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FOUR DAYS BEFORE DALLAS: JFK IN TAMPA

by Frank DeBenedictis

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States, visited the Tampa Bay area on the eighteenth of November in 1963, just four days before his assassination in Dallas. When medical officials announced Kennedy's death at 1:00 p.m. central standard time on November 22, a feeling of shock, disbelief and mourning engulfed the American public. This was, of course, true for the Tampa Bay area, perhaps even more so because of the President's recent visit. Sunshine state residents had seen this handsome, charismatic president only four days earlier. The suddenness of Kennedy's death by assassination became, for Tampa Bay, a harbinger for turbulent times in the Sixties, the defining moment for the decade to follow.

On November 18, 1963, a sunny Florida day, there was no indication of what was to follow four days later. The visit to Tampa went smoothly, as reported in the November 18 and 19 editions of the major newspapers. Locally, optimism and boosterism prevailed, as Suncoast citizens prepared to welcome the President. Both public and parochial schools granted excused absences for students anxious to get a glimpse of JFK. Presidential watchers in St. Petersburg boarded "bus motorcades" destined for Al Lopez Field for a Presidential rendezvous. *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Don Meikeljohn wrote, "The best spot will be at Al Lopez Field, located at Dale Mabry Boulevard and Tampa Bay Boulevard in Tampa."¹

While Suncoast residents moved into their stadium and motorcade viewing spots, the Presidential party was landing at MacDill Air Force Base for a military welcome. On hand to greet Kennedy were General Paul D. Adams, Commander in Chief U.S. Strike Command; Lieutenant General Bruce K. Holloway, Adams' deputy; General Walter Sweeney, Commander of TAC and headquartered at Langley A.F.B., Virginia; and General John K. Waters, Commander in Chief Continental Army Command, Ft. Monroe, Virginia. Congressmen and other dignitaries on hand included U.S. Senator George Smathers, Congressman Sam Gibbons of Tampa, Congressman Dante Fascell of Monroe County, Congressman Claude Pepper of Dade County, and Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce President and General Manager of the Tribune Company James H. Covey, Jr. Tanned and healthy, the President greeted the MacDill crowd at 11:45 a.m. The Commander in Chief, accompanied by Strike Command Chief Paul D. Abrams, proceeded to inspect the Army and Air Force honor guards. The rest of the day would be spent politicking in visits to selected locations and riding in a motorcade through Tampa.²

Ask any contemporary Democratic politician why Kennedy went to Tampa, and he will respond that it was because the President's reelection campaign needed desperately to carry Florida, a state he had lost to Richard Nixon in 1960 by only 46,776 votes out of 1,544,180 total ballots. Thus, Kennedy's visit was meant to strengthen his position in politically conservative Florida. His position in the South concerned party officials, which explains why his November schedule included trips to both Texas and Florida. The South's two most populous states were crucial to the President's 1964 re-election chances.³

PROPOSED PROGRAM

TAMPA – MIAMI Nov. 18, 1963

10:45 a.m. Depart residence, Palm Beach, Fla.

11:10 a.m. Airborne for Tampa, Florida

11:45 a.m. Arrive MacDill AFB Receive brief military honors,
motor to STRIKE Hdq. 3/4 mil. – 2 min.

11:55 a.m. Arrive STRIKE Hdq. (Briefing Army-Air Force)

12:10 p.m. Depart STRIKE Hdq.

12:15 p.m. Arrive Officers Club – luncheon 30 military, 30
civilians

1:15 p.m. Depart Offices Club – 150 yards to heliport

1:20 p.m. Depart heliport (5-7 min.)

1:30 p.m. Arrive Lopez Baseball Field
20 min. program – President will speak

50th Anniv. Tony Jannus Flight – St. Pete-Tampa

1:55 p.m. Depart Lopez Field – motorcade through Tampa – 7.5
miles. – 45 min.

2:40 p.m. Arrive Fort Homer Hesterly – Armory

2:45 p.m. Armory program begins – 45 min.

3:30 p.m. Depart Armory – motor – 3 mi. 10 min. (escort)

3:40 p.m. Arrive International Inn (address 600 union members)

3:55 p.m. Depart International Inn (motor 9.1 miles. – 25 min.
escort)

4:20 p.m. Depart MacDill AFB (40 min. – Miami – AF 1)

5:00 p.m. Arrive Concourse #1, Miami International Airport.
Rally – 30 min.

5:35 p.m. Depart Concourse #1 via helicopter – 15 min.

5:50 p.m. Arrive Americana Hotel – Miami Beach

6:50 p.m. Attend John S. Knight Cocktail party

7:00 p.m. Inter-American Press Association Dinner begins

8:00 p.m. President will address dinner guests

8:30 p.m. Depart Americana Hotel – helicopter – 15 min.

8:45 p.m. Arrive Concourse #1, Miami International Airport

8:50 p.m. Airborne for Washington, D.C.

10:50 p.m. Arrive Andrews AFB - helicopter

11:00 p.m. Arrive south grounds White House

President Kennedy's proposed itinerary for November 18, 1963.



President Kennedy speaking at Al Lopez Field on November 18, 1963. Congressman Sam Gibbons is seated to his left.

Photograph courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library.

The President's first and only speaking appearance open to the general public in Tampa was at Al Lopez Field. His entourage flew there from MacDill by helicopter. Kennedy touched on several topics, but in a style true to his New Frontier image, the President emphasized that the day was the fiftieth anniversary of commercial flight in the United States. He praised pioneering Tampa Bay pilot Tony Jannus. Ten thousand people in attendance cheered as he commemorated that day in 1913 when a hydroplane loaded with a passenger and groceries flew from St. Petersburg to Tampa. Reiterating his New Frontier theme, the President noted that, "in the 1970s giant supersonic airlines will be speeding across country at three times the speed of sound." After another round of cheers, he continued speaking and focused on some serious national – and local – issues.

One topic of particular importance to Tampa Bay was the omnipresent Communist regime in Cuba just ninety miles from Key West. Tampa's large, long established Cuban-American community and its recently settled Cuban exile population eagerly awaited Kennedy's next confrontation with Castro. Kennedy's awareness of Florida and Tampa connections to Latin American affairs can be traced back to the fifties. While running for President in 1960, he changed the place of his Alliance for Progress speech from San Antonio, Texas, to Tampa, Florida, and he strengthened his image as a cold warrior in a campaign speech at the Hillsborough County courthouse.⁵



President Kennedy speaking at Al Lopez Field, greeting local dignataties, including Congressman Sam Gibbons at whom he is looking.

Photograph courtesy of *La Gazeta*.

Three years later, JFK complimented the Cuban exiles at his Al Lopez Field speech, remarking that they “had borne a heavy burden during last year's Cuban Missile crisis.” He also gave special thanks and recognition to the 3,000 cigar workers in Tampa put out of work when the U.S. began its embargo against Cuban tobacco as part of a policy to isolate Fidel Castro. The President candidly assessed American military actions against the Castro regime, underscoring the Communist regime’s stubborn resistance. “But,” the President added, “a measure of success has been achieved in isolating the island.”⁶

Following the Al Lopez Field address, the Presidential entourage headed toward the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory on Howard Avenue. A crowd of four thousand businessmen, invitees of the Florida Chamber of Commerce, listened to the President discuss economic policy. Kennedy defended Democratic programs against critics. “With the new figures on corporate profits after taxes having reached an all time high – running some 43 per cent higher than they were 3 years ago – they still suspect us of being opposed to private profit. With the most stable price level of any comparable economic recovery in our history they still fear we are promoting inflation.” Kennedy’s speech did not go over very well with the conservative business community. They praised the President for his frankness, but most left unimpressed with his economic policy.

Although the reception of the conservative Armory crowd differed markedly from the greeting JFK had received at Al Lopez Field, both gatherings approved his comments about Communist

Cuba. Kennedy returned to this theme at the Armory, admitting to the business gathering that “the efforts of the United States have not been too successful so far.” But he added, “The United States has drawn together with other nations of the hemisphere to isolate the virus of Communism in Cuba.” The President continued his Cold War rhetoric, pointing out that “In 1959 the trade of the Free World with Cuba was about \$1.3 billion; now it is only one-third of that.” The business gathering received a stern presidential warning about irresponsible foreign policy acts. Although Kennedy lamented that Castro had not been removed, he warned of the Cuban dictator’s close ties to the Soviet Union. Any action leading to Soviet involvement, the President warned, could “involve the possibility of war.”⁷

Following his speech at the armory, the Presidential convoy headed to the International Inn on Grand Central Boulevard for a handshaking and speaking engagement with the United Steelworkers of America. Ironically, Grand Central Boulevard would soon become Kennedy Boulevard. John Kennedy has been both eulogized and criticized for his public openness with large crowds. After his assassination, this point was brought home more frequently than in the past. The crowd at the International Inn deeply appreciated the warmth of the President. When the motorcade arrived, the President stepped out, walked into the hotel, and was immediately spotted by a bell boy who yelled, “This way Mr. President.” Kennedy immediately went over and shook hands with several bell boys and clerks at the desk. After this typical friendly encounter with the hotel staff, he proceeded with another speech. His talk to the membership of the United Steelworkers of America focused on enemies of the labor movement’s bygone days, and the history of progressive labor legislation. The enthusiastic steelworkers listened as Kennedy praised organized labor and its tradition of progress. He reminded them that “the same people who fought against the progressive legislation of the 1930s are now fighting new legislation such as Medicare, aid to higher education and Civil Rights.” Estimates of attendance at the union meeting were about 1,000 persons. The labor gathering also listened to the tax-cut theme heard earlier in the day by businessmen.⁸

Following the union address, the President enjoyed a motorcade ride. Tampa streets bustled as residents and visiting Floridians expressed their adulation for the young handsome leader. It was a fast moving, hand waving motorcade highlighted by the Kennedy smile. The motorcade lasted forty-five minutes and marked the end of the Tampa visit. His entourage proceeded from MacDill Air Force Base to Miami for an evening visit.⁹

The Kennedy visit engendered extensive commentary from the local newspapers. The local editors saw the event as a milestone, the first Presidential visit to the area. On the morning of his arrival, the *Tribune* in its banner editorial had stated, “His visit reported as it will be by newspaper, television and radio correspondents will help millions throughout the country learn something about Tampa.” The *Tribune* continued, “With the nation’s eyes upon us, let us do honor both to the nation’s highest office and to Tampa’s long tradition of hospitality by saying: Welcome, Mr. President.”¹⁰

The day after the visit, the *St. Petersburg Times* reiterated the *Tribune*’s hospitality theme. “If for no other reason than the rarity of the occasion – the first time an incumbent Chief Executive visited this area – the warmth of the overflow crowd greeting President Kennedy at Al Lopez Field yesterday was not unexpected.” In the same editorial, Florida Governor Farris Bryant



The Kennedy motorcade in Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of John F. Kennedy Library.

reinforced the local commentary. As proof of the administration's support for Florida, he cited the location of the Strike Command at MacDill Air Force Base, the giant space age complex at Cape Canaveral, the federal program of aid for Cuban refugees in the state, and the President's leadership in resurrecting the long dormant Cross-State Barge Canal.¹¹

Security for the Presidential trip went well. The Tampa police alone supplied 200 of the department's approximately 270 uniformed force. Law enforcement officers from the state, six counties, and the cities of St. Petersburg and Clearwater assisted. Four hundred men from federal law enforcement agencies, such as the U.S. Air Force, also saw duty during this Presidential Visit.¹² Since the visit seemed to go over so well, there appeared to be no need to report that arrests were made of persons making threats to the President's life. These arrests surfaced later.

Kennedy's strategy to use the Florida trip as a future political dividend appeared successful as the Presidential motorcade wove its way through city streets. Receptions at all three Tampa stopovers proved warm. The majority did like their President. Their warm reception attested to this. But the extremists also had their day.

One negative political ad appeared in the *Tampa Tribune* on November 18. In bold one-half inch high letters appeared an exclamation addressed, "TO THE PEOPLE OF TAMPA." Signed "TAMPA'S CUBAN EXILES," the advertisement declared: "Today, The President of the

United States visits the city of Tampa. We Cubans, that have lost our liberty crushed under the Military boot of International Communism would like to take this opportunity to remind the people of the United States and its President that Cuba is fighting again for her independence ...and again with the indifference of all the great nations of the free world.” The end of the ad urged people to listen to the echoes of the voice of Cuban hero José Martí in the streets of Tampa and called for war on communism.¹³

Two important lessons may be learned from JFK’s Tampa visit. One involves the importance and diversity of the Cuban community in the reaction to JFK. The other suggests widespread dissension toward the President by Cuban exiles – in Tampa, Miami, and along the way to and including Dallas, where the President ultimately met his death. The authors of the ad did not address the President directly, but it remained one of two large prominently displayed ads that greeted the President on his stops in the South. The other appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* on November 22. It took up an entire page and was sponsored by a radical right wing organization called the American Fact Finding Committee. A large heading read “WELCOME MR. KENNEDY.” The contents were very negative and vehemently criticized his administration. This ad became famous because it appeared in the Warren Commission Report.¹⁴

While the ad from “Tampa’s Cuban Exiles” was negative, it was hardly representative of Tampa’s Cuban-American feelings toward President Kennedy. In 1960, when then Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts had paid a visit to Tampa, he fully understood the importance of Latin American affairs to this city, as he entered a community that had a Cuban tradition dating back to the 1880s. Up until the Cuban diaspora of the 1960s, Tampa, not Miami, was the Florida city most often associated with people of Cuban heritage. Tampa’s oldest Cuban community had a heightened sense of class consciousness and a radical political tradition, which sparked strikes in several different decades. Prominent Tampeños, such as Victoriano Manteiga, editor and publisher of the influential *La Gaceta*, offered early support for Fidel Castro, who raised money for the 26th of July movement in Tampa in addition to some larger American cities.¹⁵ And finally there was the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

In the Warren Commission report on the assassination of President Kennedy, the name V.T. Lee appears on numerous occasions. He had received letters from accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald in the summer of 1963 asking for a New Orleans charter for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). Lee at the time was the national director for the FPCC. What the Warren Report did not say was the V.T. Lee had been Tampa director of the FPCC before he took the national director position. The Tampa chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee was very active in the early 1960s. It was roundly criticized by a *Tampa Tribune* editorial, and V.T. Lee wrote a letter to the editor, which was published in the paper on April 12, 1961. Lee defended his organization, while telling the Tampa daily and the United States government to keep out of Cuban affairs. Three days later came the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion. The ill-fated strike against Fidel Castro proved to be one of the low points of the Kennedy administration.¹⁶

Tampa’s Cuban community was composed by and large of third-and fourth-generation Americans, and many considered themselves more American than Cuban. Yet Tampa’s ethnic enclaves still maintained strong ties to Cuba. When Kennedy paid his final visit to Tampa, Cuban Americans were among the many faces at Al Lopez Field and in the motorcade crowds

who cheered the President. They were also present at both Fort Homer Hesterly Armory and the International Inn. The extremists of both the left (Fair Play for Cuba Committee) and the right (the anti-Castro faction) constituted the minority, albeit a highly vocal minority. This minority, especially the right wing, was not an isolated Tampa phenomenon, but rather indicative of the disenchantment with Kennedy's policies.

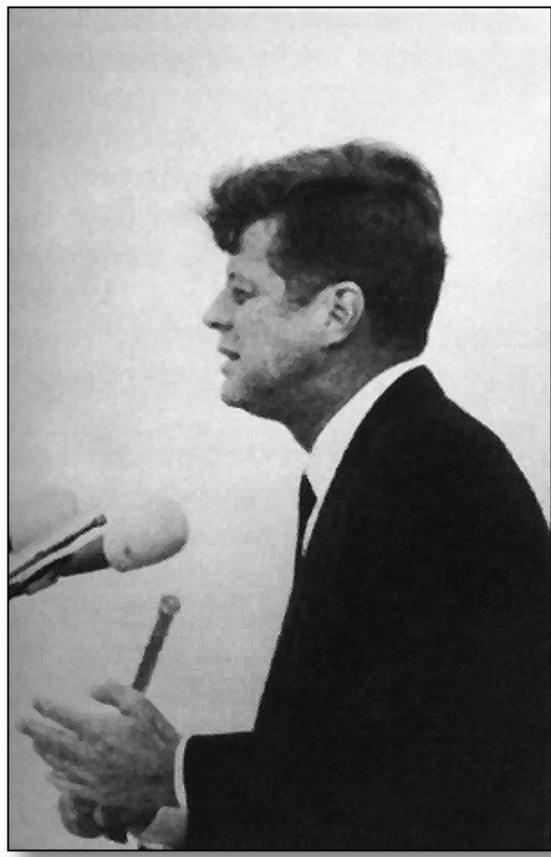
While some hostility existed among members of the Cuban community toward President John F. Kennedy, it proved to be a very small and disconsolate minority. Kennedy's support in the Tampa Cuban community was strong. *La Gaceta*, a local Tampa weekly based in Ybor City, showed this in its reportage on the Kennedy visit. Ybor City was a Democratic and Kennedy stronghold. While Kennedy had lost the state of Florida in the 1960 election, he carried Hillsborough County by nearly 14,000 votes. He beat Nixon in Ybor City and West Tampa precincts by margins of up to ten to one.¹⁷

In 1963 the Cuban community in Tampa again expressed its adulation for the President. Kennedy became an honorary prime minister of Ybor City during his final visit. The President accepted the award with gratitude. Kennedy added his wit and humor as he accepted the honorary position, citing additional gratitude for the fact that there was no Congress involved.

La Gaceta's favorable account of Kennedy's visit appeared on November 22 the day of the assassination. But *La Gaceta* had anticipated the visit of the head of the state and ran articles in the November 15 issue. The paper noted, "This humble weekly was the only newspaper in this city to endorse Mr. Kennedy in 1960. While we have not been in accord with a number of his administration policies, we believe that his administration, in the long run will prove to be beneficial to the majority of Americans." *La Gaceta* showed an unbridled loyalty to JFK when it added, "*La Gaceta*, which has always supported the Democratic Party and its presidential nominees will do so again in 1964." So it could easily be said that not only did the majority of Cuban-Americans in fact support their President, but outside of local Democratic Party loyalists, they were probably Kennedy's strongest supporters in Tampa. As *La Gaceta* remarked in its November 22 edition, "Tampa Bay's Latins forgot their Spanish long enough to express a 'Shurr and 'tis glad we are to have ye' in the good old Irish way." This endorsement probably was reassuring to a President with the Bay of Pigs still fresh in the memory of many and as he continued making fence-mending trips in an area with a strong Latin constituency.¹⁸

President Kennedy boarded the plane at MacDill Air Force Base for Miami at approximately 4:20 p.m. on November 18. The plane arrived at Miami International Airport at 5:00 p.m., where a thirty-minute rally took place. The President then departed for the Americana Hotel in Miami Beach where he spoke at an important Latin-American gathering – the dinner of the Inter-American Press Association. In Miami the President reiterated the themes that had dominated his trip to Tampa. He talked of Latin American, and particularly Cuban affairs, in Miami's glitzy Americana Hotel just as he had done at his Tampa stops. President Kennedy pledged at Miami Beach that the United States will fight for "any Western Hemisphere nation the Russians or other Communists take over." The President went on in his appeal to assure the Latin-American editors that the "U. S. will not permit establishment of another Cuba in the Western Hemisphere."¹⁹

His speech charmed the Latin American editors, but a few rough moments interrupted the festivities at the Americana. Seventeen Cuban women appealed to President John F. Kennedy to allow the large Miami based Cuban-exile constituency to combat communism without the harassment of the U.S. government. This appeal was circulated at the Inter-American Press Association meeting at the Americana Hotel. The petition went on to chastise the government for “drastically stopping the exiles’ anti-Communist activities in the U.S., thus closing the only avenue open to us to fight communism and assist our countrymen.” The Bay of Pigs operation and many subsequent operations had been based out of the Miami area. Many of the military excursions against Cuba after the Bay of Pigs were shut down under the Kennedy administration. Along with the women attending and who had circulated the petition, other groups of editors were interviewed and expressed the opinion that Kennedy’s image had been tarnished. Editors pointed to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Many felt the U.S. should have initiated a total blockade of Cuba which they felt would have brought Fidel Castro to his knees. The print media’s reaction to the Florida trip thus started with a strong November 15 endorsement by *La Gaceta* and finished with an appearance in Miami where Latin American editors criticized the President for not taking a strong enough stand against Fidel Castro.²⁰



President Kennedy speaking in Miami on November 18, 1963.

Photograph courtesy of Dade County Archive.

After the assassination on November 22, a proliferation of news stories followed in daily newspapers. For Tampa and Miami there were, in addition, several articles detailing arrests made in Tampa during the President’s visit. On November 23, the *Tampa Tribune* noted that security had been tight for the President’s Tampa visit. The story told of fastidious preparations taken by the Secret Service, the Tampa police, the Air Police at MacDill, and the other area supportive forces. The Secret Service sent an advance party one week ahead of the President. The motorcade route through Tampa was reviewed by the Secret Service at 3 a.m. one morning.

Edward Stern, one of the owners of the International Inn where Steelworkers welcomed Kennedy, said the Secret Service had left no stone unturned. At MacDill, Lieutenant Glen Hudson, law enforcement officer said, “More than half of the 150 Air Police were detailed to the President’s visit here.” Guards were posted for all-night watches at Al Lopez Field and at the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory. Tampa police prepared for the visit and took extra security precautions. They were also joined by officers from the St. Petersburg and Clearwater police.²¹

When a President travels, it is normal procedure to take extra precautions, including the investigation of threatening calls. The *Tampa Tribune* mentioned several threats on the President's life and subsequent arrests made in the past, in December 1960, May 1963, and October 1963. Some of these persons had been committed for mental observation. But something special happened in Tampa on the Monday Kennedy visited the Cigar City. Undisclosed on the day of the visit was the fact that Tampa police and the Secret Service had scanned the crowd for an unidentified man who had vowed to assassinate the President on his visit that Monday. Both the police and the government agency whose main function was to protect the nation's chief executive scanned the Tampa crowds for this man. In addition to the unidentified man, Police Chief J.P. Mullins reported other threats against the President's life. When Kennedy came to Tampa, there had been threats made by three other individuals. According to the *Miami Herald*, Mullins had been quoted as saying that he had advised his men that there were three other persons making threats against the President, including the man held in custody. Mullins could not be reached for comment about this, and the FBI and Secret Service would not comment either. One thing certain about these reports is that they would have had little meaning if the President had not been assassinated, or if there had not been an assassination attempt against him.²²

After the assassination, much of this changed. Starting with the articles appearing in the *Tampa Tribune* and the *Miami Herald*, questions relating to Presidential security became more common. An American public which had grown accustomed to Presidential visits characterized by the routine motorcade, speeches, luncheons, and dedications, now experienced something unprecedented in modern American society – the assassination of a President. What started out as political fence-mending trip for John Fitzgerald Kennedy ended in the President's untimely and unnatural death and a subsequent change in power. For the residents and observers in the Tampa Bay area, the event proved to be especially shocking since they had experienced a very traditional Presidential visit by JFK just four days earlier.

Kennedy's visit to Tampa was a milestone for an area which to that point in time had never been visited by a U.S. President. John Kennedy valued his Tampa Bay constituents as much as they valued his visit. He entered social and geographical areas with a spirit of rapprochement. These geographical areas were later shown to have hostile elements toward his administration's practices. Just as the local newspapers reported the earlier death threats – some of which had seemed inconsequential – after the assassination occurred, the historian's discourse should include those who disliked the President as well as the majority who adored him. America's role in the Cold War created divisiveness at home and evidence of this emerged in Kennedy's visit to Tampa four days before Dallas.

¹ *St. Petersburg Times*, November 18, 1963, p. B-2.

² *Tampa Tribune*, November 17, 1963, p. 10-A; *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1963, p. A-1.

³ "Why Camelot Came to Tampa: JFK Four Days Before Dallas," *Tampa Bay Life*, p. 45; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, November 18, 1963.

⁴ *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1963, p. A-1.

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 183.

⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1963, p. A-1.

⁷ *Tampa Tribune*, November 17, 1963, p. 10-A; *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1963, pp. 12-A and 13-A; *Tampa Tribune*, November 19, 1963, p. 12-A.

⁸ *Tampa Tribune*, November 19, 1963, p. 12-A.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Tampa Tribune*, November 18, 1963, p. 12-A.

¹¹ *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1963, p. 12-A.

¹² *St. Petersburg Times*, November 19, 1963, p. B-1.

¹³ Advertisement in the *Tampa Tribune*, November 18, 1963.

¹⁴ *The Warren Commission Report: Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, p. 294.

¹⁵ L. Glenn Westfall, "Retention of Cuban Culture in Tampa," in *Ethnic Minorities in Gulf Coast Societies*, ed. by Jerrell H. Shofner and Linda V. Ellsworth (Pensacola, Florida, 1978), 71-73.

¹⁶ Warren Report, p. 407; *Tampa Tribune*, April 12, 1961.

¹⁷ "Why Camelot Came to Tampa," p. 46.

¹⁸ *La Gaceta*, November 15, 22, 1963.

¹⁹ *Miami Herald*, November 19, 1963, p. 1-A.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2-AW

²¹ *Tampa Tribune*, November 23, 1963, p. 1-B.

²² *Ibid.*; *Miami Herald*, November 24, 1963, p. 2-A.