

[Secret History of U.S.-Cuba Ties Reveals Henry Kissinger Plan to Bomb Havana for Fighting Apartheid](#)

In the new book, "Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana," authors Peter Kornbluh and William LeoGrande use recently declassified documents to expose the secret history of dialogue between the United States and Cuba. Among the revelations are details of how then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger considered launching airstrikes against Cuba after Fidel Castro sent troops to support independence fighters in Angola in 1976. In the years that followed, top-secret U.S. emissaries, including former President Jimmy Carter and Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez, worked to normalize relations with Cuba. The book's release comes as Cuban leader Raúl Castro is set to participate for the first time in next year's Summit of the Americas in Panama. Cuba recently denounced the Obama administration for extending the more than 50-year embargo for another year in a little-noticed move in September.

Image Credit: Courtesy of Frank Mankiewicz

Image Courtesy of Frank Mankiewicz. (From right to left: Frank Mankiewicz, Kirby Jones, and Saul Landau deliver a message to Fidel Castro from Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, proposing negotiations to normalize U.S.-Cuban relations, July 1974)

Transcript

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NERMEEN SHAIKH: A declassified document cited in Back Channel to Cuba offers a window into the first formal negotiating session to explore normalized relations between the United States and Cuba. We spend the rest of the hour with the authors of a new book that exposes the secret history of dialogue between the United States and Cuba. Much of the book relies on recently declassified top-secret documents. Among the revelations are details of how then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger considered launching airstrikes against Cuba after Fidel Castro sent troops to support independence fighters in Angola in 1976. In the years that followed, top-secret U.S. emissaries, including former President Jimmy Carter and Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez, worked to normalize relations with Cuba.

The book's release comes as Cuban leader Raúl Castro is set to participate for the first time in next year's Summit of the Americas in Panama. Earlier this month, Panama's foreign minister flew to Havana to personally invite Castro to attend for the first time. President Obama has not said yet if he will attend the talks.

AMY GOODMAN: Meanwhile, Cuba has denounced the Obama administration for extending the more than 50-year embargo. The White House authorized the trade embargo for another year in a little-noticed move in September. Speaking before the U.N. General Assembly, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez said U.S. restrictions on Cuba have worsened under President Obama.

BRUNO RODRÍGUEZ: The State Department has again included Cuba in its unilateral and arbitrary list of states that sponsor international terrorism. Its true purpose is to increase the persecution of our international financial transactions in the whole world and justify the blockade policy. Under the present administration, there has been an unprecedented tightening of extraterritorial character of the blockade, with a remarkable and unheard-of emphasis on financial transactions through the imposition of multi-million fines on banking institutions of third countries.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, for more, we're joined by Peter Kornbluh and William LeoGrande, authors of the new book, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*. Peter Kornbluh directs the Cuba Documentation Project at the National Security Archive at George Washington University. And William LeoGrande is a professor of government at American University. You can read the introduction to their book on our website at democracynow.org. They also wrote an article, which is now on The Nation's website, headlined "Six Lessons for Obama on How to Improve Relations with Cuba: The president knows US policy has been a failure. Here's how he can make a breakthrough, in the little time he has left."

Well, we'll get to that, but William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, welcome back to Democracy Now! Peter, I want to start with you and your—really, the documents that you've got, that have never been revealed before, once again, showing how close the U.S. came, that U.S. leaders were willing to risk world peace in going after Cuba. Talk about Henry Kissinger.

PETER KORNBLUH: Henry Kissinger deserves much credit for actually taking the initiative to reach out to Fidel Castro through a secret emissary, sending him a handwritten note saying, "We should try and improve relations, and let's set up a secret mechanism to start talks." That was in the summer of 1974. And a series of talks did take place, culminating in an extraordinary three-hour meeting at the Pierre Hotel here in New York City in July of 1975. But, you know, the United States has always wanted Cuba to compromise either its foreign policy or its domestic policy to come to terms with the United States.

And Fidel Castro had a request from Agostinho Neto in Angola for support against CIA-supported right-wing guerrillas challenging his MPLA movement. Castro sent troops into Angola. Kissinger was irate that a "pipsqueak," as he kept calling Fidel Castro in meetings with Gerald Ford, would actually project military power into another continent and thwart Kissinger's kind of chessboard design of the Cold War on that continent. And he ordered up these contingency plans, which are now in the news and posted on the website of the National Security Archive. Our book, *Back Channel to Cuba*, broke this story of these documents. And they were pretty powerful contingency plans for airstrikes, mining of the harbors of Cuba, a naval blockade perhaps. In the Oval Office, he said to Gerald Ford, "I think we're going to have to smash Cuba, get them out of Africa. We might have to wait 'til after the 1976 elections." Of course, Gerald Ford, fortunately, lost the 1976 elections.

AMY GOODMAN: And Carter came in. And talk about what happened to those plans.

PETER KORNBLUH: Well, Carter certainly did not pick up on those plans at all. He had a completely different perspective of dealing with Cuba and all sorts of other countries with which we did not have close relations, with which we had hostile relations. In fact, he told Bill LeoGrande and I, when we interviewed him, that he had a broader approach: Civil dialogue, even relations—positive relations—with enemy states was much preferable to military hostilities. And so he also attempted—picked up on kind of where Kissinger had dropped the issue of trying to normalize relations, and engaged in a series of secret meetings and talks with the Cubans, as well, which are detailed rather extensively in this book.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Well, William LeoGrande, can you talk about where you got access to these documents? Why were they declassified now? How long did it take for you to get access to them? And how much are we talking about? How many documents did you get access to?

WILLIAM LEGOGRANDE: Well, I think over the course of doing the research for this book, we looked literally at hundreds and hundreds of declassified documents. A lot of them were declassified as a result of Peter's work at the National Security Archive, because the archive has really been a leader in forcing the United States government to declassify things that it'd prefer not to, through the Freedom of Information Act. These particular documents and some ones that really were just released a few weeks ago continued to document this hidden history. We're all very familiar with the 50 years, 55 years now, of hostility between Cuba and the United States. What most people don't know is that every president since Eisenhower has negotiated with Cuba about one issue or another. During the Kissinger and Carter years, it was about normalization of relations. In other years, it's been about smaller issues, but no less

important ones, like finding peace in southern Africa. And we were determined to unearth that history, and getting these documents was the key link for being able to do that.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And how many times did the Cuban government take the initiative to open a dialogue with the U.S. in the same period of time that you looked at?

WILLIAM LEOGRANDE: What's really fascinating is that the Cubans repeatedly took the initiative to try to improve relations. Essentially, every time a new U.S. presidential administration came into office, Fidel Castro would make some sort of initiative. Sometimes it was private, through private emissaries. Sometimes it was very public—in 1964, for example. The Cubans just repeatedly made an effort, which suggested to us that in fact the Cubans were really interested in trying to normalize the relationship with the United States, but not on any terms. As Peter said, Cuba has its own foreign policy, has its own domestic arrangements, and has never been willing to make major concessions in its foreign policy or in its domestic social and political organization for better relations with the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: For your chronicling of the negotiations that were taking place, even people in this country don't realize the number, the hundreds of attempts on Castro's life. And you tell this interesting story of a U.S. negotiator for the United States, [James] Donovan, on the one hand negotiating, and then he's being undermined by the CIA—explain this story—to bring a gift to Castro that will kill him.

PETER KORNBLUH: Yes, we talk about this story literally on the very first page of the book. James Donovan was a New York lawyer, very famous for organizing a prisoner swap with the Soviet Union. And John F. Kennedy picked him to, first, win the liberation of the Bay of Pigs prisoners, over a thousand prisoners and their families, and then the CIA sent him back to kind of win the release of three CIA agents that Fidel had in his jails and arrange a prisoner swap there. And he was doing confidence-building work with Castro. He was doing shuttle diplomacy back and forth from Miami, and he brought him all sorts of little gifts, including a wetsuit, a scuba diving suit, and a watch and a snorkel, etc. And when one branch of the CIA, the executive action branch, which was the euphemism for the assassination branch of the CIA, found out that he was going to be bringing this wetsuit, they concocted this plan to poison it. They had a particular poison for the snorkel, a different poison of—

AMY GOODMAN: They were going to put tuberculosis in the snorkel?

PETER KORNBLUH: Yeah, they were going to put tuberculosis in the snorkel, I believe, and a special fungus in the wet suit. And Donovan had these handlers at the CIA, who liked him and who were positive about his, A, negotiating the release of their fellow CIA guys who were in prison and, B, you know, possibly actually making progress on better relations with Cuba. And they basically said to him, "We are going to keep control of this wetsuit in our possession, so that other people in the CIA never get it and can't contaminate it." And, you know, that was an opening story to show the tug-of-war between some people over the course of these years in the U.S. government who really were focused on improving relations and the kind of hardliners who all they wanted to do was either assassinate Fidel Castro, start a counterrevolution in Cuba, and, you know, basically bring the force of the United States down upon the Cuban Revolution.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to break and then come back to just a list of the times, the attempts at negotiation, and what was this tremendous force that prevented the opening of relations between Cuba and the United States, and your recommendations for President Obama. We're speaking with Peter Kornbluh and William LeoGrande. Their new book is *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: This is Democracy Now!, democracynow.org, The War and Peace Report. I'm Amy Goodman, with Nermeen Shaikh. And our guests are the authors of a new book called *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, Peter Kornbluh and William

LeoGrande. Professor LeoGrande, start with these negotiations that we know so little about. They often take place in secret places, either in—or also very public.

WILLIAM LEOGRANDE: So, even in the Eisenhower administration, there were efforts negotiate to prevent the breakdown in relations.

During the Kennedy administration, as Peter was saying, there were negotiations to release the Bay of Pigs prisoners, the CIA prisoners who were imprisoned. There were communications during the missile crisis. And then at the end of the Kennedy administration, there was a serious effort to try to open a dialogue with Cuba through representatives of the United Nations to normalize relations. Kennedy saw that the Cubans were really angry with the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the missile crisis and thought it might be possible to win Cuba back to the Western orbit.

During the Johnson administration, there was an effort using Spain as an intermediary.

During even the Nixon administration, there were negotiations for an anti-hijacking agreement. As we've talked about a little bit already, during the Ford administration, there was this very serious effort, leading to the meeting in the Pierre Hotel, to try to normalize relations, which came to an end because of Angola.

Jimmy Carter, within his first month in office, signed a presidential directive saying, "I want to normalize relations with Cuba," and directing his foreign policy bureaucracy to open negotiations to do that. That broke down as a result of Cuba's involvement in Ethiopia. But even after the Cubans sent troops to Ethiopia in 1978, for the next several years of the administration there were a whole series of secret meetings in Washington, in New York, in Atlanta, Georgia, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and in, finally, Havana itself.

The Reagan administration, who you would have expected to be the most hostile to Cuba, sent Secretary of State Alexander Haig to Mexico to meet secretly with Carlos Rafael Rodríguez to talk about Central America. Then they entered into a multi-year negotiation with Cuba to sign a migration agreement, to try to resolve the abnormal migration relationship between the two countries. And finally, during the Reagan administration, Cuba was invited to participate in the negotiations that ended the war in southern Africa, leading to Namibian independence and Cuba's withdrawal from Angola.

During the Bush administration, there wasn't so much success in terms of reaching agreements, but there was a dialogue around Central America, as well.

And then, during the Clinton administration, there were a whole series of talks, the most important of which normalized, finally, our migration relationship with Cuba, the agreements in 1994, in which President Jimmy Carter and President Salinas of Mexico served as intermediaries between the two governments, and then a migration agreement in 1995 that was held so secretly, for fear of domestic opposition in the United States, that the National Security Agency, the NSA, was directed not to intercept the phone calls of the diplomats, for fear that the word would get out to the wider government that there were negotiations going on.

Even during the Bush administration, the second Bush administration, there was a dialogue around counternarcotics cooperation and counterterrorism cooperation.

And, of course, since President Obama came in, we've seen continuing dialogue around a whole range of issues, like counternarcotics, Coast Guard cooperation, oil spill mitigation and so on. So there's this long, long history of dialogue and of a variety of successes on a number of issues.

PETER KORNBLUH: Can I just add that this wonderful list of dialogue and covert-overt, back channel, informal-formal that Bill LeoGrande has just laid out was facilitated over these last 50 years by a who's who of really colorful intermediaries. The political issues around talking to Cuba are so sensitive that

presidents have felt they had to use back-channel intermediaries, many of whom were not actually tied to the U.S. government in any way, to bring messages back and forth. In the Kennedy era, you had a pioneering female journalist, the first correspondent for—the first female correspondent for ABC News, Lisa Howard, setting up her Central Park apartment as command central, communications central, for phone calls and messages between Cuba and the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Did she report them?

PETER KORNBLUH: She didn't report them. She did actually write for a magazine called The War and Peace Report, that was very positive and famous in New York in the 1960s, about her conversations with Castro, but she never reported these secret communications. You had Gabriel García Márquez, you know, a Nobel Prize-winning, world famous writer, being a secret intermediary between Castro and Clinton. You had the chairman of the board of Coca-Cola, J. Paul Austin, ferrying messages back and forth. We tell that story in the book. And, of course, you had the—

AMY GOODMAN: What was he doing, doing that?

PETER KORNBLUH: Well, Jimmy Carter enlisted him. Carter, of course, was from Atlanta, and they were friends. And Carter didn't believe the bureaucracy in the State Department, and the White House even, would support him in his efforts to reach out to Castro, see if normal relations were possible, particularly in the wake of the Ethiopia incursion of Cuban troops. And so, he sent in 1978 a private message to Fidel Castro with J. Paul Austin—

AMY GOODMAN: In a Coke bottle?

PETER KORNBLUH: Well, Austin, of course, wanted to bring Coca-Cola back to Cuba.

WILLIAM LEOGRANDE: That's right.

PETER KORNBLUH: That was his thing. And then they used Austin again in 1980, and only to—as a private emissary, only to find out that he had started suffering from Alzheimer's disease and couldn't effectively deliver the message—in fact, had kind of delivered his own message that compromised kind of the way this really needed to play out. And he had to—

AMY GOODMAN: What was his message?

PETER KORNBLUH: Well, he was trying to help—the message was to end the Mariel boatlift crisis, that threatened Jimmy Carter's re-election, quite frankly. And they sent him down, a two-step process: "You end the Mariel boatlift; after the re-election of Jimmy Carter, we will enter into a broader dialogue of normalizing relations. Everything will be on the table, including the embargo." And instead, Austin went down and said, "Jimmy Carter wants to have a summit with you before the end of the year. He wants you to come to the United States, and he's going to talk to you face to face, and the United States will lift the embargo before Christmas. And that's the first—these are the first steps before actual serious negotiations take place." And, of course, this was not at all what the message was supposed to be. And almost immediately, literally, only three or four days later, this high-level State Department official was sent down to tell Castro that that was not the correct message, and, in fact, they wanted a much more kind of drawn-out process for talks. Of course, Carter was not re-elected. And one of, I think, the really compelling things in our book is that he told us, when we interviewed him, that he now regrets that he didn't normalize relations during the first term, because he never had a chance to do so during the second term.

AMY GOODMAN: Which brings us to President Obama.

PETER KORNBLUH: Yes, exactly.

AMY GOODMAN: Talk about what you feel he should be doing.

PETER KORNBLUH: Well, we have an article coming out in The Nation magazine—it's online now, but it's going to be in the magazine next week—which lists the lessons of all of this history for Barack Obama. You know, Barack Obama now faces an extraordinary window of opportunity. He has been forced, by the pressures of the other Latin American countries, to basically accept the new reality: The United States can't keep excluding Cuba from regional events without completely isolating itself. In the next Summit of the Americas, which is going to take place in April 2015 in Panama, is going to include Cuba. And Barack Obama, who famously said, when he was running for office in 2008, that he would sit down with Raúl Castro face to face to talk about our differences, now actually is going to have that opportunity. And between now and April really is the time when the lessons of the history, that we've put under this one cover of this book, can be applied to a face-to-face meeting between the president of Cuba, the president of the United States, for the first time since the Cuban Revolution.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, William LeoGrande, to what extent do you think what you've discovered about this back-channel diplomacy, the use of intermediaries between the U.S. and Cuba, is similar to what the U.S. might also have been doing with other countries with which it has hostile relations—for instance, Iran, North Korea, etc.?

WILLIAM LEGOGRANDE: I think presidents always like to use back channels, they like to use private envoys like J. Paul Austin, in part because they don't entirely trust the layers of bureaucracy, and they don't the information filtered, so they send down an emissary that they feel they have personal confidence in. And also, it's less likely to leak than if you go through the regular bureaucracy, where there are always people opposed to your policy who are willing to leak it to Congress or to the press. So I think presidents always use private emissaries in that regard. And they even use secret diplomatic channels to—because you can't negotiate some of these tough issues in public, because of the kinds of compromises that have to be made.

I think Cuba is different, though. I think there's been more of this in the case of our relations with Cuba, because we don't have formal diplomatic relations with Cuba. We still don't technically recognize the Cuban government, even though we have U.S. diplomats in the interest section in Havana. And because the Cuban issue has been so hot politically in the United States domestically for so long, presidents have had a special incentive not to let their secret dialogues with Cuba get out in public.

AMY GOODMAN: This obsession that the U.S. has had with Cuba, what is the force that is behind—even huge businesses, multinational companies, want to do business with a country that's 90 miles off of our shore. What has been the most successful force, and how do you think that will be countered? You had Nelson—you had President Obama, at Nelson Mandela's funeral, shaking hands—a very big deal was made of this—with Raúl Castro, the president of Cuba.

PETER KORNBLUH: Yeah, just that handshake seemed so symbolic, because the two presidents of these two countries had never really publicly been together, talked to each other in any way, in all of these decades. And Cuba is really one of the most intractable foreign policy issues in the modern history of U.S. world relations. And part of it is the historic kind of imperial and imperialist kind of attitude of the United States towards Cuba pre-revolution, and towards all of Latin America, quite frankly, smaller countries which we kind of assumed we would be the hegemon and control. And here came Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, and saying, "Hey, guess what. You can't control us, even if we are a small country. We're going have a revolution, be independent, have our own political system and our own foreign policy." And then, of course, it has evolved—

AMY GOODMAN: Ten seconds.

PETER KORNBLUH: It has evolved into a domestic political issue, with hardliners in the Senate and the Congress basically being in a position to challenge any real movement on Cuba policy.

AMY GOODMAN: And do you think President Obama wants to change the policy?

PETER KORNBLUH: I personally do think that he and his team would like to change the policy. The question is whether they have the spine, the courage, to take on the right and do it. This could be Obama's key legacy, frankly, and he now has this window of opportunity.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to thank you both for being with us, Peter Kornbluh, William LeoGrande. Their book, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*.

Author:

- [Goodman, Amy](#)

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