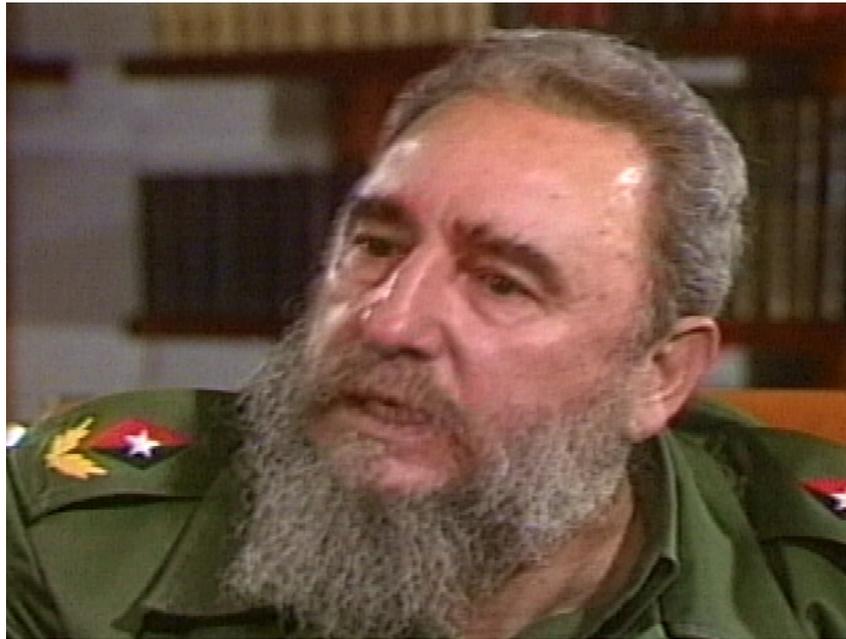


Fidel Castro Discusses Panama, Noriega, and Human Rights in Cuba

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NBC's Maria Shriver talks with Cuban President Fidel Castro in this exclusive interview in 1988. Castro discusses events in Panama, drug charges against him, and allegations against Cuba concerning human rights.

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Fidel Castro, Cuba, Allegations, Drug Traffic, Politics, Jose Blandon, Panama, Manuel Noriega, Panama Canal, Smuggling, Interview, Conspiracy, Central America, Foreign Relations, Bribe, Evidence, Investigation, Blockade, Spies, Spy, Espionage, Lies, Slander, Committee, Senators, Testify, Trade Embargo, Rights, Military, Communism, Communists, Revolution, Socialism

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Transcript

Fidel Castro Discusses Panama, Noriega, and Human Rights in Cuba

MARIA SHRIVER reporting:

Fidel Castro rarely gives interviews to American television journalists. When he does, it's always for a specific reason. When we met him this week in Havana, he seemed most anxious to show us his Cuba, which he did for more than seven hours one day.

But by the end of the day, it became clear that Castro wanted to talk about recent allegations made against him before a Senate sub-committee looking into Central American drug traffic. The accusations were made by former Panamanian defense aide Jose Blandon, who charged among other things that Castro was an active partner with Panamanian military strongman Noriega in a drug smuggling operation.

Well, during much of the 4-hour interview, Castro laid out his scenario of a different conspiracy, a conspiracy that is based to effort to discredit Noriega and remove him because of his support for an agreement between former President Carter and former Panamanian President Torrijos to give back control of the Panama Canal to Panama in 1999. Castro believes Blandon was only one step in this conspiracy.

FIDEL CASTRO: It's dirty thing here. I believe that all of this anti-Noriega campaign is based on a great conspiracy – not against Noriega, but against the Torrijos-Carter agreements. The United States is simply pursuing a political purpose. They want to take over the canal because they want to separate the National Guard from the political role it's playing. I have the evidences that Blandon's lended Noriega miserably. Now then, he did so trying to deceive the Senate. Or are there people in the United States that place in Blandon's mouth these affirmations?

SHRIVER: Who? Who in the United States?

CASTRO: I don't know. Someone. It could be someone. Could be CIA. It could be the Department of State. Because it seems strange. Because it seems this is a whole conspiracy. And I think Blandon has

been bribed. Some say that he was given \$800,000, and the one that paid Bandon must be giving him instructions.

SHRIVER: So let me summarize, Mr. President. It is your theory that somebody bribed Jose Bandon to lie before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in order to discredit General Noriega.

CASTRO: Some of the things he said, I have irrefutable proof that he lied. I cannot pass judgment on all the things he said. But what I say is that several things he said are false. He had accused Noriega of bypassing the blockade, of warning Cuba before the invasion of Grenada, of being a spy, of drug trafficking, of asking me for advice to return some money. All those are lies and slanders.

SHRIVER: Throughout the evening, Castro waved his 800 pages of alleged evidence in front of us, allowing us to see it, but never to read it.

CASTRO: He lied in the Senate. I have irrefutable evidence of that. Because every time he came here, I have written that down and the transcription of all conversations.

SHRIVER: Do you tape these conversations?

CASTRO: I would simply say that I have the transcription. I'm not saying anything else. My evidences are irrefutable.

SHRIVER: Castro says he will only reveal the contents of his classified evidence to the senators investigating the case.

Would you be willing to go to the United States and testify in front of the Foreign Relations Committee about what you told me?

CASTRO: With my own security people, I'll go.

SHRIVER: To summarize, you'll be willing to let the United States senators look at all of your evidences, but you are not willing to go there with your evidence at this time.

CASTRO: I am ready to go. I am willing to go, but there's many other things – if they organize a schedule of things to be discussed. But don't tell me to travel because of this, because this is to kill a little bird with a cannon.

SHRIVER: Why are you coming out and supporting Noriega so much?

CASTRO: It is not the person of Noriega. That's not what is important. What is important is the independence, the sovereignty of Panama, the rights of Panama over the canal.

SHRIVER: But Bandon has testified that the relationship between Castro and Noriega is less ideological than it is convenient.

Bandon also testified that you needed Panama as a conduit to bypass the American trade embargo.

CASTRO: That's the biggest and most complete lie. Noriega has never cooperated with us in bringing any type of technology to Cuba.

SHRIVER: Has Noriega ever cooperated with you in exporting any kind of shrimp or tobacco from Cuba to the United States?

CASTRO: Noriega has never offered that type of cooperation, nor do we need it because we consider that we have the right to fight the blockade, because it is part of our morale. It is legitimate. And everything we can do to bypass the blockade, we will do. That's our right.

SHRIVER: Who does cooperate in bypassing the American trade embargo?

CASTRO: What do you want me to tell you? Those who cooperate with us? You want me to cooperate with the State Department? The Department of Commerce? The CIA? The government of the United States? No, I am not willing to cooperate with them. I will not tell them who cooperate with us. But I can tell you that Noriega has never cooperated with that. And that's the truth. And that's why I say there is a conspiracy. There is a shady, dirty conspiracy.

SHRIVER: Castro is relentless in his rejection of anything involving the United States, including its presence in Central America. He applauds Congress for rejecting Contra Aid funding and says he favors the Arias Peace Plan for Central America. Yet, he continues to support rebel forces in El Salvador and the Nicaraguan regime of his good friend Daniel Ortega.

If the Arias Peace Plan did call for an end of all foreign military support, that includes the United States, everybody, you would be prepared to withdraw your support as well?

CASTRO: I think that if it ceased, that is if all the military support ceases with all the direct and indirect participation in Central America, we would totally agree. Totally agree, without any discussion.

SHRIVER: As President and Commander-in-Chief, Castro rules his 10-million citizens with an iron hand. His revolution does not tolerate dissent or any form of political opposition. The high number of political prisoners who have told of suffering in Cuba's prisons have led many around the world to condemn Castro's human rights record.

CASTRO: All these campaigns of abuses, of violence, all that is a lie. It's a terrible slander. We have set a position within the revolution, not against the revolution.

SHRIVER: But what if they do disagree with the revolution and they're Cuban, why can't they stay here and voice their opinion?

CASTRO: No one forbids them to do it. No one forbids them, or no one forces them to stay.