

Ending the Feud With Castro's Cuba

By Abraham F. Lowenthal

CUBA IS eager to resume commercial and political relations with the United States. Provided the Carter administration shares that aim, Cuba seems willing to reassure the new U.S. government on several issues of obvious concern to Washington: Cuba's policy in Africa, Cuba's relation to Puerto Rico's independence movement and the principle of compensation for U.S. properties expropriated by Cuba.

Although Fidel Castro recently served six-months notice of his decision to suspend the anti-hijacking agreement unless the new administration acts decisively to curb anti-Cuban terrorism, that announcement was aimed not to convey hostility but to help bring about improved relations.

Prospective members of the Carter administration, for their part, are interested in Caribbean detente, and want to start a constructive dialogue with Cuba — soon.

I draw these conclusions after dozens of conversations over the past 18 months in both the United States and Cuba. On two trips to Cuba I talked with high-ranking government and party officials, among them Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Castro's chief foreign policy adviser. These interviews were supplemented by exchanges through the Cuban Mission to the United Nations, even within the past few weeks. I have also consulted with many American foreign policy specialists, in and out of government, including members and staff of the influential Commission on United States-Latin American Relations (the "Linowitz Commission") as well as advisers of the incoming administration.

Near Yet Far

EVEN IN a pokey little propeller plane, Havana is less than two hours from Miami. Varadero, the beach resort, is but 140 miles from the Florida coast, as close as Lynchburg, Va., is to Washington. South Florida disc jockeys can be heard day and night on Cuban radios.

Yet Cuba is very distant. Less than 1,000 U.S. citizens visited Cuba in 1975, about as many as land in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on an average winter morning. American goods are gone



Carlos Rafael Rodriguez

from Cuban shelves. American citizens are so rare in Havana's streets that Cubans assume a foreigner is anything but a "gringo" — Russian, German, Italian, Canadian, even Bulgarian.

One obvious result of Cuba's revolution has been to end the historic U.S. domination of every sphere of Cuban life. Trade with the United States used to account for over 65 per cent of Cuba's foreign commerce. American corporations owned more than \$1 billion worth of property in Cuba, including over one-third of the island's sugar production, much of its industry and commerce, the major public utilities and almost all the big hotels and casinos.

Politically, the U.S. ambassador was considered almost as powerful as Cuba's president, sometimes more so. Culturally, American trends in dress, the arts and music set the tone for the middle and upper classes. As one observer put it, Cuba was "no more independent than Long Island."

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Clear traces of the former Yankee presence are still noticeable in Havana. Cuban children play *beisbol*; a U.S.-style fried chicken stand attracts customers on Havana's waterfront; Cubans still say "OK" and hum American tunes, and some even watch "The Godfather" and Marilyn Monroe movies. The major downtown department store is still the "Ten-Cent," with no apparent adjustment for inflation.

But Cuba today has unquestionably escaped the American orbit. Now Cubans are proud of their political distance from Washington and have no desire to return to the kind of relationship Cuba enjoyed — or suffered — before 1959. They are self-confident about Cuba's ability to endure U.S. hostility for another generation, if need be; the worst years of blockade, isolation and shortages are past. Cuba finds mutual respect and reciprocal advantages as the basis for any renewed contact; Cuban officials believe their counterparts in Washington are by now ready for discussion on that basis.

My second visit to Cuba last August illustrates how Cuba is actively exploring the prospect for improving relations with the United States.

Eight of us were invited by Cuba's Foreign Ministry to make the trip together. We are all U.S. foreign affairs specialists with a variety of establishment credentials. Four had more senior-executive branch experience in foreign policy-making than any American to visit Cuba since Castro's triumph: William Donaldson, former undersecretary of state; Benjamin Read, the State Department's executive secretary for several years and now president of the German Marshall Fund here; Albert Fishlow, a deputy assistant secretary of state until March, 1976, and William Watts, staff secretary of the National Security Council until he quit in 1970 over the Cambodian invasion. Together we were given a red-carpet introduction to Cuba: briefings, interviews, sightseeing, fishing trips and a couple of days at implausibly beautiful Varadero beach.

The substantive high-point of our visit was our wide-ranging, three-hour discussion with Vice President Rodriguez. It had the earmarks of a quasi-

diplomatic exercise: careful preparation, considerable formality and copious notetaking on both sides.

Havana's Rationale

WHY DOES Cuba want renewed relations after all these years? Cuban officials stress the concrete. They see the United States as still a natural market for Cuba's exports — sugar, cigars and nickel principally — as well as the primary potential source for a renewed tourist flow. More significant, Cubans would like to look to us for many imports: agricultural commodities; farm machinery; food processing, textile manufacturing, construction and port equipment; cars and automotive equipment; computers and computer technology, and general

know-how in agriculture and industry.

Beyond these reasons, intangible factors are undoubtedly important, though mostly unstated. Washington's recognition would signify the ultimate acceptance of the Cuban Revolution and of its irreversibility — the final tribute, after all, by Goliath to little David.

Relations with the United States, too, would doubtless help expand Cuba's options in world affairs. That is a point no Cuban official makes directly, but Rodriguez may well have been hinting at it when he told us that Angola's interests would be well served by establishing relations with the United States.

Cuban officials sense a reciprocal interest in *rapprochement* within U.S. business circles, in the American foreign policy community, in and around Congress and even within the State Department. They attribute this tendency in part to international trends, to the dispersion of power away from the bipolar extremes and to the corresponding decline of America's hegemonic presumption. They think American foreign policy-makers are adjusting to many international changes and are probably ready by now to rid the United States of an obviously anachronistic and ineffectual policy toward Cuba. Influenced — probably overly so — by the steady stream of business executives inquiring about trade, Cuban officials also believe that economic interests here are pressuring for *rapprochement*.

Cuban officials see no insurmountable obstacles to improved relations, though they recognize that concessions on both sides will be necessary. To begin, Cuban officials emphasize, each side must accept the fact that the other is different in some fundamental respects, and that neither side will soon change its essence. Even with the change of administration in Washington, Cuban officials do not expect the United States to become sympathetic toward socialism or toward Cuba. Conversely, Cubans expect the United States to understand that Cuba is "no banana republic," but rather a socialist revolutionary nation, firmly allied with the Soviet Union and committed to a foreign policy supporting national liberation movements.

Cuba anticipates tangling with the United States on issues ranging from Angola to Zionism, from agricultural commodities to technology transfer. But Cubans feel the two countries

could resolve many concrete disputes and could facilitate mutually fruitful exchanges — commercial, cultural and political — even while agreeing to disagree on some issues, much as is true in relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Once Washington accepts the notion that Cuba and the United States are bound to clash on some issues, Cuban officials think the conflicts between the two countries need not be acceptably intense. Rodriguez and other officials seemed eager to reassure us they are well aware of the issues of greatest concern to the United States and think mutually acceptable accommodations are possible.

Cuba's intervention in Angola, for instance, is portrayed as unique. Cuba is "no Joan of Arc, hearing voices," Rodriguez told us, and Cuba does not seek or expect to find similar circumstances elsewhere.

What actually happened in Angola in 1975 — or even what is happening there now — is very difficult to determine. But Cuban officials take great pains to distinguish Angola from other situations in southern Africa — because of Cuba's long association with Neto's MPLA, because the MPLA was the closest thing to an established government in 1975 and particularly because of South Africa's military intervention, which Cuban officials insist preceded Cuba's combat involvement.

Those countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia which had at first been disturbed by Cuba's Angolan venture, Cuban officials argue, have by now come to appreciate what Cuba did and to understand its limits. The Cubans expect American opinion eventually to concur, particularly as Cuba's troops start coming home.

No Aid for Terrorists

THE PERTINENT point, Cubans stress, is that Cuba will not send its combat forces anywhere except in response to foreign military intervention and that Cuba will not intervene against established governments. U.S. officials confirm that Cuba is no longer "exporting revolution," nor is Cuba still promising that the Andes will become another Sierra Maestra; those dreams apparently died with Che Guevara, if not before.

Officials in Havana vehemently affirm Cuba's longstanding commitment to work for Puerto Rico's self-determination. Because the Cuban stance in theory is not inconsistent with the offi-

cial U.S. position — both governments claim to support the right of self-determination for Puerto Ricans — the real question is what Cuba will do to translate into practice its solidarity with the Puerto Rican *independistas*.

On this point, too, Cuban officials seemed to me to convey the impression that agreement with the United States can probably be reached, at least as long as Washington does not attempt unilaterally to impose a particular status on the island.

Cuban aid for terrorist activities is ruled out entirely by Havana, as is any activity "which can be considered illegitimate under international law." More important, Rodriguez indicated that Cuba recognizes reasonable political limits on what it should do regarding the Puerto Rican issue. Rodriguez made it clear he understands that overt, dramatic gestures of support for

Puerto Rican independence might well be regarded as provocative by the United States, and he implied that renewed relations would cause both sides to tone down their rhetoric.

The Expropriation Issue

CUBAN OFFICIALS understand that commercial relations with the United States will probably depend in part on Cuba's acceptance of the principle of compensation for the expropriated U.S.-owned properties. Although Rodriguez quickly conceded that at least some of the specific companies' claims are well founded, and that some funds are therefore owed by Cuba, he also reiterated Cuba's view that the United States owes indemnities for damages done by the U.S. embargo, by the Bay of Pigs invasion and by other hostile U.S. actions, including sabotage of Cuban facilities by the CIA.

Were a settlement to take place today simply taking into account the claims of each side, Rodriguez argued, the overall balance would be favorable to Cuba. He did not seem to rule out, however, that the result of detailed negotiations in a general political context might be agreement on a final balance favorable to the United States.

His clearest definition of an acceptable basis for U.S.-Cuban relations stressed simply that any claims settlement must avoid compensation by Cuba directly to the companies involved, a condition easily satisfied by allowing the United States govern-

ment to act as an intermediary, adding up the individual private and corporate claims and negotiating a settlement on the claimants' behalf.

Although Cuban officials seem to have few fixed ideas regarding the process by which *rapprochement* might take place, they insist that the next step must be some visible sign that the U.S. government will end its hostile policy toward Cuba. Usually, Cubans put this point more concretely; no negotiations can begin until the United States ends its commercial embargo of Cuba, at least in "its substantial aspects" (according to one of Castro's own formulations).

Cuban officials at every rank repeat time and again Fidel's statement that Cuba will not negotiate under unequal conditions, with a "dagger at its throat."

Castro's speech of Oct. 15, announcing that the 1973 anti-hijacking agreement would be allowed to lapse (after the six-month notification period provided for in the treaty) unless the United States takes effective steps to counter the wave of anti-Cuban terror carried out in part by refugees based in Miami, should be understood within this context. Beyond its desire to protect its citizens and property, Cuba wants Washington to take a visible conciliatory step.

Understanding, however, that the United States will face domestic political problems in making a symbolic gesture, Cuba seems to be trying to make it easier for the United States to find a suitable mode by suggesting that Washington should act first to combat anti-Cuban terrorism. By asking the U.S. government simply to comply with its already established duties under national and international law, Castro has handed the new American administration a virtually costless op-

portunity, should it want one, to take a step toward *rapprochement*.

By respecting the six-month notification provision, moreover, Castro has skillfully triggered an "action-forcing" device to bring the Cuban issue before top policy-makers within the administration's first 100 days.

If Washington's new officials are prepared visibly to act against anti-Cuban terrorism and to signify Washington's intent to lift the commercial embargo, beginning perhaps with the ban on the sale of food and medicine, Havana seems set to respond. One such

quid pro quo, for example, might be the release and repatriation of the eight or nine U.S. citizens — alleged CIA agents — still imprisoned in Cuba on political charges.

After preliminary gestures, Cuban officials are prepared to consider various ways of going further. One approach, following the China model, would be to increase cultural exchanges and to renew commerce first, leaving diplomatic relations for a later stage. Another approach would be to follow some initial signals of intent with an immediate decision to ex-

change ambassadors, leaving it to the diplomats to negotiate subsequently on all outstanding issues — financial claims, the status of the Guantanamo Base, human rights, terms of trade and credit, etc. Cuban officials seem prepared to proceed in either fashion, or through some intermediate formula.

An Opportunity

AMERICAN policy toward Cuba is far from the most urgent issue which the Carter administration has to face.

If the new Administration sees the issue as mainly a bilateral one, it is likely to favor an eventual establishment of relations — virtually no one in the foreign policy-making community regards the current policy toward Cuba as meaningful or successful — but to assign the matter very low priority, to be dealt with only after many other international problems are on track.

If it regards the issue as primarily an item in U.S.-Soviet relations, it is also likely to shelve the matter for a while, until talks with the Soviet Union on many other subjects are well advanced.

My interviews suggest, however, that the new Administration could well grasp the Cuban issue as one of several opportunities to recast America's approach toward the Third World. The President-elect and some of his key advisers have suggested their desire to replace the image of "the United States in opposition" to the Third World with a serious American effort to build constructive relations with developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

A quick and clear gesture to establish relations with Cuba, together with an immediate initiative on the Panama Canal issue, would help signal the new administration's desire to end Cold War policies and practices, and to concentrate instead on the problems of the 1970s and 1980s. It would help the administration outline a consistent, understandable foreign policy to the American people, a policy opposing unilateral blockades and embargoes by anyone, accepting political diversity everywhere and pressing effectively for the protection of fundamental human rights in all countries.

Finally, the establishment of mu-

tually respectful relations with Cuba would help the administration prepare itself to deal with mounting challenges across the Caribbean. Hard political and economic choices are being posed in Jamaica, Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and elsewhere. To protect its interests in this border region, the United States will have to come to terms with Cuba, by far the largest and most influential of the Caribbean states. There is no need to wait.



By Geoffrey Moss for The Washington Post

