
Stephen S. Rosenfeld 3/11/92

Cuba: A Disaster Scenario

Once again this past week the United States and Cuba tangled, and both countries got off relatively easy, though not the four Cuban American pilots killed by Cuban MiGs. But the next time—and the 37-year confrontation of American power and Cuban communism virtually ensures there will be a next time—things may not go so well. We should be readier than we are.

Many people assume that the end of the Cold War changed Castro's Cuba from a strategic and regional menace to a still-objectionable but now-harmless relic of Communist empire. Harmless, that is, except to its citizens. They are offered social guarantees and the mixed satisfactions of defying the United States but are denied the dignity of individual rights and political choice. In this view Fidel Castro represents a low-grade political fever that, if only by his aging (he's 69), will someday pass.

But this may be wrong. Bernard Aronson, George Bush's Latin hand, is one who warns of the inflammatory potential of a unique mix, including (1) repressive Communist rule in Cuba, (2) the proximity and exposure of a Cuba lying just 90 miles off the American shore and (3) the presence of a sizable, concerned and resourceful exile constituency in Florida.

Rendering this mix even more volatile is the

classic American ambivalence just demonstrated anew by the Clinton administration. Like its predecessors, it is pulled one way by diplomatic prudence and another way by the exiles' idealistic appeal and political weight and by Castro's radioactive glow in American politics—he fires people up. Washington had tried but failed to

“The United States should have its own agenda.”

head off both the exiles' provocative penetrations and the Havana regime's bloody reprisal. The weekend's drama provided a textbook case of how events flout policy control.

The administration's immediate response was reflexive. To preempt Congress, it notched up American pressures on the regime; unassuaged, a raging Congress demanded more. More quietly, the administration moved to keep a handful of exiles from continuing their bold and, in this instance, wildly and troublingly successful bid to commandeer the nation's foreign policy.

You can argue that this was what President Clinton had to do, and could do, in the circumstances. But it in no way meets the abiding requirement to realize how events might again spin out of control, this time in a much more severe way.

A consensus disaster scenario opens with Havana Cubans rising up and Miami Cubans coming to their aid—in hours by sea, in minutes by air. The scenario continues with the American government . . . But how could Cubans of any stripe be convinced that the U.S. government, which repeatedly tried to murder Castro and has steadily opposed his rule, had no hand in whatever was by then unfolding? How could Americans?

It was a combination of popular desperation and official calculation in Cuba and the exiles' initiative in Florida that produced the explosive flight/rescue of 125,000 Cubans from Mariel in 1980. A repeat of that massive, disruptive exodus is the specter haunting the election-bound Clinton administration today. The United States could invade Haiti to block a similar threat. It can't conceivably invade Cuba.

Yet the embargo tighteners preach their message of pressure and deprivation without thought of how to handle the political crisis, let alone the human pain, their strategy would aggravate. Nor, it must be added, are contrary-

minded embargo looseners spelling out very well just how their policy would better the Cuban people's plight, rather than simply bail out Fidel Castro.

It could happen that Cuba and the United States will slouch into a true violent disaster. I don't see Washington asking for it. Castro is hard to figure. Until just the other day he was playing the moderate, hustling up international investment. Suddenly he turned bully, savaging a feeble human rights collective and firing at exile flights he had previously cursed but abided. So much for investment any time soon.

This seems a poor moment for the halting and broken dialogue that constitutes the official American-Cuban relationship. No matter, the United States should have its own agenda. A provisional list would include a unilateral humanitarian lifting of the embargo on food and medical supplies. As soon as possible, Miami-Havana telephone calls and family visits should be resumed, even if Castro skims off dollars. Legal emigration procedures must be kept intact. There must be encouragement of the faint stirrings of political pluralism on the island. Policy planners must think out the disaster scenarios. Policy enforcers must address the Florida freelancers. This is a foundation for peaceful change, over time.