

CHRONOLOGY OF A DIPLOMATIC TRAGEDY

On February 1 the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Cape Knox sighted four small unarmed Cuban fishing boats trolling 19 miles west southwest of Marquesas Key, off the Florida south coast. This seemingly normal and innocent event was the beginning of an incredible series of blunders and mistakes by which in the following five days the United States Government fashioned a diplomatic disaster of the first magnitude.

At 1:20 p.m. February 2, one and a half miles east of ~~of~~ Southeast of East Bay, the Coast Guard ordered the boats to anchor and stand by for boarding. The Cubans complied but weren't boarded until 7 p.m. Inspection, negative in results, took three hours. Not until the next day did the flotilla leave for Key West, arriving at 5:45 p.m. Two full days later, on the evening of February 5, the Federal Government turned men and boats over to the State of Florida "for handling under State law". Five minors were separated for repatriation, two men defected, and the remaining 29 were jailed in a single cell in which there was not even a cot.

It wasn't until February 8 that there were any signs of calm thinking by responsible officials. By this time Castro had understood the benefits he could derive and had dramatically turned off the water to our Guantanamo Naval Base, Secretary of State Rusk had made a statement notable for its display of poor judgment and both lack of complete forthrightness and excessive frankness, and President Johnson had issued a futile statement threatening economic retaliation against individual Cuban workers and coercion of our allies.

Reaction was strong, world-wide, and not in favor of the action and position of the United States.

At every step while the United States, alone and unassisted, created this crisis, there were obvious warning flags that no one heeded. Not until

the situation was frozen, with no alternatives except embarrassment and humiliation, not until the prestige of the country, the President and the Secretary of State were needlessly and irrevocably committed, did any responsible official realize what every junior clerk in the State Department should know - that diplomats always leave themselves a way out and they never unnecessarily involve their country or its ranking personalities.

At the very worst, the presence of these small Cuban boats in American waters, even if intended as a provocation, should have been a very minor affair. Especially if there was reason to suspect provocation should the matter have been handled with great care and thoughtfulness. Instead, within a few days, our major allies were involved. Sensitive international issues were raised. Friendly foreign leaders and newspapers were placed in a position where they had to take public issue with us - even condemn us as "bullies". And the incident had been escalated into a major crisis, with no possible benefit or credit to the United States, its image, or the principles for which it stands. Even British Prime Minister Home felt forced to disagree with us publicly in the White House, on its steps, and every place he was questioned in and between London and Washington.

Rarely do preeminent leaders such as a President or a Secretary of State prepare their public declarations personally. How could those lower in authority have led them into such a fiasco? Or, indeed, allowed it to happen?

Chronology of events - sighting, watching, searching of ships with negative results. Unusual delay in taking to port after "capture".

Background of international events - major worldwide international problems of United States at that moment - Panama, Cyprus, Vietnam, Ghana, French recognition of Communist China, etc.; predictable unfavorable reaction of rest of world; failure of boycott and known opposition of allies to interference with non-military trade with Cuba; all militated against artificially creating another crisis.

No chance of diplomatic benefit to United States; no chance of harming Castro.

Recent fishing rights incidents involving United States against its allies - Japan, Ecuador, Peru; also, Iceland vs. Great Britain, Brazil vs. France.

Continuing admitted United States violation of Cuban airspace and alleged violation of its waters.

Analysis of Rusk's statement: distortions, half-truths, untruths with respect to fact; turning foreign relations over to State of Florida for specified reasons of vindictiveness; abusive treatment of fishermen; loss of truth and righteousness as major American weapons.

Other related circumstances: no protest to Cuba until February 4; Cubans actually fishing and had fish in holds; substantiation of their claim of taking shelter from threatening weather; Coast Guard obviously unworried about contents of boats - no guards on three and plenty of time and opportunity for destruction of incriminating evidence by Cubans.

Obvious value of incident to Castro: witness turning off of water to Guantanamo when he didn't during grave 1962 missile crisis; allowing him to legitimately appear abused and persecuted; intrusion of domestic politics into international relations (Goldwater, Rockefeller).

Why were President and Secretary of State involved? Analysis of President's statement - known opposition of friends and allies to proposals. How could their assistants make such mistakes?

What has happened since - second thoughts in U.S. government; unfavorable reaction of rest of world. Public action against our demands and even to our foreign aid law.

What it means - danger to United States' international leadership.