

'Good Lord protected me' from death, Castro quips

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro quipped that comments by President Bush on Thursday helped him finally figure out how he escaped so many assassination attempts: through the grace of God.

"Now I understand why I survived Bush's plans and those of presidents who ordered my assassination," Castro joked in a short essay distributed via e-mail to international media in Havana.

"The good Lord protected me," Castro said sarcastically, echoing Bush's own words on the 80-year-old leader's eventual demise.

"One day the good Lord will take Fidel Castro away," Bush said earlier Thursday in response to questions following a speech at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island.

When the audience applauded, Bush said, "No, no, no," evidently to indicate that his statement was not a wish for Castro's death.

Bush told the group that his administration would ``continue to press for freedom on the island of Cuba."

Castro's citing divine intervention on his behalf was most likely just a rhetorical device. Although the communist was educated at Roman Catholic schools in his youth, unlike Bush, he rarely mentions God or religious matters.

Cuba has maintained diplomatic relations with the Vatican since the revolution that came to power in 1959. But the government was officially atheist for several decades until the early 1990s, when the constitution was changed and believers for the first time were allowed to join the Communist Party.

Bush's comments and Castro's response come just one day after newly declassified papers were released showing that the CIA recruited a former FBI agent to approach two of America's most-wanted mobsters and give them poisonous pills meant for Castro during his first year in power.

Contained among hundreds of pages of CIA internal reports collectively dubbed "the family jewels," the official confirmation of the 1960 plot against Castro was welcomed by communist authorities as more proof of their long-standing claims that the United States wants Castro dead.