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 fidel-castro-lisa-howard.jpg

THE FRIDAY COVER

The Hot American Reporter Who Banged Fidel Castro

The untold story of how Lisa Howard's intimate diplomacy with Cuba's revolutionary leader changed the course of the Cold War.

Was she CIA?

By PETER KORNBLUH

| Illustration by Cristiana Couceiro

Lisa Howard had been waiting for more than two hours in a suite of the Hotel Riviera, enough time to bathe, dress and apply makeup, then take it all off to get ready for bed when she thought he wasn't coming. But at 11:30 p.m. on that night in Havana—February 2, 1964—Howard, an American correspondent with ABC News, finally heard a knock at the door. She opened it and saw the man she had been waiting for: Fidel Castro, the 37-year-old leader of the Cuban revolution and one of America's leading Cold War antagonists.

"You may be the prime minister, but I'm a very important journalist. How dare you keep me waiting," Howard declared with mock anger. She then invited Castro, accompanied by his top aide, René Vallejo, into her room.

Over the next few hours, they talked about everything from Marxist theory to the treatment of Cuba's political prisoners. They reminisced about President John F. Kennedy, who had been assassinated just a few months earlier. Castro told Howard about his trip to Russia the previous spring, and the "personal attention" he had received from the "brilliant" Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Howard admonished Castro for the repressive regime he was creating in Cuba. "To make an honorable revolution ... you must give up the notion of wanting to be prime minister for as long as you live." "Lisa," Castro asked, "you really think I run a police state?" "Yes," she answered. "I do."

In the early morning hours, Howard asked Vallejo to leave. Finally alone with her, Castro slipped his arms around the American journalist, and the two lay on the bed, where, as Howard recalled in her diary, Castro "kissed and caressed me ... expertly with restrained passion."

"He talked on about wanting to have me," Howard wrote, but "would not undress or go all the way." "We like each other very much," Castro told her, admitting he was having trouble finding the words to express his reluctance. "You have done much for us, you have written a lot, spoken a lot about us. But if we go to bed then it will be complicated and our relationship will be destroyed."

He told her he would see her again—"and that it would come naturally." Just before the sun rose over Havana, Castro tucked Howard in, turned out the lights and left.

Howard's trip to Havana in the winter of 1964 was pivotal in advancing one of the most unusual and consequential partnerships in the history of U.S.-Cuban relations. She became Castro's leading

American confidant, as well as his covert interlocutor with the White House—the key link in a top-secret back channel she singlehandedly established between Washington and Havana to explore the possibility of rapprochement in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis. From mid-1963 to the end of 1964, Howard secretly relayed messages from Cuba's revolutionary regime to the White House and back again; she also used her reporting skills and high-profile perch at ABC to publicly challenge the Cold War mind-set that Castro was an implacable foe of U.S. interests. Her role as peacemaker was built on a complex, little-understood personal rapport she managed to forge with Castro himself—a relationship that was political and personal, intellectual and intimate.

Today, almost no one remembers Lisa Howard. But in the early 1960s, she was one of the most famous female TV journalists in the United States—a glamorous former soap opera star who reinvented herself as a reporter and then climbed to the top of the male-monopolized world of television news. She became ABC's first female correspondent and the first woman to anchor her own network news show. Her influential role in the media empowered her efforts on Cuba, even as it worried White House officials who were the targets of her ceaseless pressure to change U.S. policy.

Polaroid photos taken with Fidel Castro's camera at his first meeting with Lisa Howard in Havana on April 21, 1963. | National Security Archive Lisa Howard Collection

In top-secret reports from the era, those officials speculated about “a physical relationship between” Howard and Castro and feared she would use her position at ABC News to break the story of Washington’s secret talks with the Cuban comandante. But both she and Castro took the secret of their intimate diplomacy to their graves. Only now, thanks to declassified official documents and, most important, Howard’s own unpublished diaries and letters, can the story finally be told of how one tenacious journalist earned the trust of the legendary leader of the Cuban revolution, and cajoled two U.S presidents into considering peaceful coexistence with him.

Lisa Howard was born Dorothy Jean Guggenheim to a middle-class Jewish family in Ohio, but she was first known to the

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world as TV's "first lady of sin"—a designation Hollywood bestowed on her for playing temptresses, murderesses and thieves in forgettable TV programs and second-rate

movies in the early 1950s. In 1957, she scored the recurring role of Louise Grimsley in the popular CBS series "The Edge of Night." But even as she gained attention in Hollywood, Howard signaled far greater ambitions. "Though a looker (5'3; 109 lbs; 35-23-35 from bust to hips)," read a cringeworthy 1953 cover story in *People Today*, "Miss Sin prefers to think of herself as the 'sensitive-intellectual type' who is 'going places.'"

The National Security Archive will be posting a selection of documents related to Lisa Howard's secret diplomacy with Cuba on Friday.

And she was. "I became more and more interested in politics and world affairs ... and less and less interested about the fate of Louise Grimsley," Howard would later recount to audiences on the lecture circuit. "I wanted to talk to people who were making news. I wanted to be there on the spot when history was being written." So, in 1960, while living in New York City with her husband, Walter Lowendahl, and two daughters, Howard abandoned her acting career, grabbed a tape recorder and began scoring exclusive radio interviews as an unpaid volunteer for the Mutual Radio Network. She earned access to major political figures, including then-Senator John F. Kennedy, former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and even President Dwight Eisenhower. But it was Howard's lengthy interview with Khrushchev in September 1960—the first the Soviet leader had granted to a reporter from the West—that caught the attention of executives at ABC News. In May 1961, ABC hired Howard, then 35, as its first-ever female correspondent; two years later, the network gave her her own show—a daily midafternoon broadcast geared toward housewives called "Lisa Howard and News with the Woman's Touch."

At a time when women in television news were typically relegated to reporting on fashion, lifestyle and the weather, Howard's was the first female face beamed into the living rooms of America offering authoritative coverage of national and international events on a daily basis. "Six changes of Puccis and six politicians in one day are par for the course for Lisa Howard," read a 1963 *McCall's Magazine* cover story about Howard that described her as "a dead-serious reporter," as well as "bright, buxom, and bumptious." In another profile that same year, *Time* magazine wrote that the pioneering female journalist "has achieved this distinction by scrambling harder than six monkeys peeling the same banana. ... Political leaders, domestic and foreign, have learned that there is no dodging Lisa Howard."

Fidel Castro was no exception.

In the early 1960s, the Cuban leader was one of the most dynamic, and for U.S. policymakers, alarming, new figures on the international political stage. The young, bearded guerrilla fighter had overthrown the U.S.-backed authoritarian regime of Cuban President Fulgencio Batista on January 1, 1959, installing a revolutionary government just 90 miles off the coast of Florida. Initially, the United States seemed impressed with Castro's charisma. But U.S. officials soured on his anti-American rhetoric and his economic outreach to the Soviet Union. In the spring of 1960, Eisenhower authorized planning for a secret CIA paramilitary intervention to roll back the Cuban revolution and install a more compliant government in Havana, cutting diplomatic relations in January 1961.

FROM STARLET TO STAR REPORTER In just a few years, Lisa Howard transformed herself from a sultry soap opera star to a leading TV journalist. “I wanted to be there on the spot where history was being written,” she later said of her metamorphosis. | National Security Archive Lisa Howard Collection; Alamy; ABC promotional; TV Guide

Kennedy inherited the covert operation, gave it the green light to proceed in April 1961 at the Bay of Pigs, and watched it explode into a major debacle when Castro’s militia defeated the CIA-led brigade in less than 72 hours. In frustration, he ordered a new program of covert operations against Cuba, known as Operation Mongoose, and a full economic blockade in early 1962—aggressive moves that persuaded Castro, who had recently declared Cuba a socialist state, to accept Soviet nuclear missiles as a deterrent to another U.S. invasion, leading to the Cuban missile crisis. For 13 days in October, the world stood on the brink of nuclear Armageddon until Kennedy offered Khrushchev a secret deal: pulling U.S. missiles out of Turkey in exchange for removal of the missiles in Cuba. With Castro furious at Khrushchev for removing the weapons without consulting

him, some Kennedy officials saw the opportunity to entice Castro back into the Western orbit; the CIA, however, was determined to continue efforts to overthrow him.

Cuba was a major news story. But with tensions running high, the embargo in place and no direct travel between the two countries, few establishment reporters could gain access to the country, let alone an interview with its fiery leader. Howard had tried and failed to obtain an interview with Castro twice in the early 1960s, and after the missile crisis she made another attempt. “Considering the present state of the world crisis,” she wrote Castro, “wouldn’t this be an ideal moment for you to speak to the American people?”

After months of her cajoling, the Cuban mission in New York finally granted Howard a visa to travel to Havana in early April 1963. Castro ignored her for several weeks as he finished negotiations with New York lawyer James Donovan for the release of U.S. prisoners in Cuban jails and prepared to take a long trip to Russia for his first summit with

Khrushchev. In a bid for his attention, Howard wrote Castro a letter after she arrived—“I beg you to say ‘YES,’” it stated in Spanish. “Give me this interview, please”—and passed it on to various interlocutors, among them Donovan, whom she beseeched to put in a good word for her. “I told [Castro] there was a beautiful blonde dish of a reporter wanting to interview him and would he give

A Note About Sourcing Peter Kornbluh first uncovered the Lisa Howard-Fidel Castro connection in the mid-1990s, when he discovered a secret file of White House contacts with Castro held by the Kennedy Presidential Library, and filed a request for its declassification. Kornbluh then tracked down Howard’s husband in New York, who donated a trove of her personal and professional papers—including photos, notes, letters and diaries—to the National Security Archive.

her some of his time,” Donovan recalled. “I went about it by whetting Castro’s natural masculine curiosity and vanity.”

Whether out of curiosity and vanity, or a sense that Howard could become a genuinely valuable channel to America, Castro relented and agreed to meet Howard at the nightclub in the Havana Riviera hotel. He arrived at midnight on April 21, and the two talked until almost 6 a.m., discussing Kennedy, Howard’s personal impressions of Khrushchev—“a sly old fox” who “would cut you off like a twig”—and what Howard deplored as “the police state apparatus” under Castro’s rule. Howard was impressed by Castro’s breadth of knowledge. “Never, never have I found a Communist interested in the sentiments of Albert Camus,” Howard later recounted in a letter. “And I certainly have not found dedicated Communists anxious to discuss the merits of our Constitution and our Bill of Rights. But Fidel enjoyed the conversation immensely.”

Castro enjoyed the conversation so much that he agreed to a formal interview—the first he had granted a U.S. television journalist since 1959. In the early hours of April 24, with Cuban Communist Party cameras rolling at the Riviera, Howard put a series of forceful questions to the Cuban comandante: When had he become a communist? Did he ask Khrushchev for the nuclear missiles? Why were hundreds of thousands of Cubans fleeing to Florida? There were lighter moments, too. Castro asked Howard whether her bright blond hair color was natural. “We don’t have to answer questions like that in my country,” she shot back. And then came the showstopper: Under what conditions might he support a rapprochement with Washington? Castro cited his successful talks with Donovan on the prisoner release as a positive step forward. A rapprochement “was possible,” he noted in halting English, “if the United States government wishes it.” Coming from one of America’s most renowned Cold War enemies, just months after a tense nuclear standoff, Castro’s interest in better relations was headline news.

Within hours of the interview, Castro flew off to Moscow—but not before he had arranged for a huge bouquet of flowers to be delivered to Howard’s hotel room. In return, the journalist left Castro what she described as “a little keepsake”—a deeply personal letter she drafted in her room at the Riviera. “I wanted to give you something to express my gratitude for the time you granted me; for the interview; for the beautiful flowers,” her message began. “I have decided to give you the most valuable possession I have to offer. Namely: my faith in your honor. My faith in the form of a letter, which, if revealed, could destroy me in the United States.”

L TO R: A CIA memo about Howard's first trip to Cuba, marked "Psaw" (president saw); a draft of Howard's letter to Castro dated April 27, 1963. | CIA MEMO: National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library; Howard letter: National Security Archive Lisa Howard Collection

Howard described her four-page letter, the drafts of which she saved along with other records from her trip, as "a tribute, a poem to you—the man." It mixed intense criticism with sincere praise. "I do not want you destroyed. ... You possess what George Bernard Shaw called 'that spark of divine fire,'" Howard wrote. "You are not the ruthless, cynical tyrant [your critics] have depicted. ... I do not believe you have meant to hurt people, though, in all candor, I am both saddened and outraged that you have destroyed thousands and harmed many more without just cause."

Howard beseeched Castro to find his "way back"—to become the transformational historical figure she believed to be his destiny. "What you have to offer the world that is meaningful and universally applicable is not some capricious brand of tropical Marxism (the world scarcely needs that), but your humanity; your compassion; your deep knowledge and sense of justice; your genuine concern for the poor; the sick; the oppressed; the defenseless; the lost; the despairing. ... And your sacred

duty, your solemn obligation to mankind is to make that quality ever stronger, to make it a reality for your people—all your people, every class and sector. Let flow in the most untrammelled way the goodness that is your substance and can be your salvation.”

“I feel deeply that you must be permitted to play out your role,” Howard continued, pledging to do what she could to ensure Castro’s survival and bring the U.S. and Cuba together. “I am going to talk to certain people when I return to the States,” she wrote. “I do not overestimate my influence. But I shall try to help.”

I am who I am and you are Fidel Castro and for us, at this moment in history, nothing personal could be realized. ... Our personal desires are not important.”

One draft of her message, typed on Hotel Riviera letterhead, ended “on a personal note.” “We met and came together and, I know, felt something for one another that could not go further. I am who I am and you are Fidel Castro and for us, at this moment in history, nothing personal could be realized. No matter ... our personal desires are not important.”

Howard crossed out that paragraph during a revision, big blue Xs cutting through the type. “Perhaps we shall never see one another again,” the letter concluded instead. “But I shall treasure with all my heart for as long as I live my trip to Cuba in April of 1963 and my meetings with you, my dearest Fidel.”

When “Fidel Castro: Self Portrait” aired on ABC on May 10, 1963, it dominated the news cycle. “Castro applauds U.S. ‘Peace Steps,’” declared the *New York Times*. “Castro Would Like Talk With Kennedy,” announced the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. “The interview was a great success, front page of nearly every paper in the country,” Howard wrote in a private note for Castro. “The entire interview is now being discussed on the highest levels.”

That was only the public part of the message she delivered. Behind the scenes, as she had promised, Howard met with CIA and State Department officials to personally convey Castro’s interest in a dialogue with the United States. She used the positive news coverage of her ABC interview to argue that public opinion was not opposed to better relations with Cuba, and even presented a list of potential intermediaries who could facilitate talks with Castro—including herself. “Liza

Nobody Talked to Fidel Castro like Lisa Howard

In her diary entry for August 13, 1964, Lisa Howard recorded this candid banter with Castro.

2:00 AM

Collect call from Havana. It’s Fidel. He asked me if I know what day this is.

“Yes,” I say, “It’s Thursday.” “But it’s the 13th,” he says. “So,” says I. “It’s my birthday,” says Fidel. “I’m 38.” Congrats all around. I sing to him.

He wants to know if I’ll seek asylum in Cuba if Goldwater is elected. I say, yes, if he will let me do a daily television news

[sic] Howard definitely wants to impress the U.S. Government with two facts: Castro is ready to discuss rapprochement and she herself is ready to discuss it with him if asked to do so by the U.S. Government,” stated a secret CIA report delivered to the White House.

Howard also typed out a 10-page brief to Kennedy himself, elaborating on what Castro had told her during their conversations in

Havana and attempting to obtain a meeting. “I wanted to see you personally,” she wrote, “to impress upon you how strongly I feel that Fidel’s alliance with the Communists is a precarious one ... [and] that we might profitably fish in those troubled waters.” Castro was “now ready to discuss everything: the withdrawal of [Soviet] troops; an end to the exporting of his revolution” to end the blockade and resume diplomatic relations with the United States, she reported. “And not just ready, Sir, but positively eager.”

“He was most interested in you, Mr. President,” Howard continued. “He kept saying to me ‘What is President Kennedy like, what does he want ... what does he want of us?’” She beseeched Kennedy to actually “sit down and negotiate with Fidel.”

Unbeknownst to Howard, however, the CIA vigorously opposed her message of potential reconciliation—and lobbied Kennedy to ignore it. In a secret memo to the White House, dated May 2, CIA Director John McCone recommended that “the Lisa Howard report be handled in the most limited and sensitive manner” and “that no active steps be taken on the rapprochement matter at this time.” Howard’s initial efforts went nowhere.

But she would not be ignored, nor denied. As *McCall’s* wrote about Howard that year, “Her massive drive is so uncomplicated and single-minded that it usually carries the day.” “The key to understanding Lisa,” her husband told the magazine, “is to think of her as a sort of mutation. She simply doesn’t have the inhibitions other people have. When she goes after something, she’s completely overt, she has no qualms or second thoughts or reluctance to operate.”

Getting no traction at the White House, Howard redrafted her letter to the president into an article, “Castro’s Overture,” which appeared as a cover story in the September 1963 issue of the liberal journal *War/Peace Report*. Castro had been “emphatic about his desire for negotiations” in their conversations, she reported. She called on Kennedy to “send an American government official on a quiet mission to Havana to see what Castro has to say.”

show. He says Okay if every day I report Marxist and Leninist propaganda. I tell him he should write an article for *Life* explaining in great detail why Cuba did as she did—why the expropriation—what [Cuba] hopes to do in the future etc, --

He says: “Will they pay me a lot of money?” I say: “Ten thousand dollars.” He says: “Great, I’ll take it.”

We talk of Goldwater. He says: “I’ve been thinking very much about Goldwater and Johnson & I have decided I’m for Goldwater. I think he looks very nice.” I leave him with the thought: “Fidel, if Goldwater is elected I will be very sad, but you will be dead.”

'THERE IS NO DODGING LISA HOWARD' Howard was known for her interviews with high-profile subjects, from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. At left, Howard is pictured with then-Senator John F. Kennedy at the 1960 Democratic National Convention. At right, Howard interviews Che Guevara in Havana in February 1964. After the cameras were turned off, Guevara confided to her that Castro had instructed him to do the interview—more proof for Howard that Castro was “the maximum leader and in the final analysis everyone must take his orders,” as she wrote in her diary. | National Security Archive Lisa Howard Collection; Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

At the United Nations, a U.S. official named William Attwood read Howard’s article. As a former senior editor of *Look* magazine, Attwood had interviewed Castro in 1959 and shared Howard’s view that coexistence with the Cuban regime was both possible and preferable. On September 12, he called her, and together they set in motion a plan of action. First, Attwood approached U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson to get a green light from Kennedy to make “discreet contact” with Cuba’s ambassador to the United Nations, Carlos Lechuga. Then, Howard approached Lechuga in the U.N. lounge and told him that Attwood urgently wanted to talk to him. A cocktail party at her East 74th Street town house would serve as cover for the two diplomats to meet.

On September 23, as members of the New York literati munched on finger foods and sipped drinks in Howard's house, the United States and Cuba held their first, albeit informal, bilateral meeting since the Eisenhower administration. Off in a corner of the living room, Attwood and Lechuga discussed how negotiations between their two hostile countries might be initiated. Lechuga "hinted that Castro was indeed in the mood to talk," Attwood reported back to the White House, adding that "there was a good chance I might be invited to Cuba."

Over the next two months, Howard's home became the hub for secret communications between the U.S. and Cuba. Howard placed a series of calls to Castro's office conveying U.S. interest in setting up a meeting, and passed on Castro's responses to Attwood. Finally, Howard set up a time for Attwood to talk directly with Castro's top aide, Vallejo.

When Attwood arrived at midnight on the evening of November 18 for the call, Howard greeted him wearing a lavish dressing gown. As she dialed Cuba again and again, attempting to track down Vallejo, they listened to jazz, drank bourbon and discussed French philosophers. In her diary, Howard recorded this dramatic turning point in her protracted efforts to connect Washington and Havana: "D' Day for the telephone appointment. ... We put through the call. No Vallejo. Placed at least seven calls. ... Read Camus out loud. ... Me on the bed in a lacey peignoir—Bill sipping bourbon and shy but dying to slip into bed with me. And there was that white phone—mute—tense ... our link to our secret and oh-so-longed for mission. We do have a deep common bond. An inexorable conviction that this can be an honorable rapprochement between Cuba and the U.S."

Around 3 a.m., Howard managed to reach Vallejo and put Attwood on the line to discuss arrangements for the two to meet clandestinely. This was the moment Howard had long awaited. "At last! At last! That first halting step. Contact has been established!" she rejoiced in her diary. "I feel strongly this is only the beginning. A long, frustrating, tension-filled, but exciting experience lies ahead."

Three days later, Howard found herself covering the shocking story of Kennedy's assassination for ABC. Howard, Castro and a handful of U.S. officials knew the assassin's bullet had terminated not only JFK's life, but also his secret efforts to find common ground with Cuba. "The events of November 22 would appear to make an accommodation with Castro an even more doubtful issue than it was," wrote National Security Council aide Gordon Chase in a Top Secret/Eyes Only White House assessment. "In addition, the fact that Lee Oswald has been heralded as a pro-Castro type may make rapprochement with Cuba more difficult."

But Howard would not give up. She persuaded her superiors at ABC to let her return to Cuba to do another TV special—this time on life under the revolution. When she informed the new administration about her trip, White House staff responded that they would be interested in what Castro had to say.

Howard and her entourage arrived at José Martí International Airport on February 1, 1964. Castro had sent Vallejo to meet her, and "I was taken through customs like a diplomat," she recalled.

She *was* a diplomat—albeit a self-appointed one. While filming the new TV special, she would also be strategizing with Castro about how to renew his delicate diplomacy with President Lyndon B. Johnson.

There was another reason she was eager to be in Havana. “When will I see him?” Howard asked Vallejo upon her arrival. “He has been crazy to know when you’re arriving,” the aide replied. “He’s been asking about you all day.” She didn’t see Castro until the next evening, February 2, 1964, when he arrived at her hotel close to midnight and the two stayed up until dawn before he tucked her in and left.

Elliott Erwit/Magnum

Over the next two weeks, Howard and her crew traipsed around Cuba with the energetic Castro, filming him playing baseball, visiting a cattle farm and interacting with peasants. As much as Howard believed Castro was a dictator, the overwhelming public adoration he generated impressed

her. "They mob him, they scream 'Fidel, Fidel,' children kiss him, mothers touch him," she wrote. "They are awed, thrilled ... ecstatic, but mostly passionate. There is no doubt in my mind that the emotion Fidel inspires in all women is sheer undiluted sexual desire. He is the most physical animal man I have ever known." The attraction between them was undeniable. "I sat and stood beside him for five hours and I nearly went out of my mind," she recounted.

One night, Howard returned to her suite and burst into tears, torn between her feelings for the man and her distaste for his revolution. "This revolution isn't at all what he thinks it is," she wrote in her diary. "How can I tell this to Fidel. And why do I feel that I must? Yet I guess what keeps me involved is that down deep I believe that if I could convince him of the truth ... of the despair and agony and chaos he has brought to this Island ... he would change."

Certainly, she believed, ending the existential threat that Washington's hostility posed to Castro would contribute to that goal. During their formal ABC interview in the wee hours of February 13, Howard posed a question to which she already knew the answer: "You said at one point after President Kennedy's death that you believed that under Kennedy it was going to be possible to normalize relations between Cuba and the United States. What leads you to believe that?" "My opinion is that he was in the way of persuading himself of his mistakes about Cuba," Castro responded in stilted English. "We had some evidence that some change was taking place in the mind of the government of the United States ... I do not want to speak about now."

It was well after midnight when the interview finished, and Castro, Howard and Vallejo adjourned to the bedroom of Howard's suite. "We were in a wonderful mood," Howard wrote in her diary. The Cuban leader lay down on the sofa and put his head in her lap. "[Secretary of State] Dean Rusk should see us now," Howard joked, as Castro roared with laughter. Lounging on the couch, they strategized about how to entice Johnson to finish the dialogue Kennedy had started. Castro said he wanted to "discuss a trade" with the new administration: The United States would stop backing sabotage raids into Cuba led by Cuban exiles in Florida and halt its effort to roll back the Cuban revolution. In return, Cuba would end its efforts to export revolution to other areas of Latin America. Castro also said he would do what he could to ensure Johnson was elected in November 1964, rather than face the prospect of a hard-line Republican such as Senator Barry Goldwater as president. If the Johnson administration "feels they must take some hostile action for domestic political consumption," Castro said he would even understand. "If he was informed, ex-officio, that this was a political action," he would refrain from retaliating.

At 3:30 in the morning, Howard once again decided it was time for Vallejo to give them some privacy, which made Castro nervous. "I can't be alone with you without my lawyer," he joked. When Howard announced she wanted to "get into something comfortable," he made a futile attempt to keep her fully clothed. "He made a great fuss about my not changing my dress because it was so pretty and he wanted to look at it," she wrote. And when she emerged from the bathroom in a nightgown and pajamas, he chastised her for disobeying him. "You don't understand me," he complained in a flourish of machismo. "You just want to do what you want to do. Why can't you treat me like a man?"

You don't understand me," he complained in a flourish of machismo. "You just want to do what you want to do. Why can't you treat me like a man?"

Castro turned the conversation to their complicated relationship. Nights earlier, Castro had confided that he used to sleep with many women, but not anymore—"that now that he is the leader all the women want to go to bed with him, but he thought it wasn't him they wanted but to sleep with the leader. This seemed to trouble him," Howard recounted. As Castro explained why he was reluctant to sleep with her, he asked Howard: "What do you want, Lisa? Do you want my body?"

Tonight, he was still conflicted. "He said he wanted me very much but the conditions had to be right and we had to be away somewhere where we could forget everything," Howard wrote. Nevertheless, "we did get to bed and he made love to me quite expertly and it was, of course, thrilling and ecstatic—as much as anything I have ever experienced."

"Lisa, you are not simple," Castro told Howard just before he left. "With you and me it is not simple. But that is more interesting."

They would engage in one more conversation on that trip, an emotional tête-à-tête as Howard readied to leave two mornings later. Castro arrived at Howard's hotel suite at 5:30 a.m. to ensure she made her flight, and found her drugged from a sleeping pill, unable to wake up. While she, half asleep, entreated Castro to delay her flight—a request he refused, telling her "that would be arbitrary"—he managed to rouse her. "I dressed in front of Fidel like he was a schoolroom mate," Howard recalled. Then, "he pulled me over and asked me to sit on his lap, and then spoke to me very gently, and said, 'Lisa, you are very dangerous for me. I could love a girl like you very deeply. You're very sweet, very pretty, very intelligent, very

Howard's second interview with Castro on February 13, 1964. | Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

sensitive." If they were together, he suggested, "we would have many fights, a hundred fights, two hundred fights, but in the end it would be all right." He said: "You can teach me very much."

Howard told Castro he had "touched [her] very deeply." But she confessed to being "overwhelmed by sadness" watching him intermingle with Cuban citizens because "he had such a genuine belief in the revolution and in what he was doing [when] in fact so much of what he was doing was truly evil."

He could not see it, “and I was not capable of making him see it,” she tearfully explained. “Castro said he understood part of what I was trying to say, and that I must return again and we must talk and talk and talk for many, many hours and days,” she wrote. He promised to take English lessons so that they could “understand each other better.”

Once back in New York, Howard typed up a six-paragraph memo to Johnson from Castro, titled “Verbal Message given to Miss Lisa Howard of ABC News on February 12, 1964 in Havana, Cuba.” In the missive, Howard relayed what she and Castro had discussed in her suite—from Castro’s offer to weather a U.S. provocation during the campaign to his hope to continue the dialogue Kennedy had started. He recognized the need for “absolute secrecy,” and suggested that Howard could be trusted as an intermediary.

With the memorandum in hand, Howard placed a call to Gordon Chase at the NSC, now her contact in the new administration, and told him she had a confidential message for Johnson. “Lisa Howard wants very much to give her message from Fidel to the President only,” Chase reported to the national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy. Bundy, however, was dubious of Howard’s dual role as a secret go-between and a prominent journalist. “She is an extraordinarily determined and self-important creature and will undoubtedly knock at every door we have at least five times,” he warned other White House officials. “It is quite impossible that she can see Castro and the president without writing about her peacemaking efforts at some stage, and I see nothing whatever to be gained by letting her play this game with us.”

Chase, however, pressed Bundy for permission to debrief Howard and try to “pump out” Castro’s message. As “a shrewd, aggressive, good-looking gal,” he argued, “she probably gets a lot closer to Fidel than most (pure speculation) and may be able to give us some insights about Castro’s intentions.”

A LOOK INSIDE CASTRO'S CUBA In February 1964, Howard traveled to Havana to film an ABC special, "Cuba and Castro Today." "It's impossible to film [Castro] properly, he won't ever hold still," Howard wrote in her diary. She was struck by how much the Cuban people adored their leader. "They mob him, they scream 'Fidel, Fidel,' children kiss him, mothers touch him." | Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

On March 7, Chase traveled to New York to receive a briefing on Howard's trip. As they pored over photographs and the transcripts of her interviews, they agreed on a common mission "to get Fidel to end his Soviet tie and end exporting the Rev[olution] and announce elections in exchange for a guarantee of American aid, trade, and official recognition." Howard offered her services as an "effective emissary" and affirmed her discretion. "So the young man will make his report to Bundy and we shall see," she wrote.

In his comprehensive Top Secret/Eyes Only report on their meeting—titled "Mrs. Lisa Howard"—Chase advanced Howard's message "that we should be communicating with Castro" about normalized relations. "I regard Mrs. Howard's motives as mixed," he advised: "First, she is a newspaper woman and probably knows she is sniffing at a highly readable story. Second, because of her influence with Fidel, she probably regards herself, somewhat romantically, as fated to play a

historical role in helping to bring about an agreement between the U.S. and Cuba. Third, she probably is a sincere, anti-communist, libertarian democrat who regards the Cuban scene as a tragedy and who wants to see the island living in the Western tradition and at peace with the U.S. (To go out on a dangerous limb, my own estimate is that as long as she can feel useful, the last two motives control the first.)”

Chase transmitted Howard’s assertion that she had “a rapport with Castro which a man will not easily duplicate. I am not certain that there is a physical relationship between them,” he informed Bundy, “but regard it as likely.”

Sensing she now had a strong ally inside the White House, Howard began placing evening calls to Chase at his home, seeking his help to obtain a meeting with Johnson so that she might deliver Castro’s message. Each time, Chase gently put her off and tried to persuade her to entrust the message to him, which she declined to do. In a top-secret memo on these conversations, Chase reported, “She roundly scolded me and the White House for taking her message from Fidel to the President as a joke. I assured her we didn’t.”

Stymied at the White House, Howard turned again to U.N. Ambassador Stevenson. Late in the evening on June 5, 1964, she went to see Stevenson at his room in the Waldorf Astoria. The two discussed how to persuade Johnson to continue dialogue with Cuba. She gave him Castro’s “verbal message” and entrusted him to personally transmit it to the president.

True to his word, on June 16, Stevenson sent LBJ a top-secret memorandum, with Castro’s secret communique—one of the most compelling Castro ever sent to a U.S. president—attached. Stevenson advised the president of the secret dialogue Kennedy and Castro were pursuing at the time of the assassination and recommended that “if it could be resumed on a low enough level to avoid any possible embarrassment, it might be worth considering.”

Three days later, Howard traveled to Cuba for the third time—this time not as an ABC journalist but as a secret emissary. Her mission was to report to Castro that she had finally gotten his message into Johnson’s hands. But she also carried a high-level warning from the White House: The U.S. government was concerned about threats Castro had made to shoot down U.S. reconnaissance planes that continued to overfly Cuba in the wake of the missile crisis.

Castro arranged for Howard to stay in one of the confiscated mansions that now served as a protocol house. The house came with a Cadillac and chauffeur, a butler and cook, air-conditioned bedrooms and a sunken bathtub. She had come a “long way from ‘Edge of Night’ to guest of the Cuban government,” Howard confided in her diary.

THE JOURNALIST AND THE REVOLUTIONARY During filming, Castro and Howard spent many hours together, talking about everything from love and death to the workings of U.S. politics. "I like to talk to Lisa," Castro remarked. "She is very wise." One day, as they toured the countryside, Castro told Howard about his decision to cut off the water supply to Guantanamo Bay in response to the U.S. Coast Guard seizing Cuban fishing boats. "The U.S. might attack you," she warned. Renowned photographer Elliott Erwitt, who traveled with Howard and her film crew to photograph the trip, captured these more intimate moments as well. | Library of Congress; Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

Far less luxurious was their one evening spent together on Castro's "yacht" in the Bay of Pigs, which Howard described as a small, battered boat with a broken shower that slept two. They stayed up till 5:30 a.m. talking about "politics, life, love, freedom, peace, hope, despair, my family, all of it," Howard remembered. They also discussed the U.S. warning to refrain from shooting at any U.S. reconnaissance planes. Castro promised to restrain himself during the 1964 election season. "You are right, Fidel," she later confided to him about their night on the boat. "Our intellectual relationship is the essential one. Though the other one is rather pleasant too ... the frosting on the cake."

Before she left Havana, they talked over how their back channel would work: To prevent future incidents between the United States in Cuba, Castro would rely on Howard to get messages to Stevenson and would count on his response, passed through her.

Less than two days after she returned to the states, Castro used this channel to address a crisis at Guantanamo, where a U.S. Marine had reportedly shot a Cuban soldier. On June 26, Vallejo placed an urgent call to Howard and shared his leader's message: "Please call Governor Stevenson and tell him about the shooting, that the Cuban is in the hospital and Castro thinks he is going to die, that this is the second time there has been a shooting at the base. He wonders if it is part of a deliberate plan of provocation or an isolated act."

Howard immediately called Stevenson. She told him what Castro had said about reconnaissance planes and asked for an answer on the shooting. He assured her "there was no plan whatsoever of deliberate provocation at the Guantanamo Base." She then relayed the report to Vallejo. "Fidel was glad to get my message," Howard wrote in her diary the next day. "I guess he feels our channel of communications has been established."

L TO R: Chase's memo to Bundy after Howard's second trip to Cuba; Stevenson's memo to Johnson after Howard's third trip; Chase's memo about Che Guevara's visit to New York. | National Security Archive Lisa Howard Collection

Indeed, the back channel—known as the “Castro / Lisa Howard / Stevenson / President line” in top-secret White House documents—between the White House and the Cuban leadership was now open, and active. In a top-secret memo to Johnson written after the phone call, Stevenson reported Castro’s message that “there will be no crisis until after the November elections; that nothing will happen to our [reconnaissance] planes, and that we do not need to send him any warnings. He will use utmost restraint and we can relax.” Stevenson also conveyed Castro’s belief that “all of our crises could be avoided if there was some way to communicate; that for want of anything better, [Castro] assumed that he could call [Howard] and she call me and I would advise you.”

Howard had almost single-handedly built an unprecedented bridge between Castro and the Oval Office. But the White House wasted no time shutting her out. In a July 7, 1964, memo to

Bundy, Chase warned that the newly established communications “make Lisa Howard’s participation even scarier than it was before. ... Before this, the Johnson Administration had relatively little to fear from Lisa since, essentially, we were just listening to her reports on or from Castro.” Chase also warned Stevenson’s involvement would mean more media attention if news of the back channel leaked. “Lisa’s contact on the U.S. side is far sexier now (Stevenson), than at any time in the past (Attwood and then Chase).”

Extricating Howard from these secret operations without offending her and risking public exposure of U.S.-Cuba communications, Chase understood, would be a delicate operation. “Lisa should relax, stay quiet, and stand at the ready,” was the message Chase recommended passing to her. “We may want to use her influence with Castro in the future.”

It is unknown whether that message was ever delivered, but after July 1964, the Johnson administration appears to have cut Howard out of the loop. There are no more memos about contacts between Howard and Castro—and no more diary entries about communications with the White House. As for official communications with Cuba, U.S. officials turned a deaf ear to Castro’s public call for “extensive discussions” with Washington, and to an offer from his brother, Raúl Castro, to meet with U.S. negotiators “any place to discuss improving relations, even the moon.”

Deeply frustrated, in December 1964, Howard seized on the visit of Che Guevara, the Argentine revolutionary who had helped usher in the Cuban revolution, to the United Nations to renew her attempts to bridge the Cold War gap across the Florida straits. She shepherded Guevara around town—together they attended a premiere of a new documentary film commemorating the life of Kennedy—and organized a soiree for him at her New York apartment. “Che Guevara has something to say” to the White House, she told Chase on the phone, in hopes of once again using cocktail diplomacy as a cover for the two sides to confer. “I asked her point blank whether this was her idea or Che’s,” Chase reported to his superiors. “She would not answer me directly and kept repeating that she was ‘in a position to arrange a meeting.’” “Stevenson was all hot to go on this,” according to a top-secret White House memo, after Howard invited the U.N. ambassador to talk with Guevara. But State Department officials refused to authorize a Stevenson-Guevara meeting for fear it would quickly leak to the press.

A Brief History of U.S.-Cuba Cold War Ties

January 1959: Fidel Castro leads the Cuban revolution to power.

January 1961: President Dwight Eisenhower severs diplomatic relations with Cuba.

April 1961: President John F. Kennedy authorizes the CIA-led paramilitary invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

February 1962: Kennedy declares a broad economic embargo against Cuba, prohibiting all trade.

October 1962: The United States and the Soviet Union confront the prospect of nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis.

April 1963: Lisa Howard travels to Havana and interviews Castro, the first interview he has granted to a U.S. TV journalist since 1959.

November 1963: The Kennedy administration secretly pursues talks with Castro, up to the day of the president’s assassination in Dallas.

February 1964: Howard returns to Cuba to film another ABC News special.

June 1964: Howard travels to Cuba a third time, as a secret emissary, to advance a dialogue between Castro and the Johnson White House.

Howard did manage to persuade the progressive senator from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy, to come to her cocktail party and talk to Guevara off in a corner. “The purpose of the meeting was to express Cuban interest in trade with the U.S. and U.S. recognition of the Cuban regime,” McCarthy reported to the State Department the next day. But after debriefing him, U.S. officials concluded that “the conversation was entirely Lisa-generated and that Che really had nothing to tell us.”

As Howard lost her Cuba cachet with the Johnson administration, she also lost her position at ABC News. In late September, as the 1964 election approached, the network summarily suspended her, citing her public participation in “Democrats for Keating”—a committee of prominent New York liberals who opposed Robert Kennedy’s bid to become a senator from their state. After the election, ABC fired her. When Howard moved to sue ABC for violating her constitutional rights to express her political beliefs, ABC executives let it be known that “her actions regarding the Cuba show” were among their reasons for terminating her contract.

Indeed, Howard’s internal struggle to control the tone and content of her April 1964 TV special, “Cuba and Castro Today,” marked the beginning of her downfall at ABC. According to Howard, she had waged “a titanic battle” with network executives to keep the broadcast from adopting a conventional Cold War approach to the complex issue of the Cuban revolution. “We fought over every inch of the show,” she recorded in her diary. ABC higher-ups—in particular the executive director of news, Jesse Zousmer—wanted “to present just one more indictment of Fidel Castro and his revolution,” she wrote. “I could not do that. I would not do that.” When the program finally aired, Howard believed she had “won all the major points.” The broadcast was “not an indictment of Fidel—and he comes off fairly well,” she wrote. Most important, “I think it will help U.S.-Cuban relations.”

Howard might have won the battle over her TV special, but in the ensuing weeks and months, she lost the war. Within the news division, Zousmer became a powerful, and in Howard’s mind, “brutally vindictive” foe. In mid-April, as the special was being finalized, Howard twice failed to appear for her daily show, and Zousmer circulated a memo stating that he planned “to take definitive action” if she failed to honor her contractual obligations. “You have tried to bully me, insult me and humiliate me,” Howard responded in a blunt memo to her boss. “I strongly advise you not to threaten me again.” According to Howard, Zousmer began chipping away at her job. During the July 1964 Republican National Convention in San Francisco, she received few assignments, and the interviews she did were not used on the evening news.

By the time of the Democratic National Convention in late August, Howard had initiated Democrats for Keating and was lobbying party leaders not to support RFK’s Senate bid. During the convention, ABC received two calls from the White House press secretary, Pierre Salinger, complaining that Howard was creating “quite a stir” by speaking out against Kennedy. ABC dispatched an executive to the convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to tell her to cease and desist.

Never one to compromise her principles, Howard escalated her public efforts against Kennedy’s candidacy. “I can assure you that I am acting in my capacity as a United States citizen and my

television broadcasts will in no way reflect my personal involvement,” she wrote her superiors in defense of her political activities on September 16, 1964. Without warning, two weeks later ABC suspended Howard from her daily show. Less than a month later, she was fired. Her efforts to get ABC to reconsider failed, as did her attempts to get a job at another network. One ABC executive informed her “she had been marked as ‘lousy.’” A civil suit Howard filed against ABC seeking \$2 million in damages to her reputation and career was dismissed by the New York Supreme Court in early 1965.

Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

And then came the personal tragedy. In the late spring of 1965, Howard suffered a miscarriage. Her ensuing depression resulted in a period of hospitalization that, sadly, failed to relieve her despondence. On July 4, 1965, while spending the holiday weekend in the Hamptons, Howard altered a prescription for 10 barbiturates and obtained a bottle of 100 tablets at a local pharmacy; she consumed the pills in the parking lot and died of the overdose. She was 39 years old.

The FBI would soon launch a bizarre inquiry to determine whether her death was somehow tied to Guevara's disappearance following his visit to New York. (Unbeknownst to the U.S. intelligence community, Guevara had gone underground to lead guerrilla fighters in the Congo.) FBI agents interviewed Howard's former colleagues at ABC about her Cuba work, her relations with Castro and Guevara, and why she might take her own life. The FBI also reviewed her case with members of the NYPD to ascertain whether Howard's was "a legitimate suicide"—or sinister foul play tied, presumably, to her work on Cuba.

Howard's Cuba work is a fundamental part of her forgotten legacy. "I was an integral part of this fledgling new look at Cuba," Howard once confided. Her efforts might not have fully paid off during her short lifetime, but they created the historical foundation for the back-channel diplomacy that led to the breakthrough in relations achieved by the Obama administration 50 years later. As Cuban President Raúl Castro steps down from power in April, and as U.S. policy makers revisit relations with Cuba in a post-Castro era, Howard must be remembered as an essential player in the original efforts to bring about what, in her diary, she called "an honorable rapprochement."

"She showed us by her extraordinary sacrifice what moral strength means," Senator William Proxmire said in his eulogy at Howard's memorial service, without even knowing the extraordinary role she had played behind the scenes. "To live by the truth as she saw it; to dig out more of what she regarded as the truth than the establishment can comfortably permit. And to speak that truth loud and clear."

Castro recognized her fearlessness, too—and knew what it had been able to accomplish. "You know no one could come down here and do what you did—with your will and persuasiveness," he told her during one of their late-night phone conversations between Havana and New York in 1964. "No one."

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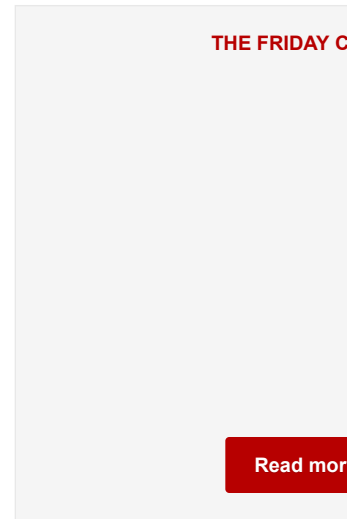
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