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6309 – Cuban Situation

Guest: Senator John C. Stennis (D-MS)

Morphew: Introduction...chairman of the Senate's Preparedness Subcommittee currently holding hearings on the Cuban situation...welcome and thank you for coming and discussing this as much as security will allow...

Stennis: Thank you, Dick, and I'm delighted to be here, and it's well that we do put that condition here. I'm glad to answer any and all questions that you might have, but I am conducting a very sensitive hearing and a lot of this information is considered of value to the enemy and hurt our cause to be disclosing it and for that reason alone it is classified and I might not be able to fully answer every question for that reason.

Morphew: Generally, people across the country are in agreement that something needs to be done about Cuba, but they're not exactly sure what.

Stennis: Very much aware of that need the people are. I say that the common sense of the people speaks on this matter. That's the way I feel about it, it's just a matter of common sense that we must continue without abatement our efforts diligently, week after week, month after month, with the pressure in every way that we can to rid this hemisphere of this menace of armed Russian might right here at our shorelines.

Morphew: There have recently been reports of Russian-built jet fighter planes buzzing American aircraft and actually firing on that shrimp boat in international waters and yet the people are getting the impression that our people are being told not to shoot back...what is the situation there?

Stennis: Well, with reference to the firing on the shrimp boat the president did give the orders soon thereafter, immediately thereafter, to shoot back. Now, it's always a tickly

situation here, we don't want to give one inch, not one inch on any of these matters, leave them with the impression that they can get by with more and one step follow another, but these incidents sometimes the men are a little trigger happy, sometimes it's really not a clash. We must remember this, we are flying U2 missions over Cuba now. That's a very valuable asset for us with continued value to us, and these things balance off maybe, but I don't want us to give one bit with reference to our men being fired on and I don't think we will take such a position. First, they have a right of self-defense, and we're not going to tolerate any such attacks.

Morphew: Who is our real adversary in Cuba? Is it Castro or the Soviet Union?

Stennis: Oh, I think the Soviet Union now is the primary adversary or enemy there. They are there, too, with their armed might. They can take over Cuba themselves, readily. It kills off any chance for a successful uprising there. The Soviets are there in business to operate in every way they can and fan out with infiltration, sabotage, blackmail, and the taking over of other spots in the western hemisphere. I think without a doubt and that this will happen in the course of time unless we get them out of there. I think we make a mistake in arguing about offensive weapons and defensive weapons. That's not the issue. I think we make a mistake in arguing about whether it's 17,000 men or 20,000 or just how many guns there are. We know there are too many. In fact, 10 soldiers there is too many, but we also have, of course, Castro, too. He's our adversary and enemy and Castro communism. But the primary thing now is this Russian military might and this Soviet operations that's astride that island and they're going to leap frog into other places in the western hemisphere and take over other areas, I think, in the course of time, unless they are stopped.

Morphew: In the hearings that you've conducted to date, can you say whether the American military and diplomatic officials are in general agreement on our Cuban policy or is there some significant variance of opinion?

Stennis: Well, we haven't completed our hearings at all. I think we are going to get right down to the facts, by the way. We have our witnesses testifying under oath, they are highly confident men, they have a frankness about them that's encouraging and I think we are going to largely get to the bottom of the facts about what the situation is and what the policies have been and allowing for natural differences of opinion, why, our hearings so far have not disclosed any glaring differences that are alarming, but this matter of interpreting intelligence that you gather from variance sources and evaluating it is often more difficult than the gathering of the information. It's very difficult and there's no such thing as exactness. So, I think that we are going to get to the bottom of the matter and bring out a picture of what our problem was last fall and what it is now, which is even more important. And I believe we are going to contribute in getting a legislative opinion on this matter, and thereby contribute to a hard, firm policy that will stop this advance on our hemisphere and get those Russians out of there and also continue to cope with Castro.

Morphew: There are some in the executive branch who would have the public believe that such decisions on foreign policy should be left to the executive branch...there are

people in the legislative branch who criticize any criticism of foreign policy of being destructive our historic bipartisanship...what is your thought on this?

Stennis: Well, my idea about the foreign policy is this, our form of government places the primary responsibility for the ultimate foreign policy on the executive branch of the government, but certainly the legislative branch has a great say-so and responsibility. For instance, the Senate has to approve all treaties. It has to confirm all appointments to the foreign service, ambassadors and others. And then we have a broad responsibility, the entire Congress, for sound policies, basic policies, and we have to know the facts, the real facts, and that's what our committee is trying to do. We are trying to get the basic facts that are necessary to form sound conclusions and then, I've never said we wanted to set aside the executive branch, I said we could contribute to a sound, strong, hard foreign policy on this matter, a firm policy on this matter, that would yield results. And I think that's clear and we're following that course anyway.

Morphew: With the facts as they are known today, if it were within your power to deal with this problem, what would you do?

Stennis: Well, you can't handle these things quickly nor easily. I think an intensified economic pressure on Cuba itself and on Russia's activities there, appealing to our western allies, our Latin American allies, to really isolate them, ostracize them economically, is number one. Number two would be all kinds of diplomatic pressure, from our allies in Latin American countries too, to continue from week to week and day to day, this economic pressure and our government giving the riddance of these, this Russian power down there, the first priority, the highest priority in our foreign relation affairs and the continued pressure, week after week, month after month on, as long as it was necessary, with a firm policy to make them know that we were going to continue this demand even to the extent of a blockade again, if necessary, and we were not going to yield and we were ready to back up whatever consequences might come. And I say that takes time, but once we firmly resolve to do that, far it to the limit, I think we'd get results.

Morphew: Do you believe the Soviet Union is bluffing somewhat in its military buildup in Cuba, or do you believe they would fight rather than pull out its troops and material?

Stennis: Well, I think they'll go just as far as they possibly can. I believe, though, that they would not go to war with us over Cuba. I don't believe they'll start a war. If they want to start a war on us, I don't believe they will start it in Cuba where we would have advantage. But this thing is fraught, there's always some danger, and there's danger in this matter, but we must face it.