

SATURDAY OBSERVER

SoulMATES



ROD MACIVOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Former prime minister Pierre Trudeau, with Cuban President Fidel Castro, arriving in Havana in 1976. The two were friends and 'intellectual soulmates' according to a former Canadian ambassador to Cuba.

Former prime minister Pierre Trudeau and Cuban President Fidel Castro were friends who enjoyed each others company and intellect. But were they subjects of a joint assassination plot?

Author **ROBERT WRIGHT** explores the conspiracy theory

Sensational stories about a dual-murder conspiracy against former prime minister Pierre Trudeau and Cuban President Fidel Castro have surfaced this week. The only Canadians not surprised by such reports appear to be the men and women who served as Trudeau's RCMP security detail. In Cuba, by contrast, where Castro still maintains an air-tight security apparatus which includes safe houses and food-tasters, this is all par for the course.

The idea that anti-Castro plotters might have wanted Trudeau and Castro dead is entirely plausible. The two were friends and "intellectual soulmates," as a Canadian ambassador to Cuba once put it. Castro even served as an honorary pallbearer at Trudeau's state funeral in October 2000. Both were educated by Jesuits and trained in the law. Both were men of formidable intellect whose political idealism inspired millions of their compatriots, infuriated millions of others, and changed the course of their nations' histories.

What does not ring true about the assassination conspiracy, at least as it has been described in Canadian media reports this week, is not so much its rationale but its timing.

As the story goes, American mobster Myer Lansky believed that if he had Pierre Trudeau murdered in 1974, Fidel Castro would dutifully travel to Canada for his friend's funeral, where he too would be assassinated. It is true that Lansky hated Castro for confiscating his lucrative gambling enterprises in Havana. In April 1959, for example, during the Cuban leader's one and only formal visit to the United States, Lansky tried to have him killed during a speech in New York's Central Park.

Thanks to newly declassified transcripts from the hearings of the Church Committee, a subcommittee of the U.S. Congress that in the mid-1970s studied the covert operations of the CIA, we also now know that Castro was targeted for assassination repeatedly by the CIA and that mobsters including John Roselli and Sam Giancana were recruited as part of that effort. The best known of these clandestine programs was called Operation Mongoose, attorney general Robert Kennedy's pet project of paramilitary operations against Cuba, which included assassinations, hotel bombings, the sabotage of industrial and agricultural sites, and the contamination of Cuba's sugar crop.

Less well known is that presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon continued to back covert action against Cuba well into the 1970s. Not until February 1976, in fact, when president Gerald Ford issued executive order 11905 prohibiting assassination as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy, did Washington ratchet down its sponsorship of counterrevolutionary activities against Fidel Castro. And even then, many of the Cuban-American militants who had worked closely with the CIA in its efforts to destabilize Cuba continued to terrorize the island on their own initiative. There is no reason to believe that Myer Lansky's

Trudeau asked External Affairs officials to schedule an excursion to the very fields where he had laboured as a footloose young man. As it happened, the outing could not be accommodated on his official schedule. Fidel Castro was briefed about Trudeau's cane-cutting adventure and was impressed. The prime minister had shown solidarity with the Cuban people, said Castro, and he had demonstrated that he was not afraid of hard work.

On the first day of May 1960, Trudeau and two other Montrealers tried to paddle a home-made canoe from Key West to Havana. No match for the powerful currents, pounding waves and blistering sun of the Strait of Florida, the three exhausted Canadians agreed to abandon the crossing the next day. Former prime minister John Diefenbaker would later mock Trudeau's attempted channel crossing, telling the House of Commons that Trudeau's "love affair" with Castro had begun "by canoe."

Trudeau delighted in such partisan jousting, because it was Diefenbaker himself who set Canada's Cuba policy by refusing to fall in behind the U.S. embargo in October 1960. (Death threats against Diefenbaker, in fact, had prevented him from vacationing in Miami over the winter of 1961.) But, as for Trudeau's paddling adventure, it had been a lark and nothing more. When he was pulled from his canoe, sunburned and seasick, he made no reference to Fidel Castro, nor did he even bother to make his way to Cuba by more conventional means.

In 1964, Trudeau ventured to Cuba for the second time, to see the revolution first hand. He spent three weeks there, traversing the entire island and immersing himself as much as possible in the daily

Mr. James Cross." Knowing that the young radicals were hoping to get some guerilla training while in Cuba, Trudeau added: "I also understand that in keeping with the good relations between our two countries, the individuals who have been given safe-conduct will not while in Cuba undertake any activity directed against Canada."

The two leaders finally met face-to-face when Pierre Trudeau stepped off his Armed Forces Boeing 707 at José Martí Airport on January 26, 1976, Castro oozing affection for Trudeau's four-month-old son Michel and plying his wife Margaret with what she called "a stream of romantic and flowery English." The following evening, during an informal picnic dinner on a small coral key off Cayo Largo, Trudeau and Castro cemented their friendship with a lengthy, meandering and "brutally frank" chat about world affairs, as Trudeau himself later put it. The prime minister enjoyed himself so much that in a speech at the port city of Cienfuegos the next day, he shouted exuberantly, "Viva el Primer Ministro Fidel Castro!"

Within days of the 1976 state visit, it became clear that the prime minister's personal affinity for Fidel Castro could not trump the growing political liability he represented back in Canada. Trudeau was attacked mercilessly for cuddling up to Castro while thousands of Cuban soldiers were pouring into Angola to shore up the fledgling MPLA government. By May 1978, Trudeau could withstand the pressure no longer, rising in the House to inform Canadians that the government would be terminating CIDA aid to the island to protest Castro's activities in Africa. "Canada disapproves with horror the participation of Cuban troops in Africa," he said.

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rhythms of ordinary Cubans. He would later express his admiration for the fact that such a poor country, hobbled by economic sanctions, was working against the odds to improve the lives of even its poorest citizens. This, and his extensive travels throughout the communist world, prompted some of Trudeau's political enemies to smear him as a closet Red. Starting with his Liberal leadership bid in 1968, right-leaning organizations including the John Birch Society in the United States and the Toronto-based Edmund Burke Society tagged Trudeau "the Canadian Castro." They accused him of imposing by stealth his socialist ideals on an unsuspecting Canada via the once-great party of C.D. Howe. What put the bite in comparisons of Trudeau and Castro was that the Cuban leader had concealed his radical intentions during his revolutionary war while claiming to be a democrat.

Trudeau was not reunited with Castro until 1991, when he first journeyed back to Havana. Accompanied by his three sons, the former prime minister went snorkelling with the Cuban leader and the two men quickly rekindled their friendship. Their advancing age had the effect, especially after Castro turned 70, of accentuating their essentially philosophical natures and thus of orienting their conversations towards the personal rather than the political. Trudeau would enjoy three more visits as Castro's guest before his failing health curbed his ability to travel in the late 1990s.

The one element in the conspiracy story that accords with what is known about Canada's relationship with Cuba is that the hit was called off when it appeared that Trudeau had adopted the Americans' hard line against Castro. Yet here, too, as in so many aspects of the Cuban-Canadian story

vendetta against Castro ever abated, thus the suggestion that he, too, was still scheming against the Cuban leader in 1974 rings true.

The big wrinkle in the conspiracy story is that Pierre Trudeau and Castro did not meet face-to-face for the first time until January 1976, during Trudeau's historic state visit to Havana. There is thus virtually no chance that the reclusive and security-obsessed Castro would have come to Canada in 1974 for the funeral of a murdered Canadian prime minister he did not know personally.

Prior to 1976, in fact, Trudeau's connection to Castro was a series of near-misses. In 1948, the 29-year-old Trudeau embarked on a year-long spiritual quest that took him to Asia via eastern Europe and the Middle East. One of his last stops was Cuba. He ventured to the island to cut sugarcane — a back-breaking task he wanted to confront as a personal challenge. Later, when he was planning his 1976 state visit,

Trudeau's first direct contact with Fidel Castro took the form of a thank-you letter. On October 17, 1970, Pierre Laporte's body was found in the trunk of a car, turning the unpredictable threats of the FLQ into a case of cold-blooded murder. Seeking to prevent the killing of a second hostage, James Cross, the federal government engaged the FLQ in a secret negotiation. Allowing the kidnapers safe transit out of Canada was a concession even Pierre Trudeau was prepared to make, though not publicly and certainly not on a basis that would include Laporte's murderers. Fidel Castro put himself at Canada's disposal and agreed to provide sanctuary in Cuba for Cross's kidnapers and their families. "Dear Mr. Prime Minister," Trudeau wrote Castro a few days after the FLQ members arrived in Havana, "On behalf of the Government of Canada I wish to express to you our sincere thanks for the co-operation extended by your government in the arrangements leading to the safe release of

in these years, there was great irony. Starting in 1974, in the same spirit of détente that had taken Nixon to the U.S.S.R. and China, Henry Kissinger embarked on secret talks with the Cubans in order to normalize diplomatic relations. The talks petered out in February 1976, a month after Trudeau's visit, and ultimately came to nothing.

But the important point is that, far from believing he was crossing the Americans in meeting Fidel Castro, Trudeau went to Havana with the blessing of the U.S. State Department, which understood the advantages of having a loyal NATO ally at Castro's dinner table.

Far from imagining Trudeau as a fellow traveller circa 1975, the wonder is that Castro did not think of him as an American proxy.

Robert Wright is the author of the national bestseller *Three Nights in Havana: Pierre Trudeau, Fidel Castro and the Cold War World* (HarperCollins, 2007).