

A Signal, Perhaps, From Havana

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By Ben F. Meyer

WASHINGTON—There is the nagging thought here that Washington may have missed a signal indicating that Fidel Castro's Government may be ready to seek an end to the United States' 13-year boycott of Cuba.

Various circumstances suggest such a sounding by Havana. Cuba's economy still is in chaos and her dependence on the Soviet Union is increasing despite Premier Castro's known desire for greater freedom of action.

The question of United States-Cuban relations arose at a news conference of Cuba's Ambassador to Mexico, Fernando L. Lopez Muiño, when he said: "We are not in a holy war with the United States. We would be willing to talk to the United States, given a single and irrevocable condition—that it end the blockade of Cuba."

To many, this appeared a strong hint that if Washington dropped its boycott, imposed when it broke relations with Havana on Jan. 3, 1961, Washington might find it possible to end the thorny problem of relations with Havana.

Some newsmen in Moscow have even thought that the Soviet Union may have suggested such a feeler by Mr. Castro. The Soviet Union has been reported urging Cuba to drop her hostility toward other Western Hemisphere governments and also not to get caught in any more attempts at invasion or guerrilla warfare.

The reasoning here is that if the Cuban Ambassador was not putting out a feeler he could have answered the question by saying simply, "There is nothing new on that matter."

A Cuban Foreign Ministry comment, issued after Washington indicated no

enthusiasm for the idea, was couched in the tart language characteristic of Foreign Minister Raúl Roa. But it did not actually rule out the idea of negotiation.

If it was a feeler, it would not be the first time that Washington has fumbled in dealing with Cuba. A notable case occurred after a hijacked United States plane landed in Havana on Oct. 29, 1972. It had hardly touched ground before Havana suggested a discussion of means to end the bothersome hijacking business.

A few days later another hijacked United States plane, carrying two rapists who had escaped from a Tennessee prison, landed in Havana, adding to its growing problem of playing host to a collection of murderers and other criminals. Apparently still lacking a real response from Washington, the Castro Government decided to force the State Department's hand.

On Nov. 15—seventeen days after its original invitation—the Cuban Government jolted the United States with a broadcast announcement, patently aimed at public opinion and the Congress in this country, that Havana was ready to negotiate "without delay." Soon afterward, an agreement was negotiated and the hijackings from the United States ended.

Recently, editors of outstanding newspapers in the United States, members of Congress and others have become increasingly vocal in urging an end of the United States boycott. They say that the trade embargo has outlived any usefulness it may have had and that the United States stand on the sanctions voted by the Organization of American States in 1962 and 1964 disturbs inter-American relations.

In addition, the United States position patently forces Havana to remain

under Moscow's domination and gives the Soviet Union a splendid geographical base for military, economic, political and subversive activity in this hemisphere.

United States officials concede that Cuba has diminished her subversive activity in Latin America, but say she has not ended it altogether. They say also that the Cuban situation poses no military threat to the United States or to other hemisphere nations—a contention that most laymen find hard to believe in the light of Soviet submarine, air and ship activities in the Cuban area. It would seem highly advantageous to have relations that would permit much closer scrutiny of military and subversive activities in Cuba.

One thing bothering Washington is that Latin America is divided on the Cuban question. Only three countries, Argentina, Mexico and Peru, have relations with Havana, as do four former British colonies, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad-Tobago.

The ideal solution for Washington would be for Latin-American nations to get together and make a decision. But some countries are reluctant to take the risks involved. For these, it would be much simpler for the United States to stick its neck out.

The issue might arise late this month when foreign ministers of the Americas meet with Secretary of State Kissinger to present their ideas and to hear his about the future of United States-Latin American relations. There would perhaps be much more time for discussion of Cuba at the April meeting in Atlanta of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States.

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