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MEMORANDUM - May 30, 1978

TO: G. Robert Blakey

FROM: Fonzi & Gonzales

RE: Interview with Max Lesnik

Background: Max Lesnik is the editor and publisher of Replica, a Spanish-language week magazine prominent in The Miami Cuban community. It regularly carries statements, proclamations and letters from the key Cuban activist and terrorist leaders, including those from Orlando Bosch in prison in Venezuela. The office of Replica is a regular gathering spot for many of Miami's Cuban political leaders, including Alpha 66's Antonio Veciana. George Volsky, a freelance correspondent for the New York Times and formerly with the U.S. Information Agency at the American Embassy in Havana, maintains a desk at the Replica office. Reinaldo Pico, in on the first entry with the Watergate burglars, is an employee of Replica. The Replica office has in the past been the object of bombings, usually with little or no damage, but reportedly the result of Lesnik's espoused "liberal" political leaning. Lesnik himself is one of the founding leaders of the Second National Front of the Escambray.

Details: Max Lesnik was interviewed in his office at Replica, 2994 N.W. 7th Street, Miami (305-643-5481) on May 25, 1978.

Lesnik said we could best understand his place and role in the Cuban political situation if he provided us first with some historical background. In the middle of 1951, he said, the ruling Autentico Party government of Carlos Prio was being strongly challenged by the Ortodoxo Party's dynamic leader, Eduardo Chibas. The son of a wealthy family, Chibas had given most of his money away to the poor and had a regular Sunday evening radio broadcast during which he harangued against the corruption of the Prio government. He was so popular with the people in the villages and rural areas of Cuba that it was generally believed he would walk away with the election for the presidency in 1952. However, in August of 1951, to demonstrate his sincerity and dramatize his charges of governmental corruption, Chibas publicly committed suicide on his radio program. To some extent, that created a power vacuum in Cuban politics, said Lesnik, but it made the election victory of the Ortodoxo Party a certainty in the 1952 elections.

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That is why Fulgencio Batista, convinced he would lose the election, engineered a successful and almost bloodless coup d'etat on March 10, 1952. Carlos Prio was forced to flee the country. And although, says Lesnik, Batista promised an honest administration and eventual return to constitutional government, his dictatorship soon became characterized by corruption and brutality. It was that, Lesnik claims, together with the vacuum left in the people's desire for a dynamic leader by the death of Chibas, which seeded the situation for the coming to power of Fidel Castro.

Lesnik said that both he and Castro were among those most politically active in the Ortodoxo Party at the University of Havana but, he said, they were not close. Castro came from a wealthy family but Lesnik said he always objected to the way Castro wanted to control the Party in his personal manner, rather than have the members of the Party decide its direction. Nevertheless, on July 26, 1953, Castro took a party of 120 followers from Havana to Oriente Province and attacked the army barracks at Santiago de Cuba. His arrest, subsequent trial and sentence to 20 years in prison then made him, said Lesnik, the most well-known opposition leader against Batista.

Although Lesnik was not directly involved in the attack on the barracks in Santiago, he was arrested and sent to prison with Castro. But because Batista would have recurring demonstrations of benevolency, Lesnik was released in three months and Castro within two years. Castro went to Mexico while Lesnik remained at the University of Havana. In a meeting with Castro in Mexico in 1955, Lesnik said Castro told him he would continue fighting against Batista until he won or he died.

By March of 1957, with Castro in the mountains again with a small band of guerillas, Lesnik had become very active with the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE) at the University. With Lesnik as one of its organizers, the DRE mounted a major assault against the Presidential Palace. The leader of the assault was Carlos Gutierrez Menoyo, who was killed along with many of his men. Those who survived fled into the Escambray Mountains and set up a permanent guerilla camp there. That led to the founding of the Second National Front of the Escambray by its leaders: Carlos' brother Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo, Max Lesnik, Armando Fleites and Nazario Sargen (presently head of Alpha 66).

Lesnik said that as a result of the Second National Front of the Escambray (SNFE) ensconced in the central part of Cuba and Castro's 26th of July group in the Sierra Maestra, there wasn't significant coordination at the time of the Revolution in January, 1959. Although, said Lesnik, Castro

offered SNFE leaders major positions in the new government, he insisted, at the same time, that the organization be dissolved. For that reason, many of the SNFE leaders, including himself, says Lesnik, remained apart from the Revolution and Castro. Then, when it became apparent that Castro was embracing Communism-- the final manifestation of that for SNFE leaders, said Lesnik, was when he executed his close associate, Major Hubert Matos, who had tried to warn him about Communist infiltration in the government -- Lesnik and the other SNFE leaders began a counter-Revolutionary campaign against Castro. Because of that, Lesnik and 12 other key members of SNFE, were forced to leave Cuba in January, 1961.

Lesnik said that he and the other SNFE leaders arrived in the United States by boat at Key West on January 26, 1961. He said they had absolutely no contact with or help from any U.S. government agency. In fact, he said, they were immediately arrested and sent to a detention camp in McAllen, Texas. At the time, said Lesnik, neither he nor the other SNFE leaders knew that the Bay of Pigs invasion was in the final stages of preparation.

Lesnik and the other SNFE leaders were not released until July, 1961, three months after the Bay of Pigs. Lesnik said they were not asked to participate in the invasion because E. Howard Hunt, whom Lesnik described as the chief planner of the invasion, had told everyone that they were Communists. Asked how he knew that, Lesnik said that he had become close personal friends with [redacted] in Havana during his anti-Batista activities. [redacted] was, ostensibly, in the U.S. Embassy's political section. When [redacted] heard that Lesnik and his associates were being held in Texas, he attempted to get them released. Failing that, he sent two emissaries -- [redacted] whom Lesnik says he never knew the real names of -- to explain to them that they weren't being asked to take part in the Bay of Pigs because Hunt was saying that they shouldn't be trusted and that they might be Communists.

Lesnik said, however, that even if they had been asked to participate in the Bay of Pigs, he and his SNFE associates would have refused because they would not have wanted to be aligned with those who were taking part in it. He said while in detention in Texas, he discovered there were many Cubans being brought there who had run away from the training camps in Guatemala and he was told by them that the Cuban leaders of the invasion were Batistianos and those who had been associated with casinos and gambling. "The closest associate of Hunt and Artime, for instance," he said, "is Bernard Barker."

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After they were released from detention in Texas, Lesnik said he became inactive in political affairs as a result of a difference of opinion between him and the other SNFE leaders, mainly Eloy Guitierrez Menoyo. Although he has always espoused a political philosophy of democratic socialism, he said, the smear campaign conducted against him and the other SNFE leaders by E. Howard Hunt and his right-wing cohorts led many Cubans to distrust them and consider them as Communists. Menoyo, said Lesnik, took the position that it didn't matter, that they should carry on their anti-Castro military activities anyway and when they were successful at it the people would see that they were not Communists. "My argument," said Lesnik, "is that we could not fight on two different fronts. We could not fight against Castro and at the same time against the Batistianos and those who were accusing us of being Communists. I told Menoyo that we should win the support of the Cuban exiles first. Why should I risk my life if I was not going to get any support?"

It was at that point, said Lesnik, that he dropped out of being politically active with any exile organization. He did, however, get into radio broadcasting and helped some organizations with their public relations and propaganda.

It was also at that point, he said, that Antonio Veciana came along and with Menoyo founded Alpha 66. Later, he said, when the Batistianos and right-winger Cubans who had joined Veciana found out that Menoyo was involved, they split away and formed Commandos L. Veciana then regrouped with Menoyo.

Lesnik said that he never heard of Veciana's association with Maurice Bishop until he read about it in Jack Anderson's column. He was aware, he said, of the Castro assassination attempt in Chile in 1971 but, he said, Veciana told him at the time that it was his own plan. He always did think, he said, that Veciana must have had some high government contacts, [redacted], because he was able to get the AID job in Bolivia.

Lesnik was shown a sketch and given a description of Maurice Bishop. He said he did not recognize him as anyone familiar to him. "As far as I know," he said, "I only met two CIA men that I know in my life: [redacted] and [redacted]"

[redacted] is a Miami area resident [redacted]

[redacted]

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Lesnik was asked his opinion of Veciana's credibility. He said: "Well, you are asking me if I believe what Veciana says. Is Veciana an honest man? Yes, I believe Veciana is an honest man, very trustworthy and very dedicated. At times I say to myself, Yes, I believe Veciana. At other times I am not so sure. For instance, do you believe Veciana when he says it is not true about the narcotics charge? If you ask me, I would say Veciana is not the type of man who would have anything do with narcotics. Not at all. Yet, on the other hand, I know how dedicated Veciana is, I know that more than anything else he is dedicated to overthrowing the Revolution and to killing Castro. So the question is, could it be that he might have thought that the money that could be gotten from narcotics could be used to a more noble purpose? I don't know. But I do know that Veciana is a very honest and dedicated man."

Lesnik said the only significant contact he has had with the CIA was through [redacted] in Havana. When he was in Havana in 1958 a friend told him that an American at the Embassy was interested in what was going on in the Escambray. That's how he met [redacted]. He has not been in touch with him in recent years. Lesnik said he was not receiving any CIA assistance or financial aid when he was doing his radio broadcasts on WMAE in Miami. He said he paid for the broadcasts by selling his own advertising. He said he never met David Phillips or [redacted] or anyone named [redacted].

He also said he never met E. Howard Hunt. He said his business associate, Reinaldo Pico, had worked for him before he started working for the CIA. He said Pico thought he was working for the CIA when Hunt asked him to take part in the Watergate operation.

Lesnik said he knows Frank Fiorini Sturgis but he never worked with him in any anti-Castro activities. He said he met Sturgis occasionally at the studios of television Channel 23 where Sturgis would come to pick up his wife, who also worked there. He said he doesn't think Sturgis would have anything to do with him because of his reputation as a liberal.

Lesnik said he met Manolo Ray in 1960. Ray had been one of the early members of the Ortodoxo Party but had not become active in politics until 1957. In 1960, Ray was a minister in Castro's government when he broke with it and went into hiding. Menoyo put Lesnik in touch with Ray and gave him names of anti-Castro Cubans who would help him. One of the names that Lesnik says he gave Ray

was that of Rogelio Cisneros, who took over as head of the MRP when Ray left Cuba.

Lesnik said that almost all his anti-Castro activity has been in the public relations and propaganda end. In fact, while still in Cuba, he said, he was doing radio broadcasts openly for Castro in support of the Revolution but at the same time he was covertly editing and publishing a small anti-Castro publication. He said he started Replica in 1966 as a two-page propaganda sheet paid for by the MRP and Alpha 66. He said Menoyo and Ray paid him to publish the newsletter on a strictly cost basis. He said they did not pay him anything because he ~~insisted~~ insisted on remaining independent. "I told them," he said, "you do not tell me what to write and I will not tell you how to conduct your military operations."

Lesnik said he had no contact with Orlando Bosch in the early 1960s. "At that time," he said, "Bosch was working with people who were our enemies, the Batistianos and right-wing people. It wasn't until 1968 or 1969, when he started Cuban Power, that he came to me and asked me to publish statements for him."

When Bosch made his famous bazooka attack against a Polish ship in Miami harbor, he immediately afterwards went to Lesnik's home. "I asked him when he told me, 'Why did you do that? Do you belong to the CIA?' He said no, he didn't belong to the CIA. Then I said, 'Well, you are going to be arrested. In this country you cannot blow up a ship unless you belong to the CIA.'"

Lesnik said, however, that as a result of his attempt to help Bosch by publishing his statements, the FBI and the CIA and other U.S. agencies have begun a campaign to get him. He said there have been attempts to link him to narcotics and terrorist activities and, he said, an FBI informant has more than once attempted to entrap him. As a result, he says, he knows his files at the FBI and CIA are thick with misinformation about him. He has been attempting for more than a year to get them through FOIA and has not been successful. He said as soon as he gets them he is going to publish them completely as they are. He said the one who is the key man in misinforming the FBI about him is Riccardo Morales Navarette.

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Lesnik said he is linked to many different Cubans of various political factions, some of whom are involved in narcotics and terrorism, because the U.S. agencies do not know the historical nature of Cuban politics. He said it is unlike U.S. politics where political opponents rarely meet and do not get together or associate with each other. In Cuba, he said, political opponents often got together in some public place or, more likely, in the newspaper's office where they would argue for hours. "That is the way it is here," he said. "Everyone comes here because they all want me to do something for them, write stories about them or publish their statements. That's why Bosch would come here and Aldereguia, who they now say is a Castro agent, would come here and Veciana would come here. And many others. They would be here almost every day, but the FBI would see them come in and say, 'Look, they are conspiring with Lesnik!' That's why my files are so thick."

Lesnik said he remembers that when he first heard about the assassination of Kennedy, his first reaction was that Kennedy was a victim of a right-wing conspiracy. He said he still feels that way but he has no information to support his feeling. He said he does not believe that Castro would have killed Kennedy. He does remember that prior to the Kennedy assassination there were rumors about in the Cuban community that there would be a coup d'etat, but he did not give them much thought because "the Cuban mentality at the time was always thinking about plots."

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