

Pierre Salinger

A Mistake and an Anachronism

JFK moved to lift the embargo just five days before he was killed.

I am quite amazed that President Clinton has become a supporter of Fidel Castro, and an enemy of the Cuban people, like many of his predecessors. This idea of embargo of Cuba goes back all the way to when I was working with President John F. Kennedy.

It is true that my president made a major mistake early in his administration in the operation of the Bay of Pigs invasion. But unlike many other presidents who have gotten into trouble, he went live on television the day after the Bay of Pigs and said: "I am the president of the United States. I made this decision. I made this mistake. I take all responsibility for it."

There was an extraordinary reaction from the American people. Two weeks later, a Gallup poll showed that President Kennedy had the support of 82 percent of the American public. I will never forget his calling me into the office and asking, "Did you see that poll, Pierre?"

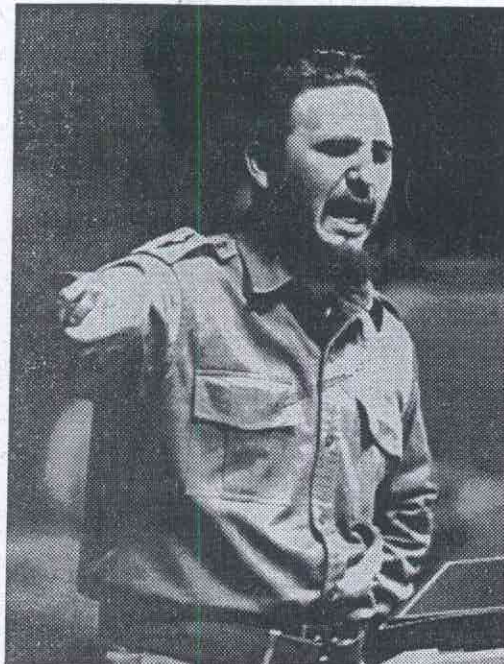
"Yes," I replied.

"I hope I don't have to continue doing stupid things like that to remain popular," Kennedy said.

John F. Kennedy imposed the embargo against Cuba, but late in his administration he understood he had made another mistake. Only five days before he was assassinated, he had a meeting with a French journalist who, he discovered, was heading for Havana. He gave him a note to give to Fidel Castro calling for negotiations to normalize relations between the two countries. Kennedy understood that if the embargo was not lifted, that if trade was not reestablished between the United States and Cuba, the Soviet Union would dominate that island. The journalist was in the office of Fidel Castro when Castro's phone rang, bringing the news that Kennedy had been killed. If the embargo had been lifted in 1964, Cuba would be a different, and democratic, nation today.

In 1975, when I held my first and only meeting with Fidel Castro, I learned that the Ford administration understood that relations between Cuba and the United States should be normalized. Accompanying me to the meeting with Castro was the famous American journalist Scotty Reston. At one point in our long meeting with Castro, Reston said to him, "Excuse me, sir, but can I change my hat?"

"What kind of a hat do you want to put on?" Castro asked.



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

Reston said he was bringing a diplomatic message from the then-secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. He said that Kissinger wanted to start a dialogue with Cuba to normalize relations. Castro said he was willing to discuss it, but only after the embargo was lifted.

"That's what Kissinger told me you would say," Reston said.

They then negotiated a pre-dialogue between the U.S. and Cuban ambassadors in Madrid to start the process. Unfortunately, six weeks later, Cuba was persuaded by the Soviet Union to send 30,000 troops to Angola, something that broke down those talks.

But now, more than 30 years since the embargo was created and almost five years since the Soviet Union crumbled, we are looking at things in a desperately wrong way. We keep saying that the embargo or tougher sanctions will bring down the Castro regime and bring democracy to Cuba. Of course, we want to see the Castro regime go down. Of course, we want democracy in Cuba. But we simply are forgetting history. And, unfortunately, those who seem to forget history the most are the Cuban Americans who are pushing the Clinton administration to go in this direction.

Did we bring an end to communism in Eastern-bloc countries like Poland,

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and others with embargoes or sanctions? Did we bring down communism in the Soviet Union by imposing embargoes or sanctions? Of course not!

We traded with those countries. We maintained diplomatic relations with them, and our presidents visited those communist countries. Dialogue was underway all the time. The important links that President Reagan set up with the Gorbachev regime, his extraordinary visit to a Moscow summit with Gorbachev in 1986, played a significant role in waking up the Soviet population to the reality that they had to go in another direction.

Embargoes and sanctions beef up leaders and ruin the populations. Look at the examples. We wanted to get rid of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. He is still powerful there as the sanctions continue. But tens of thousands of Iraqis are dying every year from hunger or medical problems.

The only embargo that worked was against South Africa. But you also have to understand history there. First, it was an international, not a U.S., embargo. But the countries involved, including the United States, didn't break their diplomatic relations with South Africa. The United States and other countries kept a strong dialogue with



ASSOCIATED PRESS

that country in a continuing effort to persuade its leaders to move toward democracy. American companies allowed blacks to play significant roles in their business until the companies were forced to leave South Africa, but they showed how firms could operate there without accepting apartheid.

Now we are beefing up Fidel Castro and causing even greater problems for the Cuban people. Believe me, if Clinton had dropped the embargo early in his administration, we would not now be seeing thousands of Cubans fleeing the country, Castro would have stepped down, and Cuba would have had its first democratic election. Of course, the same thing is happening in Haiti, where we are destroying the population and beefing up the power of the military leadership.

Let's go back to history. Let's adopt the policy that helped us bring down the communist regimes except for North Korea (no embargo), China (no embargo) and Cuba (a long embargo). Let's not be pals of dictators. Let's be pals of the populations, and by doing this we will persuade them to get rid of the dictators, as they did when we saw the end of the Cold War.

The writer was press secretary to President John F. Kennedy.