

## After 87 Hijackings, An Agreement With Cuba

For years Cuba complained that the United States was committing, sanctioning or—by remediable laxness—permitting two kinds of acts harmful to the security and sovereignty of Cuba. One was armed raids by exiles; the other was escapes by disaffected Cubans. The complaints were essentially true, although the scope of American complicity has altered over time. Successive presidents were trying, if not to topple Fidel Castro or subvert his rule, then to prevent him from stabilizing his rule. Attempts to stigmatize Castro as an outlaw and to expel him from the inter-American system constituted the formal diplomatic aspect of this policy. Hospitality to fleeing Cubans, amounting to an invitation, constituted an informal political aspect.

Havana responded in three ways. It went to Moscow, giving the Kremlin its first Latin presence and client—a matter which took on apocalyptic dimensions in the 1962 missile crisis but which has since, one hopes, been tamed by detente. Second, Havana took up the cause of Latin revolution; having failed, perhaps being wiser, Castro now limits most of his support for the cause to rhetoric. Finally, Havana demanded that the United States stop permitting disaffected Cubans—“illegals” or “criminals” to Havana, “political refugees” to Washington—to enter the United States. Taking the view that it was Fidel’s problem, the U.S. turned a deaf ear.

The situation might have gone on unchanged but for the airplane hijackings, especially the two especially terrifying cases last fall. There can be no serious argument that it was the American policy of “isolating” Cuba which forced the Cubans into the unwanted role of being viewed by American criminals and psychopaths as a good place, the only convenient place, to hijack a plane. Such people, Havana has correctly observed, “saw our country as a site where the U.S. itself had destroyed all legal international instruments to act against them.” Through 85 “successful” hijackings the United States tolerated these consequences of its isolation policy, without, of course, conceding that they were the consequences. But

the especially flagrant and bloody nature of the 86th and 87th passed the limits of Mr. Nixon’s toleration.

Political considerations no doubt played a part but it was plainly the last two hijackings which provided the President the impetus (and also the cushion of public support) for opening hijack talks with the Cubans. In turn this gave the Cubans the necessary leverage and opportunity to open talks with the United States on “illegal exits.” The result of these negotiations, conducted through the helpful Swiss, was yesterday’s agreement on hijacking “and other offenses,” the first Cuban-American accord of any sort since Castro came to power in 1959.

The agreement would seem to enable each country to grant asylum to individuals it characterizes as political refugees and to require both countries to prosecute or extradite individuals who commit violence in their flight or escape. The language, deliberately ambiguous, presumably is reinforced by understandings which are not yet part of the public record. Experience will show the precise meaning and effectiveness of the agreement. Until then, one can hope it works.

In a *macho* spirit which (fortunately) he is too intelligent to apply to big adversaries, Mr. Nixon has insisted that he would not change American policy toward little Cuba until Cuba changed its policy “toward Latin America and the United States.” Well, the new agreement is concrete evidence of a change of Cuban policy in a matter of special import for Americans. It should allow Mr. Nixon to unbend towards Cuba and seek out further paths of accommodation: how silly to deal with Peking and Moscow but not Havana.

The new agreement is also concrete evidence of a change of American policy towards Cuba: Mr. Nixon found it necessary and fruitful to deal with one of Cuba’s serious grievances in order to have Havana deal with one of the United States own. We salute the President for his insight and initiative in taking this first crucial step toward ending a policy of isolation whose bankruptcy should have been officially recognized years ago. What a pity it took 87 hijackings.