



2013

Mike Weis

Willis Kern, (Interviewer)

WGLT

Recommended Citation

Kern,, Willis (Interviewer), "Mike Weis" (2013). *Interviews for WGLT*. 18.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/18

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Michael Weis Interviewed by Willis Kern With Introduction by Mike McCurdy

(opening music)

- **McCurdy:** This is Sound Ideas, I'm Mike McCurdy. Anyone grade school age or older in 1963 can tell you where they were and what they were doing 50 years ago today. President John F Kennedy was assassinated in downtown Dallas during the noon hour while riding in a motorcade. There are almost as many JFK 50th anniversary specials as there are conspiracy theories about the assassination. GLT will bring you a documentary about Kennedy's life tonight at 6, it's called "We knew JFK: Unheard Stories from the Kennedy Archives" hosted by Robert MacNeil. In just a bit, you'll hear the final installment of the weeklong series of many stories we've been bringing you during Sound Ideas. It deals with Kennedy's work as an ambassador. But first, a close-up look of JFK and his compelling relationship with Latin America. WGLT's Willis Kern has more with a Central Illinois JFK scholar.
- **Kern:** Michael Weis chairs the department of History at Illinois Wesleyan University, and is widely regarded as an expert on the Cold War, and JFK's relations with Latin America. He joins us in the studio today. Thanks for being here!
- **Weis:** Oh, thank you!
- **Kern:** What are your memories of that day, November 22, 1963? 50 years ago.
- **Weis:** First of all, I was a third grader. And I remember distinctly, cause I, I remember we were in class and I was in a Catholic school. And the nun came running into our classroom and she told us all to go home. The president had been shot. And that's kind of weird, at least in today's world in the sense that there is no way that a principle would tell all the students to go home. But, I only lived a block away from the school, so we all just sort of filed out and went home. My mom was right there and she was like "Why are you home so early?"
(laughs)
- **Kern:** Oh she didn't know?
- **Weis:** She didn't know, but, she didn't know. So the president had been shot and we all, I got out of a test. I remember that, being really worried.
- **Kern:** So were you engaged then, even as a third grader watching things unfold on television, or you pretty much were not interested at that point.
- **Weis:** I remember very distinctly watching Oswald get shot right on camera there. For the most part though, a lot of it to me was boring and I remembered having the distinct impression that there was nothing you could do. You couldn't go to school. And the only thing on television, cause there was only three channels back in those days, the only thing on was the President's assassination. So I remember playing a lot of basketball with my brothers during those days.
- **Kern:** So let's cut right to it. You're an expert on Central America and John F Kennedy. What role, if any, do you think Central America played in the assassination of President Kennedy?
- **Weis:** I don't think that it played much of a factor, other than the fact that Lee Harvey Oswald, obviously, had ties with and great sympathy for the Cuban Revolution. And he was in fact a supporter of Castro. Other than that, there's no evidence that Castro had anything to do with the assassination, or that the Russians had anything to do with the assassination. I think it's probably safe to say that Oswald acted alone.

- **Kern:** One of the first things that President Kennedy did once he became president was to establish something called the Alliance for Progress, aimed at stemming the spread of communism in Latin America. Kennedy said, "Those who make peaceful revolutions impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." What was communist Central America's reaction to this belief and the Alliance for Progress, overall?
- **Weis:** The Alliance for Progress came out of a, it was initially a campaign slogan. It came out of a trip that Richard Nixon made when he was Vice President in '58. And Richard Nixon was greeted very hostilely; in fact, there was even fear that he might be killed in Venezuela. Because he was in the middle of a riot and they were rocking the car back and forth and things. And when they came back, they tried to study why did Latin America hate us? And so they began to study that and in the middle of that study, Fidel Castro's successful revolution occurred. And Fidel became the head of Cuba in 1959. And the Alliance for Progress was, how can we give the region money to prevent more Fidel Castro's from coming to power? And so the idea was, if we underwrite it that they'll reform their societies and they'll enter into a stage of self-sustained economic growth and development. And that would only take ten or twelve years, we pledged twenty billion dollars for a ten year program.
- **Kern:** And that was a lot of money back in the early 60's.
- **Weis:** Oh that was huge! That would be like paying two-hundred billion in today's money. I mean, it was a huge program. It never was completely funded, well that's not true. The first couple years it was completely funded, and then by the mid-60's we got involved in Vietnam and we kind of forgot the Alliance for Progress. But there was already evidence that it wasn't working too well, already before then.
- **Kern:** Well Fidel Castro had taken power before President Kennedy was elected. How was Castro viewed by the other leaders of the countries in Latin America? Was he looked to as a leader of a coalition of Latin American countries? Or was he viewed as a rebel?
- **Weis:** Castro was always viewed as a rebel by the leaders of the various Latin American countries. There was a great deal of sympathy for Castro among people. People wanted to emulate him and create revolutions in their own societies. But among the Latin American elite, he was feared from the beginning, and or disparaged. I think our reaction to Castro was actually, in some ways, more temperate than the average Latin American response to him.
- **Kern:** This is Sound Ideas; I'm Willis Kern with Michael Weis, an Illinois Wesleyan University history professor and JFK scholar. Let's go back to the beginning now, JFK's inaugural speech in 1961 where he sent various messages all over the world. This was his specific for Central America:

(Recording of JFK's speech) "To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge- to convert our good words into good deeds- in a new alliance for progress- to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house. (Audience claps)"

- **Kern:** Now communism had a firm grip with Castro entrenched in Cuba. How was this message,

delivered by Kennedy on the day of his inauguration, received by Castro and the other dictatorial regimes in Central America at that time?

- **Weis:** I'm sure that he was fairly alarmed that he was singled out. Not by name, but everybody knew that he was the only communist regime in the entire region. Other dictators like Trujillo, in the Dominican Republic, probably were very applauding of the speech too. Because they thought themselves exempt from any kind of US action and things. And in fact, Trujillo would be assassinated within the year. So I think most Latin Americans were thrilled by this speech, not only because it promised to wage a vigorous cold war in the region and elsewhere in the world, I mean the whole speech is really focused on foreign policy. But, just the pledge that South America was going to be finally in line to get some aid. You know, between 1945 and 1960, Latin America got less aid than countries like Yugoslavia. I mean, which we had almost no trade relations with and which was a communist country itself under Tito. And so, Latin America felt left out and they were very hostile to that. I would say disappointed is probably a better word.
- **Kern:** And not only aid, but the Kennedy administration also agreed to treaties, such as cleaning up the Colorado River, which is a source for water in Mexico. And goodwill gestures like that occurred later on in the Kennedy administration. Obviously, sent good vibes at least to Central America.
- **Weis:** And Kennedy obviously had a great deal of affection for Latin America. He spoke a little Spanish, Jackie spoke a little Spanish, they liked to go there. They went there a few times while President, but they also went there before he became President.
- **Kern:** Castro obviously a communist dictator and the leader of the communist world at the time was the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev. What did he make of Kennedy at the time of that speech in 1961?
- **Weis:** Well the Russians actually were first of all, fairly thrilled that Kennedy was the President. Because Nixon was known to be a vigorous cold warrior. And because Eisenhower, the previous president, had been a military man, so the fact that they got somebody who was young and a little green probably thrilled them. In fact, I think there's a lot of evidence for that. When they finally did meet in Vienna in that summer of '61 and Kennedy tried to tell Khrushchev not to build the Berlin Wall and things. Khrushchev kind of blew him off, you know, just sort of like "who are you to say that I shouldn't do this" and stuff. And Kennedy came back from that meeting in Vienna with egg on his face. I think the Russians were thrilled to have Kennedy in the Presidency.
- **Kern:** President Kennedy visited Central America a couple of times. He was in Mexico in 1962 and then the next year was in Costa Rica. Here's a short clip of a speech that he made in Costa Rica. This is from March of 1963.

(Recording of JFK's speech) "I want you to know, Mr. President, that I come here today, not only with the Members of the Congress and the Secretary of State and others, but I come here today, with a 180 million fellow Americans who want this hemisphere to be free, and who want this hemisphere to be an example to a watching world in the crucial years of this century and this decade."

- **Kern:** The President was in Costa Rica to attend a summit of six Presidents of Central America. What came out of that summit?
- **Weis:** The Latin Americans were becoming a little hostile of the reforms that they were expected

to enact. And dictators like Somoza in Nicaragua would have been quite hesitant to do anything that would cause them any kind of turmoil. So, I'm sure he chose Costa Rica because Costa Rica was the most democratic of all those countries and probably the most supportive of the alliance. But there also had been a coup in 1963 in Honduras and Kennedy, I think, wanted to support democracy while not publicly condemning the coup. He wanted to let people know that the United States still cared about the region and even though they were having these problems, that we were still paying attention. So although nothing I think came out, nothing concrete came out of the trip to Costa Rica. I think its intention was to sort of show Latin America that the United States still cared about the goals of the alliance for progress.

- **Kern:** You mentioned the assassination of Trujillo, the Dominican Republican president in 1961, the US reaction to that led by the Kennedy administration, although not the President himself, caused an upheaval inside the administration within the inner workings of the West Wing. At that time, how much did the public know about this internal strife that was going on? Anything at all?
- **Weis:** I don't think the public knew anything about it at all, but there were certainly vigorous dissent within the administration. There were those in the administration who really were glad that he was gone, who wanted him gone, who wanted to put rifles in the hands of the assassins. And they thought that Trujillo was every bit as dangerous as Castro was. You know, that he was just, a Castro on the right, rather than just being a Castro on the left. But there were other people that said, he's been our ally since 19... he took power in the early 30's. We can't just cut him off at this point. And so, there was a lot of disagreement on what to do about Trujillo. Almost every bit as much as what to do with Castro.
- **Kern:** Speaking of Castro, two of the most famous occurrences regarding Kennedy in Central America are the Bay of Pigs, the disaster that cost him a lot of political capital at home and all around the world, and then the victory of the Cuban Missile Crisis. How did Kennedy go from that horrible situation with the Bay of Pigs to this triumphant victory with the Cuban Missile Crisis?
- **Weis:** Well I think that the two side by side show enormous amount of growth in the President. Kennedy was surprised of what the Eisenhower administration had been doing in regards to Castro, in regards to training Cuban exiles to return and overthrow Castro. And so, he knew about it, but he didn't know the details of it and so when he... Shortly after he became President, they basically came to him and said its good to go. And he was like is it going to work and they said yeah it will work (laughs), and so he trusts the CIA to go ahead since they had known how to do this. They had it worked out in Guatemala in '54 and in Iran in '53 that they knew what they were doing. And so I think he, trusted them and I don't think he questioned them at all. The CIA itself assumed that once Kennedy approved it, that he would do everything in his power to make sure that it succeeded, like including giving US air force cover of the rebel force. So when they landed and they were immediately surrounded and captured by Castro and the Cuban army, it was a huge defeat. I went to Cuba a few years ago and they have this huge sign at the Bay of Pigs that says: "The first time the American imperialists were ever defeated in Latin America". They celebrate it.
- **Kern:** But then you have that, and then we have the tremendous Cuban Missile crisis. Kennedy had to have doubted himself; many others, both people in the United States and around the world had to doubt his ability to get the country through this. How did he pull that off?
- **Weis:** The Bay of Pigs pushed Castro further into the hands of the Russians. Castro after

succeeding thought the Americans were going to come with a full-fledged invasion to get rid of him. And so he convinced Khrushchev that it would be a good idea to place nuclear weapons in Cuba. And when we discovered that, we realized that that was just impossible. There's nothing that... there's no way that the American people would accept that. And so, Kennedy I think displayed a real great combination of aggressiveness and restraint at the same time. And he resolved the crisis satisfactorily. It is one of his shining moments, although I think in some ways the Bay of Pigs prompted the Cuban Missile Crisis cause it prompted the Russians to try to protect Cuba. The fact that he handled it the way he did, not only averted a world war, but I think really lessened the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union never came very close ever again to a direct one on one confrontation with each other. And so, the world became a safer place.

- **Kern:** Michael Weis, thank you for being with us today. We really appreciate it.
- **Weis:** Oh, thank you very much.
- **Kern:** (background music) Michael Weis is the chair of the department of history at Illinois Wesleyan University and is an expert on the Cold War and JFK's relations with Latin America. I'm Willis Kern.