

NEWSMAKERS

Peter Kornbluh makes career of exposing old secrets

BY ANA RADELAT

Peter Kornbluh has spent his life prying secrets from the U.S. government — and so far, he's had plenty of success.

Kornbluh is director of the Cuba Documentation Project at the National Security Archive, a Washington-based nonprofit group. For years, he's specialized in the U.S. relationship with Latin America — especially Cuba, Chile and Nicaragua.

Much of Kornbluh's research is done by ferreting out state secrets, usually through Freedom of Information Act requests.

"I FOIA all the time. That's what I spend all my time doing," Kornbluh told *CubaNews* in a recent interview.

His tenacity usually pays off.

In 2000, he wrested once-classified sections of a report commissioned by President Kennedy on the botched paramilitary 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. The documents show that the commission members who wrote the report — a panel that included Gen. Maxwell Taylor, former Attorney General Robert Kennedy and former intelligence chief Allen Foster Dulles — were highly critical of the operation to overthrow Fidel Castro.

They determined that planning the Bay of Pigs invasion as a covert CIA operation should have been recognized as a mistake as early as November 1960, five months before it actually took place.

Kornbluh has also turned up key documents and tapes that reveal Fidel Castro's complicated relationship with JFK — as well as attempts to set up clandestine meetings and secret efforts at rapprochement.

NOT THE NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

Unfortunately, the National Security Archive is frequently confused with the top-secret National Security Agency, which has a vastly different objective. That's why Kornbluh prefers not to use the abbreviation NSA to describe where he works.

"Sometimes in Latin America, people hear our name and think we're the CIA library or a member of the national security bureaucracy," he said, "but we're certainly not that."

The National Security Archive was founded in 1985 by former *Washington Post* reporter Scott Armstrong. Kornbluh, 51, joined the institution a year later.

"Armstrong wanted to create an institutional memory in Washington," Kornbluh said. "Journalists and politicians can come here and have declassified documents at their fingertips."

The archive employs some 25 people and is headquartered at George Washington University — which happens to be exactly where Kornbluh was born — though it receives no funding from that institution.

Rather, it relies on financial support from foundations and a variety of media-related in-

stitutions that advocate access to public information. The archive also derives income from the sale of digitized subscriptions to its document collections.

"We go around the world to get the full picture from various archives," Kornbluh told us. "There was a period of time after the collapse of the USSR where it was possible to get access to Soviet archives, and in the former Soviet-bloc countries as well. But as you get into more recent times, it's harder, of course."

as the historical foundation for a 40th anniversary conference in Havana on the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

In 1988, he obtained a storage list of thousands of documents relevant to the history of that crisis. Those included documents pertaining to a U.S. sabotage campaign known as Operation Mongoose, secret letters between Kennedy and former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev that ended the crisis in fall of 1962. The list indicated where in the State



Peter Kornbluh visits Havana during a 1999 mission to study US-Cuba counter-narcotics collaboration.

In 1997, on the 30th anniversary of Che Guevara's death, Kornbluh released a selection of key CIA, State Department and Pentagon documents relating to the guerrilla leader's 1967 assassination in Bolivia.

And in 2001, he organized a 40th anniversary conference on the Bay of Pigs in Havana. Several former CIA agents attended the reunion, prompting Kornbluh to remark that "history can become a common meeting ground for even the worst of enemies."

FREQUENT VISITOR TO CUBA

To Kornbluh, U.S. and Cuban history has been long entwined, usually painfully.

"In the 1800s, there were two efforts by the United States to annex Cuba," he said. "It's a country whose historical weight in the region dramatically exceeds its geographic size."

Kornbluh, who's been to Cuba more than 25 times, grew up in Ann Arbor, Mich., where both his parents were professors in labor relations. He earned his undergraduate degree in Latin American studies at Brandeis University, and in 1979 returned to Washington, where he got a master's degree in international relations from GWU.

Some of Kornbluh's early research served

Department the files could be found.

Kornbluh's group used that list to file dozens of FOIAs for more than 10,000 pages of still-secret records. Eventually all the documents were released, after the archive went to court to force the CIA to declassify records that the agency declared could still be "blueprints" for future operations against Cuba.

FOIA PROCESS REQUIRES LOTS OF PATIENCE

Kornbluh has also discovered secret plans for "beisbol diplomacy" in 1975.

Hopes for a game between Cuban and American players were fostered by former baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn and several U.S. officials. One supporter, former assistant secretary of state William Rogers, argued to his boss, Henry Kissinger, that a bilateral baseball game might be as successful as the "ping pong" diplomacy that opened the door to China. But Kissinger nixed the plan.

"I did have a major coup 10 years ago, when I got the inspector general's secret report on the Bay of Pigs declassified, and we got a huge amount of press on that," he said.

Kornbluh described the National Security Archive as "the nation's leading nonprofit research facility specializing in the declassifica-

tion of U.S. documents, and the leading international proponent of FOIA laws and access to information.”

Kornbluh said response time varies from one agency to the next. “The CIA takes a whole lot longer to respond than the Federal Aviation Administration,” he quipped. “It’s a multi-year process. I often have to wait seven to nine years just from the State Department.”

He added: “I’ve had discussions with Cuban officials about getting greater access to their archives, not only for me but for their own citizens as well.”

And the scholar continues to dig.

In May, he released documents describing new links between Cuban exile Luis Posada Carriles and the 1976 bombing of a Cubana

Miami, a Democratic Party-controlled Congress and an evolving post-Castro era in Cuba may provide the international and domestic circumstances to move forward toward more normal interaction,” he said.

BOOK TO CHRONICLE US-CUBA TIES SINCE 1959

Kornbluh is currently working on a book marking the 50th anniversary of the Castro era, tentatively to be called “The United States and Cuba: 50 Years of Relations with the Cuban Revolution.”

“Since the 50th anniversary of the revolution will become a focal point for debate over its legacy as well as over the direction of U.S. policy, we are compiling a major indexed col-

list in Latin American politics at American University, Kornbluh said he hopes the book “will put that history under one cover.”

To do so, the two scholars are collecting some 1,500 records from the vaults of the U.S. government and other countries that have dealt with Cuba over the years.

“If you rely only on U.S. documents, you end up with what I call informational imperialism,” he told *CubaNews*. “You have only one side of what is often a multilateral, or at least a bilateral, story. So in the case of the Bay of Pigs, you had a situation where until the Cubans started releasing a number of their documents, instead of the victor telling the story, it was basically the loser telling the story.”

“And in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, this wasn’t a one-sided affair. In addition to the United States, Russia and Cuba itself, all the other countries including Canada and Great Britain were players in one way or another. You needed to get the full picture.”

THE CIA’S FAMILY JEWELS

The National Security Archive’s latest coup was the release in June of about 700 pages of declassified CIA documents detailing illegal covert operations going back to the 1960s.

Known as the “family jewels,” the file was drawn from the memories of CIA officers who responded to inquiries from White House and congressional investigative panels in 1973.

While former CIA Director William Colby revealed in 1975 that the documents detailed assassination plots against Fidel Castro and other foreign leaders and spying on American citizens — and while congressional panels spent years amplifying the documents — they had never been released to the public.

Kornbluh said his archive filed a FOIA request for the documents 15 years ago and finally received the documents because the CIA wanted to avoid a court fight over their release. He said the secret missions detailed in the family jewels “ranged from the cockamamie to quite sinister.”

The very first case in the documents involved several failed attempts to poison Castro with special pills that were supposed to take three days to act — so that all traces of the poison would be eliminated from Fidel by the time he died.

The CIA recruited ex-FBI agent Robert Maheu, who was a top aide to billionaire Howard Hughes in Las Vegas, to approach mobster Johnny Roselli and ask the gangster to help in the plot. Several people failed in their attempts to place the pills in Castro’s food. The plan was dropped after the Bay of Pigs invasion, but other clandestine U.S. plots against Castro’s life continued.

Although the family jewel documents are revealing, Kornbluh is more concerned about what’s *not* there. The opening pages of the report — which likely discussed Castro assassination plots — are all blacked out. So are many more in the report, while other pages are heavily redacted.

“Nobody knows what’s missing,” said the patient scholar.

Leave it to Kornbluh to eventually find out. □

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— PETER KORNBLUH, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL SECURITY ARCHIVE’S CUBA DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

Airlines flight that killed 73 people. Kornbluh said the information in the documents pressured U.S. authorities to arrest Posada, who was later cleared of charges of lying to U.S. immigration officials.

Yet Kornbluh believes the end of the Bush administration will lead to a whole re-examination of the relationship between Washington and Havana.

“A new U.S. president, changing opinion in

lection of declassified documents spanning the last five decades,” he said.

Although the history of U.S.-Cuba relations “is dominated by examples of U.S. aggression,” he said, there’s also an “untold story” of efforts at promoting dialogue and negotiation between the two. He said those efforts began with Kennedy and continued through the two terms of the Clinton administration.

Working with William LeoGrande, a special-

Cuba seeks to toss Dell out the Window

Cuban authorities are preparing to quit the Windows operating system and use the GNU/Linux free software instead, thus avoiding any sanctions for using Windows by its owner, Microsoft Corp.

According to a Sept. 15 report in *Cubanow*, over 3,800 technicians have been trained in Linux. In Ciego de Avila province alone, 600 people are taking intensive four-month courses to learn how to use Linux and replace the Windows operating system.

The move is apparently aimed at breaking Cuba’s dependence on programs that are under the control of U.S. companies.

It also anticipates any claims by the patent’s owners for the use of this system in Cuba, which cannot be paid because of the U.S. embargo, among other reasons.

Linux was developed in 1991 as an alternative to the Windows program created by Microsoft. It provides users with the freedom to access its source codes and to modify them, thus enhancing the privacy of information. And it’s all free of charge.

“Among other advantages, it allows compatibility with the equipment we have in the

country and its immunity to the majority of the computer viruses,” said *Cubanow*.

As Cuba prepares to dump Windows, one of the world’s top computer makers appears to be in a Cuba-related pickle of its own.

A group of Brazilian physicists has launched a campaign among the country’s academic community to boycott the Brazilian subsidiary of PC maker Dell. The campaign follows Dell’s demand that its products not be handed over to citizens of five countries including Cuba.

According to the daily paper *Folha de São Paulo*, Brazilian nuclear physicist Paulo Gomes of Federal Fluminense University tried to purchase two computers for his laboratory in mid-September. He was asked to sign a document vowing not to use them in the production of weapons of mass destruction and not to hand them over to citizens of countries hostile to the United States.

“We will not transfer, export or re-export, directly or indirectly, any product(s) acquired from Dell to Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, or any nationals thereof, or to

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