



A Carter Credibility Gap

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ON MAY 25 President Carter said that Fidel Castro had done "nothing" to stop the invasion of Zaire. This week, at his press conference, he said that Castro didn't do enough — which is not quite the same thing.

Carter is plainly obsessed with fingering Castro as the aggressor. Castro is equally insistent that he tried to play peacemaker.

Does it matter to anyone but them?

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CARTER'S PRESS secretary, Jody Powell, speaking at the Town Meeting, said he understood Castro's motivations. He is "concerned about public opinion around the world" because of the death and destruction that occurred in Shaba Province in the course of the unsuccessful invasion.

Carter's reasons for prolonging the dispute Powell did not explain.

The President's prosecutorial stance would obviously be much stronger if he had instructed the State Department to put out all of what Castro said to our man in Havana, Lyle Lane, at a May 17 meeting. Only the half about Castro's prior knowledge of the invasion was published. Two weeks later, the State Department coughed up the rest of the story for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Castro told Lane that he had tried to stop it.

The other difficulty, of course, is that the "firm proof" of Cuban involvement that is being peddled on Capitol Hill has not convinced all who hear it. CIA director Stansfield Turner has been urgently briefing Congress, but some come away saying his evidence is hearsay, circumstantial and less than compelling.

There are also the conflicting opinions from the State Department, which on May 15 said there was "no hard evidence" that Castro was the culprit, but on May 19 found the same data "overwhelming."

Last weekend, in the middle of the argument, two young Democratic congressmen, Stephen Solarz of New York and Anthony Beilenson of California, turned up in Cuba and were granted a nine-hour audience, most of which was taken up with Castro's "vigorous, vehement and passionate" denials that he fostered, encouraged or even supplied the abortive invasion. He sent an emissary to warn President Agostinho Neto of Angola about it, but the message miscarried.

The congressmen don't know if he was telling the truth — Jody Powell sniffed that Castro wasn't asked "tough questions" — and they don't particularly care. Like a lot of other Americans, they can't understand why it all matters so much to Jimmy Carter.

The Cubans, once called "a stabilizing force" in Angola by U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, can run railroads and operate electrical systems and are looked up to by the natives.

The unfortunate consequences of foreign adventures are not visible. The dead are buried on the spot, the wounded sent to Soviet hospitals.

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CARTER IS not presently offering any inducements to Castro to come back from his ego-trip — unless you consider stopping short of calling him a liar a peace initiative of sorts.

The President may be at a White House meeting next Tuesday evening, where Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski are scheduled to explain everything to a delegation from Congress.

The President is in an awkward situation. Trying to shore up his "toughness" flank, he has backed himself up to the edge of a credibility gap. He is asking Americans to choose up sides between him and Castro: Which one is lying? That's hardly a majestic posture for the leader of the Western World. And it's no substitute for a sensible approach to the African problem, or, for that matter, for a rational policy toward a small island off our shores.