

Ambassador Jefferson Caffery (1886-1974): Latin American Posts

Introduction Life Before Ambassador El Salvador (1926-28) Colombia (1928-1933)

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Cuba (1934-37)

From July 11, 1933 to December 4, 1933, while Caffery was serving as Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs in the place of Sumner Welles, Welles was serving as Ambassador to Cuba under direct orders from President Roosevelt (Office of Historian). According to Phillip Dur, Caffery's assignment as Assistant Secretary of State was "to organize the diplomatic boycott of Cuba" and Welles' assignment was to carry out its implementation ("Ambassador" 15). Previous to Welles' arrival, Cuba was in a state of civil war with the then-Cuban President Gerardo Machado using oppressive military force against his opponents causing complete chaos in the region (Dur "Highlights" 367). President

Machado was eventually replaced on September 10, 1933, with Dr. Ramon “Grau” San Martin with whom Welles struggled to form cordial relationships with and ultimately hindered Welles’ ability at achieving successful diplomacy in the region (Dur “Highlights” 368; Dur “Ambassador” 16). Considering Grau was not any better than Machado, President Roosevelt had ordered Caffery and Welles to get rid of Grau in order to restore whatever potential was left towards achieving a more democratic state in Cuba (Dur “Ambassador” 16).

Unlike Caffery, Welles made enemies out of the only people in Cuba that could have possibly helped Welles successfully accomplish the mission President Roosevelt assigned to him of getting rid of Grau (Dur “Ambassador” 16). Fulgencio Batista was the commander of the Cuban army in addition to the Cuban Chief of Staff and therefore was one of the most important people Welles should have made a point to befriend, but Welles did just the opposite (Dur “Highlights” 372). According to Phillip Dur, Welles escalated the situation to the extent that Batista and Welles eventually refused to communicate with each other, with Welles later admitting that he ruined his relationship with the “only individual in Cuba...who represents authority” (“Ambassador” 16). This is where Caffery and Welles completely differed in their diplomatic abilities; Caffery consistently employed the idea that it was essential for diplomats to form working relationships with the leaders of the countries they represented, whereas Welles let his emotions and anger get the best of him. Again, as Caffery always expressed, “The value of diplomacy, both in tangible accomplishments and in good will, is very largely a matter of person contact and human relationships, and results are obtained because of mutual understanding fostered by our officers in their out-of-office association with the citizens of the country wherein they are stationed” (Figures 1-4) (Ambassador Jefferson Caffery to United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt).

C O P Y

Habana, March 8, 1935.

Dear Mr. President:

I have heard that some Chiefs of Mission have been giving you their ideas about the Foreign Service. Therefore, I venture to give you some of my own. I will immodestly say that I can speak with authority, because I believe that in the last twenty-four years (I have been twenty-four years in the Foreign Service) no Chief of Mission, either career or non-career, has done as much for protection and assistance of American interests abroad as I have. I claim that possibly I have helped them in one way or another in a figure running into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

I, personally, know Foreign Service officers who are very efficiently doing their part; that is, rendering efficient service in helping to furnish legitimate protection to the interests of the United States abroad and at the same time cultivating on the part of foreign peoples

The President,
The White House.

Figure 1

- 2 -

peoples confidence in the United States Government and people, and good will toward them. The efficiency of a Foreign Service officer is based on three things: intelligence, personality, and prestige. By prestige I mean the respect and esteem in which the officer is held by the officials and people of the country in which he is stationed. An officer is not efficient if he lacks one of these qualities. Intelligence and personality explain themselves, prestige is a bit more elusive: whether we like it or not, this prestige is based in good part on externals; that is, the way the officer and his family live, et cetera. Now this may be all wrong, but it is a hard, cold fact that in the majority of countries other than our own, an officer's mode of living, habits, and associations are subject to keen and not always friendly scrutiny, and things which to us may seem trivial and unimportant weigh heavily in the foreigner's scale of values. I know officers in the Foreign Service now who are simply not making the grade, that is, they are of little use to the Missions they serve because their salaries are so small (and they have no independent income) that they cannot get around as much as they should in cities where they are located, or know people there in

the

Figure 2

- 3 -

the manner they should know them. I point this out merely because I believe that fact is being lost sight of (or people are afraid to say so) at this juncture. I can say this all the more freely because I never have had a large personal income myself. I have always known that it behooved me to make the best showing on what I had; otherwise I had much better quit and go home.

I believe that few people in the United States appreciate how much can be done in dollars and cents, and I mean big dollars and cents, by an efficient Chief of Mission; but no matter how efficient the Chief is, unless he has an adequate staff, his own efforts will, obviously, be hampered. (I have a good staff here; have picked them myself and have no complaint, personally, on the score.)

Strangely enough, this is not a plea for larger salaries; salaries at present are high enough. However, I do highly approve of an expansion wherever possible of the present system of rent, heat, light allowances, et cetera. (This, however, is merely by the way.)

The point I want to make is simply this: that nothing is more mistaken than the idea which, I hear, prevails in some quarters that you can get satisfactory results out of Foreign Service officers who work efficiently in the office and then, outside, to all intents and purposes, pass out

of

Figure 3

- 4 -

of circulation. That is nonsense. The value of diplomacy, both in tangible accomplishments and in good will, is very largely a matter of personal contact and human relationships, and results are obtained because of mutual understanding fostered by our officers in their out-of-office association with the citizens of the country wherein they are stationed: were it not for this all-important factor of the human equation, our foreign relations could almost be carried on by note, cable, and telephone from Washington. The Foreign Service officer who cannot or does not do his part outside the office (and most of the really worthwhile work is done outside of the office -- by worthwhile work, I mean, on the one hand, direct results in thousands and millions of dollars to American interests and, on the other, results in the way of confidence and good will on the part of foreign peoples --) is little good to me. I take this Foreign Service business seriously; I know that a lot can be done to create work and improve business conditions in the United States of America by efficient work abroad; and I believe that an efficient Service is worth saving and fighting for.

Faithfully yours,

JEFFERSON CAFFERY.

Figure 4

In September of 1933, just shortly after Cuban President Grau was elected, the White House laid out two criteria that had to be met in order for the United States to formally recognize the newly elected Cuban leader: 1) "The Cuban government must 'represent

the will of the people” and 2) The Cuban government must be “capable of maintaining law and order” (Dur “Highlights” 369). Grau’s administration did neither, and Welles’ presence in Cuba did nothing whatsoever to better the situation.

Although Sumner Welles was successful in some aspects while in Cuba, he ultimately gave up his position when he was unable to continue producing successful results in overthrowing Grau (Dur and Gilcrease 282). Welles wrote the White House on November 13, 1933 requesting to return home due to “the increasingly complicated problems presented as the result of recent developments here” (Dur and Gilcrease 281). In this letter to the White House, Welles “suggested that, if there were to be a change of policy, Caffery should replace him as ‘special representative’ and that this ‘might be preferable in any event’” (Dur and Gilcrease 282). Sumner Welles was President Roosevelt’s right hand man when it came to Latin American affairs, in addition to being a close family friend to the Roosevelt’s. So, for Welles to basically admit to Roosevelt that he was unsuccessful and to suggest Caffery for the “complicated” job in Cuba says a lot about Caffery’s diplomatic skill and reputation among his colleagues (Dur and Gilcrease 255).

On November 17, 1933, after receiving a letter from the newly elected Cuban President Dr. Ramon “Grau” San Martin requesting that Welles be removed from Cuba, President Roosevelt had reached his breaking point and immediately ordered Welles’ removal from Cuba the next day on November 18, 1933 (Dur “Highlights” 368). Just five days after removing Welles, President Roosevelt held a press release on November 22, 1933 stating that he was soon going to swap Welles with Caffery as Ambassador to Cuba clarifying “that has been planned for some time” (Figure 5) (FRANKLIN). Roosevelt mentioned nothing regarding Sumner Welles’ diplomatic letdowns, or any of the specifics as to why he was swapping them out, simply that this was the plan “for some time,” even though Roosevelt’s “some time” actually equated to only five days (FRANKLIN). The next day on November 23, 1933, President Roosevelt held another

press conference where he reiterated to the newly elected Cuban President that “No progress can be made until there exists in Cuba a provisional government which, through the popular support which it obtains and through the general cooperation which it enjoys, shows evidence of genuine stability” (Dur “Highlights” 369). Without this, as Roosevelt stated, the United States would not recognize Grau’s presidency. The United States was hopeful that with these reoccurring public statements, the newly elected Cuban president would choose to govern Cuba differently than his predecessor Machado, but that hope was short lived.

at the present time that we haven't yet got a provisional government that clearly has the support of the majority of the Cuban people. What can we do? We can't do anything. The matter rests.

Q You seem to have pretty good confidence that we may get a good government down there, from that statement.

THE PRESIDENT: And then the only other thing there -- the only real bit of news in that statement was that we are going to do shortly what we were planning on for some time, and that is to swap Welles and Caffery. Of course that has been planned for some time.

Q There is a big mystery here, Mr. President. We had you and Morgenthau and Hugh Johnson meeting all afternoon.

(Laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: Just between ourselves, I talked to old man Doherty about Warm Springs and also to Judge Lacy about Warm Springs, and now I am going to take a sweat bath and get back in time to see Morgenthau.

Q Is it perfectly safe for us to report, as we have been doing, that there is no change in your present policy contemplated?

THE PRESIDENT: I think you are pretty safe in doing that.

Q Who is Judge Lacy? Is he from New York?

to do
een

At the end of 1933, President Roosevelt sent Caffery to Cuba with the rank of "special representative" to the President and gave him direct orders to "Get rid of Grau...but no Marines!" (Dur "Highlights" 370). See, during the Spanish-American War 1898, the

United States took control over Cuba in order to protect the American military assets located there (“Spanish-American War”; U.S. Department of State). In 1901, three years after the war had ended, the United States provided Cuba with 8 requirements that they had to agree to abide to in order for the United States to release control over Cuba; this treaty was called The Platt Amendment (U.S. Department of State). To get an idea of what some of these requirements looked like, one of them stated that the United States had a right to intervene in the nation’s affairs whenever it deemed it necessary if it would 1) “defend Cuban independence” and/or 2) help “maintain ‘a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty’” (U.S. Department of State). The United States had intervened in Cuba before using the Platt Amendment as its justification, but President Roosevelt refused to use military force against the multiple Cuban regimes that governed Cuba throughout Caffery’s years as Ambassador there (Dur “Ambassador” 15).

On December 18, 1933, two weeks after Welles returned to the United States from Cuba, Caffery arrived in Havana and was greeted by crowds of over 200 people who were cheering and welcoming him into the country (Dur “Highlights” 370). Upon Caffery’s arrival, Cuba was still extremely unstable from the effects of Machado’s presidency, and Grau’s administration was not helping. The streets were filled with protests, gunfire, crime, and explosions, but Caffery didn’t mind the “madhouse,” as Phillip Dur describes it, with Caffery even referring to it as “thrilling” (“Highlights” 370-71). “As I unfortunately remarked that they hadn’t bothered me much,” Caffery ironically explained, “they exploded a giant one under my room at the hotel the next night, destroying what was left of Machado’s statue” (Dur “Highlights” 371). On Caffery’s first night in Cuba, he documented over one hundred explosions from his hotel room (Dur “Highlights” 371).

By the beginning of 1934, just a couple of weeks after Caffery’s arrival, Cuba’s unrest escalated to the point that Caffery began to question Roosevelt’s refusal to use military

intervention (Dur “Highlights” 371). Again, Caffery had the ability to solve conflicts with rationale and reasonable negotiation, unlike other diplomats who immediately resorted to force. Therefore, for Caffery to consider American military intervention truly showcased the dire state of Cuba at the time. Although the threat of military intervention would have been the easy way out, Caffery began to consider alternative options.

Caffery realized that the only reason why Grau was able to maintain power was because his presidency was reinforced by the support of the Cuban military (Dur “Highlights” 372).

With this new discovery, Caffery thought it important to meet with Cuban Chief of Staff and commander of the Cuban military, Fulgencio Batista, in order to discuss options towards his mission of overthrowing Grau (Dur “Highlights” 372). Unlike Welles who made an enemy out of Fulgencio Batista, Caffery turned to Batista hoping that with Batista on his side overthrowing Grau would become an accomplishable task. Caffery knew, unlike Welles, that in order to get things done, the United States had to work together with Cuban officials. Caffery worked hard at earning Batista’s respect and was able to eventually form a relationship and friendship with Batista (Dur “Highlights” 372). Upon meeting with Batista, Caffery gave him one condition to follow if he ever wanted to have a relationship with the United States and that was to help him get rid of Grau (Dur “Highlights” 372). As a result of Caffery’s relationship with Batista, Batista agreed to arrange a meeting with he, Caffery, and Grau, on January 13, 1933, and it was during this meeting where Batista and Caffery were successful in persuading Grau to resign (Dur “Highlights” 372). Caffery’s plan to get Batista on his side, unlike Welles, was a complete success and was the ultimate reason Caffery was able to succeed and Welles was not. Caffery successfully accomplished the special mission President Roosevelt assigned to him; Caffery got rid of Grau through reason and rationale and most importantly with “No marines!”

With Grau officially gone, Caffery met with Batista to present options as to who the

United States would want to see succeed Grau (Dur “Highlights” 373). Batista presented Caffery with the idea of a “coalition government broadly representative of all democratic parties, under the presidency of Colonel Carlos Mendieta y Montefur” (Dur “Highlights” 373). Caffery liked the idea of replacing Grau with Mendieta, as did Welles, but Caffery needed President Roosevelt’s approval before making any final decisions. On January 23, 1934, ten days after Grau resigned, Roosevelt instructed Caffery “to extend immediately to the Government of Cuba on behalf of the United States a formal and cordial recognition” of Colonel Mendieta for Cuban president, and Caffery did (Dur “Highlights” 373). Now that the United States had officially recognized a Cuban president, Caffery was presented with his credentials on February 23, 1934, officially becoming United States Ambassador to Cuba (Office of Historian).

With Mendieta now governing Cuba, Caffery made it his goal to pursue an amiable relationship with the newly elected President and to get Cuba to a somewhat stable state, politically and economically. Caffery told Mendieta, “It will be my aim during my period of residence near Your Excellency’s Government to find practical methods for improving the country’s economic status, thereby to bring better conditions for many in this Republic” (Dur “Highlights” 374). The same week of Mendieta’s recognition in January of 1934, Caffery signed a contract with the Cuban Foreign Minister, which would allow the United States to loan two million dollars worth of farm produce to the Cuban government through the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (Dur “Highlights” 374). Caffery became an agent of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation in 1933, which was an organization that distributed American grown produce to impoverished or economically struggling countries abroad (Dur “Highlights” 374). The Federal Surplus Relief Corporation not only helped the countries receiving the imports, but also helped the local American farmers; a win-win from a diplomatic standpoint. Additionally in 1934, President Roosevelt and Cuban President Mendieta agreed to finally nullify the Platt Amendment, both agreeing to fully restore Cuban autonomy due in part to Roosevelt’s extension of his Good Neighbor policy to Latin American countries (Our

Documents).

In 1933, it was estimated that the United States had invested nearly one billion dollars in Cuba, mostly from sugar exports, making Cuba an important trade partner to the United States (Dur “Highlights” 371-72). In 1934, Caffery pushed the passage of the Jones-Costigan Act of 1934, which designated 28% of American sugar imports to Cuba (Dur “Highlights” 374). As a result, the cost of sugar rose from 0.86 cents per pound to 1.5 cents per pound in just four months. Seven months later that price rose to 2.0 cents per pound and continued to increase (Dur “Highlights” 375). The profit margins for Cuba increased from 21 million dollars to 36 million dollars in just under a year, greatly benefiting the Cuban economy, just as Caffery had promised Mendieta the year before (Dur “Highlights” 375). Caffery also worked diligently to persuade the American businessmen in Cuba to raise the agricultural worker’s wages in Cuba (Dur “Highlights” 375). Caffery pleaded, “It is my earnest hope that American firms here in Cuba will take it upon themselves to lead the way to paying as high wages as possible,” and they listened, as most people did when Caffery spoke (Dur “Ambassador” 19). Globally, unskilled workers’ wages averaged anywhere from 10 to 20 cents per day; Caffery successfully advocated for worker’s wages in Cuba to be set to nearly 80 cents per day, a 400% increase (Dur “Highlights” 375). Caffery was the one solely responsible for the complete turnaround of the Cuban economy and human rights standards. Caffery paved the way for future legislation in Cuba that would cover “minimum wages, workmen’s compensation, vacations with pay, and child labor,” spreading American values and ideals abroad (Dur “Ambassador” 19). While Caffery was able to successfully accomplish his goals of getting Cuba to a stable position economically, political stability was still to be accomplished.

Cuban President Mendieta was not elected by the people of Cuba, but rather appointed through the influence of the United States. As a result, by 1935 the Mendieta administration had become “the narrowest, most unpopular clique that has ever

governed Cuba” (Dur “Highlights” 376). Considering Caffery and Batista were the ones who put Mendieta in power, Mendieta’s oppositionists along with Grau’s supporters targeted Caffery to the extent that Caffery began referring to them as his “killers” (Dur “Highlights” 376). As Philip Dur points out, at a time when ambassadors were not common targets for assassination attempts, Caffery surely became one and narrowly escaped with his life on numerous occasions (“Highlights” 376).

The first assassination attempt on Caffery’s life occurred on May 27, 1934, as reported by *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, when Caffery’s bodyguard was shot multiple times outside of Caffery’s residence in an attempt that was meant to take out Caffery.

According to *The Times-Picayune*, four men with “sawed-off” shotguns fired rounds at the door of Caffery’s residence at the exact time Caffery normally left to go to the yacht club. Caffery had left earlier than usual that day, which was something he apparently never did (The Associated Press). *The Times-Picayune* reported that Cuban President Mendieta ordered the entire police force to track down the assailants but they were never found. Batista expressed his condolences stating how he was “un-expressably sorry to hear of the attempt on Ambassador Caffery’s life, which resulted in the wounding of a soldier...I regret the incident as a Cuban and as chief of the army, and cannot help but think fatal consequences might be had for Cuba if the attempt had been successful” (The Associated Press). Caffery’s bodyguard’s leg was blown off during the attack, and according to *The Times-Picayune*, he was pronounced “near death.” Upon hearing the news of the attempt while at the yacht club, Caffery immediately made way to the hospital to visit his wounded guard (The Associated Press). It is unknown as to whether or not the guard survived the incident (The Associated Press).

The second assassination attempt occurred a little over a year later on October 31, 1935 when a communist member by the name of Vilar planned to assassinate Caffery by shooting numerous rounds into Caffery’s car (Dur “Highlights” 376). Thankfully though, the Cuban government found out about Vilar’s plans before he was able to carry

them out, and therefore they were able to arrest Vilar before he was able to carry out any of his plans (Dur “Highlights” 376). Sumner Welles sent a letter to Caffery on November 4, 1935 stating, “With regard to your letter No. 248 informing me of the arrest of Vilar, I am frankly disquieted by the information contained therein. I had seen some short report in the papers here two days ago of the discovery of some plot to assassinate you and others in Cuba, but I had not paid very much attention to it thinking it was one of the many rumors of that kind which have come out periodically” (Figure 6). Despite the fact that Caffery’s life was constantly in danger during his last few years in Cuba, he continued to serve the Cuban people without fear. When presented with Caffery’s circumstances, many diplomats would have requested to return home to the United States, but not Caffery. Caffery remained persistent and dedicated to his duties as Ambassador, always remembering his purpose and never losing sight of why he was there in the first place. The fact that Caffery had a target on his back only showed that he must have been doing something right.

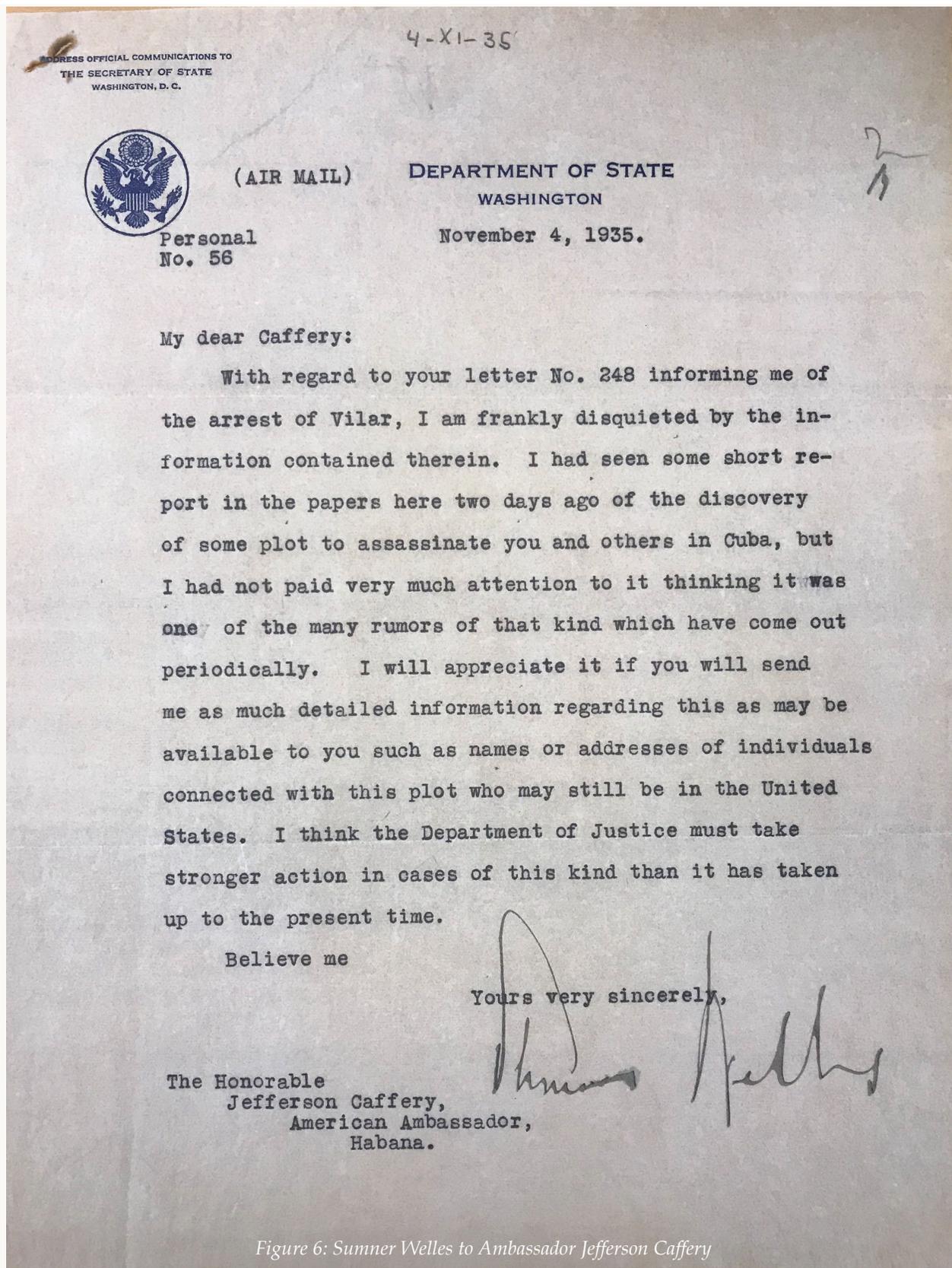


Figure 6: Sumner Welles to Ambassador Jefferson Caffery

As a result of the assassination attempts, Batista assigned four to five soldiers to accompany Caffery everywhere he went for the remaining two years of his ambassadorship (Dur "Ambassador" 17). According to Phillip Dur, Mendieta's

presidency began to resemble a dictatorship more and more as the years went on, and his time as president eventually came to an end when Miguel Mariana Gomez was elected as president on January 10, 1936, only to be impeached just seven months later (“Highlights” 378).

Caffery was the most influential and successful United States Ambassador to ever be assigned to Cuba. Caffery successfully aided in transforming Cuba from a state of economic despair to a state of economic prosperity throughout the years and decades to come. By 1959, Cuba had become the highest rated Latin American country on standards of living, which was all due to Caffery’s diplomacy in the region throughout his time there (Dur “Highlights” 375-76). As Philip Dur wrote, “When he looked back on his career, Caffery boasted that he had both defended the economic interests of the United States and furthered social reform in the countries of his assignment” (“Ambassador” 19). Caffery left his post as Ambassador to Cuba on March 9, 1937, but not before making sure to send President Roosevelt a new panama hat, and The Apostolic Delegate in Washington D.C. Amletto Cicognani some new, freshly cut alligator slippers (Figures 7-8)(Office of Historian; Ambassador Jefferson Caffery to President Franklin D. Roosevelt; Ambassador Jefferson Caffery to Amletto Cicognani). As *The Times-Picayune* pointed out in an article on July 1, 1937, “Despite the fact that his service was during one of the most trying periods in the history of the island, the feeling in Cuba toward the United States never was more cordial than at present” (The Times-Picayune, Washington Bureau).

6-I-37

ROOSEVELT, President Franklin D.

Habana, January 6, 1937.

Dear Mr. President:

Some time ago during the campaign, the press reported that you had worn out your Panama hat waving to the crowds. I have just received some new ones, which I had specially made in Colombia, and trust that you will accept a new one in place of the old one as a Christmas remembrance.

Respectfully yours,

(JC)

P.S. The hat will go forward in a separate package as soon as possible.

J.C.

The President,

The White House,

Washington, D. C.

Figure 7: Letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt from Ambassador Jefferson Caffery

6-I-37

CICOGNANI, Amletto (Apos. Del. Wash.)

Habana, January 6, 1937.

Excellency:

I have recently had an alligator skin
cut up into some slippers and am sending you
a pair of them as a Christmas remembrance.

With all good wishes,

Sincerely yours,
(JC)

P.S. The slippers will go forward in a
separate package as soon as possible.

J.C.

His Excellency
Amletto Cicognani,
The Apostolic Delegate,
Washington, D. C.

JC:CBS

Figure 8: Letter to Amletto Cicognani from Ambassador Jefferson Caffery

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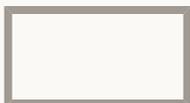
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