

**Jose Figueres Ferrer Written Statement – JFK#1, 08/03/1966**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Jose Figueres Ferrer  
**Date of Interview:** August 3, 1966  
**Place of Interview:** San Jose, Costa Rica  
**Length:** 7 pages

**Biographical Note**

Figueres was the President of Costa Rica from 1948 to 1949 (provisionally), from 1953 to 1958, and from 1970 to 1974. In this written statement Figueres discusses his memories of John F. Kennedy [JFK], the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Social Democratic Movement in Latin America, JFK's assassination, the Alliance for Progress, and attending JFK's funeral, among other issues.

**Access**

Open.

**Usage Restrictions**

Copyright of these materials have passed to the United States Government upon the death of the interviewee. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

**Copyright**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

**Transcript of Oral History Interview**

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

**Suggested Citation**

Jose Figueres Ferrer, written statement, August 3, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Jose Figueres Ferrer

Although a legal agreement was not signed during the lifetime of Jose Figueres Ferrer, upon his death, ownership of the recording and transcript of his interview for the Oral History Program passed to the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The following terms and conditions apply:

1. The transcript is available for use by researchers.
2. The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.
3. Copyright to the interview transcript and tape is assigned to the United States Government.
4. Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request for a fee.
5. Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Jose Figueres Ferrer – JFK #1  
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Memories of John F. Kennedy [JFK] in the Senate
1	The Bay of Pigs invasion
3	The United States and the Social Democratic Movement in Latin America
5	Figueres' reaction to JFK's assassination
5	The Alliance for Progress
7	Attending JFK's funeral

Copyright to the oral history interview of Jose Figueres has passed to the United States Government.

Oral History Interview

with

JOSÉ FIGUERES

San José, Costa Rica

August 3, 1966

For the John F. Kennedy Library

FIGUERES: It would be too trite to say that this is an honor, it is almost an emotional shock for me to try to recall some of my memories of President Kennedy. For example, he was so youthful and full of joy. Once when my wife and I visited him in the Senate when he gave us a very nicely dedicated copy of his Profiles in Courage, I remember he showed three or four or six desks in a small office and said, "Look at this. This is how much space the U.S. government can afford to give us. And then the people say that we are spending all the taxpayers' money."

I had a great deal of contact with him during the Bay of Pigs invasion. I had been fully aware of the preparations ever since they began. I had been recommending another course of action which was to overthrow the government of the Dominican Republic first, and then to use the Dominican Republic as a base for attacking Cuba. When invasion day came, I was in Washington. I was very much worried. Saturday afternoon when the supposed Cuban pilots bombed the Cuban bases, I was in [Adolf P., Jr.] Al Berle's home, and I remember telling him literally, "Al, I'm extremely worried. As a former guerrilla fighter, I know all that we have in Guatemala. Unless these boys have weapons or methods that have been developed after Korea,

which I have no knowledge, they have absolutely no chance." Now, he said, "Pepe, you know more about this than I do. I have just come into the government." Which he had, he was the head of the task force for studies of Latin American affairs, and, of course, I realized he was bound by secrecy. He had just become a sworn officer of the U.S. government, so I told him, "Don't you worry, you don't have to tell me anything, but it is my duty to tell you what I know and what I think now that you represent the U.S. government, and I'm breaking no secrets." It was Saturday afternoon. That evening we cancelled a trip to Massachusetts to the Berle's home because things weren't looking well in Cuba. Next day, Sunday, I kept in contact with the White House, especially through Arthur [M., Sr.] Schlesinger.

Monday things began to look worse and worse, and finally we agreed that I would have a talk with the President Wednesday, the seventeenth. By that time he already knew of the failure of the invasion. I saw him in the morning. He was extremely concerned. He wasn't open, he couldn't be; he didn't tell me, although I could guess, that the thing was already a flop. I told him, "Mr. President, don't let it worry you too much. Maybe someday we can try something else. It may be preposterous on my part to say that if my plan had been followed, we might have had a little better luck. Anyway, it was done in the best of intentions. Don't you worry. I wish you luck." On the way out from the White House I remember my problems with handling the press. The news of the invasion was all over the world already.

That same night, Wednesday--I think it was the seventeenth of April, anyway, it was Wednesday--I received a group of Cubans in the hotel who came from Miami representing President [Dr. Carlos Prio Socarras] Prio, who said--Prio had sent word to me, he said, "I still have some two hundred and fifty men available, do you think that we should use them, or do you think this is all lost?" I couldn't

answer at that moment, so I called the White House, nearly midnight, and Arthur was still there, Arthur Schlesinger, and I said, "Arthur, is it looking bad?" He said, "Terrible." "Is it a Dunkirk?" He said, "Yes." "Mmmhmm. Do you think we saved half the boys?" He said, "That's what we hope." Of course, you know, we didn't save half the boys. In fact, we saved practically nobody. When I told this to one of the people who worked with me, the former President, he collapsed. He has a weak heart and he had a mild attack right in my hotel room. So my wife and I had to take him in a taxi to his wife in another hotel, and you can imagine all the excitement among his friends. The news was becoming worse and worse. And they still didn't know how bad it was because I didn't choose to relay the information that Arthur Schlesinger had just given me. For several days I kept sending memos that were requested from the White House, and I remember that I ended up by publicly recommending that we forget about Cuba for the time being and try to develop Latin America. And let's postpone the Cuban problem. Probably this opinion was shared by other people because this was the course of action that was followed after the Bay of Pigs.

When President Kennedy got the Latin American Diplomatic Corps together in the White House and announced what eventually became the Alliance for Progress, I was already in Costa Rica. And Haya de la Torre was here, although he doesn't come very often. Haya and I organized a movement to send solidarity messages from Latin American parties to President Kennedy on this proposed new policy. I think that by spending about a thousand dollars in cables, we finally got twenty-three Latin American parties and groups to sign this message, which was cabled to him. It took a little time because [Eduardo] Frei from Chile wanted to consult with the Venezuelan Christian Democrats, and they changed a few words, but finally the message was sent to the White House. I went there a few weeks later and complained to [Richard N.] Dick Goodwin that the message had not been answered. So he brought me in



to see the President, and I showed him a beautifully written copy of the cablegram, a formal document. He read it very rapidly. He said, "Dick, this has to be answered. Please write a nice letter, and I want to sign it personally." The letter was never sent. These were the times when what you call the permanent bureaucracy, or the technical bodies of the government, were still in those difficult relations with the new President, who is supposed not to be very familiar with what's going on and with the background of things.

Unfortunately, there's always a lack of understanding in the high Washington circles that sometimes political parties are more important than governments, because governments come and go in Latin America and parties seem to be a little more stable. Anyway, in spite of the personal orders of President Kennedy, these parties never got an acknowledgement of the message of solidarity, and instead of that many of the leaders got trouble from the rank and file, which is largely anti-U.S., for having sent such a message. Another order that President Kennedy issued in my presence and was never fulfilled was a help to the integrated Latin American Democratic Movement to be given through Walter Reuther, or somebody in the labor movement. He even mentioned the amount; he gave instructions. But the money was never given, probably because of the opposition of technical bodies in the government. It is a regrettable thing that the Social Democratic Movement in Latin America has never had a help from outside, whereas other international movements, not to mention the Communists, but even the Christian Democrats, are financed from Germany.

The only help that we've gotten from the U.S. in this Social Democratic Movement is the economic contribution to our School of Democratic Leaders, which functions in Costa Rica, with small groups of about thirty-five students three times a year. It's been running quite successfully for five or six years now. We already have some four hundred alumni. And it's the only effort of this kind in the hemisphere. The money is given to us through a

small foundation called the Pan American Foundation in Gainesville, the University of Florida.

When President Kennedy visited Cost Rica, it was a great occasion. He and I had a very warm chat in the Presidential House of Costa Rica. He and I knew about many things that we had been in together before which couldn't be discussed officially, so we spoke in private. Then he went to the University where my son helped organize a student's reception. I think that never a President of the United States has been so well received in a Latin American university, where so many troubles are going on. I didn't see him ever again, I think.

One day in Boston I was giving a course on Inter-American affairs--I gave, as you know, a full semester--and a friend from the Christian Science Monitor called and said, "The President has been shot." I turned on the little portable radio and began listening. "The President is not dead. The Governor is not dead. A priest says that he's dying. Somebody else says that he is not dead." These went on for a century, compressed in I don't know whether seconds or minutes, and finally the voice on the radio said, "The President is dead." I fell on my knees, which hadn't happened to me ever before, with the exception of a day when my young boy of three was drowned, we recovered him, we brought him back to life, but those have been the two worst shocks of my life. I don't think that ever in human history there has been an event that has affected more people than the President's assassination. His youthful picture, his image to the world, the importance of the United States, the facility of communications that made the news spread through all the world certainly made this, by far, the most shocking experience of mankind in all its history.

Now, a few words about the Alliance for Progress. A few friends and I coined the phrase during the campaign. I helped the ghost writers in some of the speeches, and we coined this phrase, "Alliance for Progress." U.S. friends and Puerto Rican friends. When the Alliance was finally launched

at Punta del Este, I was present. A little incident of Latin American politics is that I did not represent Costa Rica, but Honduras. The government of Costa Rica would not appoint me. So I received offers from, I think, four or five Latin American governments offering to appoint me, and I accepted the poorest of the countries, Honduras, and I went as representative of Honduras. Most of the things that were agreed upon there were what we Latin Americans had been fighting for, working for, together with the professors in the U.S. universities, particularly at Harvard, Stanford. I remember that I proposed international minimum wages, and the Latin Americans were horrified. The U.S. representative would have gone along. This continues to be a great need in the program of integration. The most important aspect of the Alliance is that it was a change of attitude on the part of the United States, a radical change. For the first time we got an official statement from the U.S. government in favor of the type of social reform that we had been recommending, in favor of support for elected democratic governments, and for the first time we got the influence of the United States on Latin American governments to sign such propositions. Of course, many people just signed documents thinking that nothing would come out of it. This is a dangerous practice. Sometimes things do come out. And I think that a great deal has come out of the Punta del Este Charter. People expected too much; people oversimplified it; some confused it with a simple program of loans. I think that it was a great deal more than that. Maybe the only mistake of any importance we did was our time schedule. Everything will take longer than we anticipated at those moments. The process of education of the Latin American people will take a long time, the transformation of customs, the traditions. But I think that, by and large, the outlook of the Alliance for Progress was the right thing, and that it has done a great deal towards the building of a great human society in the western hemisphere. I think that the western hemisphere is the best monument to the memory of my dear friend, John F. Kennedy.

The day after his death I flew from Boston to Washington, and in the Costa Rican Embassy called the President of Costa Rica, and offered myself as a representative to the funeral. The President was very pleased, so Ambassador [Gonzalo J.] Facio and I both went officially to the funeral. It's hard to convey the emotions of that afternoon. At Arlington I saw [Luis] Munoz Marin. We embraced each other and began crying like children. There were no words to express the feelings. I was late in arriving to the White House. I think I was the last one. People who were watching television thought I wasn't coming. Finally, I went in, had tea--the State Department had kindly arranged for the guests to have tea--and then all of the delegates were asked to go through a room in which Mrs. Kennedy, Jacqueline, was to shake hands with us and receive our bereavements. When I approached the group, the two brothers were there. I had never seen her, but Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] said, "This is Figueres." I could hear him. I could hear him, so in her very particular low tone of voice said, "My husband used to tell me how kind you all were to him in Costa Rica," which impressed me very much. She was unusually strong, and I didn't know whether to pity her, or to admire her more.