

John J. Muccio Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 4/13/1971
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

John J. Muccio (1900-1989) was the Ambassador to Guatemala from 1959 to 1961. This interview focuses on Cubans being trained in Guatemala in preparation for the Bay of Pigs and relations with Latin America during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, among other topics.

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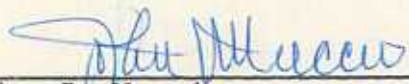
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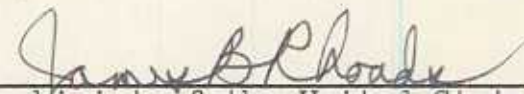
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John J. Muccio



Archivist of the United States

November 29, 1973

Date

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Date

John J. Muccio– JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

AMBASSADOR JOHN J. MUCCIO

April 13, 1971
Washington, D. C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Ambassador Muccio, you were ambassador to Guatemala beginning in late 1959, if my information is correct. The sources that I have indicate that the Eisenhower administration went ahead with funding of a project to invade, or to do something about recapturing, Cuba in March of 1960. The money went towards training guerilla bands in Guatemala. I was wondering what the first knowledge you had of this was. How did it come to your attention, in what way, under what circumstances?

MUCCIO: When the liaison to Ydigoras man arrived in Guatemala he had a note to me from one of the assistant secretaries of state saying that so and so will approach you on a program we intend to be inaugurated in Guatemala.

MOSS: All right. Were the terms of that program made known to you at that time?

MUCCIO: No.

MOSS: All right. In what way did you begin to discover what was going on?

MUCCIO: Well, there were two sources of information that were available to me. I received nothing official out of Washington, but the liaison man had been my CAS (Covert American Source) chief for several months before being pulled out, and he and his replacement didn't get on too well. But the former liaison man was more or less of a compulsive talker and he felt freer to talk to me than elsewhere. . .

MOSS: In what terms did he put it?

MUCCIO: . . . and in that way be brought to my attention a lot of developments as they occurred, in implementing and carrying out the program.

MOSS: All right. Did he discuss the program itself with you, or merely the logistic steps, the business of taking over the plantation, and so on?

MUCCIO: I doubt whether he knew, except what was going on in Guatemala, very much of the overall strategy.

MOSS: Yes, all right. Now you say you doubt that he knew the particulars, or the purpose of what he was doing at that time.

MUCCIO: As far as he was concerned this was a training project. As to whether it was going to be used, where and when it would be used, was very nebulous to him.

MOSS: Right. When did you begin to see the thing build up and change character? I assume that in the early days it looked rather like a guerrilla warfare school, much as the Panama school is. I wonder at what point you began to sense that this was a major development, and in what ways.

MUCCIO: Anyone that knew anything about President (Miguel) Ydigoras (Fuentes) would know that he couldn't keep anything to himself. Ydigoras assumed that I knew what was going on and he talked. Almost every time I saw him he brought out some new fact of what was underway.

MOSS: Yes. Now let me ask this. As I understand it, the story broke in the American papers after--what is it?--La Hora in Guatemala picked it up. It broke in the American papers around October, just before the election; and then was picked up again by a chap named (Paul P.) Kennedy, curiously enough, for the New York Times in January, and Kennedy was expelled from the country over this, as I understand, and then brought back. What was your involvement in this little episode?

MUCCIO: Practically none. Ydigoras invited me up to the two fincas where the training was underway, repeatedly, and I repeatedly avoided going up there. I never did go up there, except on one occasion. That was when, after it had become a matter of conjecture in the American press and media, Ydigoras invited the whole diplomatic corps up there for an asado, with a sleight of hand he had all the Cubans run up to the other

finca, and brought in some of the Guatemalans who were being trained at the same time. He took all of us around and said, "See, everybody's saying that there's been Cubans here; there's nothing but Guatemalans. My boys are being trained."

MOSS: Did anybody swallow this?

MUCCIO: Dam few. (Laughter) You must remember that most of these Cuban youngsters were from the so-called better classes. They had means, and they ran all over that country.

There were these specially marked jeeps, or unmarked jeeps, going in all directions at all times. I'm sure that more were killed on the roads of Guatemala than were killed at the Bay of Pigs.

MOSS: The whole ineptitude of the operation is amazing, not only what you're talking about now, but I was struck by the simple tactics at the beach. It was just incredible to me that it could have been done that way, but that's an aside--my opinion.

MUCCIO: On that point let me mention that I understand the same chief of operations handled the Bay of Pigs preparation, implementation, or whatever term you want to use, that had handled the famous Guatemalan incident.

MOSS: Oh, yes.

MUCCIO: When--what was his name--(Jacobo) Arbenz. . .

MOSS: Yes. In 1954.

MUCCIO: . . .1954, was left isolated and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) supported Castillo Armas, who came in from Honduras. I doubt whether a single shot was fired by one or the other side in the march from Honduras into Guatemala City. Guatemalan military are brought up in a school where no officer, no member of the armed force ever points a gun at another member, another individual in uniform, period. And I'm afraid some of the haphazard planning was due to the ease of the Guatemalan . . .

MOSS: I see.

MUCCIO: . . . incident in 1954. They were not aware of the control that (Fidel) Castro had already established in Cuba.

MOSS: Yes, Yes, I understand. Now in March of 1961, after the new administration took over, Roberto Alejos went to Washington with a letter from Ydigoras.

MUCCIO: Go ahead.

MOSS: Yes. I was going to say, had you foreknowledge of this, and were you aware that Ydigoras was trying to put pressure on the Americans to get this thing moving.

MUCCIO: Well, on two occasions the liaison officer came to me and said that they were having trouble keeping the boys under control; that they'd been trained to such a pitch that they were eager to get this thing going. He wanted to know if I wouldn't write to Washington saying that it was time to use these excellently prepared (laughter). . . .

MOSS: Yes. And what was your response to this?

MUCCIO: My response was that I had not been consulted in any way, and I had no role to play in that particular phase of this operation.

MOSS: Were you informed before the Alejos trip that he was going?

MUCCIO: No. I know that Alejos had been going back and forth.

MOSS: When did you first receive official word of what was going on from the department?

MUCCIO: That was before anything really was underway, when the liaison man came down to establish his role there in Guatemala. His role was merely liaison between the operating group and President Ydigoras. Roberto Alejos was right in the midst of this.

MOSS: Now did you have any specific instructions from the State Department on this?

MUCCIO: Not any.

MOSS: Okay, now let me ask you when the operation was underway, when it became apparent that it was going to end in disaster, what was the reaction of Ydigoras, of Alejos and other Guatemalans to this, and of the CIA people who were in Guatemala at that time?

MUCCIO: Well....None of the CIA men responsible for that operation ever came anywhere near the embassy. They were always up in the....They had their own transportation, their own communication facilities and everything else. I took the position that I had not personally seen anything going on, which was the reason why I dismissed Ydigoras' repeated invitations to go up and see how fine the boys were doing. I could legitimately say I had not seen them myself. That was very helpful, particularly when it became a public issue.

MOSS: Yes. Do you recall how Ydigoras responded to the failure of the invasion? Do you recall his mood, his attitude?

MUCCIO: Well his whole attitude was that some of the people in Washington were scared of their own shadow.

MOSS: How about your CAS liaison man? Was he still there after it went off?

MUCCIO: For a while, yes.

MOSS: Do you recall his reaction?

MUCCIO: Well, that something had gone wrong.

MOSS: Nothing specific?

MUCCIO: He was there for a while because the question as to what to do with all this equipment that had been brought down there came up. Now I had a role to play in that.

MOSS: All right. Let me shift the topic somewhat. Well, let me ask you first. . . . I would be negligent if I didn't ask you about your personal feeling about the operation: its wisdom, its implementation, and so on, with hindsight of course, and realizing that this is one man's perspective. Would you comment in general on it?

MUCCIO: Well, I had good grounds to be very skeptical of Ydigoras. He was a man who preferred to be mischievous, even when it was not to his advantage. He loved intrigue. These were his boys. They were not under CIA or the U.S. These were his boys. He talked about them incessantly every time I saw him. He talked loosely about this to many others. His lack of perception and sensitivity was evident in the baffling attempt to use Cubans to suppress the revolt of his army on November 13, 1960. I heard of his plan to inject Cubans into this purely Guatamalan fray as follows:

Midnight, Saturday, November 13, a third of the Guatemalan armed forces "took off" against Ydigoras. At La Aurora Air force headquarters, junior officers disarmed and isolated the Chief of Staff. Shortly thereafter some had misgivings, could not agree on the next move and decided to let the Americans know what was underway, particularly since they had received word that Ydigoras had secretly ordered some DC-3 planes loaded with Cubans flown to Puerto Barrios where the revolt was most active.

They'd first called in Lieutenant Colonel (William J.) Cavoli, who was the air attache. Cavoli didn't know what to do and called Colonel John Berry, senior Army attache. Just as soon as Berry arrived there and saw what was underway he called my deputy (Robert F.) Bob Corrigan. Bob Corrigan said, "this is something the ambassador should know about right away." The whole American group came up to the embassy residence. The liaison man came in a few minutes later and said that the Cuban trainees were already airlifted and should have landed by now in Puerto Barrios. I turned around to the liaison man--he had instant access to Ydigoras at all times--and I said, "You go tell President Ydigoras that those cubans should not be used in Puerto Barrios; that if they have landed to keep them at the airport; if they have not landed to return them back to---" What was the name of that airport? Anyway the airport nearest the training finca. (Well, apparently the first DC-3, when it came down for landing, was fired upon whereupon the pilot took off immediately, and he was still in the air.) President Ydigoras sent his own pilot down there to tell these fellows to go back to camp, back to the airport. Before I knew what action had taken place by Ydigoras, the telephone rang, and it was a call from Washington. It was Secretary Christian Herter asking what was underway down there. I told him, and he said, "Well good. I'm glad you sent word to Ydigoras, but you go over there personally right away and tell him that he's to return those men to the base immediately."

MOSS: I'm trying to find the name of the airport. I have the name of the finca there, near, what is it? How do you pronounce R-e-t-a-h-u-l-r...?

MUCCIO: Retalhuleu.

MOSS: Retalhuleu. Okay, that was the area airport? Right, right.

Okay, let me ask you a question on another subject. With the confusion in Guatemala, on the whole Bay of Pigs involvement and so on, I get very little feel for the way the manner in which the Alliance for Progress idea was being received and implemented in Guatemala. Could you make some comment on that?

MUCCIO: Well, Ydigoras was very much like old Syngman Rhee: he'd say yes to everything, as long as he was on the receiving end. I got quite some kudos. . . The U.S. military got the idea that it would be a good thing to sell our civic action concept to the military in Latin America. The Pentagon wanted to send teams to each of the countries, to review the situation and see whether they couldn't send a permanent group. I was the first one to wire back saying, "Yes, it's a fine idea." I didn't say it was a fine idea. (Laughter)

MOSS: Ydigoras did, yes.

MUCCIO: Every time we came to Washington someone in the Pentagon reminded me I was the first one to go along with this idea.

MOSS: Okay, let me go a little further. You left Guatemala in late 1961 to come back to Washington. As I read the cables about the time you left Ydigoras went to your deputy, who was left in charge awaiting a new ambassador, and began to put pressure on him, asking for United States intervention to convince Great Britain to honor Guatemalan claims to British Honduras, what they called Belize. Is it Belize?

MUCCIO: Belize.

MOSS: Belize. And that Ydigoras was claiming that one of the conditions under which he allowed the Cuban training to go on, under CIA auspices, in Guatemala, was that the United States would do this for him. Now I see that this becomes a very touchy thing for the State Department. Did you have any advance knowledge of this?

MUCCIO: Well Ydigoras had raised the question with me. Belize has been Guatemalan, Mexican, and then British. This triumvirate has extended over this area for a hundred years? Ydigoras raised this question of Belize time and again. But he never did it on the basis that, you said you would help me if I helped you vis-a-vis this training program. He never said that to me....

MOSS: He never said it to you.

MUCCIO: ...knowing damn well that there was no basis to it.

MOSS: He definitely put pressure on Corrigan in those terms. Now I wonder....

MUCCIO: I wouldn't put it past Ydigoras that's the way he operated.

MOSS: This would be typical of the man, to wait until the man who knew it all was out of town and then go and try and put it on the next one. Okay, now what did you do after you came back to the State Department?

MUCCIO: Well, I was brought up here precipitously to coordinate the study that was about to be undertaken by U.S. government agencies on relations with Panama. I was the coordinator of that interdepartmental group.

MOSS: Right. This was, I'm trying to remember, Ball?

MUCCIO: George Ball.

MOSS: George Ball was running that thing. Well, do you have any view as to the....I almost hate to get one ambassador talking about another, but I think (Joseph) Joe Farland's experience in Panama, and his view of things going along pretty well until we began to stick our oar in down there. Do you have any comment on that?

MUCCIO: I think I can say this, that Joe Farland sent repeated reports on the wonderful developments in the relations between Panama and the United States of America. I went to Panama with Under-Secretary Ball, who had recently been appointed a director of the Panama Canal Company. First time anyone from the Department of State had been allowed to even look into that.

MOSS: Yes, normally it's a Defense (Department) operation, right?

MUCCIO: During the three days we were there, the culebra section of the Panama Canal had just been illuminated so that it could be transited at night. The governor of the Panama Canal gave widespread invitations to Panamanians and to Americans to board his yacht at--I'm finding difficulty in remembering, recalling some of the names--Pedro Miguel coming through the cut back to Miraflores. The whole American Canal Company, the Panama Canal hierarchy and the embassy were there in toto. The only Panamanians to appear was Tomas Gabriel Duque the editor, owner, operator, general manager of the Panama Star, Estrella de Panama, and the wife of Gilberto Arias, who was Minister of Finance. I understand that she was a Puerto Rican. Those were the only two non-Americans on the trip. Now if relations were anywhere near as well as had been reported from

the embassy certainly the "boycott" of such an occasion wouldn't happen.

MOSS: Right. I sense that you're perhaps tiring, but at this point let me ask you then as a closing comment to give a general evaluation from your point of view as to the effectiveness of American policy towards Latin America during the Kennedy administration. Were we doing the appropriate things as much as we could, or what were our sins of commission and omission?

MUCCIO: I think the main sin of commission was that we sold, or tried to sell, the idea of the Alliance for Progress as something coming out of the virgin mind of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, instead of giving the Latinos a chance to come up with this same concept as something that they had taken part in developing. In the course of our whole history of relations we've been continuously "throwing" things at the Latinos and acting baffled when they don't swallow it immediately, willingly eagerly. I think that psychologically it was a bad tactical presentation of something that had a great deal to it.

MOSS: I think people on the other side of the argument would say, "Well, where is the evidence that something would be forthcoming from the Latinos, if we sat back on our hands?"

MUCCIO: A lot of things that were included had in fact been presented by Latinos. The (Inter-American) Bank is a good illustration.

MOSS: All right, fine. Thank you very much indeed, Ambassador Muccio. (Interruption) All right. You say you had a comment or two about the movement towards a Central American common market, and that people in Washington seemed to ignore the development of this movement.

MUCCIO: Beginning as far back as 1957, 1958, there were various exchanges between the younger elements in the several republics of Central America. Most of these lads had been educated in the United States in economics and business administration and government operations. The local, old established authorities of these Central American states pooh-poohed these ideas, and they certainly got very little sympathy out of Washington. Washington just paid no attention to what these young men were doing. It wasn't until the meeting in San Salvador of a...

MOSS: The San Jose meeting?

MUCCIO: No, this is San Salvador. . .

MOSS: Oh no, I'm sorry...

MUCCIO: ...of financial representatives of the Central American Republics and of the U.S., but that must have been in January of 1960, that some of the more senior officials of Washington in the financial, commercial world were at this meeting (Secretary of the Treasury Anderson, Upton Grady, etc.) and they were surprised at how much had been already done. From then on, of course, Washington started taking an interest in what was already underway in Central American toward a common market.

MOSS: All right now, What about during the Kennedy administration. What was the State (department), AID, Commerce Department, if you will, response to this movement?

MUCCIO: In matters of this kind the country bureaucracy, the government bureaucracy of the United States, is so darn complex and so big, it's very hard to say when the new spirit, whether it was done intentionally, or whether it was just thrown at them. But there was a world of difference beginning after this meeting in San Salvador. That was still the Eisenhower administration, but right at the tail end of it. But the whole concept of integrated industries for instance, and free trade between these countries, uniform tariffs, was well underway by the time I arrived there, and I arrived in Guatemala in January of 1960.

MOSS: Was there something more that could have been done to encourage this, and what would have been the benefits had we moved in a stronger manner of it?

MUCCIO: As a general attitude I think we should let the Latinos go ahead and experiment and do a lot of these things, on their own initiative, and not have the young fellows in our own government continuously act as "overlords"....I'm not using that as limited to the Kennedy group.

MOSS: No, I understand.

MUCCIO: But, that's a tendency. Young fellows in the ARA (American Republics Area), the LA (Latin America) whatever term you want, dealing all the time, have less trouble in dealing directly with the young bureaucrats in Latin America than they have in dealing directly with the young bureaucrats in Latin America than they have in dealing with other elements in the United

States government right here in Washington. I hadn't given that a thought and I'm afraid I haven't presented it to you at all clearly.

MOSS: I think it comes through. I think it comes through. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about? Anything that you think should be covered?

MUCCIO: You raised a question of the entrance of the Kennedy group into Latin America. Let me mention a parallel. I was in Panama when the coordinator of Latin American affairs was set up on the eve of the World War II. For a long spell though there was hardly a week that went by that some expert out of the coordinator's office didn't appear in Panama--and mind you, I was in Panama from October, 1938, until September, 1944; I was there six years at this stretch, on the eve of the war, and the early part of the war--and these American lads would come in and I would point out to them that the embassy in Panama was larger than the foreign office, and everyone that came out of Washington connected with the coordinator ended up seeing the same one or two or three of the men in the foreign office. Even though we took great pains to point out that this was merely a survey group as to what might be done, the Panamanians were left with the idea that we're eager to do things. It's very important to be careful in presenting your initial presentation. But there were so many "eager beavers" coming through at that time. I was trying to recall whether that was 1940 or '41, but it was in that period.

MOSS: Which was about the time that young Jack Kennedy took a South American trip on his own. He didn't happen to pass through your area, did he?

MUCCIO: No, I don't recall that, no. The first time I met Jack Kennedy was when I was ambassador to Korea and he came out there as a congressman...

MOSS: Oh, could you describe that for us?

MUCCIO: ...in the summer of...

MOSS: 1951?

MUCCIO: No, the summer of 1950. It was during the perimeter days in Pusan. He came in for a few hours before going up to the front and he had lunch with me, just the two of us. I didn't see him face to face again until I came back from Guatemala. He received six ambassadors who were going abroad in the same time. I really marveled at some of the things he mentioned about his visit to Pusan. He either had some very ingenious...

MOSS: Diary?

MUCCIO: ...diary system, because there were things that had come up just between the two of us, and there couldn't have been any other person who had briefed him. It was either in his own mind somewhere, that he was able to retrieve, or he had some very very clever recording system (laughing) this....

MOSS: What sort of things did he recall to you? Do you remember?

MUCCIO: Specifically I don't.... I mean, just matters that were of concern in Pusan back in August of 1950. He was a reserve naval officer when he came out. He was a congressman, but he came out as a naval reserve officer.

MOSS: How did he strike you in 1950? What impression do you have of him as of that time, on that trip?

MUCCIO: This was a very brief visit. He was very very earnest. I suppose to him, I don't know how much older I was than he, but we sort of just don't....

MOSS: Do you recall the substance of your meeting with him later? I have the date, it was June 29, 1961, when you were back for consultation.

MUCCIO: From Guatemala.

MOSS: From Guatemala, yes. You and John Cabot from Brazil and four others. Do you recall the circumstances and substance of that meeting with him?

MUCCIO: Well, that was not a meeting, that was just our going in and paying our respects. I had not met him....

MOSS: As president.

MUCCIO: I was already in Guatemala when he came in as president.

MOSS: I've asked one or two ambassadors to comment on the importance of actually seeing the president face to face, of being able to say to the host country people that you had seen the president and he said thus and so.

MUCCIO: That's all part of the aura build-up of ambassadors. To go to a post and say, "No, I haven't even seen the president?" would be calamitous. And in most of these small countries a relationship with the president is all so personal.

MOSS: Yes, yes, I understand. Right. Is there anything else you think should be added?

MUCCIO: Not that, not that...

MOSS: Okay fine. Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Ambassador.