocates of "invade now" and so on were somewhat chastened when confronted with the possibility of nuclear war. I think that the situation, and particularly the Kennedy Administration's clear demonstrations of its ability to handle a crisis of this proportion muted a lot of the people who had criticized the Cuban policy but were primarily criticizing the Kennedy Administration for whatever political motives they had and

focused on Cuba because Cuba was such a dramatic issue. But the successful resolution of the crisis and, as I say, the clear demonstration of President Kennedy's ability to meet this kind of crisis also contributed to dampening the criticism of US policy.

MR. PLANK:

Bob, thanks very much for having taken so much of your time to give your thoughts and your observations to us here. I'd like to ask just a concluding statement or summary from you with respect to how you looked at this whole evolution or development of our Cuban policy over time both in terms of policy and in terms of moving in and out of personalities. Would you be willing to talk a little bit about that?

MR. HURWITCH: Well, let me say first, John, that during the three-year period that I was the Officer in Charge of Cuban Affairs I worked for four Assistant Secretaries of State. When I arrived there, Mr. Mann was Assistant Secretary. He was followed by Bob Woodward, then ^{Wymberley Coer} Wym Coer, and finally Ed Martin who has now been subsequently replaced by Mr. Mann, so that you get a feeling of coming full circle. Policy was consistent, really, among all of these gentlemen -- in part, I think, because the facts did not change very much and being men of intelligence and good judgment, they observed the facts and came up with pretty much the same judgment.

The other thing, a very steady

brother, of course sensitive particularly to whatever domestic political repercussions there might be with regard to the Administration's handling of the Cuban situation. But he also was very much interested and energetic in working with us and consulting with us on what might be done.

I must say to the credit of both former President Kennedy and the Attorney General that no matter how much they sensed at any given moment, the importance of Cuba from a domestic political point of view, they never really lost perspective or became in any way willing to sacrifice the security of the long-range interest of the United States for whatever short-range gains might be derived from an opportunistic handling of the Cuban

situation. The President was always a real statesman and always regarded Cuba within the broad perspective of the overall interest of the United States and certainly never from the short-range political point of view or whatever gains that he might make in domestic politics.

MR. PLANK: Thank you very much, Bob. This has been an interview with Mr. Robert Hurwitch of the Department of State.