

The Affair of the Cuban Sugar Men

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NEW ORLEANS, Aug. 20—Federal officials here have a special place in the hearts of their Washington masters. This is where the President's Government Decentralization Program got the acid test and where it was used to keep the White House, State Department and Pentagon out of a hairy international incident.

The near-nightmare took place 6 months ago. It has become a textbook example of how the bureaucracy can be unbureaucratic in the provinces. This is what happened:

New Orleans was the site of an international conference of sugar experts whom Uncle Sam was happy to host, except for 19 Cuban delegates who had been denied visas.

In preparing for the convention, U.S. officials forgot about the Cubans, but the Cubans didn't forget. Just as a hijacked jumbo U.S. airliner was being put on display in Havana, a Cubana airliner with 19 sugar men and three crew members was heading for New Orleans.

When U.S. officials got word the Cubans were coming, anyway, they alerted Washington and sat down to decide what to do. They could have ordered the plane turned back by the military, or permitted it to land and isolated it. Aware that a planeload of Americans was stuck on the ground in Cuba, local officials let it land here.

In charge of the delicate care-and-feeding of the Cubans was Troy Adams Jr., head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and then chairman of the Federal Executive Board. The FEBs in major cities include top of-

ficials who meet to figure out ways to work with state and local government aides and each other.

Adams sent out a quiet Mayday to his fellow FEB members and told them to stand by. As INS's man on the scene, he refused the Cubans entry because they lacked visas. As head of the FEB, he agreed to give them a hearing and to make them comfortable while they were waiting.

The Cubans, as one FEB veteran recalled last week, "were polite and cool as cucumbers." They were put under house arrest, in a motel near the airport, while U. S. officials figured out their next move.

Meanwhile, the press surrounded the motel and the Cubans held a series of news conferences from the balcony demanding the right to attend an international conference. Word got around that the anti-Castro colony was coming out to the airport for a special reception of its own.

Fearing, "that this thing could turn into a circus," Adams called on FEB members for help in finding safer lodging for the guests, and transportation from the crowds. They were finally housed at a nearby naval air station with

a minimum of red tape. They stayed until the day that their hearing came up that, officials say, coincidentally hit the day the conference ended. The Cubans asked to leave.

FEB brass still had a problem—how to get the Cubans back to their airplane safely. Again the board called into play its buddy-system, and the Coast Guard agreed to supply helicopters with Navy choppers as a back up. The Cubans were hustled to the airport where our government presented them a bill for food and lodging (U.S. officials say hijacked Americans pay costs to the Cubans).

When an INS official handed the Cuban leader the tab, it was paid on the spot in crisp, new American bills. The worried airport services manager also got into the receiv-

ing line and was paid for parking, fuel and maintenance charges. The Cubans departed for Havana.

Washington officials believe the situation could have been weathered without the teamwork and buddy system of the New Orleans FEB. But they agree it would not have run as smoothly and could have meant delays and overlaps as individual agency heads ran back and forth through the chain of command causing problems for the hijacked Americans.

A White House official said of the incident that "everybody saved face. The Cubans got to stay here and make their point. We kept them on ice, without incident, and got them out, so we made our point. They even paid us rent."