

36. Conversation Among President Nixon, the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), the President's Assistant (Haldeman), the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), and Director of Central Intelligence Helms, Washington, March 5, 1971.¹

~~1:29:30, 462-5~~ DECLASS

Nixon: Now, looking at Cuba, let's turn there a moment: Do you agree—Do you still—You know, my conviction is very strong that we cannot give up in our policy toward Cuba. I think, as you know, there are arguments to the effect that, well, the Chileans recognize them, and all that sort of thing. [Unclear] The problems with Cuba are enormous. They are still, of course, bent on revolution. So, if we, we throw in the towel with the Cubans, the effect on the rest of Latin America could be massive. Encouraging that—Encouraging Communists, Marxists, Allende, or, call it what you will, will try for revolutions. Now, I've made [begged] the question already, but I want to know what your honest opinion is due to—from the intelligence and everything else. Do you think we should hold the course on Cuba, or we start being nice to Castro?

Helms: Sir, I sat at your desk about a year ago on this question, and I gave you the answer, then, that I was opposed to the idea of relenting on Cuba.

Nixon: Um-hmm.

Helms: I'm just as opposed today. In fact, even more so. I think what's happened in Chile makes it even more advisable to keep a tough line on Cuba. I think that if you give the impression that we're now soft on Cuba, and can live with any of these things, I think what, I'm afraid, is the wave of Latin America anyway is going to crash on the beach a lot faster. But, it's a lot easier for this country to handle Cuba the way we handle her now, than to start these little pacifying moves—

Nixon: So, we're right about it?

¹ Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Oval Office, Conversation No. 462-5, Oval Office. No classification marking. The editors transcribed the portions of the tape recording printed specifically for this volume. The transcript is part of a larger conversation that took place between 8:30-10:15 a.m. According to the President's Daily Diary, Haig joined the meeting at 9:15 a.m. and Helms joined the meeting at 9:29 a.m. (Ibid., White House Central Files, President's Daily Diary)

Helms: —which are really cosmetic, and which just makes it—make it difficult to face the problem. Neither—

Nixon: [Unclear] No, no—I don't want any of those—don't let any of those pacifying things getting in here now. Well, they get in, but we're going to be sure [unclear], because I've been—I've put “No” on a hell of a lot of sheets coming through this office on that one, I want you to know.

Helms: I'm sure you have.

Nixon: Do this, or that, or the other thing with the damn Cubans? And to hell with them. Now—

[Declassified audio not available for the following underlined portion]

Helms: The other thing is the situation here—

Nixon: Yeah.

Helms: Just one more point, because I don't want you to forget this.

Nixon: No.

Helms: One of the things that impressed you—I remember when we were talking the last time—was it is costing the Russians a million of dollars a day—

Nixon: Yeah.

Helms: —to keep Cuba afloat, and it may continue to cost them a million dollars a day. This is good. I mean, this is, I think, an effective reminder to the Soviet Union—

Nixon: Yeah.

Helms: —of the fact that we're beating them up on this.

Nixon: [Unclear] This is an awful time. Our—Is there anything, anything that we should do on the convert side to help in the election? The election, I understand, there's one—it's not popular, as I understand—before the end of the year? They're asking for dough there—

Kissinger: There's a presidential election in December, Mr. President.

Nixon: You're taking it up in the 90—

Kissinger: Yes, we're taking it up in the 40 Committee—

Nixon: The 40 Committee?

Kissinger: Well, next week.

Nixon: All right, let me tell you what I want—

Kissinger: The presidential election isn't—

Nixon: I'll tell you what I want, just so you know my views. If you think Chile [unclear] Italy, for the Latin countries, would be disastrous, because Italy is a Latin country.

Kissinger: Yeah.

Nixon: [Unclear] Goddamnit, let's be sure that that thing [unclear] everything you want—

[Unclear exchange]

Nixon: Come up with a tough program, ask for plenty of money to do the job.

[Unclear exchange]

Nixon: I don't—I don't want to let this get screwed up like Chile. Is that clear?

[Omitted here is discussion unrelated to Latin America.]

1:34:00, 462-5 DECLASS

Nixon: Here's the thing we have to realize, and it—The most single, the most single event in terms of, of ideological and philosophically [unclear] that has occurred in the last ten years in my opinion has been the deterioration of the attitude of the Catholic Church. I am probably pro—the strongest pro-Catholic who is not a Catholic; the greatest admirer of Catholic traditions—what they've done through the years. I'll say this—I'm not going to say it to anybody else—the Catholics, at the present time, as some people have said to me, they're—in Latin America—they're about one-third Marxists, and the other third are in the center, and, the other third are Catholics, now—now about that, at the present time. In the old days, you could count on the Catholic Church for many things to play an effective role on a serious question. What we see here is very cathartic. And, it—What has happened is that the American Catholic Church, finally, has condemned, I mean, an awful lot of Catholics in Latin America and everywhere else.

1:35:27, 462-5 DECLASS

[Omitted here is discussion unrelated to Latin America.]

1:38:57, 462-5 DECLASS

Nixon: I believe we support whoever are our friends anyplace in the world. And I believe that in most Latin countries [unclear] not dictators—that's a horrible word,

and a reprehensible word to most Americans—but, that strong leadership is essential. De Gaulle proved that. I mean, France is a Latin country. It couldn't—If even France, with all of its sophistication, couldn't handle a democracy, you can't. The Italians? That's their problem. They, they can't afford the luxury of democracy. Neither can Spain. And no country in Latin America can that I know of. They say, “Well, Colombia.” Well, heck, would we like that here? Well, the party in power wouldn't like it worth a damn, and the party out of power would say, “Great, let's change every four years.”