The Untold Story of the U.S. and Cuba's Middleman

New documents show how hard Switzerland worked to keep the Cold War from turning hot.

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On the day the United States and Cuba restored full diplomatic ties after a half-century of acrimony, the scene at the newly opened Cuban Embassy in Washington was euphoric. A boisterous band played the Cuban national anthem as a three-man honor guard marched onto the front lawn and mounted the island nation's flag. Five hundred dignitaries, including senior U.S. diplomats, a large visiting Cuban delegation, and U.S. lawmakers filled the nearly century-old mansion. Even Hollywood B-lister Danny Glover made an appearance.

But on that same day in mid-July, less than two miles away, another historic milestone occurred without a single reporter or media photographer to document it. In silence, the Swiss ambassador to the United States, Martin Dahinden, took out a screwdriver and removed a small golden plate from the Swiss Embassy that identified the Swiss government as the "protecting power" of Cuban interests in the United States.

With a few turns of the screw, Switzerland was out of a job after 54 years of playing the middleman between Havana and Washington — the longest stretch of time that the Swiss government, and perhaps any government in history, has represented the interests of a foreign power in another country. Due to the resumption of diplomatic ties, Cuba and the United States no longer need Switzerland to communicate with each other, ending an assignment the Swiss formally accepted in 1961 when President Dwight Eisenhower cut off ties with Fidel Castro's communist regime.

Lost in the fanfare surrounding the July 20 opening of the embassies in Havana and Washington was the unusually outsized role that Switzerland played between the longtime adversaries. Now, in a new set of documents provided to Foreign Policy by the Swiss government, historians are getting a fresh look at the Central European government's nail-biting role in everything from the Cuban missile crisis to the mass exodus of Cuban refugees to the United States in the 1960s and '70s.

"This is a rich and relatively untold story of a government that dedicated itself to pushing diplomacy and engagement between Washington and Havana, even during the most antagonistic of times," said Peter Kornbluh, a historian and co-author of *Back Channel to Cuba*, an exhaustive book on the secret negotiations between the United States and Cuba during the Cold War.

Typically, the role of a "protecting power" like Switzerland is fairly mundane, filled with processing passport and visa documents, relaying diplomatic notes, and looking after the citizens of the relevant country. But during the dark days of the Cold War, Swiss archives show, a generation of diplomats cultivated exceptionally close relationships with Castro and senior U.S. officials and helped de-escalate a conflict that nearly triggered World War III.

The very existence of the U.S. Embassy in Cuba — a seven-story building on Havana's seaside Malecón boulevard — owes a massive debt to its former Swiss caretakers.

According to Swiss records, the Cuban government attempted to nationalize the U.S. Embassy in 1964 and convert it into the Cuban Ministry of Fishing. If not for the stubborn resistance of the former Swiss ambassador to Havana, Emil Stadelhofer, the United States may have permanently lost ownership of the imposing seaside edifice.

"It took a lot of courage, but for Stadelhofer, Cuba was the role of his life," Dahinden, the current Swiss ambassador to the United States, told Foreign Policy.

The tense standoff was set in motion on Feb. 2, 1964, when the U.S. Coast Guard arrested four Cuban fishing vessels and detained their crews. In response, Cuba cut off the water supply to the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay and made moves to occupy and confiscate the U.S. Embassy building in Havana. According to Swiss archives, that's when Stadelhofer intervened personally. He barred the embassy door shut and declared that "this was diplomatic property and that the Vienna Convention would be violated only over his body." He warned the Cubans that Switzerland would consider this "the most unfriendly and severest act."

"Stadelhofer drew a red line. Without him being in the right place at the right time, things may have been different," said Dahinden. After the tense standoff, the authorities backed off, and the incident marked the last time Cuba tried to nationalize the U.S. Embassy.

"What strikes me as most interesting and important is that the Swiss played a far more important role than being a caretaker, or 'protecting power,'" said Kornbluh, after reviewing the Swiss documents. "They became a key player and trusted interlocutor in ongoing efforts to bridge the Cold War gap and bring Washington and Havana closer together."

Beyond mountain ranges, money-laundering, and instant hot chocolate mix, Americans typically associate Switzerland with its implacable neutrality: a distinction that is at times regarded as refreshing and principled or cowardly and bloodless. But for a country populated by French, German, Italian, and Romansh speakers — and sandwiched between the imperial strongholds of Europe — Switzerland's neutrality guaranteed its survival during a chaotic 20th century.

With the country neutral during both world wars, Switzerland's experience in representing foreign countries ballooned during World War II as it accepted more than 200 mandates from belligerent parties needing to communicate with sworn enemies.

When the Eisenhower administration first proposed, in 1960, that Switzerland represent the United States in Cuba, it caught the Swiss off guard, according to government documents, "especially given the small size of the Swiss diplomatic mission compared with the staff of other countries such as the United Kingdom." But the government's long-standing experience as a protecting power of foreign governments, dating back to the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War, made it an attractive candidate.

After Switzerland agreed to represent the United States, the first priority of Swiss diplomats on the Caribbean island was to educate Castro's new revolutionary government on the international laws governing a protecting-power relationship — and add staff as quickly as possible. "Nine Swiss personnel were dispatched immediately to replace the 60 or so U.S. officials," according to Swiss records.

The Cuban missile crisis, in particular, was a proving ground for Swiss diplomats — and a crucial example of how Washington relied on Stadelhofer's close ties to Castro.

During his time on the island, Stadelhofer nurtured a surprisingly close personal relationship with El Comandante, who was known to drop by his residence and consult with the diplomat day or night. "Stadelhofer was a man who had very direct access to Fidel Castro. They met frequently and had social contacts," said Dahinden. That rapport would be key as the world's two superpowers — the United States and the Soviet Union, which served as Cuba's communist patron — came closer to a nuclear war than at any other time in history.

Former *Swiss Ambassador to Cuba Emil Stadelhofer (pictured right) consults with Fidel Castro.*

In October 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy imposed a blockade on all military equipment to Cuba and demanded that the Soviet Union remove missiles detected on the island. Even after Moscow relented and removed the missiles in exchange for the removal of American ballistic missiles in Italy and Turkey, the crisis wasn't over: The United States needed to send reconnaissance planes over Cuba to verify that the arms were no longer there. But to establish a clear picture of the sites in the dark, U.S. pilots would have to deploy military flares, which could easily be mistaken for bombs and prompt a counterattack from Cuba.

According to Swiss archives, the Cubans needed to be convinced that America's air campaign was strictly for surveillance purposes. But given the CIA's botched attempt to overthrow the Castro regime in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion a year earlier, Washington had zero credibility with the Cuban government.

As a result, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk contacted the Swiss ambassador to the United States, August Lindt, with an urgent request. "If I have called you it is to ask a favor of you that only you, as the Swiss representative in charge of our interests in Cuba, can provide," said Rusk, according to an account in a memoir by Swiss diplomat Edouard Brunner. Lindt was asked to assure Castro that the reconnaissance flights were peaceful and that the military flares should not warrant a response from Cuban air defenses. After the conversation, Lindt immediately called Stadelhofer in Havana, who forwarded the message to Castro. Within an hour, Stadelhofer called Lindt back confirming that the message had been transmitted to Castro. Lindt was then able to call Rusk and assure him that no military response should be feared. On Oct. 28, the Cuban missile crisis ended with an exchange of letters between Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Reflecting on the intense flash point in his notes, Brunner noted, "and thus could be avoided, thanks to this rapidly conveyed message, an escalation of the crisis."

But that wasn't the only time the Swiss were helpful in a pinch. After the Cuban missile crisis subsided, the most pressing job of the Swiss was facilitating the safe passage of Cuban refugees to the United States. This responsibility expanded greatly in late September 1965, when Castro declared that any Cubans who desired to leave the country for Florida were free to do so by their own means. As a result, thousands of Cubans set sail from the port of Camarioca in substandard vessels that often capsized, in some cases with children on board. According to Swiss records, Stadelhofer was "moved by the drownings" and pressed for an alternative solution. Washington, also alarmed by the number of deaths at sea, authorized the Swiss to negotiate an airlift from the resort town of Varadero to Miami.

By December, the Swiss had helped secure an agreement between Havana and Washington to provide two flights each day for five days a week, enabling the departure of 3,000 to 4,000 Cubans monthly from the Varadero military airport. The arrangement held for the next seven years and became the most labor-intensive aspect of Switzerland's protecting-power mandate in Cuba. Some tasks were mundane, like interviewing each person who wanted to leave to help gain Washington's approval. Other issues were trickier, like when Cuba initially refused to let 700 Americans and their relatives in Cuba leave the country.

But by the end of the operation's run in April 1973, a massive number of Cubans had been airlifted into the United States: 260,737 in all. According to Swiss records, Stadelhofer's efforts maintaining the lift garnered the attention of the British ambassador in Cuba at the time, who confided to the Swiss: "Your ambassador is the most outstanding diplomat in Havana. He did miracles. But he is tired now. You should take him away before he has a breakdown."

Four years after the airlift, in 1977, a partial rapprochement between Washington and Havana resulted in the formal establishment of the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba. Although the Swiss flag continued to fly over the former U.S. Embassy building, American diplomats returned to Cuba, which reduced the United States' reliance on Swiss diplomacy.

Beyond Cuba, the Swiss saw their protecting-power mandates elsewhere in the world decline as open conflict between nation-states became much more infrequent. With the resumption of full diplomatic ties between the United States and Cuba on July 20 of this year, Switzerland currently has only four protecting-power mandates: It represents the United States in Iran, Georgia in Russia, Russia in Georgia, and Iran in Egypt.

Although Switzerland's diplomatic efforts between the United States and Cuba have been largely thankless over the decades, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry did express his gratitude in a July 1 speech in Vienna announcing the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Cuba. "I also want to thank the government of Switzerland," said Kerry, "for the essential role that they have played in serving as the United States' protecting power in Cuba for more than 50 years."

In Washington, where embassy parties and receptions celebrating far less significant milestones are ubiquitous, Switzerland's modesty stands out. On the day its protecting-power mandate ended, four Swiss colleagues simply stood outside the Swiss Embassy and watched the ambassador remove the Cuban Interests Section sign from the building. "The Swiss media were interested in having an event, but we decided against it," said Dahinden. "We did it amongst ourselves. Four or five people."

A photograph from the occasion screams "anticlimactic" in a way that words can't convey. But for Dahinden, that's the way it should be.

"This is very much part of our diplomatic culture in Switzerland," he said. "You're not working well when you're at the forefront. You need to work in a very discreet way."

Photo credit: Getty Images/FP Illustration. *Photo of Stadelhofer courtesy of the* Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland group.