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AIR MAIL

Habana, Cuba,
Feb. 17, 1941.

Personal Copy

Confidential

Dear Sumner:

I am able to send you really encouraging news. You know we have been discussing with the Cuban Government the desire of the Navy for increased facilities in connection with the Naval Base at Guantanamo, and more recently the desire of the Navy to carry on some exercises or maneuvers in Cuban territory in a specified area around our Naval Base. President Batista had a meeting on February 14th with Cortina, Ramos, Colonel Migoya, and I believe with Saladrigas and several others. I should like to say here that Cortina and Ramos had laid the background most carefully for this meeting, and Cortina saw that it was not held until he was sure that the result would be altogether satisfactory. At this meeting they discussed both the question of the increased facilities we want at the Base through the establishment of a complementary Cuban military zone around the Base, and also discussed the granting of permission for the exercises or maneuvers which the Navy wished to hold in a limited specified area of Cuban territory around the Naval Base.

During this meeting, Cortina was authorized to inform me for the Cuban Government that it was in agreement in principle on both questions, that there should be no difficulty with respect to details, that the Cuban Government wished to work out the matter in the most complete spirit of co-operation, and that I could work out the details with respect to both matters with Ramos, as Minister of Defense. I had a talk with Ramos today and find that they are not raising any difficult questions and are not trying to bargain in any way. I have worked very hard on this in preparing the ground and you can appreciate what it has involved. I am really very much pleased, not only because we have

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The Honorable
Sumner Welles,
Undersecretary of State,
Department of State,
Washington, D. C.

the favorable answer in both matters, but because of the spirit which has been shown by the Cubans in these conversations, which spirit has been one of the most complete and whole-hearted cooperation.

I am appending hereto the two despatches which I am sending on these matters. The one on the maneuvers I do not believe you need read as this is now a relatively simple matter. Bonsal informed me over the telephone on February 15th that I could work out the details with the Commander of the Atlantic Fleet directly, as it seems that he is in charge of the contemplated exercises.

The despatch on the extension of the facilities of the Naval Base, I believe you will wish to read as this matter is of primary interest to the Army and Navy and, as you know, the President has shown an interest therein. There may be questions in this connection which will arise in your confidential conferences with General Marshall and Admiral Stark. Now that we have their agreement to the establishment by them of the complementary Cuban military Zone around the Naval Base at Guantanamo, there are really important problems to work out. I am particularly interested to know whether the Department agrees with me that the arrangements should be completed for this through the exchange of notes rather than through a treaty. The Navy wants these facilities as soon as possible, and to do this through a treaty would require several months if we have to await ratification which, as you know, under the most favorable circumstances takes time.

At the same time it is significant of the real attitude of the Cuban Government that Saladrigas in the meeting with the President raised the question as to whether it would not be better to settle the Guantanamo facilities matter through the negotiation of a treaty of military alliance. It shows the real willingness of the Cuban Government to cooperate and to come out completely in the open. It was the idea, I think, of Saladrigas and, I believe, of Cortina that the negotiation of such a treaty of alliance would be very helpful to us as an example for others of the American Republics. Irrespective of these considerations, desirable as such a treaty might be, I believe that we should settle this matter of the Guantanamo facilities through an exchange of notes.

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I do not wish to burden you with detail, but I think it is important that if this is to be accomplished through an exchange of notes, the Navy should send me the necessary material without delay so that I can draft. Of course, the Department may prefer to do the drafting, which is quite agreeable to me if this course is preferred. What I want from the Navy is the detail which would have to be put into our note, or in the appendix thereto. We should get as much settled as possible in the original exchange of notes so that there will be no difficult questions arising afterwards.

It is really quite extraordinary that with respect to these additional facilities at Guantanamo, there has been no effort to bargain whatever. The only money involved, that I can see in the arrangement, is that we must, of course, pay for the land which the Cuban Government will expropriate in the complementary area at places where we will wish to put up gun emplacements. This amount should be small as the land is not worth much. No difficulty should arise through the expropriated sections remaining the property of the Cuban Government, even though we advance to the Cuban Government the money to pay for the expropriated lands. The Cuban Government has expressed a desire that this question of the expropriated lands be kept secret.

I would like to mention one point which you may find it desirable to take up with Admiral Stark. The Navy has in mind building some landing stages, machine shops, etc., in the Cuban complementary area adjoining Joa Bay. The landing stages are essential and some small repair facilities may have to be made available near these landing stages. It is my hope, however, that the Navy will put its permanent and important repair and other facilities in our Naval Base proper rather than in the complementary zone. This I think will save us difficulties in the end. The Navy may wish to insist on putting certain facilities in the complementary zone which I believe it would be desirable should be kept within the limits of the Naval Base proper.

You may wish to tell Admiral Stark that it would be desirable not to load up the agreement with anything more than is absolutely essential. Our main facilities should be kept in the Naval Base proper and the important thing is that we can carry on necessary operations in the complementary Cuban zone.

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I think President Roosevelt may have facilitated the solution of this Guantanamo matter very much. You will recall that I suggested to Concheso that he get President Batista's authorization before leaving here for Washington to say to President Roosevelt, when he saw him for the first time, that the Cuban Government was inclined to view favorably the establishment of this complementary Cuban zone around the Guantanamo Base. I understand that this question was raised during Concheso's conversation with the President and that what Concheso wrote here to President Batista did much to facilitate this satisfactory outcome.

I have suggested in both the appended despatches that the arrangements with respect to the establishment of a complementary zone, and for the maneuvers, be kept entirely confidential until they are completed and that whenever any announcement is made, eventually, it be done simultaneously by both Governments, or at least not by us until the Cuban Government has had a chance to do so. I am sure that you will agree as to the importance of this and see that it is impressed on the Navy.

Cortina made a speech at the Maine celebration on February 15th, at which Batista was present, in which he committed the Cuban Government to the most complete defense cooperation with us. This action by the Cuban Government on the two matters discussed in this letter is really most significant as it is a definite indication that they are not merely giving lip service to this idea of defense cooperation. Cortina, in a confidential conversation the other evening, said to me that he saw the whole picture in Europe very darkly, but whatever the outcome might be, there was only one path for Cuba to follow for a thousand reasons and that was one of the most frank and complete cooperation with us, not later, but now. This defense cooperation, he said, the Government was determined must be independent of the outcome of any conversations on economic or financial assistance. He said that President Batista had given orders that large groups of Cuban officers must learn English as rapidly as possible. If it came to trouble, Cuba could raise 300,000 men, and he wanted them to be in a position not only to have the men, but to fight and to be used effectively in the way we saw best.

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It is for this reason also that Batista and others are so interested in bringing Cuban officers and members of the armed forces in contact with our own people and they think that this complementary zone and the maneuvers will furnish an excellent beginning in this respect.

With all good wishes,

Cordially and faithfully yours,

GEORGE S. MESSERSMITH