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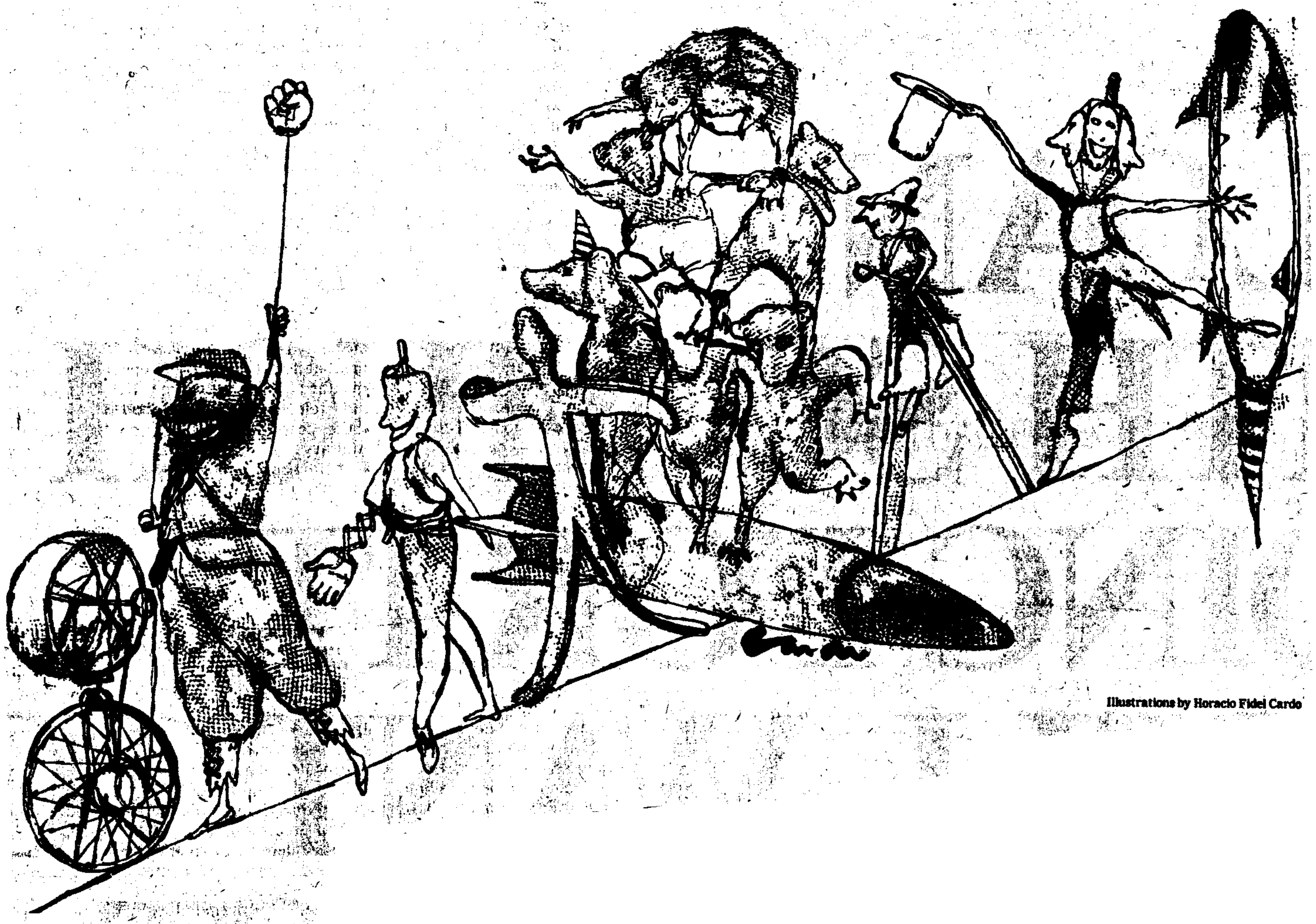
Fidel Castro's Theater of Now



Illustrations by Horacio Fidel Cardo

Old enemies swap terrifying tales of the Cuban missile crisis.

By J. Anthony Lukas

HAVANA

The Cuban piano player had just wound up his snappy rendition of "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" for a phalanx of morose Russian apparatchiks when Fidel Castro began to speak.

By the time the Commandante reached his crescendo 135 minutes later, it was apparent that a conference here would provide an odd moment of cultural and political redefinition — Cubans and Americans dancing with mounting bemusement to each other's music, while dispirited Russians shifted uncomfortably on the stag line.

This tableau was all the more arresting since many conferees were veterans of the cold war's most dangerous juncture: the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

From Jan. 8 to 12, they attended the fifth in a series of conferences sponsored by the Brown University Center for Foreign Policy Development and devoted to probing hidden dimensions of the missile crisis.

Even in this era of rolling realignment, the gathering was notable for exquisite incongruities:

- Beard to beard at a reception, President Castro and Ray S. Cline, a former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, who first informed the White House of the missiles in Cuba, joking about the C.I.A.'s ham-handed efforts to assassinate Castro.
- Gen. William Y. Smith, a former high-ranking aide to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, exchanging queasy smiles with Gen. Anatoly I. Gribkov, former operations director of the Soviet High Command, as they posed for photographers beneath a Soviet missile that is now a soaring white monument on Havana's waterfront.
- Fidel Castro's brother, Defense Minister Raúl Castro, clapping Robert S. McNamara, who was Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, on the back and inviting him to the Defense Ministry to watch a film on Cuban military doctrine — and then when Sergei Khrushchev, Nikita's son, and Sergo Mikoyan, Anastas's son, sought to tag along, asking McNamara deferentially, "Is it all right if they come, too?"
- Castro telling an elaborate yarn about a ride he took in a Soviet helicopter during Mikoyan's visit in 1960. Armed with an inaccurate map, the Soviet pilot insisted on heading east when Castro knew he should be going north. "If we'd gone much further," Castro recalled in mock horror, "we'd have run out of fuel and plunged into the sea. I wasn't sure I'd ever set foot on earth again." Listeners could be pardoned if they took the helicopter and its pilot as a metaphor for the former Soviet Union and its reckless leadership.

Castro gave no signs of abandoning his allegiance to Marxist-Leninist principles that make him an anachronism in the 90's. Cuba remains a police state, with dissidents languishing in prison, the media controlled, elections rigged.

Still, Castro is plainly seeking at least limited rapprochement with Washington. The U.S. trade embargo, combined with a catastrophic decline in direct aid and subsidized barter from the former Soviet bloc, has pushed Cuba into painful austerity. Havana's streets were virtually bare of traffic for want of gasoline, long lines trailed outside bread shops and many workers were ordered to stay home on partial salaries rather than drain the island's electricity supply by operating heavy machinery.

J. Anthony Lukas won a Pulitzer Prize in 1986 for "Common Ground," a book about school desegregation in Boston.

As Castro frankly admitted at the conference, Russia's abandonment of socialism put Cuba's back against the wall. With his former patrons in disarray, he must turn to the U.S. To facilitate such détente, he has repudiated at least one tenet central to his regime for 33 years — that Cuba must actively support revolutionary movements abroad. "Times have changed. We have changed," Castro said. "Military aid outside our borders is a thing of the past. The most important task is to see that the Cuban Revolution survives. Abroad, we intend to live by the accepted norms of international behavior."

For a regime that supported subversion or armed struggled in Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua and kept troops in Angola for 14 years, this is a significant about-face that should attract attention in Washington. Cline, a Republican, intends to bring this to the attention of highly placed friends in the Bush Administration. McNamara and Arthur Schlesinger will use their influence as well.

In an election year, little movement can be expected in Administration policy. With Patrick Buchanan and David Duke rumbling on the right, and Cuban Americans a significant voting bloc in Florida, President Bush can ill afford to relax official hostility to Cuba. After the election, reconsideration of our Cuba policy may be in order.

If the renunciation of support for revolution was the most striking development here, the principal news on the missile crisis was chilling: the world was closer to nuclear apocalypse that October than anyone outside the Soviet High Command had realized. That emerged when Gribkov revealed that, in addition to 24 launchers for the intermediate-range ballistic missiles, the Soviets had equipped their troops in Cuba with tactical nuclear weapons — specifically six mobile launchers and nine Luna missiles. The Luna, a battlefield weapon that has a range of about 30 miles, can be armed with a conventional warhead or a nuclear warhead with explosive power equivalent to about half that of the Hiroshima bomb.

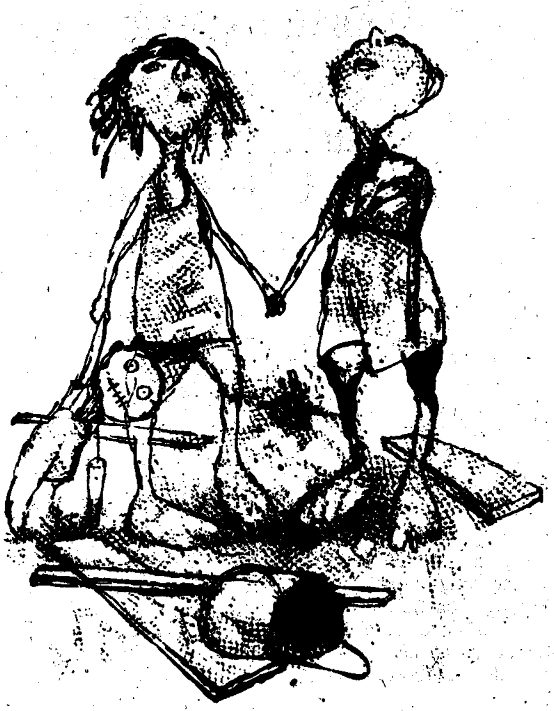
The U.S. had known, from aerial reconnaissance, that these weapons were in Cuba, but did not know they had nuclear warheads. Perhaps more important, it did not realize what Gribkov also volunteered here — that Soviet field commanders were free to use the Lunas at their discretion to repel a U.S. invasion.

By late October 1962, the U.S. was poised for such an invasion. On the critical weekend of the crisis, John F. Kennedy promised the Joint Chiefs of Staff that if Khrushchev did not agree to withdraw the missiles, he would authorize an invasion within 48 hours.

At the conference, Castro confirmed the presence of the nuclear-tipped Lunas, saying he would have urged their use against invading U.S. troops. That prompted McNamara to say the pressure for a U.S. nuclear counterstrike, either on Cuba or on the Soviet Union, would have been irresistible.

"My God!" McNamara exclaimed in a voice choked with emotion, "can you imagine what would have happened? It would have been a disastrous thing, not only from the point of view of Cuba, but from the point of view of humanity."

The Gribkov-Castro-McNamara exchange had a palpable effect on



others in the room, captured by an observer from the U.S., the actor Mandy Patinkin, who played Che Guevara in the musical "Evita" and may play him again in a projected TV mini-series on the missile crisis.

"I've always thought that if teenagers could witness thoracic surgery and see a smoker's lungs — black with tar and pollutants — they would never smoke again, and would spend their lives trying to clean the air we breathe," Patinkin said. "And if all mankind could somehow have been here, as we were, to witness the human frailties of the men who lived through the missile crisis, humanity would eradicate the cancer of nuclear weaponry from this planet."

Castro dominated the conference with his rhetorical skills, his rough charm, his sheer capacity to bestride center stage for hours. A vintage Castro performance, as this surely was, is a mesmerizing spectacle. He uses his hands like an Italian tenor delivering a Puccini aria: now pressed with heartrending sincerity against his khaki tunic, now skewering an imaginary opponent with a gnarled forefinger, now clasped on the desk in front of him, now chopping the air, now steepled in prayer, now balled before his chin, now exploding outward with the force of a nuclear warhead.

Havana courts the Americans and insults a group of glum Russians.

Throughout the conference, Castro implied that the Russians were betraying him in 1991 and 1992 just as they had in 1962.

After McNamara suggested that Smith and Gribkov meet privately to iron out differences over how much nuclear material had been dispatched to Cuba, Castro broke in, "I'm asking myself, why only Soviet and U.S. generals are to meet?" Another Cuban chimed in, "It seems that there is a certain hangover of old habits among the superpowers."

Amid embarrassed laughter, McNamara promptly agreed to include Cuban representatives in the discussion (which never took place). But the blunder gave Castro an opening to reassert his decades-old resentment at being a pawn in a dangerous game between the superpowers.

The Russians insisted that they had installed the missiles for Cuba's defense against U.S. aggression, but Castro unequivocally endorsed the American position — that Khrushchev was acting principally to alter the strategic balance of power in the Soviet Union's favor. "If it had been a matter of our own defenses, we would not have accepted the missiles," he said. "It would turn us into a Soviet military base, which could only damage our country's image. But we saw immediately that it was a way of improving the strategic balance in favor of the socialist camp, and that we regarded as our duty."

Castro had strenuously opposed keeping the dispatch of missiles secret, arguing here: "It's as if a man and his girlfriend go to the movies. They will not report it to anybody. But it's not illegal or if they go to the beach and then rent a room. They're not doing anything illegal.... If our conduct was legal, if it was moral, if it was correct, why should we do it in a way that makes it seem as if we were doing something wrong?"

The Cubans bowed to Khrushchev's insistence on secrecy, but when Raúl Castro went to Moscow in the summer of 1962, Fidel Castro instructed him to ask Khrushchev only one question: "What happens if the operation is discovered?'" Khrushchev replied: "That's nothing to worry about. If there's any difficulty, we'll send the Baltic fleet." (Since that was the smallest of the four Soviet fleets, this was a flippant response, equivalent to an American President saying, "We'll send the cavalry.")

When Khrushchev, faced with Kennedy's ultimatum, agreed to withdraw the missiles, he did so without consulting Castro. "We heard over the radio that there had been an agreement," Castro recalled. "We felt great indignation. It was deeply humiliating."

In return, the Castros were not averse to a little sport at the expense of the Russians, now forlorn men who no longer receive the deference due representatives of a superpower. At a reception at Fidel Castro's residence, where waiters offered 25-year-old rum and fragrant cigars, Raúl Castro gathered a group of Americans and suggested a toast, asking, "What shall we toast with?" "Vodka," somebody suggested. "It's good you asked for vodka here," he said. "In Russia, they wouldn't have any."

Raúl Castro then launched into an interminable story about a Soviet train that came to the end of tracks in the Siberian tundra. How would each Soviet leader have reacted? He suggested that Stalin would have shot the track-layers, Khrushchev would have driven off the end to "see what happens" ("that's the missile crisis," he confided), Leonid Brezhnev would have put everybody in a car and told them to rock back and forth and pretend they were moving, and Mikhail Gorbachev would have called a meeting, criticized everybody, then gone home.

When Raúl Castro spotted Gribkov and other Russians lurking at the edge of the circle, he brought them in and summoned a Russian-speaking interpreter to make sure they understood the story. When they grew visibly uncomfortable, a beaming Raúl Castro insisted they sit tight and enjoy the joke. □