

Adlai E. Stevenson at the National Press Club, June 26, 1961



Adlai Stevenson. Photo by Benjamin E. Forte, News Associates, Inc.

United States Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai E. Stevenson (1900-1965) returned to Washington on June 22, 1961, after touring 10 South American capitals in 18 days. Viewed by many Latin Americans as, next to the president, the most prestigious member of John F. Kennedy's administration, Stevenson—formerly the Governor of Illinois, Democratic Party presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956, and party leader until Kennedy's victory in November 1960—consulted with government leaders to learn firsthand their views on Kennedy's recent proposal for an Alliance for Progress, or *Alianza para el Progreso*, a ten-year cooperative undertaking for the economic, political, and social modernization of the region, likened by many to both the Marshall Plan that helped rebuild Europe following World War II and the U.S.'s own Depression-era New Deal. Stevenson received favorable responses to Kennedy's plan for a hemispheric ministerial meeting in Uruguay during the summer to agree upon a charter for the Alliance.

Stevenson also sought to sound out South American opinion on the possibility for collective action to stop the spread of communist activities in the Western hemisphere. Stevenson's tour began just two months after the botched U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by Cuban exiles recruited by the CIA and trained in Guatemala to try to trigger an uprising against Fidel Castro's regime. On his return, Stevenson reported to Kennedy that "President [Janio da Silva] Quadros of Brazil represented the general official feeling over most of the Continent in describing the April attempt as 'disastrous' and any further unilateral intervention as 'fatal' to Latin American support for and cooperation with the United States." Stevenson stated in his report and also related in his

talk before the National Press Club on June 26 that the governments he met with agreed “no collection action should be officially considered until the economic conference was concluded and had demonstrated its success as a major step toward economic and social betterment.”

Stevenson and the Bay of Pigs

The Bay of Pigs operation had been set in motion in March 1960 by Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who perceived that Cuba had become a Soviet satellite after Castro's government expropriated U.S. corporate properties and established trade agreements with communist countries. Eisenhower broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba on January 3, 1961, when Castro demanded that the U.S. cut the size of their Havana diplomatic corps drastically. After Kennedy assumed the presidency, CIA director Allen Dulles, a holdover from the Eisenhower administration, made a convincing case that Castro was spreading his influence throughout the Caribbean and into South America. Kennedy found himself in a dilemma, as historian Robert Dallek has written. If Kennedy ended support for the exiles, he might be perceived, in the words of his aide Kenneth O'Donnell, as an “appeaser of Castro.” Following through with the invasion, however, could provoke a profoundly negative reaction, “a wave of massive protest, agitation and sabotage throughout Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa,” as aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. speculated, that would “fix a malevolent image of the new Administration in the minds of millions.” With the CIA and Joint Chiefs of Staff predicting that the plan would succeed, Kennedy gave the go ahead to proceed.

Stevenson held Cabinet-level status, but he had not been consulted. During the 1960 campaign, he had not supported Kennedy—whom he viewed as inexperienced—until after the Democratic convention, and relations between the two were not warm. After winning the election, Kennedy, pressured by his party's liberal wing, offered Stevenson the U.N. ambassadorship, but Stevenson hesitated before accepting and demanded first to know Kennedy's choice for Secretary of State, the post he really coveted. Stevenson had been a part of the U.S. delegation to the conference drafting the U.N. charter in 1945 and a key U.N. delegate during the following two years, but he now told a friend, “I don't want to be a lawyer arguing a case whether he believes in it or not. I'm not interested in explaining or defending a policy; I want to be involved in the making of that policy.” Once Kennedy selected Dean Rusk, a former supporter of Stevenson, to head the State Department, Stevenson acquiesced.

With the invasion set to occur just as Stevenson was preparing for a U.N. General Assembly debate over a long-standing Cuban charge that the U.S. was planning aggressive actions, Kennedy decided that Stevenson needed to be informed. “The integrity and credibility of Adlai Stevenson constitute one of our great national assets,” Kennedy told Schlesinger. “I don't want anything to be done which might jeopardize that.” When Schlesinger and a CIA official alerted Stevenson in a vague briefing, Stevenson “made clear that he wholly disapproved of the plan, regretted that he had been given no opportunity to comment on it and believed that it would cause infinite trouble,” Schlesinger later related. Still, Stevenson vowed “if it was national policy, he was prepared to make out the best case.”

On April 15, eight B-26 planes made a pre-invasion strike on the Cuban air force. Relying on relayed CIA information, Stevenson told an emergency session of the U.N. Political Committee convened that day at the urging of the Cuban foreign minister that the pilots were defectors who took off from Cuban airfields. Stevenson presented as evidence a photograph of one plane bearing Cuban air force insignia whose pilot, Stevenson had been informed, had flown to Miami that day seeking asylum. He soon learned to his dismay that the CIA had doctored the photo and the story was false. According to Francis T. P. Plimpton, Stevenson's deputy representative to the U.N., "Adlai felt absolutely sunk at having misled the United Nations." The next evening, Stevenson informed Dulles and Rusk by telegram that the U.S. faced dire consequences in its dealings within the U.N. "If Cuba now proves any of planes and pilots came from outside," he wrote, "we will face increasingly hostile atmosphere."

With Stevenson's concerns in mind, Kennedy and Rusk cancelled a second wave of air strikes over Cuba slated to occur at dawn the next morning, April 17, to protect the exiles as they landed. Rusk later explained, "I was trying to advise Adlai Stevenson at the U.N. on what was happening and suddenly found out there were additional air strikes coming up. We didn't want him to have to lie to the U.N." Stevenson subsequently received blame in some quarters for canceling the air strikes and thus dooming the operation to failure. When asked by a congresswoman to comment on the charge during a hearing the afternoon of his National Press Club talk, Stevenson stated, "I am sorry, but I can't help you on Cuba because I don't know anything about it. I was never consulted about it and I didn't cancel any air cover or anything else."

Following the landing of more than 1,400 Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, Stevenson told the U.N. Political Committee, "The United States has committed no aggression against Cuba and no offensive has been launched from Florida or from any other part of the United States." Later that day, he confessed in frustration to a friend, "I did not tell the whole truth; I did not know the whole truth" and worried that "my credibility has been compromised, and therefore my usefulness." Despite worldwide anti-American demonstrations protesting the invasion after 114 of the exiles died in battle and nearly 1,200 were captured, the U.N. passed only a mild resolution on the matter that failed to condemn the U.S. The *New York Times* noted that Stevenson "is entitled to some of the credit" for the passage and that "the support provided by Latin-American members was the decisive factor in avoiding a vote against the United States." A few weeks later, Stevenson observed that his prestige had not suffered long-term damage, as he wrote in a letter that "the Cuban absurdity made me sick for a week while I had to indignantly defend the U.S. (and got finally a harmless resolution) but I've been surprised how little it seems to have affected my *personal* regard."

The Alliance for Progress

Shortly after the disaster, Kennedy told his aide Richard N. Goodwin, "Let's get moving on the Alliance for Progress before they think I didn't mean it, that all we care about is Castro." On March 13, Kennedy had delivered an address to the Latin American diplomatic corps calling for "a vast cooperative effort, unparalleled in magnitude and

nobility of purpose, to satisfy the basic needs of the American people for homes, work and land, health and schools -- techo, trabajo y tierra, salud y escuela.” The goal was to create in the next decade self-sustaining economies within political democracies imbued with principles of social justice. Kennedy saw the program as an alternative to the appeal of communism. He told Goodwin, “All those people want is a chance for a decent life, and we’ve let them think that we’re on the side of those who are holding them down. There’s a revolution going on down there, and I want to be on the right side of it.”

The principles behind the Alliance marked a shift in U.S. policy away from total reliance for economic development on U.S. private investment and support for autocratic anti-communist regimes to provide internal security, a move that had taken shape gradually in the final two years of the Eisenhower administration following violent anti-American demonstrations during a tour of South America by Vice President Richard Nixon. Alliance planners in the Kennedy administration relied on theories of economic, political, and social development then current in academic circles, especially modernization theory, which analyzed ways that traditional societies moved into modernity. These social scientists worried that underdeveloped societies undergoing structural changes especially would be vulnerable to appeals by leaders advocating communist principles as more efficient and fairer than those of liberal democracies. The economist and historian Walt W. Rostow, a member of Kennedy’s National Security Council staff and the social scientist most closely associated with modernization theory, referred to such communist propagandists as “scavengers of the modernization process” and warned of Marxism’s appeal to “a transitional society if it fails to organize effectively those elements within it which are prepared to get on with the job of modernization.” Schlesinger argued, “Latin America’s landed oligarchy does not understand the gravity of its own situation. It constitutes the chief barrier to the middle-class revolution and, by thwarting the middle-class revolution, may well bring about the proletarian revolution.”

Harvard Business School economist Lincoln Gordon, who accompanied Stevenson on his South American tour and to the Press Club luncheon and congressional hearing of June 26, believed that prosperity in the hemisphere would greatly benefit the U.S. economy. A key planner of the Uruguay conference and soon to be the U.S. Ambassador to Brazil, Gordon wrote, “American values of freedom, responsible government, and equality of opportunity, together with American economic prosperity, would be more likely to flourish at home if they were widely shared abroad. We had benefited from the revival of Europe and Japan, and would benefit similarly from the modernization of the underdeveloped world.”

Kennedy chose Stevenson to tour South America, mend relations, and plan for the upcoming Alliance meeting in Uruguay because Stevenson’s reputation for integrity had withstood the Bay of Pigs debacle. Stevenson had drawn admiring crowds during a two-month tour of Latin America he took in 1960 as a private citizen, one that contrasted vividly with Nixon’s embattled trip two years earlier. Stevenson had made a point of visiting the worst slum areas to show his sincere concern. Diplomat William Benton, who accompanied Stevenson, later wrote, “It was in Latin America that I realized fully the extent, and even the intensity—the depth and sincerity—of the world’s admiration for Adlai Stevenson, as the very conscience of the American people.” When he returned,

Stevenson wrote an article for *Look* magazine in which he expressed distress that “in a region rich in resources, half the people are hungry, half don’t sleep in beds, half are illiterate. . . . I am concerned that if they don’t achieve their desire for a better economic and political life, we may find enemies, not friends, on our doorstep.”

In August 1961, the U.S. promised \$20 billion for the Alliance at the ministerial meeting in the beach resort of Punta del Este, Uruguay; supported stabilizing prices for leading commodities; and pushed for governments to commit to reforms in health care, housing, and education, in addition to programs for land redistribution and progressive taxation. During a conference in 1986 marking the Alliance’s 25-year anniversary, Lincoln Gordon noted “profound disappointments” with the program, concluding that “even after making large discounts in the overambitious goals and timetables of the Charter of Punta del Este, results were far below expectations and considerably short of realistic possibilities.” Some Kennedy administration officials have accused the Johnson administration of shifting priorities so as to protect U.S. private investments more than to promote democracy and social reforms. Gordon shifted blame to the Nixon administration, writing “the Alliance was repudiated by Nixon and Kissinger in favor of a new era of neglect.” Historians have listed a number of reasons for the initiative’s failures, including resistance to efforts to forestall soaring birthrates; military coups in nine Latin American governments from 1961 to 1966; the allocation of massive amounts of Alliance funds to companies controlled by Latin American ruling elites; the shift in U.S. aid to support police training and counterinsurgency operations that propped up autocratic regimes uninterested in social reform; and reliance on a modernization theory based on models derived from historical U.S. and Western Europe situations and that paid insufficient attention to indigenous institutions and cultures.

Castro’s delegate Che Guevara met informally with Kennedy’s aide Richard Goodwin at the conclusion of the Punta del Este conference and proposed a temporary agreement that would commit Cuba to ending revolutionary activities elsewhere in Latin America if the U.S. would lift its trade embargo and end attempts to overthrow Castro. No agreement followed. Historians have suspected that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev placed nuclear missiles on Cuban soil that year to deter the U.S. from attempting future attacks. During the subsequent October missile crisis that threatened the world with nuclear devastation, Stevenson again relied upon photographic evidence in a U.N. forum on a crisis involving Cuba. Armed this time with authentic photographs of Soviet missiles in Cuba taken from U-2 aircraft, Stevenson successfully challenged the Soviet ambassador and, in Schlesinger’s words, “dealt a final blow to the Soviet case before world opinion.” Stevenson himself judged that Khrushchev withdrew the missiles shortly thereafter in part because of a “sudden realization that, after the Security Council confrontation and the exposure of the plot, they risked losing the confidence and good will so painstakingly developed over many years” among nonaligned African and Asian nations.

*-- Alan Gevinson, Special Assistant to the Chief,
National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, Library of Congress*

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