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A Step Toward Cuba

The United States effort to perpetuate the isolation of Cuba in the Western Hemisphere is a conspicuous anachronism in 1973, one of those aloof standoffs that does no one any good. It has been an anachronism at least since President Nixon's historic trips to unblock the American stalemate with the People's Republic of China and to expand and improve relations with the Soviet Union. Even before those journeys, the Cuban quarantine was steadily eroding.

Yet, despite some progress toward an anti-hijacking accord with Cuba, Washington's official word to Latin America still reflects the rigid line toward Fidel Castro's regime voiced by the President last November. Only a few weeks ago, the State Department sharply criticized four small Caribbean nations, three of them members of the Organization of American States, for daring to open diplomatic relations with Cuba in defiance of the sanctions invoked by the O.A.S. in 1964. Last June, the United States defeated a Peruvian bid to relax the O.A.S. quarantine, whereupon Peru promptly went ahead on its own to restore ties with Havana. Mexico never adhered to the sanctions and Chile resumed relations with Cuba in 1970.

With his incessant abuse of Mr. Nixon and the O.A.S., Premier Castro does not make it easy for Washington to change course. Yet these attacks are no more extreme than those from mainland China against Mr. Nixon and the United Nations right up to the Washington initiatives that led to the President's trip and indirectly to Peking's arrival at Turtle Bay. Mr. Castro's attempts to export his revolution—the main motivation for the O.A.S. sanctions—have long been a conspicuous failure.

No dramatic Washington overture is called for; merely a quiet passing of the word that the Administration will no longer bar Cuba's return to the inter-American system if and when Mr. Castro wishes to lessen his dependence on the Soviet Union. Normalization of relations between Washington and Havana cannot come quickly; the important thing is to make a modest start to remove an anachronism that not only no longer serves any American purpose but, if clung to indefinitely, could eventually produce a wholly unnecessary diplomatic humiliation for this country.