

Clayton Fritchey

The Cuba Connection

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On Feb. 1, 1973, President Nixon promised to give "priority attention" to inter-American co-operation. During the ensuing year, not a single Latin American head of state was invited to Washington, and Mr. Nixon called off his own projected tour of the region.

So, in comparison to 1973, the administration's approach this year to the southern half of the Western Hemisphere is at least off to some kind of a start. The results of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's conference in Mexico City with the foreign ministers of Latin America are not exactly historic, but it can be said we're now in communication for a change.

From Mr. Nixon's point of view, Dr. Kissinger's chief accomplishment was doubtless his success in keeping relations with Cuba off the agenda as well as out of the final communique. The secretary made it clear that, important as Cuba may be to the Organization of American States, he couldn't talk about it. He didn't have to explain that he's forbidden to mention the subject. The reason was obvious.

It is not obvious, however, even to some of Mr. Nixon's Republican supporters, why he has—or seems to have—such a fixation about Cuba. Rep. Charles Whalen (R-Ohio), a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee who thinks it's time for a new Cuba policy, recently offered some possible explanations for the President's inflexibility.

"Some claim," Whalen said, "that the President's unfavorable impression of Fidel Castro, stemming from his 1959 private conference with the Cuban leader at the United Nations, still lingers. Others maintain that the President is strongly influenced by his Cuban-American neighbors in Florida. Still another version has it that the President does not take kindly to the savage treatment accorded him in the Cuban press." Whatever the reason, Whalen added, "I believe the time is right for the President to come to grips with this nagging issue."

Many others, including prominent Republican business leaders, think so, too. My own view is that Mr. Nixon's "inflexibility" is more political than personal, and that when he decides the time is right he will come to terms

with Fidel Castro, just as he did with Chairmen Mao and Brezhnev.

In Mexico City, Dr. Kissinger, it should be noted, was allowed to subscribe to "the principle that every state has the right to choose its own political, economic and social system without foreign interference, and that it is the duty of every state to refrain from intervention in the affairs of another."

That is a radical departure from the policy of Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. It was Gen. Eisenhower who said upon breaking relations with Cuba on Jan. 3, 1961, that the United States could not and would not tolerate an island of communism in its midst. It was Kennedy who sponsored the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. It was L. B. J. who not only isolated Cuba but also ordered the invasion of the Dominican Republic.

Mr. Nixon, it must be conceded, has kept hands off. In regard to Latin America as a whole, he has, with some justice, been accused of both malign and benign neglect, but if he survives impeachment, it is a good bet that the President will find a way of resuming normal relations with Cuba.

It is doubtful that the 25 foreign ministers at the Mexico conference really understood the domestic political problems presently confronting Mr. Nixon and Kissinger. Because their detente with Russia is momentarily a little frayed at the edges, these old hardliners find themselves accused of being soft on communism. So, for the time being, they are not going to play into their critics' hands by recognizing Communist Cuba.

Nevertheless, recognition eventually will come, not only because it makes sense but because the Democrats have given the President the green light to get on with it, as they did with the Russian and Chinese rapprochements. In recent days, both Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and the assistant majority leader, Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia, have called for "normalizing" relations with Cuba, which ensures the

President against partisan criticism when, and if he comes to terms with Castro.

In the 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy took a harder line on Castro than Mr. Nixon, who condemned any Cuban intervention in these prophetic words: "We would lose all of our friends in Latin America; we would probably be condemned in the United Nations, and we would not accomplish our objective . . . It would be an open invitation for Mr. Khrushchev to come in . . . and to engage us in what would be a civil war and possibly even worse than that." It was one of the best predictions Mr. Nixon ever made.

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Joseph Alsop is on vacation. His column will resume upon his return.