

John E. Nolan Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 04/25/1967
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Nolan was the administrative assistant to the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy [RFK], from 1963 to 1964. In this interview he discusses the Cuban prisoners release project, including working with Attorney General RFK; why the Cubans agreed to the prisoners' release; trips to Cuba and interactions with Fidel Castro; starting as the administrative assistant to the Attorney General; James B. Donovan; Castro's view of the United States; problems with the prisoners' release; and the significance of this project in regards to John F. Kennedy's Administration as a whole, among other issues.

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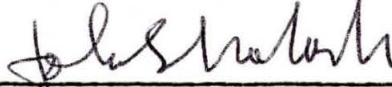

By John E. Nolan, Jr.

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN E. NOLAN

April 25, 1967
Washington, D C.

By Frank DeRosa

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DeROSA: How did you first become involved in the Cuban prisoners release project?

NOLAN: On one day in early December 1962, late in the morning, I got a call at my law office from [Milan] Mike Mikovsky, who was then over at the Department of Justice. He asked if I could come over to [Louis F.] Lou Oberdorfer's office where a group was meeting in connection with a problem that he wondered if I could help work on. I went over there shortly before lunch time and met with a group which, as I recall it, consisted of [Mitchell] Mitch Rogovin, John Jones, Mike, Lou Oberdorfer, perhaps [Norbert A.] Norb Schlei, [Robert A.] Bob Hurwitch, and there may have been one or two others. We talked initially about the project of getting the brigade out of Cuba. They asked about my relationship with [James B] Jim Donovan, whether I knew him and to what extent.

We had lunch there that day, and then they asked if I could go to New York either that afternoon or the following morning to meet with Donovan to work on what might be called the logistics side of the prisoners exchange. They said that Donovan had the deal, had the agreement with Castro, with the Cuban government, for the release of the

prisoners, that the agreement provided for the shipment of goods, medicines, baby food, medical equipment, and so on in the specified amount, fifty or sixty million dollars worth or whatever it was, that it was set to go so that the prisoners would be released by Christmas Eve, and that the immediate job confronting us was to get the supplies that would be transported to Cuba. They explained that the Cuban Families Committee had been set up and qualified as a tax exempt, charitable corporation under the internal revenue laws, that contributions by American companies to the Cuban Families Committee would be tax exempt, and that would provide a basic motive for getting contributions, and that the job remaining then was to organize the solicitation of contributions in some effective way to collect the supplies as they came in and to transport them to Cuba.

I couldn't go that afternoon, but I went back to my office and wound up the stuff I was working on. And as I recall, I left the next morning, which was a Friday morning, on an early shuttle. I went up to New York and went to Jim's office and worked there during the day with him and came back to Washington that night.

I think that was December 10th because there was a Party dinner, I believe, that the Democratic National Committee was giving that night. I went to the dinner and then worked through Saturday and Sunday at the Justice Department on the solicitation. We started with the baby foods industry because it was smaller than any of the others, more manageable. There were only five or six companies, I guess. And I contacted several of them from Jim's office on Friday, and then we sent telegrams to others on Saturday. We called a meeting in Washington for early Sunday afternoon of the baby food manufacturers. A number of them showed up, and then that was really the start of the organized giving part of it.

DeROSA: Did you have any contact with President Kennedy during your work with the project?

NOLAN: I had no direct contact with the President from the time I started working on the prisoners exchange until after it was over. But a day or so after we got back--it may have been a couple of days after Christmas--he called me from Palm Beach at my home in Washington and said that his brother had told him that we had worked on the prisoners exchange and said that I had done a good job and he just wanted to thank me. And that was the only direct contact that I had with him at all in the course of the prisoners exchange.

DeROSA: Was there any mention made about his personal interest in this project at all?

NOLAN: I don't recall that there was. I think everyone took it for granted that he was personally interested in it, and everyone knew that [Robert F.] Bob Kennedy, the Attorney General, was working directly and closely with him, with the President, with regard to it. But I don't recall any talk of the President's direct involvement.

The first contact that I had with the Attorney General in connection with the prisoners exchange was on Sunday afternoon December 9, the date that we had set up for the meeting with the baby food manufacturers. In the telegrams that went out, I believe, to the baby food manufacturers, I believe we said that they would be coming to Washington for a meeting with the Attorney General--or we may have said that in telephone conversations with them. But it was understood from the beginning that he would be there, that he'd be at the meeting. And in advance of the arrangements that we made for it, he was committed to it by Lou Oberdorfer or to me through Lou Oberdorfer.

On that day, Sunday, December 9th, Lou and I went up to his office before the manufacturers came in, after we had gone over our agenda for the meeting: what we were going to say, what we were going to do after they came in. No, as a matter of fact, I think that we talked about it; we went down there an hour or so early and went over our own arrangements for the meeting in Lou's office. And then they came in, and we took them, Lou and I took the manufacturers, up to the Attorney General's office for the meeting. We brought them into the large, main office, and

went on through to the smaller office in the corner of the building where he was. I think he had just come in from his home; I think he had one or two of the children with him. He was dressed in sport coat and sport shirt, rough shoes and wool socks and so on. We talked with him for a few minutes, and then he came in and met for, I suppose, ten or fifteen minutes with the baby food manufacturers. He told them that this was an effort on the part of the United States Government to get the brigade out. He referred generally to the tax provisions and the fact that we were there prepared to advise them with regard to tax and antitrust aspects of the contribution to the Cuban Families Committee. He talked about the very poor conditions of the prisoners which had been reported to him by Jim Donovan and Alvaro Sanchez and Harry Williams [Enrique Ruiz-Williams] and Roberto San Roman with whom he had met earlier. And then he had talked periodically with Donovan and with Harry Williams before that. I don't recall that there were. . . . No, there were, there were questions and comments at the meeting.

The representatives of the companies were generally very cooperative, in a very good mood. There was no, obviously, no coercion of any kind. On the terms that it was discussed at the meeting, it was a personal request for assistance and cooperation in a charitable and humanitarian endeavor which they seemed all to understand and accept very readily. And then the basis for it--the dollar and cents business basis for it--was that the contribution that they made would be credited as a charitable contribution. Now this was in late December, and it could be considered surprising that they hadn't used all their charitable contributions by that time, but they hadn't.

So then after the meeting we went down--and we had met with them first, and then we went up to the Attorney General's office. We came down after that and, I believe, split directly into different groups on a company by company basis. They were naturally reluctant to talk about some aspects of the contribution in front of each other because it involved pricing, it involved disclosure of what products they were long or short of and so on and so on. So we broke up into different groups, and then there were maybe, perhaps, three or four companies represented.

We spent the rest of the afternoon meeting with them and discussing various aspects of their contribution, where the stuff was located, how it could be shipped, what its value was. We received from each of the companies a kind of an informal pledge or offer to give a stated amount of their product. And then I remember at the end of the day, then well into the evening, we totalled those pledges up, and I don't remember what the total was, but it was several million dollars, three million dollars, as I recall.

DeROSA: How did the Attorney General, though, view this whole commitment? Was it a moral commitment on his part to free the prisoners or was it a debt owed by the United States to the brigade or a purely humanitarian basis?

NOLAN: Well, he talked about it in humanitarian terms. I think implicit in everything that he said was a personal commitment on a moral basis that we, the nation, the United States, owed this much at least to the brigade. I don't think he said that; I don't think he spelled it out. But that was the clear implication you'd get from what he did say.

DeROSA: During the course of the project, were you ever present when either Robert Kennedy or anyone else who could make a decision discussed the pros and cons of continuing or continuing either at a specific time or in light of various public reaction or congressional reaction?

NOLAN: No. That was the wonderful thing about it. There was no. . . . From the time I first went to the Justice Department until it was all over, I never considered, nor did I hear any talk or have any inkling that anyone else was considering, anything other than going full speed ahead all the way through it. It wasn't a question of whether or not we were going to do it; we were going to do it. It was a question of how the hell we could get it through on the time schedule which would seem to any reasonable observer to be completely impossible. No, there was no question of turning back at any time.

DeROSA: Why do you think the Cubans went along with the deal?

NOLAN: Well, number one, I think the prisoners were a serious problem to Castro. Donovan said, "They're your problem; they're your cross. What are you going to do with them? You can't shoot them. If you do, you'll go down as one of the greatest butchers in world history. Maybe you could have done that at one time, but you can't do it now. And it's difficult for you to keep them here, to keep them in jail for a prolonged period of time." And he said, "If you want to get rid of them, if you're going to sell them, you've got to sell them to me. There's no world market for prisoners." So I think the existence of the brigade posed a problem for Castro to that extent.

And then I think that the doing the exchange the way it was done in terms of medicinal supplies, medical equipment, baby food, and so on offered a humanitarian based vehicle for the exchange that it was a kind of thing that people of good feeling the world over could accept more readily than they could accept ransom in money, for example. It was a kind of thing that made it acceptable from the standpoint of Castro justifying it to those in his entourage, government, or in Cuba, who were very opposed to the idea of the prisoners exchange, who didn't want to let the prisoners go.

DeROSA: Who was that?

NOLAN: There was one element of contact with President Kennedy a few days after we got back. Was it the 27th of December? We went down to the Orange Bowl for his address and Mrs. Kennedy's address to the brigade. I had no direct contact with him there other than seeing him. As I recall, we arrived late. We flew down as a group in a plane, maybe a Corvair sized plane and arrived--the weather was bad getting out of Washington--we arrived late, went over to the Orange Bowl. I believe we got there before he did, or perhaps at about the same time, and we sat down at the far end of the

stadium. We heard his speech. He came by and was, you know, a few feet away, close, but I had no contact with him there.

Well, why don't you just ask questions and I don't want to ramble on too much on some of it that I do recall. So if you feel you're getting too much detail, just ask another question.

DeROSA: Did you have personal contact with Fidel Castro during your trips into Cuba with Mr. Donovan?

NOLAN: Yes, I. . . . Well, when I went there, I was always with Donovan, and Donovan was usually with Castro. So of the total time we spent in Cuba, we spent a clear majority of it, I guess, with Castro.

DeROSA: What was Donovan's relationship with Castro?

NOLAN: Well, it was obviously a very cordial, bantering, I'd say warm relationship. He got along well with Castro in a kidding relaxed way. Castro, I think, regarded Jim as kind of a character, a role that Donovan played to the hilt, perhaps illustrated by some of the incidents that took place. The first time that I saw Castro, we were over there on the Sunday of the prisoners exchange which was the day before Christmas Eve, so I guess it was the 23rd of December. And at noontime--we had spent the day, we had gone in there early in the morning, 6 or 7 o'clock, and we spent the day at the airport working with the bills that described the gear, the supplies coming in, waiting for the prisoners to be gathered there at the airport. And Jim, who had been there overnight. . . . Donovan was there. And when I say we went in, that was the first of the exchange planes, it was loaded with supplies. In terms of personnel, it contained the Red Cross people, the immigration naturalization people, a doctor, Harry Williams, Barrett Prettyman, Dr. [Leonard A.] Scheele, myself, other people like that who were working on the exchange.

Late that morning Jim came out to the airport, San Antonio de los Baños, outside of Havana. At noontime he and I went over to the officers mess, which was at the airfield but a mile or so away from the hangar and the strip where the planes were coming in, for lunch. And he was jovial, in a good mood. He had not had very much sleep the night before, and he described how Castro had come over to his house or wherever he was staying--I think they had had either a bottle of champagne or they drank some scotch and then somebody produced a bottle of champagne, I think. And they had talked far into the night, until 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and exchanged views of philosophy and so on. So he, this was all Jim describing his night before with Castro. And then he had gotten a few hours sleep, and he'd come out to the airport.

Well, we were at the officers mess at the field eating lunch when a fellow came running in, and he said, "Fidel is coming, Fidel is coming. Come we must meet Fidel." So we went out and got in a staff car, Cuban staff car that they had at the door, and roared off to the field. When we got out to the field, there was a crowd of, oh, I guess, 100-150 people around one of the planes and in the middle of the crowd was Castro and [Rene] Vallejo. And we went through the crowd to where they were, and Jim introduced me to Castro.

And right within a minute or so of that time, a flight of MIG's came over. They had been flying around the airport during the morning in preparation for the anniversary of the Castro regime which was coming up in another couple of weeks, fifth anniversary or something, fourth or fifth anniversary. And this time, I guess because they realized that Castro was at the field, they came in much lower than they had before, right over our heads, unexpectedly, and they were jets, and they were screaming. So, everyone suddenly, everyone in the crowd, suddenly reacted to the fact that they were flat-hatting us, and the whole crowd almost went down, like almost going down into a crouch. And they roared on past, and while we were still in a crouch and just coming up from it and kind of looking around to see where the terrific noise had come from, Donovan was standing next to Castro, elbowed him, and said

in this loud voice that was clearly audible to me and to other people around, "It's the invasion." And I was really startled at this; this was within, I would say, a minute of the time that I'd been introduced to Castro. And it seemed to me to be a very jocular remark to make. Castro laughed at it. And then it seemed to me that the other people around, who initially didn't think it was funny at all, looked at Castro and saw his reaction, and they laughed too. And then Castro called for the guy who was the commanding officer of the airport, whose name I believe was Corbello or something, and waved at the planes and, pointing upward, directed that they should fly higher. So we didn't have any more trouble with that.

But I have always thought of that as an example of the relationship which existed between them. And then that was characteristic, really of the relationship between Donovan and Castro in all of our time that we spent together. Never at any time during the period that I was there was there any, well, rupture of that relationship; we never saw Castro angry; we never saw him irritated. I gather that Jim had had his difficulties before this during the summer, in the early part of the negotiations. But from December on, and then through the delivery of supplies down there until April, which was the last time I was there, their relationship was always very, very good, very cordial.

DeROSA: How did Castro view the whole operation? Did he view it as a U.S. government operation?

NOLAN: Oh, I think he did. I don't recall anything specifically about that, but I think it was obvious to him that an operation of that scope could not be mounted without the very full cooperation of the U.S. government. At the same time, Donovan, I think, always maintained his identity as an individual person; and I don't recall that subject, as such, coming up between the two. But I'm sure that Castro was aware of the degree of U.S. government cooperation in the whole project.

DeROSA: What was Dr. Vallejo's role in the whole operation?

NOLAN: Well, he was always there. There was never a time that we were with Castro that Vallejo wasn't there. In the beginning, in December, he acted as an interpreter; he spoke perfect English. I don't know exactly what his background was; I think he'd gone to medical school here; I think he went to Harvard Medical School. But he had lived in the United States, and his English was as good as yours or mine. Later on he did not serve as an interpreter, and we all spoke, Castro spoke English and then we all did. But initially he served as an interpreter. He served to some extent as kind of an intermediary; he liked Donovan. And I think that Donovan from time to time would talk to Vallejo or would rely on Vallejo's support in some of the things that we were talking about. And the relationship there was very cordial, too. Donovan worked very well with Vallejo, and Vallejo. . . . He's a very gentlemanly fellow, and he sort of took care of Castro, and he was very solicitous for our comfort, welfare, and he kind of ran the logistical side of the Castro operation which involved always a couple of cars, six eight or ten guards, arrangements for leaving and arriving, and planning, that sort of thing. He seemed to direct most of that. If Castro would say, "All right, now we'll go to Varadero," or something, Vallejo would lay it on, and we'd go.

DeROSA: What was your overall impression of Castro, especially with regard to the remark made by Mr. Donovan at the time that he impressed him as being more Latin than Marxist?

NOLAN: Well, he's a . . . Well, many of the impressions that we had, and I think that my impressions were about the same as Jim's, many of our impressions would not square with the commonly accepted image, if you want to use that word, of Castro in the United States. During the time that we were with him, Castro was never irrational, never drunk, never dirty. In his personal relationships with us and in connection

with the negotiations, he was always reasonable, always easy to deal with. There were no tantrums, fits. He was a talker of very significant proportions. I mean, he would come over at midnight or 1 o'clock in the morning and stay all night talking. But he wasn't a conversational hog; he was, you know, he was interested in. . . . He'd ask questions, listen for answers, give his own viewpoints. He was easy to talk to, good conversationalist, hard sell guy, constantly plugging his programs, his government--we've done this for the people, we've done that for the people, we've collectivized, and all this, that, the works. We traveled around with him some. We drove on one occasion all the way across Mantanzas Province from Varadero to the Bay of Pigs. We spent a day on the Bay of Pigs with Castro. We went fishing, skindiving, guided by a Russian PT boat.

DeROSA: What did you do at the Bay of Pigs with Castro?

NOLAN: We drove over there one morning; we left early in the morning, got up at 5 a.m., and left from Castro's beach house at Varadero. We arrived at 8 or 9 o'clock on the Bay of Pigs after having made several stops at the beaches of Playa Giron and Playa Largo on the way in where he'd get out of the car and describe different aspects of the battle: where he was when he got such and such a message from the troops and what he did and so on. At one point, there's an area there which is marshy land, swamp, leading--it's inland from the Bay of Pigs, and there's only one road that runs across it to the solid ground. And in describing the tactical disposition of the brigade and his troops, when the car was parked on the road and we were standing on the side of the road, he got out, walked off the road and into the marsh to show how swampy it was. You really had a sense of history listening to somebody like Castro describe something like the Bay of Pigs. And then the feeling that, you know, in walking out into the marsh, which was considered impassable by him and also by the brigade, if he stepped in the wrong spot or something, that he might just disappear beneath the ooze, and, you know, that would

be the end of the whole problem. And he sunk down and it was up to his boots, but he got back. Well, we got there and we went on, there were two boats, one was a smaller, like a Chriscraft type fishing vessel that we all embarked on, went out. And then there was this guard boat, PT boat . . .

DeROSA: Kolmar, Kolmar class.

NOLAN: The PT boat? Was it? I wasn't familiar with it. We went out, and we spent the day on the water, out on the Bay of Pigs. And at noon we went over to a larger boat where they had lunch prepared. And we had a lunch, sat around in the sun for a while, went back on the smaller boat, more fishing and potting around. Donovan has a lot of pictures of all of this. And then John--well, I guess there were three of us, John Donovan, Jim, and I. And that afternoon about 4 or 5 o'clock we came off the water, got into the cars and drove from there to Havana, getting back late in the evening. And then we came out the next morning. That was the last time I was in Cuba. That was in April.

DeROSA: Did you think that Premier Castro was trying to better his relations with the United States at all? Or did he wish to do so?

NOLAN: Oh, yes. I think that would be the only reasonable explanation for his conduct at that time. There was a lot of talk about that, actually, in the course of this trip. We were, the four of us, or however many there were, riding around in a car together for periods of four or five hours at a time, and yes, the general tenor of the conversations between Castro and Donovan would make most sense in the context of an improving relationship between the United States and Cuba. And I think Jim always had his eye on this as a possibility. He felt that his maximum usefulness lay in the direction of providing that kind of alternative to American policy. And I think that Castro had a similar interest in Donovan and in our presence there. To continue the present policy, then present policy, in its present

form was easy enough; he didn't need anything to do that. But the relationship which existed there for a while offered the possibility for either nation of going a different course.

DeROSA: Was this ever discussed in Washington at all?

NOLAN: I don't know, I don't know. It was discussed--well, I'm sure it was discussed, I'm sure Jim discussed it with the agency. I don't think he ever discussed it with the Attorney General. I discussed it with the Attorney General, but not in any meaningful way, after April when we got back.

After I came back from Cuba in April, I went--as a matter of fact, that very day. . . . I returned from Cuba on one day which I believe was a Tuesday or a Wednesday, whenever it was. The following day I reported in as administrative assistant to the Attorney General. I, at his request, wrote a memorandum which described in as much detail as I had fresh in my mind at the time, having just returned, what we had done during the previous five days in Cuba: where we went, what we did, what we talked about, what we said, what Castro said, what his views were on each of the subjects we talked about in some detail.

The Attorney General read this memorandum. We talked about it briefly on a couple of occasions. I talked with him on the telephone from Miami right after we got back. I remember him asking at that time, "What do you think? Can we do business with that fellow?" meaning Castro. As I recall, I answered to that that I thought that that was a possibility, but it would require more; you know, it really wasn't a question you could answer with one word; it wasn't a yes or no answer question. And we talked about it some after I went to work over there, I would say in the first few weeks.

Within three or four weeks of the time I went over to the Justice Department, the prisoners exchange was wound up by the last of the American prisoners coming out. I think Jim made one more trip to Havana after this April trip that we were down there. And on that trip the twenty-one or twenty-three, and then some extras came out. I

believe when we came back, we brought the skin divers back on this April trip and a couple extra missionaries, or something like that. Then shortly after that, I'd say three or four weeks after that, it was then early May, the thing wound up with the return of the last of the Americans.

I remember Lou Oberdorfer calling me at my desk in the Attorney General's office and saying that Donovan's plane had just put down at Miami airport and that that was the end of the mission. Now after that, I don't recall that I ever talked with the Attorney General or anybody else in government about the broad general subject of Cuban-American relations. I talked with them a lot about other aspects of the Cuban problem involving individuals, involving the Cuban-American colony, involving various things that Harry Williams would raise from time to time. But after the first few days of coming back, I don't think we got into that subject. The memo, as I recall it now, dealt with. . . . That entire trip to Cuba is a five day interlude. It recounted in outline form what we had done during the time that we were there, and it emphasized the conversations that we had with Castro with regard to anything that seemed to be pertinent.

DeROSA: Other interviews have pointed up the fact that at one point, Donovan did not want to go to Cuba, actually, prior to being able to say that the goods were on their way there. Were you familiar with this at all?

NOLAN: Yes, that was back in December, of course. I think it was almost that, but not quite that. It wasn't that the goods were not going to be on their way, but it was--now let me see if I can think of it. This gets back to about December 16 or 17. I believe Donovan went to Cuba for the first time in December, on December 18 or 19. For three or four days prior to that, the Attorney General was very strongly of the opinion that he should go.

Donovan was reluctant to go at that time because he thought that he didn't have his part of the deal put together, not necessarily the ships in motion, because I think the plan was always that the ship would be loaded at Port Everglades and the air cargo part of it would be loaded at Opa-Locka, and then it would all go on schedule. But he wanted a more complete assurance that the first part of the deal, the 20 per cent, was in existence, in our hands, ready to be loaded and ready to be shipped, and that the letter of credit--and as I think of it, it may have been more the guarantee or the assurance which was embodied in the letter of credit--was not ready at that time. Because during this period, between the 10th and the 20th of December, the negotiations for the letter of credit were going on, and the guarantee of the insurance companies, the flyingtrips to Montreal with Mike, and the stuff that [Robert H.] Bob Knight was working on and so on. And I know during that time, the Attorney General was pushing very hard for him to go, and he didn't want to go until it was more complete. And then he finally went on a Tuesday, I believe.

DeROSA: But the Attorney General felt that the trips were extremely essential?

NOLAN: Oh yes, and he wanted to get him over there; he wanted to get Donovan on to the ground in Havana directly talking to Castro as a part of the deal while we built up the rest of it here.

DeROSA: Do you know why Donovan was picked on this project?

NOLAN: Do you mean back in the beginning?

DeROSA: Yes.

NOLAN: Well, I don't know from firsthand knowledge. I've heard the story reliably. Yes, I think I know why he was picked. He was picked

because Harry Williams and Alvaro Sanchez and possibly Roberto San Roman, but Harry and Sanchez, at a minimum, went to see the Attorney General to get help in getting the prisoners out. The Attorney General said, "What you need is some kind of a private vehicle and a guy who can run it for you. And," he said, "why don't you talk to this fellow Donovan who did the Powers-Abel [Gary F. Powers-Rudolph Abel] exchange?" And he may have suggested, as I recall, the way I heard the story, I believe he suggested someone else. I don't know who else he suggested. I'm quite sure that at that time Jim Donovan and Bob Kennedy had never met.

BEGIN TAPE II SIDE I

NOLAN: I described in outline what we did there and then with particular emphasis on our conversations with Castro and anything that seemed to me to be of interest in terms of what he was like, what his present attitudes were, what his attitude toward the Bay of Pigs, and various aspects of the Cuban government since the revolution. I remember we talked about this fellow [William A.] Morgan, the American, who had been one of Castro's captains and then became an executioner, I think, ran some firing squads or something after Castro came to power, and then had eventually gotten liquidated himself. In all of these conversations, Castro was always reasonable, I think not always truthful. But the position he took was always plausible, and he always would state it with vigor and apparent sincerity and sometimes with great feeling.

I really don't remember the details or the particulars of the memo. I remember the general subjects we talked about. We talked about Morgan; we talked about American constitutional law; we talked about the possibility of new Cuban constitution with James B. Donovan as a special constitutional advisor; we talked about Cuban participation in the U.S. World's Fair which was coming up in another couple of years or so; we talked a good deal about Castro's own personal security precautions and his attitude toward possible assassination; we talked some about the Voice of American broadcasts beamed to Cuba.

DeROSA: Did Castro feel that the United States government at any time had any plans to assassinate him?

NOLAN: If he did, he didn't let it on, or he didn't emphasize that aspect of it, and, of course, we didn't. But we talked for, as I recall, an hour or so riding in the car about the possibility of somebody, a Cuban, a disaffected Cuban, shooting Castro. It was obvious, of course, being around Castro, that his personal security preparations were extensive and really very well run. Someone who rides in the middle of the back seat of one of those cars with his knees stuck up in the air because his feet are on top of four or five BAR's on the floor of the car, I was very conscious of. Castro would generally express the opinion that he thought he was doing so much good for Cuba that everybody loved him and that his basic security was provided by a satisfied, if not adoring, populace, and that his greatest security in crowds would come from the fact that attempts to knock him off would be noticed by someone who was a supporter or admirer of his, who would either thwart the attempted assassin or call it to his attention or do something else that would serve to protect him. And beyond that he said that, you know, they did everything that they could, and he professed not to be very concerned with it and not to worry very much about it.

But it was clearly something that had given a good deal of thought to. And the people around him were very obviously well trained and skilled in what they were doing. The way they handle the cars, for example, it would have been impossible, or very difficult, for any other car on the road coming from either ahead of us or behind us to get into a position to harm Castro. And they'd, you know, they'd switch leads, one car would cover another. And they did this without apparent effort, they did it like they'd run a lot of drills on it. And the people around him moved fast, quickly, whenever he wanted. . . . He could get up from a table where we were sitting meeting in a house and walk from there to the door of the house, and by

the time he got to the car, both cars would be started up ready to go and all of this entourage five, ten fellows, all in dungarees, would be in the cars and ready to go. Well, those are generally subjects that we talked about, and then late that evening we got back to Havana, and then the next morning they came out.

DeROSA: Did you have any contact at all with Celia Sanchez?

NOLAN: No, never met her.

DeROSA: What was the State Department's general view of the whole operation?

NOLAN: Well, our contact with the State Department was limited, and the State Department interest, as far as I knew, in the operation was represented by Bob Hurwitch through the main part of the exchange when the brigade came out and, after that, by John Crimmins who typically would meet us, or meet Donovan if he had come back alone, in Miami at the house that we used as a base of operations and debrief us and sometimes tape the account of anything that was reported. But I don't recall their taking a position in a policy sense on it. They were interested; they followed it closely; they were interested in information, as you would gather that they would be. But they had no discernible attitude, as such pro, con or they were kind of aside from the mechanics of it and they just seemed to be interested in what was going on.

Towards the evening--well, during the afternoon of the first day, which was Sunday the 23rd of December, 1962, a problem arose in connection with the exchange of the prisoners. It was a problem that Donovan had been aware of from the outset and that we had talked about, that I had talked with him about by telephone when he was in Havana and when I was in Miami during the week preceding the actual exchange, that everybody had been aware of from the beginning. That was the problem of the remaining payment of 2.9 million dollars to the Castro government.

The problem originated when sixty wounded prisoners were released in the spring of 1962 by Castro in return for a promise of the Cuban Families Committee or whatever its predecessor organization was, a Cuban group in the United States, to pay fifty thousand dollars a head or a total of three million dollars. A hundred thousand dollars had been paid as a down payment on the deal. The fifty wounded prisoners, including Harry Williams, were released and came to the United States. The remaining 2.9 million had not been paid, and Jim, I know, has said that that was the first question that Castro raised when he went over there the first time in July or August or whenever it was. Castro had said to him, according to Jim, that, "I'm not going to talk to you at all about the prisoners until we clear up the matter of the 2.9 million." And that was a real hurdle, of course, and Jim had somehow managed to get by it saying, "That's not a problem." I think he said, first of all, "That's not our obligation (or something), but I'll see that that's taken care of. But if we wait like that, we're never going to get any place. So why don't we sit down and try to talk about how we can do the main part of the deal, and then that will just take care of itself?" Or he gave him some kind of assurance at any rate which was satisfactory to Castro to go ahead and talk about the exchange of the brigade.

All right, from that point in the summer of 1962 all the way through the resumed negotiations in early in mid-December and on down to the time in the 18th, 19th, 20th or so when Donovan was over there while I was still in Miami, the matter of the 2.9 million was hanging, as it were, undecided. I suppose it was undecided. I suppose it was undecided because it's not easy to raise 2.9 million, and the rest of the thing seemed to be going along all right. But Donovan always said that before the thing was over, the 2.9 million would have to be paid, that Castro would never let all of the brigade go out until it was paid, and his position with Castro was always that it will be paid; it's just a detail; they're getting it now; and it'll be on its way over.

It came up on this Sunday afternoon in the context of a letter written by General [Lucius D.] Clay by hand, black ink, and sent into Cuba or carried into Cuba by a pilot of one of the Pan Am planes that flew in the goods. The letter was addressed to Jim Donovan; the instructions were that the letter was to be delivered to me and that I was to decide whether or not to give it to Donovan. This was given to me orally by the pilot of the plane. He gave me the letter. I opened it and read it on the plane behind the pilot and co-pilot's cabin. The letter said. . . . Now inside I don't recall exactly whether the salutation was to Donovan or to Castro. And, as I recall, I think I gave the letter to Donovan, so it may be extant, but he has it, I don't have it. But the letter said, in effect, "Oh, about that 2.9 million, we are going to do the best we can to get it. We're going to use our best efforts to get it, and we feel reasonably sure that we should be able to raise it within thirty days. We don't want you to be disturbed about it, and we want you to go ahead on this assurance and just act as if you already had it."

Well, as soon as I saw the letter, I knew that it wouldn't wash as far as either Donovan or Castro was concerned. On the other hand, I didn't see how I could be justified in withholding the letter from Donovan because Donovan was in the actual negotiations that might change from minute to minute. Something might come up with Castro when I wouldn't be there, and it just didn't seem to me to make any sense to withhold from Donovan the information that I had the letter, and that the proposal in this form had been advanced. As I recall, I think I showed the letter to Barrett Prettyman. I remember talking with Barrett at about that time.

No, I'm getting two things mixed up. Before Barrett left for the waterfront in Havana, he came to me and he said, "I have to give the order on whether or not to unload the ship." This was around noon, and as of this time, no prisoners had been loaded, no prisoners had been turned over yet. And the ship had docked, I think, and with the news the ship had docked conveyed to us there, he and Dr. Scheele were sent from the airport to the ship and he said, "What's the latest that we know? and what do you

think about it? and what do you think we should do?" And I said, "I don't think there's any choice. You know, having gone this far, we can't stand on any ceremony of holding up the unloading of the ship. When you've got that goddam ship docked next to a wharf in Havana, it seems so artificial, you know, it doesn't make any sense to say you're not going to unload it. So without regard to any other pros or cons of the thing, we're just going to have to go ahead. So it doesn't seem to me that you have much of a choice." So he went on with that.

And if my recollection is right in that, then I think Barrett was not around when this letter came in because, as I recall, that was later in the afternoon. So I stuffed the letter--I had a white shirt on, and I'd taken my coat off, it was warm. I put the letter in my pocket, in the pocket of my shirt, turned down so that the address and the writing on the envelope would not show. And then I tried to get Donovan, who was talking to the Cubans, I don't remember whether. . . . I think Castro--no, Castro was there then. Castro and Vallejo were still there, still at the airport, had not gone back. The other fellow who was running the thing from the Cuban standpoint was also there, the minister of economic planning, I forget his name.

DeROSA: [Regino] Boti.

NOLAN: Boti, yes. So I wanted to talk to Donovan alone about the letter. And there followed a half hour or so of real frustration in being unable to split him off, first from Castro, then from the Swiss ambassador, then from some Cubans and newspaper guys who were around, wanted to talk to him. Ultimately, there came a time when Donovan and I got alone around the corner of a hangar. I told him that I'd received the letter and what was in it. He said, you know, "Obviously, we can't show it to the Cubans. There isn't anything we can do with it. So we just pocket it." And as I recall, I gave him the letter at that time. That evening--well, we left the airport late in the afternoon. By the time we left the airport, approximately half the brigade had been loaded into planes and taken off for Miami.

At the same time, Boti, I believe, told us that they were shutting off the exchange, that no more prisoners were coming out that day, I think he said because they couldn't operate at night or they couldn't get more prisoners there, but it was clear, it had been raised by Castro and also by Boti directly with us, that if the 2.9 was not paid, the exchange was at an end as far as. . . . They had released all the prisoners they were going to release until that part of it came through. We went back to--what's the name of that Cuban lady?

DeROSA: Berta Baretto.

NOLAN: We went back to Berta Baretto's house, had a drink, and had some dinner--as I recall, it was very light. We talked about the problem of the 2.9 million, which was then the crucial issue in the exchange, everything else working smoothly. We agreed--when I say we, this was Donovan, Alvaro Sanchez, and I agreed--that I should go back to Miami that night to present the case of what was happening there with regard to the 2.9 requirement.

At the same time, or within minutes after we had arrived at this judgment among ourselves, the phone rang, and it was somebody from Washington. I don't recall whether it was Nick [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach] or--I don't remember who it was, but somebody, at any rate, said that they had been considering the same problem or they had been. . . . It was all kind of double talk. But they had been considering the same problem, and they thought that I ought to come back and talk about it there. So we were all in agreement on that. Sanchez, I might say, was extremely exercised at this time because his son had not come out in the first half of the brigade, and he regarded the assurances which had been given him that the 2.9 million would be paid as absolute and ironclad. And he was just extremely concerned.

We went--Sanchez stayed there, I guess--Donovan and I went downtown to Boti's office in connection with re-drafting some part of the agreement and signing it there. When we got through with that conference--I think of another humorous anecdote that applies to Donovan's relationship with the Cuban. We get through with the conference, the three of us stand up. Donovan says to Boti, he said, "Mr. Minister (or whatever Senor Boti, or whatever he called him), we have decided that it would be good for Mr. Nolan to return to Miami this evening to discuss some of the details in connection with the exchange, and then he'll be back here tomorrow morning." So Boti beamed and smiled and nodded and everything, and there was no mention at this time of the 2.9 although all three of us knew that that was really the only thing that we were there about, we were all concerned with. Boti nodded, and he said, "Fine. That is fine. I will do anything possible to assist . . ." Have you heard this before?

DeROSA: No.

NOLAN: ". . . to assist Mr. Nolan in his departure." He said, "I will call the airport right now and arrange for them to hold a plane for him." And he said, "I will personally take him to the airport." And he said, "I will do anything at all to facilitate Mr. Nolan's mission." And Donovan kind of smiled, and he said, "Look Mr. Minister," he said, "if you want to be helpful in this regard, there is only one thing you can do when you get Nolan out to that airport." And Boti leaned forward in all expectation and everything, and he said, "What is that, Senor Donovan?" And Donovan said, "When you get him out there and that big plane is waiting to take off for Miami," he said, "there's just one thing you can do." He said, "Don't defect." [Laughter]

He left after that, and Boti and I sat around for an hour or so while this was typed up. And he drove me out to the airport where they had held not one of the planes, but all of them. And there was great consternation there which, I guess, everybody's familiar with. But at any rate, we took off, and we got. . . . It was after 1; it

was maybe 1:30 or so by the time we took off from the airport. It was closer to 3 or 3:30 by the time we landed at Homestead rather than at. . . . En route we got switched from Miami International to Homestead. We landed there, and Lou Oberdorfer drove out to the plane in a jeep or airport pickup car or something, picked me up.

We went back to an office at the airport where we talked the problem through first, and then called Washington, and we got, I guess, a four part hook up with Bob Kennedy, Nick Katzenbach, Lou and I in the same room on extensions there, and the Attorney General and Nick here in Washington. We talked--as I recall, it was then late; it was like 4 or 5 a.m. Well, we talked about all the matters that I've reviewed so far: what was going on over there, what the Cubans expected, when they expected it, and so on.

I remember they asked the question, "Do you think our position is stronger once we have made the payment of the 2.9 million than it is just before? Are we in a stronger position then or in a weaker position?" I said, "I don't think our position is stronger after we've made the payment. I think it's weaker. But I don't think that we can carry out the rest of the exchange without the payment having been made at some point. And I think that the only thing that's keeping it going now, keeping the operation going, although it is suspended at the present time, it's keeping it going in the sense that the expectancy of starting it again tomorrow morning or later this morning is that the 2.9 will be paid. And everything we do has to be consistent with that. In other words, we can't tell them now that we're going to pay the 2.9 million in thirty days or something like that because it just won't wash, because Donovan has been telling them from minute to minute that it's going to come, that the banks are closed in the U.S. because it's a Sunday (that was what we had told them a few hours before), and they couldn't get the bank transaction through. So, you know, we got a little more time, but we can't turn it off. As soon as the immediate possibility of delivering the 2.9 million disappears, the rest of the deal disappears with it."

DeROSA: Had Donovan ever discussed this with everybody, though? That they needed 2.9?

NOLAN: Oh yes, yes, yes, at great length. But nobody ever realized it, you know, until. . . .

There was so much going on. And then I think some place in this conversation or in the telephone conversation earlier, the question of the American prisoners held in Cuba was raised. And, I think, when they had called us at Berta Barreto's, somebody mentioned that, you know, "Can you get out the brigade and get out the Americans, too?" to which Jim's reply was, "Jesus Christ, I've already done the loaves and the fishes, and now they want me to walk on the water." [Laughter]

But, well, we left it at that, that they would do the best they could to raise it, and that they were impressed with the fact that it had to be raised, and that it had to be raised sometime within the next very few hours. And then, I remember, the Attorney General said, "John," he said, "what are you going to do now?" And I said, "Well, I'm going to go back. I'm going to leave here and go to the airport and go back in on the first flight going back in." And he said, "Don't you think you ought to wait until you see whether we can get the money or not?" And I said, "No, I think I'll just rely on you to do that because I don't. . . . You know, I'll just assume that you're going to get it. And I think, really, that's the only way you can play it." So he said, "Okay." And then either at the end of that. . . . Oh, then I think he said something to Nick about, "I'll call you in a few minutes," or something like that. And we turned off that conversation at that time.

I believe that sometime before I left to go back, Lou and I called Nick to get some kind of a. . . . Oh, I know what it was. We wanted to get Nick to say that if we didn't hear from him by the time the first plane left, that it was on, that they had it. And as I recall, he wouldn't agree to that. All he would agree to was that they realized we needed it and they were going to do the best they could.

So Lou drove me to this house where we'd been staying before, where [Jim] Smith was, and where the phones were. And I got a clean shirt and shaved, and we went on to the airport and got there in time, and they held the first plane going back in. And I got on the plane and went on in.

When I got back to Havana, there was a car waiting there for me. Oh, at that time, I met Barrett and Dr. Scheele who were just coming out, and they left at that time. And I got in the car and went on to Berta Barreto's house where Jim was alone with this maid, this gal that we called Tondaleyo who was around sweeping the floor and all. And every time we'd start to talk, she'd come in with a broom, you know. So we went out on the veranda. . . . She was around in the living room, so we walked out of the house and onto the terrace in the yard. And Jim said, "How did it go?" or something like that. And I said, "Well, I think it's going to be okay." And that was the only mention of the matter between Donovan and me from the time I got back until it was all over. We never discussed it. We never discussed my conversations in Miami; we never discussed any of the arrangements for the 2.9. He didn't ask. I figured that what he knew with that was the best he could know. There wasn't anything, really, that I could add to that. And anything more that I said about it was going to detract from it. And so in any further conversations he had with them, where I wasn't there, I thought he was better off on that, and, I guess, he thought so, too, because as I say, we never discussed it.

So then we went downtown and. . . . By this time I had been, I guess, up for three days or so with no sleep except for a couple of hours the first night, the preceding Friday night. It was then Tuesday morning. Now, I got two hours sleep on Saturday night and I slept for a half hour or so on the plane going back to Miami, but I hadn't been in the sack at all. And I was getting tired then. And we ended up in a restaurant in Havana ordering lunch. And Boti was there and some of the pseudo Red Cross guys who had come over on the preceding Friday night that we had been up all night with were there. And somebody came and got Boti and Donovan, and I stayed at the table and we finished our. . . . I think I fell asleep

a couple times during lunch. And we finished that, and Donovan and Boti left. We later on joined up some place, maybe, oh, I think the Canadian consul's office or something, at 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon. I think we were at the Canadian Consul's office because it had come through the Bank of Canada, he got some notification of it or something like that.

And at that point, at that point I think the money had still not come through, and I think that at that point still nobody had taken off from the airport because I remember Donovan was talking on the telephone something about that if it didn't come through directly, he would personally guarantee it or something. And he was blinking. But in the course of the next hour or so, sometime in the late afternoon or very early evening, we got word that it was fixed and that the draft had arrived at the Bank of Canada to the Banco Nacional, or whatever it was, to the satisfaction of the Cubans.

The planes started flying, or we were informed that the planes were flying, with the last half of the brigade out. And we went to somebody's house, Castro's sister's house or Vallejo's sister's house or something, some social milieu where there were women, Vallejo's sister and some other general types. We sat around there for a while and then I think Donovan got cleaned up a little bit, and we got in the car, drove out to the airport. Just before we left, for some reason, I was in an office trying to make a phone call back to Miami, but I don't remember why. We got aboard the last plane and came out.

DeROSA: Did anybody ever tell you where that million dollars from Boston came from?

NOLAN: No. Well, I read about it in the newspapers later on. But at that time, no one ever told me. No, I couldn't care less.

DeROSA: What's the significance of this project with regard to the whole Kennedy Administration?

NOLAN: Well, it's a couple of things, I think. Number one, it demonstrated the degree of humanitarian concern on a personal and individual basis, which could've come only from the President himself and from the Attorney General acting with him as the director or executive of his wishes. I think that's an extraordinary thing, really, that the United States can stop and do something like the Cuban prisoners exchange in the midst of conducting its affairs. It's, in a way, not unlike sending in a fleet of destroyers to pick up a downed airman in the water, or something like that. It shows a willingness to accept human values as supreme values by the conduct of other large affairs of state.

The other thing that was a great lesson to me was the kind of action that you can get out of a government and out of government and private cooperation in an entirely unprecedented, an emergency activity like this. If your course is right and acceptable in a moral sense, you can get through all the technicalities and all the red tape. The Cuban prisoners exchange on the logistical side of this, an obviously impossible operation. Nobody ever could have done it. You know, if you sat down and started thinking about possible things, you would never expect that that could be accomplished. Much less would you expect that a President of the United States and an Attorney General of the United States would bend their efforts and their responsibilities to accomplish it. So I think it's unprecedented in that respect. And it was a very thrilling humanitarian accomplishment in its essence.