

But Cubans Don't Enjoy It

U.S. Boycott Fits Castro's Need For a Scapegoat

Last of a Series

By Lewis H. Diuguid

Washington Post Staff Writer

HAVANA—Cuba's car fleet, which has been rusting out for eight years now, recently added two new Thunderbirds. They turn more heads in Havana than Linda Darnell ever did, and in the countryside they draw crowds as excited as those who turn out for Premier Castro.

New cars are a curiosity because of the policy. Cubans make do and blame the Yankees. It never occurs to them to ask if Castro could pay for the new cars — or parts for the old ones—even if there were no boycott.

Economically, the U.S. boycott does serve to hinder the island's Communist government. It not only withholds consumer goods, but it raises the cost of Castro's ambitious economic development plans.

But politically, the boycott enables Castro to blame the United States for all of Cuba's economic shortcomings. In this way, it offers him a holiday from his most difficult and important foreign policy problem—the need to rationalize the relationship of Cuba to the United States.

Effects of Boycott

In any case, I saw no evidence during three weeks in Cuba that the boycott can bring Castro to heel. Even if a policy of interference by a large country in the affairs of a small one can be justified, the U.S. boycott does not appear to be accomplishing its aim.

The streets of Havana abound with signs of the

boycott. Shops are shuttered, gasoline expensive, cigarettes acrid, shoes shoddy, the cupboard bare. The old favorite drink in the green bottle is now a sugary near-Coke. These irritants are explained away: no goods from traditional U.S. suppliers.

More damaging is the rising cost of building the new Cuba in the countryside. Russian trucks cost more and perform poorly. The tractors, harrows and cane-cutters needed to mechanize the farms are more expensive in Europe, and sometimes not available.

Most of the vital equipment Cuba needs for its development is eventually obtained, and the Cubans even manage somehow to obtain "made-in-USA" technical equipment (no one knows how), and to exchange indispensable technical information with U.S. universities slowly through the mails.

U.S. Move Bypassed

Modern methods help Cuba to bypass the boycott. When the Chinese discovered that Cuba had no literature on soils, for instance, they microfilmed their own library and transplanted it.

But the boycott hurts, and it cuts two ways. It has deprived Cuba of her historic sugar market. Cuba now

sells elsewhere, at a loss.

Also, east coast U.S. cities would have been a natural market for the fruits and vegetables that Cuba's newly diversified agriculture produces. Much of this produce is now sold in Canada.

But these economic losses imposed by the boycott tend to be more than balanced by the political gains it offers to Castro.

Most Cubans, especially those of the dynamic nationalistic younger generation, are readily persuaded that the U.S. boycott is to blame for all of their economic difficulties.

Some Blame Castro

Some Cubans do blame Castro for the economic annoyances caused by the boycott, reasoning that he triggered it, but they come from the ranks of the anti-Castro Cubans and they are few, aging, overly materialistic and therefore relatively ineffectual.

If the boycott were removed, Castro would have to own up to the fact that

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under his leadership Cuba has failed to produce the exports it needs to pay its way in the world. He would also have to admit—as the franker Marxists in Cuba admit—that no lifting of the boycott would quickly solve Cuba's shortage of foreign currency.

As long as the boycott stands, it shields Castro from his opposition at home.

It also helps solve a longer-range problem that any leader of Cuba faces—the island's traditional overdependence on its giant northern neighbor.

By its mere size and nearness, the United States poses a threat to Cuba's freedom of action, almost to its independence. Tie Cuba too closely, as Batista did, and that independence is jeopardized. Cut contacts with the U.S. and Cuba loses its natural markets, its economic viability. The boycott forces Cuba to face this long-

neglected problem.

Depends on Russia

Castro has faced it by substituting Cuba's old dependence on the United States with a dependence on Russia, similar in many ways. An easing of the boycott might permit Castro to achieve a healthier political as well as economic balance in the world.

Moscow, for one, would probably cheer this development.

One Soviet official in Havana, reportedly drawn into a conversation about the chance of another Marxist revolution in Latin America, said: "We can't afford the one we've got."

Russians Perplexed

The Russians themselves need the very kinds of machinery that Castro requires, and they are said to be perplexed by Castro's demands and his priorities. Castro military and monetary needs are a continuing drain on the Soviet Union.

Yet Russia continues to be patient with Castro, and is not likely to abandon him, whatever the cost.

There are those who feel that since the U.S. boycott does not appear to be hast-

ening the departure of either Castro or the Russians, U.S. interests would be better served by ending it. It is argued that the spectacle of Cuba's economic performance would be a more convincing object lesson to the rest of Latin America if the United States were not interfering.

Castro's Argument

The visitor sees no evidence that Castro would respond to such a gesture now. Perhaps as a hedge against the exposure of Cuba's economic weakness and shortage of foreign exchange that would follow a resumption of American trade, Castro casts the problem in ideological terms. He argues that Cuba cannot settle its differences with the United States as long as the war in Vietnam continues, that it cannot isolate its own problems from those of the rest of the world.

But if Castro really wants the economic advantages that would flow from a limited trade with the United States, the issue of his meddling in the Hemisphere may be negotiable.

And whether he wants it or not, many of the young Cubans who serve him are now thinking that it might not be such a bad idea.

Cubans Find Plague Ironic

HAVANA—In a doughty and salty forward position on the seaside main drive of the capital stands a monument with the following inscription in Spanish:

"The people of the island of Cuba are and by right ought to be free and independent"—Joint Resolution of the Congress of the United States of America of April 19, 1898.

Subsequent U.S.-Cuban history gives the phrase an ironic turn or two, and such are the fortunes of the island that not everyone feels free yet. The plaque is located about midway between the shuttered U.S. Embassy, opened partially by the Swiss to process Cubans departing for the United States, and the Morro Castle, which serves as a prison for many of the country's political prisoners, estimated by Castro to number nearly 20,000.